

Discovering yew sites in Derbyshire

by Tim Hills

Derbyshire's oldest yews are listed in Allen Meredith's Gazetteer in *The Sacred Yew* by Chetan and Brueton. These are at Allestree, Beeley, Brailsford, Darley Dale, Doveridge, Marston Montgomery and Mugginton. During my visits in 1999 and 2002 I added only Shirley to that list.

Since that time a number of new leads made it worthwhile revisiting the area for a week in September 2005. As a result several new trees can be added to Derbyshire's list of veterans, though I also identified 7 lost yews sites.

Day 1

Carsington:

A yew with a known planting date of 1638 is reported in Appendix 2 of *The Sacred Yew*. Trees with known planting dates help build a picture of the likely ages for yews of a certain size. This one, with a girth of about 12' in 367 years is within the expected range.

Kniveton:

On the website Domesdaybook.co.uk/derbyshire2.html an "ancient yew outside of an 11th century church" is described. (Please note that individual yews are not mentioned in the Domesday Book itself.) The hollowing male tree of about 17' girth grows on the south side of the church.

Parwich:

In 1857 White's Directory of Derbyshire described "venerable yew trees" in the churchyard.

The word venerable can apply to trees 'worthy of reverence on account of great age, religious association or character', and it could well be that White was using 'venerable' to denote religious association. The largest yew at this site grows SW of the church and has a girth of only 11' 6".

There is also a record in the churchwarden's accounts of payment for 'fetching' and 'setting' a yew in 1713. Was this the tree recorded above, or one of several smaller yews also found in the churchyard?

Hermit's Cave, Cratcliffe Tor:

Much has been written about this location, probably less frequently visited than the nearby Robin Hood's Stride. The extraordinary atmosphere of this hidden site makes it well worth finding. However, the age of the 2 yews is considerably less than half of the 1000 years sometimes suggested. The site faces south and perhaps the yews have not always been so hidden behind other trees.



The female yew outside of the Hermit's Cave © Tim Hills

Day 2

Pleasley:

In 1868 a "yew-tree of great antiquity" was recorded. There is an 8' girthed male growing south of the church which would perhaps have been 4' 5" in girth in 1868. It could not have been mistaken for a yew of great antiquity and we must therefore assume this to be the site of a lost yew.

Ault Hucknall:

A yew here had been described on a local website as between 2000 and 4000 years old. The fine looking hollow yew grows by the path between gate and church; its girth however is a mere 9', and there is nothing to suggest that it might be a fragment of an ancient tree. Its age estimate should be in hundreds rather than thousands of years.

South Wingfield:

In 1879 a yew was described as "in the NE corner of the burial ground...23' in girth at 4'." There was no trace of it in the churchyard. Along the southern perimeter wall grows a line of younger yews, formerly 8, with one now a stump. The girth range is between 5' 9" and 7' 5" with two of the 7 surviving trees already hollow.

Day 3

Edlaston:

In 1868 there was recorded "an old yew tree in the churchyard of unusual size." The hollow male yew with internal growth is found SW of the church. Girth is 16' 3" at 3'.

Osmaston:

Two yews with a known planting date of 1650 are reported in Appendix 2 of *The Sacred Yew*. From another source I found a reference to old yews in Osmaston Park. We were denied access to the park and instead explored the churchyard, recording a hollow yew of 17' 7" girth at the SSW corner and younger yews to the south and north east. The 1650 planting date did not seem to belong to any of the churchyard yews, so if anybody can gain access to Osmaston Park and discovers it to be the site of these 2 yews, please let us know.

Dovedale:

Wild cliff yews can be seen on various parts of the walk from the Dovedale car park to Milldale.

Tissington:

Visited with no previous reference, we found many yews in the churchyard, though nothing especially old. The largest, 11' 4" at the base and covered in ivy, grows on the S side. At the east end is a line of 3 yews. More striking is the avenue of 6 yews leading to the south door. Of these, 5 are female and the girths of all 6 vary between 5' 3" and 10' 2". Planting dates, if known, would be useful.

Day 4

Shining Cliff Wood, Ambergate:

This visit found the remains of a yew with a place in folk lore, the Betty Kenny Yew, whose hollowed out branch provided a baby's cradle and is supposed to have inspired the nursery rhyme 'Rock-a-bye-baby'. This would have once been one of the 60 largest yews in England and is a salutary tale of what can happen when a tree becomes too well known. Its remains are not easy to find at the end of a long walk from Ambergate. Since all traces will probably be gone in a century, perhaps it is time to make a sculpture replica of what remains.

Duffield:

'Duffield' is recorded as a 'lost yew' site in Meredith's gazetteer. Robert Bevan-Jones in *The Ancient Yew* also wrote about "the old yew that was formerly at Duffield church..."

It was an unexpected surprise to find a complete stump remaining – and in such good condition that it could remain in situ for another 1 or 2 centuries. How long it has looked like this is unknown, though reports suggest it might be up to a century.



The Duffield Yew © Tim Hills

Day 5

Haddon Hall:

In 1798 Jewitt, Llewellynn and S. C. Hall. *The Statelike Homes of England* described the gardens as "....planted with yew trees, many centuries old, whose gnarled and knotted roots may be seen curiously intertwining and displacing the stone edges of the parterres".

In 1894 L. Valentine's *Picturesque England*: "The upper garden is a lawn, from which rises a flight of stone steps to the Terrace and Winter Garden. The Terrace is a very noble one, with one of the finest views from it; the Winter Garden is planted with very ancient yew trees."

Haddon Hall's extensive records do not contain the word Winter Garden, and nobody appears to know what happened to these yews. What is known is that the garden had become "overgrown and uncared for" and at the beginning of the 20th century, a "massive clearance took place and the once grand and then neglected gardens at Haddon Hall were returned to their former glory." ([Haddon Hall](#)) They might have been more glorious had their yews, "many centuries old" in 1798 been allowed to survive.

Taxal:

Arthur Mee in *The Kings England* described "a magnificent yew 20 feet round".

The old female yew grows SE of the church, its hollow shell alive with vigorous growth all around. Is there any connection between the yew family name Taxaceae, the genus *Taxus* and the place name Taxal?

Day 6

Baslow:

Many guide books and leaflets mention ancient yews at Baslow. If this refers to the abundant clipped yews they are not ancient. There is however a reference to a yew at Baslow on the Tree Register data base, 14m high and with a girth of about 20'. If the information is correct this is a lost yew site.

Chatsworth:

"Keep an eye open in Stand Wood for ancient oaks and yews, some being over 500 years old." We found one tree fitting that description and many younger yews.

Day 7

Smalley:

"In the churchyard stands a yew tree which is estimated to be 700-800 years old..." We found what at first sight appears to be a large dead stump of 15' girth, however a single strand of growth maintains its life and bushes out at the top of the tree. Also contained within the churchyard are many younger yews.

Hartshorne:

A 13' girthed female grows at the east end of the church. If Farey's description in 1813 of a 'large' yew referred to girth, then this cannot be that tree, but he may have been describing height or spread of branches, each of which can make even a young yew 'large'.

Smisby:

In 1837 "a spreading yew tree to the west of the church" was described. It is still a fine spreading tree with its branches dipping to the ground. Because these hide the bole the area has been used as a builders yard. It is to be hoped that this is a temporary arrangement. Girth was 13' 6" at 2'.



Smisby Yew © Tim Hills