

Here is a tree whose praises have been sung for a long time, with girth records dating back to 1680.

Some of the recorded measurements dating from 1680:

1680	27' at 4'	John Aubrey	The Sacred Yew
1835	27'7" at 4'	Horsfield	The Sacred Yew
1879	26'7" at 4'	CS Greaves	The Sacred Yew
1894	26'9" at 4'	Lowe	Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland
1954	27'2" at 3'	Swanton	Informed by Rev E.D. Edwards
1982	28' at 4'	Meredith	The Sacred Yew
1998	289 cm diameter 0.8 / 1.5m	Johnson	The Sussex Tree Book

- 1842: The yew carried 'a noble and flourishing head'. *Forest Trees* Selby
- 1867: 'Here is an immense yew tree, the circumference of which, at 4 feet from the ground, is 27 feet, and round the bottom 42 feet.....' *Kelly's Post Offices Directory*
- 1897: Lowe reported 'sad changes.....as the tree shows every sign of rapid decay, and there is very little verdure left'. There was also a wide opening 'caused by the falling away of a large portion of the tree on the south side'.
- 1907: Described as a 'caged lion' by Rev.Lonsdale Ragg after fencing was erected around the tree in 1907. JH Wilks *Trees of British Isles in history and legend*.
- 1954: '....in fairly good condition, although it has to be supported with chains, and there are props or stays to support the branches. It is certainly not dead'. *Yew Trees of England* E.W.Swanton

Phyllis Springford, Parish clerk from 1980 to 1985 provided me with recent information about the yew.

In 1982 Tony Denyer, forestry advisor for East Sussex visited the site with a tree surgeon to make recommendations on work to conserve the yews. An appeal to raise the necessary funding was launched and generosity enabled work to start in 1983. This was 'ably' carried out by the Sussex Tree Surgeons and consisted of cutting out dead wood, particularly in the upper crown, removing loose bark, pruning, and feeding the root system. The unsightly metal bands were removed and replaced by 3 hawsers bolted through the branches, this being considered more effective and visually less obtrusive. Pockets of decay and the build up of debris in the trunk were removed and drainage established to prevent further decay. The existing props were replaced by new ones.

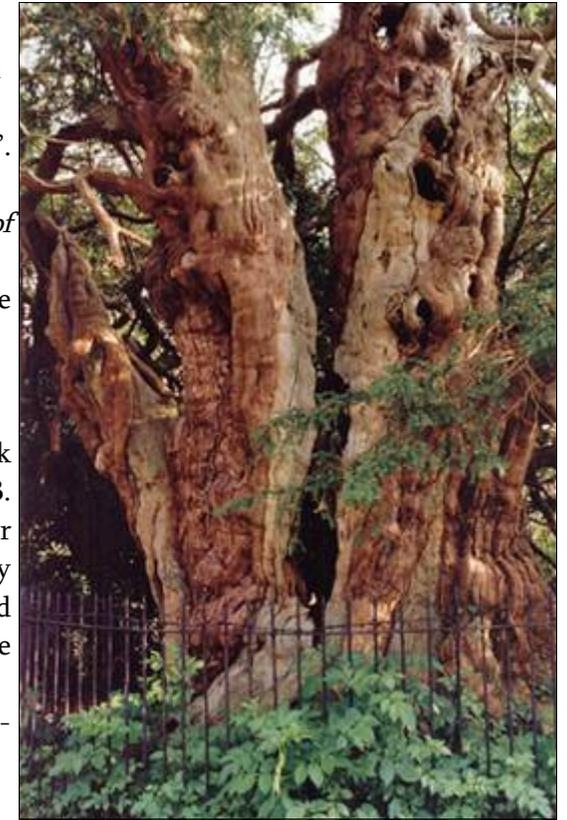
17 years later when I was sent this information the tree was already considered to have 'increased vigour'. It was able to withstand the 1987 hurricane with 'no significant damage'.

July 7th 1999

The process of change, sometimes imperceptible and at others dramatic, is a feature of an old yew's long life. Owen Johnson in his *Sussex Tree Book* (1997) reasoned that the 'timber of yew is so fluid that the gap, that must have yawned open in the rest of the bole as the southern section split away, is now hardly visible: in another hundred years the leaning part will probably have been shed, and the enigma will remain of a perfectly clean bole the same size as, or slightly smaller than the tree measured 4 centuries earlier'.

