

The ancient yew tree of Crowhurst, Surrey

Compiled by Tim Hills

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Christian Wolf collection

The ancient yew tree of Crowhurst, Surrey

by Jeroen Pater

If there is one yew tree that directly seems to appear from the prehistoric times, it is surely the one at Crowhurst in Surrey. It is a true photogenic specimen: its hollow trunk with holes, bizarre shapes and a mysterious door leave us in no doubt that this yew is very ancient. With a girth of 10.01 meters, it is also one of the largest girthed yew trees of England.



It stands, as do most of the oldest yew trees, next to a church. This is a most favourable position, for here receive more attention, better care, and events connected with the old yew trees are well documented. Of course there are a few historical events about this yew tree to tell. In 1820 inhabitants of the village found a canon ball in the hollow trunk. It was already partially overgrown with fresh wood. The canon ball probably dated from the civil war of 1643. The inhabitants left the bullet behind in the hollow trunk. On a morning during the 2nd World War the canon ball suddenly disappeared. A few years later, during the evacuation of a Canadian army camp in the neighbourhood of Crowhurst, the canon ball was found again and handed over to the church. Obviously a Canadian soldier had the intention to take it home as a souvenir.

During a violent storm in 1845, there was heavy damage in the top of the tree and many big branches broke. But yew trees are well known for their tough wood, and it takes more than one storm to finish this yew tree.

In 1850, an article in Brailey's *History of Surrey* reported that the hollow trunk was fitted with a door. The hollow in the yew tree had a diameter of 1.80 meters. This was large enough to put a table and chairs in it. There was also a roof, but that was already almost collapsed. The inn-keeper of Crowhurst was responsible for looking after this - perhaps he wanted an extra room for his guests! These days only the door remains.

Historical measurements of this yew tree date back to the 17th century. Often it was measured at a height of 4 or 5 feet (c 1.20 or 1.50 meters). In 1630, it was surveyed for the first time and then the girth was 9.15 meters (30 feet). Evelyn writes in 1664 that he was told of a yew in Crowhurst churchyard with a girth of 10 yards (30 feet). From 1833 until 1845 the yew tree was surveyed several times and the girth recorded as 9.15 meters. In 1877 a girth of 9.58 meters was recorded.

In April 1890 John Lowe together with the vicar measured the yew tree and recorded a girth of 9.65 meters at 1.20 meters and 9.91 meters at 1.50 meters height. In 1999 girth at the same heights it was 10.10 and 9.80 meters. All these measurements are difficult to compare, but they do indicate that this yew is growing very slowly. In 369 years the girth only increased by 65 centimetres!

The question now is whether it is possible to come to a reasonable estimation of the age of this yew tree. To be honest, I really cannot say. Everything points to a really great age. In 1999 I measured it at a height of 1.30 meters and recorded a girth of 10.07 meters. Recording at the same height in 2006 I obtained a girth of 10.01. This indicates that recording a few centimeters higher or lower always makes a little difference in girth, but the fact is that this yew tree grows very slowly. In France there are several examples of yew trees of comparable size that are certainly not older than a thousand years. They still grow more than 1 centimetre each year. But this yew tree in Crowhurst is quite different. I think that it is certainly 1000 years old, and 1500 years is in my opinion quite possible. Perhaps it is even much older, but this is pure speculation.

The ancient yew tree of Crowhurst, Surrey

by James Malcolm 1805

From *A Compendium of modern husbandry; principally written during a survey of Surrey*

“In almost every church yard throughout the kingdom, about the most ancient castles and mansions these trees were formerly planted, not only for their ornament, but for the great use which in those early days our countrymen made of them ; since the bows of yew can be traced as far back as the time of Julius Caesar. Of it the old English yeoman made his long bow; which he boasted nobody but an Englishman could bend.

