

# Lost yews in the Diocese of Bath and Wells

by Tim Hills



In his 1791 *Histories of the County* (of Somerset), Revd John Collinson included information about significant yews found in Somerset's churchyards. Later contributors to our knowledge of yews in the Bath and Wells diocese include:

John Lowe - *The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (1897)

Robinson - *West Country Churches* (1916)

Mee - *The King's England* (1941)

In 1946 Vaughan Cornish published a list of Somerset's churchyard yews in *The Churchyard Yew and Immortality*, using information he received from the office of the Bishop of Bath and Wells. It is unfortunate that most of the descriptions had been copied from Collinson's 1791 record, so that many yews described as alive in 1946 had been dead for decades!

The following pages list significant yews lost from churchyards in the Diocese of Bath and Wells.

**Broadway**      St Adhelm and St Eadburga      ST3296115897

Collinson 1791: 'There is also an ancient yew tree, the body of which is 14ft in circumference. The trunk is quite hollow, but it has a fine spreading head'. The yew no longer exists.

**Broomfield**      St Mary and All Saints      ST2242132015

Collinson 1791: '...two fine old yew trees, and a stone cross, tolerably perfect'.

In 1895 Rev. Percy G. Bulstrode informed Lowe that there was now only one yew, 'hollow and surrounded by young growth'. This tree survives, with a girth in 1997 of about 19'.

**Clevedon**      St Andrew      ST3940070820

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones  
That name the under-lying dead,  
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,  
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

These words are from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, written over a period of 17 years between 1832 and 1849.

In 1897 Lowe wrote that 'there is now no trace remaining of the tree mentioned in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as existing in Clevedon Churchyard' and 'in reply to a letter of enquiry (1896) the present sexton informs him that there was a very old yew-tree in the churchyard when his father was appointed 70 years ago, but he did not give the date of its disappearance'.

**Chillington**      St James      ST3897111087

Collinson 1791: '.... a large, ancient yew'.

This stump, southwest of the church in a sub-circular churchyard, would appear to be all that remains of the yew.



In 1791 Collinson described ‘a fine yew’, an opinion shared by John Rutter, who in 1829 noted in his *Delineations of the North Western*. that the chancel windows were ‘shaded by an unusually fine yew tree’.

At around this time the tree is reported to have been struck by lightning, from which it was unable to recover. The following account is from the 1886 *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*: ‘The dead trunk of an enormous yew tree remains in the churchyard at Congresbury, and that the village gossips say that the bones of the saint repose beneath in a golden coffin!’

By 1916 ‘nothing but the ancient trunk remains. This is of immense size.....and probably dates from before the Norman Conquest’. In 1941 Mee reported that only ‘a stump of ancient yew’ was left.

There are however further strands to this story. One is that the final 100/150 years of this yew’s existence was played out in the company of this beech tree. Andrew Morton (*Tree Heritage of Britain and Ireland* 1998) wondered whether the beech was planted next to it, and grew to dominate the ‘fading yew, eventually encircling it and tightening its grip’. He also suggested that the beech might have grown in the yew’s hollow centre to eventually spread all round it.



I took photos in 1997, not realising that they would be the last pictorial record of this ancient tree, which by now consisted only of a few slithers of trunk nestled up against the beech.

A newspaper headline in 2000 later announced the DESECRATION OF ST CONGAR’S YEW TREE as vandals damaged what was left of the yew by climbing the beech and dislodging the decaying remains.

St Congar, the son of the Emperor of Constantinople, is supposed to have arrived in Somerset in the 6th century, built an oratory, and wishing to provide shade, planted his staff in the ground. The next day leaves sprouted, impressing the King of the West Saxons, who is supposed to have given land to Congar to found a monastery.

In *How old is that yew?* Jeremy Harte puts this story into perspective, reminding us that although a saint has been associated with Congresbury since 894, he is but one of six Congars identified in different parts of the Celtic West.

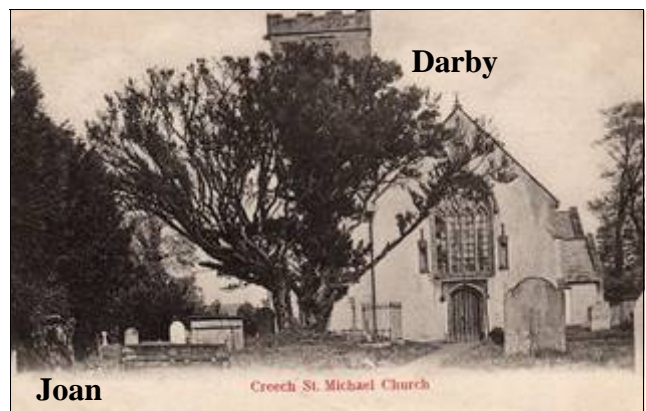
**Creech St Michael**

Collinson 1791: ‘.....2 very large old yew trees, both hollow, and measuring 15’ in circumference’.

