

The Billericay Tree Warden's Bi-monthly News-sheet for November 2023



Conserving Our Tree Heritage
In association with Billericay Town Council

Our News-sheets are available to view on the Billericay Town Council's website including back issues and are listed under the header "The Town". There are also tree related Factsheets included to advise residents. The Factsheets can also be viewed on Facebook at <https://tinyurl.com/k8bzd772> <https://tinyurl.com/3hxdy5m9>

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1] News:-

A] The saga of the Ancient Woodland tree loss in a Norsey Road rear garden that extends right down to the Wood's Main Ride is still continuing! The third of an acre of woodland was felled in late January of 2022 and many of the stumps were ground out. The Forestry Commission (FC) has always stated that they are "*still considering a prosecution*" have at last contacted the BTW asking for as much evidence in terms of photographs, documentation and the timeline involved of the incident to be sent to them. One of our "Friends of the BTW" has periodically reminded the FC that the legal aspect of the case is still outstanding and has thus kept the issue live!



So we have collated what evidence has been at our disposal of the felling and sent the documentation to the FC for their case file. Meanwhile, the Basildon Borough Council (BBC) has stated in the undecided Planning Application for the replacement property that they expect to see woodland planting of native species at the end of the garden as reparation for the tree loss. So leverage is being applied. Meanwhile we await the FC's findings as the saga continues! The photograph above was taken on the 5th February from the Wood's Main Ride looking NW showing the felled area - "Woodchips and Sky!"

B] Brightside School Planting Project. On the morning of Monday 6th November we are to plant up a dedicated area with already installed benches by one of the main school buildings with four Buddleja plants (Butterfly bushes!) and a 6ft 6inch high Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*). As with previous planting projects at the school, we are to involve the children in the planting process!

C] Takeaway a Giveaway Tree! On the morning of Saturday 25th November outside of Paul Robison Solicitors in the High Street, the BTW are giving away some 50+ native tree saplings potted up for members of the public – First come, first served! We have prepared a pamphlet with planting instructions. Tree species on offer are Rowan, Cherry, Hazel, Silver Birch and Oak. The event starts at 10am.

D] The native tree planting event that was planned for the 18th November at Barleylands has unfortunately been cancelled. Apologies to those volunteers that had pledged their time to help with the planting.

E] Tree Warden and ecologist Nathan Hume is working in association with the BBC and creating three sizeable wildlife ponds in the local area. The BTW's contacts will be providing aquatic plants to "seed" them. We hope to bring news of their progress in a future edition of the BTW News-sheet.

F] The BTW has had two articles focusing recently published in October's edition of the Town Crier.

G] The plot of land where trees were felled on the corner where Hatfield Drive connects with Hillway is owned by a gap-site Developer who most likely intends to build a dwelling there. However, as we understand it, a complication has arisen whereby the ECC had adopted the land for reasons of a Highways H&S issue. The legal aspects are being investigated by both the ECC and the BBC. Meanwhile the regrettable loss of several mature trees, felled by the Developer, that had served as a "Street Scene" amenity aspect, has revealed the eyesore of a long blank and drab stepped wall beyond. It is regrettable that a green area with mature trees has been lost as expressed by several local residents.

H] We note that building work has commenced at a property along Norsey Road where there is a mature and characterful Monkey Puzzle tree in the front garden. We had earlier requested a TPO on the tree after viewing a Planning Application as the tree was destined to be removed. Our Local Authority duly designated the tree with a TPO. TPO trees and those remaining on building sites should be temporarily protected from root compression from stacking building materials over them and a temporary fence about the trunk to avoid damage from site machinery. This necessary and legally required protection of the tree had not been undertaken by the onsite building contractor so we alerted the BBC's Enforcement Officers to investigate. The situation is ongoing as we write. Trees not temporarily protected this way can take many years to die with the probable cause lost in the mists of time!

I] The BTW only applies for a TPO when we come across a mature and characterful tree that is under a "*perceived threat*" and usually within the town providing a "Street Scene" amenity value. Such vulnerable trees are more often than not the result of a gap-site Developer intent on totally removing all trees and vegetation on their newly acquired building site. Trees in private gardens do not have legal protection unless they are TPO designated. However, the Forestry Commission (FC) should be consulted for advice if woodlands in large private gardens are intended to be felled. The BBC only TPO two or three trees per month across the entire Borough of approximately 45 sq miles. As we understand it, designating a TPO is expensive requiring much Officer time and legal searches.

J] Every month our Planning Application (PA) checking team trawl the current applications to see if trees are being unnecessarily threatened. If we identify such, then we submit a "*Comment*" on the relevant PA and recommend a revision to what is being proposed.