At Crowhurst alias Crowherst, in the hundred of Tanridge in the eastern part of the county, and in the church yard, there is the largest tree I have met with in the kingdom ; its circumference at 5 feet high in the stem is 36 feet, and the extreme height about 50 feet. The situation of the church yard, standing upon a bold elevation, commanding the most extensive views of the counties of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, and forming, as it were, a rallying point to each ; together with the antiquity of this tree, gave birth to the following lines from the juvenile pen of a gentleman, whose father has long graced one of our senatorial assemblies with no small celebrity.”

Hail ! venerable tree ! whose ample head
Five hundred summers o'er this turf has spread ;
This sacred turf! where turn'd to parent clay,
"The rude forefathers of the hamlet" lay ;
Thrice hail ! for to thy gen'rous trunk, we owe
The hero's lance, and the elastic bow.

Oft when Bellona blew her trump to arm,
And discord drew the peasant from his farm,
To thee tall tree! the village youths would fly,
And from thy sturdy arms the war supply ;
Trim thy tough bows they knew so well to use,
To deal high deeds for the historic muse.

If for the Barons bold, thy bows were bent,
Ere stubborn John had wisdom to relent ;
Thrice blest be thou, for we are bound to thee,
For Albion's greatest boast, her liberty !

If for the haughty peers thy arms were spread,
When civil fury dy'd the white rose red,
T' oblivion shall thy bard the tale consign,
The fault was theirs, altho' the deed was thine.

What tho' no more we ask thy pow'rful aid,
Since dreadful sulphur fits the warrior's trade ;
Still may'st thou hallow'd be, and flourish still
The pride, the glory of this peaceful hill ;
And may the clown that wounds thy boughs or bark,
Ne'er court thy shade, to hear the soaring lark ;
May dryads haunt him in the woodland way,
When sinks the moon before the break of day ;
And wond'rous tree ! that has ten ages stood,
May light'ning never blast thy hallowed wood ;
May those who guard thee without pain decay,
And thou, in turn, shed yew-tears on their clay.
Be't thine, O Walker !* to preserve this tree,
And he shall praise, who yields this verse - thee.
T. N.



Old Yew Tree, Crowhurst.

* Walker was the vicar of Crowhurst

The ancient yew tree of Crowhurst, Surrey

1820 This year seems to appear in many accounts as the time when a cannon ball was discovered in the tree. Mrs Pamela Cook (1990) wrote “The tree was hollowed out in the 1820s when a door was put into the side of the trunk. A wooden bench seat was put inside the tree (believed to seat 12 persons) also a small wooden table. It is understood that this was done to provide shelter for those attending the annual Palm Sunday Fayre in the Churchyard. When the tree was hollowed out, a cannon ball was found embedded in the side of it, which was assumed to date from the time of the Civil War (about 1652). Mansion House, opposite the road from the church, is believed to have been a Royalist stronghold.”

