

TREES ANCIENT AND MODERN

Trees—we've got quite a few of them at the Abbey, including several big yew trees. Yew is dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers grow on separate trees. In practice that means that if it is windy in spring pollen blows off the male trees like smoke, and in autumn the female trees drop a carpet of red berries, as anyone trying to reach our chapel from the village will know. Try to sweep the berries up and they spread out in a goeey mess. The yew trees in the front garden would have closed the road long ago if left to their own devices. The one near the village gate currently has a girth of just over eleven foot, and is quite likely the same tree that John Higgins, who owned the Abbey at the beginning of the 19 century, wrote about in his 'Scrap Book', remembering his father out on a walk from their house at Weston Underwood:

'One morning about Christmas time, on a walk at the bottom of the field below the house he observed (in a thick hedge) a Yew Tree, at that time about two feet high, it had evidently been sown there by some bird, and till then had been overlooked: – it was a prize, and instead of going for a spade, which would have taken a quarter of an hour, he fell to work with his knife, and worked away till he had undermined the roots of the yew tree, but not without encountering the roots of other trees, which he was obliged to cut in two. – Accomplishing the job, he brought it away in triumph, – planted it against some laurels which he had raised (himself) from cuttings, and congratulated himself with the acquisition. . . . There it stood until the year 1793, when the writer was engaged in forming the garden at Turvey Abbey, when he transferred the same tree with some other shrubs to the bottom of the garden at the back of the pond. In the year 1801, when the stables were finished and the clumps in front of the house were planting, he examined what trees could be spared for that purpose from the garden, and the said yew tree was again taken up and planted near the entrance gate from the village, where it continues to stand in 1831, and from its size can no more be removed with any expectation of its growing.'



Watercolour by John Higgins

There's a famous tree in the bible, the fruit tree in the story of the Garden of Eden, (Genesis Ch 2). Everything gets off to great start, all is good, indeed, very good, but then something goes terribly wrong—recognise the feeling? A snake causes trouble and Adam and Eve are banished the Garden of Eden, from Paradise. (Someone has suggested that if Adam and Eve had been Chinese, we would still be in Paradise, as they would have left the fruit on the tree and eaten the snake.)

Our yew tree has witnessed about 200 years of history, a lot of it not very peaceful—will we ever return to Paradise? One of the hymns that we sing here at the Abbey is a prayer to God for that return:

Once in a garden Adam walked with God at evening tide
Maker and man among the trees, companions side by side

But faithless Adam turned away and lost that blessed Face;
From paradise to sorrow came, with promises of grace.

Jesus the shepherd passed through death to rescue what was lost;
Mankind is reconciled to God, and God has paid the cost.

Children of Adam who were far, in Christ have been brought near.
The Father feasts his guilty sons, most prodigal, most dear.

Maker and Lord, who take delight among the sons of men,
Bring us to share your evening calm in Paradise again.

words: Turvey Abbey

Next time you pass the Abbey, don't forget to say hello to our yew trees!

Sr Benedict, Turvey Abbey