

HISTORY

Deep roots for myths and legend

In his new book, *Elderflora*, US historian **Jared Farmer** looks at the complex history of the world's oldest trees, including the Fortingall Yew

Fortingall, a hamlet in Glen Lyon, Perthshire, may seem an unlikely location for a world-famous tree. The plant's notoriety can be explained historically, but a shroud of mystery remains. Through its eponymous yew, Fortingall is connected to the New Age moment, the Victorian era, the medieval period, the deep human past – and the deeper history of planetary change. *Taxus baccata* (European or common yew) may be the oldest extant tree species native to Europe. It occurs from the British Isles to the Caucasus, plus a few island mountains in North Africa. The *Taxus* family evolved around the end-Cretaceous extinction event. Yews thrived in the Tertiary period, when, for millions of years, the Arctic was humid, mild, and forested.

Then came the hard times of the Quaternary, when extreme climatic oscillations dried, iced, thawed, and re-iced the European subcontinent. Once a hotspot of conifer diversity, Europe was repeatedly, progressively deconiferized. During deep freezes, yews retreated to Mediterranean refugia. With each warmish interlude in the Ice Age, the species faced faster competition from flowering plants, particularly beeches.

With its combination of resilience and tensile strength, yew wood attracted tool-making hominins. The Paleolithic "Clacton Spear" – the oldest known woodworked object, uncovered at Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, in 1911 – dates back some 400,000 years. That time was an interglacial stage when *Homo heidelbergensis* and *H. neanderthalensis* walked the shores of future Britain. Their competitor kin, *H. sapiens*, created the first masterpieces of European art, cave paintings, which imply yew

in the form of weapons. From bogs in Denmark, archaeologists have dug up hundreds of *Taxus* shafts and bows from the Neolithic period. The ancient man dubbed Ötzi – mummified in Tyrolean ice for 5,000 years – carried a stave of yew. When yew-armed hunters migrated to postglacial Britain, they encountered coniferous poverty. Only two forest conifers and barely more evergreens are native to the isles. Unlike Scots pine, *Taxus* occurred widely, excepting the marshy lowlands of the east. Before early modern conifer introductions, yew was the sole British species that offered Britons year-round shelter from rain and wind. All the colonizers



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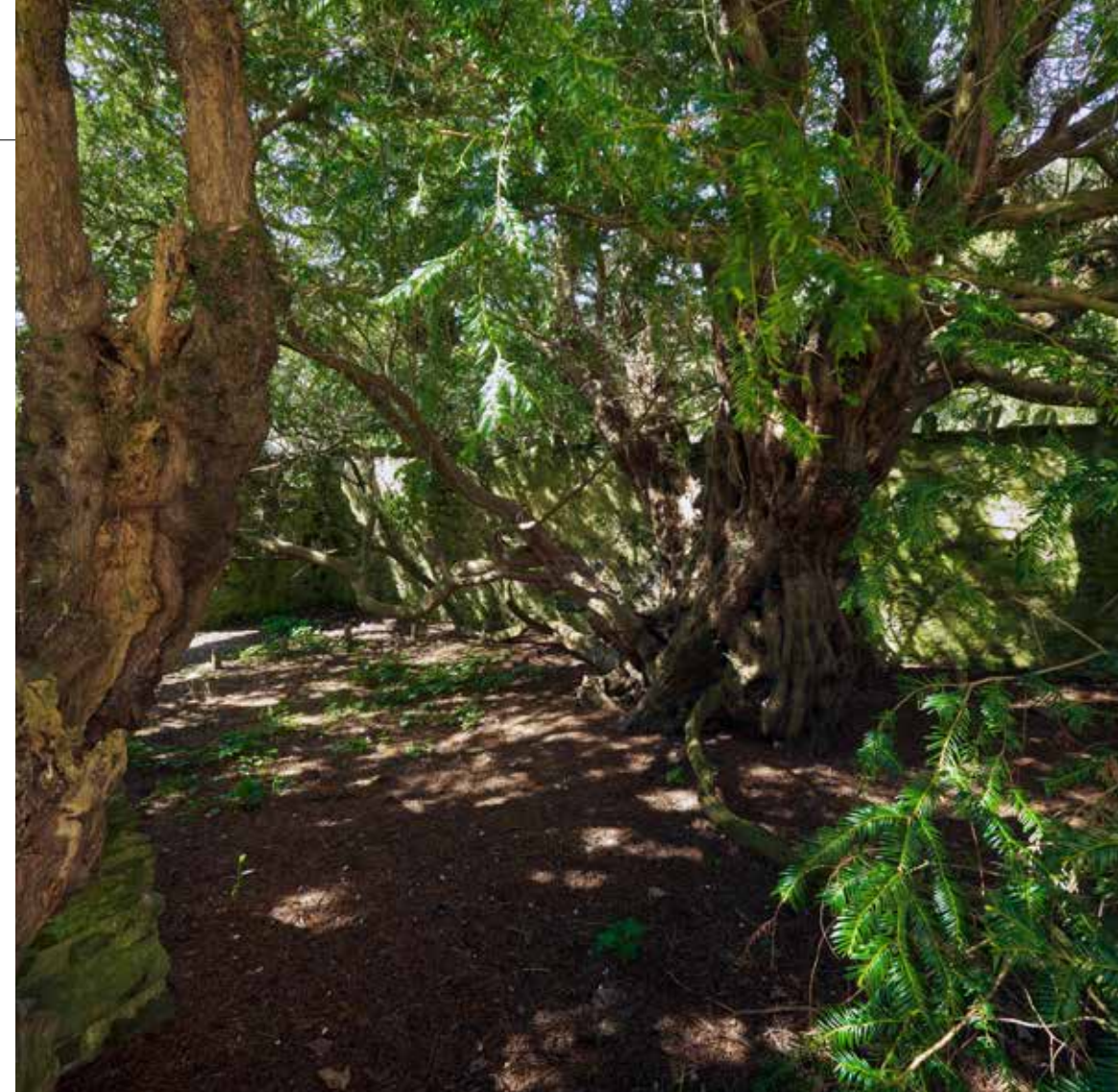
of Hibernia and Albion – Celts, Romans, Scandinavians, Saxons, Normans – fashioned implements and meanings from yew.