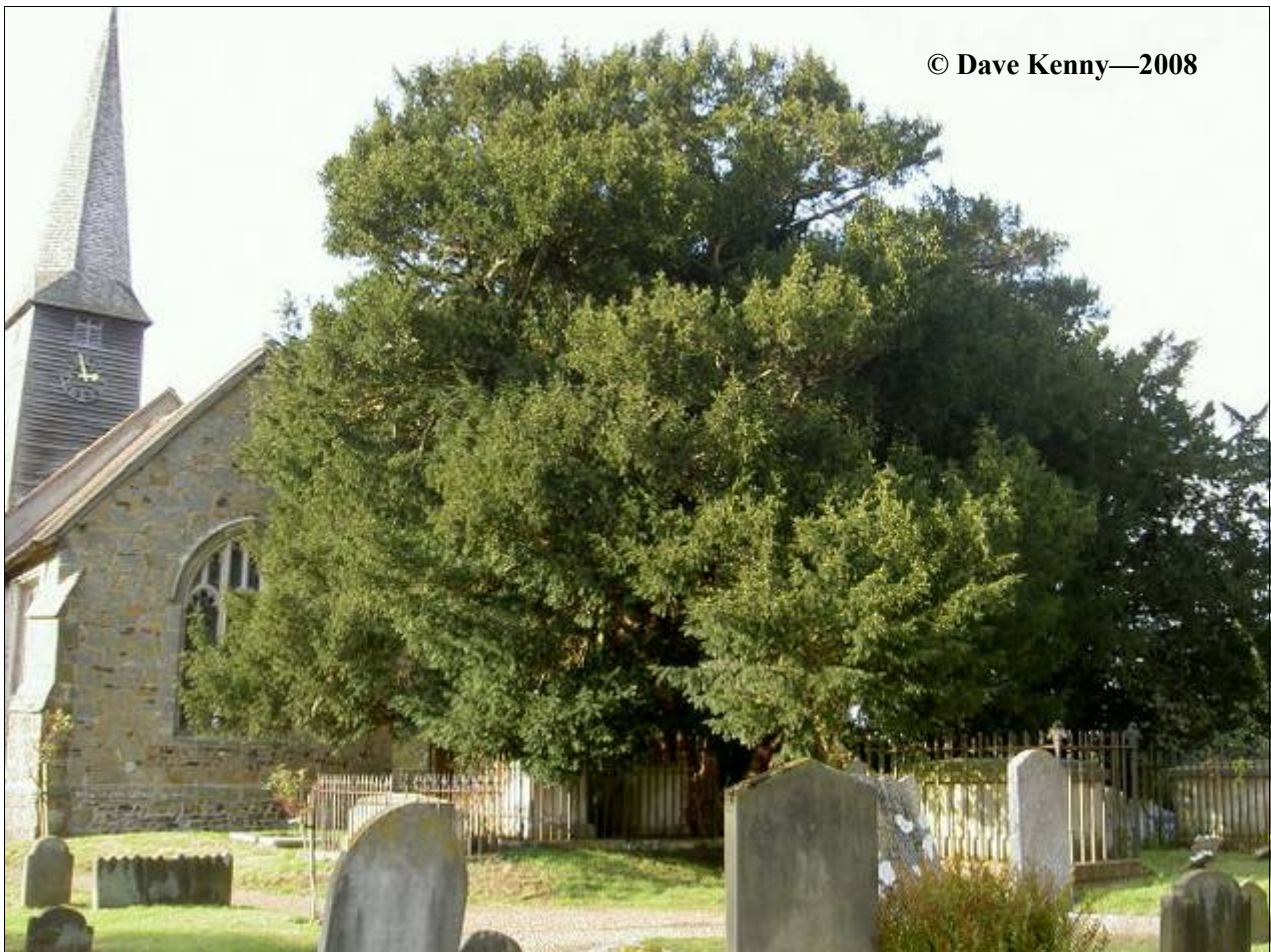
JH Wilks in *Trees of the British Isles in History and Legend* tells it differently, “In 1820 some villagers apparently found a cannon ball in the earth around the base of the trunk, this was believed to be from the Parliamentary Wars in 1643.”

1850 Brayley noted that “the roof, as it may be termed, has fallen in.”

1855 “Adanson and De Candolle have ascertained and published accounts of the probable longevity of numerous celebrated trees. The English yew trees of Fontaine Abbey, in the county of York, have survived twelve centuries; **those in the churchyard of Crowhurst, in Surry, fourteen hundred— ‘ceux du cimetiere de Crow-hurst....1283 lignes ou...quatorze siecles et demi.’** ; that of Fotheringall, in Scotland, from twenty-five to twenty-six hundred; that of Braburn, in Kent, three thousand.”

Friends Intelligencer 1855 p 173 Venerable Trees

1865 “A fair or ‘wake’ used to be held under the boughs of this yew on Palm Sunday, but was put an end to 12 or 14 years ago. The tree is the largest in the county.....” *A handbook for travellers in Surrey, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight* by R.J. King and J. Murray



