



## The most significant YEWS in the DIOCESE of BANGOR

© Tim Hills - April 2011

This document provides a 'snapshot' of information gathered from many sources during the last 13 years, and which is held on behalf of the Ancient Yew Group. A full account will eventually replace this document.

The yews featured here are the most important to be found in the churchyards of the Diocese of Bangor, and all deserve proper protection.

**Ancient yews** are at least 800 years with no upper limit. The Yews for the Millennium project took cuttings from yews considered to be 2000 years old, and there is a growing acceptance that our oldest specimens have reached this age, with some thought to be older still.

**Veteran yews** are at least 500 and up to 1200 years old.

**Notable yews** are at least 300 and up to 700 years old. This category also includes younger yews with a known planting date.

## Significant yews recorded in the Diocese of Bangor

Site name	Church name	County	Tree Classification
Abergwyngregyn (Aber)	St Bodfan	Gwynedd	3 notable
Beddgelert	St Mary	Gwynedd	1 notable
Betws-y-Coed	St Michael	Conwy	2 notable
Caerhun	St Mary	Conwy	2 veteran
Carno	St John the Baptist	Powys	1 ancient
Cemmaes	St Tydecho	Powys	3 notable
Dolwyddelan	St Gwyddelan	Conwy	2 veteran
Gyffin	St Benedict	Conwy	1 notable
Llan	St Mary	Powys	2 notable
Llanbedrog	St Pedrog	Gwynedd	1 notable
Llanbedr-y-Cennin	St Peter	Conwy	2 notable
Llanddeiniolen	St Deniolen	Gwynedd	3 ancient
Llandegai	St Tegai	Gwynedd	Yew avenue
Llandinam	St Llonio	Powys	1 ancient
Llanelltyd	St Illtud	Gwynedd	1 ancient 1 veteran
Llanfairfechan	St Mary's and Christ-church	Conwy	Yew Avenues
Llangwyfan	St Cwyfan	Denbighshire	1 notable
Llanrhychwyn	St Rhychwyn	Conwy	1 veteran 1 notable
Llanrug	St Michael	Gwynedd	1 notable
Llanwnog	St Cwynog/St Gwyn-nog	Powys	2 veteran
Llanwrin	St Gwrin, formerly St Ust and St Dyfrig	Powys	1 ancient
Llanymawddwy	St Tydecho	Gwynedd	1 ancient
Machynlleth	St Peter	Powys	1 ancient
Maentwrog	Maentwrog Parish Church	Gwynedd	3 veteran
Mallwyd	St Tydecho	Gwynedd	1 ancient 1 veteran
Nant Peris	St Peris	Gwynedd	1 veteran
Penegoes	St Cadfarch	Powys	1 ancient
Trefeglwys	St Michael	Powys	1 ancient 1 veteran 1 notable

ABERGWYNGREGYN (ABER)

St Bodfan

Map 115/SH 653 727

10 old yews were recorded at this site for a survey in the 1940s. In 2000 I counted 12, of which 3 are notable. These are two females, each many branched from a short bole and having similar girths of between 16' and 17', and a third with a girth of about 14'.

BEDDGELERT

St Mary

Map 115/SH 588 481

2000: To the NW of the church is a yew with a 2' bole and a small platform from which rise 5 branches. Adventitious and twiggy growth were well developed on 4 of these yet the 5th, growing straighter than the rest, had smooth bark. Measured at the ground its girth was 15' 3".

BETTWS-Y-COED

St Michael with St Mary Virgin

Map 115/SH 796 566

In *The Art Journal - London* 1870 were described "aged yew trees....which seem coeval with the sacred edifice". A later record of 1890 noted "3 grand yew trees".

2000: A male between two females grow in line south of the church. Though not of large girth (between 12' and 14') they are fine spreading trees with good, clean boles.



Edwin Pretty



The site is shared with a Roman Fort called CANOVIUM and overlooks the river valley. “2 aged yew-trees” were reported 200 years ago in *A description of Caernarvonshire* - E. Hyde Hall 1809-1811.

2000: A male and female pairing grows on the south side of the church. The female measured about 18' at 1'. A sawn off branch revealed hollow spaces inside the tree. Foliage was thin with many brown leaves.

