

Ancient Yews & Tree Preservation Orders

The need to protect a special and unique international resource
A joint initiative between the Conservation Foundation & the Ancient Yew Group
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1.0) The wow factor

I remember my first encounter with an ancient churchyard yew. Expecting to see a large specimen like the old oaks climbed during childhood and having glimpsed photographs of such ancient trees is a quantum-leap compared to actually seeing one. Your eyes have to 'double-take' to comprehend their sheer scale. The first instinctive act is to walk around it: pace after pace taking you on a huge circumferential walk wondering all the time how could a tree grow so large? The second act is to look inside: a huge cavern in which you could fit half your family tree (excuse the pun). The third act is to imagine that this tree was around when an array of historic figures - that you learnt about at school - were alive. That's the wow factor of encountering an ancient yew. These trees are something truly unique and special. They are without doubt important biological, cultural and historical green monuments.

2.0) The uncomfortable truth

In Europe and globally, ancient yews are a threatened genera. Specifically in Europe, yew stands were felled on a huge scale for English long bows (13th-16th century). Firstly from England and Wales - and then as 'supplies' were depleted - yew was imported from Italy, Switzerland, Spain and Poland. Additionally, from mediaeval times, forestry practice changed: yews were removed as they are slow growing and because their fruits were a toxic threat to horses and cattle. In more modern times, the huge demand for anti-cancer drugs (taxanes) from yew tree bark has removed what significant remnants have been left. As a result over the last 2,000-3,000 years ancient yews have been restricted to isolated mountain sites in Spain, Italy, Sardinia, Corsica & Turkey. On a world stage, the most significant and now vital refuge for these trees is English and Welsh churchyards. In fact, 84% of our ancient yews are found in these churchyards. In his critically acclaimed yew book, Fred Hageneder (2), describes Britain as "*A true Noah's Ark*" for ancient yews. But compared to their isolated mountain 'cousins' where human interaction and conflict is rare, ancient churchyard yews are under constant pressure, sharing a limited space with the public. These threats come in many guises:

- Development works to existing church buildings or new annexes.
- Building maintenance works.
- Destructive lopping and topping tree works: misguided management.
- Spurious building subsidence insurance claims.
- Poor risk management decisions.
- Change of 'ownership' (effectively parish priest stewardship).
- Competing space in grave yards.
- Root loss due to revised/expanded car parking spaces.

All the above have resulted in the loss or mutilation of ancient churchyard yews across England & Wales.

3.0) Church Faculties: the safeguard for ancient yews

It could be argued that, if these yews are so huge and presumably well known within the community, how could they be mismanaged when a church (diocesan) faculty is required for the removal of any tree or where major tree works are required. Problems begin, however, when professional arborist guidance is not sought by the incumbent, church warden or PCC secretary when applying for such faculties and are compounded by the fact that within a diocese there is frequently no arboricultural expertise to vet these faculty applications. The net result is the loss or mutilation of ancient churchyard yews we see today: albeit piecemeal but year on year.

4.0) Establishing the need for protection

In 1984, The Conservation Foundation launched the Ancient Yew Campaign and this resulted in the first gazetteer of the UK's ancient yews. Churches were encouraged to take pride in their role as 'caretakers' of the UK's ancient living heritage. The Foundation's campaign has been developed and built on by Tim Hills founder of the Ancient Yew Group (3) has visited more than 1,300 churchyards in search of historically recorded yews. He is only too aware of the constant threats to our ancient churchyard Yews. Some of these are covered in a few illustrative case histories below.

Case 1 - Llanlleonfel in Powys. In 1999, Hills found a veteran yew with all its major branches removed "to let more light into the church". The vicar admitted that the local man employed to do the work had been over zealous, but gave an assurance that the 7m high stump would be left in situ, since new green shoots were already sprouting from it. When visited a year later to check on the tree's progress he found that the stump too had been removed.

Case 2 – In Llanycil an ancient tree was saved in 2009 only because a tree contractor did not think he should be cutting down a healthy tree and reported it to the Ancient Yew Group. Not all tree contractors would have been prepared to deprive themselves of such work.

Case 3 – The yew at Freyerning has been mutilated by having two of its three major limbs removed to solve the problem of branches overhanging a grave. Even the Llangernyw Yew, considered to be the oldest yew in Wales and singled out as one of fifty Great British Trees to celebrate the Queen's jubilee year in 2002, was threatened in 2009 with a similar mutilation.

Case 4 – Past surveys give us an insight into the steady rate of decline in churchyard yew numbers. Straker surveyed churchyards in the Bourne district of Surrey in 1880, and these were revisited in 1994 to find that eleven of the twenty four yews had gone. The churchyards recorded in the 1970 Brecon Survey have been recently revisited and again a large number of yews, including several ancient specimens, have been lost. In the late 18th century the Revd. Collinson surveyed Somerset churches and churchyards, noting and describing significant churchyard yews. From this we know of at least eleven sites where old yews have not survived.

Another Ancient Yew Group Member, Toby Hindson has reported similar cases:

Case 5 - A very large yew bole of an ancient yew still stands in the churchyard at Privett in Hampshire. It girths 10m and was killed when the branches were all removed leaving only a 3m high stump. No-one has yet been able to discover when or why this was done.

