

Re-discovery of a heritage tree

David Alderman

Yester's Elusive Yew...

Yester House in East Lothian was built 300 years ago on the site of a C16th tower house. The oldest trees appear to be contemporary with this and planted from c.1690 into the early C18th, including the lime avenue that leads the visitor up to the Gifford Gate. Just beyond these gates and still some way from the house, is a pair of quite remarkable yew trees.

JC Loudon

First reference to there being notable trees at Yester appears in the 1837 *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* by J C Loudon. He described a large sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), and a Silver birch (*Betula alba* syn. *B. pendula*) planted in 1757, presumably a commemorative planting. The Sycamore, we believe, is the one that today stands by St Bathan's Chapel, originally built as Yester parish church in the C15th but rebuilt c.1650, from when the 6.5m girthed sycamore could well date.

Hutchison

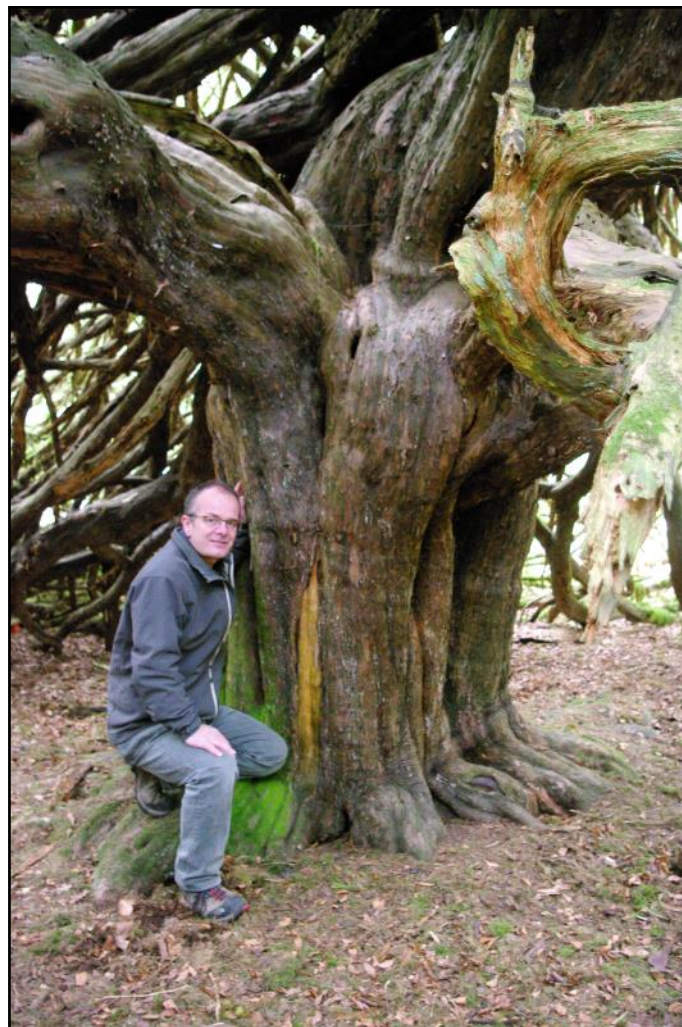
First mention of a yew here is from 1894, when Robert Hutchison, of Carlowrie Castle, President of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, measured one tree, the imperial equivalent of 9m tall x 3.86m girth. He recorded several trees between 1880 and 1894, including Loudon's sycamore but, apparently, only one of the two yew.

Conference

The 1931 RHS Conifer Conference Report was provided by Capt. G I Campbell, on behalf of the Marquess of Tweeddale, whose family owned the estate up until the late 1960s. The report lists a "fine specimen" yew with an 88ft spread of branches. We have always presumed that this was Hutchison's tree but today we find there are two trees next to each other, the wide spreading and layering tree and the second much taller and slightly larger in girth.

McLean and Mitchell

Colin McLean and Alan Mitchell, both working for the Forestry Commission's Forest Research, visited Yester in the 1950s but focussed their recording on the larch and beech, looking for potential seed trees. Mitchell returned in 1967 but it was his more detailed survey of 71 trees in 1987 that highlighted Yester as a notable tree collection, whilst failing, both times, to record either of the yew!



Thanks to new owners Gareth and Nicola Wood, Donald Rodger admires one of the two great yew of Yester (Photo: Charles Henderson)

Today

Scrambling between the lower branches today reveals two trees (3.71m and 3.58m girth) that equal many other famous Scottish yew, including the nearby and a similarly layering tree, the Darnley Yew at Whittinghame. Their age is unknown but their position is, perhaps, more relevant to the old Yester village, moved to Gifford in the C17th, whilst the remains of the 14th century Yester Castle is more than one mile to the south-east.



Scottish Wildlife Trust volunteer, Alison Smith, is dwarfed by the spread of the Yester yew (Photo: Charles Henderson)