

Cholsey's lost yew

compiled by Tim Hills from written and pictorial evidence provided by Janet Wedgwood and Allen Meredith

St Mary's church at Cholsey in Oxfordshire is found on O/S map 174 at SU 583 870. The churchyard is best known as the burial place of Agatha Christie, who lived in Cholsey Parish for the last 35 years of her life. She would certainly have been aware of its old yew, "well loved and known by everybody around Cholsey."

1805 The earliest record of the Cholsey Yew is contained in the drawing shown below left. This is found in *Views of Reading Abbey, with those of the churches originally connected with it*, written by Charles Tomkins. He reported that "in the churchyard is a very handsome yew tree 16ft in circumference."



Cholsey church and yew seen from the east in the early 19th and late 20th centuries.

1837 The yew must have been known to botanists of the time, for in a study on the longevity of the yew, found in Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopaedia*, Professor Henslow "found, for instance, that the layers of wood at different depths, in a hollow yew tree at Cholsey, Berkshire, varied considerably in thickness." He found 5 times the number of annual rings per inch on the outside of the tree- its most recent growth - than he found in wood laid down closer to the tree's centre. Girth at the time he noted to be between 14' and 15'.

1868 *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland* recorded that "in the churchyard stands a yew-tree said to be 900 years old."

1981 and 1989 Visited by Allen Meredith, who made the following notes: "In May 1981 I visited this tree, not as healthy as other churchyard yews, its age must be considerable despite its moderate size of 17' 8". It is hollow and much decayed inside, a metal brace high up on the trunk appears to be holding the tree together." In 1989 he noted it to be a male yew with an open gap on the south side, and inside a large enough hollow space for two or three people to stand in. On this visit he took a series of ring counts from the south side of the yew and consistently recorded between 30 and 33 rings per inch. He was not to know that later in the year the tree would be blown down.



Postcard of St Mary's Church, Cholsey by Janet Wedgwood

1989 The tree fell during heavy storms. Only the jagged stump seen in the photo below remained and it was later decided that this too should be removed.

1990 The *Oxford Times* of 24th August reported on the forthcoming centenary of Agatha Christie's birth on September 15th 1890, with the headline “**Yew clue to centenary**”. It was reported that until September 15th the Friends of Cholsey Church would be selling items made from “the wood of the centuries-old yew which was blown down in the churchyard during the winter gales.” Proceeds for the sale would go to the church restoration fund.



Alan Wedgwood salvaging wood from the fallen yew in January 1990

Janet Wedgwood, a local resident at the time said, “The tree had in fact been showing its age for some time. Two iron bands had been strapped round the tree in the 20th century by village blacksmiths and when the trunk was examined it was found to be hollow inside. However there was enough wood to count some of the tree-rings and expert opinion dated the tree to a minimum of 750 years old, but possibly 300 years older than that. So it was planted sometime between the 10th and the 13th centuries and was probably as old as Cholsey itself. The old tree had special significance for so many people, doing service as a shelter in lieu of a porch, as a background to so many wedding photos and not least as a climbing frame for children bursting out of church ahead of their parents!”

Paul Bendall grew up with the yew and remembers as a young teenager (c1982) climbing the hollow yew on the inside. He recalls that the metal bands had been in place long enough for living bark to grow over them.

These final images, thought to have been taken during Allen Meredith's visit in 1989, show what a fine looking tree has been lost.