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“Long-past years have left their trace on everything around, on yonder farmhouse, called the “Mansion House,” with its strangely trimmed yew trees, and its old walls and chimneys, no less than upon this ancient church. Even while yet on the outskirts of the village, the grayness of antiquity made itself *felt* as well as seen—it was in the very air. Generations have come and gone, and seen no change in anything surrounding us here. The yew tree, says Murray’s *Guide*, “may probably contend with its venerable brother at Crowhurst in Sussex, which, according to Decandolle, is one thousand two hundred years old.” The inside of the tree has been “barbarously hollowed out,” as the same writer very properly describes the operation, and you open a door and walk inside the tree. There are wooden benches fixed against the trunk, and a little round table in the middle, and, according to my calculation, fourteen or fifteen persons could seat themselves at this table. Picnic parties still meet here occasionally, drinking and carousing; but a boy from the rectory who showed me the church said that the new rector would not allow this practice to be carried on, and I hope he will be as good as his word. The top of the tree is fresh and green, and in parts it has been strengthened with iron plates. The girth of the trunk is nearly thirty-one feet, about eight feet more than the largest of the yews which I measured at Norbury. Large wens or “bosses” have grown upon it, and yet, in spite of all that time and ill-usage can do, it remains a noble tree, worth travelling over many a mile of clayey roads to gaze upon. The boy from the rectory said that the tree was “fourteen thousand years old.” I suggested fourteen hundred, but he declined to make any correction in his estimate, and said he knew it was fourteen thousand, for his master had told him so. So fourteen thousand be it.

.....The old rector, weighed down, perhaps, with roads of “bottomless clay” and a somewhat melancholy parish, had allowed the churchyard to get knee-deep in brambles, and I was assured that “the birds had made such a mess in the church that you could scarcely sit down.” But all was very neat and tidy when I was there on the 5th of September 1876.....and the signs of tender care were everywhere visible. They had somewhat softened the ruggedness of this primitive country church, and thrown around it an air befitting so venerable and sacred a place.”



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“It is not a little remarkable that that there should exist in places of the same name two such noble trees as are found in the church-yards of the two Crowhursts, the one in Surrey, the other in Sussex. This identity in name has, on several occasions, led to confusion. Of the two, the Surrey tree is the larger. In Brailey’s *History of Surrey*,’ written so lately as 1850, it is stated that the yew-tree near the east end of the church ‘measures 10 yards 9 inches in girth at the height of 5 feet from the ground. The interior is hollow, and has been fitted up with a table in the centre, and benches around. The roof, however, as it may be termed, has fallen in.’ Jennings, in 1877, gives its girth as 31 feet. In April 1890, the Rev. Mr. Curteis and I found that it measured at 4 feet from the ground, 31 feet 8 inches, and at 5 feet from the ground, 32 feet 6 inches, so that it has grown 8 inches in girth in forty years. The trunk is hollow, the space in the interior measures 6 feet across, and there are seats all round. The shell is thin, but there is a considerable amount of living wood, and evidences of extensive cicatrization of large branches, which have been cut away, close to the trunk, probably after a large destruction of the top which took place in 1845. The rector, Mr. Curteis, informs me that an old parish record in the church states that its girth, in the time of Charles the First, was 10 yards, and this has been copied by Evelyn in his *Sylva*, 1664; Humboldt (*Aspects of Nature*); Aubrey, De Candolle (*Nat. Hist. and Antiq. of Surrey*); Manning (*Field Paths and Green Lanes*) and others. Selby’s measurement is an error, and obviously refers to the Sussex tree.”

“Mr. Gill in a letter to the *Times* gives an account of this tree, and mentions that a cannon ball was found in its interior in 1820, and is supposed to have been there since the Civil War, and to have been gradually enclosed by the growth of the tree. This may well have been, when it is seen how the new tissues have spread over the cut ends of the dead branches. ‘Crowhurst,’ says Mr. Gill, ‘is a very interesting little parish. There is a farmhouse, surrounded by a moat, held by tradition to have been the temporary abode of Henry VIII when he was on his way to Anne Boleyn at Hever Castle.’”

1904 Walter Jerrold, in *Dent’s County Guide MCM!* Wrote: “One of the greatest yews in the county, or rather what is left of it, stands in the churchyard here. It’s age has been computed at 1290. Its decay may have been hastened byand the treatment which it got in the old time Palm Sunday ‘fair or wake’, which, says tradition, was usually the scene of considerable excess in this churchyard.”

