

Taxus baccata

The English Yew Tree

By Eric Bell



Perhaps the most notable feature of Burton village is the length of carefully clipped yew hedging in the centre of the village which draws comment when people learn where you live.



Yew hedge looking towards the Garden house.

Yew is useful as a screen, hedging, topiary and its wood used to make some of mankind's oldest artefacts – spears, bows and musical instruments. These include the prehistoric spear found near Clacton (150,000 years old), the 4,000 year-old wooden pipes from Greystones, County Wicklow and the medieval English longbow.

In modern medicine since 1966 taxol/paclitaxel has helped revolutionise the treatment of certain types of cancer. The isolation of the anti-cancer agent from the bark of the Pacific Yew has caused the systematic destruction of yew trees in North America and elsewhere, for example 90% of India's yews have been destroyed. This mass destruction means that the U.K. is now a Noah's Ark for the conservation of ancient yews worldwide. An ancient yew is one over 1000 years old of which 400 are registered in the U.K. The Fortingall Yew Tree in Glen Lyon, Perthshire is estimated as being between 3,000 – 5,000 years old.

The yew tree is very slow growing but is capable of great longevity but its leaves and bark are very poisonous to man, cattle and horses and this is thought to be why it is confined to churchyards and in the grounds of estates of the wealthy where its screening and topiary uses were much valued, not for the wealthy the brash Cupressus leylandii! Yew is an indigenous evergreen along with box, juniper and holly.

Yew hedging leading to Mexborough House.



There are a number of fine examples of yew around Burton Hall, one of which has a girth of some three metres which would probably make it 300 years old. The plant is very hardy and has unusual powers of recovery after being trimmed, Burton churchyard has some examples of severe trimming undertaken in 2007 and already they are showing a remarkable rate of recovery. In South Carlton churchyard Norris Jackson has carried out the ultimate in pruning and has cut three yew trees to ground level – we will have to wait a while to see whether Lady Monson is pleased or displeased !

The Vikings used yew wood for nails in the building of famous long boats. Wine barrels were sometimes made from Yew, which gave rise to a saying in Ireland that "Yew was the coffin of the Vine."

The beautiful patterns in the wood with its darker rusty red-brown heartwood, golden/orange sapwood and irregular ring structures have made it much sought after for making furniture, ornaments, sculptures and keep-sakes of all kinds. The 17th century arborist John Evelyn recommended Yew wood for: "Parquet-floors, cogs of mills, axles and wheels, the bodies of lutes, bowls, pins for pulleys and for drinking tankards." The wood has also been used as a high class veneer.



M'ladi's Walk - Yew hedging probably planted by William Young the head gardener around 1860. The walk led from Burton Hall to the walled garden.

A previous owner renamed the property "Rosewalk" much to the dismay of the villagers

Yew makes an excellent quality firewood, when it is available, although it seems rather a waste of this sacred wood unless you make the fire for a very special purpose.

The trade of yew wood to England for longbows was such that it depleted the stocks of good-quality, mature yew over a vast area. The first documented import of yew bowstaves to England was in 1294. In 1350 there was a serious shortage, and Henry IV of England ordered his royal bowyer to enter private land and cut yew and other woods. In 1470 compulsory archery practice was renewed, and hazel, ash, and laburnum were specifically allowed for practice bows. Supplies still proved insufficient, until by the Statute of Westminster in 1472, every ship coming to an English port had to bring four bowstaves for every tun. Richard III of England increased this to ten for every tun. Robert Hardy CBE, the actor is an acknowledged expert on the long-bow.

So do take an interest in Taxus baccata. They have certainly been around for some time and I would be very interested to hear of any whose girth exceeds 3 metres. There are four examples of the tree to the rear of Burton Club but they are unlikely to be older than the club itself – built 1897. Dating the yew (in the time sense) is difficult because of its tendency to bifurcate and counting tree rings is inaccurate as it has the ability to stop growth and then restart.