EXCEPTIONAL YEW TREES
Toby Hindson and Tim Hills


The article was based on the analysis of 2,760 records of live yew trees recorded at that time in the Ancient Yew Group database, and from this information a ‘unique population’ of the most significant specimens was categorised by girth as follows:

717 Veteran (5-6.99m), 204 Ancient (7-8.99m) and 55 Exceptional (≥9m) yew trees.

Those of you familiar with the Ancient Yew Group’s classification of yews, based on many years of research carried out by Toby Hindson, will be aware that Ancient yews are regarded as having a likely age of 800 years +, while Veterans have a likely age of 500+.

What we can be sure of is that in reaching a girth of 9 metres a yew will have had substantial periods when girth increase will have virtually ceased – for instance during extreme canopy retrenchments and other factors affecting the bole. Our first indication of these extended growth stalls comes from historical girth records. These have been verified by repeat measures carried out during the last two decades and enable us to realise that the last two metres of girth on a 9m yew (from being a 7m girdled Ancient) is very hard won, and that the processes involved may take many centuries. So yews that have achieved this girth are demonstrably of extreme age, as well as being different in character and complexity from most of the Ancient specimens. Hence the need for this further category.

Can we give this new category a minimum age? Unfortunately, while we can be 90% certain that a Veteran is at least 500 and an Ancient at least 800, it is not yet possible to give a likely minimum age for Exceptional yews. For the time being ‘very, very old’ will have to suffice.