Ancient Yew Tour around Brecon and Usk

from Defynnog to Bettws Newydd

1

Defynnog

The extraordinary Defynnog Yew resembles the Magic Faraway Tree with it's vast 40 foot main trunk and the diversity of the different areas within it. It's possible with care to climb up into this ancient tree which appears to be 2 trees (the other trunk being 20 feet girth) though DNA tests have shown it is actually just one. The Defynnog Yew was put on the map by Janis Fry as the contender with the Fortingall Yew in Scotland, for the title of Oldest Tree in Britain. The yew is monoecious, (a female carrying a male branch) and also carries the mysterious Golden Bough. No other known yew tree has both these attributes. The Defynnog yew is aged at over 5,000 years and may have been planted to mark the burial place of a tribal chieftain. It is likely to have been an Axis Mundi, a sacred tree..

2

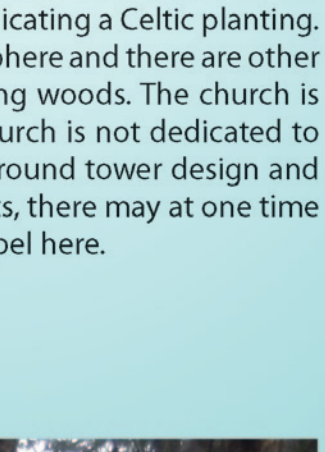
Penpont

This was once a complete circle of some 40 yews, cut into now by the A40 but with a central ancient yew of over 2,000 years at it's centre. This male yew has a girth of 27 feet and grows on a mound on the east side of the church, indicating a Celtic planting. The place has great atmosphere and there are other old yews in the surrounding woods. The church is an unusual design. The church is not dedicated to a saint. It is of an unusual round tower design and according to archaeologists, there may at one time have been a medieval chapel here.

4

Brecon Cathedral

At Brecon Cathedral there is a big 1,000 year old yew tree but perhaps the most interesting thing here is this avenue of 200 year old bleeding yews. This phenomena is very rare, the famous example in Wales being the bleeding yews of Nevern. No one knows what causes the blood red sap to ooze from the trees but it is associated with the blood of Jesus or the pre Christian Earth Mother.



5

Cantref

Cantref is noted for it's beautiful, late Celtic, male yew on the south east of the church with a girth of almost 22 feet. The yew is in very good health in this peaceful churchyard and offers a good opportunity to see the old tree inside the new. At the back of the church on the south side was once a holy well with a female yew. The well has now gone under the wall only to reappear on the other side! The male yew on the south side was recently rescued by the community from being smothered by ivy and brambles and is taking on a new lease of life. Sadly the yew avenue recently suffered storm damage and adjacent yews are more exposed to wind. These could be supported by wooden props while allowing the yews to put branches down to root which it will do within a few decades, enabling it to support itself.

3

Llanspyddid

Llanspyddid was an important 6th century site of St. Cadoc's College and monastery, as reported by S. Baring Gould, where there would have been more than a thousand students at one time. St. Cadoc planted yews and would have carried a yew staff. Llanspyddid has 8 old Yews. The largest, on the west end, is female, 27feet in girth and aged at 1800 years which means it would have been there at the time of Cadoc and his friend St Illtyd, who also spent time there. These 2 saints were known, along with Peredur, as 'keepers of the secret of the grail' in the Welsh Triads. Llanspyddid is said to be the burial place of King Brychan's father Anlach, with an inscribed stone associated with him and dated between 6 and 700 AD.

WALES:-
THE COUNTRY WITH THE LARGEST COLLECTION OF ANCIENT YEWS ON EARTH

Ancient Yew Tour around Brecon and Usk

Text and photographs by Janis Fry, author of 'The God Tree'

This tour aims to introduce you to some of the best examples of ancient yews in Wales. They occur in a relatively small area, probably due to the culture of revering yews and planting them which dates back to the Silures, the Celtic yew tribe who inhabited this area and fought the Romans. The tour starts with a 5,000 year old yew and ends with one of 4,000 years and is designed to take up a weekend.

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6

Llanfeugan (Pencelli)

Some of the most awesome ancient yews in the area are to be found at Llanfeugan, the largest with a girth of 32 feet. There are 12 yews altogether, in a wild and isolated setting, almost on an island with streams on both sides joining together below the entrance to the churchyard, This site has all the signs of a pre Christian burial mound. The land drops steeply away at the back. Dedicated to a little known saint, 5th century St Meugan, Llanfeugan holds something of a mystery as to why such a site was chosen. Nothing is known of any settlement around the church, and when the first maps of the area appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, the picture of the church and one house beside the churchyard was much the same as it is today. Like Llanilid near Bridgend it may have been a natural sacred site which was adopted as a hermitage.

7

Llanbedr Ystradwy

The male yew at Llanbedr Ystradwy is one of the most beautiful in the area. With a girth of over 24 feet, it is hollow allowing 2 chairs to be placed inside, while it's branches touch the ground all round forming a protective umbrella. The yew which is a minimum of 2,000 years old, is on the north side of the church and was mentioned in the story of Culhwch and Olwen in the Mabinogion. Recent excavations have revealed the foundations of what may be an early Celtic church on the east end of the present church. Cup and ring marks on one of the foundation stones indicate a Neolithic culture.