The bole of the male seemed solid and bulged outwards from the base. It measured 17' 2" close to the ground. It was covered in adventitious and twiggy growth, much of which had been trimmed. A further 6 female yews grew around the perimeter of the churchyard. These were not examined.



Church and yew are on a site that belonged to the Knights of St John. Though the present building is as recent as 1863, this is a medieval site. In the churchyard is an early Christian stone of the 7/8 century incised with two superimposed circled crosses. Little has been recorded about the yew, except for a girth measurement of 22' 4" in 1947.

In 1998 I recorded 23' 3" at 5'. Seen from the road the female tree appears solid; closer inspection reveals a thin skin around a hollow centre filled with a convoluted internal stem. A metal bar encircles the bole at 8'. Directly above this is dense bushy growth. In 1998 two upright



branches rose through it. The foliage on this upper part of the tree appeared unhealthy and we speculated that in time these branches might become vulnerable to storm or high winds, leaving a short and squat tree. By 2008 this had become the case. Many of our oldest yews will have been through similar cycles of growth and loss many times during their centuries of existence.



Here is a late medieval church on a site thought to be early medieval. *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales* (1849) described “four large yew-trees” in the churchyard. It is not possible to know whether the word ‘large’ referred to girth, height or spread of the trees, so it is unclear whether the 4 most significant yews seen in 2005 were those recorded in 1849.

(1) The largest grows SSW of the church, its girth of 15' 8" at 1' exaggerated by 4 limbs close to the ground. It is a fine looking symmetrical tree with large central leading branch.

(2) grows SE of the church on a steep 3' high mound with what appeared to be a rough wall at the base. It has thick limbs close to the ground and far spreading branches, but carried sparse foliage. Girth was 13' 11" at the ground.

(3) grows east of the church, also on a walled mound. A large limb has almost separated from the tree at the ground. Foliage was sparse and it had a girth of about 14'.

The above 3 are all male, the only female recorded grew by the perimeter wall, a jumble of stems from the ground.



In 1868 “three or four aged and sombre-looking yew trees” were noted. In 2000 I recorded the following two. The female yew on the south side is almost touching the building. It is a fine, tall, hollow tree with an internal stem. Although not of great girth it is an aged tree, whose decay pattern will lead to a yew standing on 3 ‘legs’ with large hollow spaces. An example of such a tree can be seen at Heyop. Girth was 14' 4" at 1', 14' 11" at 3' and 13' 4" at 5'.

The male grows SW of the church. From a low bole rise three main branches. Girth was 18' 3" at the ground.



Several younger yews were also noted.

In *Observations on the more ancient statutes from Magna Carta to the twenty first of James I. Cap. XXVII.* The Honourable Daines Barrington (1796) wrote the following:

“The last statute of this reign, entitled, *Ne Rector arbores in cœmeterio prosternat*, is a very short one, but deserves to be taken notice of from the preamble's stating, that trees in a church-yard were often planted to skreen the church from the wind: low as churches were built at this time, the thick foliage of the yew answered this purpose better than any other tree. I have been informed accordingly, that the yew-trees in the churchyard of *Gyffin*, near Conway, having been lately felled, the roof of the church hath suffered excessively.”

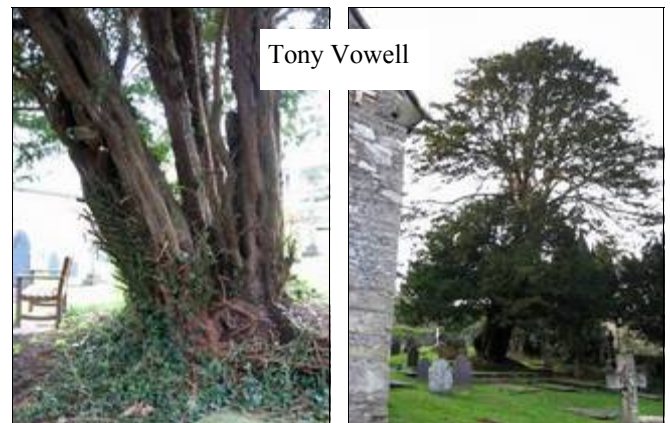
In 1946 a parishioner informed Cornish of “2 magnificent yews” in Gyffin churchyard. They are however relatively young specimens. To the SW is a good looking tree with a fine spread of branches, girthing 13' 2" at 3'. The yew to the SE had been trimmed all round in an attempt to keep it neat. A covering of twiggy growth and ivy exaggerates its girth which is probably similar to that of the first tree.

