

The Ancient Yew Group's
Guide to recording and measuring old yew trees
Taxus baccata L.



There is no English tree which has gathered round itself so much of historic, poetic, and legendary lore as the Yew; none is so closely associated, directly or indirectly, with events, persons, and buildings, which are famous in our national history. – Lowe 1897 The Yew-Trees of Great Britain and Ireland

Identification:

The Yew (*Taxus baccata* L.), also known as the Common yew, the English yew and the European yew, is a remarkable living link between the present day and the landscapes and beliefs of our past. The majority of old yews are found in churchyards, but occasionally you may come across one or more growing in woodland, in hedgerows, in open pasture and in parks and gardens.



The colour of the trunk can appear as various shades of grey through to reddish brown and even scarlet on a damp day. The bark on some trees will appear to be flaking while on others it will not.



The dark evergreen foliage consists of straight pointed needles which grow in two rows either side of each twig.

The female yew can be identified as having green cone like buds which develop into a red berry type fruit (aril) that surrounds the seed. This can normally be seen between June and December. At other times of the year look for the small brown seeds that have dropped onto the ground.

The male yew develops small clusters of pollen sacs that can have various shades of yellow which stand out well with the green foliage. These are normally visible from February through to May. They will turn brown and drop to the ground.



During identification you might come across what looks like a green flower; this is in fact swelling of the leaf buds caused by the eggs/larvae of the gall midge (*Taxomyia taxi*). This swelling is commonly known as the 'artichoke gall' and starts to form in spring. As it ages the tight bud will relax, open out, then eventually turn brown and drop to the ground. This process may take up to two years and can appear on both the male and female yew.



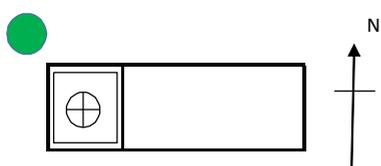


The Irish yew (*Taxus baccata fastigiata*) is a unique form of the Common yew. It was first discovered around 1770 and became commercially available in the 1820s. Its distinctive upright growth and conical shape have made it a feature in many churchyards, parks and gardens.

Records of the Irish yew are not kept by the Ancient Yew Group

- Location:

When recording a churchyard yew, note the name and location of the church and the tree's position in relation to the church. Most churches lie on an east/west axis with the tower to the west. So in the diagram below, the tree is 'close to the northwest corner of the church'.

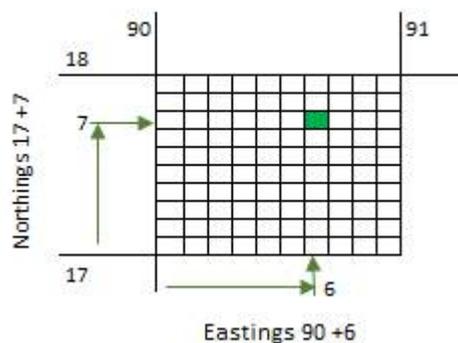


When recording yews outside of churchyards a National Grid Reference (NGR) is necessary and for that an Ordnance Survey (OS) map will help.

The example shown here indicates the 1km square 9017 and this was obtained first by the 90 (Eastings 'along the corridor') and then 17 (Northings 'up the stairs').

The square is then divided into tenths and the Eastings now become 906 and the Northings 177. (906177)

Next look for the large blue letters normally found at the base and top of the full map e.g. ST, SU, NX or similar and prefix the 6 figure to give ST906177.



If you have access to modern technology, a Global Positioning System (GPS) is capable of giving an accurate ten figure NGR.

- Measuring:

In the past, the practice developed of measuring all trees at the height of about 5 feet, and to a large extent this continues today. The yew, however, is clearly a tree with a great deal of natural variability in its form and so different shaped yews require the girth (circumference) to be measured at different heights.

The earliest yew measurements, from centuries ago, were in feet and inches, as was the height at which the tree was measured. If the historical measuring height is known then this should be attempted again.

Below are examples that illustrate the variety of yew form with suggestions of where it is most appropriate to obtain measurements. If in doubt the minimum girth measure on the lower trunk should be found. What is most important however is to record precisely where the tree was measured, so that it can be repeated in future years.

