



By Paul Greenwood

In the summer of 2004 local people of the Thornhill area in the town of Alwick, Northumberland, England were distressed to discover more plans being submitted by the Duke of Northumberland to widen a bridleway, said to be for the improvement of access for traffic to farmland and a water treatment works. A similar application had been previously rejected in 2003 and local allegations quoted in the press claimed that the area had nevertheless suffered damage at the hands of the Duke; which had included the loss of locally cherished trees.

By August Northumberland County Council's Planning Department were anxious to support residents' efforts to save a particularly loved yew 'a couple of centuries old' at this location. Threatened by the latest planning application it had already attracted favourable media attention via a local publicity initiative inviting people to tie a yellow ribbon or bow around the yew's trunk to show support for saving it and many people did. Although subject to a Tree Preservation Order this was simply not enough in order to refuse the application and save the yew. To their everlasting credit Northumberland County Council made further enquiries with a number of voluntary and charitable groups in a desperate attempt to acquire more information of benefit to the yew's plight and those concerned for it.

One enquiry came my way via my position as a newly elected Trustee of the Registered Charity *Friends of the Trees U.K.* and was referred by the chairman Fred Hageneder as I live in the north east and my research specialises in the yews of northern Britain. I was surprised by the context of the enquiry because, on paper, a small girthed yew of less than 300 years of age is a rather nondescript yew outside of the tree professions in general and in yew research. There is little concern generally for what are in fact *young* yews, as by 300 years old a yew is really still in rather a youthful stage of its life as intended by Nature. This particular tree also had no history of a famous person being linked with it, nor was it planted in a special location like a churchyard, neither does it have any special provenance being sourced from seed or cutting from an already notable yew. Therefore the only real possible defence it had as an individual was that it had been well loved by local people for a couple of centuries. Unfortunately this is not the best of reasons for defence when it comes to challenging planning applications by powerful people. So there was a real challenge in turn for the concerned parties to successfully defend such a yew which normally would probably disappear without a second thought in a new development.



Some 'nondescript' yew trees © Paul Greenwood

Fortunately in July 2004 Andy Moir of Tree Ring Services UK and I had been assisted by Maurice Pankhurst of the National Trust with a dendrochronological survey of the Borrowdale Yew grove consisting of truly wild yews. Preliminary results were filmed by BBC NE and Cumbria and scheduled to be broadcast in a programme of *Inside Out* presented by Chris Jackson on 13th September 2004. The results proved that yews in northern England could be truly ancient trees with ages of 1000 years and more. This news was passed on to Northumberland County Council prior to broadcast because it proved that a yew of any age in the region has the capacity - *programmed into it by Nature* - to live a life measured in millennia rather than centuries.

Therefore on a *cultural amenity value* basis the 'young' yew at Alnwick simply has no peers. No development, community based or private, and however grandiose, could claim the same. There is as much a statistical guarantee as can possibly be made that in 1000 years that yew would still be there if left alone by Man and not utterly destroyed by Nature - 40 generations of human beings at least could marvel at what is one of the true natural wonders of this world. And also in a multitude of aspects in addition to the biology involving the yew's inbuilt multiple powers of longevity, but which are beyond the scope of this article to fully enter into here.

Nevertheless it is worth briefly exploring some of the main points which prove that individual yews belong to a family of trees embedded in the history, culture, spirituality and very fabric of the lands of the British Isles since they emerged from under the Ice over 10,000 years ago and which were here when humans returned.

Strips of yew wood were being used to bind the hulls together of the first sea going vessels in the Bronze Age era. Obviously the precursor of the later iron nail, this essential role of the yew in Britain's maritime history is a rarely quoted fact despite being known for over 50 years. Recent years have seen experiments in reconstructing such craft and it has been surprising how seaworthy these ships were and capable of carrying many tons of cargo. As Britain prides itself on its maritime heritage because it is an island community it clearly owes the yew an overlooked reappraisal of its role in the original exploration of the seas around these shores.

In Ireland pipes of yew wood - the *oldest wooden musical instruments so far found* - were making tunes 4000 years ago and were pitched in natural keys. It is virtually impossible to separate Ireland from the sounds and images of pipe music; be they the whistles and flutes of many a celebration moving the feet of the revellers, or the sweet and mournful *uilleann* pipes similar in principle to the Scots bagpipe and utilised on more sombre occasions. Again we see another overlooked place for the yew in the very fundamentals of human music making in Britain.

A further example is the longbow but so much is known about the association between the yew and archery that it is pointless to really explore the point further- except to say that without the longbow the history of England would have been very different indeed and 'England' well may not have existed at all!

