Trees In Mythology, Legend, Symbolism
And Religion.

A chapter from “Yew Trees and their Inter-relationship with Man” – a BSc dissertation in Rural Resources Development (1993)

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The majority of Yew trees are found growing in churchyards, and this is the image of the Yew that many people have in their minds.

The Yew, Hampshire © Tim Partridge

The Yew however, is an important part of our native flora and has been of great value historically. The Yew stands out as the ultimate tree in many ways. It provides us with a living witness to so much of our cultural development that it is unique amongst trees.

The Yew has been the subject of myths, legends and Acts of Parliament. It has become part of religious beliefs and is featured in a wealth of literary material. The Yew has also been used as a marker in the landscape because of its exceptional longevity.

Trees have become part of our lives in four areas that are distinct, yet have elements of each other within them. They are represented in legends and myths, both from our culture and from others. Trees have also become deeply integrated in symbolism and are used in a variety of ways to convey messages related to the qualities that certain trees possess. The tree also appears in religion, where it is worshipped directly or used as a place around which to worship.

Trees in Mythology

Mythology in itself can be described as a collection of traditions that refer to the forces of Nature, to national heroes and to the gods. Nature Myths are primitive attempts to explain the processes of nature and may be looked upon as the beginnings of natural science. Hero Myths
are more likened to sacred mythology. Myths draw their parallels from common experience and grow up with the nation.

The myth in this way becomes part of tradition. The emergence of myths can be understood by the examination of the early primitive men that lived in those ‘mythological’ times. The primitive man in his simplicity of experience had not learned accurately to differentiate or distinguish; definitions were impossible, and he would not have been able to detect the contradictions in to which his methods of thought plunged him. The development of religious and scientific ideas was the result of the way in which he faced such contradictions as they emerged into distinct consciousness. Subsequently his ideas became a coherent system, which was updated by new ideas as older ones were superseded by new. (Mee 1958).

Probably the most profound way in which trees are regarded is by their association with mythology. Trees bewitch us and offer a sense of mystery, and our association of known myths with particular trees fuels this. This association takes place not only on a species level but also in geographical terms, with individual trees. In mythology, trees take on magical powers and become the centre of our fascination. Trees in this context give us a sense of the unknown. The human preoccupation with the unknown is eloquently summarised by Plutarch in his work on Morality. Writing in about 90 A.D. Plutarch said of Man’s curiosity;

“This curiosity which now is in hand, being masked under the name of wisdom and hability of spirit, is (to say a truth) a covert and hidden fury, which carrieth the mind of the curious person past himself.”

Trees in mythology offer us a living reminder of events too terrible to contemplate or so wondrous as to be beyond our comprehension. There is an uncanny inquisitiveness about such events that leads us to hold up the image of some trees as worthy of reverence. The tree has become the witness to and often the centre of mythical happenings. To be able to see and touch such a tree is a powerful experience, although we cannot physically draw from it any of that power. We are unable to grasp the complexity of these feelings, and for this reason we bow to the superiority of the tree over us.

One story exists surrounding the mythical power of a Yew tree. The tree, in the cloisters of Vreton in Brittany is said to have sprung from the staff of St. Martin. The tree was always regarded as sacred and the Princes of Brittany were said to offer prayers under it before entering the church. Apparently no birds ate of the berries and no one dared touch the tree. One day, a local band of pirates came to cut bowstaves from the branches. Two of them climbed into the tree and met their fate. They fell from the tree and were killed. The tree is still living. (Loudon 1838).

Trees in Legend

Legends are a different phenomenon to Myths and have much less basis in fact. Many are merely stories of fiction that claim to be truth. They are less concerned with happenings beyond comprehension, but in associating places and people with particular events. One legend from Scotland that is related to the churchyard Yew illustrates this well. It reads: -

“If a Clansman held in his left hand a piece of churchyard Yew, then as he confronted his enemy in battle to denounce him or threaten him, the enemy would hear nothing. All around
would hear however, enabling the Clansman to swear afterwards that he gave clear warning of his intention and was thus not guilty of treachery.” (Wilks 1972).

One of the most popular characters of legend is the Yeoman of the 12th or 13th Century who roamed Northern England with a band of outlaws. The story of Robin Hood is well known, yet the true identity of the man is lost in the mists of time. Two things are certain however. Robin Hood was regarded as the best archer in England, and although his true identity is unclear, as a character he was a living legend. (Valentine Harris 1952).

His use of the longbow is well documented, and a statue of him unveiled in 1952 in Nottingham shows him in the process of drawing his bow. It is likely that he used a bow made from Yew wood though there is no evidence to support this, save that it was the traditional material. A longbow reputedly used by Robin Hood’s closest companion, Little John was in the Wakefield museum, but now is in a private collection. This bow is certainly made of Yew wood but there is some dispute about the true origin of the bow. (Lees 1987).

