

## The Medlingham Yew

Let me introduce myself, dear readers. I am the Medlingham Yew, though the village of Medlingham disappeared many years ago as I shall tell you later.

I was here long before Medlingham ever was, for we yew trees are long lived. We spend the first 400 years growing to maturity, the next 400 years in our prime and at 800 years you people start to call us 'ancient', but our ancientness may last many centuries. Some of us yews are 2000 or so years old and one is claimed to have lived for 5000 years.

Over that long time we slowly build up many memories. 'How can you have a memory?' you may ask, 'for you do not have a brain.' But then, dear reader, I move sap around my body without a heart; I live, breath and feed without lungs, stomach or mouth. Our biology is different from yours; we live more slowly. Though we have neither eyes nor ears, we do see and hear and over the years our memories slowly build up.

When we speak, we speak more slowly than you, and you humans are usually far too hasty to listen. You live your lives so fast. Fortunately, I have an amanuensis who does have the patience to listen.

My earliest memories are of people living in round houses with thatched roofs down by the river, a little way away from me. They were an industrious people, farming with iron tools. One among them had some sort of authority. He would come to me on certain days, utter chants and make sacrifice of some poor animal. I learnt later he was a druid. When dead people were brought to be buried here, the procession stopped beneath me as the druid chanted before moving on to the burial place.

Then the druid stopped coming. I became aware of other people who behaved differently and spoke a different language which I learnt was called Latin. These people mixed with the earlier Iron-Age people, and the round houses gave way to a whole farmstead with a large house for the owner and smaller dwellings for others. These buildings were of brick and wood.

They built a small temple near me which they dedicated to someone they called Minerva. On certain days a priest offered sacrifice on a small altar in front of the temple. Perhaps Minerva appreciated them more than I had done. These people did not normally bury their dead, but burnt them. Then they gathered the bones, cleaned them with wine, crushed them and put them into containers they called urns, which were placed in small tombs near me. So things carried on like this, slowly and uneventfully for nearly four hundred years.

Then things changed. The temple was abandoned and dead people were buried again. I heard another language; it seemed to be called Saxon, though I continued to hear some Latin and, indeed, occasionally even the language of the old Iron-Age people. I got the sense that these were more troubled times and things were less settled; the old farmstead was abandoned and fell into ruin. People set up small-holdings of their own and somehow managed to survive.

Eventually the ruins of the temple were taken down and a new building, which I was to learn was called a church, was built in its place. I was surprised to hear Latin again in the church and I liked the slower manner in which the priest chanted it. I am also happy to say that no altar was build outside the church and there has never again been any of those horrible bloody sacrifices.

A small village grew up where the old farmstead had been; the houses were oblong shaped with thatched roofs. Dead people were again buried around me, with lovely chanting in Latin. One day workmen arrived and built another stone building, larger than the church. I learnt it was called a priory; men lived there who were called monks. They came, I learnt later, from a large abbey in a city about twenty miles away. These monks used to spend their time working in the fields behind the priory, caring for the sick and praying in the church. I heard even more Latin in those days. They began at midnight with a three hour service, then during the day there were other services, finishing with one at night. The main morning service was one called Mass; some villagers often came to that and on Sundays nearly everyone from the village came. I loved hearing the chanting of the monks; it

was slower and more thoughtful than people's hasty everyday speech.

Then people came speaking another language, I think it was called Norman French, though it certainly was nothing like the French I hear from modern tourists. These people built a larger stone house, which they called the manor, near the village. So things settled and life went on around me like this for several hundreds of years. I noticed over time the Norman French and Saxon languages seemed to fuse together to give something which gradually became your English. But I still liked best the Latin I heard chanted in the church.

There was a slight interruption at one point when people spoke about the Black Death. They were more fearful and there was very little contact between the village and anywhere else. But that seemed to pass. A much bigger interruption came about two hundred years later when some soldiers arrived, drove the monks out and took everything they could from the Priory. Not long afterwards workmen took down the Priory and the stones were carted away to help build a huge house on top of the hill which overlooks this valley; they called it Medlingham Hall. It has stood there ever since. This was followed by troubled times. People took statues and other things from the church. The services were fewer and in English. Then suddenly for a few years I heard Latin again. But it did not last long. English came back and it has remained ever since.

The village and the church were still there but there were far fewer services. The man they called the parson went into the church in the morning and evening, though very few people from village ever did. But they were there on Sundays in the morning and, quite often, in the evening. Then came the Great Plague; this time the village was not so fortunate and many villagers died. I saw many burials at that time.

The Lord at Medlingham Hall thought that with so few villagers, they could be moved to a new village over the other side of the hill so that, with the village completely removed, he would have an uninterrupted view across the valley towards me and the old church. Later, ground was cleared and a broad avenue of linden trees was planted down the hill towards me and the church. So I was left to the animals and birds and the church was hardly used at all, just twice a year: at Easter and Harvest Festival. Then the church was decorated and all the people that worked for the Lord of Medlingham Hall packed the little church.

About a hundred and fifty ago they started to use the church at Christmas well. But then just over a hundred years ago I noticed these occasions were more sombre and there were fewer men there. I heard people speak about a great war. I did not really understand what that was about; but things soon picked again until there was a similar disruption. After this I saw fewer people and the great hall was abandoned. The land was not looked after and the graves disappeared under a sea of grass, flowers and brambles. Occasionally there were visitors, but I did not like them. They wrote things on the side of the church and threw stones at the windows; they made barbecues and drank and smoked strange concoctions. They always left a mess behind which caused distress for many of the wild creatures.

Then one day all this stopped. People came to cut down the grass, flowers and brambles and I could see the graves again. The writing was removed from the church walls, the windows repaired and the inside restored. The great Hall now seemed cared for. I learnt that an organization called the National Trust now owned the Hall and all the land around. They put railings around me to prevent people from removing branches or getting too close and compacting the ground above my roots. I was very grateful for this. I really enjoy it when from Spring to Autumn people called tourists come; they take photographs of me and of the little church, where they can buy cream teas. But what I like best is when the church is decorated at Christmas time and parents and children come for the special services held there.