

Trees

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Introduction

Albion, an ancient name for Britain – meaning white, shining, invaded by many different peoples during the course of its long history. Bringing their culture, beliefs and folklore, peoples from Celts to Romans, Vikings, Angles, Saxons and Jutes, creating a rich heritage of stories and mythologies.

Our ancestors honoured, respected, every aspect of the natural world, considering each element of this world capable of being an ally, guide and teacher; from trees to birds and animals. They were very aware of a term we use today ‘The Spirit of Place’ – how a landscape creates and invokes certain energies, emotions or feelings – recognising the sacredness of mother earth, doing their best to work in harmony with her seasonal cycle.

Each clan or tribe would have a shaman, druid, wise woman, witch; or cunning man, to interpret nature’s secrets. Today we’d probably call them naturalists, alternative therapists, ecologists or herbalists, and we wouldn’t dream of burning them at the stake, as in earlier centuries – at least I hope we wouldn’t !

Homes were primarily formed from living materials, often inscribed with amulets, talismans, sigils and symbols for fertility, protection and good luck. Look out for the ‘Ing’ rune, a diamond pattern similar to those on leaded windows, or ‘Sowillo’, an ‘S’ shape and ‘Gifu’, an ‘X’ shape, to tie end beams on buildings.

During these earlier times, we were far more in tune with the natural environment, responding to the rhythm of solar and lunar tides governing fertility, growth and decay. We’re rediscovering this wisdom as many gardeners use lunar phases to plant and grow vegetables and herbs, thus enhancing vitality and health giving properties.

Alternative therapists, healers and those seeking a more responsible eco-friendly way to build homes, living in harmony with planet earth, are growing in number. We learn from the past, hopefully applying our knowledge and wisdom towards a sustainable future.

Conservation work by the LOHP, is testament that many people care deeply about the natural environment, giving time and energy as volunteers to restore the valley fens habitat.

Alder – Alnus

Tree of balance, inspiration, inspired action. Elements: Fire and Water Rune: Ansuz
God: Odin

The only broad leaved tree to produce cones which grows in clusters of twos and threes, it has red catkins in early spring.

An ancient tribe known as the 'Averni', people of the alder – alder's name derives from old English 'Ealdor', meaning chief, relating to the official known as an alderman, senior member of a Welsh or English local council. It's a very special honour to be elected to this office.

Folklore and legend

Alder was known as 'King Alder' or 'The Elf King' throughout Europe. Traditionally alder carr woods were haunted by faeries, water spirits and undines, protectors of these powerful trees, even magical unicorn was thought to dwell within their realms! The fenland character Jack 'O' Lantern also known as Will 'O' the Wisp, would lay in darkness waiting amongst boggy roots of tangled alder, beckoning unsuspecting travellers with his lantern, to abandon the safe tracks across the fen and follow him to a watery doom!

A tree governed by the elements of fire and water, it was considered the best wood for use as whistles and pipes. Allegedly, druids and witches whistled up the wind with them! The top most alder branch became known as the 'oracular singing head of Bran', an ancient giant king of England, whose celtic name means 'Raven'.

Bran's head was reputedly buried beneath a white hill, known today as the Tower of London. Ravens still guard his head! So great was this hero king, the Christian church had to acknowledge him, becoming known as St. Brons or Bran the Blessed. A perfect role for Brian Blessed! People believed if the ravens departed Tower Hill Britain would be conquered. Aware of this legend, Churchill ensured the raven's wings were clipped – even to this day – just to be on the safe side.

Odin ~ Norse God

Odin is also associated with the alder tree, he had two ravens ~ Huginn, meaning thought, and Muninn, meaning memory,. He sent the Ravens out every day to gather information about events in the nine worlds. Returning to rest upon his shoulders, they told him of their observations ~ avian spies.. It is alleged that a raven chick kept in captivity will 'out-talk' any parrot!

