

St Mary's church was not built until the mid 13th century. The presence of this vast ancient yew has led to the assumption that the present church must have replaced a much earlier church. We now learn that this was not the case, and that St Mary's was built on this raised piece of ground at a time when local people realised that their Saxon parish church, at nearby East Stoke (Eastoke), was on a site that would soon be flooded by the encroaching sea. This proved to be the case and the church was lost to the elements in 1324/5.

This information fuels the debate about the yew's age. If, as somebody has written on the postcard, it is 2000 years old, then it would have been 1250 years old when the church was built, and would already have been a significant feature on Hayling Island, growing in a prominent position on this raised knoll.

But if it was planted when St Mary's was built, then it has exhibited such extraordinarily rapid growth over a prolonged period of time that it would turn upside down present theories on the age of old yew trees. Perhaps we should not dismiss

out of hand John Barrow's suggestion in 1835, that it was the 'union of three or four stems'.

While everything we know so far about yew growth says that this tree was alive when the church was built c. 1250, there is no evidence to support an age as high as 2000 years.

Much has been said and written about this tree:

1817: 'Adjoining to the western porch stands an aged yew tree, perhaps of equal or greater age than the church, and under its broad and sable branches it is said two thousand people might be shaded'.

*Topographical account of the hundred of Bosmere, in Hampshire* - William Bingley

1826: 'Near the southern entrance stands a large and venerable yew tree, whose existence, perhaps, is coeval with that of the church itself'. *A topographical and historical account of Hayling island* - R. Scott

1835: 'There is one I have seen in the churchyard of Hayling Island, *thirty-six feet in circumference*; but it is ragged and twisted, and rough as a rock, appearing to have been an union of three or four stems'. *A tour round Ireland, through the sea-coast counties, in the autumn of 1835* - John Barrow

1879: 'It is quite hollow and yet bears two very large limbs and is still a flourishing tree'. The 1883 *Flora of Hampshire* - Frederick Townsent



photo - Christian Wolf - 2006



1884: A thorough description of the tree was reproduced in the following account in the *Hants Field Club VIII* 1918:

THE ANCIENT YEW TREE IN SOUTH HAYLING CHURCHYARD By John Glas Sandeman, M.V.O., F.S.A.

“The oldest expert description of the ancient Yew Tree in South Hayling churchyard that I have come across is that by Mr H.E.Evershed which appeared in “Woods and Forests” of the 7th of May, 1884. Mr. Evershed writes that this tree “affords a curious example of the rejuvenating power which yews possess beyond all other trees.” The lapse of thirty-three years has done much to corroborate this statement, as well as to prove what an accurate observer he was. A careful examination of this interesting tree, undertaken in September, 1917, by my neighbour, Mr. E. S. McEuen, and myself, fully confirms Mr. Evershed’s observations. We recognised without difficulty the “hollow trunk in which you find yourself encircled by the rugged shell which alone remains of the original tree and which is still furnished with sufficient living bark to feed and support a large and leafy head of branches.”

“Within the hollow of this old trunk of the original tree springs a separate stem of doubtful origin, a stem of probably more than a century old, which may be a seedling or a sucker of the older tree from which it is separate at the foot, but is united with the old yew’s living envelope some ten feet from the ground. There is another somewhat similar growth of apparently greater age about a yard to the south of the growth just described, but this may possibly form a part of the original tree, from which it seems now impossible to distinguish it. These two apparently more recent growths occupy that portion of what must have formerly been the north-eastern part of the shell of the ancient tree, which part has now completely disappeared. The difficulty experienced by Mr Evershed in determining the boundaries between the ancient and the more recent wood are, of course, exaggerated after a lapse of thirty-three years. He describes it as “a gigantic tree ruined once and dead and now alive again, though the exact method of rejuvenescence can hardly be traced.”

In 1884 according to Mr Evershed’s report, the circumference of this tree was thirty-three feet. It is now thirty-six feet, including the two growths above mentioned as having replaced part of the original exterior shell, but according to the same authority this affords no foundation for an estimate of age, however one might think to the contrary. Beyond the propping up of three of the heaviest limbs on the north-east of the tree, thereby relieving the strain on the trunk on the side opposite to the prevailing winds, nothing seems to have been done until now in the way of restoration and preservation.

Some years ago one of my neighbours suggested that the restoration of this ancient tree should be undertaken, and very generously offered to provide the amount necessary for the work, an offer that it appears was not favourably received until the Archdeacon of their Diocese was appealed to, but the subject remained in abeyance until 1916, when Mr Goldring W. of Kew was consulted and asked to inspect and report upon the best of preserving the life of the tree. This was done, and a report with directions for the necessary treatment was furnished. These recommendations, after some delay owing to the scarcity of labour, have been carried out by Messrs. Cheals of Crawley, with some modifications, such as the substitution of lysol for crude carbolic acid, which Messrs Cheals considered too drastic, and they added a copious dressing of Stockholm tar after the spraying with lysol for the extermination of the fungoid growth. This application appears to have effectively eliminated the fungus with which the hollow trunk was infected.

More than a ton and a half of dead wood was cut away and several large and straggling limbs which jeopardised the stability of the tree were lopped off, with the result that the true proportions of the trunk, which had hitherto been obscured, were opened out to view. A substantial unclimbable iron fence now surrounds the ancient trunk; this is by no means an eyesore, whilst it protects the hollow tree from being the dumping ground of refuse by thoughtless people. There are sixteen younger yew trees in the churchyard.”

1896: It was noted that the tree was 'covered with young shoots from the ground' with its 'trunk split at 4ft'. *Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland*. Mr Trigg, who supplied this information also noted: 'Diameter of dead centre 8 to 10 ft'.

1908: *A History of the County of Hampshire* wrote that 'to the south of the church, near the south porch, is a very fine yew tree, which though somewhat past its prime is still full of leaf, and adds greatly to the beauty of the churchyard'.

1952: In *The Yew Trees of England* Swanton wrote that the tree was 'completely protected by stout iron palisading 6' high. Large outward leaning branches were supported by thick wooden posts'.

1981: In *THE KING HOLDS HAYLING* F.G.S. Thomas wrote that 'in 1225, a middle aged tree dominated the landscape and a chancel was built where meetings of every sacred and secular kind had been held, perhaps since the time of Augustine, Birinus or Wilfrid'.

1984: Meredith wrote that 'the yew is still surrounded by iron railings...realistically it was only possible to measure below 2 feet thus avoiding all the obtrusions, young shoots and swollen growth, any measurement above 2 feet would be a little false, and certainly several feet more in girth because of all the obtrusions mentioned; when we did measure the tree at just below 2 feet its circumference was 33 feet 8 inches; the tree is hollow inside and very decayed, wooden posts support the trunk, on one side the tops of the iron railings are embedded in the trunk, this may need checking at some later stage. On the east side there is a large opening in the trunk about three feet across. On the west side of the trunk it is much ruined, and the older part of the trunk is quite visible. It is clear to see where new growth has taken centuries to grow, the tree still looks quite healthy'.

1995: 'The largest Yew in Havant...It has grown to a height of 30'. The tree is very hollow and the two main branches have separated to nearly ground level. They also lean badly to the NE and have had to be propped up'. *Hampshire Tree Survey*



2006: The yew was visited - and admired - by 36 members of Eibenfreunde



Photos below - Peter Norton - 2011

