

Boundary and other Marker Yews of the Western Downland Region of South Hampshire and of the adjoining area of Cranborne in Dorset.

by Peter Andrews

During 2005/2006 I discovered a high number of boundary and other marker Yews in an area that extends south-westwards from Whitsbury through Damerham in Hampshire to Cranborne and Wimborne St. Giles in Dorset.

Boundary Yews in contrast to those in churchyards have received comparatively little attention. One reason for this may be that they rarely reach the great girth and ancient status of the churchyard Yew. The only well documented boundary yews prior to this study are recorded on the ridge in Acton Burnell Park, where the largest of several yews is 25ft in girth (7.62m).

The use of Yews as route markers is also well known. These have been found along old droveways where they would also give protection to the drover and his animals in bad weather. Ancient trackways are also marked by Yews and Cliff Hansford in Kent is currently making a study of those along the Pilgrim's Way. In Dorset I have recently found a number of large Yews, one 27ft (8.23 metres) in girth, marking a route to a lost church.



27' marker yew - All Hallows © Peter Andrews

All but one of the boundary Yews in this region are to be found along very old footpaths and trackways. This would give the Yews a dual purpose both as a boundary tree and an important route marker. The use of Yew as markers has its obvious reasons, but also to the people who planted them, this was a Sacred tree, with the power to ward off evil and in doing so protect the wayfarers and also the people living within the Yew boundary.

Dating Yews has proved very difficult and no precise age can be given for the Yews that were planted here. To gain an insight into the Yews that I found, I have made a study of the history of this region, and through this study I now believe many of the Yews here are ecclesiastical plantings from the late Anglo-Saxon and Norman period. I believe this because the marker Yews in this district are to be found where the Monastic Orders influence was at its strongest, such as Breamore, Damerham and Cranborne, with its satellite manors of Boveridge and Monkton Up Wimborne.

Recently I found out that in the late Saxon/Norman period, the Abbots of Cranborne, later of Tewkesbury, also owned the manor of Monkton Up Wimborne, which is a few miles west of where the Abbey once stood at Cranborne. To put my theory that the Monastic Orders were responsible for most of the marker Yew plantings to the test, I visited Monkton Up Wimborne to see if any such Yews would be found here. I was not to be disappointed, in fact what follows reveals the uncovering of an astonishing location containing not just one, but several sites of previously undocumented ancient yews.

Firstly on a hill above the site of where there was once a small Monastic Chapel, I found a large boundary Yew with a girth of 21ft (6.40) metres. I believe it is not coincidental that a Yew with an identical girth stands on a hill above the Abbey site at Cranborne.

I then discovered yews both in and close to an old churchyard with no trace of the church remaining. This site lies a short distance from Monkton Up Wimborne at All Hallows, now a cluster of houses around a large farm. What makes All Hallows exceptional and relevant to my study are the large Yews above the churchyard marking a disused route to the now vanished church. The four marker Yews are to the south of the churchyard and have been planted well apart from each other. Three of these are by a track, which is shown on early O.S. maps, but being no longer in use, is barely visible today.

One church marker Yew is at the top of the hill and was only seen later from the slope across the river valley. The second Yew is half way down the hillside in the middle of a well cut hedge, and has a girth of 18' 6" (5.64 metres). The third marker Yew is just above the churchyard and has a huge girth of 27ft (8.23 metres). This tall Yew with an ivy covered trunk stands today on the edge of a small pit and below the new parish cemetery. A fourth storm battered old Yew with a girth of 21 ft (6.40 metres), clings to the high wooded bank above the road just opposite the churchyard.

To gain a better understanding of the marker Yews, a study of the lost church is essential. Inside the small neglected churchyard, ivy covers most of the gravestones and has spread up the trunks of the two big Yews here. One has an impressive girth of 29ft, nearly 9 metres. The other stands in a dark corner of the churchyard, and is a rather sorry looking tree with broken branches. All Hallows is obviously a very old site. The large Yews inside the churchyard and the largest marker Yew are probably pre-Christian plantings.



Largest of the yews in All Hallows churchyard © Peter Andrews

Another remarkable fact is that All Hallows lies only 1.5 miles north of Knowlton Henge, one of the most significant Yew sites in Britain. The church of All Hallows Upwimborne is mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086, when the large farm and its land were held by William the Conqueror. Then the church of All Hallows was the most important in the locality, there being only a small chapel at nearby Wimborne St. Giles.

During the course of time, the Ashley family, later Cooper, became lords of the manor and occupied a house in what is now St. Giles Park. The community focus shifted towards St. Giles, whose chapel had been rebuilt into a church. When Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, built a great new house near the church of St. Giles, the end was nigh for All Hallows. There is a letter written in 1672, from the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury to the keeper of the Great Seal, offering to give King Charles II a living of his choice in exchange for being allowed to close down the living of All Hallows and concentrate worship at St. Giles because "The places so commodiously together that they now come all to St. Giles church the other long layen ruin". This request was granted and the disused church was eventually pulled down in 1742, to leave no apparent trace.

