

The Yews of Wychbury Hill

Tim Hills—September 2001

There is parking next to the public footpath to the north of the hill, at SO9219782252. Follow the path upwards and left. Just before reaching the gate into the field leading to the obelisk turn right. A steep climb leads to the eastern edge of the hill fort.

What makes this an exceptional hill fort site is that it is one of only a few remaining in Britain with a botanical history that might be as old as the site itself. Lack of protection means that the site is abused and may eventually lose the botanical link with its ancient past.

Edwin Lees in *The Botany of Worcestershire* (1867) wrote that ‘the wood is very thick upon **Wichbury**, and on the sides of the outer vallum are many large and very fine Yew Trees, feathered by extending branches to the very ground, and some of these are so large, and evidently so old, that I should consider it probable that they have stood where they now appear for nearly, if not quite eight hundred years. The largest are about twenty feet in girth’. In another description he wrote that ‘the very largest, which is of great bulk, may exceed the age of a thousand years’.

An 1882 visit by the Worcestershire Naturalists Club described the site as follows: ‘When the camp was abandoned it was left in the hand of nature, and it became robed in dense vegetation, where for centuries yew trees have occupied the hill fortress, and some of these are of enormous bulk, and shroud the ground in horrific gloom. One of these was noted as 30 feet in girth, and no doubt entered upon existence soon after the Saxon invasion of Britain’.

Unfortunately we will never know whether this thirty foot girthed giant had its roots in Saxon times, since it no longer exists. In more recent times there has been further loss of the oldest and many other younger specimens.

Wikipedia describes the site as ‘much beloved of pagans, with the site containing a 28-tree ancient yew grove’.

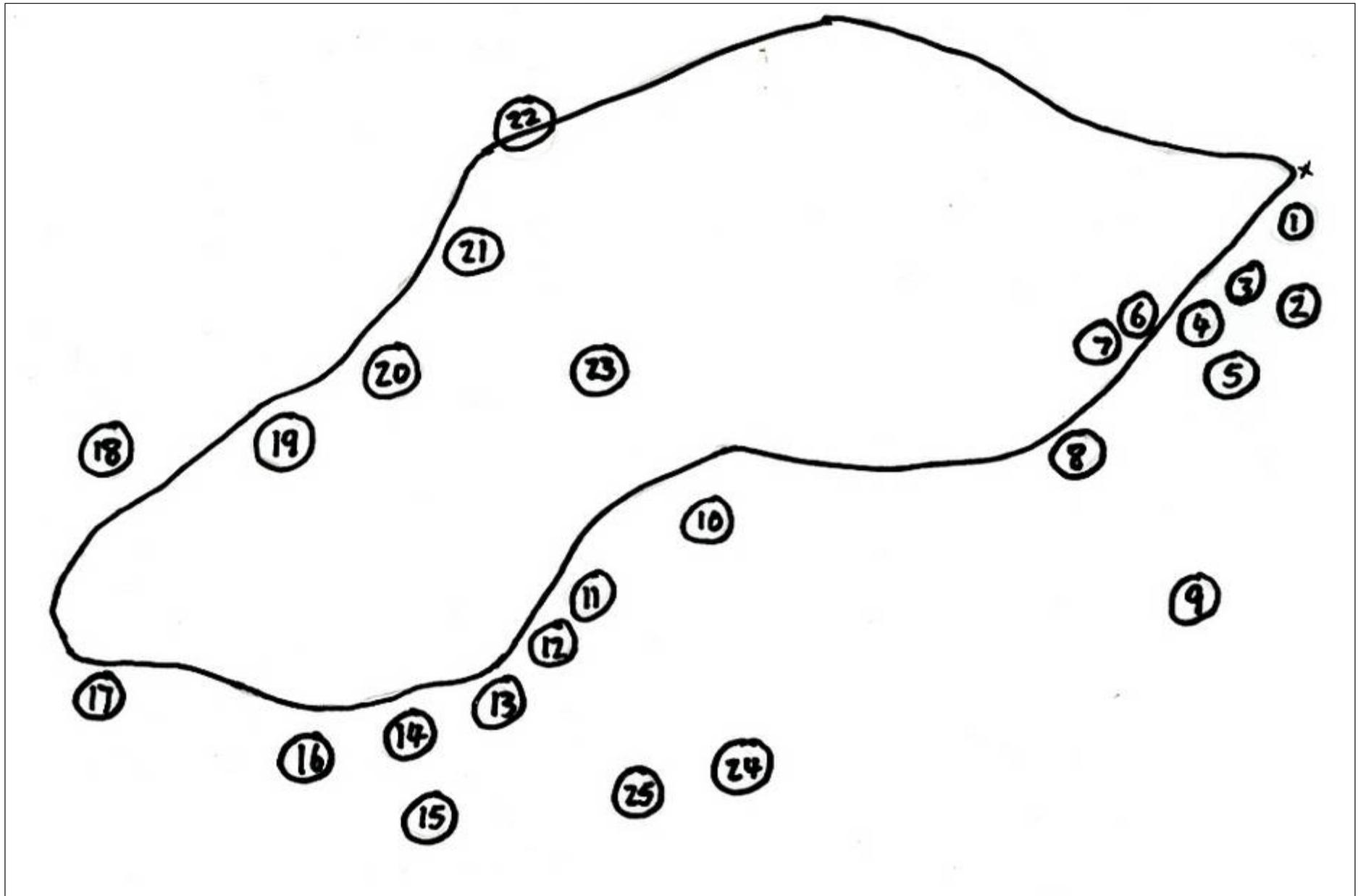
I visited in 2001 and in a limited time managed to record 25 yews. Of these, fire damage was observed in no fewer than 6 trees. An article at <http://www.whitedragon.org.uk/gazette/gazwest.htm> written in 2002 paints a bleak picture of misuse of this site:

