

YEW AND HUMANS



As well as being helpful to the environment, the yew tree has also been used by humans throughout our history. In fact the oldest wooden thing ever found in Britain – the “Clacton Spear” which is over 400,000 years old – is made from yew.

However the yew is probably most famous for its use in making **longbows**. The longbow was used to fire arrows longer distances than was ever possible before and was important for winning many civil war battles and **King Henry V’s** wars in France. The yew tree was used because it has **elastic wood** which can withstand being pulled back without breaking, to give the arrow more power. However so many yews were cut down to make longbows that they almost became extinct in northern Europe.

Henry V might also have enjoyed listening to yew trees! **Musical instruments** of the time such as lutes – which are plucked like a guitar – are often made of yew because the wood’s grain gives an **interesting pattern** to the instrument. This has also made it a prized wood for building **furniture**, and its strength was used by the Vikings to create nails for their longboats.

As well as being deadly because of their use in making weapons, the yew tree is also **very poisonous** itself – to animals and humans. They can kill cattle and only the fleshy part that holds the seed in the autumn is not poisonous – so never eat a yew! It is also a reason why you **do not often find plates or cups made of yew**. However scientists have used this poison to create helpful **medicines** to fight cancer, so the yew tree can also help to save lives.

Yew trees can be very, very old! They can **live for over a thousand years** and are often the oldest living thing in the landscape. This means they were used as a **marker to meet at**. They were easy to find because they have a **distinctive shape** and are **evergreen** – which means they keep their leaves throughout the year. They can also become **hollow** after about 500 years, which means they have a large hole in the middle which people can shelter in. In some places, such as Crowhurst in Surrey, they even put a door, seats and a table inside for dinner parties!

Activity: Look at the pictures below and circle the images of objects that yew wood is useful for. When you have finished, think about what other objects yew trees are useful for and why, then try drawing them.