Uses

Alder, used extensively for bridge foundations, poles upon which marsh and fenland homes were built, became very hard and black when in water. Buildings in Venice were found to

have alder wood foundations and boats, water pumps, sluices and weatherboards were also made from this tree. Spinning wheels, cartwheels and clogs, proved warm and waterproof ! All came from alder ! In Scotland chairs – termed Scottish mahogany, were made from its wood. An ancient riddle attributed to ‘Bran’ questions ? ‘What can no house ever contain ?’ The answer being, ‘The piles on which it is built !’ Bran must have lived on Fenland ! Smiths used alder in their forges for making weapons, producing a very hot burning charcoal. What other gifts has the remarkable alder ? – Well – it has the ability to produce strongly coloured dyes. Dyers, weavers and spinners used it extensively. Reds, greens, browns and blacks, could be obtained from different parts of the tree. When cut, alder’s sap turns a rusty colour, notice how the water in which it grows also turns a rusty shade . Alder’s leaves were also used in the tanning industry.

Healing

The famous herbalist Culpepper, recommended bathing in a decoction of alder bark for burns and inflammation. To refresh weary feet try putting fresh leaves onto your bare soles – a tad difficult with modern shoes !

Need to eliminate woodworm ? - No problem ! – Spread fresh alder wood in the house during spring ! When the woodworm beetles hatch, the eggs will be laid on the alder, gather and burn ! Sticky leaves of alder could be hung or laid on the floor to catch insects, especially fleas ! Off course this would make vacuuming a real nightmare ! – Not to mention the strange looks from friends and neighbours! But hey !- think how eco friendly you’d be !

Finally – yes finally, if you’re involved in a dispute, alder twigs will give you spiritual protection. Worth a try !

A guardian tree of streams and rivers, alder watches these life-giving waters, promoting the health of our lands. Alder carr woods are rare and endangered, we’re lucky to have surviving remnants on the Fens, so we must protect them !

The Birch - Betula Alba

Deciduous Gaelic ~ Beith Lives for 80-100 years Rune ~ Berkana

Attributes : Ruling planet ~ Venus – love, Moon, intuition – Jupiter – good fortune & happiness

The Birch is a magical symbol of rebirth, new beginnings, a feminine tree, often given the name 'Lady of the woods'. The Birch is a tree of enchantment, protection, its' silvery bark, lit by moonlight is a hallmark of the faerie kingdom. It is a pioneer tree. Cattle and deer will not eat young Birch, which allows other trees to establish. A tree of purification and cleansing. Cleansing the old to make way for the new. In many parts of Britain and Europe, Birch was one of the trees used as a living Maypole at Beltaine – 1st of May.

Being the white tree, the silver birch was seen to have the ability to ward off evil or negative spirits. Traditionally birch rods were used to drive out the spirit of the old year, for beating the bounds of a parish; 'birching', to drive out bad influences ! Birch is synonymous with the Goddess Freya or Frigga, a Norse Goddess. Sauna and sweat lodges use birch to stimulate the skin and circulation.

The wood and its uses

Barrel making, tool handles, furniture – cradles for babies, were all traditionally made from birch, an item carved from birch is an ideal gift for a new baby. Oil from its bark is used to 'tan' leather. It's water resistant, containing large amounts of resin. In the past birch was used for roofing shingles, shoes, leggings, canoes, basket making, parchment and making paper. Traditional brooms – witches besoms, were made with birch.

Healing

The sap was tapped in March, extracting a syrup used as a sugar, birch sap wine was imbibed as a spring tonic, used to prevent kidney or bladder stones. Decoctions of young leaves were used in treating cystitis, infections of the urinary system and rheumatic diseases.

Magical properties

Silver birch is used in all works of love, protection and purification. If you pick birch twigs, put them into a vase and use them to clear away any negative or stagnant energy in your life. Birch shares its' name with the ancient Irish Goddess Brigid – Indo European word Bher (e) g – 'shining white'. The image of the White Goddess!

Try this for yourself !

Visit Knettishall Heath on a clear night, when the moon is full, be enchanted by stands of birch shimmering in sylvan light beside the Little Ouse river. Truly ~ The Lady of the woods.

