

Wiltshire Yews – Hare Warren & Bishopstone Down

During the 8th century King Egbert established a priory at Wilton. The land and manors at Wilton were granted to the church around AD 871 and it became an abbey. In 1541 Henry VIII gave Wilton Abbey and its surrounding land to Sir William Herbert (created 1st Earl of Pembroke 1551), whose family have owned it since.

Hare Warren is a 300 acre wood in southern Wiltshire and grows along the north side of the chalk escarpment that separates the Nadder and Ebble rivers before they converge with the Avon around the Cathedral City of Salisbury. During the 16th-century Hare Warren was fenced off from the rest of the Wilton House parkland in order to preserve it for the hunting of the hare.

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) wrote of Wilton Park (1720's) in his letters on London to Land's End;

The gardens are on the south of the house, and extend themselves beyond the river, a branch of which runs through one part of them, and still south of the gardens in the great park, which, extending beyond the vale, mounts the hill opening at the last to the great down, which is properly called, by way of distinction, Salisbury Plain, and leads from the city of Salisbury to Shaftesbury. Here also his lordship has a hare-warren, as it is called, though improperly. It has, indeed, been a sanctuary for the hares for many years; but the gentlemen complain that it mars their game, for that as soon as they put up a hare for their sport, if it be anywhere within two or three miles, away she runs for the warren, and there is an end of their pursuit; on the other hand, it makes all the countrymen turn poachers, and destroy the hares by what means they can. But this is a smaller matter, and of no great import one way or other.

To the far west of Hare Warren, on Bishopstone Down, is more woodland owned by the Wilton Estate. Running along the south side of these two tracts of woodland is the old road from Salisbury to Shaftesbury in Dorset, known as the Shaftesbury Drove, which fell into disuse in the 1780s when the new road (A30) opened along the Nadder Valley.

From Salisbury follow the A36 and turn off onto the B3094, following the signs for Salisbury race course. It is possible to park opposite the race course on the old drove road (OS184/SU092285).

Initially I have found some 100 yews growing in a small area of Hare Warren.

Head north, through the one bar gate, on the public footpath for only a few feet until a small track heading west is reached. Six young yews grow along the track, the largest a female with a girth of 8' 4".

Google map 51.056529,-1.870143

The path then turns north, but straight ahead is a very faint track which runs west towards two small cottages hidden among the trees. 30 or more yews grow alongside this path, made impassable at the time by dense bramble cover.

Follow the track as it turns north and soon a line of four female yews are observed growing to the west. Before reaching them an undercover of bramble and saplings makes the going difficult. The first yew girthed 9' 3" at the root crown while the second was not measured. The third (below left) has seven leaders emerging from a two foot bole and girthed 13' 9" at the root crown. The fourth (below right) girthed 13' 7" at the root crown.

Google map 51.057689,-1.871023



Return to the track and close by another line of yews is seen to the west. Growing next to a young tree is a larger female to the south with an exaggerated side limb. Close to this is the female (right) with a girth of 13' 2" at the root crown, followed by the male (below left) with a large side limb and lastly a female (below right). Both had a girth of 12' 9". Google map 51.05806,-1.870948



Returning to the path and continuing north a junction is reached with another path coming from the west and continuing in a north east direction. To the immediate east of the junction and on the south side of the path is the large female (below left) girthing 13' 8" at 1'. On the opposite side of the path are two males, the larger (below right) girthing 11', a figure distorted by lower cut branches.

Google Map 51.05833,-1.87053



At this junction head west, passing thirteen yews along the way. A junction of five paths is reached marked by this male growing on the south side of the path and girthing 12' 3" at 1'. This is the largest yew along this small section of path. Re-trace your steps back to the junction.

Google map 51.05864,-1.873652



From here continue to head east and a further six young yews are passed on the north side of the track. At the next junction turn left and head north. Soon the first of eight yews is found growing on the west side of the path. This is the male (below left), with a girth of 11' 10" at the root crown. A few paces away another male (below right) girthed 12' 4" at the root crown.

Google map 51.06133,-1.8701



After the last yew in this group cross over to the east side of the path where twenty yews grow quite close to each other. The largest of these are the multi-stemmed male (below left) girthing 12' 9" and the twin trunked female, girthing 12' 3"; both measured near to the root crown.

Google map 51.061843,-1.869586

These are the last yews to be found in this small area. From here head south, keeping to the main broad track and return to the car park.



Bishopstone Down wood

From the car park this part of the old drove road (designated Byway) has a few potholes but is easily navigable, so drive west for approx ¼ of a mile towards Bishopstone Down Wood. At the junction with a minor road that leads from Wilton to Bishopstone turn right and drive north towards Wilton. Within a few yards it is possible to park outside the single bar gate (OS184/SU081288) but take care not to obstruct.



On the opposite side of the road is a small copse with seventeen young yews.

Go through the single bar gate and within a few paces a green sign indicates the 'Lorenzo Trail'. Turn south of the main footpath and follow this trail. Immediately scattered around are thirty or more yews, with those nearest to the trail having had most of their lower branches removed.

Turning round to the north there are two larger yews in an unmanaged state. The first (below left) is female with a girth of 12' 10" just above the root crown while the second (below right) is male with a girth of 12' 9" above the root crown.
Google map 51.058633,-1.886215



Head back to the main path. From the one bar gate go west to the next crossing of footpaths, along which a further twenty seven yews grow and border the adjoining field. It was interesting to note that the yews growing further west are larger than those nearer the east of this path. Some interesting shapes but hard to view, due to dense lower branches.



At the footpath crossing retrace your steps to the car, or head south west to a small copse containing fifty yews, found near to the field edge and behind barbed wire with no public access.

The largest observed was male with an 11' girth (left).

Google map 51.061088,-1.896601

Continuing south west takes you to the next junction; turn east along the old drove road and back to the car, passing a further twenty five young yews on the north side of the track.

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