1924 “At Crowhurst is a much mutilated yew. The hollow of the trunk was foolishly enlarged in 1820, when it was made to hold a round table capable of seating a dozen people; at the same time a doorway was fitted into the opening. This barbarously vulgarised tree is said to have a girth of 32 ½', but this is partly artificial, it has been repaired with several pieces of tin or iron.” *Unknown Surrey* by Donald Maxwell



© Tim Hills 1999

1955 Swanton wrote of “an unhappy yew with early 19th century gravestones within 10' of the trunk.” It is one of 3 Surrey trees he considered to have suffered from excessive root pruning. He goes on to say that the burials, and perhaps cutting away of living wood when the hollow trunk was drastically scooped out about 1820, may also have checked its growth. When he visited the yew he noted that the door was padlocked. Mr Giltrow got in “through an opening 2' from the ground on the right side of the door and found all the furniture had been removed.” He noted “no laying down of new wood in the hollow, but the edges of openings are being sealed over with living wood.”

Swanton considered the tree looked “unhealthy”, Mr Giltrow used the word “unhappy”, though “with much life in its branches and a good amount of spray.”

The yew trees of England



© Tim Hills 1999

9th July 1999 Two gaps in the bole, one containing the door (misleading in photographs since it is only 4' high). There is much dead wood, if this decays before new wood envelops it the tree's appearance will be much altered. The structure leans slightly towards the church, and wires and chains must have been in place for some time, since one section of chain has been almost 'swallowed' by new layers of wood. One branch rests on the ground, still firmly attached to the tree, another is propped.



© Isabelle Borsus-2005

Crowhurst was one of the yew sites visited by Luc Baba while carrying out research for his novel *If (Yew)* published in 2005.

“Je ne t'ai pas parlé de Crowhurst. C'est le plus beau. On y entre par une porte, tu vois, une petite porte en bois de rien, mais moi, même si c'est un arbre, et même si cette porte est une facétie clouée là pour cacher une déchirure du tronc, je frappe avant d'entrer. Il a un cimetière autour de lui, c'est plein de fleurs en été, on ne coupe pas les jonquilles ni les pâquerettes, ça te fait un petit pré fantastique. Nous irons, un jour. Tu sais ce qu'on raconte ? On raconte que des arbres, ifs et autres, plantent leurs racines dans la bouche des mort pour guider leur âme vers on ne sait qu'ell monde, un paradis, je suppose. Un paradis ! Il a trios ou quatre mille ans, cet arbre. Il et a conduit, des âmes, nom de Dieu !”

Several of the yews that feature in the book are illustrated by Isabelle Borsus.

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Girths recorded

The tree has been measured on many occasions, below are some of these taken from Lowe, Cornish, Meredith, Swanton, and other sources.

Dates visited	Girth measurements	By
1630	30'	Old parish record (Cornish)
1650	30' at 5'	John Aubrey
1664	30'	John Evelyn
1833-45	30' at 5'	Samuel Lewis
1850	30' 9" at 5'	Brayley's <i>History of Surrey</i>
1865	30' 9" at 5'	R.J.King and J.Murray
1874	30' 9" at 5'	<i>Gardner's Chronicle</i>
1877	31' at 5'	Mr Jennings (Lowe)
1880	30' 6" at 5'	E.Straker
1890	31' 8" at 4' 32' 6" at 5'	Rev Curteis (Lowe)
1955	33' 9" at ground 33' 2" at 3'	Swanton
1984	31' 6" at approx 5'	Allen Meredith
1994	31' 6" at 5'	Gwyneth Fookes



The Crowhurst yew, Surrey

August 1999 & January 2000

Toby Hindson

This huge and ancient yew is deserving of particular attention due to its vast size and the body of documentary evidence about it, stretching back to the early 1600s. This piece of work presents the tree as it has been documented in the past and a snapshot of it now.

