

# Return of the Golden Bough

Author and researcher Janis Fry describes its re-appearance in an ancient Welsh yew and others around Britain after 3,000 years and what it might signify

It was at the turn of the millennium, on Christmas Day, 2002, to be precise, that the Golden Bough was discovered growing on an ancient yew at Defynnog, near Brecon in Wales. Over a decade later, in 2017 it still grows on the same tree, like a flame growing larger and brighter with each passing year.

The yew, meanwhile, is sprouting new golden sprigs, up in the branches, as well as a nest of golden twigs, like a golden fleece, in its sister tree next to it, part of the original tree (proved by DNA) which seems to have split off and walked away from the main trunk.

The mythology and legends of a 'Golden Bough' are well known. Until recently, the last time it was seen and heard of was 3,000 years ago, immortalised by Roman writers such as Virgil, and 2,000 years ago, in connection with the Trojan hero, Aeneas, who appeared in both Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad*. And these classic writers were recording events that had occurred 1,000 years before them.

Its reappearance is one of the most unexpected and extraordinary, mystical events of our time. Since the Golden Bough was found, growing on the ancient yew at Defynnog, possibly the oldest tree in Europe, it has now appeared on a dozen other ancient yews in Britain, most recently a few months ago at Buxted (see cover). The yews that bear it are, remarkably, all trees of some historical importance, possibly planted originally by those who knew they were special and different.

The reappearance of the Golden Bough at the beginning of the new millennium, almost as if it was programmed to do so, felt highly significant and raises questions as to its purpose and meaning, particularly when other yews began to follow suit.

The Golden Bough is the stuff of dreams. Virgil said it was always a rare sight and called it, 'The fateful brand, unseen for many years'. All the evidence as to why the Golden Bough was never the mistletoe, nor the Holme Oak, as has

been wrongly thought, is detailed in my book, *The God Tree*. The Golden Bough, described by Virgil as 'a fatal branch', grows from the 'double fatal tree in a gloomy vale'. A tree referred to in these terms could only be a yew, the tree connected with Fate since ancient times.

Virgil writes of, 'The lurking gold upon the fatal tree' and says, 'Conduct my steps to find the fatal tree'. His reference to 'double fatal' or 'double tree' concerned the double aspect of the yew, with both its death-dealing poison and its life-giving properties. He describes the tree as, 'The double tree that bears the golden bough'.

However, the yew on which this fatal golden branch grows is not just any old yew tree but a most special yew, for it is only on one tree in the sacred grove at Avernus, the entrance to the Underworld, that this Golden Bough could be found. Another important point to note is that this rare Bough was not growing on the tree, like mistletoe, but was actually part of the tree itself.

## Dangerous mission

From ancient literature, we learn that the search for the Golden Bough was a great adventure, a dangerous mission that few would undertake. Some of the main themes and elements of this quest conjure up scenes you might encounter in a Spielberg film – the Underworld, River Styx, ferryman, Triple Goddess, the Sybil, Tartarus, a talisman, the gloomy grove and the Fateful Tree.

In Virgil's classic poem it was the Sybil who commanded the quest and discovery of the sacred bough to be carried by Aeneas when he entered the Underworld for, without such a bough from the wondrous tree, sacred to infernal Juno, none could enter Pluto's realm. And when Charon, the ferryman, refuses to carry Aeneas across the Stygian lake, the Sybil presents the Golden Bough from her bosom, making it clear that the Bough is the passport to Hades. Thus, one of its primary functions was to ena-

ble the bearer to descend into the Underworld and return with certain knowledge from the realms of the gods and the dead.

Avernus or Avernus, which concealed the entrance to the Underworld, was a thick yew grove, as we know from the Roman writer, Statius, and is where the Golden Bough was to be found. Although Aeneas can be pointed in the right direction to look for it, he has to find it for himself and pluck it from the tree, for the Bough cannot be taken from the tree unless it is his fate to do so. He is thus helped by the Sybil, prophetess, seer and guardian of the sacred wood, to find and take this prize to the goddess Proserpina as a gift. Only in this way can Aeneas be permitted to enter the realms of the dead. Once there, our Trojan hero must reach Proserpina's palace and plant the Golden Bough on her threshold or his safety is not assured.

Other Roman writers, such as Ovid, write about the Golden Bough and we find there are common themes and factors to do with the character of this sacred branch. 'There is a shelving path, shaded with dismal Yew which leads through profound silence to the infernal abodes. Here languid Styx exhales vapours...' He also speaks of 'the gloomy funeral yew which leads to the Underworld of Tartarus and the sluggish Styx'. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how the Sybil shows him where the Golden Bough grows in the glade of Juno Averno (Persephone) and bids him break it from the trunk if he is to visit the Underworld and present the Bough to the Goddess.

Since it is quite clear from these and other statements by the Roman writers that the yew plays a major role in the whole adventure of the Golden Bough and entering the Underworld, one wonders why there has ever been any doubt as to the nature of the Bough and the species of tree it grew from. Further confirmation that the Golden Bough comes from the yew is presented by the fact that the Goddess Persephone is depicted in ancient mythology as holding a yew bough! The custom of placing branches of yew in graves is still carried on in parts of Wales and the West Country to ensure the recently deceased a safe passage through the Underworld to the next world.

Virgil writes of the dark abode of Tartarus, the Underworld, in the *Aeneid* and describes one bough hidden on a tree with 'ductile rind and leaves of radiant gold', a 'shining bough' of 'ruddy rind', 'glittering' with 'lingering gold'. This is a remarkably accurate description of the present-day Golden Boughs, with