



HOLLY- TREE OF PROGRESS.

Holegn (Anglo-saxon)- Holin (middle English to become Holm/Hulver) - Hussetum (medieval Latin)
Celynen(Welsh)

A third of a wheel is holly for it is one of three timbers of the chariot wheel.

Third of a wheel.

A third of weapons, an iron bar.

Fires of coal.

Book of Ballymote 1391

Now it's time to leave the protection of the oak and move forward to the holly grove. This progression happens at every summer solstice as the sun reaches its peak. In the same way that the Oak giant fights the Holly giant and wins at the winter solstice, this fight also happens at the summer Solstice when the holly wins and becomes the King of the waning year.

It may feel strange to think of the waning year at the height of mid-summer but as you will probably be aware the days are then becoming shorter. However, we mustn't feel dismayed at this prospect for we are yet to bring in the main crops and there is plenty of time to enjoy warmer days.

Holly is the perfect tree to take us through the second half of the year as its broad evergreen leaves and hard timber offer much shelter. The first of the kennings listed above from the book of Ballymote point to the fact it was traditionally used to make chariot wheels. If we imagine the role of the wheel and its importance in human development especially in terms of transport and trade,

we begin to see why the holly invites us to move on in life.

The 'third' is mentioned several times in the kennings above which indicates we are entering into more subtle realms as three in Celtic lore is a very sacred number and represents the in-between state, the subtle reality which permeates all creation. As we walk upon the earth there is an unseen reality, an energy that moves through all things which can be accessed when we connect deeply to nature. This true state within us contains boundless joy and enables us to access a steady place of courage even in challenging times.

Holly is a widespread tree but is less common in Eastern England and East Scotland. Holly is considered to be bad luck to cut although this has not stopped it being used. The wood can be sanded to a beautiful white finish and is hard, strong and durable making it ideal for cogs used in machinery. The close-grained wood is ideal for carving and turnery. Its wood also makes good charcoal. Spears and chariot shafts were also made from holly, its foliage has been used for fodder for both sheep and deer.

Holly is an important tree, a specialty of the British Isles, an example of an evergreen broad-leaved tree rare outside of Britain, just like the strawberry tree is in South-West Ireland. This inevitably means ancient holly sites must be protected. Holly woods include sites in Epping, the New Forest, Sherrard's Park Wood and the grandest stand is in Staverton Park.

Holly thrives in the west usually on acid soils, although as with many native species there are exceptions. Holly will both cast and tolerate shade. It is one of the few species which has actually profited from woodcutting rights that were terminated in 1878 due to its shade tolerance. Holly regeneration is increasing as grazing declines. Holly has a poor flora but can be rich in bryophytes (mosses and liverworts). It also provides shelter and food for mammals and birds as well as providing nectar for insects.

Holly speaks of tenacity, a refusal to give up and its evergreen leaves lift one's spirits and shelter the fairies and elves. It is said it is safe to bring holly foliage into the house at the time of the Winter Solstice (21st/22nd December) as the nature spirits are not going to harm you provided, they are removed by Imbolc (1st February).

In some parts of Europe holly is known as 'Christ's thorn' as the thorny leaves and its red berries represent the suffering of Christ and the passion of his message.

The Green Knight from the Arthurian tales has a holly club and perhaps represents the challenging holly giant spoken of above. Nadcranntail, a famous warrior of Irish stories carried nine holly spears charred and sharpened as did Mannanan Mac Iir, the son of the sea.

The weaving sisters who reside at the base of the Tree of Life in Norse Mythology are said to use holly spindles to weave the threads of life that govern our destiny.

The twelfth night is known as 'Holy night' and it may well have originally been 'Holly night' when the strongman of the village carried a heavy holly branch through the streets as part of a procession on this night. Holly in folklore is considered to be a guardian against evil spirits, poisons, short-tempered angry elementals, thunder and lightning.

The Ogham name Tinne means a link as in a chain or a bridge but to where? Maybe the Other-world, as the kennings already discussed for this tree point to the otherworldly character of the Holly Ogham.

