The branches of immortality

CLIVE FEWINS

All is not well with many of our historic yew trees. Despite being formed six years ago with the express function of fighting for the preservation of the oldest ones, the Ancient Yew Group (AYG) finds it is constantly battling for the future of many of the 900 or so venerable specimens its members have so far recorded.

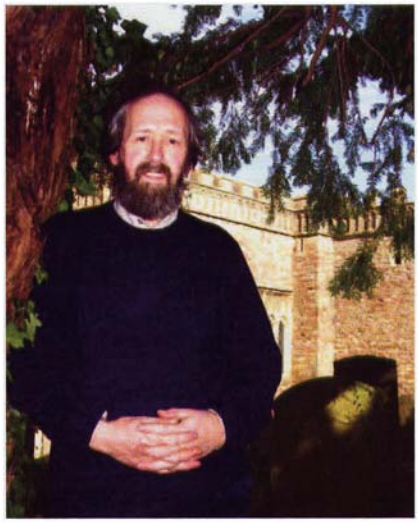
Since 2003 retired deputy head-teacher Tim Hills, sixty-one, has worked a full five-day week from his home near Bristol co-ordinating the group and maintaining the website. In the twelve years since he became a yew enthusiast he has paid 1,400 site visits to yews all over the UK.

Now a seasoned campaigner, Tim chooses his words carefully. "We tend to say yews can be destroyed or removed but we generally avoid the words 'kill' and 'die'," he says.

The reason is that this remarkable species has a unique capacity to regenerate itself by sinking aerial roots from within the hollow trunk, and so, if allowed to grow, appears to be virtually immortal.

Certainly it is believed that some of our oldest specimens, the vast majority of which are in churchyards, are believed to be around 4,000 years old. Sadly however, because so many fine old yews often appear to be on their last legs, churchyard guardians have a habit of reducing them to a stump, or worse.

"Yew trees have many remarkable properties," explains Tim. "They were



Tim Hills of the Ancient Yew Group.

This yew tree at Linton in Herefordshire is believed to be several thousand years old; sadly it was damaged by fire in 1998.

revered by our ancestors because of their ability to regenerate, and because they retain their greenery all year round.

"But the yew also has the amazing capacity to stop growing when conditions are unsuitable, then — decades or perhaps even centuries — later, spring back to life and continue growing as if nothing had happened.

"And while its foliage is intensely poisonous, the juice from its sappy young shoots is processed into a drug that brings relief to cancer sufferers."

Sometimes, in a misguided quest for tidiness, an over-zealous local worthy will assume quite wrongly that an old churchyard yew is dead, and destroy it. If this is allowed to happen a thousand years of history can be lost, because many ancient specimens quite frequently predate the churches beside them.

Part of Tim's job, assisted by a small band of helpers strategically placed in different parts of England and Wales, is to explain, educate and assist parochial church councils to try to prevent their members or nominees from lopping off chunks of irreplaceable history. They also constantly campaign to help preserve this amazing collection of ancient trees, of which the UK possesses the finest collection in Europe .

A classic example of a yew that is under the eye of the AYG is the fine old specimen in the churchyard at Acton Beauchamp, Herefordshire — a county that contains many wonderful old yews.

Here, Tim explained, the yew is undoubtedly in a transitional stage

and at present looks quite different from the fine specimen that appeared in a painting 200 years ago. The picture shows that half of the tree has disappeared since then. However, from the substantial stool fragment that remains (itself twenty feet / 6 m in girth) many new branches are carrying sufficient foliage to fuel the tree's recovery.

Not all ancient yew trees are as fortunate. Elsewhere in Herefordshire the massive Linton yew, believed by some to be several thousand years old, was severely damaged by fire in 1998, and, again in Herefordshire, ancient yews at Yazor, Eaton Bishop and Little Hereford have been similarly damaged.

In Oxfordshire the huge old churchyard yew in the village of South Moreton was damaged by fire in 2002, and in 2005 its neighbour at Didcot had suffered severe fire damage.

The fires are not always deliberate acts of vandalism. Churchyard wardens often find it convenient to site fuel tanks, sheds and compost heaps underneath ancient yews. Fire hazards such as dead brushwood have also been found dumped beside them, while heavy tombstones are sometimes piled up against their trunks.

Pruning is another great fear. At Birling in Kent the churchyard yew was so drastically pruned that some of its internal growth is now no longer connected to the live parts of the tree from which it developed over centuries, and which it was supporting.

Tim likes to think that, with their huge ringed 'tent' shape, yew trees such as this one at Ormiston acted as meeting places in ancient times, and afforded shelter, and also a sense of spirituality, awe, wonder, and mystery.

And at Llanlleonfel in Powys, the flourishing old yew beside the church was considered to be "very overgrown and possibly dangerous", obscuring some gravestones and making the entrance to the church "rather dark". In 1999 a local man was employed to "tidy the tree and make it safe". Unsupervised, he reduced the grand old specimen to a mutilated stump, which stood for several years beside the church before it was totally removed.

Some old yews are protected by tree preservation orders (TPOs) or conservation area legislation, but many are not. "Very often local authorities will not make TPOs on church land," Tim says. "Even when they do, TPOs are only as good as the tree officers who oversee them, and few tree officers are yew experts, while trees that are thought to be dangerous are exempt from TPO legislation."

What possessed this former primary school deputy to undertake the task of co-ordinating the fight for our wonderful collection of ancient yews?

"Yew trees are all different and also shrouded in folklore," explains Tim. "With their pagan associations they throw up all sorts of challenges as well as mysteries. With their evergreen quality, coupled with their regenerative powers, they can be seen as symbols of life, or even rebirth, or immortality. At

This fine speciment at Didcot, Oxfordshire, suffered fire damage in 2005.

the same time, in their graveyard settings and with their poisonous leaves, they are potent symbols of death."

Tim believes that their circular form — if allowed to grow naturally a yew will throw out its branches to form a great ring, possibly as much as 200 feet (60 m) round — gives us the clue to their ancient origins. He likes to think that, with their huge ringed 'tent' shape, they acted as meeting places in ancient times, and afforded shelter, and also a sense of spirituality, awe, wonder, and mystery.

"Who is to know?" concludes Tim. "We all have our pet theories. Naturally I believe the work I am doing with ancient yews is worthwhile — we are helping to stem the rate of loss of these irreplaceable ancient trees.

"But I also find it fun. Through my yew researches I have discovered many remote corners of Wales that I would otherwise never have found, and even little bits of Kent that you would never know existed." ■

For more information on the Ancient Yew Group, write to Tim Hills, Vine Cottage, 3 Ham Green, Pill, Bristol BS20 0EY; email Tim at tim@ancient-yew.org; or visit the website www.ancient-yew.org.

The best way in which you can assist the work of the AYG is to use the Help Find an Old Yew page of the website and go out looking for those trees. Alternatively go to the gazetteer web page, find the nearest ancient yews to you and check that they are still there.