

# The Llanfoist Yew - A Fallen Giant

This ancient yew at St. Ffwyst church in Llanfoist, Abergavenny, Powys, was felled by storm force winds on Thursday 5th January 2012. By Monday 9th all that remained was a large stump.



### Earliest records

The known history of this tree can be traced to 1836, when JE Bowman's article on *The longevity of the yew, and the antiquity of planting it in the churchyard* appeared in the *Magazine of Natural History*. He referred to an account he "had read somewhere" in which the yew at Llanfoist had been measured with a circumference of 33 feet. Expecting to see one of Britain's largest girthed yews, he visited the churchyard, only to be "disappointed to find

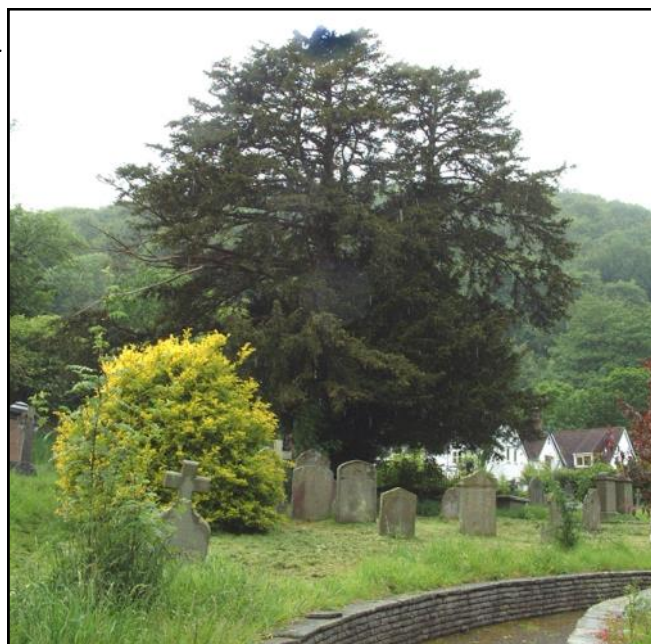
that this measurement must have included a great arm or bough that proceeds from the very base of the trunk on the south side, and therefore formed no part of it." Bowman tried to correct the misleading measurement that had lured him to Llanfoist by adding the following details: "Even with this bough, the circumference at 3ft. high, is only 27ft. 6in.; without it the circumference of the real trunk, at the same height, is only 21ft. 6in." It is not known when the great arm finally snapped off and opened up the south side of the tree as we see it in the 2005 photographs.

Now that the old yew had appeared in print it attracted more visitors and writers. The entry in *Arboretum and Fruticetum Part III* of 1838 reported that it grew on a raised platform within a circle of stones. "Since a circle was a sacred symbol among the Eastern nations of antiquity," the writer thought it would be interesting to know whether the practice he had seen here and at other places might be "a remnant of this superstition."

In 1845 John White's *Guide to town and neighbourhood of Abergavenny* described it as "one of the most aged and remarkable yew trees in the county, which has been the theme of poets. This tree is believed to have existed since the time of the Druids." The renowned botanist, Edwin Lees, was less speculative, choosing in 1851 to describe it simply as a "noble tree."

### Gardener's Chronicle

We have already seen how an exaggerated 33 feet girth measurement persuaded Bowman to visit the tree. His attempt to present a more accurate record was to prove unsuccessful, for when John Lowe wrote *The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (1897), he ignored Bowman's measurements, and quoted instead a girth of 32 feet taken from the 1874 *Gardener's Chronicle*. The outcome of this was the Llanfoist yew's inclusion in Lowe's list of the 27 largest girthed yews in England and Wales. It is not the only yew to incorrectly find its way onto this list.





When carrying out research for *The Yew Trees of England* (1958), Swanton was sent the following notes by the Revd. H.S.Richards: "Trunk hollow, but the tree is in very vigorous growth. Several very large branches have been cut off some time in the past, but the diameter of umbrage is still 15 yards, and no branch is supported. The roots protrude above the ground and it is difficult to get a true ground level measurement, but I think the girth may fairly be said to be 32' as stated by Dr. Lowe." And so in spite of Bowman's attempt, 120 years earlier, to present an accurate record of the Llanfoist Yew, it continued to be mistakenly regarded as one of the largest girthed in Britain.



1998 (Tim Hills)

### Damaged by fire

My first visit to record this tree was in April 1998. It was in a sad state, hidden in a thicket of elder and brambles, its leaves predominantly brown and its interior damaged by fire. But there were also signs of new growth and I was optimistic that the tree would eventually revive.

Girth was 23' 9" at 3'.

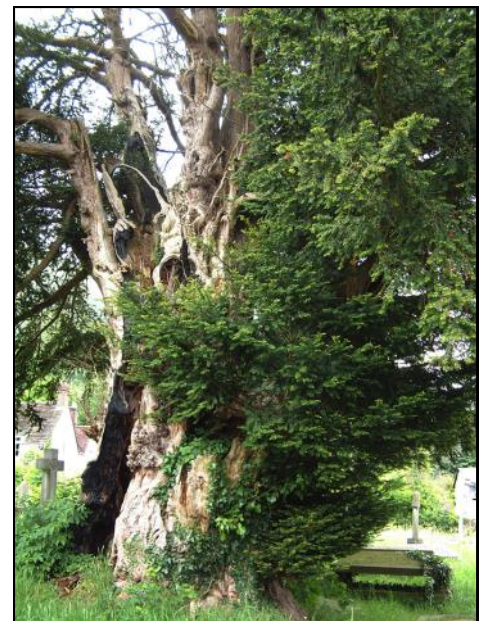
Two years later in 2000 the area around the tree had been cleared, and it once again took pride of place in the churchyard.



2000 (Tim Hills)



Above left - 2000 (Tim Hills) and above right - 2005 (Geoff Garlick)



### New growth

Between 2000 and 2005 the tree grew rapidly, especially close to the ground, where several new branches had developed and were flourishing. This sort of growth is characteristic of a yew under stress.

And it is one of these branches that has survived the collapse, giving the tree every chance of recovery. Experience tells us that a stump like this will take decades, sometimes even centuries to decay. That is long enough for the stump to be used as a form of scaffolding along which new growth can develop. Its progress will be monitored.

**For more ancient yew profiles go to [www.ancient-yew.org](http://www.ancient-yew.org) the web site of the Ancient Yew Group hosted by the Tree Register**