Elder Tree - Sambucus Nigra

The Queen of all herbs ~ cauldron of rebirth, regeneration and wisdom.

Elder is a common small tree, prolific throughout Britain and Europe, in fact it's almost thought of as a 'weed', often removed from gardens and parklands ! What a big, mistake!

A panegyric in praise of elder!

Cherish your elder trees ! Britons, Celts and Romans revered elder, having the ability to cure many ailments. It was said that mother elder could cure 'all the ills of mankind'.

Virtually every ailment of the body is cured by some part of the elder. Elder bark is a diuretic,. Young shoots boiled and eaten clear lungs and head of phlegm. Juice of fresh elder leaves clear the eyes of inflammation, if sniffed they clear a stuffy nose ! A volatile oil can be distilled from elder flowers to be used in eye and skin lotions and in diluted form for elder flower water.

War Horse cure, recipes, and other goodies!

Elder ointment was used to heal wounds in horses during war time. Soups can be made from the berries, puddings, jellies, chutneys, drinks and wine ! Elderberry port was once so popular, huge orchards of elder in Kent supplied enough fruit for the entire population !

Queen Elder

Known as the queen of the trees, grandmother, crone, elder wise woman. The elder mother's spirit dwelt within the tree, working strong earth magic, according to legend avenging all who harmed her host trees. No forester of old, would touch elder, let alone cut it ! Her permission had to be requested three times, even then he was still in dread of her possible wrath !

All growth of elder was considered sacred, only those in dire need, would dare take a piece of her wood. 'Lady Elder, give thee some of thy wood; Then I will give thee, also some of mine when it grows in the forest'. A saying from northern Europe that referred to death, the decomposition of human bodies in the earth.

Scandinavians referred to her as 'Hyldemoer', elder mother, Germans as 'Frau Holle', Mistress Elder. A symbol of the White Goddess, a benevolent deity of light, life and wisdom, imbued with gifts of healing. It has been the traditional guardian tree of household and farmyard.

Uses and abuses

Elder wood should never burnt! On an open fire it will spit, and many a house fire has been caused by burning sparks, they can travel a long way ! However, it was used for funeral pyres at cremations and placed either in the ground or coffin at the time of burial.

Elder is a hard grained yellow wood which polishes up well with a little beeswax. Wood from the smaller branches has soft pith running through the centre. It can be poked out leaving a hollow tube from which pan pipes, whistles and peashooters may be made.

Magic and Mythology

Some say sleeping beneath elder means one will never awake – in reality the pith inside the branches contains a mild sleep inducing drug. Legend records that witches would often materialise into elders, one famous witch tree turned a King and his men into stone, thereby creating the ‘Rollright Stones’ in Oxfordshire.

It is said that inhaling deeply of elder blossoms on Midsummer Night, will open the portals to the fairy realms where reputedly – it is said one will see the fairy King and Queen with their host in colourful procession. Well Maybe after a bottle or two of elderberry wine ! Who knows ?

Across northern Europe elder was known as the ‘medicine chest’. A cornucopia of recipes for health and healing ! All gifts from mother nature in the guise of our elder tree!

Hawthorn - *Cratagus Monogyna*

Ruling planet ~ Mars

A tree of fertility, guardianship, a door to the Kingdom of Faery. Associated with Thor and Jupiter both Gods of fertility and good fortune, hawthorn is a tree of love, marriage and affairs of the heart. Also known as whitethorn, quickthorn, haghorn, haegthorn or may. Symbol of the 'White Goddess'

Folklore & mythology

A tree heralding summers return, celebrated at the Beltain festival on 30th April-1st of May. In past centuries this was as important as Christmas Day.

The May Queen or 'Queen of the May', joined her consort the Green Man alternatively ~ Jack of the Green, Jack in the May or May King. Their union ensured the land's fertility and why many couples chose this month for weddings. Both bride and groom would carry garlands of May blossom, later these would be placed around their bed, symbols of lasting love and fertility.

Calendar changes in 1752 from Julian to Gregorian, meant hawthorn was seldom seen in blossom at the beginning of May, rather towards the middle or end of the month.