Lewis’s *Topographical Dictionary of England* 1811: ‘.....two venerable and remarkably flourishing yew trees in front of the western entrance’.

By 1941 it was evident that one of the pair was ailing. Mee described how ‘pathetic it was to find these oldest inhabitants apparently soon to be parted, for one of the yews was dying after 700 years’. He named them Darby and Joan, describing Darby as ‘hollow and broken’ while Joan ‘carried her age like a great lady’.

The church guide considers the surviving yew, seen below left in 1999, to be older than the church, denoting the likelihood of a pagan site preceding the building of a Christian church.



**Enmore**      St Michael      ST2397635210

Collinson 1791: '.....an ancient yew tree, the body whereof is 19' round'.

Mee 1941: '.....two yews guard its ancient cross, one 19' round and hollow, the other 15' round and solid'.

The 19' hollow yew is lost, but the smaller girthed solid tree, seen here in 1997, is thriving.



**Fitzhead**      St James      ST1196628380



Collinson 1791: '....a very fine yew tree 16' round, with a very large spread'.

Today 12 clipped yews, planted in around 1903, line the path leading to the church door, but the large tree is gone. The undated postcard shows what was almost certainly the old yew.

**Flax Bourton**      St Michael and All Angels      ST5065669377

According to the *Journal of British Archaeology* (1857) there was scarcely a churchyard in Somerset without a yew. It named several churchyards in possession of a single yew of 'considerable magnitude' and included Flax Bourton in this number. Perhaps the young yew growing here today was planted to replace the old tree.

**Hinton Blewett**      St Margaret      ST5943956990

'In the SE corner of the churchyard is a fine old yew tree, said to date from the time of Henry VIII'. 1916 *West Country Churches*

In 2003 it was possible to locate a few pieces of yew wood poking through the soil on a slight mound east of the church close to a vent in the pub wall. I was told the tree came down in the 1920s.

**Kilve**      St Mary      ST1468243960

Collinson 1791: '.....a very old yew tree with a large spreading head, the trunk 19' in circumference'.

In 1941 Mee recorded 'an old yew tree, with a trunk over 20' round'.

We found no sign of an old yew either in the churchyard or the nearby ruined chantry.

**Mark**      St Mark, also known as Holy Cross      ST3807247845

The 'fine old yew tree in a decaying state' recorded in 1791 by Collinson no longer exists.

Portbury once boasted '3 very large yew trees'. They were described in detail in 1791.

'The first of which standing westward is 19' in circ. at 7' from the ground, and timber for near 60' high.

Second is 18' round at 4' height, and runs that size for near 20'; the height of the top most branches, which are widely spread, is 70'.

The third, which is entirely a shell, is 15' round at 3' and continues that size to a height of 18'.

Near the door there is a fourth, but much smaller than the rest. They altogether exhibit a very remarkable picture and are doubtless upwards of 500 years old'.

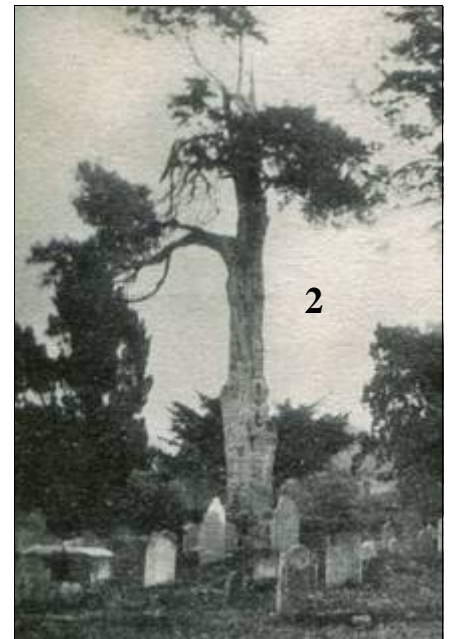
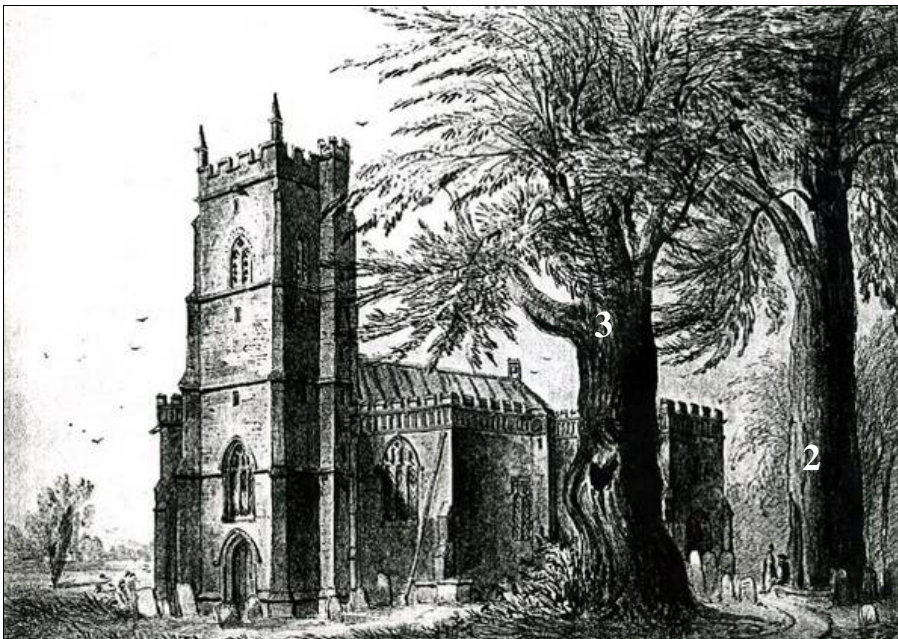
The first two of these are lost yews, with the tree described as 'standing westward' probably succumbing before 1861, since in that year *Kelly's Directory reported* only 'two very beautiful yew trees'.



