

# Living History

Yarpole Group Parish  
2000



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# Living History.

## NEWSLETTER EASTER 2007.



(Photograph by Tony Blythe)

A public meeting, attended by about 110 people and chaired by Councillor Sebastian Bowen, was held in St. Leonard's Church on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> March 2007 to introduce proposals for the radical re-ordering of the church. The proposals are intended to improve the church for worship in various forms and to adapt it for a wide range of secular uses including accommodating the village Community Shop in the west end of the nave with a public gallery above.

Our Ancient Yew; the one with the large hollow bole, on the right of the gate as you enter the churchyard – with an estimated age of 1000+ years makes it older than the Bell Tower and confirms the churchyard as a religious site dating back to Saxon times.

Croft Castle is being re-roofed and the work can be observed from a viewing platform.



The final report on the archaeological excavations carried out at Croft Castle over the past five years is expected to be published early in 2008.

## Bicton Pool ?



Taken on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007, after a particularly heavy and prolonged spell of rain, this photograph recaptures Bicton Pool.

John's departure: At our last regular meeting, the membership gave a unanimous vote of thanks to our previous chairman, John Gunson, who had led and steered the group through its initial six years, and is now leaving the area.

Nature Jottings: A polecat was sighted on the evening of 20 March 2007, on the C1045, between the Bircher Turn (cross-roads) and Gorbett Bank.

The appearance of so many birds and spring flowers seems to be very early this year.

And soon we should be seeing the flowering of the Amelanchier in the garden of Stoneybrook, the subject of one of the accompanying Articles.



Note:- One or two copies of the Article on Slime Moulds, issued last December, have less than perfect perforations and will be replaced: contact Ian on 780788.

And finally may we remind you of the Gravestone Inscription Recording in the Burial Ground (opposite side of the road from the church) on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April starting at 10.30 a.m. The more the merrier and the easier it will be for the rest of us.

Date of the next meeting: **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007**, 8pm at the Bell.

### The Ancient Yew Tree:

Did you know that the big yew tree in St. Leonard's Churchyard at Yarpole is internationally "web-famous"? In 1999, Tim Hills of Bristol came to visit the yew tree, as part of his millennium survey of ancient yew trees. He was undertaking a photographic and descriptive record of these venerable trees over a two-year period. He visited St. Leonard's on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1999, ours being one of 71 in Herefordshire. According to the Churchyard Handbook, "the value and significance of yew trees cannot be overestimated. Many are important historically and they are of considerable, even exceptional, antiquity".

He left a note of his observations - "This is the only yew tree I have seen so successfully growing above a wall. It appears to be a healthy and thriving tree." He also left a question - "Do you have a policy that enables it to flourish in this unusual location - or is it just good fortune?"



Since then he has continued with his survey both in this country and overseas. His web-site, [www.ancient-yew.org/treeInfo.php?link=865](http://www.ancient-yew.org/treeInfo.php?link=865), gives an extensive record of all the trees that he and his colleagues have seen.

In March 2002 a tree survey, commissioned by the Caring for God's Acre project was carried out by Phi Evans. No signs of disease or dieback were found. The good condition of the wall, which bears some of the tree's weight, was noted. The scorch marks inside the trunk were "probably due to vandalism rather than lightning." (The Fire Services attended a fire in the tree in the late 1970s).

#### Statistics:

- Girth at the top of the wall is 24ft 3ins.
- Approximate height above the wall is 55ft.
- Approximate width at its widest is 60ft.

Estimate of age is difficult to determine; "A yew that has grown to this sort of girth, lost its centre and split apart, is undoubtedly of vast age - I think it would be safe to say 1000+yrs. This makes it considerably older than the present church and would suggest to me a previous site of worship or an important meeting place in Saxon times" (personal communication from Tim Hills).



From the road below, its bole appears massive and solid. This is misleading - from the churchyard it is possible to walk into the tree's hollow which leans several feet out over the pavement. There has been fire/smoke damage.

#### **Why are yews in churchyards?**

Firstly, there are, of course, (ancient) yews outside churchyards as well. But in woodlands they don't grow so big and impressive as in churchyards because they have less light and space. Also, Britain has lost most of its ancient woodland, and even more so, lost most of the wild yews due to the early medieval longbow production. Churchyards are protective enclosures. But there is much more to it:

Investigating the yew from the viewpoint of comparative religious studies we come across an astonishing degree of parallels in the way this tree was perceived and treated by otherwise the most different cultures and times. In a nutshell, we can say that the three main themes which occur time and again in yew traditions are:

- a) the sacred (the yew as part of a sanctuary, or being the sanctuary, e.g. the medieval tree sanctuary at Uppsala, Sweden; yews in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in Japan);
- b) death and burial rites (e.g. British Isles, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Japan);
- c) kingship, royal family, leadership (e.g. Ireland, Russia, Japan).