Today, in Britain as well as the Continent, wildwood yews are scarce – the legacy of a long-ago arms race for bow-making material propelled by the English monarchy. In the contemporary isles, however, the species remains common in churchyards. This density of age-old conifers in sacred enclosures has no parallel save in Japan.

Strangely, no one knows exactly why and when God's Acre embraced *Taxus*. This Irish and British parochial landscape tradition also occurs on the coastal peripheries of France and Spain, a distribution that suggests, if not proves, a Celtic determinant.

Two lines of scrutiny – the origin of churchyard yews, and a yew's potential lifespan – crossed in Perthshire. Although Wales, not Scotland, is the British epicentre of the species sometimes called "English yew" – Fortingall's tree became iconic for two reasons: In addition to being one of the largest, it was the northernmost.

The Fortingall Yew was put on the scientific and touristic map by Daines Barrington, London barrister and early fellow of the Royal Society, who measured it twice over two decades in the 18th century as it decayed from a monstrous 52-foot circumference to a bifurcated tree tunnel. Naturalists assumed that thicker meant older. By the early 19th century, the yew's hollow was wide enough for funeral processions. The split trunk became a shell, then further split – one timeworn yew transformed into many. Numerically-minded visitors attempted to measure the would-be girth of the arboreal ruin, then



The Fortingall Yew, main; author Jared Farmer, left

ruminated on the greatest antiquity of Scotland.

The "oldest vegetable remain" gained competitors. Influenced by antiquarians and graveyard poets, rectorors started claiming that their yew was the eldest in Britain. Fortingall's parson played this game. Taking advantage of Victoria's holidays to the Highlands, he penned a poem, *The Queen's Visit*, which named Fortingall the birthplace of Pontius Pilot. However weakly, this local legend about Roman Scotland connected the sempiternal yew to Jesus Christ, defeater of death. No tree could top that.

The stature of this evergreen Caledonian could be measured in the extracurricular activities of Sir Robert Christison. In 1879, this towering figure in Scottish academia delivered a three-part lecture on the "exact measurement of trees." The octogenarian toxicologist, who had recently climbed a 3,000-footer in the Highlands with a boost from coca leaves, presented an analysis of data, personally collected, on the growth of churchyard yews. Christison concluded his heroically pedantic discourse with an age estimate for the Fortingall Yew: 3,000-plus years.