Case 6 - The remains of another ancient Hampshire yew destroyed in this way still stands at Soberton. After being topped, its 7.5m girth shell failed to produce sufficient new growth, and the tree died.

5.0) What can be done – TPOs the Alternative Noah's Ark?

Firstly, as the threats to ancient churchyard yews are many and varied, and secondly, as church faculties often fail to protect these trees from mis-management, the only consistent approach is the provision of Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) by local authorities. This would bring into play professional and objective arboricultural guidance: consistently for every ancient yew. On the face of it this would be a 'monumental' bureaucratic move for councils up and down the land. However, there are only around 800 ancient churchyard yews in England and Wales: a number of which are already protected with TPOs or are sited in conservation areas. This would mean that parish priests and their dioceses could not prune or remove such green monuments without professional assessment, consultation and/or site investigation. The positive flip-side would be that councils could offer free impartial advice and direct dioceses to suitably experienced and qualified tree contractors. The regrettable and unnecessary loss and mutilation of these ancient trees would thus be avoided.

6.0) The expedient use of TPOs

Under the Town & Country Planning Act, it is recommended that TPOs are placed on trees when it is *expedient* to do so. The main reasons are threat of (a) bad management or development or (b) change of (tree) ownership. When looking at our unique resource of ancient yews it is difficult to justify the blanket use of a TPO for each and every tree as the latter threats are intermittent. Consequently, any blanket provision to serve TPOs could be open to appeal and objections as this would not be expedient. Under such circumstances, a council would find it difficult to confirm such a TPO. Another problem is mobilising council's to make TPOs on ancient yews when the threat (see above) is not immediate - this returns back to the expediency issue.

Stepping back, however, there is another route to making a case of expediency. This is the national, scientific and cultural value of ancient yews: as heritage trees (see section 7). Heritage designation for an ancient yew could be used as a precursor to a TPO. Moreover, it may overcome any objections when confirming them. Another important point is that the community can assess these heritage designations – a very strong basis for the protection of ancient yews.

7.0) Tree AH: ancient heritage yew trial

In the spring of 2011, a heritage tree survey was undertaken with the eleven ancient churchyard yews in the Diocese of Southwark (4). All yews were assessed using the Tree AH (5) system. The TreeAH two-step check-list sheet was used for each tree as described below. This led to a *Heritage Status* assessment that was recorded as either insignificant, undecided or significant.

Step one: *Heritage Potential*. This potential is benchmarked against three criteria: aesthetic, scientific and cultural. Given the size, age and unique characteristics of ancient yews these criteria were easily satisfied for each surveyed tree. On the recording sheet a simple answer “Yes” took the assessment to the next step.

Step two: *Heritage Significance*. The criteria here are:

- Aesthetic
- Scientific
- Cultural
- National Importance

For each *Heritage Significance* criteria a maximum of five points can be scored to give a maximum total of twenty. Each surveyed yew scored highly.

Looking at the *Heritage Significance* scores in more detail, the three criteria - scientific, cultural and national importance - were scored at maximum for each yew (i.e. five points each). In terms of the aesthetic criteria, however, only five yews scored the maximum of five points: as they could be clearly viewed from a road. These yews thus scored twenty points out of a maximum of twenty.

Of the remaining seven yews, six scored only one point with the aesthetic criteria as they were in a secluded location with limited public visibility (one yew also had fire damage). The other yew scored only one point as it was ivy clad*. These seven yews scored sixteen points out of a maximum of twenty.

The significance of these results is that all of the yews surveyed merited significant *Heritage Status*.

It is of concern that of the eleven ancient yews in the Diocese of Southwark, only seven are protected by a TPO or by virtue of growing in a conservation area. The remaining four yews have no statutory protection. These could be lopped and topped (effectively destroyed) with only a faculty application: and we have seen the flaw in this system.

* The Church has been contacted and a request has been made to remove the ivy by hand.

8.0) The Big Ask for Councils

The provision of a TPO for every ancient and veteran churchyard yew would be no small undertaking for councils across England & Wales. But there are less than 800 trees. Given the significance of this unique resource on a global stage - and the fact that this is the United Nations *Year of Biodiversity* - we cannot stand by to see another senseless loss or destruction of an ancient churchyard yew. The tree AH Heritage Tree assessment system can help us in this endeavour as a precursor for the much needed TPOs.

Footnotes

- (1) For the purposes of this initiative, veteran yews are included in with ancient yews. Minimum age for a veteran 500 years and 800 years for an ancient.
- (2) Hageneder, F. (2007). *Yew – a history*, Sutton Publishing.
- (3) The main aims of the Ancient Yew Group are to raise public awareness of the national and world wide importance of our ancient yews, research and collate all modern and historical references of our ancient yew heritage and to campaign for their better protection.
- (4) Survey undertaken by Revd Dr Barry Goodwin (Southwark Diocese *Environmental Officer* & Russell Ball). Yews surveyed - St George (Crowhurst), St Agatha (Woldingham), St Leonard (Chelsham), St Marys the Virgin (Farleigh), All Saints (Warlingham), St Nicholas (Charlwood), St Barts (Horley), St Barts (Burston), St Peters (Tandridge), St Marys the Blessed Virgin (Addington) and Barnes.
- (5) The TreeAH system: http://www.treeaz.com/tree_ah/

Supporters to date:

