



GLOUCESTERSHIRE



Yews growing outside of churchyards
by Tim Hills

The Oldest Yews in Gloucestershire found outside of churchyards

Location	Tree Category	Ownership/Responsibility
ALVESTON (Rudgeway)	Ancient - formerly churchyard	Rolls Royce
BLAKENEYHILL WOOD NORTH	Veteran - woodland	Forest of Dean - managed by Forestry Commission
BURY MANOR CASTLE, Wick	Notable - garden	Owner of Bury Manor Castle
CHIPPING CAMPDEN	Notable - garden yews	Individual home owners, Conservation Area
DEVIL'S PULPIT	Notable	Natural England - The Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
FLAXLEY	Veteran and Notable yews marking a hollow way	Farm owner
HAILEY WOOD	Ancient - woodland	
HIGHBURY WOOD	Veteran and notable yews on Offa's Dyke	Natural England - National Nature Reserve
KING YEW, EAST WOOD	Ancient - woodland	
LITTLE SODBURY MANOR	Veteran - private chapel	Lord and Lady Killerne
LYDNEY PARK	Ancient - site includes hill fort, Roman remains and deer park	Viscount Bledisloe
OLD SODBURY HILL FORT	Notable - Bronze to Iron age encampment	Private ownership
PINBURY PARK	Notable - former convent site with a yew tree avenue	Private ownership
PINSWELL	Notable - garden yews	Private ownership
PUZZLE WOOD	Notable - old mine workings	Private ownership
SCHOWLES – Devil's Chapel	Veteran - old mine workings	
STOWE	Ancient - possibly marking the site of an old chapel	Private landowner not known
TARLTON	Veteran - a row of 13 yews	

This is one of an increasing number of yews that has lost its status as a churchyard yew. It means that it is no longer accessible without first seeking permission, and less easy to be sure that it is being properly looked after.

The drawing of 1793 shows St Helen's church with the "Alveston Yew in the foreground." There has been a church on this site since at least the 12th century, but all that remains today is the tower.

When I visited in 2000 the old graveyard site was owned by Rolls Royce. Tombstones had been removed from the churchyard and arranged neatly around the edge of a grassy space in which the tree had pride of place. Not far away is Old Church Farm, where Rolls Royce holds corporate functions.



The female tree grows SE of the church ruin. Its bole divides into two main growth areas, each supporting many branches, while a large section (A) is pulling away from the tree, the beginning of the process of fragmentation. Inside the cavity are twisted roots and stems which join together all sections of the tree. The overall impression was of a vigorous yew, strong and sturdy in appearance with many branches dipping towards the ground. There was much adventitious and twiggy growth. Girth was 21' 11" at the base.

The drawing of 1793 shows quite clearly that the yew was urn shaped at that time, with massive swelling outwards between a height of about 2' and 6'. Measurement of the bole either side of 1900 has produced contrasting results, a girth of 25' 6" being recorded in 1887 and a girth of 30' in 1916.



There are few records of yews in the Forest of Dean, but there are surely more waiting to be discovered. To locate this yew, take the unfenced road from Blackpool Bridge (SO 653 087) towards Upper Soudley. After about 1/2 mile is a wide track to the right. The yew grows close to the forest trail and stream, about 50m from the road.

Being close to a path, branches which might have caused an obstruction have been systematically removed, some so long ago that new wood laid down almost covers the wounds. Others were not cut so closely to the tree and pieces of dead branch protrude. A gap in the bole reveals inner decay and possibly internal growth. Foliage was thin and much of the trunk covered in adventitious shoots. Young yews grew nearby. Girth 16' 10" around the base.

2003: A male tree grows due west of and about 8 metres from the Manor – at the time of my visit a small hotel. The building is thought locally to be 350 years old, and the tree's girth of 12' 10" at 1' suggests that it might be of similar age. It had 3 main upright branches growing from a bole of about 5' and there was considerable internal growth.

CHIPPING CAMPDEN

2010: This is one of the most unlikely settings in which to find so many notable yews. They grow on mediaeval 'burgage plots', long narrow gardens each about 20ft wide behind equally narrow houses on the main street of Chipping Campden. It seems extraordinary that so many yews should have been planted in such a confined space. It raises several questions. Was the land once owned by one person? If not how was agreement reached by such a large number of residents to plant the yews? Are the surviving yews the only ones planted, or were there once more - perhaps originally one on each burgage plot? One suggestion is that they were planted to commemorate the coronation of James I in 1603. It is known that the crown at the time owned about 50 properties in Chipping Campden.