The history of All Hallows was found in a booklet in the church at Wimborne St Giles, written by T.A. Cooper, descendant of Sir Anthony Cooper. Although the church of All Hallows was gone, the churchyard continued to be used by people of the parish for burials up to the end of the 19th Century. There was not much room in the tiny churchyard of St. Giles and what room there was, has been taken up by another magnificent large Yew. The 19th century use of All Hallows churchyard is probably why the site of the lost church and a path leading to it are marked on the 1st Edition O.S. Map.

By 1102 Cranborne Abbey had become a priory and a cell of Tewkesbury. The estate of Boveridge, just to the north of Cranborne was also held by the Abbot and large Yews are also to be found here on and near the parish/county boundary. The boundary also once divided the land held by the Abbots of Tewkesbury and the monastic estate of Damerham held by the Abbots of Glastonbury.

It was near to the Cranborne and Damerham boundary during September 2005, that I found a number of large Yews in a roadside copse. Five old Yews were found with others, the largest reaching 23ft, just over 7 metres in girth. I now believe that these old Yews were planted here as markers and some of the smaller Yews near them are their descendants. It is possible that the monks planted the roadside White House Copse Yews but I suspect the largest Yews here may predate the arrival of the ecclesiastical order. White House Copse is an intriguing site. The two largest Yews, both females, have been planted near to each other and the conifers around them have been recently felled.

Another interesting fact is there was once a Yew Tree Copse just across the boundary from White House Copse. Yew Tree Copse adjoined the larger Biddlesgate Copse, which is part of a complex of woodlands. Perhaps large Yews also stood in Yew Tree Copse, but we may never know, for it was cut down at some point during the World Wars to make way for arable land.

It is known there was a dispute over pasture here between the Abbot of Tewkesbury and the Abbot of Glastonbury, and because of this dispute, a perambulation was made demarcating the boundary in the early 13th century between Biddlesgate and Bokerley Dyke. The other two large Yews that I found on the boundary here may have been planted at this period. One of these boundary Yews is on the edge of Biddlesgate Copse in a field. This old Yew has a girth of 18ft, nearly 5.50 metres. This is the only boundary Yew in this region that does not occur by a footpath or a track which is in use today. This rare example of a field boundary Yew is regenerating well and a number of very young Yews have sprung up beside the old trunk.



Yew on Dorset/Hampshire boundary at Biddlesgate © Peter Andrews

South east of the Biddlesgate boundary Yew, another slightly larger boundary Yew was found just east of Bratch Copse. This boundary Yew stands in a hedgerow by a footpath that leads to Hyde Farm and Damerham. Further along the hedgerow, another Yew has been planted as a route marker. It is worth walking the short distance along the footpath to the old farm to see another special use for the Yew as a shelter tree. A number of now tall Yews have been planted close together on the south and west side of the farm to protect it from Atlantic storms. Another very good example of farm shelter Yews can be seen at the farm near Knowlton Henge.

The parish of Damerham has a number of other large marker Yews. Damerham, which included the present parish of Martin, was once a Royal possession of King Alfred. Some sixty years later, his grandson, the West Saxon King Edmund bequeathed the estate to his wife in a charter made in 945, with its reversion to the Abbot of Glastonbury when she died. Abbot Siqigar took charge of the estate in 975 and it was this acquisition that started the revival in the fortunes of England's Jerusalem. Glastonbury and Tewkesbury would both hold on to their estates in this region until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII.

In the Parish of Damerham, two large marker Yews are to be found on the hill south of Bouldsbury Farm. These two Yews have girths in the region of 18ft (nearly 5.50 metres). One of the Yews, which can be seen at quite a distance, marks a footpath that leads down to the farm. Unfortunately the other Yew nearby is now surrounded by planted trees and has been blown onto its side in a storm. Despite this, its roots are still embedded in the soil and the still green Yew clings to life. North of the farm, another large Yew marks the trackway leading to Damerham. The outstanding Yew here stands on a hill above the other marker Yews.

The finest Yew in this region, which I will call the Bouldsbury Yew, is in a remote location on the edge of a wood in a private field. The Yew has massive ancient presence, its bleached trunk like the old bones of a skeleton lying in the sun with beautiful flushes of pink. It measures 26' 4" (just over 8m) at its base, swelling to 29ft (almost 9m) at 3ft. The Yew is close to Grims Ditch which is very shallow and now thought to be a tribal boundary marker unlike its neighbour the huge defensive Bokerley Ditch. I believe that the Bouldsbury Yew was planted for a special reason, probably as a Celtic tribal boundary marker.

There are two further boundary Yews to the west of Bouldsbury, the first at Blagdon Hill, by a track near Martin Down above the farm. The second has been planted by the roadside, between Martin and Cranborne on the edge of Blagdon Hill Wood. The Yew is near the parish and county boundary, and was probably planted here, when this was also the boundary between the enclosed Royal Park of Blagdon and the monastic estate of Damerham. This lovely Yew has a girth of 16' or just over 5 metres.



Yew at Blagdon Gap ©Peter Andrews

The road by which the Yew stands today was once the coach road between London and Weymouth. The Yew would have been a welcome sign to the coach driver that the Blagdon Gap had been reached after the long steep climb from Tidpit. King George III would have often passed this Yew on his way to Weymouth to convalesce from his illness. This is a very good example of a smaller Yew having important historical associations.

