

THE YEW TREE (*TAXUS BACCATA*)

By ALEXANDER L. HOWARD

"The warlike Yew by which more than the lance
The strong arm'd English spirits conquer'd France."
DRYDEN.

THIS romantic but rather sombre tree has for long ages been connected in simple country minds with superstitious stories of illness and death. All the old authorities on trees have lurid tales to tell of its poisonous effect on both man and beast, and it is therefore not surprising that the yew has never had a fair chance in England, but lived out its long life with little help or encouragement.

As long ago as 1662 John Evelyn wrote:

"Since the use of bows is laid aside among us, the propagation of this tree is quite forborne. But the neglect of it is to be deplored; seeing that the barrenest grounds, and coldest of our mountains, might be profitably replenished with it."

Much has been written, and many reasons advanced for its invariable proximity to churches and graveyards. It has been suggested that this may have been partly to secure its continued cultivation on account of its value for bow-making, partly to safeguard cattle from its poisonous leaves, and partly because its rather sombre evergreen branches made of it a fitting symbol of death and immortality. The first of these cannot be accepted—the quality of the yew grown in England appears to have been inferior to that obtained from Spain, for Boulger says:

"It was to bows of Yew that we mainly owed the victories of Crecy and Poitiers; and Edward IV enacted that every Englishman should have a bow of his own height. English Yew-wood, however, for this purpose, only fetched one-third the price of that which was imported."

Further, the greater number of, if not all, the yew trees by churches are living, nor have we any record of any being felled for bow-making. Mr. Teulon Porter also tells me that in past days the parson's revenue partly consisted of the licence to feed cattle in the churchyard, which negatives the second reason: we must accept the last as being the most probable.

Throughout the ages yew has been used as an emblem of death and burial, and this custom, which is even mentioned in ancient Greek and Roman records, has insensibly become a universal tradition, very ably expressed by Johns:

"Generation after generation might be gathered to their fathers, the Yew tree proclaiming to those who remained that all like the evergreen unchanging Yew were yet living in another world, the life which had been the object of their desire."

"Of all the trees in England,
Oak, Elder, Elm and Thorn,
The Yew alone burns lamps of peace
For them that lie forlorn."

WALTER DE LA MARE (1873).

and

"My shroud of white, stuck all with Yew."
SHAKESPEARE.

The yew has a short irregular bole, with strong-limbed branches somewhat resembling those of the hornbeam in habit of growth. These are densely covered with a dark green cluster of needle-like leaves spreading widely with a broad crown. Some

of the trees are brightened at intervals by clusters of golden or red berries, according to the variety.

It shares with the oak the claim to live the longest life of any tree grown in Great Britain, but Elwes thinks that its great age has been much exaggerated by many authors, particularly the great Swiss botanist De Candolle. Elwes refers his readers to Lowe, who proves "that the average rate of growth is about 1 foot of diameter in 60–70 years in both young and old trees". He also says that there is:

"abundant evidence to show that though old trees grow at intervals much more rapidly than young ones, they do not grow uniformly but have periods of comparative rest, and that the increase of girth is fastest when old trees have lost their heads and the stem is covered with young shoots.

No tree has such a remarkable faculty of covering up wounds or injuries by the growth of fresh wood from the outside, and even after the main stem is completely dead, fresh and entirely new stems may grow up around it and form a new tree around the dead one. For this reason most of the yews of very large size are mere shells, and even when no hollow can be seen from the outside, decay—which is often indicated by moisture running from holes in the trunk—has set in."

It is impossible in this article to enlarge upon this question of the age, about which many authorities have already written extensively, but after exhaustive inquiry into the history of a number of yew trees, and study of the growth of many that have been felled, I am inclined to the view that the ages claimed by tradition may be correct.

It is equally impossible to enumerate the many outstanding examples of yew trees which have been commented upon by all authorities since Evelyn's time, but some are specially worthy of mention. Elwes describes in his "Timbers of Great Britain and Ireland" trees at Midhurst:

"They consist of four avenues of yew trees forming a square of about 150 yards, together with a grove of yews at the upper end which average, as nearly as I could measure them, about 75 feet in height, but some probably exceed 80. These trees are for the most part sound and healthy, though little care has been taken of them, and some have fallen. They are remarkable not only for their great height, which exceeds that of any other yews on record in Europe, but on account of their freedom from large branches, many having clean boles of 20–30 feet, with a girth of 8–9 feet."

Mr. Thomas Roberts of Cowdray informs me that these avenues are in good healthy condition to-day (1944). Elwes also refers "to the largest pure yew-wood in England on the downs three miles west of Downton, Wilts, on the property of the Earl of Radnor" partially planted, and adds an account of "The Little Yews"—another wood near by, which contains much finer trees. He says:

"the Cherkley Court Yew Wood is the best in England. . . . The wood covers an area of 50 to 60 acres in a shallow valley forming part of the old Ashurst estate, about three miles from Leatherhead in Surrey, on the east side of the old pilgrims' road to Canterbury."

Another is at Castle Eden Dene in Durham.

With the knowledge we have of these outstanding plantations, which date from very early times, we conclude that there must have been a far greater interest in its cultivation than that which has obtained for the last three hundred years or even more. This view is supported by the fact that it amounted to almost a penal crime to make use of any yew wood

other than for bows prior to the year 1550. It is likely, therefore, that the demand was so great that the better quality was becoming scarce, and even at that early date it was found necessary to import supplies from Spain.