The church was by tradition founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with a 12<sup>th</sup> century dedication. The *Topographical Dictionary of Wales (1849)* describes a church at Llanbrynmair as follows: “an ancient structure, ornamented in the interior with some beautiful specimens of old oak carving; in the churchyard are some yew-trees of fine growth and of great age.” There is no old church site in the village of Llanbrynmair and it is St Mary's church at nearby Llan that fits the description.

2005: The yews are both female and grow on the south side of a church in a churchyard perched high above the road. The most easterly consists of 3 trunks struggling out of 4' of drying and decaying grasses. It was impossible to measure but could certainly have been up to 16'. The more westerly of the pair had a depth of 6' of drying and decaying grasses against its bole. It is not known if that is still the situation.

In 1897 Lowe noted how “three yew-trees in Llanbedrog Churchyard, well illustrate the effect of early destruction of the stem.....No. 1 is 21 feet high, and out of its stem, which is nearly on a level with the ground, eight trees grow and make one bush. No. 2 has twelve trees growing in a similar manner, and No.3 has five.”

In 2005 only one of these trees remains, the male yew pictured below. It consists of many straight stems from a short bole with a girth of about 16'. The stump below had a girth of 12' 5".



LLANBEDR-Y-CENNIN

St Peter

Map 115/SH761 696

Cornish (1946) reported 6 old yews. In 2000 only 2 seemed really old. They are found NE of the church and both grow next to the wall of an adjacent dwelling. There were a further 6 much younger yews.

LLANDDEINIOLEN

St Deniolen

Map 115/SH545 659

1809/11: " In the churchyard are several yew trees, bald and ragged with antiquity". Edmund Hyde Hall's *A description of Caernarvonshire*

1834: "...several yew trees, of luxuriant growth, one of which measures 28 ft 4 in girth." Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Wales*

1868: "near the church are some ancient yew trees.....and a little to the N.E. is the famous camp of Dinas Dinorwig, supposed to be of Roman origin." *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland*.

1998: Here are three immense yews, each on a mound and each of distinctive appearance. They create a formidable presence in this churchyard.



LLANDEGAI

St Tegai

Map 115/SH601 710

1849: "The church is approached by an avenue of fine yew-trees: it is beautifully situated on an eminence overlooking the river Ogwen". *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*.

The avenue is well documented, though its precise age seems uncertain. Lowe's list of yews with a girth of 10ft and upwards (1897), describes a yew measuring 11ft 1ins at

the ground, 8ft 11ins at 3ft 'not hollow, no young shoots'. This is not one of the avenue trees, but one of the yews growing on a patch of rough ground NE of the church but still within the church enclosure.



2004: A three trunked yew grows on a mound south west of the church. Two are cylindrical in shape, while the largest (A) is a hollowed out fragment, almost 14' in girth, from which two large branches develop. Ivy filled the tree to its top most branches. In the centre was a pile of dead grass. Girth was 24' 11" around all 3 fragments.



The church stands in the centre of a circular churchyard, indicative of a very early church. The present church was founded in the 13th century. In 1891 Lowe described “two trees about same size; the tops have been broken, and they are evidently compound trees.” The church guide states that there are no fewer than four ancient yew trees; I am more inclined to agree with the Rev. J.W.Jones who reported to Cornish (1946) that there were “two ancient yews.....also younger yews.”

1998: The male (left) grows NE of the church on a mound. It has many trunks, some rising from, and others pulling away from the centre. Girth close to the ground is about 30'.

The female (right) grows south of the church and girths about 22' over twiggy growth. One of its two main areas of growth is becoming hollow.



2008: An avenue similar to that at nearby Llandegai. The trees line a straight path to the church on the north side, then make a right angled curve as the building is approached. On the left side are 7 in a line, followed by 13 which are now incorporated into adjacent gardens. On the right are 8 in a line and a further 8 lining the path as it turns.