Perhaps the most significant cultural role of the yew however is its presence at so many sacred sites throughout the millennia and proof enough of its spiritual importance also as a 'sacred' tree ; but significantly to *more than one religion*. Even the Roman Papacy recognised the importance of Britain's "Pagan" native sacred sites when instructing the missionary St Augustine in the early 7th century not to destroy them but to rededicate them. The presence of yews at these sites is proven by some still being there and in the meantime this means they have survived the arrival of Roman Christianity and various subsequent offshoots of Christianity becoming enemies of Rome. So it clearly proves that no matter what religion - or political hegemony - which ever rules in Britain, they have all fundamentally maintained recognition and respect for the yew as a *sacred* tree. This is especially proven by the swearing of the Magna Carta in 1215 taking place under the great yew at Ankerwycke, Runnymede in Bucks, England. Something about this tree brought all parties together under its boughs and *all parties* swore their oaths 'before God'. Why then under a yew tree? Mere primitive superstition? Surely all of these people throughout the ages cannot be wrong about there being 'something' sacred about the yew and worthy of protection and preservation?



Young yew at Brinkburn Priory © Paul Greenwood

In the priory grounds, according to tradition, is the burial place of the last of the Northumberland Faries.

So from prehistoric times the yew has *always* greatly benefited the people of the British Isles in many material ways and *spiritual* ways too. This is also seen in deep and meaningful expression in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Sylvia Plath. Wordsworth himself is buried under a yew with his wife Dorothy in a Grasmere churchyard and such figures as T.S. Eliot, Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, the anthropologist Charles Darwin, all enjoyed personal contact with yews during their lifetimes and some expressly requested to be laid to rest under them. Again, are all of these great figures, and so many of their ilk throughout history (and too many to mention here) all wrong to hold the yew in the greatest of personal esteem - even desiring their presence beyond this life?

By the latter end of the 20th century history would have suggested that there was no more for people to discover about the yew, having been companions of it for so long. Yet perhaps the greatest significance of the yew came when medical research had a totally unexpected breakthrough from the yew in the desperate attempt to find something in the fight against cancer. It is fairly well known now that the drugs *Taxol* and *Taxotere* (both are Registered Trademarks) came as a revolutionary and comparatively safe weapon against certain forms of cancer in the 1990's as they have minimal side affects and lessen the need for radical surgery or chemotherapy. Few know however that they came from the yew's unique cellular structure. The full extent of this pharmacological discovery has yet to be explored but in its early days millions of yews in the U.S.A. were slaughtered for their bark and killing the tree before discovering that the requisite chemical for these drugs is harvestable from yew needles! Already extant mazes and ornamental yew plantings when clipped readily supply constant sources of needles; a practise carried out on the famous Longleat Estate in southern England.

Information which considerably expanded upon these themes was supplied to the County Council and passed on for the attention of Alnwick District Council to simply show that this yew belonged to an amazing - and unique - family of trees and *at any age* a yew is on its way to becoming 'immortal' as it is *already living* 'an eternal life'. However I was able to make an additional observation about why the yew should be defended because of my yew research inevitably involving the history of Northumberland since prehistoric times.

This clearly showed that the Dukes of Northumberland, ever since their inception and the Percy family in particular, had yews at their most private sacred sites. One such stunningly beautiful place is the Hermitage, upstream from Warkworth Castle, a Percy stronghold and home to the medieval character "Harry Hotspur" made famous by Shakespeare. Here a private chapel and oratory, only reached by ferry, was carved out of the living rock of a sandstone cliff beginning in the 12th century and it is a marvel of masonry in its own right. Additional building of a hall took place a few centuries later. It is sheltered and screened by yews both along the footpath to it and in front of it, with two yews in particular of apparent ancient age. Details of this site are available in the Gazetteer.

History also revealed however that the Dukes of Northumberland were also Earls of Derwentwater in Cumbria in the 16th century when Sir Thomas Percy led a rebellion of the Northern Earls against Elizabeth I and her Crown Estates. These lands included the very valley of Borrowdale! One issue was sending miners into the Borrowdale valley where Sir Thomas had forbade any tunnelling to take place. The whole overall argument mushroomed into much more and ended with his defeat and beheading. Borrowdale was thereafter 'devastated' for timber, its oak stands being obliterated in some areas for smelting purposes. The massive irony that the Borrowdale Yew Grove itself had just yielded such breakthrough information from dendrochronology could not therefore have arrived at a more opportune moment; as here was a direct ancestor of Sir Thomas Percy embroiled in the same kind of thing - but arguably on the opposite side of the situation these centuries later! It seemed therefore reasonable to suggest, based on the empirical historical evidence, that it was clearly unfair for a yew to fall due to the intentions of someone whose family has enjoyed such intricate links with them for centuries. I would make plain that this was a personal point given insights via my research in addition to the published information.

It is local people who have enjoyed their own links with this tree for centuries and not because it is a 'famous' tree in any way - they have just learned to love and cherish and seek its presence for whatever personal reasons over the years. No one has 'told' anybody that this is a special tree and therefore it 'is' sacred. It has become 'sacred' i.e. holds a dear place in many a heart, simply for being what it is, a tree on the way to *seeing in the next millennium* if all goes according to Nature.

The Duke's planning application was refused and feedback from the authorities concerned confirmed that the information provided had assisted in saving this individual yew; by showing its relevance in a number of degrees to the collective position of the history of the yew in Britain. Therefore it is to be hoped that this information can always be used in the future should the yew again be at risk.