Robin Hood also had links with other trees. Sherwood Forest, where the outlaw based his ‘merry men’ was set into legend by the use of one tree as a meeting place. The ‘Major Oak’ as it is known, is now a focus for tourists who come to see something living linking them directly to the legend. The last word goes to the Yew tree in Doveridge, Derbyshire, said to be up to 1,400 years old. Legend has it that under this tree Robin married Maid Marrion. (Wilks 1972).

**Trees in Symbolism**

Trees are Nature’s gladiator, who despite great imbalance in odds, fights to keep a foothold in the most extreme conditions. This strength is one of the characteristics that have led to the symbolic use of trees. The tree has three parts in terms of symbolism – roots, trunk and branches. (Davies 1988).

Its roots lie deep in the ground drawing up nutrients and providing a solid base. The canopy contains the leaves that draw energy from their surroundings. The trunk stands above ground providing material strength for the whole tree. These elements offer to us symbolism of feelings we seek in choosing our individual landscapes. A sense of belonging is something many people strive to achieve in a community. The tree with its firm base symbolises that concept of ‘roots’ and an element of an ongoing relationship with our surroundings. The canopy drawing in energy from its environment is symbolic of our need to absorb our cultural heritage in order to feel in tune with our evolution from times past. The drive to find an historic link with our present lives is almost instinctive and propels us forward as if on a quest to attain status and find a reason for being. The material strength of the trunk and its part in holding the tree together is perhaps symbolic of our need for inner strength.

The way in which the Christian Church has developed has been eloquently described by Pope Paul VI, who wrote of the church in ways which use the symbolism of the tree to describe it, thus;

“This is how the Lord wanted his church to be: universal, a great tree whose branches shelter the birds of the air.......In the mind of the Lord the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world.” (Exarchat Apostolique 1992).
Trees are also regarded by some as powerful indicators of certain traits. They have become a potent symbol, and are used to convey particular qualities. Their steadfast longevity is now used, for example to advertise investment accounts. The advert uses the tree in such a way as to suggest that the account too has those qualities.

The symbolism of trees also finds its way into human expression. The gnarled trunk of a tree is in many ways symbolic of those amongst us who have achieved great age. A wizened human face can be suggestive of great wisdom. This concept of ‘wisdom of maturity’ is thus mirrored in our oldest trees. They have attained great age and maturity so providing us with a sense of respect for them. As the numbers of older people in Europe continue to grow, maybe the symbolism of trees will find new resonance. Indeed the profile of trees amongst health care professionals is rising up the agenda as the latest EU project ‘Action on Forestry - Human Health and Wellbeing’ is showing. This four year project (2004 –2008) will gather data on the impact of forests on peoples health and shape our future relationships with trees.

**Trees and Religion**

One of the most significant ways in which trees are regarded is through their association with religion. Several Races exist that revere trees, and there are some that use them as icons. Others used them to make representations of gods that they worshiped. (Davies 1988). These Totems are visible representations of ‘forces unseen’ that allow the worshipper to prostrate himself before the gods, lest they should harm or kill him. Some totems are representations of other things, carved in wood, and some are representative of trees themselves. (Mee 1958). Within this country there is evidence to show that in the past trees were regarded as sacred, and became the focal point for worship.

Some religious groups such as the Druids worshiped other gods but used trees as places of gathering for worship. They did however value the trees considerably and even planted trees to form groves in which they could worship. An article of the Druidic religion forbade them from worshiping their gods inside a temple enclosed by walls and a roof. Instead the Druids worshiped in the open air, and most of their sacred sites were on elevated ground where the heavenly bodies that they worshiped could be seen most clearly. However, for their most sacred places, the Druids sought out a more secretive location. They chose the deepest parts of woodlands and either planted trees or used existing groves as places of worship. These groves, generally of Oak, were tended and protected by the Druids, who enclosed many of them with a ditch. Gaps were left to allow them access, but these too were closely guarded. (Porteous 1928) The shape of these enclosures is significant since it takes its form from an Eastern sacred shape, the circle. This is of importance later on in religious terms as many early Christian churches took on this shape. (Dallimore 1908).

Other groups such as Pagans, it is believed, actually worshiped the trees themselves. Some of the values that Pagans historically associated with trees are held as valid by them even today. The association of trees with longevity and of fertility is well documented and this may give some base to the sacred position that some trees hold. (Davies 1988). The Pagans it is thought, used the Yew tree as the focus for their attentions. It must have been seen by Pagans as more of a mythological deity rather than a place for worship. The Yew itself has particular qualities which emanate a feeling of awe in its presence. The natural Yew forests that still cover parts of Europe are places with an intense feeling of atmosphere. In the early morning mists, such vast forests become forbidding places that can give a strange sense of unease to a modern day
visitor, let alone a hapless Pagan, at the mercy of natural forces and of simpler mind and understanding.

