

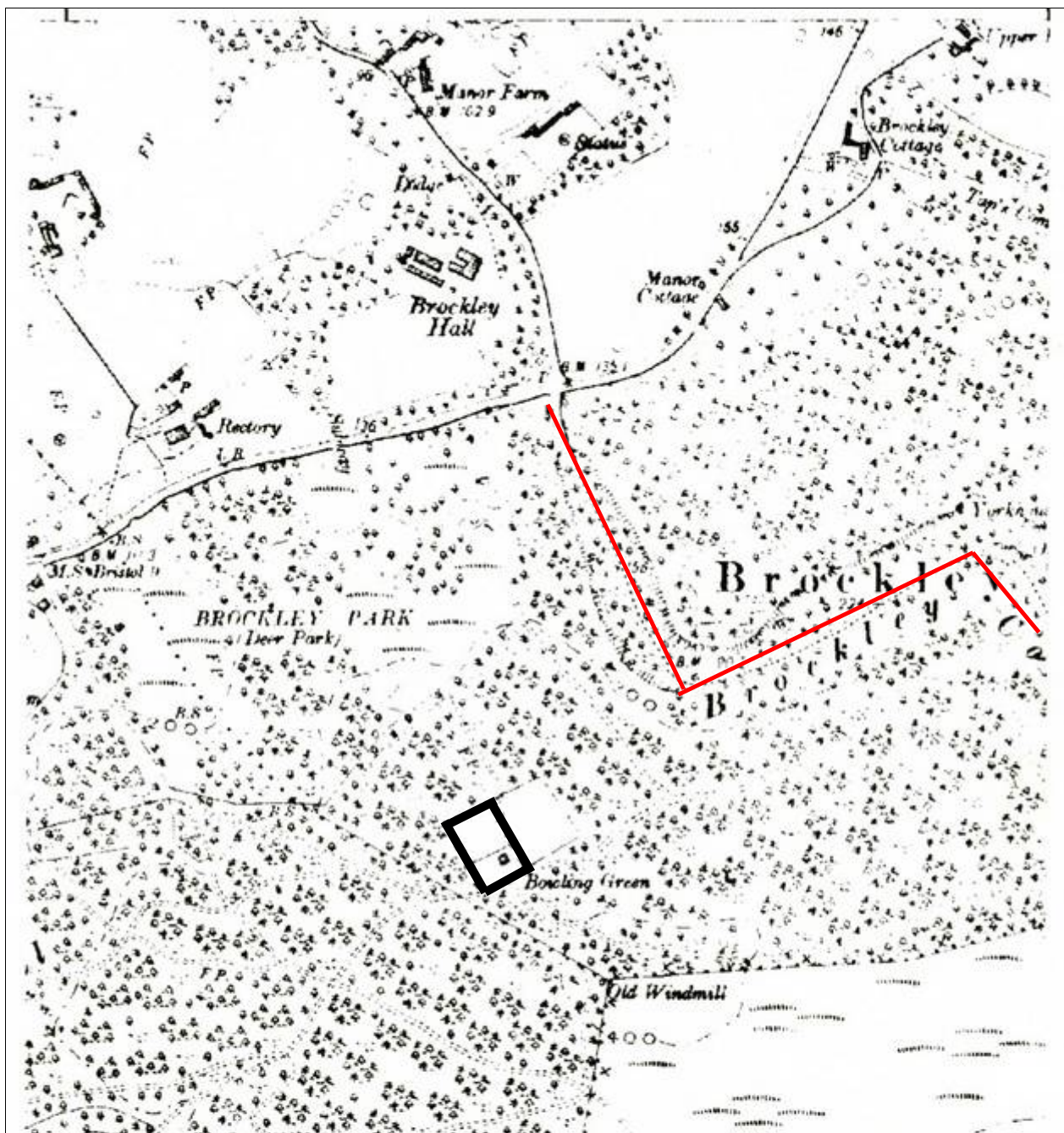
The Yews of Brockley


Tim Hills - 2012

Brockley is one of several limestone combes on the south side of Bristol. Significant old yews are also found in nearby Taps Combe, Bourton Combe and Cheston Combe.

The most unexpected find in the heart of this woodland, due south of Brockley Hall, is a rectangular enclosure surrounded by tall yew trees. The 1884 map below shows that this was once a bowling green, while drawings from 1788 show that the limestone plateau was then an almost treeless landscape. The yews were no doubt planted to act both as a windbreak and to afford its 'fashionable' visitors greater privacy.

- p1 1884 map of Brockley Combe
- p2 1795 Brockley Coomb by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- p3 Brockley Coombe's woodland yews
- p4 1788 Brockley Bowling Green - drawings by S.H.Grimm
- p5/9 The Bowling Green Yews
- p9 Brockley Hall lost yews



 The main route through Brockley Combe

In May 1795 Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote Brockley Coomb, with its subtitle *Lines composed while climbing the left ascent of Brockley Coomb*.