Traditionally a living tree served as a Maypole, brought into the village with its 'Dryad', a tree spirit, decorated and danced around, hoping to enlist the help of the dryad, thus ensuring abundant, bountiful crops.

Popular rhyme

Morris teams continue to 'dance in the May', ancient patterns, weaving in summers magic! See our local teams, Hoxne Hundred and Kenninghall Morris at Fair Green, Diss, every May morning ~ but you have to be up very early, they start at 5.00 am ! But it's well worth it ! The popular rhyme 'here we go gathering nuts in May', was more likely to be 'knots of May'. In Britain nuts are not ripe at this season. It probably refers to May eve, 30th April, when traditionally villagers would visit local woods, gathering garlands of hawthorn to decorate Maypoles and front doors, thus ensuring good luck and fertility !

Beware enchantment !

Beware ~ sitting under a hawthorn tree between Beltain eve and Midsummer allegedly may result in enchantment !, or being 'fetched away by faeries !'

Lone hawthorns were held in much respect, paths and roads were redirected around them, no one dared to fell hawthorn, as these trees marked the faery pathways !

Blessings, good health & wishes that come true !

Old Midsummer day falls on the 5th July, many towns and villages decorated hawthorns with red ribbons and flower garlands ~ we still have this ceremony known as 'bawming the thorn',

trees growing by springs and village wells would thus be blessed. 'Clouties' or rags would be tied to the tree for healing, good health and wishes to come true !

Well dressing

A wonderful opportunity to create a beautiful 'well dressing' celebration for St. Mary's Well, near Thelnetham !

Hawthorn has so many uses !

Being a hard dense wood, orange in colour, hawthorn sands well, polishing to a good finish, however, it cracks easily when drying and the grain is irregular.

It was used for engraving blocks, the roots were prized for combs, small boxes, handles, charms, brooches and special 'talismans or Albion knots' bringing good fortune and protection. Hawthorn burns well when green, better than oak for heating an oven, and it makes excellent charcoal!

Healing properties

Known as the 'Valerian of the heart', hawthorn contains chemical components which are anti spasmodic, sedative and diuretic. A natural heart stimulant, hawthorn controls palpitations, regulating arterial blood pressure and also angina. A natural sedative, it's fine for easing insomnia !

Bread & cheese

Young leaves and buds were known 'as bread & cheese' to country folk. It can be nibbled straight from the tree, added to salads, and dried for herb tea. Flowers and buds could be eaten or made into 'tea', and used as a daily tonic.

The berries or haws are gathered before leaf fall, dried in brown paper bags and made into a decoction. It also makes an interesting wine.

Historical note !

Having a long history as a boundary marker and hedging tree, hawthorn in Anglo-Saxon charters, was the most frequently mentioned tree. The Parliament Enclosures Acts of 1750 and 1850 estimated 200 000 miles of hedges were planted, predominantly with hawthorn. To peasants 'thrown off' their inherited lands, hawthorn became a tree of division and derision, a barrier hedge keeping poor people off the land by political, money minded barons !

Loss. Loss, loss

We've probably lost as many hedgerows as was originally planted all those years ago. Sadly as many wildlife species have also disappeared with the result of hawthorn's demise.

Oak - Quercus Robur - Common Oak

Irish, Gaelic ~ Duir

Symbolism : sovereignty, rulership, power.

Oak provides a habitat for over 500 species of insects, invertebrates, birds and mammals, living for a thousand years or more, often referred to as 'a garden and country', it's hospitable and creature friendly, an enduring emblem of strength and courage.

Folklore and mythology

Celtic tribes revered oak . Druids, known as 'wise men of the oak', believed it contained the energy, power and strength of their mighty God, Esus. When mistletoe grew upon oak it was especially sacred; known as 'all heal', its white berries were symbols of procreation and regeneration.

Across much of Bronze Age Europe, Indo-European cultures associated oak with weather gods, particularly those of thunder and lightning. Lightning strikes oak more than other species, possibly because of its strong electrical currents, deep tap roots and a tendency to grow above subterranean water courses. Sacred to sky gods ... Thor, the Saxon god Donar and Celtic, Taranis. Jupiter and Zeus for Romans and Greeks, were powerful weather gods, creating either feasts or faminines !