‘An Iron Age hill fort with very well-preserved banks and ditches, though they are somewhat lost amid woodland. The centre holds an atmospheric grove of mature (and ancient) yew trees which has been a popular gathering place for local pagans at Samhain for socialising and informal ritual all year round. The (arguably) oldest yew was 4.6metres (185 inches) round, hollow, and often used as a shrine.

Unfortunately the number of fires (some not properly extinguished), litter and aluminium cans left lying around increased over the years. At the summer solstice in 2002 the tree was finally burned down.....People left flowers and placed messages of affection on and around the tree’.

Trees recorded at Wychbury Hill on 27th September 2001

The point x is at grid ref SO9205581800



The first 5 trees grow left of the path, on a steep slope that leads to the ditch, which then rises to a second lower ridge.

Tree 1: On a steep bank, very fluted with a limb extending above the steep slope. 14' in girth.

Trees 2 and 3: younger yews.

Before tree 4 is a yew stump, a burnt out hollow with a girth of 11' 3".

Tree 4: Close to the path. 11' 8".

Tree 5: Below 4. A tall single stemmed yew, inaccessible .

Trees 6 and 7 are to the right of the path, in the enclosed area.

Tree 6: 13' 11" at 2'. Fluted with new wood flowing over broken off branches. Tall, straight trunk Most of the branches to a height of about 15' have been broken or died.

Tree 7: Not especially large, a burned out stump, with hints of new growth suggesting recovery.

Tree 23: About 30 metres into the enclosure, one of the few not on the path. Girth about 11' at 4'. One side dead, the other supporting a strong main riser with many branches, some dipping to the ground.

Tree 8: A tall fluted straight trunked yew with limb extending above the steep slope. Girth appeared to be 10/12'.

Trees 9, 24 and 25 are best approached by walking in the ditch.

Tree 9: 16' 11" at between 2' and 5' (sloping ground). Fluted and with many vertical branches from a splendid bole.

Tree 24: 15' 2" at 4'. A fine fluted bole which divides into parallel rising branches. Some fire damage noted.

Tree 25: 15' 8" at 1'. Bole divides into 2 at 4'. The larger of these has a space at the base which has been used for lighting fires. Its shape suggests that a huge limb once grew from it. The smaller section appeared dead, but contained an area of live growth that has formed a branch which dips over and has embedded itself on the ridge. A new tree grows from it.

Tree 11: About 10' in girth. Its tall main trunk divides into parallel upright growth.

Tree 12: Fluted, large limbs have broken off.

Tree 13: A broken yew which makes a neat archway over the path. Long roots visible.

Tree 14: Truncated at about 12' with much new growth emerging at this level.

Tree 15: A younger yew, half way down the slope. Another tree had fallen into it.

Tree 16: 13' 5" at 2'. A thin skin on $\frac{2}{3}$ of the tree, but with living wood on only 5' of its 13' girth. This growth becomes concentrated into a single rising branch. Badly burnt, with one section of its dead skin fallen away from the tree and resting on the slope.

Tree 17: A young yew.

Tree 18: Girth approximately 13' 7" at 2'. Its bole becomes 2 main rising branches at 8/9' and at the same height a right angled branch dips towards the ground.

Tree 19: Almost on the path. Its bole appears solid but where a limb pulls away from it at a height of 4/6', a gap can be tapped and the sound is hollow. Girth 9' 9'.

Tree 20: The grand old tree seen here is about 20m from the path. It is hollow and has a thin skin for all but 3' of its circumference. It was badly burnt inside. Growth is concentrated into a strong riser with thick branches. It measured 15' 11" at 2'. Ribbons and oak wreaths were hung from it. I noted a yellow circle painted on the tree, but did not really imagine that it was a mark noting a tree to be felled. I was to learn later that it was deemed to be unsafe and was felled in 2002.

Tree 21: 10' 8" at 2'. Above this height the bole swells before branching.

Tree 22: In the centre of the path is the dead tree seen below. It measured about 10' 11" at 3'.



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