The yews recorded had girths as follows: 12' 4", 12' 4", 11' 8", 11', 9' and 6' 8". In one garden the pair of female yews shown here grow side by side with a gap of only 1' between the trunks. These girth 9' 3" and 9' 6" and have grown extraordinarily tall. They are of striking appearance, although rather out of place in such a narrow garden. The other yews also present a variety of forms, depending on how they have been maintained. Some have been regularly cut back and have canopies that looks the right size and shape for the small space. Using girth alone to age these trees, they would fall into the range 250/350 years. However we also need to consider the 90+ growth rings counted in one small sawn off branch, as well as the possibility that the trees were topiarised in their early years, which is known to lead to smaller girthed trees. A 1603 planting date should therefore not be discounted, and for the moment seems the most plausible explanation.



2001: While the area was being quarried for its limestone, the quarrymen chose to spare this yew. It presents an extraordinary spectacle, allowing us to see a root system burrowing through and around layers of limestone. But it is not for the yew that thousands visit this site, reached after a short, steep, walk from Tintern Abbey. For most the reward is to stand on a rocky outcrop looking down on the grand spectacle of Tintern Abbey and the Wye Valley. It is here that the devil is supposed to have lured monks away from the monastery.



FLAXLEY

2010: An interesting site, a prime example of yews in the landscape revealing information about the past. Three of the yews shown here appear to be on a hollow way leading from a low hilltop only half a mile or so from Welshbury Iron-age fort. They would seem to be marking a route that leads to Flaxley Abbey, founded in the 12th century and now a family home.

Tree 1 (SO 6882 1531) grows on the opposite side of the road from the church, about 30/40m SW of it. It was perhaps once contained within the churchyard. The tree retains its large girth for a considerable height. The whole structure leans slightly to the west, exposing some of the roots on the east side. I recorded girths between 18' and 21' at various heights. Looking west from this tree, two further yews are seen on the hillside.



Tree 2 (SO 6874 1527) has an extensive root system, with internal growth visible amongst its root structures. A girth of 15' gives a good impression of the stature of this yew.

Tree 3 is at the summit of this small hill, with commanding views across to Welshbury iron-age fort and down to Flaxbury Abbey. At about 10' this is the smallest girthed of the trees at this location. It has exposed roots, the ground being much higher on one side of the tree than the other. The contours of the ground around the tree suggests that it too is next to the hollow way.



Tree 4 (SO 6858 1532)
On a public footpath, on the south slope of a deep indentation in the ground. Girth is approximately 13'.

2002 On the west edge of Hailey Wood is the unexpected sight of an avenue an avenue of 15 young yews (seemingly all female) leading towards this ancient male.

A succession of land owners have known this tree and allowed it to flourish while the character of the woodland surrounding it will have changed many times. Who decided to plant the avenue leading to this tree? It certainly suggests a tree held in high regard.

There appeared to be a thin circle of growth almost completely surrounding an internal stem which all but fills the centre of the tree. Outer and inner growth coalesce to produce a large main rising branch, from which most of the tree develops.

There were many split and fallen branches; in a churchyard setting these would no doubt have been sawn off and removed.

Girth was 23' 7" at between 6/12" from the ground.



HIGHBURY WOOD



British History Online notes yews here as follows: "In Highbury Wood, where it follows the top of the ridge and is lined by ancient yews trees, the dyke is a pronounced feature of the landscape." I would anticipate that a survey of the trees on or close to Offa's Dyke would discover many old yews.



To reach this section a path climbs steeply from Lower Redbrook and passes Highbury Farm. To the left are footpaths into Highbury Woods where the largest yew we found girthed 12'. The most significant yews in the area however are found by staying on Offa's Dyke. Here are several specimens of 14/15' girth, including a decaying shell above a precipitous drop.

2004: Only a handful of ancient yews seen in England or Wales have been considered worthy of a plaque or other sign of recognition. One of these grows in a well concealed location in East Wood, about a mile north of Tidenham Chase. The name on the sign is KING YEW. We must assume this to be a reference to the time when this was part of a royal hunting estate. One line of research currently being explored is of yews mentioned in Saxon charters. One of these is thought to relate to a yew in this area; could this possibly be that tree?

