

# Ancient Yew Group

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## The Tandridge Yew...

In Tandridge churchyard in Surrey is an extraordinary ancient yew. It was described by Mee in *The King's England* 1936 as a tree whose branches made a circle of 250' and which had such life that the great trunk had "given itself new strength since it was reported dying more than 100 years ago". At about that time (in 1850) it was, according to Brayley's *Topographical history of Surrey*, 'a large decayed yew-tree, split into four or five parts, and in a state of rapid decay'.

### United

In *The Yew-Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* 1890 Lowe considered that two of its lateral trunks springing from the base were "slightly united to the central one" and that these had "probably grown after the main stem had fractured at some early period".



St. Peter's church, Tandridge and its great yew (Photo: Christian Wolf)



Many tall fluted stems make up the great yew at Tandridge  
(Photo: Christian Wolf)

This information was to become pivotal in Allen Meredith's efforts to establish his theories of yew ages and provided evidence that would convince scholars and scientists. Eventually he was to approach, among others, David Bellamy and Alan Mitchell. We are told that "Alan Mitchell was initially highly sceptical of Allen's findings" until one specific piece of evidence was presented to him: the Saxon stone vaulting over the root of the Tandridge yew.

This is described in *The Sacred Yew – Rediscovering the ancient Tree of Life* through the work of Allen Meredith (Chetan and Brueton 1996) in the following paragraph:

*"At Tandridge in Surrey is an immense tree. Very tall for a yew, it has a girth of 35 feet and a presence that can be felt throughout the churchyard. Allen estimates its age as in excess of 2,500 years. Tandridge provided a very particular piece of dating evidence. The tree is around 25 feet from the church, which has Saxon foundations. In the crypt it is clearly visible that the Saxon builders constructed stone vaulting over the tree's roots. While this shows that the Saxons were respectful of the tree's needs, it convincingly proves that even at that time the tree was fully grown." It was this piece of evidence that finally swayed Alan Mitchell; as he says: 'Roots increase extra-ordinarily slowly in diameter, and recent studies at Kew show that they taper sharply near the trunk and then extend far, at a nearly uniform size, much smaller than had been thought. Yet 1,000 years ago the Tandridge root was so big it had to be bridged'."*

### Tantalising evidence

Two years later Thomas Pakenham, in his *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* (1996), relates the same story, but with a note of caution: *"At Tandridge there is some tantalising extra evidence. Archaeologists have found that a Saxon vault under the west wall, a relic of the first church, was deliberately skewed. Was this to avoid the roots of the yew? If so this would make the tree pre-Saxon – perhaps imported from a Celtic tree cult. However, who is to say that the Saxon vault was skewed to avoid a tree, and that the tree was this particular yew?"*

### Misinformation

The yew's ability to recover and regenerate, even from meagre amounts of living material, is well known and the Tandridge Yew testifies to this fact. But this yew, so vast, open and approachable above ground, hides a secret of misinformation beneath the surface.

## ...and the mysterious Saxon stone vaulting

When I was asked, in 2014, how somebody might go about seeing the Saxon vault over the tree's root, I realised that I did not know the answer. I knew that the church had been approached in the past but had been unable to provide any information. I put this down to the church trying to protect its priceless Saxon asset from too many prying eyes. I felt it was time to consult Surrey Archaeological Society, who would surely be in a position to grant permission to visit.

Their reply was quite unexpected: *"I have checked our Surrey Archaeological Society Journals and Bulletins and have come up with no information but we do hold a copy of a pamphlet which discusses the yew tree; The origins of the Parish and Hundred of Tandridge by A J Hale, October 1996."*

### Saxon foundations

This makes interesting reading since it would appear that in 1960 some strange and unexplained mischief making was going on. For in that year a statement had appeared, written by an unknown person, called Notes on the Architecture and History of Tandridge Church. It is in this statement that a crypt and Saxon foundations at Tandridge are mentioned for the first time. But Hale says that "It is not possible to view either a crypt at the church or Saxon foundations. The source of the statement...is not known...Guide books to Surrey which have been published since 1960 repeat the statements about the crypt and Saxon foundations, but previous to this date no such statements were made in guide books".



The Tandridge Yew with layering branches (Photo: Christian Wolf)

### Historical evidence

While it is accepted that there may have been a late Saxon church at Tandridge, there is, apparently, neither ecclesiastical record, archaeological finding or any other historical evidence to prove it. Even when extensive rebuilding and excavation were undertaken in the 19th century, at a time when archaeological interest was increasing, there was no mention of any Saxon origins being discovered. I leave the last word to the Surrey Archaeological Society: "A Saxon Church was not mentioned before the 1960 pamphlet...and the origin of this statement cannot be traced and is not true." [my emphasis]

### Rule of thumb

As for the age of the Tandridge Yew, there is no better place to look than a conversation in Meetings with Remarkable Trees in which Pakenham asked Mitchell "how old is an old yew like this one at Tandridge?" Mitchell's reply was that "a good rule of thumb is that most trees look older than they are except for yews that are older than they look." Using Mitchell's rule of thumb, Pakenham concluded that "*it looks 1,000 years old. Probably it is older. The Celts may have decorated its branches with the heads of their victims. It may live to see our descendants flying to Mars. If awe-inspiring is too solemn a word, you might prefer 'wow'.*"

### 5 minute silence

We should not lose sight of the fact that, whatever its age, this is a formidable and wow-inspiring tree. In 2006, when thirty six members of Eibenfreunde (Friends of the yew) visited, the Tandridge Yew created such an overwhelming impression that a 5 minute silence was called to appreciate the grandeur of this magnificent tree – before we went in search of the non-existent Saxon vault!



Tandridge is visited by enthusiasts from across the world (Photo: Tim Bekaert [www.monumentaltrees.com](http://www.monumentaltrees.com))