Fantastical age estimates acquired legitimacy in the 1980s through establishment figures, including dendrologist Alan Mitchell and tele-naturalist David Bellamy. The latter baited readers of *Country Life* with an exuberant statement that Glen Lyon's yew might be nine millennia old.

For the Golden Jubilee of Elizabeth II in 2002, the Tree Council honoured Scotland's famed yew among "50 Great British Trees." This "celebrity tree" can also be imagined as a sacrifice tree. At Fortingall, in view of signage about "Europe's – and possibly the world's – oldest living thing," relic hunters still snatch twigs.



Elderflora - A Modern History of Ancient Trees by Jared Farmer is published in hardback by Picador at £20, out now.

WELLBEING

Looking to boost your mood? Consider a new houseplant

From spirit lifting to air purifying, experts tell **Hannah Stephenson** which plants to choose

It's no surprise plants can cheer us up in the winter months. New research by Dobbies Garden Centres (dobbies.com) has backed this up, finding 40 per cent of those surveyed believe colourful houseplants make them feel happier. But they don't just lift your mood. The NASA Clean Air study found that many houseplants can clean the air of toxins such as formaldehyde, benzene, trichloroethylene, xylene and ammonia, says podcaster and garden expert Ellen Mary, who recently launched People Plants Wellbeing (peopleplantswellbeing.com), a new nature-based wellbeing consultancy.

"The more plants the merrier, as long as you have the time and space to care for them," says Mary. "To clean the air you can have fewer plants if they have larger foliage, as they can be more efficient at reducing toxins."

According to the RHS, studies indicate that indoor plants can lead to increased worker productivity and increased pain tolerance, for example, where plants were used in hospital settings.

These are some of the best houseplants to boost your wellbeing...

Air purifying

"The spathiphyllum, or peace lily, is a great choice for beginner and seasoned plant parents alike, and will thrive in a bright spot out of direct sunlight. This striking plant should be watered weekly, or when its soil feels dry to the touch," says Claire Bishop of Dobbies Garden Centres (dobbies.com).

"If your plant isn't flowering, water it, feed it and move it to a brighter spot for a beautiful addition to your home that will not only brighten up your interiors but also your mood."

Mary recommends pothos, an easy-to-grow bushy specimen which thrives on low light and neglect, and purifies the air of toxins such as formaldehyde, benzene and carbon monoxide. It also helps to eliminate odours and is said to relieve tired screen eyes, she notes.

Hedera helix (English ivy) is also a good air purifier – it grows in partial



Sansevierias thrive in low light, main; Ellen Mary, inset

shade and is a low-care plant, and its long vines make it great for shelves and mantelpieces.

Green space

"If you're looking to give your home a boost of greenery without spending a fortune, smaller plants and ferns are a fantastic option. *Adiantum* (maidenhair fern), *nephrolepis* (sword fern) and *phlebodium* (fern varieties) are all typically low cost and will elevate any room in your home," Bishop suggests.

"The *Dypsis lutescens* is another wonderful choice and comes in a variety of sizes, making it ideal for homes of all styles and will instantly improve any space."

Wellbeing wonders

Bishop calls houseplants "great additions to your home office, to perk up your working environment and make you more productive. "If caring for houseplants isn't your forte but you still want to feel the benefits of them, consider a *sansevieria* (snake plant). These quirky plants can go without water for up to a month so require very little attention, making them perfect for those just starting their plant journey."

Bathroom boosters

"To promote wellness in your bathroom and give this space a zen

look and feel, use houseplants to create a spa-like vibe," says Bishop. "Ferns, with their air purifying qualities, thrive in a humid environment, making them ideal for your bathroom."

"Plant your ferns in soil with good drainage and keep them moist with weekly mistings. If your fern is looking dehydrated, you can plunge it into a sink or bucket of water to bring it back to life. Simply submerge your pot into the water and then remove it, letting it drain completely before placing it back into a bright spot."

Bedroom calm

Mary recommends orchids for the bedroom, which hold symbolism of positive energy prosperity and growth and can improve sleep, promote relaxation and enhance feelings of calmness and peace, she says. They also don't need much watering and can flower for long periods and reflower after resting. Another good choice for the bedroom is *sansevieria*, which thrives in low light, photosynthesizes even at night and is easy to grow, she recommends.

Positive energy

The money plant (*Crassula ovata*/Jade plant) exudes positive energy, says Mary, and is thought to bring good luck, growth and wealth, while also releasing a lot of oxygen.