

A Christian Church has existed here for over 1200 years. It is dedicated to St Melangell, whose festival is held on 27th May. In *Buildings of Wales* it is described as 'A remote church on the side of a beautiful cwm below the Berwyn Hills, where Monacella founded a nunnery in the late 8th century'. The earliest feature in the church is the 12th century shrine of Melangell, made for the remains of Monacella and now found behind the main altar. The shrine, which became a place of pilgrimage for those seeking cures for various ailments, was removed from the church in the 17th century, but was restored to its rightful place in the 1890s. It is considered to be one of the earliest surviving Romanesque shrines in Northern Europe.

The Clwyd/Powys Archaeological Trust have carried out exploratory archaeology here and discovered 'Prehistoric pits at the west end and beneath the tower of Melangell church. Filled with dense charcoal layer, charred plant remains and human cremated remains. Radiocarbon dating of 3180+/-60BP (CAR-1309) from one pit indicates a Middle Bronze Age date'.

The legend of Melangell is derived from the seventeenth century transcript *Life of the Saints*: 'One day a prince Brochwell was hunting, and his hounds disturbed a hare which took refuge in a thicket. The hare then hid under the skirts of the virgin Melangell as she prayed. The hounds fled howling, the huntsman's horn became frozen to his mouth. Melangell informed the prince that she had come to the palace seeking refuge. The prince granted the valley to her, and from then she founded a religious community'.

In 1987, the grass beneath one of the yews was covered with industrial salt to simulate a snowy burial scene for a film project depicting the life of Ann Griffiths, the nineteenth century Welsh hymn writer. The salt washed into the soil and eventually caused damage to the foliage of the tree. There were concerns that it might not survive, but in 1998 we were unable to detect which of the four trees had been affected, and assume that it had made a complete recovery.

This is the first of four fine yews at the site. It is female and grows just inside the churchyard gate SE of the church. It is on a mound and leans heavily towards the church, probably caused by the weight of former branches, particularly the one that once grew at (A). A further substantial branch (B) stretches out from the base of the tree. Girths recorded as follows:

1983 Reg Wheeler: 755cm (24' 9") at the ground.

1998 Tim Hills: Approximately 24' at the ground.

2000 Tim Hills: 23' 3" between the ground and 1'.



The largest girthed yew is male and grows east of the church. From a platform at about 4' three substantial growth areas emerge. There are also remnants of two dead branches, though a small amount of new growth on one illustrates why seemingly 'dead' wood should not be removed without good reason.

Girths have been recorded as follows:

1983 Reg Wheeler: 832cm (27' 3") at 30cm.

1998 Tim Hills: 29' 0" approximately at 4' Also 15' around its main stem.

2000 Tim Hills: 28' 7" at its narrowest close to the ground.

Fergus's diary, written as he collected material for the millennium yew project, described 'a male tree measuring 31' 9" with a massively spreading root mass that tapers to a waist then flares again to support 4 enormous limbs'.



The 3rd yew is female and grows west of the church. It has a fine elongated bole which is hollowing; in this tree the hollow was filled with convoluted, interlocking growth. The photograph shows an outpouring of large branches. Girths recorded as follows:

1983 Reg Wheeler: 680cm (22' 4") at 80cm.

1998 Tim Hills: 24' 6" at 3'.

2000 Tim Hills: 22' 0" at 2'.



Smallest of the four yews is male growing WSW of the church. In 1998 it was unapproachable through dense undergrowth, but by 2000 the ground had been cleared and it was possible to record its girth as 17' 10" between the ground and 1'. It has a bole of about 4' and two distinct sides to its growth, the more substantial to the east.

In 1983 Reg Wheeler recorded a girth of 574cm (18' 10") at 30cm.



© Tim Hills - Ancient Yew Group - 2020