The enormous size of a mature Yew tree and their exceptional longevity are characteristics that lend themselves to being revered. This coupled to the way in which the branches of an ancient Yew bend to rest on the ground and the poisonous nature of its seeds and foliage, make it understandably worshiped.

As long ago as 1664 John Evelyn, in his book *Sylva — A Discourse of Forest Trees*’ echoed the feeling of awe and wonder felt by the early pagans;

“He that in Winter should behold some of our highest hills in Surrey clad in whole woods of these last two trees (Yew and Box), for divers miles in circuit, might without the least violence to his imagination easily fancy himself transported into some new or enchanted country.”

**Trees and Christianity**

The Yew and other trees are also associated with Christianity. Some of the symbolism of the tree in Christianity comes from its common ancestry with Paganism. In its early stages, Christianity ran parallel to Paganism and some of the Yew trees that existed in pre-Christian times and were incorporated into the new religion may still be alive today. These Yew trees are now enclosed by Christian churches in a similar way to the ancient Druidic groves. Their circular form giving us the clue to their ancient origins. When Augustine came to Britain in 597 A.D. to bring Christianity he was given the task of bringing the Pagan faiths to an end in a sympathetic and sensitive way. He sought to convert rather than to alienate the people. He was sent by Gregory the Great who insisted that Augustine should not destroy the heathen temples, but only remove the images, wash the walls with water, erect altars and try to convert
the sites to Christian churches. The raising of some ancient Yew trees on a circular mound of earth is a reflection of the circular form that these new churches took, as a remnant of that superstition. (Dallimore 1928). Indeed a Yew tree is said to have sheltered St Augustine when he arrived to bring Christianity. The tree at Stanford Bishop in Herefordshire is still living and has a girth of almost seven metres. (Wilks 1972).

Christianity also took on many other features of Paganism including candles and altars as well as the rite of initiation. It also had some of the characteristics of the so called mystery religions, such as the dependence on a saviour figure and assurance of personal salvation. Christianity also had its sites of pilgrimage and places where votive offerings could be made. (Hutton 1991). The use of trees by Pagans was embraced by Christianity, though in a different form. A tree formed the focal point for Christianity in its use at the crucifixion. Christ, the saviour figure, suffered and died upon a cross roughly hewn from a tree. The crucifixion was a significant event since their saviour gave himself to obviate the need for future sacrifice. (Hutton 1991).

The events that followed the crucifixion were of greater significance. Once the resurrection and ascension had occurred, Christians were offered everything of the mystery religions as well as the hope of eternal life. The early Christians looked to nature to provide a symbolic representation of these events and the Yew tree, so closely associated with the religion from which they took much of their form provided the answer. The Yew tree with its evergreen leaves and great lifespan came to signify to Christians, eternal life and immortality respectively. (Dallimore 1908).

Some indeed infer that Christ was crucified on a Yew tree. In the ballad called “The Leaves Of Light”, which survived in oral tradition into the Twentieth century, we find just such an assertion.

The third verse reads;
And they went down into yonder town
and sat in the Gallery,
And there they saw sweet Jesus Christ
Hanging from a big Yew tree.
(Stewart 1990).

It is a strange paradox that the life of Jesus not only ended ‘on a tree’, but was dependent on them for his work. We know that Jesus, like his father Joseph, was a carpenter. He would have had a sound knowledge of the properties of timber and known the value of trees.

The tree also forms an important part of Christian scriptures. In the earliest books of the Old Testament the Book of Genesis makes reference to two trees created and placed in the Garden Of Eden by God. The first chapter, verse 9 reads;

The Lord God made trees spring from the ground, all trees pleasant to look at and good for food; and in the middle of the garden he set the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The latter tree is of considerable significance, since it was from this tree that Eve was fed the forbidden fruit by the Serpent. This led to the ousting of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and divine reproach from God. Eve was punished by being condemned to pain in
childbirth and to being subservient to Adam. He was punished by being made to work hard on
the ‘accursed ground’ and his struggle was to continue until he too ‘return to the ground’.

Trees appear in other parts of the Scriptures. The Cedars Of Lebanon are considered by many
Jews to be an illustration of God’s goodness, as indicated by the words in the Bible:

The righteous shall grow like the Cedars of Lebanon.

