Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*)

Holly is an evergreen. The glossy leaves are prickly; but only on lower branches. The ones on higher branches are different, probably because they were not at risk from grazing by passing ruminants. Ancient holly coppice in Sandhurst Copse may have been used for sheep feed in winter, abandoned, probably after the First World War. Ruminants can graze on bark, twigs, leaves, etc., as well as on grass. Juniper, Yew and Holly are the only native evergreens, only Holly is not poisonous.

The first leaves of holly seedlings do not have the usual form of holly leaves, they are oval. The second pair of leaves are recognisable as holly.

Trees are male or female, only the latter produce the red berries. On the left is a female flower with the potential berry, on the right are male flowers each with four pollen bearing stamens.

The result is the traditional Christmas holly berries and a wreath!

I make one or more wreaths in the wood every Christmas. The base is hazel rods, bent to form a circle and then bulked out with bracken, bound with string. The holly similarly tied on.

Apart from the holly coppice providing feed for sheep in winter, the wood, having no odour or colour was used for implements, eg. skimming ladles, in the dairy industry. If of sufficient quality it is also used for wood inlay (marquetry).

There is however another story. There is a recently started holly invasion taking place. Under mature trees I find even-aged holly saplings, which grow at 0.5m pa. creating an impenetrable thicket. If they are of a particular age, they also seem to be younger ones from every successive year. This infestation has only occurred within the last 10 years. Maybe there are more berries, maybe they are more fertile, maybe the germination conditions are more favourable! However the distribution mechanism has also changed. Under mature oak, sweet chestnut and silver birch there are well established holly zones and others with only one or two year seedlings. A plausible; but as yet unproven hypothesis, is that changing weather patterns have modified migratory redwing habits. Redwing have featured in bird surveys in recent years. They may eat the holly berries and then roost in the mature oak and sweet chestnut trees, dropping the seeds. It is also possible that if the same birds come back the following year, they adopt the same tree for roosting. Why waste energy to find a different one!