

Ancient Yew Group

Toby Hindson

The Yew of Newlands Corner & Merrow Down



Ancient yew at Merrow Downs (Photo: Toby Hindson)

The old yew groves at Newlands Corner and adjoining Merrow Down have been famous for a long time, and it will come as no surprise that they have received quite a lot of Ancient Yew Group (AYG) attention. Attention is fine, but fame is not. Fame sometimes kills ancient trees, particularly through compaction from foot fall, souvenir hunting and more major wood theft.

Precise picture

The AYG studies here have been kept very much under wraps for the 20 years that they have been running for this very reason, but the measuring work has matured and it is now possible to share basic findings. Our work has been centred on two main themes; locating the yews to keep track of losses and to ensure repeatability of our studies (Peter Norton) and repeat measuring over two decades to capture growth rates (Toby Hindson). Work done by Shane Mangan in 1995, recently made available, on the locations of the older yews will also give us a precise picture of attrition from then to the present day.

Wide range of growth rate

The big thing to share here is the growth rates. 24 yews were studied over the two decade period, with girths between 80 and 723 cm. The mean circumference increase was 7mm each year. The largest 8 yews

studied, all over 400cm girth, were found to be growing at an average 5.3mm girth increase each year. We found that smaller yews had a far wider range of growth rate than larger individuals. The larger trees had shouldered their way into the canopy through time, were all enjoying a substantial share of sunlight and were growing fairly constantly, if relatively slowly. The smaller yews were found in a variety of situations, partly shaded by other yews, overtopped by oak, growing clear, etc. These yews which had not yet established themselves as permanent primary canopy were strongly affected by their immediate environment. One extreme individual, the smallest at 80cm was heavily shaded, growing at a violent angle away from the canopy of a larger yew and was found to have grown at an unmeasurably low rate, perhaps a few millimetres over the whole two decades.

Oldest cohort

This picture, once the variables in early growth are accounted for, gives us quite a firm understanding of the ages of these trees. It is well known that yews tend to grow up as a result of the decrease of herbivore activity, and so similar sized yews in the wild are likely to date to the same environmental event. The ages and growth rates of yews thought to belong to the same cohort can be averaged, and a mean growth rate used to find the age of the sample.

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Norman invasion

The oldest cohort of yews at Newlands Corner and Merrow Down has been calculated as originating from about the time of the Norman invasion, that is to say there are, demonstrably, yews at the site which are about 950 years old. There also appears to be a "Black Death" cohort which grew up immediately after 1348. These yews are about 670 years old. Not as old as the 2,000 years guessed at by some authors, nevertheless all of these are, or should be, yews of international standing.

Questions raised

Various bodies are supporting the planned development of this site as a public amenity. Many questions are raised, but I think the most poignant one concerns the balance between conservation and amenity. Here we have one of the most important ancient woodlands in Britain, containing standing heritage trees which approach 1,000 years in age. Yet I can find no mention of them in the planning, and no amelioration of footfall seems to be planned for the sensitive areas where they grow. Coppice or old-growth non-ancient woodland would be a great place for the public but I find it extremely hard to understand how sensitive ancient woodland is a suitable place to carry out these plans.

Battleground

Here the trees cannot win. If they are made famous they may be over visited and damaged, if they are not considered important the same may happen, through ignorance and lack of care. Now that footfall is set to increase and "Health and Safety" has reared its head in this ridiculous fashion, how long before an ancient yew is felled because it is "dangerous". This is where the boundary between conservation and amenity becomes a battleground, and I sincerely hope that steps are taken to ensure that the possible loss of an ancient yew is a fight avoided.



Wood theft - damaged yew at Merrow Downs (Photo: Toby Hindson)