

This is a remarkable ancient yew, and it is not surprising that it has attracted so much interest. Many have tried to estimate its age, and while estimates between 1000 and 2000 can be supported, the age of 4000 years, often quoted for this tree, cannot.

Britton's *Beauties of Wiltshire* (1801 Volume 1) contains the earliest account of this yew: 'In the churchyard is a large hollow yew tree 8 or 10 yards in circumference, from the roots of which, near the centre, eight young stems have sprung up, twisting themselves together in a curious form, and at about the height of about 2 yards, struck into the centre of the principal remaining trunk of the parent tree, the hollow of which they entirely fill up...I regret to say that the tree is decaying fast, a great many roots having been destroyed about twelve years since, in lowering the level of the graveyard'.

Gilpin's 1834 *Remarks on Forest Scenery* described a tree 'in fine foliage, although the trunk is quite hollow, an immense yew tree, which measures thirty-seven feet in circumference, and the limbs are proportionately large. The tree is entered by means of a rustic gate; and seventeen persons lately breakfasted in its interior. It is said to have been planted, many generations ago, by the Arundel family'.



By 1855 the *Post office directory of Hants, Wilts and Dorset* had reduced its girth to '30 feet in circumference' and the number of persons taking breakfast in its interior to 15! It was, in their opinion 'supposed to have been planted at the building of the church'.

In 1867 *Motcombe, past and present*, it was not people using the inside of the tree that was making the news headlines: 'It is now so old that but few branches remain, and so large, that one very hot summer's day, two cows were missing, and it was not till after some search that they were discovered concealed within the hollow trunk of the tree, where they had found a luxurious and shady retreat, large enough to protect them both from the flies, and to hide them from their anxious owners'.

In 1868 L.H. Grindon's *Trees of Old England* repeated the 1834 account, including the girth of 37ft. In the same year, an article appeared in a Victorian publication called *Hardwicke's Science Gossip*: 'In the churchyard at Tisbury stands a venerable yew of immense size, well worthy of a place among the celebrities so pleasingly recorded by Mr Spicer. The trunk, which is hollow, with a large opening towards the north, measures thirty feet six inches round. By a calculation made from the appearance of an exposed surface, it must be at least one thousand five hundred years old'.

Elwes and Henry (p122/123) who saw the tree in 1903, observed that inside the hollow space was 'a good sized younger stem, probably formed by a root descending inside the hollow trunk from one of the limbs'. They recorded a girth of 35', acknowledging that young growth can exaggerate measurements.

EW Swanton saw it on June 14th 1924. He recorded a girth of 30' at ground and 29' 8" at 3', adding that 'the interior cavity is being further reduced by filling up' - with internal growth.

These are some of the many accounts that have described Tisbury's yew. However, because the descriptions are so varied, particularly in relation to the yew's girth, it misled John Lowe into recording that Tisbury had two ancient yews in his book *The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (1897):

"Tree A: '...an immense yew-tree which measures 37' in circumference', as reported by Sir T. Dick Lauder (1834)

Tree B: Reported by Rev H Morland, who gave a girth as 31' at ground and 30' 6" at 3'."

Unfortunately, later researchers were to repeat this misinformation, so that in Cornish's 1946 *Churchyard Yew and Immortality* we are told that Tisbury has 'two ancient yews, both more than 30' in girth'. And as recently as 1991 Hal Hartzell Jr., in his book *The Yew Tree*, informs us categorically that 'there were at one time two yews in excess of 30' and that now there is only one'.

There is, and has only ever been, one exceptional Tisbury Yew. I visited in 1998, expecting to see the hollow tree in the first photo. Nothing had prepared me for the startling discovery that its interior, once filled with internal stems that were helping sustain the tree, was now filled to the height of about 8' with grey and pink concrete. We will never know to what extent the tree's present growth has been restricted by this filling. At a height of about 9' two main growth areas develop, held together by wire which passes over wooden blocks to prevent it from cutting into the tree's surface. There was once an octagonal wall around the base, though only 5 sides are now visible as the churchyard soil level rises.

