

The Guardian Yews of Kingley Vale

By Katy Jordan

Last August (2005) my friend Chris and I traveled into Sussex to visit Kingley Vale, a great yew forest on the edge of the South Downs. This National Nature Reserve is famous – among those who care about trees – for having some of the most ancient yews in the country. And as we were to discover, some of those yews are most assertive and powerful.

We walked in bright afternoon sunshine up a long mugwort-lined path to the edge of the woodland. Here we decided to follow the official trail, reasoning that it would take us by a well-thought-out route through all the different sorts of terrain to be found in the forest.

Very soon the path passed close by a truly huge ancient yew, and I plunged enthusiastically off to visit it. But under its canopy the atmosphere thickened like soup and I was forced to stop when only half-way to its trunk. I had never felt such a powerful reaction from a tree before, and I had the distinct impression it was not welcoming.

I turned back to Chris, to find he too had stopped some paces behind me. “This is a very powerful tree: can you feel it?” I asked. “Yes, it’s weird!” came the reply. I went back to the edge of the yew canopy, got myself together and remembered something I’d been taught years ago: don’t just rush into a sacred place: ask permission of the guardian to enter. The space under an ancient yew is surely sacred, and the yew itself is its own guardian. I explained to Chris that we should ask permission, and then silently I sent to the tree, “Hail Old One. May we enter? May we enter? May we enter?” Then I waited.

No reply. I tried to sense the atmosphere, failed as usual, so moved forward cautiously. The atmosphere was still there, but distinctly less thick. I turned back to Chris who was waiting. “This is easier, this is better.” He stepped forward too, and said, “Yes, you’re right. Thank you for explaining that.” He seemed bemused.



And so we were allowed to approach the ancient yew. We spent some time with it, appreciating its size and age, its power and presence. I began to feel that it was weary of people treating it as a thing, a curiosity. As the first really large yew by the official trail, it must have to put up with far more attention than it wanted, from many people who would never think to treat it as an ancient being. When we left to continue our walk, I was scrupulous in sending it our thanks and good wishes: “Hail and farewell, Old One. Drink deep, grow strong, live long.”

We walked on, following the path which wound among the yews. The sun filtering through their branches dappled the ground with golden light. The twilight under the trees was silent, full of August heat. Finally we came to the place where the path emerged into open grassy heathland, and here was another huge guardian yew. The path passed directly under it.

I had learned my lesson well: I sent greetings to the yew before venturing under its branches. This yew too was strong and powerful. I felt its presence most clearly near the trunk, and it faded away as I approached the edge of the canopy. Chris could sense it only near the trunk at first. I checked again, definitely feeling gentle vibration under the canopy, and once assured of this he seemed able to tune into it. After a brief time spent with this ancient one, we sent it our thanks and good wishes, and continued our walk, talking over what had happened.

Chris was feeling quite spooked. He is not Druid, or pagan, and he had at that time no frame of reference for such an encounter. While these were the first trees that had ever broken through my protective rational layer, I at least had been open to the possibility and was used to the concept of communication with trees. For both of us it was a profound experience, and it affected us deeply. In the months that followed we often talked of it.

Just under a year after our first visit we decided to make a second journey to Kingley Vale. Chris wanted to see if we would have the same experience again. He had recently taken up dowsing and in a spirit of exploration he wanted to dowse the trees' auras. I was just happy to visit these old ones again. So on a hot June day we made the journey from Wiltshire to West Sussex, walked the long path to the forest, and entered.

It was bewildering. We both clearly recalled the first guardian yew as being immediately beside the path as we entered the wood. But it simply was not there. There was a largish yew which Chris thought was the tree we had encountered, but it was not the same as the tree in my photographs. Two very puzzled people walked around the area for a good five minutes, unable to relate where we were with what we remembered. Chris has an excellent visual memory, and was quite baffled by his inability to recall the layout of the wood clearly. Unable to make any sense of what was happening – I even heard myself suggest at one point that maybe the tree had moved! - we walked on down the path to a point where it forked. Neither of us could remember this from our previous visit. I chose the right fork and we walked on, Chris insisting that we were too far into the wood. But suddenly I saw the tree standing away to our right, huge and imposing as I remembered it. Somehow, we had both lost all recollection of its position in the wood. I have wondered since whether this is a trick it uses to protect itself from unwanted attention.

With care we greeted and approached the great yew, Chris dowsing with his pendulum as he walked. He explained to me that trees have a triple aura: the first point at the edge of the canopy, the second part-way to the trunk and the third close to the trunk. His pendulum clearly indicated each of these stages of the yew's aura. What interested me was that where the pendulum swung madly about half-way between the edge of the canopy and the trunk, was where I had stopped short on our first visit to the yew, unable to move forward. Chris's dowsing did seem to indicate some change of energy at that point. We went later to the yew at the end of the path, and found it too maintained the powerful presence we recalled.

In retrospect, I feel these two yews were the guardians of the entry and exit points of that part of the path, the part that ran through the most ancient part of the yew forest. The more powerful of the two trees, the first we encountered, was more hostile, and seems to me to be guardian of the wood's integrity. The second, more used to people passing under it, and perhaps less harassed by their attentions, was a living gateway, guarding the liminal bounds of the forest.

The human guardians of Kingley Vale are very aware of the rarity of the yew forest under their care. On the information board not far from the first great guardian yew, I found they had reproduced this traditional verse, which might have been written by a Druid:-

The lives of three wattles,
 The life of a hound;
The lives of three hounds,
 The life of a steed;
The lives of three steeds,
 The life of a man;
The lives of three men,
 The life of an eagle;
The lives of three eagles,
 The life of a yew;
The lives of three yews,
 The length of an age;
Seven ages from creation to doom.

If you would like to know more about Kingley Vale, you can download the English Nature leaflet from http://www.english-nature.org.uk/about/teams/team_photo/KingleyVale.pdf