Medicinally Holly leaves can be used to induce a sweat and therefore rid the body of poisons and fevers. The berries are a purgative and if dried and powdered can help relieve diarrhoea and heavy menstrual flow.

I do not recommend you use the Holly as a herb!

Woodland Ecology

We shall continue our look at Woodland ecology under the Holly tree exploring how the original wild woods looked and the fauna they supported.

*Shimmering leaves on a sunny day,
Tall, slim trees frame the world,
Bright green leaves begin to unfurl,
-A perfected landscape.*

*Birds sing and perform acrobatics,
Blossom decorates a living tree,
Flowers underneath beckon to me,
-A perfected landscape.*

*A cacophony of sound that is so quiet,
The busyness of nature that is so still,
The solitude of company surrounding me,
-A perfected landscape.*

J.Huet

The Original Wild Wood

As late as the 1980s it was assumed that the wild wood was a deep impenetrable thicket of towering trees, a dark place where squirrels could hop from tree to tree across Britain. It is important to consider if this modern misconception was true when managing woods today as it seems woods depend on light to maximise biodiversity.

Woodsman know that if woodlands today are left and the trees are not cut, they create shade and less diversity, this is due to the semi-natural behaviour of woods today. If a woodland has never been cut this may not be the case. Evidence implies our original woodlands would have been an open diverse wooded landscape teeming with life!

Imagine walking across Britain when nature dominated, the vast woods open and diverse. Huge towering trees filling the skyline, beautiful graceful limes letting in dappled light which warm the soil thus supporting a myriad of flowering plants pollinated by delicate winged delights, the butterflies and moths.

Stirring bears looking for a meal as rampaging boars dig up roots and grubs. The majestic powerful stags fight for supremacy. Packs of wolves howl and hunt, taking down the fleeing deer. Goshawks and eagles fly through the air looking for prey. Holes are bored into rotting and decaying mammoth trunks by large unusual beetles. Thousands of varieties of insects become food for perfectly formed song- birds delighting the ear with such melodious sweet sounds.

Alder carr and willow roots fill the sparkling streams whilst the black poplar dominates the wet meadow and aspen suckers in stagnant waters.

Beaver fell trees and ladies smock cheer the open wet areas. Aurochs and elks graze amongst buttercups, scabious and plantain. Wild cats clamber amongst the trees while Lynx sights its prey. A world where humans are no different from the other predators and part of an ecological structure, a perfect system, allowing every living creature a chance to thrive.

This is a depiction of the wild wood and what we know of woodland structure and ecology supports this concept which we will explore further under the Hazel tree.

Woodland fauna

The vast woodlands of the past supported an impressive range of land mammals and birds of prey which are either rare or extinct in modern times. All of Britain's land mammals lived in the woods with the exception of the hare which again supports the overwhelming evidence that woodlands were more open. Early species which soon died out include reindeer, bear, beaver, lynx and aurochs (wild cattle).

Other mammals include the legendary wolves and boars, red and roe deer, wild horses and the pine martin. The badger and fox are still here today despite being persecuted by man and the wild cat is reduced to isolated spots in the wild parts of Scotland.

Fossilised remains of animals have enabled us to determine which species were around at the time of the wildwood. Starr carr in East Yorkshire has remains of animals dating back to 8000BC such as red deer, elk, boar, aurochs, beaver, wolf, pine martin, badger, fox and hedgehog. Another site in Berkshire confirms red deer, wild cat and horse.

There are several reasons why many mammals did not survive into modern times which are chiefly habitat destruction and hunting. The species that have survived tend to be the most adaptable and the most capable of living in smaller woods such as deer, fox and badger. The once common polecat, martin and wild cat were persecuted by gamekeepers as well as many birds of prey. The world was actually enabled woods to have some rest bite and birds of prey numbers to increase. Martins were hunted for fur while the pole cat and badger were considered vermin. Red deer and fox survive well due to their sporting value rather than the sport controlling numbers!