It appears also that at a very early date it became fashionable to plant yew walks. One such walk still flourishes to-day at Huntington Castle, Clonagal, Ireland, and regarding this Mr. Manning Robertson writes to me under date of June 27, 1944, as follows:

"This consists of 122 trees in a row: the row is some 360 feet long and there are 'return ends' making three sides of a rectangle. The largest tree is 41 feet high and 12 feet 9 inches girth at 5 feet from the ground. Many of the trees have interlaced and grown together—like Banyan trees. Little is known of the Walk's history, but it is almost certainly monastic, and tradition has given the age as 600 years: it is still in perfect condition."

Elwes mentions:

"a remarkably fine yew walk at Hatherop Castle, Gloucestershire . . . which is supposed to be about 300 years old, in which the trees average about 60 feet in height with a girth of 9 to 12 feet."

The importance of the yew as hedgerow has been recognized for many centuries. Its use for the partition of fields has been debarred because of the danger to animals. Although it is slow in growing to perfection, as protection for property it has been for long ages justly prized, and is not only very decorative but also presents a formidable barrier, impossible to climb and very difficult to destroy.

John Evelyn evidently felt strongly on the question of yew hedges, as he wrote:

"the Yew tree has been generally cultivated for the pleasure garden, to be clipped into the shape of beasts, birds, etc., or for hedges. Whoever is pleased with such figures can raise no tree more proper for the purpose, as the branches and the leaves may be clipped and fashioned into almost any form or shape. But as this method is justly exploded, and as everyone who has the least pretension to taste, must always prefer a tree in its natural growth to those monstrous figures, the Yew is now chiefly planted for wilderness quarters, and for hedges, for which service it is excellently well adapted."

With regard to its uses for timber, and quoting from "The Timbers of the World":

"This useful and highly decorative wood is now little known or esteemed, although it presents qualities which deserve much better recognition. If the economic use of domestic woods were practised in this country as it has been in France and Germany, yew would have undoubtedly been brought into prominence. The colour is pale red, somewhat like cherry wood or pencil cedar: it has a beautiful smooth lustrous grain. Sometimes it is handsomely figured, and occasionally has a burr growth, the produce of which will compare favourably with amboyna, and has indeed actually been mistaken for it. The strength and elasticity of yew-wood has been known for centuries, particularly on account of its use for bows. . . . At Sir Mark Collet's house, near Sevenoaks, some handsome doors are made of yew. The stiles and rails are of the ordinary figured wood, and the panels of exceptionally fine figured burr. The colour has deepened with long exposure, assisted by careful polishing, and is now a rich red brown. Yew is particularly suited for chair-making, and some very fine specimens of considerable antiquity are to be found in many places. Elwes alludes to an extremely handsome arm-chair in Hornby Castle, the property of the Duke of Leeds. The date is about 1550. It is made of Yew, which adds to its rarity, for up to this time it was practically penal to employ yew-wood for

any other purpose than the manufacture of the national weapon; in this instance the wood has become close, as hard as steel, and of a beautiful dark amber colour. The wood, though it is difficult to obtain, is also valued for brush-backs."

Yew is specially liable to the growth of 'burrs', which I have already mentioned. About thirty years ago an outstanding example was sent to me from the Caucasus, measuring more than seven feet in length, more than four feet in depth, and weighing nearly a ton. Purchased by an American, it was cut into veneer, yielding some of the finest specimens of yew burr ever seen.

It is difficult to decide whether this unique tree should be extensively cultivated; but it is certain that as a tree it has many interesting and unusual qualities, and as timber it is a fine medium for decorative work of all kinds.

THE UNIVERSITIES AND INDUSTRY

THE "Report on the Extension of Scientific Research in Manchester University, particularly in Relation to the Industries of its Area" (Manchester University Press, 1944, 1s.) which has been prepared by a committee of professors and industrialists, all of whom are members of the governing bodies of the University, to assist the University to make a considered estimate of the increase in income necessary to ensure that its science departments may undertake their proper responsibilities in the nation's economy, is of much more than local interest. In the first place, it amplifies some passages in the recent pamphlet of Sir Ernest Simon on the development of British universities, while at the same time it offers some measure of the value of the Joint Standing Council of members of the University of Manchester and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce which has been under discussion between the two bodies, as announced by Mr. A. H. S. Hinchliffe at the last of the series of meetings on "Science and Industry" arranged by the Chamber. Again, in its chapter on research and teaching, it puts concisely much of the argument advanced in the recent House of Commons debate, by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and elsewhere, and attempts to give concrete expression to the means by which those arguments may be given effect.

The statement includes detailed reports from the Chemistry and the Electro-Technics Departments, which have been chosen because of their relevance to some of the more important scientific industries of the area. The first of these reports comes from Dr. C. J. T. Cronshaw, Prof. A. R. Todd and Prof. M. Polanyi; and the second is by Dr. A. P. M. Fleming and Prof. Willis Jackson. The broad conclusion reached is that the effective discharge of the functions of the science departments of the University of Manchester in the post-war period involves doubling the expenditure of the Departments as a whole. Even this would provide for no new developments outside existing departments, and the report proposes an increase of about 50 per cent in the first year, rising to 100 per cent in the fifth year after the War.

In its introductory survey of research and teaching, the statement emphasizes that the primary duty of the science departments must be research at the highest levels of which they are capable. The first step towards improving teaching standards in any