With many a pause and oft reverted eye
I climb the Coomb's ascent: sweet songsters near
Warble in shade their wild-wood melody:
Far off the unvarying Cuckoo soothes my ear.
Up scour the startling stragglers of the flock
That on green plots o'er precipices browse:
From the deep fissures of the naked rock
The Yew-tree bursts! Beneath its dark green boughs
(Mid which the May-thorn blends its blossoms white)
Where broad smooth stones jut out in mossy seats,
I rest: -and now have gained the topmost site.
Ah! what a luxury of landscape meets
My gaze! Proud towers, and Cots more dear to me,
Elm-shadowed Fields, and prospect-bounding Sea.
Deep sighs my lonely heart: I drop the tear:
Enchanting spot! O were my Sara here.



The route of Coleridge's left ascent of the combe is not known, but yews emerging from the "deep fissures of the naked rock" are a feature of the limestone valleys in this area.

Brockley Combe's woodland yews



Above - Brockley Combe's largest yew grows at the edge of a rocky outcrop.

Below - some of the many yews dotted throughout this woodland.



Brockley Bowling Green 1788



These 1788 drawings by S.H.Grimm¹ show already mature trees around the bowling green. The first shows the line of yews (numbered 1 to 14 on page 5) standing out on an almost treeless plateau. The windbreak would have provided shelter for its many visitors, for this bowling green has been described as “part of an extensive pleasure grounds on the Pigott family’s Brockley estate, and was a favourite destination for fashionable tourists.”²

Average girth of these yews in 2011 was 9ft 1in, suggesting an age of around 200 years, but since the drawings show that these were already well developed trees 224 years ago, this would make their likely age closer to 250/270 years. Further research of Brockley Estate records might uncover more information about the design and construction of the bowling green as well as information on the planting and maintenance of the young yew trees.

1 The pictures are available at British History on-line and we are grateful to the British Library for permission to use them here.

Brockley Windmill and Bowling-green House; drawn by S. H. Grimm, in August, 1788
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/topdrawings/b/005add000015546u00180000.html>
Brockley Bowling-green; drawn by S. H. Grimm, in August, 1788 f183
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/topdrawings/b/005add000015546u00185000.html>
Brockley Bowling-green; drawn by S. H. Grimm, in Aug. 1788 f185
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/topdrawings/b/005add000015546u00183000.html>

2 *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society vol 146*

Brockley Bowling Green Yews

	0 0	0	0 0	0 0	0	0	0	0	0
	35 34	33	32 31	30 29	28	27			
0 1									
0 2									
0 3									
0 4									
0 5									
0 6									
0 7									26 0
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0 9									
0 10									
0 11									25 0
0 12									
0 13									24 0
0 14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0



Tree 1 - 10' 10" close to ground



Tree 2 - 7' 3" at 1'



Tree 3 - 9' 10" above root bulge



Tree 4 - 9' 11" at 2'



Tree 5 - 10' 3" at 2'



Tree 6 - 6' 10" at 2' hollowing



Tree 7 - 9' 3" at 3'



Tree 8 - 8' 5" at 2'



Tree 9 - not measured



Tree 10 - 9' 5" at 2'



Tree 11 - 10' 5" at 2'



Tree 12 - about 7' at 2'



Tree 13 - 8' at 2'



Tree 14 - 8' 9" at 2'



Tree 15 - not measured



Tree 16 - 9' 7" at 3'



Tree 17 - 11' at 3'



Tree 18 - 7' 8" at 3'



Tree 19 - not measured



Tree 20 - 10' at 3'



Tree 21 - 8' 7" at 3' hollow shell



Tree 22 - 8' 6" at 3'



Tree 23 - hollow with internal growth



Tree 24—about 10'



Tree 25 - 10' 10" at 3'



Tree 26 - 11' 3" at 3'



Tree 27 - 8' 9" at 3'



Tree 28 - 8' 6" at 3'



Trees 29 and 30 - fallen



Tree 31 - 7' 10" at 2'



Tree 32 - 7' 9" at 2'



Tree 33 - dead



Tree 34 - 7' 7" at 2'



Tree 35 - 10' 4" at 3'



Building at edge of the bowling green



Two yews mark an entrance to the bowling green

The Lost Yews of Brockley Hall

In *Just Passing Through* Frances Smith tells the story of Brockley Hall and its surroundings. She relates how the ancient yews close to the Hall were “unfortunately decimated in the seventies by logging.” We know these were substantial trees because in 1838 Loudon recorded their girths as 18ft and 17ft.

In 1946 Vaughan Cornish, in *The Churchyard Yew and Immortality*, recorded “an ancient yew with a girth of 17 feet” in Brockley churchyard. This is unlikely since an earlier record in 1916 (Robinson’s *West Country Churches*) described only an avenue of yews leading to the south porch. Had there been a large yew it would have been noted. It is likely that the information given to Cornish was about Brockley Hall.