Average girth of 8 trees measured was 6' 6".

In 1883 there was mention of a "tombstone under one of five ancient yews" and in 1890 the "shell of a yew, so old that..."

A visit in 2004 found nothing of great age and it is likely that all ancient yews have been lost from this site. Of the several younger yews still here, the largest is a female, growing N of the church as part of the perimeter wall, with a girth of 14' 5" at 1'. SE of the church another female girthed 11' 7" at 2'.

1833: "The church is situated among barren mountains, at a considerable distance from any houses, and, from the rudeness of its architecture, appears to be of great antiquity." (*A Topographical Dictionary of Wales* by Samuel Lewis)



2008: 175 years later little has changed. The location felt as remote as any I have visited. Yet not only are there established yews at this site, but also recent yew plantings. One younger tree had failed to thrive, so another had been planted in its place.

The largest yews were (1) a female growing SW on a small mound, about 15' at its narrowest. As well as holly growing at its base it had another growing inside the tree. (2) To the west a male girthing 16' 2" at 2'.



Photos-NW JShakespear

2008: A male yew grows S of the church and close to a brick shed. Ivy was established well into the tree's branches. A small gap at the base revealed that the lower part of the trunk is hollowed out. There was living wood around the entire circumference. A large branch that once pointed towards the church had been removed. Rings could be counted and suggested a branch age of about 150 years. The west side of the tree was almost unapproachable with twiggy growth and new branches. Girth estimate about 15'.

The single chamber church is in a raised circular churchyard said to contain Ceriog's grave.

1834: "In the churchyard are several venerable yew trees of luxuriant growth." Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Wales*

1998: Here is an excellent example of male and female veterans growing either side of the path to the church. The male to the right is about 19' in girth, the female much larger at about 28'.

There are many more yews in this churchyard still to be documented.



In 1984 a yew with a diameter of 270cm (approx. 27' girth) was recorded by Alan Mitchell. In the same year it was cut down and thought to be another statistic in the wanton destruction of Wales's oldest trees. But in 1996 it was reported that the old stump had come to life with new shoots.

In 2005 I recorded two separate stumps—between 5' and 7' high, each with new growth rising from the base. Though the dead sap wood is now wet and decaying the new growth should be strong enough to be free standing by the time the dead sap wood is gone.

The closeness of the tree to both church and house might provide an explanation for it being cut down.

I noted two further pieces of stump near to these two regenerating fragments. If these are also yew and were part of the original tree their inclusion in the tree's girth would add 7' to 10' to its already considerable 27' girth, making it one of the 20 largest girthed yews on record. What happened in 1984 should never be allowed to happen again to this important tree.



1891: "A very large yew in the churchyard" was described.

1998: This female grows on a mound on the east side of the church. It consists of 5 branches, in various stages of repair, some joined together near to ground level, all radiating outwards. Girth was about 28' at the ground.



A church was reputedly established on this site in the 6th century.

1817: "We saw nothing worthy of remark in the church or churchyard, except three very aged yew trees, the girth of one of which measured seven yards at the bottom." *A three weeks tour into Wales* by Paul Hawkins Fisher

2005: Only one 'aged' yew remains. It was probably the one described with a girth of 7 yards, which during the intervening 188 years has had large sections decay, leaving 3 fragments. Each of these has a girth of about 10', while a measurement around all of the fragments was 27' 4" at the ground. It grows on a mound at the east end of the church near to the SE corner of the building.



It is thought that this site was a former bronze age settlement.

1903: "The walk was then continued to Maentwrog, and the church with its immense yew trees and St Twrog's stone inspected."



In 1983 retired forester Reg Wheeler made a thorough survey of the Maentwrog yews. He recorded 6, of which 3 were veteran. It is unfortunate that one of these has since been felled. This twin stemmed yew had one dead stem in 1983, but the other was thriving in 1998. For some reason it was decided to reduce the whole tree to a stump some time between 1998 and 2005.



Close to the churchyard entrance, SE of the church, is found this female yew (below) with a girth of about 22'. It consists of several thick branches, mostly fluted, rising from a short bole.



