

YORKSHIRE YEWS

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Yorkshire would probably not be the first place anyone would think of when considering looking for interesting yew trees. However, there are several trees worthy of note. Indeed, I feel quite sure that there are noteworthy yew trees not yet ‘discovered’ for their true value and importance. This is particularly the case for north and east Yorkshire, and much survey work is required by enthusiasts to collect and evaluate the information.

Although there are several fine “Irish” yews (*Taxus baccata* ‘fastigiata’) dating from the early 19th century to be found, I refer to the “common” yew (*Taxus baccata*) in this brief account of Yorkshire yews. The ancient name for York, the capital of Yorkshire, was Eborakon. This name comes from the Celtic British personal name, Eburos, meaning ‘yew man’, and probably referred to his estate among yew trees.¹

Yorkshire’s yew history can also be detected by the name of one of its rivers, the River Ure. It is thought that the word ‘yew’ is derived from the Celtic jubar, (pronounced yewar)-ure.² It is evident from the information available that there were numerous and very significant yews in Yorkshire at one time. Although the vast majority have indeed now gone, there are a few veteran and ancient specimens to be found. Even South Yorkshire, its countryside having been decimated by the industrial revolution, has a few veteran yews left.

One of the finest and most interesting yews to be found is the fantastic Hazlewood Castle specimen in North Yorkshire. It is situated in the castle grounds; its lower branches have layered, producing many young yew trees still attached to the parent plant. It is likely that many years ago the layering of branches was helped by gardeners to produce the desired effect as can be seen today. The result is that a huge circle of trees has been formed from the branches radiating out from the parent tree. The outer branches are clipped to form a hedge. Its outer circumference is an impressive 96 yards. It is a similar tree to the great yew at Shugborough Park, Staffordshire. Hazlewood castle is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and the chapel was once part of a monastery. The castle also overlooks Towton battlefield (1461). Today the castle is a fine hotel. Guests and staff have reported seeing ghostly figures there from time to time. One sighting is of a monk who walks from the castle and disappears into

the yew tree!

This is a very important yew tree in Yorkshire, and indeed in England (pictured left). Its true historic significance has yet to be established. It is located about 12 miles west of York.



The incredible Hazlewood Castle Yew

When thinking of where to search for yews, most people will automatically think of churchyard locations or other ecclesiastical sites, indeed, they are usually the best places to look. Important though these sites are, veteran or ancient yews may also be found in hedgerows or even fields. The two ancient yews at Fountains Abbey are in fact in a field location, and some distance from the abbey itself. Incidentally, I noted that there are several natural springs in the immediate vicinity of the two ancient Fountains Abbey yews, and I think that historically there is a link between these springs and the yews. As most readers will be aware, yews were often planted next to, or in close proximity to natural springs. These not only helped travellers to locate clean drinking water, they also provided a little shelter. Hedgerow yews are few and far between, but can be found occasionally. Whenever ancient hedgerows are seen, it's worth taking particular notice in case there are any yews within it. Man did not plant these ancient hedgerows. They are the remnant strips of ancient woodland that have been left to form the field boundaries when woodlands were cleared.

This ancient hedgerow yew in north Yorkshire (pictured below) has probably been dead for a hundred years or more. If left alone by man it will take another century for it to decompose



fully. It can be seen that many summers have bleached the gnarled bole white. As when it was alive, it continues to provide an important natural habitat and larder for many birds, mammals and invertebrates.

Several good examples of yew trees (as well as one old juniper) can be found in St Martins churchyard at Allerton Mauleverer in North Yorkshire. Anyone visiting the site to look at the yews will not be disappointed.

St. Michaels and Our Lady church at Wragby (next to Nostel Priory) is also worth a visit, as there are several fine yews to be seen which date back to the early 18th century.

In South Yorkshire, the well-documented Thryft House Farm yew on the outskirts of Sheffield is an ancient specimen. Although today it is situated in a private garden, it is thought that it was once in a boundary hedgerow. In Saxon times (and later) such trees were sometimes referred to in documents to help define parish boundaries, and boundaries of land between different owners. I consider this tree to be of similar age, or older than the two celebrated ancient yews at Fountains Abbey, and therefore among the oldest living trees in Yorkshire.



The Thryft House Farm Yew (left) still manages to survive in it's changing environment.

To the west of Doncaster there is a region particularly suitable for yew trees because of the shallow clay topsoil overlaying the magnesium limestone. This includes the Don Gorge area. Pot Ridings wood on the edge of the Don Gorge contains many 18th and 19th century yews, and in addition, many of the local halls and country houses have some interesting specimen yews. Also, to the north of Doncaster is Howell Wood, with scores of yews dating back to the mid 18th century.

The largest yew tree to be found in the Doncaster borough is situated on the edge of private woodland in the village of High Melton and has a trunk girth of 12 feet 10 inches³.

A few miles south of Doncaster, but still in South Yorkshire is Roche Abbey. Here yews abound, and the enthusiast should allow the best part of a day to view, examine and admire these mysterious trees. Some yews are clinging to the limestone cliffs with their roots fixed in the rock face. Others can be seen in the partly accessible semi-natural ancient woodland adjacent to the abbey by following the public footpath. Good examples of yews showing their regenerative ability can be seen, eg. branch layering. The majority of the yews are in the 100-300 year age group, with a few likely to be older.



A tree that has not read the books! This Roche Abbey yew clings to a limestone crag seemingly without the need for any soil.



If only they could talk! A Roche Abbey yew engulfs the remains of a boundary wall.

Although these yews are not ancient, they are nevertheless very interesting. By studying these specimens it helps to form an understanding of their growth habits and characteristics.

With regard to estimating the age of yews, I always bear in mind the adage: It is easy to overestimate the age of a young yew tree, and easy to underestimate the age of an old one!

I hope this short article on Yorkshire yews will encourage other like-minded people to go out and discover more yews and record them.

More information on most of the yews mentioned can be seen on the web site. (www.ancient-yew.org)

References

- 1 &2 Chetan A, & Brueton D. (1994) *The Sacred Yew* p90 &85 Arkana Penguin Books.
- 3 Pretty E A (2001) *Notable and Venerable Trees in the Doncaster Borough* p5 Doncaster Local history Library. (www.doncaster.gov.uk/-) Notable and Venerable Trees.