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## **HISTORIC TREES OF THE DONCASTER REGION : Ancient Yew trees in the Doncaster Landscape.**

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*"What scenes have pass'd, since first this ancient yew,  
In all the strength of youthful beauty grew?"*

Joseph Strutt (1749-1802)

### **Early evidence**

The earliest evidence of Yews in the Doncaster region comes from the bronze age forest (3) engulfed during the formation of Thorne Moors some 5,000 years ago. Local place-name evidence, 'Yew Tree Rein', Wadworth and 'The Eues' near Maltby are of considerable antiquity, the latter dating back to 1379, showing that yews were a recognised feature in the medieval landscape. The earliest literary allusion dates back to 1548 when the botanist William Turner observed in his herbal (12) that *"The Ughe tree groweth in diverse parts of Yorkshyre"*.

In modern times, notable areas for the yew within the Doncaster the region, have always mainly been along the Magnesian Limestone belt. F. A. Lees in his 1888 'Flora of West Yorkshire' remarked that the species was *"a fine and plentiful feature of the landscape from Warmsworth and Conisbrough cliffs to Maltby and Letwell"* and known particularly from the ancient woodlands in the Don Gorge at Levitt Hagg, Nearcliff, Farcliff and Pot Ridings Woods; in Wadworth and Edlington woods, Brodsworth Park and in the ancient Hampole Wood (6).

### **Yew Woods; a Nationally Rare Habitat**

In England today, even quite small fragments of pure yew woodland is extremely rare, justifying special recognition under conservation conventions associated with the *National Biodiversity Action Plan*. In the Doncaster region, notable yew habitats survive under English Nature or Local Authority protection. Edlington Wood and the Don Gorge woods are statutory Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's). Other woodland yews are present in the range of Local Authority Sites of Scientific Interest (SSI's) recognised in the DMBC Unitary Development Plan, the Yew grove at Howell Wood thought to be 200-300 years old (11) is part of the DMBC Country Park and several individual trees are protected by Local Authority Tree Preservation Orders.

### **The Don Gorge Yews**

Large solitary wild yews are a feature of the ancient woodlands of the Don Gorge a truly venerable specimen of which grew in nearby Sprotbrough Park in 1838. Its girth measured at 3ft from the ground was a very respectable 15ft 6 in, its canopy had a diameter of some 63ft and it was judged to have been 34ft in height (7). This was significantly larger than any of the yews currently surviving in the Doncaster region. Seven fine yews, possibly seedlings from the Sprotbrough giant, currently form a brooding backcloth to Sprotbrough Church and range in girth from 3ft 10in to 9ft with a mean of 5ft 10in.

The curious avenue of yews in Sprotbrough's Pot Ridings Wood, mysteriously marks out the ghost of a woodland ride not used since it was sliced through in the late 19th century by the deep cutting of the now defunct South Yorkshire Junction Railway. Thirty four specimens measured in October 1998 had girths very similar to the churchyard yews, ranging from 3ft to 9ft 4in with a mean of 5ft 7in. No doubt both avenue and churchyard plantings formed part of the Sprotbrough Park landscaping of the early 18th century.

It is tempting to speculate that Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), allegedly having spent time in Sprotbrough, while drafting his celebrated novel '*Ivanho*', might have personally known the yew avenue. His description of a yew grove in his 1813 poem '*Rokeby*' fits the Pot Riding Wood / Don Gorge circumstance suspiciously well :-

*"But here 'twixt rock and river grew  
A dismal grove of sable yew,"*

Rokeby (canto ii), Sir Walter Scott 1813

### **The Edlington Wood Yews**

Yew was evidently one of the original forest tree colonists of what is now Edlington Wood, pollen studies showing it to have been a major coloniser of the open limestone grassland left after the period of the Roman occupation. Certainly Yew was a dominant tree here long before any ornamental or commercial species were introduced (9).

The venerable yews of Edlington Wood have long been remarked on. The earliest published reference dates from 1731 in the '*Magna Britannia et Hibernia, Antiqua and Nova*' (1). In 1828, the South Yorkshire historian Rev. Joseph Hunter refers to large yew trees obviously of considerable age growing by the 'Dog Monument' (4). In 1840, Henry Baines, the leading Yorkshire botanist of the time was of the opinion the yews of Edlington Wood were "*truly wild*" (2). The notable Yorkshire entomologist and traveller in ladies underwear, George T. Porritt mentioned them in 1883 (10) and special note was made of the "*magnificent yews*" during the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union survey of Edlington Wood in 1891(14).

Aerial photographs of the 1950's clearly show the impenetrable canopies of the massive yews and the amazing black area of pure ancient yew woodlands in the Blow Hall area of the wood. Sadly, although nationally very rare, the largest area to survive into modern times was felled between 1960 and 73.

In addition to what remains of the Blow Hall yews, some fine individual specimens are scattered through the wood, particularly near the crags. Of nine yews close to well used woodland ridings and measured in October 1998, girths ranged from 4ft 7in to a mighty 10ft with a mean of 7ft.

