

A man in a red jacket is climbing a ladder against a large tree. He is holding a long, curved tool to harvest mistletoe. The mistletoe is green with small white flowers. The background shows a clear blue sky and other trees.

The gatherer
Mistletoe expert Jonathan Briggs gets to grips with removing mistletoe – growing prolifically on trees in Worcestershire – to be sold at auction for Christmas

A KISS IS JUST A KISS

...but at Christmas you need a sprig of mistletoe to make it special – which is why the Worcestershire town of Tenbury Wells is a hive of activity at this time of year

Words **Tiffany Daneff**

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HE PLUM PUDDING'S IN THE LARDER, the tree is waiting to be decorated and the presents are almost wrapped. All that remains to be done is to find some mistletoe to hang in the hall. If you find any at all – and often you don't – chances are you will end up with a few sickly twigs for a princely sum and to which – if you're lucky – one or two of those famous white berries will still be clinging. By the time Christmas Eve comes round, you can be sure they will have fallen off.

What makes this annual search so especially dismal is the knowledge that the stuff grows free. For heaven's sake, this is a parasite that nobody much wants clogging up the branches of their Worcester Pearmain. You won't find it growing all over the country, for sure – there's none in the far Highlands – but across the Welsh borders and down into the Gloucestershire and Somerset 'mistletoe triangle', the trees are silhouetted with great big bundles of *Viscum album*. In London and the Southeast there is more today than there was in the Seventies.

The answer is to head to the mistletoe auctions at Tenbury Wells, a pretty market town in a forgotten corner of Worcestershire. This year the first of the three annual auctions is being held in late November.

Buyers come from all over the country to bid for the lots, most of which have been picked by farmers and landowners, not so much as a crop but because they need to keep it in check – or the mistletoe will strangle the apple tree that hosts it.

Until about ten years ago the auctions were held in the cattle market in the town centre. But when that closed they moved to a local business park. It's not quite as romantic as it was then, admits Jonathan Briggs, an environmental manager with British Waterways, who lives locally and has devoted ▶

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This is a very 21st-century confection of paganism and commercialism, with a 'Green Santa' and the crowning of a Mistletoe Queen

The gatherer



Most farmers in the Three Counties (Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire) are not so much harvesting mistletoe as controlling its growth in their orchards. They saw it off the host branch, often taking just a proportion, allowing the rest to grow on until the following year. 'Mistletoe gathering is hard work,' says Jonathan Briggs, 'taking many man hours.' Armfuls are thrown down and put into crates but most of it will be composted or burned. Of a four-foot diameter plant, only the outer six to 12 inches bear any berries.

The auctioneer

The mistletoe auctions were held at the cattle market in Tenbury Wells for 150 years until it closed under the threat of a supermarket development. Many feared that the mistletoe auctioneer Nick Champion might leave along with the auction house. Instead, he stayed to set up his own company and officiates each winter at the auctions, which moved to a local business park in 2005. The auctions are busier than ever but, he says, he wouldn't be surprised if prices were the same or lower than 20 years ago.

◁ many years to the plant's study. Even so, he says, 'You still find yourself knee-deep in more mistletoe than you have ever seen in your life.' Glorious mounds of magical twigs thick with viscous white berries are spread over the ground, alongside heaps of holly, wreaths and Christmas trees.

Auctioneer Nick Champion is encircled by buyers as he walks the rows between the wreaths, handmade by local farmers' wives. The 'wraps' of mistletoe will be closely examined for quality, some buyers bringing their own scales to judge the weight. He has to rattle through the lots with sometimes as

many as 1,500 at each auction. This year, he says, the question is whether there's been enough sun to turn the green berries white.

Where there is mistletoe, druids won't be far away. Indeed, they form a key part of what has grown into a full-blown Mistletoe Festival, which takes place around the auctions. This is a very 21st-century confection of paganism and commercialism with everything from druids blessing the mistletoe crop, a 'Green Santa' and the crowning of the Mistletoe Queen (yes, she is a modern invention dreamt up to bring in the crowds) to mistletoe fairy-making workshops

and the switching on of the town's Christmas lights. However, some people have been put off by the pagan ceremony so this year the procession (led by drummers) is to end in a 'multifaith ceremony'.

'By the time the mistletoe reaches the shops it is likely to be a couple of weeks old,' says Jonathan Briggs, which is why he and a few others have started selling it online. But making money from mistletoe is difficult. 'With half the costs going on postage and a quarter on packing, the profits exist only if no one gets paid.'

A quick glance at Jonathan's website shows there is much we don't know about this strange

The druids

According to Pliny the Elder, the druids cut mistletoe with a golden sickle (as immortalised by the druid Getafix in the *Asterix* books). They had to catch it in their white cloaks before it hit the ground or it would lose its magic powers. The difficulty for the druids, who bless the mistletoe crop at Tenbury, is that the auction lots are already lying on the ground. To get round the problem, all the mistletoe they anoint and bless after processing through Tenbury will have been especially gathered that morning – and kept well off the ground.



Glorious mounds of magical twigs thick with viscous white berries are spread across the ground, with holly, wreaths and Christmas trees



The buyers

Florists and supermarkets may buy directly from farmers or from the Tenbury auctions. They buy 'wraps' of 'raw' mistletoe that has been freshly harvested and tied in bundles of around 22-33lb. One wrap may be one whole plant or, more usually, several plants bundled together. A well-berried bundle might sell wholesale for £30 but by the time it has been divided into sprigs for selling on it could well bring in £100.

◁ parasite. In France, where a lot of the mistletoe we buy originates, they dry the leaves to make a tea to counter high blood pressure. 'There is no market for it here,' says Jonathan. 'We think it's poisonous.'

Science still has not discovered quite how the parasite (of which there are 1,300 species worldwide) operates. 'Whatever branch it ends up on, the seed sends out a shoot that bends backwards into the bark and penetrates the cambium layer,' says Jonathan. What we do not know is how it persuades the tree to put more energy into the parasite, so 'dwarfing' the host branch.

Strange, too, that although it famously likes apple trees, it will also grow on rowan, hawthorn, whitebeam, and garden plants such as wisteria, cotoneasters and robinias. 'Yet it hates pears.'

Much of its current success in southeast England is in gardens which, like orchards, provide spaces between the trees. So if you have a garden and fancy some of your own fresh, green kissing boughs, why not plant a seed next March? ♦

The 2012 Tenbury Wells mistletoe auctions are on November 27, December 4 and 11, commencing 10am sharp (nickchampion.co.uk, 01584 810555).

The Tenbury Mistletoe Festival runs from late November through December with National Mistletoe Day on December 1 (tenbury-mistletoe-festival.co.uk, 01584 891130).

For all things mistletoe-related, including how to buy seeds etc, visit jonathanbriggs.co.uk and click on mistletoe, or call 01453 791135