

AN OLD YEW TREE IN THE CHURCHYARD OF ST ELTHELDREDA'S, HYSSINGTON, POWYS

About two weeks before Christmas 2019, during a spell of wet and windy weather, a sizeable portion - perhaps a sixth - of the yew tree's crown (the middle tree of the three in the churchyard) tore away from its point of origin on the trunk. The breakage was probably caused as much by the tree's structure and condition - compromised by a fungal presence (*Laetiporus sulphureus*) - as by the weather conditions on the day.

The major limbs which make up much of the width of the tree's crown mostly radiate from about 3 metres up the trunk, and this is the zone which the tear wound reveals to be much affected by *Laetiporus sulphureus*, a fungus which causes a brown cubical rot in the heartwood of susceptible tree species. Affected wood becomes dry and brittle, without the strength it once had, after many years.

The fallen limb, perhaps the largest in the crown, has a ramifying structure with clusters of branches suddenly diverging from points both near and far from the trunk. This 'irregular' structure, which is extremely common in yew trees (and many broadleaved species), contributes to the propensity to failure but also points to a pruning treatment which should significantly reduce the chances of another untimely collapse. Three more large wide-spreading limbs still emanate from the same decaying zone of the trunk and are in my judgment those most likely to fail if similar conditions pertain as last time. If a selection of the longer and heavier branch elements are cut off back at the points where they leave each limb then both a reduction in the weight of the limb will be achieved and also a reduction in its 'sail area' (susceptibility to catch the wind). If the limb being pruned is compared to an arm then the job would be analogous to removing two or three of the fingers of the hand: the tree would appear cut or damaged but the general outline would remain as natural as possible - and better than the arm dropping off one would say.

The work should be done slowly and with due deliberation before each significant cut is made. The person climbing the tree will be able to better assess how rotten may be the higher parts of the main trunk - above the visibly broken and decayed zone - than anyone on the ground. If it seems prudent on safety grounds (given that the upper trunk and branches arise from a decay-compromised base) then a few other higher branches - parts of the upper 'sail' - may also need to be removed for the same reasons as the limb pruning just described.

The work would best be done shortly, while the tree is dormant, both to reduce the period of ongoing risk and to save the tree from wasting energy - if spring came first - in enlivening and growing branches which will promptly be cut off.

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21st January 2020