A totally unexpected outcome was that the information was forwarded to senior tree management personnel of the County Council. Confirmation was then received that the contents were of such interest and importance for the ancient natural heritage of the county that all planning applications submitted in the future would seek to take into account and safeguard yews *of any age*. This was a further positive result which was undreamed of after receiving the initial enquiry when, on paper, the yew had little to save it and even the authorities themselves looked like being unable to defend it - and not from any lack of desire on their part to do so. That is why it is worth repeating that they should be commended because they did determinedly seek outside help and recognised its worth and value when it arrived. It was not legal advice - but information to use if they could and as they saw fit. That they did, and it worked, is the clear proof that enabling the yew to 'speak for itself' achieves successful results to the extent that yews throughout Northumberland *of any age* are better protected than before.

The whole matter began with a yew only known and recognised to a relative handful of people and no doubt many of their ancestors. If those people on the spot had not done something - however futile it may have appeared - then that small seed of action could not have contributed to a series of opportune events which means that all of the living yews in the county are recognised as being special trees and worthy of better protection by the very *authorities* with the *legal powers* - such as they are - to defend the environment. But the point should be emphasised that no additional *legal* advice could save this yew - local initiative, council support and a brief history of the yew in Britain did.

But it does arguably set a legal precedent in that the reason why the yew was saved, according to a legal process, was not that the individual yew is especially notable as notable yews go, but that its position as a member of the overall extant yew population of Britain is what is so important. It is discoveries involving the biological and historical importance of individual yews and the yew genus in general which have contributed to the saving of this yew at Alnwick - all yews in Britain 'speaking' on behalf of this one. Unless those concerned people at Alnwick had not raised awareness of the tree's plight to a greater extent, and literally *spoke up* for this tree's right to live, then the cry of this particular yew would never have been heard to an extent where the raising of their own awareness of yews in general in Britain could contribute to their efforts having such a successful conclusion.



Young yew with branches being allowed to reach the ground and aid stability and support for the growing tree.

© Paul Greenwood

Here is a scenario which shows how what seem to be insignificant actions can set in motion an effective network of assistance for yews which has legally proven that yews *of any age* in Britain are essential trees - and of peerless cultural amenity value because they are *programmed by Nature* to be companions of human kind for 1000 years and much more - if we allow them to be. Generations of past people at Alnwick have spoken their regard for this tree via those living today and many of those wish for the same simple privilege to be allowed to be witnessed by their descendants continuing to appreciate the eternal living presence and beauty of a yew in a corner of Alnwick.

It would be fair to say that this is now indeed a famous tree and it is hoped that at the next millennial celebrations, should they ever occur, the people of that time will be just as in awe of this tree living so long as those truly ancient yews to be witnessed today elsewhere in Britain - and have just the same stunning effect on the senses trying to comprehend it!

On a more achievable note perhaps other Government, County, District and Parish planning authorities throughout the British Isles could consider taking a lead from the events at Alnwick based on the same collective support and the reasons for it and *recognise the worth* of all living yews in Britain today. For any 'young' yews are the ancient heritage trees for the future generations of people living in Britain. Many heritage yews today are only in existence because local efforts over many centuries spared them slaughter. For a *couple of centuries* at least the same has applied at Alnwick. However in the last 1500 years countless millions of yews have been slaughtered and it is to be soberly recognised that yews 'even as young' as 300 years or even 100 or 10 years for that matter are the *last surviving remnants* of a yew population which evidence suggests used to give these islands the ancient name of the *Islands of Yew*; Hibernia being a collective name coined by the Romans before being applied to Ireland itself.

A little known fact about Northumberland is that if the United Kingdom mainland is taken as one geographical entity the 'northern' county of Northumberland is actually a central eastern location and includes the actual geographical centre stated by the Tourist Board to be based near the centre of the Roman Wall around Haltwhistle. Alnwick itself prides its location as being the 'heart of Northumberland' and therefore it seems fitting that in the 'heart of the heart' of the geographical U.K. mainland, showing a 'bit of heart' for a 'common' yew has achieved a success which could have massive implications for the protection of yews - especially those not normally considered old or historically relevant enough to be important throughout the rest of the kingdom. They are however the children of the most ancient of yews in Britain, either directly or indirectly, and deserve the chance, as all children do, to grow to maturity as Nature intended them to and that, in the case of the yew, is proven to take, and be, for a very long time indeed.

In conclusion there are a lot of salutary lessons to be learned at a number of levels from the full scenario which has occurred at Alnwick. The main one for any authorities being that although a Tree Preservation Order may not automatically be enough to save a yew, the *reasons why* that Order is there, if there is no historical evidence to defend the yew as an individual, nevertheless can be successfully defended in law. Sheer weight of evidence can prove a truly priceless *living* cultural amenity value for any yew - because of what that yew is as a member of the collective yew heritage of Britain.

The main one for any people who simply want to act on behalf of a yew is that by 'tying a yellow ribbon around the old yew tree' it seems that it can achieve quite magical and miraculous results!

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