The original grove of trees still grows on the slopes of the mountains of Syria, and some of
them are now 2,500 years old. It is interesting to note that the same grove of trees the Jews
regarded with such reverence was valued by other people many years earlier. The Egyptians,
whose homelands had little natural tree cover, made use of Cedar wood taken from the Lebanon
to build their vast trading ships that plied the Nile almost 3000 years before the birth of Christ.
The Egyptian Pharaoh Cheops had one such ship built that he used as a state barge on the Nile.
After the death of Cheops, about 4,600 years ago, the ship was buried with him in his pyramid.
The ship was subsequently excavated by archaeologists and found to be over one hundred feet
long. It was quite unique since it was unlike normal Egyptian craft and was not equalled in size
or design for another thousand years. (Heyerdal 1971).

Yew trees and Christianity

However, it is one tree, the Yew, that has retained the closest physical link with Christianity
and the fabric of the Church. Yews as a consequence of their Pagan associations and enclosure,
were planted in churchyards as Christianity spread. This was undoubtedly to placate those
whose religion had been superseded by Christianity.

The Yew tree took on other meanings and values too. It has been concerned with and symbolic
of death, sorrow and sadness since Egyptian times. They used its foliage as a symbol of
mourning and this was passed into both Greek and Roman cultures. The Romans also used the
wood to fuel funeral pyres. It is thought that much of the funereal significance of the Yew in
Britain came from the influence of the Romans, and this added to the spiritual reverence with
which the tree came to be treated. (Dallimore 1908). The links with churchyards and the Yew
tree although of ancient origin are a more contemporary idea. This is related to the relatively
recent practise of burying our dead in consecrated churchyards, where Yew trees stand.

The churchyard is where most of our great Yew tree specimens are now found, but the most
common churchyard Yew is the Irish Yew, Taxus fastigiata. This is a variety that was
introduced from County Fermanagh, where it was bred in 1780. (Wilkinson 1981) These
deliberately planted Yew trees are a continuance of the tradition begun by the first enclosure
of a Yew tree in a churchyard, and are an indication of just how deeply rooted is the meaning
and value of the tree in our society.

This association with the funeral and death made the Yew tree worthy of mention in prose and
literature. Mathew Arnold, Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Tennyson all illustrated the Yew
as a tree associated with death. The realm of poetry gave the Yew tree a sinister and morbid
identity in this respect and this is most eloquently outlined in the poem by Blair, entitled ‘The
Grave’.

Well do I know thee trusty Yew,
Cheerless unsocial plant, that loves to dwell.
Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms
Where light healed ghosts and visionary shades,
Beneath the wan cold moon (as fame reports),
Embody’d thick perform their majestic rounds,
No other merriment, dull tree is thine.

(Dallimore 1908)

The reason why the Yew was planted in churchyards has been addressed by many people. It seems that the Yew possessed properties that made it valuable, but a description by Robert Turner in his book Botanoaotia written in 1636, makes a graveyard appear to be a fearful place. He states:

“If the Yew be set in a place subject to poisonous vapours, the very branches will draw and imbibe them, hence it is conceived that the judicious in former times planted it in churchyards on the West side, because those places, being fuller of putrefaction and gross oleaginous vapours exhaled out of the graves by the setting sun and sometimes drawn by those meteors called ‘Ignes fatui’, divers have been frightened, supposing some dead bodies to walk, not that it is able to drive away Devils as some superstitious monks have imagined.”

The links with churchyards and the Yew tree have continued up to modern times, and the Yew now appears all across the country in churchyards and cemeteries. The Yew is a useful tree in such confined ground since it is easily trimmed and managed. (Heath 1912). There are many ideas and motives for the planting of Yews within churchyards, not least that of placating the Pagans whose religion had been superseded. It is also suggested the Yew was used as a decoration on Good Friday, the day that Christ was crucified. (Dallimore 1908). Some people support the notion that Yews were planted in churchyards to keep them away from cattle, since their leaves are poisonous. All these ideas are based upon the value of Yew trees whether it be perceived, monetary or spiritual.

The mould then is set. The Yew tree has become part of the fabric of our society by merit of many years association with religion and culture, from Ancient Egypt onwards. These associations, with time become tradition and the Yew tree in Britain is now synonymous with churchyards. Sadly, it seems that once Paganism was ‘tamed’ and embraced by Christianity, the centre of their worship, the Yew, was likewise tamed. It became encircled by consecrated ground and later was cross bred to create a more manageable and aesthetically pleasing form. The sinister and awesome tree that captivated the hapless pagan in early times no longer poses a threat. The churchyard Yew, commonly the Irish variety Taxus fastigiata, has become a decorative feature far removed from its ancestor. Luckily the longevity of the Yew allows us the privilege of seeing and experiencing some ancient Yews.
John Gerals Herbal 1597 ‘Taxus, the Yew Tree’

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