The tree is discussed in “The King’s England” by Arthur Mee (1938). In the introduction on page 3 he says:

“Surrey is noted in quite another way for its trees. (...) in yews Surrey is specially notable; there is one at Crowhurst of unknown age, with a girth of 11 yards and room for a dozen people to sit at a table.

On page 67 there is an entry for the village of Crowhurst, where he goes into more detail about the tree:

“How many villages, we wonder, have a living inhabitant twice as old as their ancient church? The pride of Crowhurst, like the pride of Crowhurst in Sussex, is an ancient yew, both growing by churches dedicated to our patron saint.

We do not know how old this giant is, but nothing is too old for Crowhurst; if we call it 1,400 years they will not contradict. They say it was old when the Conqueror came, and certainly we know that people were astonished by its size when old John Aubrey was going about England writing things down. What we do know is that it is growing still, though it was hollowed out a few years after Waterloo, when they found a thrilling thing inside it which we have seen, a cannon ball fired in the Civil war.

This famous tree, throwing its shade over the East window of Crowhurst church, is about 11 yards round its trunk, and there is room inside the hollow for 12 people to sit at a table. We must believe that at least it was here when the Conqueror came, and, that, if a tree remembers, this most ancient yew may remember as far back in the annals of our land as anything now alive.”

As Mee mentions, John Aubrey visited this yew, and recorded its girth c1650, though Lowe suggests that the measure was reported to him from a parish register entry of 1630. In any event, sometime between 1630 and 1650 the yew was 30’ in girth. Since then, several people have documented the girth of this great tree. Below is a list of measures, mainly taken from Allen Meredith’s work in “The Sacred Yew”. Mee’s measure is not included, as he does not give the height above ground level at which the trunk was measured, nor does he attempt to be exact.

Another author who wrote usefully about this tree needs to be quoted at length at this point. In John Lowe’s “Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland” (1897) there are a great many facts, some of which are contradictory. These need disentangling before the list of measures made in the past can be produced.

Here is a reproduction of Lowe's work on the Crowhurst yew:

“Crowhurst, Surrey. –It is not a little remarkable that there should exist in places of the same name two such noble trees as are found in the churchyards of the two Crowhursts, the one in Surrey, the other in Sussex. The identity in names has, on several occasions, led to confusion. Of the two, the Surrey tree is the larger. In Brayley's History of Surrey, written so lately as 1850, it is stated that the yew-tree near the east end of the church “measures 10 yards 9 inches in girth at the height of five feet from the ground. The interior is hollow, and has been fitted up with a table in the centre, and benches around. The roof, however, as it may be termed, has fallen in.” Jennings, in 1877 gives its girth as 31 feet. In April 1890, the Rev. Mr. Curtis and I found that it measured at 4 feet from the ground, 31 feet 8 inches, and at 5 feet from the ground 32 feet 6 inches, so that it has grown 8 inches in girth in 40 years. The trunk is hollow, the space in the interior measures 6 feet across, and there are seats all round. The shell is thin, but there is a considerable amount of living wood, and evidences of extensive cicatrization of large branches, which have been cut away, close to the trunk, probably after a large destruction of the top which took place in 1845. The Rector, Mr. Curtis, informs me that an old parish record in the church states that its girth, in the time of Charles the First, was 10 yards, and this has been copied by Evelyn in his Sylva, 1664; Humboldt, Aubrey, De Candelolle, Manning and others. Selby's measurement is an error, and obviously refers to the Sussex tree. Mr Gill in a letter to the times gives an account of this tree, and mentions that a cannon ball was found in its interior in 1820, and is supposed to have been there since the Civil War, and to have been gradually enclosed by the growth of the tree. This may well have been, when it is seen how the new tissues have spread over the cut ends of the dead branches.”

