

Editorial

On Trees: Maidens' Hair, Methuselah and Medicine

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I wonder how many of you who have sloped through the car park at Darlington Memorial Hospital at the start of the day and noticed the tree, close by the A&E entrance? 'Tree? What tree?' You say. It does seem that trees too often are ignored unless they are under threat from storm or the axe. This tree, of which I speak, is something of an oddity really. Look up when you pass by the parked Suzukis and Yamahas and you will see what I mean (figure 1). Rather ugly, and certainly unloved, in winter it appears skeletal. When spring is sprung, however, its bi-lobed, fan-like leaves emerge and, come autumn, they turn a brilliant yellow. For this is a Maidenhair Tree (*Ginkgo biloba*).

Maidenhairs or ginkgos are certainly an anachronism; a living fossil, they are actually prehistoric ferns; their leaves, evolved fronds. The genus has been on this Earth for 350 million years. Think about that! Thought to be extinct until the eighteenth century, when they were discovered in the wild in South-East China, mature ginkgos are now in the best botanical gardens (there is a superb specimen from 1762 at Kew); but not commonly in the North-East of England! What is it doing here, in a hospital car-park? I've no idea. I like to think that, when our rather dull and utilitarian hospital building was erected, some romantic and inspired landscaper slipped the tree into the plans, unnoticed, jammed between the building and the tarmac. He will have certainly known of the medicinal associations of the ginkgo. Useful for a wide variety of ailments, it appears apposite - given its ancient heritage - that its most fabled benefits are around dementia and memory enhancement. Our tree enthusiast might have hoped that his *Ginkgo biloba* would still be there long after the hospital and all its hyper-acute stroke services, its not-so-acute other services, and its much loved and lost local links are long gone; for at home in China the ginkgo can survive for 1,000 years or more.

Their longevity is, of course, what distinguishes trees from every other living organism. In the small Pembrokeshire village of Nevern, across a stone slab foot-bridge by a stream, is the Norman church of St. Brynach, itself built on the site of an earlier 6th century Celtic church. Within that ancient churchyard grows a yew tree (*Taxus baccata*) which 'bleeds,' supposedly, the blood of Christ. It is a tree, gnarled and twisted, which may, as do many church yews, pre-date the Church itself. In his excellent book, *Meetings with remarkable trees*, Thomas Pakenham tells us that 'a good rule of thumb is that most trees look older than they are except for Yews which are even older than they look'. Indeed yews are without doubt the oldest living things in the British Isles; the greatest of all of them, possibly, the Tandridge Yew in Surrey. But then again, what of the Much Marcle Yew in Herefordshire or the....? The list goes on.

Yet the lifespan of the yew pales to insignificance beside the estimated 4,500 years of 'Old Methuselah', a Bristlecone Pine (*Pinus longaeva*) in the White Mountains of California, the oldest tree yet known. Alive at the time of the Pharaohs, it clings on precariously to an inhospitable mountainside.



Figure 1

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Returning now to our native specimens - the yew's association with churchyards is well established. In times of threat of attack the church would provide the stronghold, while the yew supplied those long-bows, celebrated of Crécy and Agincourt, in whose use the yeomen were so lethally proficient. The junction between the sap-wood (which withstands the tension) and the heart-wood of the yew (which compresses) makes the perfect wood to produce a weapon of power and simplicity. Over and above defence, however, the yew seems to have long held a religious fascination and significance. As a Christian symbol their dark green leaves were regarded as our nearest native equivalent to the biblical palm in the days before more exotic, true palms had been imported. It is no surprise perhaps, that it is from the yew we find that taxols - the clue is in the name - are derived, whose chemotherapeutic qualities are so active in treating breast cancer. There are many other trees with medicinal qualities, of course. It had long been known that the bark of the willow (*Salix*) was analgesic if chewed. It was not until 150 years ago that the active ingredient acetylsalicylic acid - I told you that the clue is in the name - was identified and so the Aspirin Age was born.

Tree planting is one of the most therapeutic of pastimes. The great liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone knew this, planting saplings as a hobby, though he is better known now for felling as gratuitously as he planted. I'm lucky enough to have sufficient land to have been able to plant, a few years ago, 700 or so tree whips in a range of native varieties, as well as larger, rarer specimen trees. Oak (*Quercus robur*), beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), whitebeam (*Sorbus*), alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and others. Surviving wind and frost, rabbits and deer, they now constitute a significant copse - a shelter to harbour garden birds and wild flowers. The time of their planting brings to mind the time, one autumn, when I had been tasked to draft a constitution for the Darlington Primary Care Group. (Who remembers the PCG?!) My deadline was past, but I had just taken delivery of a tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) which needed putting in the ground. In a dilemma as to which should take priority, I took the bold decision to plant the tree before doing anything else. My reasoning, I well recall, was that the tree was likely to be around longer than the PCG and its constitution. As it transpired the constitution lasted about six months before being superseded by the - itself now obsolete - Primary Care Trust and its brave new world. The tulip tree meanwhile still handsomely graces my lawn.

I drew inspiration at that time, in my choice of tulip tree, from that other great constitution-writer, Thomas Jefferson, who planted a pair either side of the front facade at Monticello, his home in Virginia. His constitution has lasted rather better than mine; and his two-hundred year old tulip trees, gracious and proud, are just entering their prime.

It's hubris that distorts our appreciation of trees; so let's be humbled and start hugging. Moreover, as we witness the passing of yet another un-mourned incarnation of the NHS, we can delight in our *Ginkgo* and the long lives of the trees that surround us.

[The Ginkgo tree opposite the A&E entrance sadly had to be felled recently because of Health and Safety issues. The tree had a Tree Preservation Order which was removed with the agreement of the Council Planning Department on condition that a replacement be planted. We hope to have confirmation when this will be.]