



TREES IN THE CHURCHYARD Thorn

Hawthorn
is a small native
tree.

Its dense thorny habit makes it ideal for growing in hedges, forming an impenetrable barrier for keeping out livestock. It is the main constituent of hedges over much of England. Birds love the shelter it provides for making their nests. 'Haw' is an ancient English term for hedge; it also refers to the fruit.

An old name for Hawthorn is 'May'. The country saying 'Ne'er cast a clout till May be out' refers to the tree rather than the month. It is a warning not to discard your warm clothing until the flowers on Hawthorn appear, which usually occurs around late April to May. On the true native Hawthorn these are white or pink.

Hawthorn flowers were traditionally associated with death, and it was considered bad luck to bring the blossoms inside. In Medieval times it was said the blossoms smelled like the Great Plague. Intriguingly it has recently been discovered that they contain the chemical trimethylamine which is one of the first chemicals formed in decaying animal tissue.

The young leaves, flower buds and young flowers however are all edible. They can be added to salads. The haws can be eaten raw but may cause mild stomach upset. They are most commonly used to make jellies, wines and ketchups.

There is a hawthorn in the North West corner of the churchyard, close to the Church Lane path. It is an ornamental variety of the Midland Hawthorn and has deep red flowers. Look out for their striking appearance from mid April onwards. Also look for the autumn colours and the bright red haws which can persist far into winter providing a welcome food source for birds, particularly blackbirds and thrushes.

The Glastonbury Thorn

'When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.'
Matthew 27:57-60

Although Joseph of Arimathea gets a mention in all four gospels, as looking after Jesus' body, we know nothing else about him. That he became a missionary and was sent to England to preach the gospel is probably not true, almost certainly a myth dreamt up in the 13th century to promote Glastonbury Abbey. The story is that on arriving in the West Country he stuck his pilgrim's staff in the ground at Wearyall Hill and overnight it turned into a flowering thorn tree.

The legend has built up around a very unusual phenomenon. Hawthorns only flower once a year; in Spring. But for centuries there has been a thorn in the Glastonbury area which flowers twice a year – once at Christmas, and again around Easter. It is a form of the common hawthorn and extremely rare; no other tree like it exists. The thorn does not produce any viable seed but has been reproduced by grafting. There are now several trees in the area grown from the original. Following a long tradition a flowering sprig from one in St John's church in Glastonbury is sent to the British Monarch every Christmas.