In many pre-Christian religions (e.g. in ancient Greece) the yew had been connected with the journey to the underworld, with the gate of death and the soul's transition from this life to the next. For all we can say, the yew was seen as a kind of protector of the soul during this delicate process. In Druidic Britain, this was conceived as part of the 'natural law of reincarnation' (i.e. a soul becomes reborn on earth as another person). As an evergreen plant the yew was a symbol for the regenerative power of nature. As a very ancient tree indeed it was the most perfect symbol for everlasting life. In Christianity, only the pretext changed: together with other evergreens the yew was acknowledged as a symbol for the Resurrection and particularly employed at Easter celebrations.

It is feasible that some of the ancient yews are older than the adjacent church buildings because Christianity took over countless sacred places from the previous religious traditions. In 601 Pope Gregory advised not to destroy places of Pagan worship but to convert them into Christian Churches. (Copyright © Fred Hageneder 2005)

We wish to thank Tim Hills and his colleagues not only for allowing us to use their research material but more particularly for highlighting the ancient yew in our churchyard - long may it continue to flourish!

John Gunson (2007)

## 'Stoneybrook':

Those who knew Helen and Jack Coxon will remember them as a delightful and devoted couple; they bought the property, previously known as "The Corner House", in 1978 and renamed it 'Stoneybrook' although sometimes referred to, by Jack, as "Stoneybroke". The garden was an overgrown wilderness. Starting with weed killer, they then designed the garden to the form it is today. Helen had trained as a teacher and Jack was a respected judge of sheep and pigs at County and local shows; prior to his retirement he was the manager of a cattle-breeding farm. Jack was also known as the local supplier of spinach to the village; self-set spinach still comes up to this day in the vegetable patch.

Jack died in the May of 2002, Helen in 2004.



This photograph, taken about 1900, shows 'Stoneybrook' as a two-storey house; in the 1920's the house was changed to a bungalow which evidently was the fashion then; the floorboards, and wallpaper of the upper room, still exist in the attic.



And as it is today.



The internal timber framework in the pre 1920 part of the building would suggest that the structure would date from the 1700's. Unfortunately the Deeds were, it is believed, lost in a fire.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is thought that, modifications were made to raise the floor from the 'tile on earth' to vented floorboards. Evidence of this was found when the bathroom floor was recently replaced and a foot below the existing floor level tiles were found.

The extension to the south, added when the roof was lowered, proved to be built over an existing out-building, the roof of this building can just be seen in the old photograph: In the 1960s, the flat roofed section on the west-side of the bungalow was added; again it would seem on a pre-existing foundation: There are other indications of changes at different times to window and door positions.

The charm of this property is not that it has tried to retain its original character but is rather a history of social change over at least a hundred years.

#### Previous occupants:

William Humphries (farmer) resided from 1911 until his death on 23<sup>rd</sup> Dec.1923. Lifelong resident, Sam Humphries, thinks that William was his grandfather's brother. Sam says the family moved from Wales to Yarpole in the late 1700's.

By 1926, Thomas Ganderton (farmer) was in residence. He was listed in Kelly's Directory both in 1929 and 1934 as a market gardener. There was no listing in 1937.

The house was converted to a bungalow during this period and the late Nora Barker said she remembered the alteration.

Bill Talbot (then aged 14yrs) moved into the bungalow with his mother, having come from Aberaron, with her second husband, William George Henshaw Hooker, who died in 1961 aged 75.

Bill married May (who still lives in the village) in the mid 1940's and they lived in the bungalow for a short time following their marriage. Bill's mother died in 1973 and lies with her husband in the churchyard.

May Talbot recalls a beautiful lacquered clock decorated with the 'willow pattern'; inside its door was pasted a note stating the clock belonged to Sir Joseph and Lady Hooker. There was also a desk with a secret drawer, in which was a letter from Charles Darwin. These items were returned to the Hooker family when Mr.Hooker died.

William Hooker was a descendent of William Jackson Hooker, a botanist who became a member of the Linnaean Society at the age of 21yrs. He was a founder member of Kew Gardens. His son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, also a botanist, travelled extensively collecting plants. He befriended Charles Darwin. Both William and Joseph were knighted for their work as botanists. (More information may be obtained from the RHS Dictionary of Gardening Vol.2 page 582-583.)

David Rollings and family were the next occupants, and he, in the late 60's. added the flat roofed extension to the bungalow, again, it would seem, over an existing base. Could these foundations have been outbuildings to the old Corner House when owned by farmers?

Glenda and Tony Mears bought the bungalow in Oct.2002. They have endeavoured to keep the garden as Jack and Helen would have wished and if George Hooker were to see it now, hopefully, he would approve.