

Hampshire Yews – Abbotstone Down

Peter Norton 2012

Abbotstone Down lies two miles north of Old Alresford, Hampshire at SU 580 360. It is remnant downland and designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

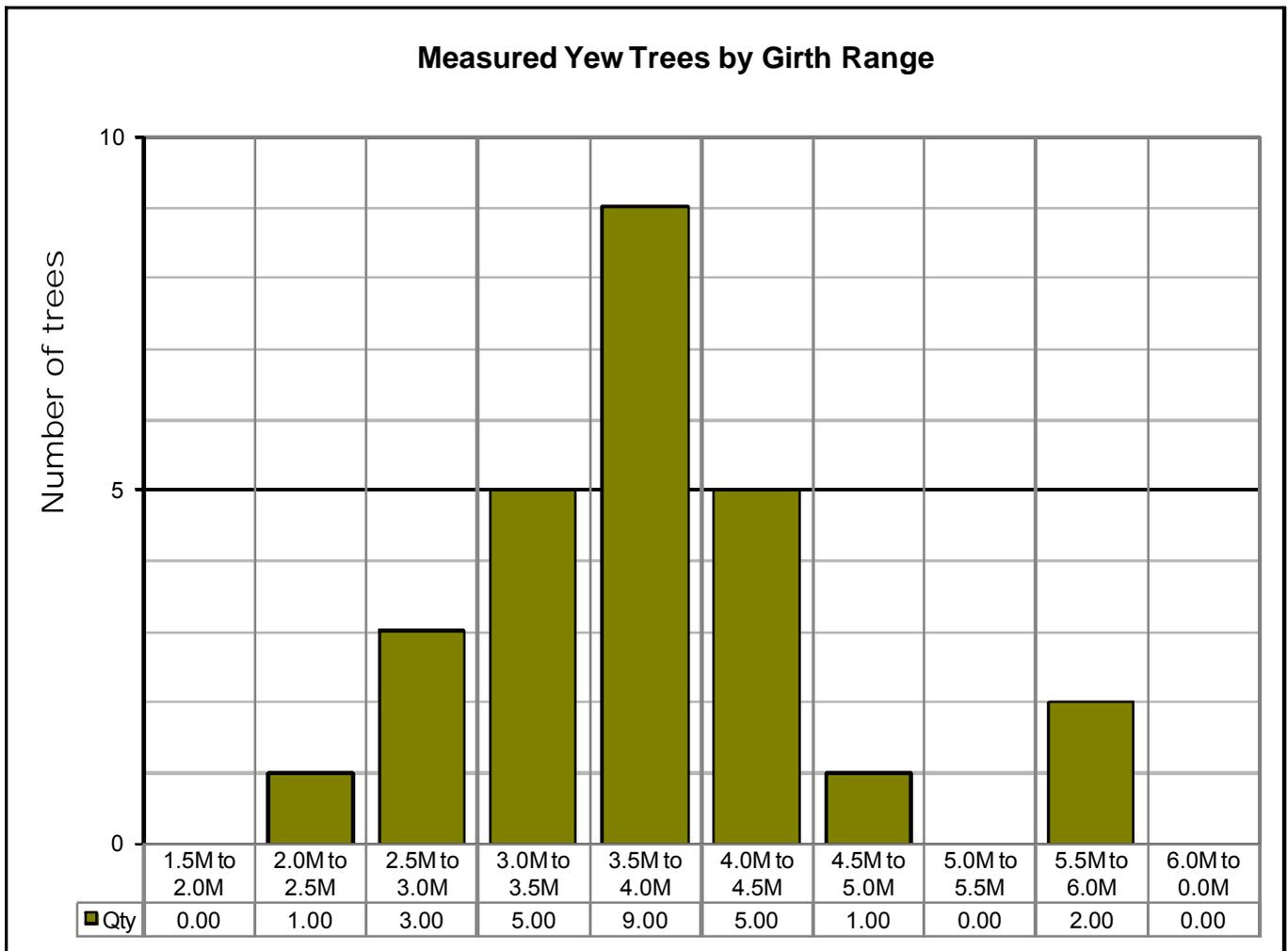
The site was one of the local chalk grassland commons grazed extensively by sheep. Changes to farming practices has allowed the area to revert to secondary woodland and so it has been necessary to carry out much conservation work to save what is left of the grassland commons.

Stock fencing has been erected around the site and three of the larger yew have had post and rail fencing erected around the trees while four of the smaller trees have had their crowns lifted to allow grazing cattle to be introduced. A decision not to lift the crowns of the larger girthed trees was taken by the Hampshire Countryside Service, who considered that it would have detracted from their character.

Also found here are the earthwork remains of an Iron Age hill fort, with evidence for both Iron Age and Roman occupation. Although known as Oliver's Battery there is no known connection with the Civil War.

On private land close to the stock fencing a further 20 plus yews can be observed. It is not known whether this land was once accessible to the public.

Not all the yew discovered are listed in detail on page three and of these only 26 had their girths recorded.



