

by Russell Cleaver

## Background

Of all the trees native to Europe the yew is by far the longest living, even the oak sees but a third of years that a yew tree experiences. The life span of an ancient yew stretches back into pre-history. Hampshire is fortunate in being home to many large veteran yews; their relative rarity elsewhere makes them all the more remarkable here.

The natural distribution of yew (*Taxus baccata*) is widespread throughout Britain and Europe to Iran. Whilst it is commonly found in woods and hedgerows yew is not usually regarded as a dominant species; yews more often occur as individual trees. However, they thrive on downland; in Hampshire the yew is locally known as 'Hampshire weed'. Over the last century with the decline in livestock grazing in the south, the growth of yews have begun to merge to form woods on chalk soils. The largest yew wood in the country lies on the South Downs, just across the county border at Kingley Vale in West Sussex. The seed source for these resurgent woods must have come from the stock of existing yews, including the many ancient trees that have long survived in Hampshire.



A woodland yew near Andover – © Tim Hills

Although there are some notable exceptions, the majority of old and large yews seem to be found mainly in a broad swathe across the country from the downland in the southeast, through the southern counties and up along the Welsh borders.

It is interesting that alone among our native trees yew has retained its Celtic name and pronunciation in modern English (*yw*), whilst its Anglo-Saxon name has long been discarded (*heben*). Perhaps the prominence of ancient yews in the Welsh borders has led to the wider acceptance of this Celtic name.

## Ancient yews

A relatively high number of yew trees have been able to survive into old age in Hampshire and veteran trees, whatever their species, are especially valuable. The older a tree becomes, the greater the number of plants, insects and animals will become dependant upon it. An ancient tree will host an enormous range of living and decaying organisms. And the more likely such an old tree will figure in local history and folk memory.

Over the last few years I have sought to identify the location of as many of the old, large yews in Hampshire as I could. The trees measured were in churchyards, hillforts, in copses and on path verges throughout the county. For the sake of brevity my list at the end of this article concerns only trees with huge girths of about 20ft (6m) circumference or greater, though I have included a few of the more remarkable smaller girthed trees. eg at Newton Valence and Owslebury.

Three further examples spring to mind: firstly, an amazing joint yew canopy propped up at Bentley Church; secondly, a 14' yew, with its unique clipped, hat-like crown at St Mary's, Twyford and lastly, at another St Mary's, the fine tall columnar tree trunk at Droxford. These trees don't make my list below but since they are full of character they deserve a mention here for each are remarkable in their own way.

### **The settings of ancient Yews**

Huge yew trees have long been known to exist in churchyards (one of my aims was to try and find big yews elsewhere; as it turned out, a particularly difficult goal to achieve). Nevertheless in some areas in Britain large churchyard yews are in fact very scarce, for example in East Anglia. All the more reason then for us to cherish the venerable yews in our Hampshire churchyards, yet surprisingly they often seem overlooked and frequently go unrecorded in church guides. This seems a great pity for such trees must have been a silent witness throughout the changing fortunes of the church and its congregation. In some cases they can add fascinating details to the history of a local community. For example, I've learnt that at South Boarhunt the large hollow yew offered shelter and a home to a dispossessed family in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - although seeing its cramped interior today one wonders how they must have lived.

Interestingly, the yews found in churchyards often look very different from the appearance of large yews growing on the downs or in copses. The trunks of churchyard yews are invariably clean stemmed for over a metre and frequently higher; whilst most open grown yews have branches feathered to the ground. Indeed, their low branches and full, dome shaped crowns repel visitors, making them difficult to approach and measure.

Consequently, what sets apart churchyard yews from all other yews is their ease of approach. I think it likely that churchyard yews lost their lowest branches very early on in their life since such trees were expected to be approachable; that was part of their function. Churchyard trees have long been regarded as special, even sacred, and thus have been managed and cared for over centuries. Some show no signs of having low branches removed. Probably aeons ago their side shoots would have been rubbed off so enabling them to grow a clean-stemmed trunk before they were allowed to branch. (The same practise is commonplace in modern tree nurseries where trees are grown for planting out.)