In such a setting I would have expected to see broken branches, yew wood lying beneath the tree and branches dipping to the ground - indicators of a yew that has developed without too much interference from the hand of man. Yet this yew's appearance had more in common with churchyard specimens. The area around the yew had been kept clear of the young forest trees which fill the area. The worth of this tree has obviously been recognised, which is not the fortune of all ancient yews growing in managed woodland.

The tree is female, with a girth of 24' 1" at 1'. Around three quarters of its circumference new wood flows over the old trunk, whose decaying sapwood (A) can be seen in 3 breaks in an otherwise complete circle of growth. Living wood closes these gaps by a height of 5', above which is a continuous circle of growth. It would seem that the centre of the tree still holds much of its decaying heartwood. A yew of this girth would normally have become hollow and lost most of this.



1916: Writing about St Adeline's church, Robinson observed that "nothing remains, save the south door, which may be seen in its original position standing between two fine and venerable yew trees, said to be 600 years old." This is possibly the only church with such a dedication, for St Adeline was the patron saint of Flemish weavers, and the nearby places named Dunkirk and Petty France suggest a strong link with the continent. In 1938 Mee described: "High on a bank



by the old manor house are still growing two ancient yews which throw their shade over the ruins of the mediaeval church abandoned in 1859.

2003: The church no longer stands between two yews, for one has fallen and not survived. Its substantial hollow trunk lies on the ground, and centuries might pass before decay is complete. The living yew stands

about 8m due SW of what remains of the church. It is a particularly tall tree, its main upright branch developing from a trunk full of gaps and hollows.

Girth: 17' 3" at 3' and 17' 8" at 2'. The dead tree was about 15' 4" at 6'.



LYDNEY PARK

Map 162/SO61934 02457

A private site, with some areas open to the public.

2007: This is a site of great antiquity, with a promontory hill fort thought to have been inhabited as early as 100BC, as well as Roman remains, including baths and a temple.

While many of the old yews growing on the estate are accessible to visitors, the two oldest which are shown here, grow on the side of a steep valley out of bounds to the general public.

A is a female yew which has recently lost half of its trunk, revealing a large internal stem. Girth of this much reduced tree was 18' 7".



Tree B is male, and of particularly striking appearance, with a twisted, fluted trunk girthing 21' 2". The only gaps into this solid looking yew occur at the base where its roots are undermined. It appeared to have been pollarded at about 6', with the many branches emerging above this height of similar age.

More old yews are dotted about in various parts of the estate open to the public. Three grow on the north slope of Little Camp Hill in the Deer Park, their girths between 12' 6" and 15' 6", while a very fine specimen girthing 18' 11" grows close by the exit road on the SW edge of Little Camp Hill.

OLD SODBURY HILL FORT

Map 172/ ST 760 827

2003: A female yew grows on the steep outer slope of the hill fort – at the NW side. Being on such a steep slope the roots have spread downwards to give additional support. The bole is clean and fluted.

Two dead sections around the roots show there are spaces in the tree. Low branches had been removed as the land is used for grazing. Girth at 1' was 13' 7".



PINBURY PARK

Map 163/SO 966 049



R.P.Beckinsale's *Companion into Gloucestershire* published in 1939 described "The grey, gabled and peaceable house....and the well-wooded grounds contain an exceptionally tall avenue of yews called Nun's Walk, on account of



the convent which formerly stood here."

2002: This avenue still exists, but I was denied access and was only able to view it from a distance on the Macmillan Way footpath.

PINSWELL

Map 163/SO 985 154

2003: These two yews grow in the garden of this private house in a secluded location. The area is steeped in history and nearby are springs and wells.

The largest yew touches the wall, above which is a large paved area. Girth was 12' 6" measured at the top of the wall, which is between 2' and 5' up on its bole. High in the tree can be seen its old trunk, onto which are attached fluted secondary stems.

The younger yew, about 3' away girthed 6' 9" above its spreading roots. Parts of the original trunk were visible and about 2' 6" of its circumference is of dead wood, with new wood gradually flowing over it.

The possibility of these being two fragment yews from a long lost tree which once stood between them needs to be considered.