8

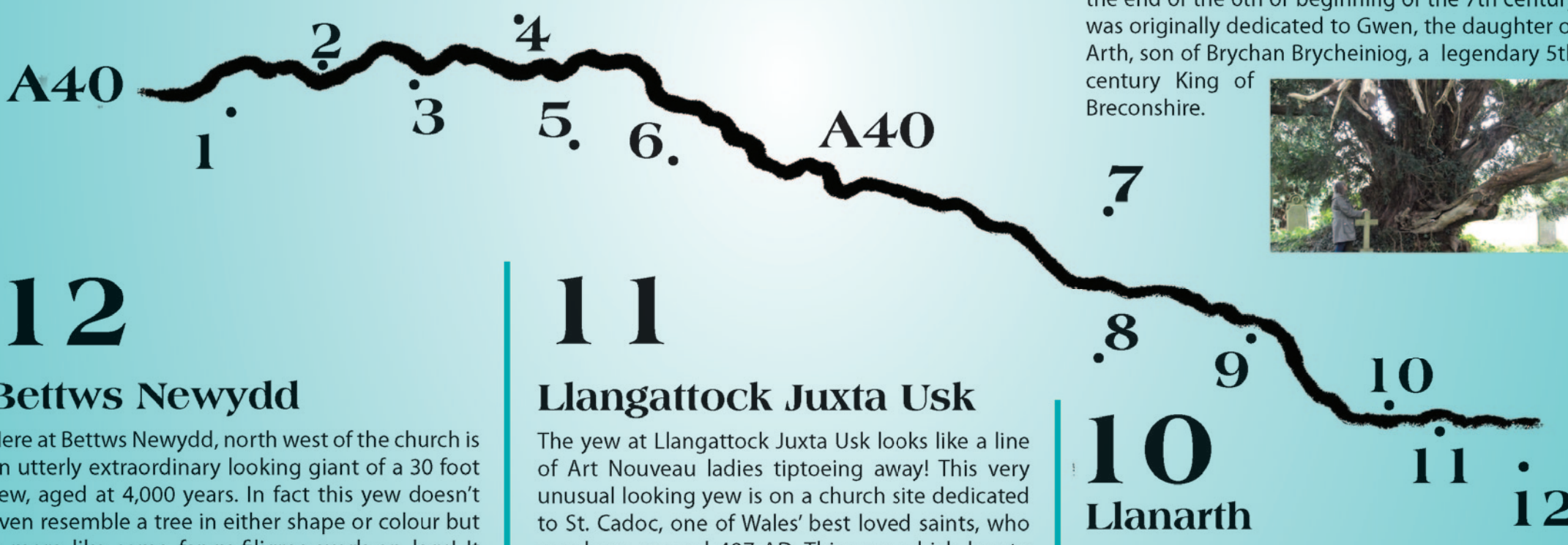
Llanelly

Set on a hilltop between the River Usk and Clydach, Llanelly has an almost complete ring of old yews and according to legend this was once a Druid site. In 1840 one of the Yews was referred to as 'The Bard Tree'. Younger yews have been added to fill the gaps where there were originally 18, now 13 ancient yews, including one beautifully gnarled tree with a 20 foot girth. The Ornithologist, William Condry wrote about this place 'Nowhere have I felt more strongly that this was the purpose of churchyard yews - as a magic circle sheltering the dead from the forces of evil.'

9

Llanwenarth

Take the lane next to Abergavenny Diesel Centre close to Abergavenny on the A40 Crickhowell side. Travel for a mile or so and the church is on the right. The extraordinary leaning yew behind the church at Llanwenarth is a 26 foot girth female tree approaching 2,000 years in age. One of the branches of this yew travels parallel to the ground for some distance and if it were allowed to come to ground and take root, would stabilise the tree. It is believed that the original church dated to the end of the 6th or beginning of the 7th century was originally dedicated to Gwen, the daughter of Arth, son of Brychan Brycheiniog, a legendary 5th century King of Breconshire.



12

Bettws Newydd

Here at Bettws Newydd, north west of the church is an utterly extraordinary looking giant of a 30 foot yew, aged at 4,000 years. In fact this yew doesn't even resemble a tree in either shape or colour but is more like some fancy filigree work on legs! It doesn't even appear to sit on the ground like a tree. This female yew encapsulates the past, present and future with the old tree, the new tree growth around it and the future tree inside, in the form of a new internal stem with a 6 foot girth. The north is the position for Neolithic yew plantings or those planted by people who still kept the Neolithic culture while the Celts were in the habit of planting their yews on the west or east of the burial mound, on the path of the sun. On the north here too, is a younger tree which is just as striking, showing extreme strength and vigour.

11

Llangattock Juxta Usk

The yew at Llangattock Juxta Usk looks like a line of Art Nouveau ladies tiptoeing away! This very unusual looking yew is on a church site dedicated to St. Cadoc, one of Wales' best loved saints, who was born around 497 AD. This yew which has to be viewed from the field, may have been planted by him. Llangattock Juxta Usk was the hub of the Silurian chiefs before Caerleon. The story of St. Cadoc meeting King Arthur at the ford comes from the Life of Saint Cadoc and is the first written reference to Arthur. The meeting may well have taken place here as the river is just a short way away and Cadoc was born here. The story is actually the earliest mention of Arthur and it seems that St. Cadoc like St. Illtyd was related to Arthur and may have fought with him. These 2 friends were both known as warrior saints.

10

Llanarth

This massive 2,000 year old hollow female yew on the south side of the burial ground has a girth of 32 feet and although much decayed, and appearing to split in half, shows signs of new growth within it's hollow. With wonderful bark formations to be seen all around this tree, this is a tree to be celebrated and protected. The decommissioned church is dedicated to St. Teilo and a church was established here at the time of the saint in the 6th century. Teilo was the Bishop of Llandaff and founder of the first church at Llandaff Cathedral. Close by is Teilo's well, which was once within the churchyard, before the boundary was shrunk.