To the SW is another female, with two main fluted branches rising from a short bole.



A large prehistoric animal bone is displayed above the church porch. Mallwyd has been a favourite visiting place for the travel writer. The following are some of their descriptions of these yews, which tell us that the churchyard has been even more remarkable:

1798: During Warner's *Second walk through Wales* he was "induced to stroll into the churchyard..... remarkable for several enormous yew trees, of which 4 measure 15', and one 27' in circumference."

1803: "...and entering the churchyard, I took a near inspection of a famous old yew-tree, which had arrested my attention in passing to the inn. The trunk is very short, though of great thickness, and is surrounded with a stone seat for the village sages to rest on. A little above this seat, ten principal branches proceed from the same stock, and spreading in a circular direction, occupy a diameter of twenty-four paces in their utmost diameter, making a circumference of little less than two hundred and twenty feet. This amazing tree, which is still flourishing in all its parts, rises to a very great height, and is unquestionably the finest I ever saw. *The British Tourists: Or, Traveller's Pocket Companion, Through England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.* By William [Fordyce] Mayor

1815: Hutton was "taken to the churchyard to see a curious yew tree, from the root of which 9 boles ascend."

1834: Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* described "3 remarkably fine yew trees, one measures 28' 3" in girth and from one stem throws out a great number of scions, which spread around it an extensive shade, and together present an appearance of sombre magnificence."

1851: Edwin Lees in *The Botanical Looker Out* described its "excessively distended branches, spreading 40' from the bole on every side, in singularly gloomy grandeur."

1855: "30 ft with 6 great branches" *Welsh Timber Trees* 4th Edition (1977) H.A.Hyde and G.Harrison.



1998: Only two of the 5 yews recorded in 1798 have survived, the male shown above left with a girth of about 33' at 3' and in fine condition. The centre is long gone leaving many trunks of various size around the hollow space.

The smaller female (right), its bole hidden behind ivy, had a girth of about 18' 6" at 5'.

1946: "3 old yews west of the church".

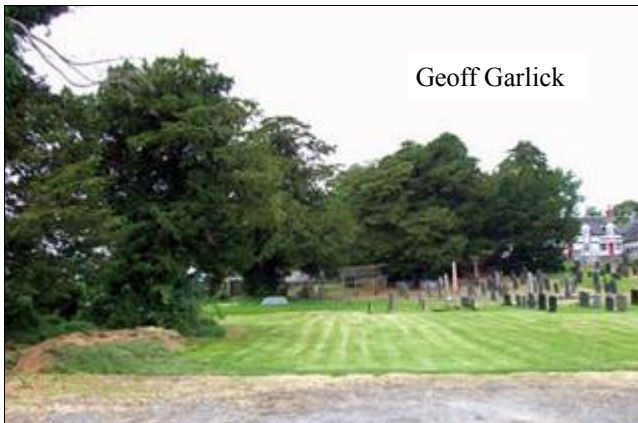
2000: 5 yews grow in this churchyard beneath the mountains. One is very old, the male tree to the right as you enter the churchyard, its girth 14' 7" at 1'.



2005: No historical record of the old yew at this site has been found to date. Remains of this formidable male yew are found at the SE corner of the churchyard. They consist of 3 massive complex fragments, with a combined girth of 29' 10" at the ground.



1849: "In the churchyard are some yew trees of luxuriant growth." *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*  
The description holds good to the present day. Yews line the northern perimeter of this churchyard, the



Geoff Garlick

largest at the entrance gate WNW of the church. Its girth of above 27', solid appearance, massive main branch and many other thick rising branches, present a tree of great presence. Also WNW is a female yew with an elongated bole of about 2' which produces two trunks with remnants of a former 3rd trunk in the middle.

NW is a yew of 3 separate trunks (below left). The raised ground suggests they are part of the same tree and that their common origin is hidden below the mound. Girth around the three trunks close to the ground was 20' 5".



Most interesting here is the one yew not on the perimeter of the churchyard but growing only 10m from the church building. It is a female tree which has been much larger. Its internal stem (A) is prominent, along with pieces of the old trunk that would have wrapped around it as it was developing (B). Girth was 12' 4" at 3'.