Feeding livestock and boundaries

'Masting' ... pasturing livestock within woods, feeding them acorns and beech nuts was important to rural economies. The value of woodland was based on the number of pigs the 'mast' could feed. Oaks were often planted as boundary markers, acting as meeting places, passing laws, public meetings, ceremonies or crowning kings ! Reading declarations and charters.

Considered fortunate to be married beneath an oak, later becoming known as 'marriage oaks'. Christian priests taught beneath these great trees, following druidic tradition.

Famous characters

Herne, God of the Wild Hunt, Robin Hood, semi divine hero of the greenwood , the Green Man, King Arthur ~ whose round table was reputedly made of oak, Charles II, all have links with oak.

Herne's oak ... in Windsor Great Park, Robin Hood's oak ~ in Sherwood Forest, and Charles' II's oak ~ the Boscobel Oak, or Royal Oak, in Shropshire, are worth visiting !

In 1651 Charles II was defeated at Worcester, reputedly hiding in what later became known as 'the Royal Oak'. On May 29th, Oak Apple Day commemorates the event.

Uses and symbols

English coins engraved with oak leaves symbolised strength and longevity until the lion usurped it ! Regarded as symbols of immortality, acorns reflected the power and strength of nature. Fireplaces adorned with acorn carvings or hung on window blinds, were amulets against lightning strikes.

Bridges, piles, waterbreaks, walkways over marshes, houses and ships, were all fashioned from oak !

In the tanning and dyeing industry it was known as 'tanner's bark'.

Paradoxes !

The homeopathic 'Quercus', may be used to cure the effects of alcoholism, gout, liver diseases and depression. Paradoxically, oak wood is impervious to alcohol being used for casks !

Oaks grow on you

Place oaks in a bowl of water, only plant those which sink ! Grow them for your children's children.

Oak a symbol of England to stand amidst a mature oak grove, as Autumn leaves turn to glorious shades of gold, bronze and orange, inhaling their scent and that of the earth beneath their boughs, encapsulates our past, when much of Britain was covered by this mighty tree !

Willow - Salix

Irish, Gaelic ~ Saille

Ruling planet ~ the Moon

Rune ~ Lagu

Element ~ Water

There are many species of willow growing along our riverbanks, White, Crack, Grey and Goat; Weeping willow is native to China.

Folklore and mythology

Believing it to be the tree of enchantment, sacred to the Goddess Brigantia, Brigit or Bride, was the belief of Britons, Saxons and Vikings. Tempted to linger beneath willow's boughs? Beware! They're believed to possess an extraordinary power, inducing prophecy, dreams, psychic intuition and inspiration! Perhaps that's why priests, priestesses, artists, poets, musicians and writers choose to meditate among willow groves.

Wands cut from willow, are known as 'Willie Wains', in northern Britain. Many dowzers use willow for divining; Sleep with a willow wand beneath your pillow for vivid dreams,~ spend time with willows if you wish to get in touch with your unconscious feelings. Small leafy twigs were used in love charms and fertility rituals; Druids frequently chose wands from goat willow, carving them into protective charms.

Knock on wood !

Folklore researchers attribute the origins of 'knock on wood', to be from an old custom of knocking on a willow to avert evil and bring good luck.

Legends tell of willows uprooting themselves nocturnally, stalking unsuspecting travellers through watery fenland! Such spooky stories ensure that willow receives due respect!

The wistful, much loved story 'Wind in the Willows', Kenneth Grahame's masterpiece, evokes the magic and mystery of Albion's secret fens, marshes and waterways; perhaps Kenneth even visited the Little Ouse and fenlands that surround it!

Spirits of Place

Ancient burial mounds, often sited near marshes or lakes were lined with willows protecting the 'spirits of place'. Not surprising, then, that people were advised never to burn willow in case grief befell them!

