

The Acton Beauchamp Yew - Saved by History

The oldest yew in Acton Beauchamp churchyard was described in *The Sacred Yew* in 1994 as 'broken and ivy covered'. I visited in 1998 and found what looked like an old stump hidden among nettles, brambles, holly, ivy and elder, with its branches carrying only small amounts of foliage.



Dr Prattinton illustration of the Acton Beauchamp Yew in 1810 - courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London

Danger zone

By 2003 the ground around the tree had been cleared, making it possible to identify this as a 20ft girthed fragment of what must have once been a formidable tree. But not everyone saw it that way and a year later views were expressed about its state, claiming that it was 'dead' and 'dangerous' and should be cut down. I was invited to a site meeting to present a case for the tree's defence. It was fortunate that evidence existed from the 19th century, for in 1856 botanist Edwin Lees wrote in his *Pictures of Nature around the Malvern Hills*: 'Near the west end of the church is a most magnificent old yew-tree, riven into two parts, but still green and vigorous and which, from the examination of various old yews, I should put down at 900 years old. The Acton (Beauchamp) Yew measures 22ft. in girth at a yard from the ground and can hardly be matched in Worcestershire'.



2012 and little altered in 200 years (Photo Tim Hills)

But this was not all, for in 1810, Dr Prattinton had painted a watercolour of the church and included the ancient yew (above left). His painting shows clearly the two parts of the tree described by Lees, and we can see that the shape of the surviving fragment to be little altered in 200 years.

Proof positive

Here was evidence that we were standing next to a tree with a likely age of above 1000 years. The Parochial Church Council members in attendance no longer saw a dead or dangerous trunk, instead they noted the vigour of new growth on its large central branch. It was decided to keep the area around the tree clear so that it was no longer competing for nutrients, and to create a viewing point in the churchyard from which the yew could be seen at its best. A return visit in 2012, when these photographs were taken, shows a steady recovery with much new wood being laid down on the old shell. There is no reason why this yew should not make a full recovery and live for many more centuries.



The Acton Beauchamp Yew (Photo: Tim Hills)

Safeguards needed

About a quarter of the remaining ancient yews in English churchyards exist as a fragment or fragments of the original tree. For some people this is not what a healthy tree should look like, leading to it being destroyed. The most recent instance of this was the felling and burning of an ancient yew in Ashford Carbonell churchyard on 23rd/24th November 2011. Its loss is a reminder of an unsatisfactory state of affairs in which the fate of individual ancient churchyard yews still remains in the hands of a few individuals, and highlights the inadequacy of the safeguards that are supposed to protect these trees.



The Acton Beauchamp Yew (Photo: Tim Hills)