The Wolf

The wolf once a very successful species in Britain seemed to be turned into a beast of terror and persecuted in extreme ways. This was mainly due to it being the main competitor for deer hunting and it was especially made unpopular as sheep farming was expanded by the Cistercian abbeys.

Whole woods were burnt and felled to drive out the wolf from its last strongholds in Scotland this in turn upset the natural balance of the highlands as deer numbers halt the natural regeneration of Scottish woodlands. The woods destroyed were in Loch Aber, Rannoch and Sloi. However it is also important to note the wolf is not necessarily a woodland animal as it is also happy hunting on bare hillsides as well as the moors.

It was stated in 1427 that the plague of wolves had to be reduced in Scotland. Did children's stories and other folk tales play a part in demonising the wolf as the media tries to demonise the fox today? In Saxon times the wolf was construed as a fabulous mythical beast being both a physical and spiritual entity possibly creating a fear of this majestic animal.

Wolf numbers were still very high in Saxon times and King Edgar was keen to cull them. The month of January was set aside to hunt the wolf as January was the time when cubs were born and wolf pelts were at their thickest. Edward the first had bounties on Welsh wolves and also encouraged the destruction of their habitats. It is thought that the last wolf in England was killed by Peter

Corbert commissioned by Edward the first, certainly by 1486 wolves were rare in England only surviving in the North in forests of the Peak district, Bowland and the Yorkshire Wolds. In Ireland and Scotland the wolf remained until the eighteenth century. Thomas Pennant, a Welsh traveler and naturalist is said to have recorded the last wolf in Perthshire in 1680.

The Boar

The original wolf, bear and boar species which once lived in Britain are now gone forever. Re-introduction cannot bring back those exact species in the same way planting trees will never re-create ancient woodlands. That period in history has gone. Personally, I feel as a nation we need to allow nature to lead what will naturally regenerate and stop repeating the age-old mistake of thinking that we know best!

All three mammals as already mentioned above were both magical mythical beasts as well as real animals of the time representing spiritual as well as practical qualities. It seems we were not able to live with animals that are a threat to us. The bear died out very early on in British history, probably after the last ice age and as already explored the wolf was eradicated to by Medieval times.

The boar's extinction was more from habitat destruction and ultimately economics. To hunt boar was to be a person of prestige, almost a hero type status. Boar was often for the feasts of Kings and hunted by warriors who could cope with this dark, dangerous, powerful animal. Again, as mentioned earlier when an animal is hunted more for sport than necessity it is given protection.

The Boar therefore was protected due to its value in the Chase and the Royal Forests.

This animal needs wide extensive woods where it is left free to roam in undisturbed forests. The last free roaming boars were in Pickering Forest in Yorkshire and the Forest of Dean on the borders of Wales. The Dean boars disappeared in 1260 probably in some great feast held by Henry the third! However, the main reason for the boar's extinction would have been the change of land use.

The Forest would have been industrialised and therefore extensively managed destroying the boar's solitude and its right to roam. The boar has now been re-introduced to the Forest of Dean.

In captivity swine herds continued until the English Civil war (1642-1651) when the old park system declined. The boar's natural habitat is large lowland woods of oak or beech.

The Beaver

The beaver's decline was another example of how avarice seems to drive the human race. Yet again a story of hunting, though this time mainly for fur and yet again the continued destruction of habitat. Another reason was due to the medicinal value of a beaver's testicles which contain certain properties of the drug we know as aspirin. The beaver was widespread in the Bronze age living in the extensive flood plain woodlands that prevailed then and certainly survived into Saxon times though quickly becoming an animal of commercial interest for its fur and testicles. There are rumours that they lived on into the Middle Ages as Gerald of Wales, a polemical writer and scholar of the 1100s records a beaver in 1188. It may well of been an otter as his claims were often inaccurate and showed a credulous believe in legend. It is clear however that in Europe in the Middle Ages they were being persistently hunted as their coats were worth seven times the value of the wolves. In wales the ongoing felling of lowland woods of the Middle Ages would've certainly added to their destruction.

