

Notes on the Garden: The Yew Garden

Our unique topiary garden at Packwood is in turn calming, yet perplexing. The mysterious shapes rise above the organic, sinuous lines of the box hedge that enclose this part of the garden, each one like an individual chess piece waiting for its turn on the board. Walking up the centre of the garden past the 'multitude' of figures, you reach the grand finale of Packwood's formal garden; the spiral mount and its imposing 'Master' yew. Whilst it may appear to have always been this way, how this part of the garden looks now is testimony to the many centuries of change that have occurred at Packwood, tastes and fashions adapting these spaces to create unique works of living art.

The box hedging that surrounds the Yew Garden and the mount are likely to date back to the 16th century when the main structure of the house was built. Mounts at this time were fashionable additions to a garden landscape, allowing for a more elevated view of the surroundings.

In the earliest drawing we have of this space in 1723, there is no sign of what have now become the iconic yews as they appear today. Instead there is an arrangement of orchard trees, and no 'Master' yew at the top of the mount. A later drawing shows the presence of bee boles on the south face of the raised terrace wall, housing woven straw skeps to encourage the bees to settle and pollinate the fruit trees. By the late 18th century, a spiral path had made its appearance on the mount.

By the 1860s, photographs show an established orchard (likely to have been replanted by this time), surrounded by hedging and small yew trees formally arranged. The arrangement of the yew trees as they appear now is often claimed to represent the biblical story of the Sermon on the Mount. However, this story first made its appearance only in 1892 in a book written by the architect and designer Reginald Blomfield. He reported that a gardener gave him this story – but how the gardener came about this legend nobody knows!

By the time the Ash family arrived in the early 20th century the yews had become large specimens and the fruit trees had deteriorated. The last of the orchard was removed, and gradually this space took on the appearance we have come to know today. This is a unique piece of horticultural history, so looking after it presents quite a challenge to the garden team. General maintenance includes regular mowing of the lawn area, as well as annual trimming of the box hedging and the yew trees beginning around August time. This is hugely labour intensive and requires significant skill to keep the sharp outlines of the yew as crisp as possible.

You may notice that some of the trees are not looking quite as healthy as they once did. This is due to a number of factors, including poor drainage, heavy clay soil and compaction from increasing numbers of visitors over the years. To try and conserve this important part of Packwood, we have used a number of methods. Yew is a very robust conifer, and unusual in this group of plants in that it will rejuvenate after being cut back to old wood. A rejuvenation programme has been put in place which will cover a number of years, allowing us to cut back in stages and focus on the most overcrowded specimens. Where we have cut the trees in half in order to regenerate them, new growth is coming back strongly. Better drainage throughout has been put in place, and we close this area in winter to minimise the impact of wear and tear on such a fragile space.

Ultimately, the Yew garden allows us to take a breath, soothe the eye and allow it to rest after the richness of colour and texture elsewhere. Despite its evolution it has a timeless quality, a mystery and an elegance that is worth preserving for generations to come.

By Robyn Booth