K] **Refer to the Updated Billericay Action Group (BAG) Website for:-** The BBC is hoping that the new Local Plan will be adopted in 2027 after a further public consultation / There is shown a revised map of the Borough's Wards as of May 2024 post the Ward elections / A map of how the 2745 new build residential houses are distributed across the nine proposed residential development sites / BAG is waiting the results of the hearings of two outstanding Planning Application Appeals - Dunton & Potash Road (H16) / The Southend Road Planning Application (H20) will be decided in 2024. There is to be a Public Consultation on the proposed residential development (Scott Properties) south of the London Road (H17b) on 22nd November between 2pm to 7pm at the Chantry Centre.

The Yew – A Tree of Immortality – Its History and Mythology

By Paul Butterworth of the Great Burstead Church

In early 2020 when Covid-19 was just starting to shut down the country, I took the opportunity to cycle to the Great Burstead Parish Church. The North Porch was locked, so taking the narrow path around the side one finds the magnificent weathered South Porch and Ancient Yew.

The weathered plank door was slightly ajar; Father Michael the Parish Priest guided me towards the front pews where I sat by a magnificent 12th century Crusader's chest in all its battered glory. Above the Mayflower Pilgrims' window I could see the dark branches of the tree swaying in the wind.

Wandering outside a fine Yew tree stood guard over such grandeur, its long and time-fashioned drooping branches seemed to kiss the ground. Steel props rose up like giant crutches supporting each sagging limb. One prop was clearly bent under the strain with decades of layered multi-coloured paint still visible. As I looked down, over the centuries a spongy reddish carpet of dense Yew needles had half submerged some nearby headstones. *The Yew by the Church - Image by PB.*



I had probably just discovered the oldest Yew tree in Essex (!) without plaque or sign, with its sheer time-expressed honesty presenting an everlasting presence. Perhaps without exaggeration, the Great Burstead Church Yew is thought to be approximately 1000 years of age and for its species at the lower end of the scale for a Yew tree's potential lifespan!

I had to find out more. By visiting www.ancient-yew.org, I discovered I too could survey Yew trees as a volunteer, and soon enough I returned with tape measure in hand. Walking and letting out the tape around this grand old lady's girth, the metallic wheel spun in my hand and revealed a measurement of 4mtrs 78cms. From there I paced towards the Church, took a photo of the tree overall and then a close-up of the trunk, added all the information on an email and posted the record. This was my first record of many Essex Yew trees that I would be sending into the Ancient Yew tree website.

All Yews are thought to have descended from the *Palaeotaxus rediviva* from the Triassic era, some 200,000,000 years ago! There are various species of Yew tree, mainly now in Asia but the species in Britain is *Taxus baccata* – A survivor of time, the result of tectonic plate drifting and collision, various advancing and retreating ice ages and a time when roaming dinosaurs would have brushed past them!

Also in the Great Burstead Church ancient burial ground is a Millennium Yew, one of 8000 planted in our 7000 church cemeteries across the British Isles in 2000. I often brush past its young soft branches whilst on the ride on the lawnmower, the lawn below covered in its red sticky berries.

Going back to our Celtic & Saxon ancestors, their customs and knowledge is all but lost but Julius Ceasar had been informed that Druid Priests dispensed Wisdom and Authority from beneath a Yew tree's canopy. Seen as a portal between Life & Death, its branches naturally splay outwards, touching the ground where new roots invade the soil (layering) and sending new shoots growing upwards, thus expanding its territory as well as staking a claim in the future!

In Norse mythology the Yew is known as the "World-Tree" that connects Earth to Sky. Perhaps the presence of Yews in burial grounds would enable or ease the passage of the deceased into the heavens.

Behold an ancient Yew, its trunk all hollow and split over the centuries as from high above an aerial root will drop down into the void forming a new trunk. The Norse Vikings even inscribed the 13th Runestone showing a Yew branch as both up and down signifying strength and flexibility as demonstrated by their bows made from the Yew wood.

It's not known why Yew trees often appear in Churchyards but there are no shortage of theories that relate to it! Often a Yew would mark a funeral route, one by the main door South of the church and another by a secondary entrance to the North. Priests and Clergymen would wait under a Yew's canopy for the coffin bearers to arrive, shielded from the wind and rain as they did. What tales must have been told under many a Yew tree over the centuries!

There are stories from those distant times that those who stood under a Yew tree in hot and sultry weather could experience a mild and pleasant hallucinogenic effect as the tree released its soothing vapour and male pollen!

My own adventures, since first visiting the Great Burstead Church Yew, inspired me to visit other Churches with Yews in Essex, has taken me visiting most of those south of a line between Thaxted and Mersea Island. I'm convinced some will find my passion a sign of eccentricity, or a maverick of sorts, but for me it's a most rewarding way to spend my time.

When visiting a cemetery the trees are simply surveyed using the Churches West Tower as a compass. One finds that some Yews are pruned hard and can be a challenge to measure. Headstones and the respect they deserve can at times require an inventive technique to obtain the required measurements of the trunk.