In May 1889 Lowe measured the trees shown here as 2 and 3. He described the tree numbered 2 as 'one of the most remarkable I have seen, as it has a straight trunk of about 20' high, measuring at the ground 17' 3"; at 3', 15' 10"; and at 6', 14' in girth'.

In 1941 Mee wrote that this tree was 'nearly bald, with only a little tuft on top'.

By 1955 Rev C du Heaume informed Swanton that this tree, though still standing, was quite dead. 'I would say it never grew after 1889'. The stump is all that remains today.



But two of Collinson's trees live on. The 3rd tree, given a girth of 15' at 3' in 1791, was 17'1" at the same height in 2000. The 4th tree, 'much smaller than the rest', grows SE of the church inside an octagonal wall. In 2013 its girth was 9' 8" at 3', but it has already become hollow and stands on two horse shoe shaped sections which combine at a height of about 10'.

**Sampford Arundel**      Holy Cross      ST1076718895

In *The Antiquities of Bridgnorth* 1856 George Bellett wrote 'there is a yew-tree known to the writer, at present growing in the church yard of Sampford Arundel, in the county of Somerset, but now hollowed by age, respecting which there is certain evidence, that more than a century has passed over it, without producing seemingly any change whatever in its state of decay ; it is now, to all appearance, as it was more than a hundred years ago'. In 2009 Barry Saich found neither living yew, nor any trace of the lost yew.

**Sampford Brett**      St George      ST0896240230

The 'very large spreading yew tree' recorded by Collinson in 1791 no longer exists.

**Shepton Montague**      St Peter      ST6821731750

Arthur Mee's 1941 description was of a giant yew higher than the roof. The church was rebuilt in 1964 after a fire, which presumably also destroyed the yew.

**South Stoke**      St James      ST7465161240

Collinson 1791: '....a fine yew tree' at the SW corner. This position is now occupied by a large Irish Yew, probably planted as its replacement.

**Stogursey (Stoke Courcy)**      St Andrew      ST2048242835

Collinson 1791: '2 fine yew trees, one large with a fine spread of branches, and a raised seat round the roots'. The larger of the two was recorded in the 1800's with a girth of 15', but was 'a dead shell only' according to Rev. Meade in 1895. Today there is only one relatively small girthed yew - about 11' at 5' - growing south of the church. If this was the 2nd yew noted by Collinson in 1791, it would have been a very young tree at that time.

**Ston Easton**      St Mary      ST6237553440

Collinson 1791: '2 remarkable old yew trees, of astonishing girth'. Both were alive in 1916 when *West Country Churches* recorded: 'Opposite the S entrance are two ancient and famous yew trees. These aged and venerable fathers of the various trees which surround the hallowed spot have weathered the storms and tempests of many centuries'.

Below we see both the living and the lost tree, each with a girth of about 20'.



## West Harptree

St Mary

ST5603056895

Collinson 1791: '10 of the finest yew trees perhaps in the kingdom. They are clipped



into cones and the diameter of the largest is at the bottom 36', the height 40', the body of the tree 13' round'.

While eight have survived, the tree described by Collinson, seen on the far right in this 1920s postcard, is lost. All that remains today are some pieces of stump, indicating a tree that was over 16' in girth at



the time of its demise.

## Whitelackington

St Mary

ST3793815279

Mee 1941: '.....two ancient yews standing before the church'.

One has gone since that time. The survivor, measuring just under 16', grows north of the church.

## Wrington

All Saints

ST4676862707

'A monument to her memory (Hannah More), and that of her four sisters, is placed under the sombre shade of a yew tree, in the rural churchyard'. Beedle's *Popular Sixpenny handbook of Weston-super-Mare* 1863.

In 1946 Cornish recorded it as 'an old yew with trunk split'. The tree no longer exists.