

It's a Gardener's World!

One of the most curious trees you'll see in Britain is also one of the most curiously-named: the Monkey Puzzle tree. There are three in Stokesley (that I know of!) – one on the bend of Cleveland Avenue, one on the way into Tameside & one on Roseberry Avenue which you can see from the By-Pass. This last one is actually two, but they are so close together they look as they're hugging each other! A very prickly hug!



The monkey puzzle is a very slow growing tree that can take 5 - 10 years before it even gets above grass height and then grows around 35 cm a year. New growth takes place from late June to September. The tree was alive 200 million years ago and rubbed shoulders with the dinosaurs. Its spine-like needles acted as protection from ancient grazing animals now long extinct. It can live for 1,000 years and grows to 50m high with a trunk diameter of over 3m. Its large seeds, pinones, take two years to mature.

Maybe you can work out how old our Stokesley Monkey Puzzle trees are?

In Chile the tree is called the Pehuén and is sacred to the local Pehuenche people: its seeds are an ancient staple of their diet. The tree possibly gained its name because it would be a real puzzle for monkeys to climb up its whorls of spiny leaves (but there are no monkeys in Chile!).

Superstitions about the Monkey Puzzle tree can be found throughout Britain. Some parents actually told their children to be quiet as they passed the tree, various reasons being that they would have bad luck or lose something, or in some cases even grow a monkey's tail! One widely-shared bit of folklore is that the Devil himself sits in this tree and people have to be quiet when walking past or else they will attract the Devil's attention and get bad luck. Strangely enough, an old Cambridgeshire belief has Monkey Puzzle trees being planted on the edge of graveyards to PREVENT the Devil from climbing them and then watching burials.

Life has been a 'puzzle' in recent months – was it bad luck? The pieces of our lives have been scrambled in so many ways because of the Coronavirus Pandemic. We lost our freedom, we lost the ability to socialise, we may have lost loved-ones, we have lost the 'old' way of doing things. With people stuck at home over the past few months, is it any wonder that jigsaw puzzle sales have soared. Puzzle-makers can't keep up with the demand! Jigsaws provide multigenerational fun and an escape from worry. Why have jigsaw puzzles become so popular during this pandemic, especially when we have so much technology at our fingertips? Jigsaw puzzles involve tactility. Touching the pieces, moving them around with the hands, allows the brain and body to interact, leading to a successful and satisfying solution - usually.

Well, remember, Jesus liked puzzles, too. In the Bible, Jesus is often found telling story puzzles to his friends. And He says this, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." You've all stood in line before (& we've certainly been perfecting the art of standing in lines/queues outside shops since the Lockdown started!): how can the last person be first and the first person be last? People have been trying to figure this one out since Jesus said it 2000 years ago. I wonder what it means to you today?

I think Jesus used story puzzles to teach because Jesus wants us to think. He wants us to work together as a team. He wants us to look at the problems in our lives in a different way so we can find the best way to solve them, the best way to make sense of them. Our lives are full of odd mysteries. And when we study the puzzles in the Bible, it makes understanding the puzzles in our lives easier. And when we think, and work together as a team, and look at things differently ... solving problems can be fun. It's been testing times, but we have found different ways of doing things, we've solved the 'puzzles' of how to keep our church active & alive ... and we've had FUN doing it!