English Yew – scientific name Taxus Baccata

This is a small to medium-sized evergreen tree, growing 10–20 metres tall, with a trunk up to 2 metres diameter. The bark is thin, scaly brown, coming off in small flakes aligned with the stem. The leaves are flat, dark green, 1–4 centimetres long and 2–3 millimetres broad, arranged spirally on the stem, but with the leaf bases twisted to align the leaves in two flat rows either side of the stem, except on erect leading shoots where the spiral arrangement is more obvious. The leaves are poisonous.

The seed cones are modified, each cone containing a single seed, which is 4–7 millimetres long, and partly surrounded by a fleshy scale which develops into a soft, bright red berry-like structure called an aril. The aril is 8–15 millimetres long and wide and open at the end. The arils mature 6 to 9 months after pollination, and with the seed contained, are eaten by thrushes, waxwings and other birds, which disperse the hard seeds undamaged in their droppings. Maturation of the arils is spread over 2 to 3 months, increasing the chances of successful seed dispersal. The seeds themselves are poisonous and bitter, but are opened and eaten by some bird species including hawfinches, greenfinches and great tits. The aril is not poisonous, it is gelatinous and very sweet tasting. The male cones are globose, 3–6 millimetres diameter, and shed their pollen in early spring. The yew is mostly dioecious, but occasional individuals can be variably monoecious, or change sex with time.

Taxus baccata can reach 400 to 600 years of age. Some specimens live longer but the age of yews is often overestimated. Ten yews in Britain are believed to predate the 10th century. The potential age of yews is impossible to determine accurately and is subject to much dispute. There is rarely any wood as old as the entire tree, while the boughs themselves often become hollow with age, making ring counts impossible. There are claims as high as 5,000–9,500 years, but other evidence based on growth rates and archaeological work of surrounding structures suggests the oldest trees are more likely to be in the range of 2,000 years. Even with this lower estimate, Taxus baccata is one of the longest-living plants in Europe. One characteristic contributing to its longevity is that it is able to split under the weight of advanced growth without succumbing to disease in the fracture, as do most other trees. Another is its ability to give rise to new epicormic and basal shoots from cut surfaces and low on its trunk, even at an old age.

All parts of a yew plant are toxic to humans with the exception of the yew berries (however, their seeds are toxic).

One of the world's oldest surviving wooden artifacts is a yew spear head, found in 1911 at Clacton-on-Sea, in Essex. It is estimated to be about 450,000 years old.

The yew is often found in churchyards in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France and northern areas of Spain. Sometimes monks planted yews in the middle of their cloister, as at Muckross Abbey (Ireland) or abbaye de Jumièges (France).

The yew tree has been found near chapels, churches and cemeteries since ancient times as a symbol of the transcendence of death, and is usually found in the main squares of the villages where people celebrated the open councils that served as a way of general assembly to rule the village affairs.

The Christian church commonly found it expedient to take over existing pre-Christian sacred sites for churches. It has also been suggested that yews were planted at religious sites as their long life was suggestive of eternity, or because being toxic they were seen as trees of death. Another suggested explanation is that yews were planted to discourage farmers and drovers from letting animals wander onto the burial grounds, the poisonous foliage being the disincentive. A further possible reason is that fronds and branches of yew were often used as a substitute for palms on Palm Sunday.

Conifers were in the past often seen as sacred, because they never lose their green. In addition, the tree of life was not only an object from the stories, but also believers often gathered around an existing tree. The yew releases gaseous toxins (taxine) on hot days. Taxine is in some instances capable of causing hallucinations. This has some similarities with the story that Odin had a revelation (the wisdom of the runes) after having been hanging from the tree for nine days.

Wood from the yew is classified as a closed-pore softwood, similar to cedar and pine. Easy to work, yew is among the hardest of the softwoods; yet it possesses a remarkable elasticity, making it ideal for products that require springiness, such as bows.[38]

The oldest surviving yew longbow was found at Rotten Bottom in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland. It has been given a calibrated radiocarbon date of 4040 BC to 3640 BC and is on display in the National Museum of Scotland. Yew is the wood of choice for longbow making; the heartwood is always on the inside of the bow with the sapwood on the outside. This makes most efficient use of their properties as heartwood is best in compression whilst sapwood is superior in tension.

Yew was historically a prized wood for lute construction.

Clippings from ancient specimens in the UK were taken to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh to form a mile-long hedge. The purpose of this "Yew Conservation Hedge Project" is to maintain the DNA of Taxus baccata. The species is threatened by felling, partly due to rising demand from pharmaceutical companies, and disease.

This English Yew at Conyngham Hall is between 60 to 100 years old.

Information provided by Wikipedia and Harrogate Borough Council.