

Hampshire Yews – Compton Downs

From Bell and Varley's 1909 Hampshire: "A delightful ramble in early summer is to follow Silkstede Lane along to the Downs. From the head of the lane a splendid prospect opens wide before you. You can follow straight on past tumuli, and the so-called Oliver's Battery, to Winchester, or, turning right, a charming walk, fringed with splendid yews, leads to Compton and Twyford."

Travelling along the road from Romsey to Winchester (A3090) turn off and head east on the road signposted to Otterbourne, The second turning on the left is Silkstead Lane and there is a narrow strip of grass just as you turn, suitable for parking at OS185/SU446243. A walk of about four miles takes in splendid views and many yews

Walk north on the narrow road and at Silkstead Manor Farm the road turns into a deep sunken lane. The farmstead was initially formed in the 13th century by Prior Silkstede, of St Swithun's monastery in Winchester, who used its produce to feed the monks. Prior Silkstede Chapel can be found in Winchester Cathedral. Carry on upwards towards Yew Hill to just beyond where the power cables cross the lane (SU449254). Approximately 900 paces after leaving the car is a group of five yews on the east side. The largest of these is a hollow male, with a girth of 15' 11" at its narrowest point near to the ground.



A few paces further north the female yew (below left) girths 12' at 2'. Many smaller yew are passed before the large male yew (below right) growing up from the west bank (SU450258) and measuring 13' 3" at 1'.



Continue along the track to the next large yew (right) on the east bank, its girth 13' 6" near to the ground, whilst opposite is a group of four yews, some growing on the side of a small pit.

Carry on along the sunken track and at the reservoir turn right, heading south east, and follow the path down towards Compton. The views across Compton Downs are quite spectacular and here small girthed yews line the west side of the path, but are difficult to reach due to dense undergrowth.

After about ¾ mile you reach two gates, one on the right which is the way back and one in front which you go through. Immediately there is a footpath on the left which takes you down the escarpment and into the woods, where after a few paces the track branches to the north west and south east.



The path heading down to the northwest has nineteen yews growing along the north side. The most interesting are amongst the first six in this group. A male (below left 2nd tree) girthed 12' 10" at the root crown and a female (below right) which is hollowed out with an internal root, also measuring 12' 10". Many of the yew along this part of the path have been storm damaged (windthrow).



On the path heading down to the south east, a further twenty yew grow on the north side of the path with the first large tree about midway down, completely hollow but with its outer shell almost intact. Girth was 14' 4" near to the root crown.



Nearby is another much hollowed female (below) with almost half the outer shell missing. Girth was 13' at the narrowest point, approximately 4' 6" from the ground.



The path continues down and reaches a junction. You now continue heading south easterly and up a slight incline with younger yew lining the north side.

At the next footpath junction do not take the path which leads back to the top road. Instead keep going, following the yew lined path until you reach the next junction where one of the larger male yews with a girth of 10' 4" has a fine internal stem.



The path heading north leads to Compton church while you take the south path, which emerges from the yew lined walk and up a steep climb to emerge on the top road known as Hurdle Way. Proceed north west in order to make your way back to the gate. The houses that line the road contain some large garden yews.

At the gate, go through and turn immediately south west and then through another gate where you will see a group of six yew, the largest having four main branches, one of which has been storm damaged and snapped. This female yew measured 14' 3" at the root crown.



Follow this track down to a junction with Silkstead Lane, turn south and head back to your car.

The yew below is the best example of several that show the feature of both internal and external growth separated by a layer of the decaying sapwood of the original trunk.



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