PUZZLE WOOD

Map 162/ SO 577 092

Puzzle Wood is part of Lambsquay Mines, shallow mines known locally as Scowles. These date back to before the Romans, some 2700 years ago. There are several scowles in this area, but most are too dangerous to fully explore. At Puzzle Wood dozens of old wild yews can be viewed in safety. The cost of entrance is fully repaid in the safe exploration of this remarkable landscape.

"It was an open cast iron mine in Roman times, and was turned in a maze in about 1830. There are a large number of yew trees there, whose roots travel above ground for several feet, and were reputed to have been planted by the Romans to open up the seams of ore. They form a fairly dense cover keeping most of the sunlight off the ground which is only covered by ferns and other small plants, making the place look something like the 'lost world.'"





1874 *Gardeners' Chronicle*

“There is a curious spot within the confines of the Forest of Dean that bears the name of ‘The Schowles,’ or often commonly called ‘The Devil’s Chapel.’ It forms a labyrinth of deep but narrow excavations, open to the day, which were made in ancient times to obtain iron ore, but they have been abandoned for centuries, and left for Nature to clothe. Vegetation of various kinds have taken possession of the aisles of this demoniacal locality, and Ferns grow in its recesses most luxuriantly. Among various shrubs and trees that have taken possession of this deserted spot



the Yew is the most conspicuous, its dark green foliage shadowing the excavations in deeper gloom; and one Yew in particular, seated on the summit of a rocky peak of carboniferous sandstone, is most conspicuous and remarkable. It is evidently of great age, for the lower part of the bole, which extends to nearly the bottom of the excavation, full 30 feet, is bare and dead, the upper part alone maintaining its vitality; but that is in a very vigorous state, and many of its branches hang gracefully down.”

In 1897 John Lowe misinterpreted the 30ft root stretching to the bottom of the excavation for a 30ft girthed yew, and the tree incorrectly appeared in his list of the 32 largest girthed yews in England and Wales.

Painstaking detective work and three field trips eventually located this tree in ‘Devil’s Chapel’ on the Lydney Estate, located in an area of Scowles near Bream. Although the tall stump standing at the top of the rocky outcrop appeared dead, from below its base a root winds through the rocks to emerge as a new vigorous branch many metres away from the stump. Above this scene towers The Devil’s Chapel, a huge vertical sided monolith of sandstone, on top of which we could see stumpy fragments of two more old yews. In *The Secret Forest* (1980) Ray Wright described the ascent to the top as “difficult and dangerous.”

In this area are many living yews, as well as stumps. Thick slabs of yew cling to the rock and a merging of root and stem material at the base of several trees was observed. The whole area is extremely dangerous and although a footpath runs through it there is no legal right of access; it would also be inadvisable to explore the area alone. Its very inaccessibility will protect the trees from almost anything, though it was noted that ivy, if allowed to go unchecked, might add weight to upper branches and make them more susceptible to breaking off in high wind.



An ancient female yew, now growing close to farm buildings, stands on 3 separated and twisted 'legs', with a 4th (A) comprising internal growth. All over its gnarled trunk, both inside and outside, slithers of living wood snake upwards. Its distinctive pyramidal crown can be seen from a distance. Although girth at its narrowest point is only 21' 9" (663cm), the tree has a massive ancient presence. 200 metres from the site grows a very old male hedgerow yew with a girth of 14' (427cm) at 1'.

Ancient yews found outside of churchyards usually indicate an historically significant site, often with ecclesiastical connections. It is no surprise that some consider this to be the site of a long lost Chapel dedicated to St Margaret. Cooke, however, cast doubt on the sacred nature of the ruin, and while he noted the presence of this "very ancient yew" he offered no suggestion of why it might be growing here. He did however add a tantalising suggestion that "NE across a field lies the camp.....perhaps the dwelling place of a prince of Gwent."

There is little doubt that this yew marks the location of a significant place and the tree should be as protected as would be any archaeological remains found in the area. It should also be noted that within a 5 miles radius of Stowe can be found KingYew, the Hewelsfield churchyard yew, some of the oldest yews so far discovered on Offa's Dyke, as well as the yews of Lydney Park and the Scowles.

This location is a mile south of the ancient yew growing in Hailey Wood. This is a rare feature, a line of yews covering a distance of just over 200 yards. No fewer than 13 grow in a narrow copse by the side of this remote lane. The largest, an old stump with new growth rising from it, girthed 17' 8", while the average girth of the remaining trees was just over 12'.