Nearly all the marker Yews in the Damerham area are female trees. I believe the monks planted the Yew because it was a sacred tree, and especially used female trees as a fertility symbol that would enhance the land they grow on to produce better crops or pasture for grazing their livestock. Where large female boundary Yews have been planted in this region you nearly always find younger Yews in nearby hedgerows and woodlands that have seeded from them. R.M. Tittensor believed she had found 15 examples of Yew growth in woodlands on parish boundaries in the East Hants and Sussex region that were descendants of larger boundary Yews.

The parish boundary between Breamore and Whitsbury has an impressive line of Yews. The boundary Yews here have been planted along Long Steeple Lane (track) between Lower Farm and where a track goes uphill to Whitsbury Castle. Two of the finest Yews are to be found where Long Steeple Lane meets the Whitsbury Castle track. One is a big spreading Yew, the other is very tall and both have good clean trunks with girths of 17ft (5.18 metres).

Two other remarkable Yews are to be found on the east side of Long Steeple Lane, just to the south of Lower Farm. The two old Yews, one of each sex, have been planted so close together that when I first saw them they looked like one gigantic tree. The Yews also have girths of 17ft (5.18 metres) and the climber Old Man's Beard has spread onto the lower boughs, the feathery white styles contrasting beautifully with the dark foliage of the Yews.

On Breamore Down above the boundary Yews, in small woods and copses, are dense stands of younger Yews. In one small wood on top of the down, a narrow path leads to the intriguing Miz-Maze. It is not known for certain why the Miz-Maze was built, but it is thought the monks used it for penance, getting to the middle on their knees.

A track lined with Yews leaves the Miz-Maze and leads to a footpath which goes downhill through Breamore Wood into the grounds of a grand Elizabethan/Georgian house to arrive at a magnificent Saxon church. Just as the footpath leaves the park near the church, there is a noble old Yew with an internal stem, which I believe is an early route marker. The Saxon church was built about the year 1000 A.D. and financed by King Ethelred II (the Unready). King Ethelred chose to build his church at the site of a great Yew, which many believe had already stood here for at least a thousand years. It is not known if an earlier wooden church accompanied the old Yew. In 1130 a priory was founded nearby on the west bank of the River Avon.

The purpose of writing this research paper is to draw attention to the wealth of interesting Yews in this region. Also I hope it will encourage people to seek out the Yew in Britain's wider countryside and to search the hedgerows, woods and fields and discover fascinating Yews for themselves.

Details of the Yews mentioned in this paper can be found in the Gazetteer page. To make it easier for anybody wishing to visit any of the Yews in this region, I have listed them below with six figure grid refs. All of the Yews below can be seen from or are by public rights of way.

List of the Yews

Boulsbury Farm Two route marker Yews south of the farm at SU 077159, one north of the farm at SU 079169.

(Gazetteer entry: Damerham – nr. Boulsbury Farm)

Blagdon Hill Two boundary Yews. The first is north of Blagdon Farm at SU 054177. (Gazetteer entry: Cranborne -Blagdon Hill Copse.)

The second is by the Martin to Cranborne road, SU 066167. (Gazetteer entry: Damerham – Blagdon Hill Gap)

Edge of Biddlesgate Copse Field boundary Yew. SU 077146. In a private field but can be seen from the nearby road.

(Gazetteer entry: Damerham -Biddlesgate Copse)

Near Bratch Copse. Boundary Yew. SU 083143. Route marker and farm shelter Yews further along the footpath.

(Gazetteer entry: Damerham - near Bratch Copse)

White House Copse. Large marker Yews near the road, just west of Biddlesgate Farm. SU 076143.

(Gazetteer entry: Cranborne – White House Copse)

Breamore-Whitsbury Parish Boundary Many boundary Yews between SU 138193 and SU 134201, along Long Steeple Lane.

(Gazetteer entry: Whitsbury)

Breamore Park. Marker Yew. SU152189

Cranborne. Large marker Yew by the road, above the manor house. SU 051130. Many other Yews marking the roadsides here, some on the parish boundaries. (Gazetteer entry: Cranborne – nr. Manor House)



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Monkton Up Wimborne. Two boundary yews SU 016131.

(Gazetteer entry: Monkton Up Wimborne - near)

SU 016126

(Gazetteer entry: Monkton Up Wimborne-old Coach Road)

All Hallows. Old churchyard with lost church and large Yews. Large marker Yews lining route to the church. SU 024126

(Gazetteer entries: All Hallows – old graveyard: All Hallows – opposite old churchyard: All Hallows – field near new graveyard: All Hallows – hedge near new graveyard)

Gussage St Michael and Long Crichel Parish Boundary A yew standing alone next to a tumulus/long barrow site at ST 974 122.

(Gazetteer entry: Gussage St Michael-near)

Knowlton – Lumber Lane A boundary yew on the Woodlands/Gussage All Saints Parish boundary at SU 020106

(Gazetteer entry: Knowlton-Lumber Lane)

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