All of the above is very interesting to researchers, but some of it must be wrong. Firstly, Lowe states that the yew has grown eight inches in forty years. Forty years before 1890, the yew was 30'9", and neither of Lowe's measurements yield a difference of eight inches from this figure. The mystery, by a roundabout route, does become clearer when his appendix, a list of notable trees and their measurements, is consulted. In this list he mistakenly attributes Brayley and Jennings measurements, labelling them as measures at four feet from the ground rather than five. It's likely that this error confused Lowe's working. Jennings measure is eight inches less than Lowe's, and directly precedes Lowe's in the list. Lowe has followed previous measures, and clumped the data together, then mis-labelled it. The measure that was actually four feet was then attributed to five feet, as there already appeared to be a four-foot measure, and the two measures thus became transposed. An additional mistake, (actually the problem that we started with) caused Lowe to take Brayley's date (1850) and Jennings measure (31' in 1877) into account when working out that the tree had grown eight inches in thirteen years. This growth rate most probably reflects a difference in measuring style rather than a real increase.

Armed with a better understanding of Lowe's measurement of the yew, we can now produce a table showing the historic growth of the tree.

Table 1: previous measures at five feet from ground.

Year	Girth	Source	Notes and growth rate checks
1630	30'	Parish record	
1650	30'	John Aubrey	
1833-45	30'	Lewis	1630-1840 rate = about 0, or all from the same ref.
1850	30' 9"	Brailey	
1874	30' 9"	Gardener's Chronicle	
1877	31'	Jennings	
1890	31' 8"	John Lowe	
1984	31' 6"	Allen Meredith	
1999	31' 9"	Toby Hindson	1840-1999 rate= 0.3 cm per year. 0.13 ins
2000	31' 2"	Toby Hindson	Tree surgery reduced girth. 1630-2000 rate= 0.038 ins

Table 2: previous measures at four feet from ground

Year	Girth	Source	Notes and growth rate checks
1890	32' 6"	John Lowe	
2000	32' 8"	Toby Hindson	Growth rate =0.018 ins. Per year, 0.46 mm.

Additional details of the 1999 and 2000 measures

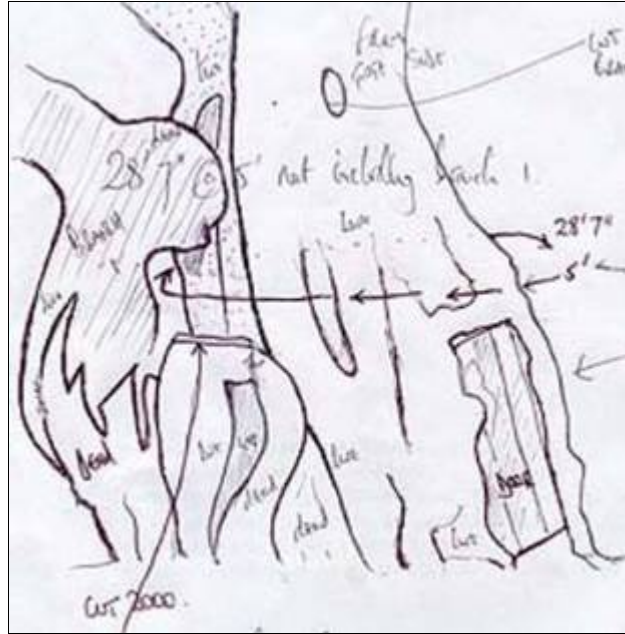
At the base the tree measures 33' 7"

At three feet from the ground it measured 33' 5".



Measuring at 5 feet

2000



Notebook sketch of the yew at Crowhurst in Surrey

The tree is hugely complex and beautiful. If you look at the sketch, you can see where the cut was made in winter 1999/2000 that reduced the girth at five feet. This was to remove a live branch that had cracked at the base. Quite a lot of the tree is dead or in a delicate state, the piece on the right of the picture with the little door in it being the largest and soundest section. As you can see, I measured that piece separately in case the less robust bits are lost sometime in the future. The branch that goes off to the far left is propped. Although the door survives, the benches that Lowe mentions are gone. I have heard, though I don't know for sure, that on a certain day each year there is a gathering of the village, and the tree is measured. If it's true, then that is an excellent custom.

2000- The girth at five feet is adjusted to 31' 2" from 31'9" following the tree surgery. At four feet from the ground the girth is 32'8". This measure is unaffected by the loss of wood that changed the five foot measure.

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