

Wiltshire Yews – Grovely Wood Yew Avenue

Grovely Wood is the largest tract of woodland in southern Wiltshire and is found along the chalk escarpment that separates the Nadder and Wylde rivers before they converge near to Wilton, the ancient capital of Wessex, approximately three miles from the Cathedral City of Salisbury. Grovely Wood formed part of a grand hunting forest and was part of the lands belonging to Wilton Abbey. In 1541 Henry VIII gave Wilton Abbey and its surrounding land to Sir William Herbert (created 1st Earl of Pembroke 1551), whose family has owned it ever since.

Turn off the A36 at Stoford, about 3½ miles west of Wilton, and head to Great Wishford, crossing the Wylde on route. Keeping the church on your left and the public house on the right pass underneath the railway bridge and keep on the no through road for approximately one mile. Park in the designated area at OS184/SU062347.



Walk up the main track to a green triangle of grass, then head east past a metal barrier and down a beech lined avenue (First Broad Drive). This follows the course of a Roman road (or Lead Road) which ran through Wessex from the lead mines of Chaterhouse in the Mendips Hills of Somerset, to join other ancient routes at Old Sarum. The beech avenue, seen here, continues east for about two miles and contains approximately 400 trees.

Within a few paces you reach the first shelter belt of trees leading south. Follow the track between these trees and continue south until you meet a major track heading east and west.

Towards the west and covering a distance of 100 paces grow six female yews on the south along with four male and two female on the north side of the track. Two large Douglas fir mark the end of the yew.



A female yew (below) growing on the north side the track is the largest in the avenue - its girth 12' 4" at 1'.



Towards the east a further 28 grow in the space of 500 paces. Seventeen of these are on the south side of the track and eleven on the north. There are gaps in the avenue, particularly noticeable on the north side, but according to the warden none were lost during the great storm of 1987.

The majority of these 40 yew are between 9' to 10' in girth, recorded at their narrowest point just above the root crown, with one or two smaller girthed estimated at 7' to 9'. The distance between the trees and gaps is approximately 20 paces, so it is possible that the original planting consisted of 60 yews, of which 20 failed to flourish.



When the yew avenue stops, marked by two Corsican pine, continue walking east along the track for a further 300 paces to a crossing of tracks.

At this point the photo below is looking south through the gap in the trees towards Hamshill Ditches, an area of extensive earthworks with enclosures and ditches. This was a large settlement site of the Iron Age and Roman periods and had a large field system around it.



Remain on the track and continue east for another 500 paces to where three female and one male yew grow on the south side. The largest of these, female, girthed 8' 4". Nearby grow a further three male and one female of which the largest (left) was male, with a girth of 10' at the root crown and 10' 2" at 3'.

You are now at a crossing of tracks; the track heading south leads to Barford Down and on the east side grows the second largest yew on this walk. Seen below, this female girthed 11' 10" near to the root crown and 12' 2" at 3'.

You can now retrace your steps or head north back to the Roman road where you turn west, along the beech lined avenue and back to the car.

It is not known when or why the yew avenue was planted. Neither estate office nor warden were able to provide any answers, and enquiries to the Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre in Chippenham, who hold Wilton Estate records, revealed no planting records.

Further investigations indicate that this track, known as South Coach Road, had been an avenue of various exotic trees including Corsican pine (first introduced in England in 1759), Douglas fir (first introduced in England in 1827) as well as European yew. The pines were badly storm damaged in the 1920's and nearly all have since been felled.