On this yew, the trunk is clean up to a height of around 5ft. The indicator lines show the lower measurement taken where the root growth meets the main trunk (root crown). The second was at about 3ft from the ground. Measuring at 5ft in this instance would be inappropriate since branch swell would inflate the yew's true minimum circumference.



This yew has no obvious swelling of the root and can be measured at the ground and again at 1ft, 3ft and even 5ft.

This churchyard yew is an old hollowing tree where part of the outer shell has rotted away. To the left in the photo is a side limb emerging from the base of the tree, which was measured in this instance excluding the limb. A measurement could however also be taken that includes it. The important thing is to make detailed notes of whatever is recorded.



Sometimes the tape may have to be undulating in order to obtain a yew's minimum girth. If this method is used state the word 'undulating'. In this instance it was taped close to the top of the mound. A tree of this appearance, with numerous branches from a low bole, can be large girthed. This example at Loders in Dorset is more than 18ft in girth, but without historical records we cannot be sure whether it is a relatively young yew, or regrowth from an old yew that was cut down and then had soil piled over the trunk remains.





This example, from Iwerne Minster in Dorset has been confirmed as regrowth. It was taped at the 'top of the mound' and 'undulating' to obtain the minimum girth. If possible record the number of individual stems and report '13 stems emerge from a 2ft high mound where a measurement of xx was obtained with an undulating tape at the top of the mound'.



This woodland yew has many stems emerging from a very short trunk. In cases like this record the number of stems and measure close to the ground but try to exclude the swell of the root growth. Look for a natural waistline as found at the root crown.

This woodland yew leans at an angle so the tape must be angled to match. Measure at about 1ft and 3ft and record the minimum girth. Height as measured from the inside lean of the tree.



This yew would/may require three girth measurements. The first at the root crown, the second and third at the split with the tape angled to match the lean of the stems. Record the heights.



Sometimes yews are covered in lower growth which makes measuring difficult. On this example the tape was run at the root crown and carefully threaded behind the young upward growth. Sometimes this careful threading of the tape cannot be fully achieved, so the record might state '18ft 7ins at 3ft height over twiggy growth'.

When measuring a yew on a slope, the tape must match the angle of the tree, the height above ground level recorded as if the tree was vertical i.e. at 90 degrees to the tape run, and the distance recorded from the top of the slope.



The photo shows a yew growing perfectly upright although the ground slopes at almost 45 degrees. In instances like this the girth should be recorded from the 'top of the slope' with the tape at 90 degrees to the tree.

This example, growing on volcanic (metamorphic) rock of the in the Cumbria fells, at around 1,250 ft. above sea level, may appear to the casual eye to be small and of less importance; nothing could be further than the truth. Cold climates, extreme wind/rain and low light can slow the yews growth by a considerable factor and as such the height above sea level should also be recorded along with the minimum girth.



Other examples can be found on the Ancient Yew website [Fragmenting Yews](#) and in greater detail under [frequently-asked-questions](#)

- Summary and notes

Take care when finding and recording an old yew, some low branches have sharp ends and are a major hazard, especially to the eyes.

If on your own, especially in woodland or on steeply sloping ground, take a mobile phone or let someone know where you are going.

Don't rush. Having found an important yew you've done the difficult part. Spend plenty of time exploring it carefully.

Always record how the measure was taken and at what level above the ground. Often the best measures are (in order) minimum, root crown or ground level, and 3 feet from ground.

Never presume the first attempt is correct, slide the tape around the tree a couple of times to obtain the smallest measurement.

On an uneven yew the minimum measure is the most useful to future researchers.

Take more than one photograph, for instance the front side of the trunk and then the opposite. With churchyard yews try and capture the location, so that church and some part of the tree appear in a photograph.

Always remember that the notes you are writing are intended to help the next researcher to do exactly the same as you did, to repeat your measure and see exactly how much the tree has grown. Do anything you can to help them; they will thank you, perhaps in hundreds of years time.

Your notes could be gathered in this format:

	Details
Date of visit	
Place name	
Church dedication	
Wood/Common/Garden etc	
Tree's location to church	
OS Grid Ref	
Male/Female	
Minimum girth Ft/Inch	
Height of measurement	
Any other observations	