### **The Loversall and Wadworth Yews**

The curious grove of at least fifteen large yews in the narrow strip of land to the east of Loversall Church and into the grounds of Loversall Hall no doubt dates from some momentous occasion at the hall. Possibly gathered as wild seedlings from nearby Wadworth Wood, their girth measurements currently range from 4ft 7in to 8ft with a mean of 6ft 3in. The ecologically rich escarpment woodland of Wadworth Shrubbery (managed by the Woodland Trust), effectively an extension of Wadworth Wood, has a large yew population. Girths of eighteen measured in February 1998 ranged from 2ft 5in to 6ft 9in with a mean of 4ft.

### **The Streetthorpe Yews**

With Sir Robert Swift of Streetthorpe (Edenthorpe) being created 'Bow-bearer' to the Royal Chase of Hatfield from 1605 by James 1st, a local tradition developed alleging that the many yew trees which grow around Edenthorpe were planted at the instigation of Sir Robert to supply his people with bows (5).

A characteristically patriotic example of the English yew - English bow, association are the lines from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's (1858-1930) poem '*Song of the bow*'

*"What of the bow?  
The bow was made in England:  
Of true wood, of yew-wood,  
The wood of English bows."*

'Song of the bow' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Ironically, current research increasingly points to the yew bows of 'Merry England' being imported from the continent, notably Spain and Italy or made from imported yew timber (8). The time honoured patriotic story, peddled in 17th to early 20th century literature, may well have been a manufacture of political and religious correctness, perhaps disseminated to obfuscate the pre Christian origins of many churchyard yews. Whatever the origins of the Streetthorpe yews, there is certainly a large population of sizeable specimens, in the frontages of properties along Thorne Road Edenthorpe.

### **Doncaster's Churchyard Yews**

Many of Doncaster's churchyards, particularly pre-reformation examples are graced by at least one, and often several fine yew trees. Of 36 local churchyards of Saxon or Norman origins surveyed in 1998 by the Doncaster Naturalists Society, 22 had yews. Though very imposing and often vastly older than other churchyard trees, most were relatively young specimens with girth measurements of less than 6ft. A few truly impressive examples were encountered with girths of 6ft 9in at Braithwell Church, 7ft at Stainton Church, 7ft 5in at Old Edlington Church, 8ft at Loversall Church and 9ft at Sprotbrough Church. The largest, yet still a 'sprout' by ancient yew standards, was the celebrated specimen at Kirk Bramwith. This local leviathan, difficult to measure due to its hollow fragmented trunk, has a girth in the region of 10ft 2in and is reputed, according to the church leaflet, to be some 600 year old.

### **How old are Yew - rooting out the vital statistics**

The dating of yew trees is notoriously difficult. Although annual growth rings are produced, the ability to undergo long periods of suspended growth when few rings are laid down can render ring counts a substantial underestimation. The Great Yew of Crowhurst, Surrey, with a girth of 30ft in 1630, only put on nine inches in the 220 years to 1850 (8). The girth of the Hampshire churchyard Yew given celebrity by the Rev. Gilbert White in his *'Natural History of Selborne'* (13) evidently shrank from nearly 28ft in 1950 to 25ft 10in in 1981 (8). The major obstacle in tree ring dating is the rotting of the heartwood of specimens of 400 to 500 years old, indeed most trees above this age are entirely hollow rendering them difficult to measure and their oldest wood is not available for dendrochronology or carbon dating. Excavations beneath truly ancient trees have provided datable archaeological objects which point to trees being thousands rather than hundreds of years old (8).

### **2000 years ... seen that ... done that!**

As more churchyard yews come under the critical scrutiny of modern dating methodologies, the more it seems they are not merely coeval with the ancient churches they accompany but in some cases are vastly older. The hollow yew in Much Marcle churchyard, Herefordshire is judged to be over 2,000 years old, that at Hambledon, Surrey over 3,000 years, indeed the yews in the churchyards at Defynnog, Discoed and Llanfaredd, all with girths in excess of 35ft, are judged to be more than 4,500 years old

(8). Not only do they put our Kirk Bramwith veteran into humble perspective, they show that Saxon churches were frequently located on much earlier religious sites. Being substantially older than western civilisation they put our flash-in-the-pan second millennium celebrations firmly in the shade, and most awe inspiring, they represent some of the oldest living organisms on earth.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Vital Statistics of Yew Trees in Churchyards of the Doncaster District

50 trees with girths of 1' 8" and above measured at chest (4') height in nine parishes during 1998

Parish	Girth at 5'
Braithwell	3' 3" (39")
"	3' 5" (41")
"	4' (48")
"	6' 7" (79")
Fishlake	2' 5" (29")
"	4' 5" (53")
"	4' 9" (57")
Kirk Bramwith	10' 2" (124")
Loversall	4' 7" (55")
"	4' 8" (56")
"	5' 9" (69")
"	5' 10" (70")
"	6' (72")
"	6' 3" (75")
"	6' 8" (80")
"	6' 9" (81")
"	7' 9" (93")
"	8' (96")
Old Edlington	3' 8" (44")
Sprotbrough	3' 10" (46")
"	4' 7" (55")
"	4' 9" (57")
"	6' 6" (78")
"	7' 3" (77")
"	9' (108")
Stainton	4' 9" (57")
"	7' (84")
Tickhill	3 @ 3' 9" (45")
"	16 @ 1' 8" (20")
Wadworth	2' 6" (30")
"	2' 8" (32")
"	2' 9" (33")

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