

# Trees

Deborah Gasking

Trees have provided us with our main sources of fuel and materials over millennia. Prior to the pyramids, they were the tallest free-standing structures on this planet. Trees are not just individual plants, they are complete eco systems – an island of biodiversity in its own right – the scaffold upon which nature's stage is built.

Trees are amazing works of nature that influence our everyday lives in every aspect, sometimes without our realising it. They create a living, changing backdrop that softens and greens our landscapes; making, cleaning and cooling the air that we breathe.

For example, a young oak – about 100 years old – can convert around nine kilograms of carbon dioxide into seven kilograms of oxygen per day, enough for about five people to breathe for that one day, whilst filtering out bacteria, fungal spores, dust and other harmful substances.

A mature tree can take up 200 to 400 litres (45–90 gallons) of water a day, reducing storm water run-off.

Today, we talk about hugging trees – a modern term, but this practice has been going on since ancient times. In many parts of the world it also became the custom to tie wreaths or ribbons to sacred trees, perhaps seeking mediation of a saint, or simply making a wish. And in some areas, people left money under a tree as an offering.

Woodlands have been the backdrop to many folk tales, legends and mysteries. Since medieval times, witches, fairies,



*Yew Tree at St Andrews Churchyard, Buckland, Dover*

sorcerers, gnomes, trolls, centaurs and unicorns were said to be discovered in their depths.



## Cowgate Cemetery

If you venture into our Victorian sanctuary you will note there are a number of **yew trees** – many seeded from others: a multi-generational family.

Latin name: *Taxus Baccata*

Meaning: sorrow, immortality, an omen of doom

The yew is the most ancient tree species in Europe, living longer than any other tree. A yew spearhead was found in 1911 in Essex, thought to be about 450,000 years old – by far the oldest wooden implement ever found in the British Isles.

The yew can grow 10–20 metres (33–66 feet) tall, with thin, flaky, purple-tinged bark. Its cone contains a single seed which

develops into a red, sweet, juicy berry-like aril, often consumed (and thus dispersed) by birds. Their digestion of the aril weakens the seed's coat, encouraging it to sprout.

Squirrels and dormice also munch the aril, while Satin Beauty moth caterpillars feast on its leaves.

However, all yew parts, especially the leaves, are highly toxic to humans and can impact on heart, nerves and muscles.

According to a label on a yew tree at Kew Gardens in 1993, the Druids regarded yews as sacred and planted them close to their temples. As early Christians often built their churches on these consecrated sites, the association of yew trees with churchyards was perpetuated. Despite this, there is little, and probably no evidence to support this reason for planting them in churchyards, which has never been satisfactorily explained.

### **Intriguing Information:**

- Used for turning, tool handles and longbows
- Popular hedging and topiary plant
- Sometimes grown near privies because its scent keeps insects away
- Once a prime choice for lutes
- Yew was said to enhance magical and psychic visions
- Has been associated with death, reincarnation and immortality
- Was linked to Norse runes
- Taxol (a chemical found in yew) has anti-cancer effects

*Editor's note: Yews were needed for longbows in medieval times, but were known to be toxic. Traditionally, they were grown in graveyards, which had to be enclosed, to keep small children and farm animals away from them.*



## **River Dour**

Bordering our splendid river next to Bridge Street, a **weeping willow**, much loved for its graceful foliage, stands magnificently draping its curvaceous branches with its leaves brushing the water where it feeds and shelters native wildlife.

Latin name: *Salix*

Meaning: mourning, grief, sadness

Weeping willows originated in China, reaching Europe by 1730. There are about 400 species of willow: broad-leaved ones, sometimes called sallows, and narrow-leaved ones called osiers.

Willows thrive along bodies of water, as a mature tree can take up to 120 gallons of water per day during the hot summer months.

Growing along a bank of water is difficult, so the willow tree has developed massive, strong, spreading roots that are tough and large. This root system vigorously seeks out water, and also helps fix the sides of the water course, preventing bank erosion. Tiny yellow spring flowers produce male and female catkins on separate trees.



*Mourning Cloak Butterfly*

The Mourning Cloak butterfly and wasps are regular visitors, while wood ants march up and down willow trunks to collect aphid honeydew.

Willow branches are flexible:

- Used in wicker baskets.
- Some Welsh coracles had willow frameworks.
- The oldest known fishing net, found in Finland, dating to 8300BCE, was made from willow.

### Intriguing Information:

- It is associated with fertility, mysticism and witchcraft
- Witches' brooms were said to be made from willow twigs
- Ancient healers made leaf and bark preparations as remedies for fever, pain and rheumatism
- The willow was associated with moon magic
- Celtic priests and priestesses sat in willow groves to gain inspiration or to prophesy, and ordinary folk made wishes by tying loose knots in the bendy willow shoots
- Native Americans used to eat its bark to cure headaches, and its flowers in a tea to cure toothache
- Claude Monet painted a series of Weeping Willow tree scenes to honour French soldiers who fell during WWI
- Willow is used for baseball and cricket bats; baskets; fish traps; fences; wattle and daub; three-dimensional sculptures; flutes; whistles; double base parts; paper; rope and wands
- Salicylic acid is extracted from the tree to make aspirin, an anti-inflammatory drug.

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS **Ann Burke**

What a lovely summer we have had, lots of sun, too much at times! And good weather for most of the events in Dover at which we had stalls and a great recruitment team too. Even at the very wet Urban Fete, one person signed up before the team were completely washed away by the monsoon type rain. Our Newsletter is a great advert too, one couple read a copy they were given by a current member and liked it so much they joined and sent money for postage as they live quite a distance away. We have had quite a few join through the website too!

Well, quite a list of new members this time: Susan Brown, Dover. Mrs Veronica & Mr Nicholas Ward, Dover. Mr Ian & Mrs Mary

Herbert, Walton on Thames. Mr Adrian & Mrs Jacqui Evans, Dover. Mrs Williams, Dover. Mrs Judith Roberts, Market Harborough. Mrs Patricia Allan, Dover. Mr Michael Callow & Mrs Barbara Rickman-Callow, Guston. Mr Martyn Watson & Mrs Lynne-Marie Taylor, Martin Mill. Mrs Debbie Philpott, Temple Ewell. Mrs Jacqueline Axford, Whitfield. Mr Stuart McGowan & Ms Carol Cook, Dover. Mr Stephen & Mrs Suzie Evans, Dover and Mr Andrew Peal, Dover.

Sadly, we have heard of the passing away of Mr Barry Sheppard & Mrs V I Wratten, we send our condolences to their families and friends

We now number 503!