

YEWS UNDER THREAT

by Fiona Anderson

It is becoming clear that all is not well with many of our veteran and ancient yews. Many of the 170 "lost" trees on the Ancient Yew Group's website have been lost in recent years.

At Bignor in the shelter of the Sussex downs, one of the two old yews in the churchyard was 'drastically pruned to prevent accidents', according to a report in 1958. This must have killed the tree, which was felled in 1982, and its ivy-covered stump can still be seen. Not far away, the massive ancient yew at East Lavant, which was said to 'throw out its branches to make a ring about 200ft round', was felled in the early 1980s because its hollow trunk was considered dangerous.

At Llanlleonfel in Powys the flourishing old yew beside the church was considered to be 'very overgrown' and possibly dangerous, obscuring some grave stones and making the entrance to the church 'rather dark'. In 1999 a local man was employed to 'tidy the tree and make it safe'. Unsupervised, he reduced the grand old tree to a mutilated stump, which stood for several years beside the church before it too was removed.



The lost Llanlleonfel Yew © Tim Hills

At Hagley in Worcestershire a 'massive yew' in the churchyard was recorded in 1882. According to the parish minutes this 'shapeless' tree was 'cut down and burnt' in 1971 as part of a churchyard-levelling exercise. Similarly, the parish church at Llanrhidian near Swansea once had two old yews, but one is recorded as being 'burnt down around 1986 and sold to the sawmill'. At Llanelen, not far away, an old yew was described in 1969 as 'quite a landmark, to be seen from afar'. It was later reported to have been 'killed by burning'.

Not all the destruction has been in churchyards. At Brockley Hall in Somerset the two old yews that had been first recorded in 1838 were felled in the 1970s. But even in the course of preparing this article, the Ancient Yew Group received a warning that there was talk of felling an ancient churchyard yew in Powys 'for public safety reasons'.

Some old yews are protected by tree preservation orders (TPOs) or conservation area legislation, but many are not. 'Generally speaking we don't make TPOs on church land,' one local authority tree officer told Tim Hills of the Ancient Yew Group recently. Even when they do, TPOs are only as good as the tree officers who oversee them, and few tree officers are yew experts, while trees that are thought to be dangerous are exempt from TPO legislation.

While the deliberate destruction of an old yew is now a less frequent event, the threats have not gone away. Today it is mostly neglect and ignorance that are harming old yews. In his travels around England and Wales, Hills has seen many of these venerable trees treated with a breathtaking lack of consideration.



Easthope, Shropshire © Tim Hills

Fuel tanks, sheds and compost heaps have been sited underneath trees, while grass clippings and litter have been thrown into their hollow trunks. Fire hazards such as dead elder have been dumped underneath trees, while heavy tombstones or excavated soil have been piled up against their trunks. Low branches, which could have been propped, have been removed unnecessarily. Areas around trees have become tangles of brambles, nettles and elder – all competing with the trees for nutrients – while ivy has been allowed to dominate crowns and make the trees top-heavy.

The excuses given by local church officials for damaging or destroying their trees range from the ignorant – ‘It was very old.’ ‘It was past its prime.’ ‘It was hollow and so might have been dangerous.’ – through the thoughtless – ‘The bonfire underneath got out of control.’ ‘We always put our grass clippings under the tree.’ – to those obsessively concerned with health and safety regulations – ‘Branches might fall off.’ ‘Drastic pruning prevents accidents.’ ‘People might trip over the roots.’ ‘Children might climb the tree and get injured.’ ‘The berries are poisonous.’

At Birling in Kent the yew has been so drastically pruned that some of its internal growth is now no longer connected to the live parts of the tree from which it developed over centuries and which it was supporting. In 1997 one of the three old yews in Bettws Newydd churchyard in Monmouthshire was found to be stuffed with churchyard waste and old newspapers, and a pile of grass cuttings had been thrown underneath the tree. In 1999 the vast hollow of the yew at Burghill in Herefordshire was found to be damaged by fire and smoke.

It is not the only yew to suffer this fate. The massive Linton yew, one of the oldest in England, has recently been severely damaged by fire and, again in Herefordshire, ancient yews at Yazor, Eaton Bishop and Little Hereford have been similarly damaged. The South Moreton yew in Oxfordshire was damaged by fire two years ago, and this September the Ancient Yew Group heard that its neighbour at Didcot has recently suffered severe fire damage.



The Recovering Didcot yew © Tim Hills

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

About 85 per cent of the old yews so far documented are found in churchyards and so most of them are owned by the Church of England or the Church in Wales. Having just two owners of so many trees should make it easy for both organisations to develop and carry out national policies covering the care of all their old churchyard yews. Tree News asked spokesmen for both churches whether such policies existed, and both confirmed that they did not, and that they offered no specific guidance on the treatment of old yews.

Instead, decision-making is delegated to the local level. Parochial church councils (PCC) are supposed to seek permission from their diocese for any significant work they want to do to their church or churchyard. But neither the PCC nor the diocese is likely to have a yew expert within their ranks. Often those taking the decisions do not realise how important their yew is. There is no central register of experts to call upon for advice on how to treat an old yew, and there are no central funds available to help towards the cost of such expert advice and treatment. And everyone is unnecessarily afraid of health and safety regulations.

The fate of the yew tree at Fair Oak in Hampshire last year is an example of the inadequacy of the system. The yew was 140 years old – a mere child in yew terms – and a vigorous, healthy tree. But the PCC and the vicar decided that it was unsafe for four reasons: it might fall down on someone, a child might climb it and fall out, its poisonous berries might kill a child and, bizarrely, a paedophile might hide behind it.

The PCC ignored the requirement to seek permission from the diocese of Winchester and within days the tree had been felled. Local residents were outraged, but the vicar, David Snuggs, who had been in post for eight years, was unrepentant and claimed that he was unaware that permission was necessary. ‘The distress and hassle I’m experiencing now is preferable to taking a child’s funeral,’ he told the Southern Daily Echo. ‘We hold to the view that people are more important than trees’.

A spokesperson for the Winchester diocese told Tree News that the chancellor of the diocese had ordered the PCC to plant a young tree in place of the yew and to pay the costs of the diocesan court hearing.

Fortunately most PCCs do not display such extreme antipathy towards the yews in their care. But it is clear that protection for our unique legacy of ancient yew trees – the oldest living things in Britain – is not adequate. 'PCCs are usually short of money,' says Tim Hills, 'but they are looking after these amazing old trees on behalf of us all. They need to know where to obtain the best advice about managing their old yew, and they also need to have access to funds so that they can follow the best tree maintenance procedures, rather than the cheapest. We should never again allow an ancient yew to suffer death by pollarding, or be destroyed because it is hollow, untidy, poisonous or considered – wrongly – to be dangerous or past its prime.'

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