

A FEW THINGS ABOUT YEW TREES.

1. **The fine old yew tree** in the All Hallows' graveyard is an English yew, *taxus baccata*, a species renowned for its longevity and its connexion with pagan and religious rites. It is native to Ireland but appears all over Europe, often in association with Druid practices.
2. **The wood of yew** reputedly outlives iron. A 250,000-year-old yew spear found at Clacton in Essex is the world's oldest known wooden artefact.
3. **The Fortingall Yew** in Perthshire is said to be 9,000 years old, has a girth of 52 feet and stands close to a Bronze Age tumulus.
4. Yew trees are **dioecious**, that is, they may be either male or female. The seeds are called *arils*. They are poisonous if chewed, though the pulp of the fruit is not poisonous.
5. **At least 500 churchyards** in England and Wales contain yews as old as or older than their churchyards. At least 130 of these trees are estimated to pre-date Christianity.
6. **Many ancient yews** are hollow, although still alive. Some have seats placed inside them. A few have hollows large enough for a coach and horses to be driven through them. Hollow yews frequently resume growth after many years of dormancy.
7. **The Irish yew**, which also grows in All Hallows' churchyard, has branches that sweep evenly upwards to form a tidy bundle. Irish yews are often clipped and planted to form avenues.
8. **The clippings of yews**, although poisonous to animals, are medicinally and commercially valuable because they yield **taxol**, an alkaloid that is effective in the treatment of ovarian cancer.
9. Yews were often planted in **boundary hedges**. It is possible that the All Hallows' yew marks an earlier boundary of the churchyard. If we had evidence of an earlier boundary it would be helpful in dating our tree.
10. **A yew tree grows very slowly**. The rate of increase in girth is approximately 1 foot in 30 years, but growth may be much slower in yews that are subject to continuous winds from the sea.
11. **In Shining Cliff Wood**, Derbyshire, a hollow yew known as The Betty Kenny Tree was once home to a family. A bough was hewn out to form a child's cradle and this is said to have inspired the nursery rhyme 'Rock-a-bye-baby'.
12. **Yew branches** often bend down as they grow and root themselves to form new trunks that then unite with the main trunk.

Almost half the parish churches in England and Wales planted young yew trees at **the 2000 millennium**.
14. **A yew tree** should be kept free from ivy. It benefits from a gently watered-in compost that includes ox-blood.
15. After the famous yew in **Gilbert White's garden** at Selworthy was uprooted by a great gale in 1990, a beautiful lute was made, using the tree's dark and light woods in a striped pattern.
16. **The age of a yew tree** may be calculated by measuring its girth just below the place where its trunk divides, or at about 4 feet above ground level. The girth measurement is then referred to a table that gives an approximate age for the tree. But it has to be remembered that this is not rocket science: climate and sea winds, the closeness of a particular yew's tree rings (they may vary from 10 to an inch in a young tree to 100 to an inch in a mature specimen) and the yew's habit of becoming dormant for years, are all factors that have to be considered in trying to estimate its age.

NOTES ON YEW TREE SUB-COMMITTEE MEETING**3 APRIL 2006 AT BELLE VUE**

1. We met to plan a summer afternoon event to which we would invite all residents of Ringmore, their families, friends and visitors. The proposal is that we measure the large yew tree in the church yard, using an approved method, record its girth and the names of those present, and spread some fertilizer around the base of the tree. It is hoped that children would be involved in the measuring, recording etc. This simple ceremony could be followed by a picnic of light refreshments in the churchyard. As a memento of the occasion we could distribute a single-page leaflet of information about the English yew and its importance in churchyards. The hope is that this might become a biennial or triennial event for the village.

A rough measurement made on the morning of 3.04.06 gave the tree a girth of c.13 feet. This means it is probably well over 300 years old and could be considerably more.

2. Jacqueline has approached the churchwarden, Phil Errett, about the proposal and he expressed his approval and encouragement.

3. The proposed date is 9 August, and the time, 4pm.

4. The Society would provide wine, soft drinks and small sandwiches (or similar nibbles) for the picnic refreshments. We would need to ask some other committee and Society members to help on the day.

5. We need to circulate advance information by means of the Newsletter, RHS notices etc. so that the date and nature of the event is made clear to everyone. Di will prepare some publicity items for consideration, and we will need to prepare invitations to go out in July.

