

FRIENDS ASSIST WITH RECORDING OF THE YEW COLLECTION AT ELVASTON

On Sunday, November 26, 2006, The Friends of Elvaston were both pleased and privileged to be able to host a visit to Elvaston Castle Country Park by a recognised paladin of the yew tree, Tim Hills. For the last nine years Tim, who is based in Bristol, has, supported by his colleagues, travelled the country compiling a gazetteer of yew trees - both the ancient specimens and also those which are only a few hundred years old - in order to both extend our scientific knowledge of these leviathans of the tree world, and also to ensure that they receive proper cataloguing and protection. Even as I write the Ancient Yew Group are involved in several cases where yews have either been illegally felled or are threatened with felling.

The work of Tim and his colleagues is chronicled on their website;

<http://www.ancient-yew.org/>

Anyone visiting the website can learn all about the important work which is being carried out on the care and protection of such an important part of our heritage and can also see no fewer than 15 photographs of some of the yew trees at Elvaston Castle, taken by Tim. These can be found on the Yew Gazetteer page by scrolling down to Elvaston Castle Country Park and clicking on both the Site Information and the Tree Information.

The yew is important elsewhere too, particularly in Europe, and especially in Germany, which has a thriving society called Eibenfreunde - Friends of the Yew. This group is not only active in yew research but every year plans an extended visit to study yew in other parts of the world. This year the Ancient Yew Group hosted a 10 day visit by 38 of their foresters, botanists and dendrologists from Germany, Switzerland and Austria. At every woodland site visited in the south of England the observation was made about the lack of regeneration. One of the features of Elvaston that adds to its unique nature is the amount of regeneration that can be observed.

Most of Europe lost its yew forests to feed Britain's need for wood suitable for long bows, it would be appalling if one of our potential yew forests of the future was lost for a golf course or land development.

On Sunday's visit Tim took literally scores of photographs from various areas of the yew stock in Elvaston Castle Country Park. Whilst Irish yew is present (and welcomed), the primary reason for the visit was to photograph and assess the collection of Common or European yews at Elvaston, much of it forming part of the planting scheme of William Barron, for the 4th Earl of Harrington. Although there has been quite a lot written about Barron's inspired and

innovative work, its interpretation can not always be fully appreciated, due to the neglect which has primarily come about due to lack of proper investment in the Estate by the Derbyshire County Council. Much more could have been done, and should be done, to ensure that this situation is rectified as soon as possible and we mean by caring for the Estate, not trying to flog it off!

One definitely positive outcome was Tim's proclamation of the major importance of Elvaston to the national yew collection. "I hope that the people of Derby realise just what they have here at Elvaston", he said – "The collection on this site is unique, and irreplaceable". It should also be noted that Elvaston can boast a yew cultivar - *Taxus baccata Elvastonensis*. The Friends are both pleased and proud to have played a part in the recognition of yet another important factor of our national heritage at Elvaston. It is an absolute gem of a place. All the more reason for the community to prevent it falling into the hands of those who would wreck it all for a game of golf and a quick profit.

On a footnote; We are reminded that William Barron was the man responsible for the relocation of the great Buckland yew at Dover, an act revered amongst yew experts because of the difficulty of carrying out such an act successfully. The yew, possibly 1500 years old at the time of moving, had split apart and each part was practically parallel with the soil. The tree, with a massive root ball, with an estimated total weight of 56 tons, was moved approximately 60 yards to a new location and replanted in a much more erect and upright position, where the tree has continued to thrive, a monumental feat of both engineering and surgical botany. What a privilege it is to be able to say that here in Derby we have an entire Estate that was transformed by the genius and imagination of this man. It can rightly be said that he was to trees and botany what Brunel was to engineering.

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Postscript added by Tim Hills

William Barron's great feat of moving the Buckland-in-Dover Yew would not have been possible without his work at Elvaston. For it was here that he practised his skills of moving mature trees from one place to another. In 1852 he published *The British winter garden: Being a practical treatise on evergreens, showing their general utility in the formation of garden and landscape scenery, as practised at Elvaston Castle*.

On pages 45 to 47 he describes and provides sketches of three of the moved trees. The first was considered to be 100 years old at the time (250+ now), and details of the other two suggest that they are now between 400 and 500 years old.

“Some have attempted to show that large trees can be moved at a very moderate rate; this may be the case, if simply removing trees be looked at; but where successful planting, preserving the beauty of the tree and vigorous after-growth are considered, it will be found to involve considerable expense. Circumstances being so varied in regard to locality, the expenses attending the removal of each tree will be found to vary, in proportion to the difficulties or facilities presented; but some idea may be formed from the statement that eight men and five or six horses have been sent several miles, starting early in the morning, and have brought a large tree home on the evening of the same day, without any previous preparation having been given to the tree: some Yew trees have been brought to Elvaston Castle from considerable distances, possessing deep interest from their great age, or peculiarity of growth.



The old clipt yew tree and the two following are given from among many, as specimens of large trees which have been removed. The arbor is now about 14 feet square and 18 feet high: it was brought twenty-five miles about eighteen years ago, and it is now upwards of one hundred years since it was planted in the garden from whence it was removed. It is one tree. The stem runs up the centre; and it is given as a specimen where severe mechanical difficulties had to be conquered. After the tree was prepared for removal, with the platform under it, it was necessary to raise it sufficiently high to travel, before the trussed beams of the large machine could be passed through the branches. It could not be raised by the screw-jack in the usual way.



Fig 7

The wood-cut (fig 7) shows a portion of a yew tree supposed to be many centuries old; the trunk exhibits internally a very remarkable phenomenon, viz., a tree luxuriating and feeding upon its own decayed trunk. Probably forty or fifty years ago, the case or shell of living wood which surrounds the rotten stem had been induced, in consequence of a wet season or seasons, to push small rootlets where a portion of the new bark had come into contact with the decomposed trunk. These rootlets laid hold and grew, and now a host of roots, many of them thick, are forming a new stem within the old one. The dimensions of this tree are as follows:-Trunk at three feet from the ground, 7 feet 3 inches in circumference, height 33 feet; and eleven feet from the ground the roots are formed which feed on the decayed trunk. This tree, though a mere shell, is perfectly healthy; it was brought to Elvaston, about thirteen years ago, upwards of ten miles.

The other engraving (fig 8) represents the stem of an old yew tree which forms an arbour 14 feet 2 inches high, and 59 feet 9 inches in circumference. The person of whom it was purchased has in his possession family writings which proved it to be upwards of three hundred years old before its removal to Elvaston, nearly twelve years ago. The circumference of the trunk is 7 feet 4 inches. This tree was brought twelve miles.”



Fig 8