The female yew grows south of the church above a steep embankment to the road. When I saw it foliage was plentiful though not dense in the upper branches.

As well as this formidable ancient specimen, Crowhurst also boasts two veterans, one E and the other NW of the church. They are thought to have been planted by Sir John Pelham shortly after 1412.



‘The village of Crowhurst makes a fair appearance from the hill, but when you get down you wonder what has become of it, for it has almost entirely disappeared. It lies, however, to the left of the point where the road forks, while the road to the right takes you to the church - a delightful old church, neat and pleasant within, and rendered a true pilgrim’s shrine without by its grand old tower, its amazing yew tree, and the ruins just below it of an old manor house, said to have been built in 1250. The effect of these ancient remains is much marred by an unsightly red and yellow brick building, a farmhouse, which has been stuck there without the slightest regard for common decency. For surely this old church and its surroundings deserved better treatment than to have these hideous flaring monstrosities pushed up close against it. A little way above, at a point to which the visitor naturally goes for a good view of the church, there are three or four abominable cottages, the models of everything that is unsightly and detestable in “architecture.” How can the man who built these have the coolness to look his fellow-creatures in the face again?

If the church tower and the old manor-house could not have kept back the hand of the spoiler, that venerable yew tree in the churchyard ought to have scared him off. Mr. M. A. Lower relates that it “is said to be three thousand years old.” I will believe almost anything of a yew tree, but not quite *that*. Mr. Lower gives thirty-three feet as the circumference of the tree. Murray speaks of it as twenty-seven feet at four feet from the ground. I have measured it more than once at five feet from the ground, and find it twenty-six and a half feet to a fraction. But there is a split or cleft in the trunk, causing rather a wide opening, and that, of course, increases the measurement. In the Rev. C. A. Johns’ work on *Forest Trees*, there is a view of a “yew tree at Crowhurst,” which, doubtless, was intended for this tree. But it never can have been a correct view, for the path is placed on the wrong side of the tree, and neither at Crowhurst in Surrey or Sussex does the great yew stand in any such position as that represented in the engraving, nor is there any resemblance to the tree itself. The top alone is now green, and even that is much broken off and battered by the winds, while below all is a melancholy wreck — the trunk shattered and hollow, and crumbling to pieces with age. A part of the trunk is held to the main body of the tree by an iron band, which looks as if that also needed to be renewed. Mr. Selby in his *Forest Trees* says that this yew “still carries a noble and flourishing head.” That description of it could not be given now. There are still green leaves, but there is scarcely a branch or twig which does not look as if it had been snapped off in the middle, and the heavy gales of last winter did it grievous hurt. I stood by it one windy day in January when the groaning and creaking of its branches, as they ground against each other, was a distressing sound to hear.....

Now supposing that this yew is 1200 years old, it will be a very difficult thing to make any one believe that it was planted there as “an emblem of immortality.” This is the explanation given by Mr. Johns and many other writers of the yew being found so frequently in churchyards. “Generation after generation,” he says, “might be gathered to their fathers, the yew-tree proclaiming to those who remained that all, like the evergreen unchanging yew, were yet living, in another world, the life which had been the object of their desire.” The idea is, no doubt, an attractive one; but it is far more probable that pagan superstition led to these ancient trees being planted in the spots where we now find them than a belief in the Christian doctrine of immortality. Mr. Bowman supposes that its branches were employed by our “pagan ancestors, on their first arrival here, as the best substitute for the cypress, to deck the graves of the dead, and for other sacred purposes.” The theory that the yew was planted in churchyards in order that it might protect the sacred edifice, or provide the neighbourhood with wood for bows, seems to me to be exploded in a few words by a writer whose article I happened to come across in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* for 1786 (vol. lvi. p. 941). He says “It is difficult to discover what influenced our ancestors to place this tree so generally in churchyards; scarce any could be selected which is so ill adapted to be planted for protection, from the slowness of its growth and the horizontal direction of its branches, both of which circumstances prevent its rising high enough, even in a century, to shelter from storms a building of moderate height; neither would one tree answer the purpose of supplying a whole parish with bows.” Many of our churches were doubtless built on spots where our ancestors worshipped before the introduction of Christianity, and the yew, which was regarded with merely superstitious feelings, was suffered to remain’.