6. It was agreed that Jan and Chris Roberts should be asked to formulate the exact procedure for measuring the tree accurately.

7. We need a good hardbound book in which to record our measurement, the names of those present, and perhaps some photographs. The length of measuring string we use can be labelled and kept.

8. We would hope to have a display board in the churchyard on the day, with photographs of some of the very spectacular and famous English yews and interesting information about their remarkable properties and uses.

9. Our expenses would be:

- wine and hire of glasses
- food
- hardbound notebook
- possibly some stationery items

10. We should be sure to keep the churchwarden informed and to seek his advice whenever necessary.

11. The growth habit of the two small Irish yews (just NE of the church) is different from that of the English and they are not susceptible to measurement in the same way. At the very least, we could give them some yew fertilizer.

12. We need to consider how we are going to estimate the number of people who might come to the event.

NEXT MEETING: 16 MAY 5.00pm AT BELLE VUE

Di Collinson

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1. We agreed that 9 August is a good date for the event. After discussion it was decided that 4.30pm is the best time as it allows people to have afternoon outings before coming to the churchyard.
2. We settled for very simple catering: a rosé wine and soft drinks with shortbread, macaroons, small kit-kats, etc. and wrapped ice-creams for children. Jacqueline will be investigating prices of these goods and will organize the wine. We shall need help from committee/society members with handing round the refreshments.
3. It was agreed we would put a preliminary announcement in the June Newsletter and follow it with fuller information and invitations in July. (See p.3 for the announcement.)
4. Jan and Chris Roberts are gathering precise information on how the great yew is to be measured. Children will be asked to help with this and with the collecting of names to be recorded in the bound book. Mike Patterson has been asked to procure the book and to oversee the transcription of measurement, names etc. We need also to find out what kind of small permanent marks may be made on the tree so that any future measurements can be taken in the same place. We hope to have a screen for interesting pictures of yew trees and information about them.
5. Di will be responsible for publicity and advertising and possibly for the designing of a small memento to be given to everyone who comes to the event. She will need to ask for some help with this and with refreshments.
6. Dennis has agreed to supervise the children to collect the names of those present and to organize the collection and clearance of any litter.
7. We hope to progress and clarify these plans, and invite helpers, at the full committee meeting on 7 June (2.30pm at Belle Vue).

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RINGMORE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE RINGMORE YEWS

There are three yew trees in the All Hallows churchyard. The largest of the three is a fine and very ancient English yew. It has a girth of more than 12 feet, and this means that it is several hundred years old.

A small event to celebrate the presence of this noble and interesting tree is being planned for 9 August 2006, in accordance with a procedure suggested by English Heritage at the Millennium, when many rural communities celebrated the splendour and usefulness of their churchyard yews and established the practice of recording their growth every two or three years. We hope very much that children in the village will come along to help with measuring the tree and to enjoy what we hope will be a very happy occasion.

The plan is to measure the tree's girth by a prescribed method, to calculate its approximate age, and to record the measurement of the tree and the names of all those present in a special book. Some appropriate fertilizer will then be applied to the base of the tree, after which everyone will be invited to enjoy some light refreshments provided by the Ringmore Historical Society.

THE DAY: WEDNESDAY 9 AUGUST 2006

THE TIME: 4.30pm

THE PLACE: ALL HALLOWS' CHURCHYARD

PLEASE WATCH THIS SPACE FOR MORE NEWS OF YEWS NEXT MONTH

RINGMORE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

DRAFT
better to member

Dear History Society Member(s) ,

This is just to remind you of the Ringmore History Society event on 9 August, when the ancient yew in All Hallows' churchyard is going to be measured and have its age calculated.

We hope you will be coming to enjoy the occasion and that you will bring family and friends with you. Visitors to Ringmore are warmly welcome and, in particular, we would like children to take part in the business of measuring the tree.

There will be a special book in which to record the names of those present, a handout giving interesting information about yew trees, and drinks and light refreshments to celebrate the age and splendour of our fine tree.

We hope the sun will shine. Please come.

AUGUST 9 2006 ‡ ALL HALLOWS' CHURCHYARD ‡ 4.30pm