Jilted lovers wore green willow, expressing heartache; the folk song 'All round my hat I will wear the green willow', refers to this practice.

Much connected with female emotions, female rhythms, willow reminds us to act intuitively; moving with change, working in harmony with lunar tides and the tides of life!

Avian connections

Crane and heron have strong connections with willow; standing in rivers beneath overhanging boughs, patiently waiting for a fish or frog to swim by !

They are one of four most frequently mentioned sacred birds of Irish and British tradition, the symbol of secret knowledge and patience.

Wells and springs

In pre Christian periods, willow goddesses presided over healing wells and springs, water being the element of birth, new beginnings, but also endings, death and the afterlife.

Two healing springs or wells, are to be found by the Little Ouse ~ St. Mary's , near Thelnetham church, whose waters were once used as a cure for eye diseases, and St. Helen's, near Santon Downham. It's thought many pilgrims visited these sacred sites on their way to the Holy Shrine at Walsingham. Perhaps in the not too distant future 'Well Dressing' will be revived in East Anglia, both Bawburgh, and East Dereham in Norfolk, have occasionally celebrated their sacred wells. It's certainly a beautiful way of giving thanks for the gift of pure, life-giving water, a wonderful way to raise funds for good causes !

Healing properties

Salicylic acid is an anti inflammatory, pain relieving ingredient in aspirin, discovered in willow bark. Used to treat arthritis, fevers and rheumatism, common complaints in fenland areas where living conditions were cold, damp and draughty ! Villagers couldn't pop into their local chemist or 'Boots' for aspirin, powdered willow bark from a local wisewoman or cunning man, was probably their only recourse.

Putting willow to work

Willow cricket bats absorb energy without splintering ~ hence 'cricket bat ' willows. Harp sound boxes were originally carved from solid pieces of willow, withstanding the tension of strings, remaining vibrant.

Coppiced, providing small poles, whips for basketry and fencing, and pollarded willow provided a successive crop to supply craftworkers.

The roots of crack willow can be boiled to obtain a purple dye traditionally used to decorate eggs at the Spring Equinox and Easter.

The legendary Celtic 'wicker man or woman', was woven from willow wands, ritually burnt at the summer solstice , symbolising the hopes, desires and dreams of all the community, rising up in flames to their sky gods !

Interesting that the celtic name 'sal' means 'near', and 'lis',water, a tree that grows by water. Sit awhile beneath a mature willow, beside the Little Ouse, pen or brush and paper in hand, allow the willow muse to inspire you, awakening your dreams, emotions, intuition ~ see what your imagination creates, with willow as your guide !

Holly - Ilex Aquifolium

Irish ~ Gaelic Tinne

Rune ~ Tyr

Element ~ Fire

Ruling planet ~ Mars

Symbolism ~ Protection, courage, renewal and regeneration

Holly is a beautiful evergreen shrub or small tree, with shiny, leathery leaves which have lobes ending in sharp spikes. These prickly leaves protect holly from browsing animals, when reaching twelve feet or more, animals are no longer a threat, its leaves becoming less prickly at that height.

Berries beautiful !

Only female trees produce bright scarlet berries, whilst male trees are pollinators; bees and insects can detect the scent of a honey liquid created by and released from the female flower.

Folklore and mythology

In common with Yew, evergreen trees represent immortality. The iconic 'Green Man' symbolises both the fertility of nature and the land.

Legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Green mantled, a holly crown adorning his head, wielding a mighty holly club in one hand, an axe in the other, the giant figure of the Green Knight rode into the court of King Arthur, upon a green horse at the midwinter solstice, a time of renewal, regeneration !

He issued a challenge to Arthur's knights to play 'the beheading game', only Sir Gawain was brave enough to accept ! They came to blows, Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew, decapitates the strange visitor, who retrieves his head, replacing it upon his shoulders with calm assurance ! He announces that Sir Gawain must prepare himself for the return blow at 'the Green Chapel', one year hence ! This mythological story demonstrates the immense regenerative and destructive powers of nature.