Grazing herds

Franciscus Vera explored the idea that the wildwood never fully formed due to large grazing herds preventing the climax species from ever dominating. However, it is more likely that Britain did not have the large herds present in mainland Europe. The herds that were present in Britain would have been a valuable food source for early man and thus hunted effectively. Reindeer died out soon after the Ice age and this well may well have been due to rapid climate change whereas elk stayed in Britain into the Mesolithic period (7000-5000BC) as a stable food source for humans. In 1952 reindeer were re-introduced into Scotland by a Swedish reindeer herder called Mikel Utsi and now a healthy herd of 150 deer range the Cairngorm mountains.

The ancestors of today's cattle were possibly the wild aurochs, the largest of the grazing herbivores in Europe. They were still around into the Iron age probably becoming extinct around 100BC. Being a woodland inhabitant, the destruction of early forests made it easy to hunt down the remaining few.

As farmland advanced even our deer started to decline, our native species being the roe and red deer. The situation today is very different as deer are a huge problem in our woodlands often overgrazing and harming the woodlands natural ecology, this is in part due to the extinction of their natural predators such as wolves.

Birds of the Wildwood.

In Britain there was also a much more diverse species range of 'big' birds such as the eagle owl, crane, pelican, spoonbill, great auk, great bustard and sea eagle but only the eagle owl of the species mentioned is associated with woodlands. Before the wildwood amongst the tundra would have been birds such as the hazel-hen and the crested lark but as the woods developed woodpeckers, warblers, tits, nuthatch and hawfinch arrive.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES

Holly connects us to the untamed aspects of woodlands, although an important native tree it does not encourage a diverse flora and biodiverse woodland structure which we will explore with the next tree, the Hazel.

Holly's foliage is dark and spiky, its wood heavy and hard and its temperament of longevity, the slow heartbeat of Nature's turning cycle into the dark part of the year. The Celtic twilight and the mysteries of the 'third' are not caught up in the religious fervour or ecstasy in union with something greater than ourselves but in the slow painful conception of a darker aspect to life which when it is not denied leads to a peace that is steady, strong and constant.

*It lies not on the sunlit hill
Nor on the sunlit plain:
Nor ever on any running stream
Nor on the unclouded main—*

*But sometimes, through the Soul of Man,
Slow moving o'er his pain,
The moonlight of a perfect peace
Floods heart and brain.*

William Sharp

It may be our uncertainty of vast wild areas that especially led to the destruction of the Wild Wood landscape and if only we could: -

Let children walk with nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights.

John Muir

Here are a few questions to actively explore the themes related to Holly:

What aspects of yourself are you not comfortable with?

Can you access the state between joy and pain?

What holds you steady in your life?

Can you cultivate tenacity in your life when you are being challenged?

In the meditation recording you will enter the wild grove of the holly to connect with your animal self and your deeper instincts. This will help you to let go of your thinking mind and trust in the senses within your body and soul.

Deepening your connection to Holly

Entering a mature Holly wood is like entering the womb of the earth and calls us to walk the untrodden path. If you do not know of a mature holly wood it will suffice to find a holly tree or even a holly bush. If you are able, sit with the tree for a while and take the impressions that come to you.

What is the Holly tree teaching you?

Can you get a sense of its voice or how it would behave if it were a close human friend?

Please do not put pressure on yourself it is enough to just be with the tree, breathe and be at peace in its presence.

Practical tasks

Once you have meditated with the tree and asked its permission you may wish to prune a small branch and carve it. When Holly is sanded, it produces a wonderful white finish and due to its weight, it is a good wood to hold and feel strong and supported.

Sometimes the bark of the tree makes interesting patterns so you may only wish to remove part or some of the bark according to the look or feel of it.

Enjoy working the wood and entering into the darker aspects of nature where a deep peace dwells.