Folk sometimes approach me and are concerned that I'm there to harm their beloved Church Yew but upon an explanation, frowns soon convert to smiles when I tell my tale.

Technical note:- Yews are unisexual with trees either male or female. Yews are not a conifer as they do not produce a cone. The Great Burstead Church Yew is a female and produces red berries that birds can safely consume but then discard the poisonous seeds uncrushed. The seeds are very poisonous to humans and horses need to be kept away from the foliage as it is very poisonous to them but deer can browse it with impunity.

Epistle:- Paul Butterworth is a local Church Historian and a "Friend of the Billericay Tree Wardens" (FoBTW) and we thank him for his expertise in his field. The organizers of the ancient Yew website have expressed their interest for Paul to continue his Essex wanderings in search of Yews. As the website's gazetteer builds up it will foster care and conservation of our Yew trees for future generations.

3] The Hard-nosed Business World!

The Billericay Tree Wardens (BTW) is a voluntary subgroup of the BTC and have been operating for nigh on seven years now. On occasions we have been called out by residents to advise on tree and border issues, some caused by gap-site Developers (GSD).

Acknowledging that infill housing can be beneficial and especially so when "affordable" housing is achieved, there are also downsides. GSD's have two knee-jerk reactions when obtaining a site – One, felling ALL non-TPO trees and vegetation including fine mature oaks before they submit a Planning Application (PA); and two, sometimes enter into border disputes to try and maximize their plot size.

Up to the present, we have only met GSD's that range between non-communicative to aggressive. We have advised our BTW members not to directly communicate with them. However, we have to acknowledge that it may be unjust to assume that all GSD's are of this ilk.

Whilst preparing this article there were two current GSD cases that were causing distress to adjacent residents. It is difficult to reason with a GSD as they are motivated by the profit motive and anything to do with ethics, trees or wildlife issues they regard as an impediment.

GSD's can be a shrewd fraternity that cannily know how to play the planning rules, stay just inside the law and push the envelope to their advantage.

In law, to carry out work or to fell a tree, whether a TPO or a non-TPO tree, requires the permission from the landowner. There is no such thing as “No Man’s Land” in England, as all land is owned by someone and unfortunately not all land is registered with the HM Land Registry. Within Billericay there are slivers of unregistered land still owned by the original housing estate Developer but the paperwork involved can be very difficult to trace!

Some of these slivers of land may be ideal for infill housing and benefit society but some will require protection to benefit the community aspect. It’s a case-by-case issue but it would be good to have foreknowledge before a site and their trees were lost so a judgement can be made. It’s fair to say that our Local Authority is quick to act when violations of Planning Rules are contravened and our local Councillors are always on hand to advise our residents. **The BTW is a subgroup of the BTC.**

4] Did You Know? Trees have the ability to communicate with each other via their roots! Woodland trees can be aware of each other’s presence and signal to each other when pests are invading their foliage. That can trigger a tree’s chemical defences. Specialist fungal strands work in partnership with the tree roots just under the soil surface and interconnect with neighbouring trees of various species: known as mycelium. These also provide nutrients to trees that are struggling to survive. Woodlands and copses sometimes have a “mother” tree!

Did You Know? The Tree of Heaven, a native of Northern China, can grow in harsh conditions where other tree species find it difficult to survive. It’s a tree that can grow out of fine cracks in concrete! It can grow to 100ft tall and makes a fine standalone specimen with an attractively patterned bark. But the invasive habit of its seeds germinating everywhere like rampant weeds makes it unpopular outside of our arboretums!

Did You Know? The Great Banyan tree of Kolkata in India is sacred to the Hindus and is a parasitic strangler fig. A bird or monkey will drop a “fertilizer” encased banyan seed in the upper branches of a tree that will then send down aerial roots. They eventually thicken and become props as the original support tree dies. The fig tree spreads out sideways into an enormous size. It’s an 800 metre walk around the Kolkata tree as it covers an area of 4.7 acres propped by over several thousand aerial roots that have morphed into supporting trunks! The Great Banyan tree is 24.5 metres high at its tallest point!

We would like to say thank you to the various BBC and BTC Councillors who support our goals and those “Friends of the BTW” (FoBTW), who’s anonymity we respect, who offer their technical advice and practical support when called upon

A thank you must go to the Billericay Town Council for providing the BTW with advice, a meeting room at the BTC’s Chantry Centre, moral support and Personal Liability & Personal Accident insurance for BTW members and their volunteers, whilst out in the field with no geographic restriction

The Billericay Tree Wardens are a voluntary group and all information contained therein is not legally binding and is provided as a source of advice and information only

**The BTW’s next members’ Committee Meeting is scheduled for
Wednesday 6th December 2023 at 7pm (Zoom meeting)
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