The Scottish connection

During the 17th C Scottish prisoners were used as slave labour in many fenland areas. Around the huts provided as living quarters, the Scotsmen planted holly hedges, or 'hulver' as they were known in their native land, believing these trees would protect them from attacks by demons and unfriendly faeries . It could also be the reason why cottages and farms with old holly trees, bear the name 'hulver', to this day !

Interesting to note, many Scottish clans depict holly on their badges and heraldry, symbol of justice, and steadfastness in adversity.

During the early to mid 20th C a number of lowland Scottish farmers settled in South Norfolk and North Suffolk, no doubt attracted by the falling price of agricultural farmland.. Perhaps the dedication or re-dedication of some churches to St. Andrew may have a link with those earlier settlers.

The Roman's influence

Gifts of holly were given during the Roman festival of Saturnalia, celebrating the Sun God's return at the winter solstice. When Christianity adopted the 25th of December as Jesus' birthdate, holly was planted in churchyards, used for decoration at Christmas and Easter, mistletoe was banned, being far too pagan with its druidic associations ! However, the possible origins of 'holly' may be derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'holegn' and Old High German 'hulis' perhaps meaning 'holy'.

The Holly and the Ivy

Holly was perceived as a male plant, Ivy female, sacred to the Moon Goddess. In some parts of England, a boy would be decked in holly, a girl with ivy, at the midwinter festival they would be paraded through their town or village, singing satirical songs against each other, in a kind of poetic contest !

Thus the age old battle betwixt the sexes was kept alive with this seasonal re-enactment and some researchers believe it may allude to changes in belief, from lunar celebrations to solar orientated sun worship.

However there is a commonly held superstition, that a male holly bough brought into the house first on Christmas Eve means men will rule the roost in the coming year. If smooth leaved female holly enters first, women predominate. Be warned !

An attractive force

Holly is supposedly very lucky for men. If they carry a leaf or berry in their pocket, they'll quickly become attractive to women ! Is that really the case ? Men take note ... may be worth trying, and it's very economical !

Uses

In the Irish ~ Gaelic ogham alphabet, holly is known as 'tinne ', which may originally have meant 'fire' and 'tinder'. Burning brighter and hotter than any other wood, holly is much in demand by smiths who were almost regarded as 'Godlike' beings for their ability to transform molten metal into weapons or agricultural instruments.

It makes excellent charcoal; incense from holly was burned to purify or consecrate special swords or knives, engraved with sacred symbols thus protecting warriors !

The runic symbol for holly is 'Tyr', a battle god in the Northern pantheon, representing qualities of justice, law, order and sworn oaths. His symbol was painted onto Viking and Saxon shields. Spears made with holly shafts gave better balance, flying straight and true.

Holly is a hard, dense, white wood, difficult to dry because of its propensity to distort, changes in humidity can cause it to 'move'. Holly takes stain well, dyed black it's known as 'English ebony'. Good for carving, turning and inlay work, once sanded and polished, it gives a smooth, bone-like finish.

Healing

Bach Flower Remedies use holly to treat oversensitivity, hatred, anger and aggressive behaviour.

In earlier centuries leaves soaked in vinegar, were applied to corns for a day and a night, in the hope of a cure ! Mmm, might give that one a miss ! Chilblains thrashed with a holly branch to 'chase out' the chill ? Ouch ! Fortunately modern cures are possibly less painful !

An infusion of dried holly leaves were believed useful in treating catarrhal coughs, bronchitis, pneumonia, influenza, rheumatism and fevers ! Phew ! Holly such a prickly character, however, blessed with a soothing, healing side as well !

Good fortune and protection

A tree of good fortune, bringing magical protection against evil spirits, angry elementals or thunder and lightning, it is little wonder they were regarded as guardian trees in hedgerows and gardens.

Their scratchy, spiked leaves deter any unwanted visitors ! No 'hedger' of yore would dream of felling holly, being fearful of the bad luck or retribution such an act would bring.

However, if you do have to prune or fell, remember ... speak to it with heartfelt and utmost respect !

In the words of a popular Christmas carol, 'of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown .' A truly noble tree !