The largest yews I found in a wood (seen on the nature trail at Kingley Vale, West Sussex) have short clear trunks but carry wide spreading branches that commonly bow to the ground and even take root and layer. Consequently they seemed to combine characteristics of both churchyard yews and open-grown yews. (These Kingley Vale yews form a huge grove, over 30 trees up to 21ft girth, and could have possibly been planted, as local legend purports.)



One of Kingley Vale's many old yews © Tim Hills

### **Hillfort yews**

Yews I have examined on Iron Age hillforts are less easy to categorise. At Danebury Ring the largest yews are near the entrance to the ramparts and have girths up to 15'; but although they are big and impressive they are not ancient. They have the classic appearance of open-grown yews; indeed their convoluted low branches did their best to keep me at bay. At Rockbourne, there are 7 large yews at the Ducks Nest longbarrow but they too have the dome shaped form of open grown yews. The largest has a girth of 13' but this includes a linked stem at ground level. A nearby yew with a girth of 10'6" (3.20m) seems a more reliable guide to their antiquity.

Interestingly the picture is less clear at Merdon Castle, a site that appears to have Norman fortifications on Iron Age earthworks. Here there are yews that may both date and predate the Norman era. All the yews are on the sides or close to the top of the embankments. That is, their location is clearly inconvenient, and implies they would not have been deliberately planted. Of the ten I found, two had girths in excess of 20' (6m). How they got there and why they were allowed to remain is a puzzle that is difficult to unravel. Both Iron Age hillforts and Norman castles had timber palisades on top of their ramparts. Perhaps, when they became abandoned could the yews have self seeded themselves amongst the rotting timbers?

### **Yews in hedgerows, roadsides and elsewhere**

Most yews I have inspected on field boundaries, roadsides and rights of ways have not been huge, as probably over the years many must have been felled either because they got in the way as paths broadened or because their poisonous foliage was seen as a danger to livestock. Nevertheless more yews grace our Hampshire hedges than I can possibly inspect. I think it more likely that somewhere in the county there are ancient tracks that are still overshadowed by equally ancient yews.

Many hedgerow yews bear tall trunks since, due to years of hedge clipping, their lowest branches have been systematically cut back. Where trees remain in well-lit locations they usually re-grow green brush-like sides. In shadow, their trunks more often remain clean. However, I have only ever seen one roadside yew tree with a large girth in excess of 15 ft (4.5m), others must surely survive.

Elsewhere in a few notable exceptions, I have had the memorable and unexpected pleasure of inspecting yew trees that were not only ancient but stood in unlikely locations. For example, one was discovered in the middle of field, another in a farm garden and two more in a small country garden. The settings for all of these trees were clearly historic. It looked to me that these sites could well have once been sacred but over the centuries had become profane. The buildings and spiritual ceremonies may have disappeared but the yews and the environment around them remain as expressive as ever. Wherever they are found truly ancient yew trees invariably bear a spiritual heritage.



Hampshire's largest field yew © Tim Hills

### **The Heritage of Yew Trees**

Trees have always been closely associated with man. Throughout our history trees have provided shelter, their timber becoming our building materials. Wood was also used for our tools; our weapons and even supplied our transport; firewood kept us warm and trees gave us fruit and nuts to eat.

However, from the very beginning trees have also had a spiritual impact on our lives. This is hardly surprising – they are the largest organisms on the planet, some can be awe-inspiring, impressive structures that dominate their surroundings. No wonder they have figured so strongly in our culture ever since (and no doubt before) Man came down from the trees.

In Britain the tree that became most closely associated with Mans spiritual needs is the Yew. The oldest and largest specimens are invariably to be found in our churchyards. Whilst yew is natively occurring in Hampshire the largest trees nevertheless grow in our churchyards. Several reasons have been forwarded as to why this is so.