Observations

The area on private land is now complete woodland but up to about 25 years ago was open wood pasture comprised of a scatter of old yew and ash, with a few old birch and still fewer beech. Small areas of 'pioneering' hazel and hawthorn were also present.

Due almost certainly to a cessation of grazing at that time, a profusion of young ash subsequently colonised most of the pasture. Many of the old ash and beech were windblown, probably in the storm of October 1987. All the old birch died as the ash succeeded them but many of their rotting butts up to 2m high have been partially preserved below the yew canopies. Aerial rooting was noted, 1.5m from the ground, from a yew bough into a rotting birch stump. Only a small number of young birch now exist.

The general habit of these yews is multi-stemmed with low-domed canopies, only about 12m high. When the yews were more or less alone on the hill, they would have responded to the relative exposure by spreading horizontally much more than vertically. Consequently there is little apical dominance to be found in the groups.

Roe deer are now so numerous that an obvious browse-line up to 1.2m high was noted on most of the yews, with many low branches below this height now dead from continuous predation. Debarking on the low horizontal yew boughs is fairly common. It is well known that deer have become a problem in the countryside only in the last 30 years or so. This is clearly evidenced at this site with most yews having produced branches at or close to ground level, which from about 150 years ago to perhaps 40 years ago succeeded in self-layering. All this occurred in an open pasture situation, without competition from other trees. There is no recent successful layering.

With the loss of pasture to young ash woodland, the yews have not had their lower foliage shaded out, as would have occurred with competition for light from beech or oak.

The yews found here are within a relatively small age range. There were no ancient or hollow specimens and none younger than perhaps mid-Victorian. Almost all regeneration has been vegetative via self-layering. Only two or three young maidens were found, with an age of perhaps forty years. No seedlings were observed.

Table of recordings

Grid Loc (SU)	Sex	Girth			Height measured	Comments
		Ft	Ins	Mtrs		
5823935939	Female	13	7	4.1402	3'	Four leaders - and crown lifted
	Male	9	10	2.9972	Root Crown	Crown lifted
5827835810				0.0000		2 young yew with crown lifted
5829736111	Female	12		3.6576	2'	Enclosed with its own fence
5840636090	Male	12	5	3.7846	Root Crown	Enclosed with its own fence, smaller fenced yew close by
5819235803	Female	9	10	2.9972	2'	
5819135869	Female	10	6	3.2004	2' 6"	Note the young oak
5815235914	Female	8		2.4384	Root Crown	
	Female			0.0000		young yew with many branches touching the ground
5820735926	Female	10	2	3.0988	Root Crown	
5821335939	Female	11	1	3.3782	Root Crown	
5822335950	Female	12	7	3.8354	2' 6"	13' 8" at root crown but measured above the side limb
5820735962	Female	12		3.6576	Root Crown	
5819135981	Male	14	6	4.4196	Root Crown	
5820535991	Female	18	8	5.6896	Root Crown	Very low break of crown - unusual fungi on dead wood
	Female			0.0000		
5820835990	Female	13	7	4.1402	Root Crown	Both root and branch layering
5821336035	Female	12	10	3.9116	Root Crown	Branch layering
5821536081	Female	13	6	4.1148	Root Crown	More fungi
5818636061	Male	12		3.6576	Root Crown	
5815636111	Female	16	3	4.9530	2'	huge side limb not included
5820636048	Female	13	9	4.1910	1'	Twin trunk
5821636198	Female	12	5	3.7846	Root Crown	
5820336172	Female	10	8	3.2512	Root Crown	tree to the front of photo
	Male	9	9	2.9718	Root Crown	tree to the rear
5817936182	Female	13		3.9624	Root Crown	Unusual stock with large side limbs
5817936182	Female			0.0000		Unable to measure - large side limbs - at least 8 new trees from layering
5817136191	Female	18	4	5.5880	Root Crown	heavy layering with at least 10 new trees - one at 4' 4"
5811136198	Male	12	2	3.7084	1' 6"	
5812436213	Female	10		3.0480	2'	many layers in this mini grove - from such a young tree

SU5823935939 Female 13' 7" at 3'



Male 9' 10" root crown



SU5829736111 Female 12' at 2'



SU5840636090 Male 12' 5" root crown



Male above right with fungi on side branch



SU5821335939 Female 11' 1" root crown



SU5822335950 Female 12' 7" at 2' 6"



SU5819135981



Male 14' 6" root crown



SU5820535991



Female 18' 8" root crown



Fungi observed on previous yew



SU5820835990

Female 13' 7" root crown



SU5821336035

Female 12' 10" root crown



SU5821536081

Female 13' 6" root crown



Fungi observed on side branch of previous yew

SU5818636061 Male 12' root crown



SU5815636111

Female 16' 3" at 2'



SU5817936182

Female 13' root crown



Close to the above this female could not be measured



SU5817136191

Female 18' 4" root crown



SU5811136198

Male 12' 2" at 1' 6"



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