It has been suggested that the oldest yews are mainly found in churchyards since they have been commonly felled elsewhere – as yews bear poisonous foliage it has been said that generations of farmers must have removed them from farmland to prevent livestock eating the leaves. This sounds plausible but is only partially borne out by the evidence. Many yews remain in pastureland and livestock rarely eat the foliage unless they are actually tethered to the tree\*. (see 'Further reading')

A particular myth is that yews were planted to supply wood for longbows. In fact we now know that in medieval times most English longbows were made from imported Spanish yew wood\*\*. (see 'Further reading')



It has been recognised that yew foliage and yew wood have been used in church ceremonies for hundreds of years; clearly the tree has had a symbolic association with our spiritual needs. This may be due to the fact that the tree seems ageless and it bears evergreen foliage, (implying evergreen life) and evergreens are relatively rare in England. The only truly native conifers in Hampshire are yew and the shrubby, less frequent juniper. (Scots pine is only truly native to Scotland. The other common evergreens are holly and ivy, interestingly both too have a long religious lineage).

As trees age they put on greater girth as they add concentric tree rings. Over the last ten years research into the lifespan of trees, and yew in particular, has been revised. The oldest yews all have huge girths, over 30 feet (9m) in circumference. However these old veterans are always hollow, consequently boring into trees to count their tree rings is pointless. Other methods have been used for dating evidence, including carbon dating, but again the oldest wood is usually unavailable. Nevertheless, such recent research has greatly improved our knowledge; enabling some experts to suggest that a number of our oldest yews must be in excess of 3000 years. Even so, enough uncertainty exists for experts and other interested parties to all disagree with each other; as for at least the time being nobody can be proved to be either absolutely right or wrong.

For the most interesting argument about yew trees is whether they were introduced as a Christian symbol or whether pagan peoples worshipped them first. There are views either way: Ancient yews could be associated with cells of the earliest Celtic Christian saints, whilst others may once have marked a sacred site to pagans, a site which in time would have been converted to Christianity. (The land alongside the Meon River is known to have been occupied by the Meonwara, one of the last pagan peoples in the country to be converted – and there are at least 3 ancient yews close to the River Meon.)

Consequently, today, even whilst some uncertainty exists, we can be confident that these ancient yews stand on sacred ground and have done so throughout their life. What is more, we can be sure that the oldest yew trees pre-date the churches that stand beside them. These yews were not planted in churchyards. The church must have been planted beside the Yew\*\*.

Our earliest churches rarely survived, they were often made of wood and were later rebuilt in stone. And as the church expanded and grew old so did its yew, gaining character as it aged, often yielding its branches of foliage and even its wood for use in the church. Whilst amongst its roots have been buried departed church parishioners. Together the tree and the church have become intertwined in time.



Steep © Tim Hills

It is a relationship that is very noticeable in many a churchyard one visits today. For ultimately what makes ancient yews so remarkable isn't just their longevity; it is the realisation that they have been closely interlinked with our ancestors and mankind all the way back into prehistory. They share in, and are apart of, the heritage of our Island. One hopes this relationship will continue for many years yet.

Sadly, over the years, many churchyard yews have been felled and lost as at one stage or another in the past the trees were seen as either too pagan or irrelevant or simply too large and demanding of space beside the church to be retained. It is to be hoped that the heritage value of ancient yews is now sufficiently recognised to ensure this will not happen again.

The unashamed purpose of this article is to sing the praises of ancient yews in the churchyards of Hampshire so that more people will recognise their significance.

**Further Reading** (a brief selection only)

- \*\* 'Alan Mitchell's Trees of Britain': Alan Mitchell. *Harper Collins*
- \* 'The Ancient Yew': Robert Bevan-Jones. *Windgather Press*
- 'The Sacred Yew': Brue-ton and Chetan. *Penguin Arkana*
- 'Veteran Trees: a guide to good management' Helen Read. *English Nature*
- 'The History of the Countryside': Oliver Rackham. *Dent*

Alan Mitchell has written many books on trees. The book referred to is a more in-depth study than his well-known 'Field Guide'. His was the most authoritative voice on trees until his death in 1995 and he was instrumental in setting up the Tree Register Of the British Isles (*See below*).

'The Ancient Yew' is extremely comprehensive and is the most recent publication on yew trees.

'The Sacred Yew' was the precursor to the current interest in ancient yews and bears a most impressive list of ancient yews.

'Veteran Trees' is excellent, the best book for owners/managers of ancient trees.

'The History of the Countryside' is a renowned book by an acknowledged authority.

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