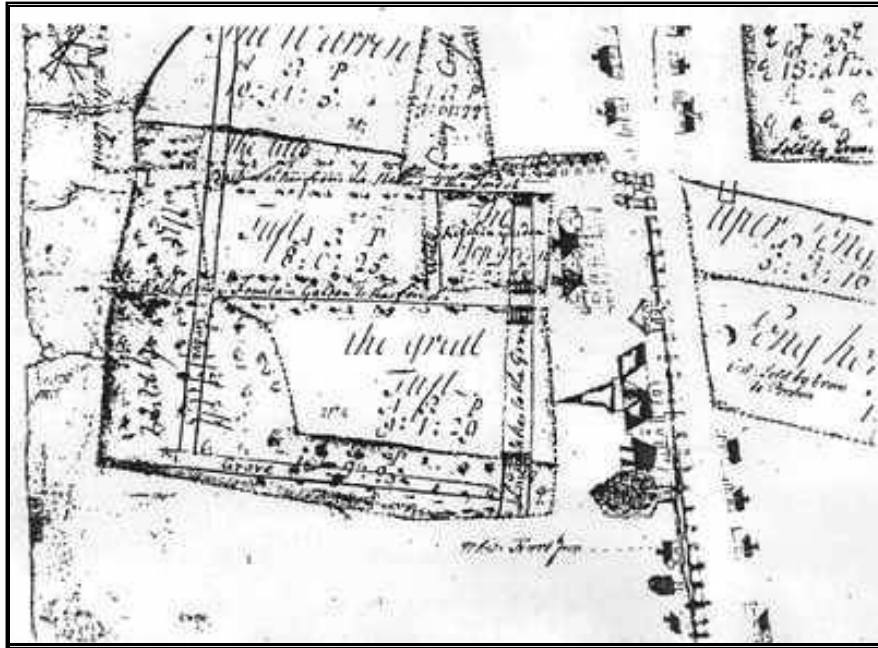


WOODFORD Essex – History of a lost yew

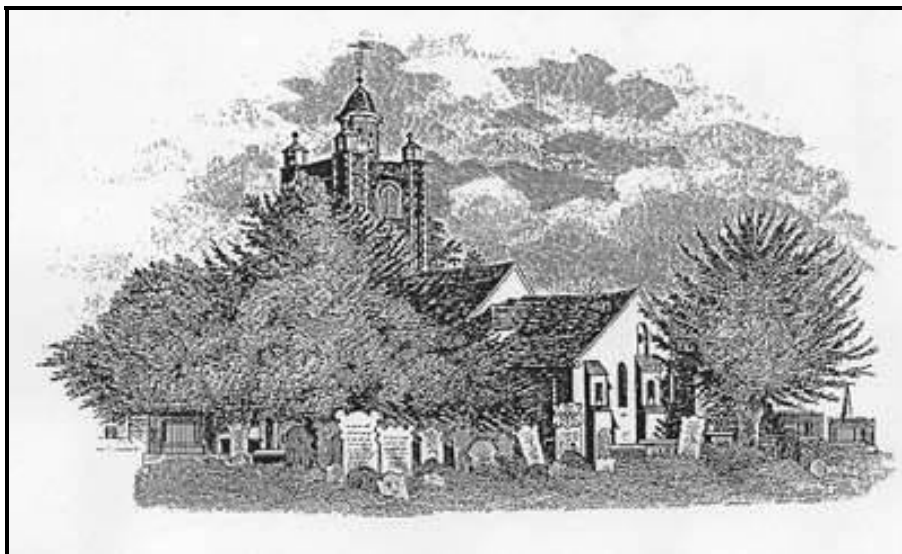
Compiled by Tim Hills from material collected by Dave Martin and others

The history of St Mary's Church, Woodford (erroneously called St Margaret in many early records) has been well documented in a succession of publications. It was once a country parish, but had to respond to an increasing population by extending the church. The tree's fate seems to have been determined by a combination of factors: (1) damage caused during building work (2) fires lit inside its hollow spaces (3) hurricane force winds.

The earliest records of the yew date from the end of the 18th century, but it is possible that the prominent tree shown on the south side of the church in this manorial map of 1700 is the yew in question.¹



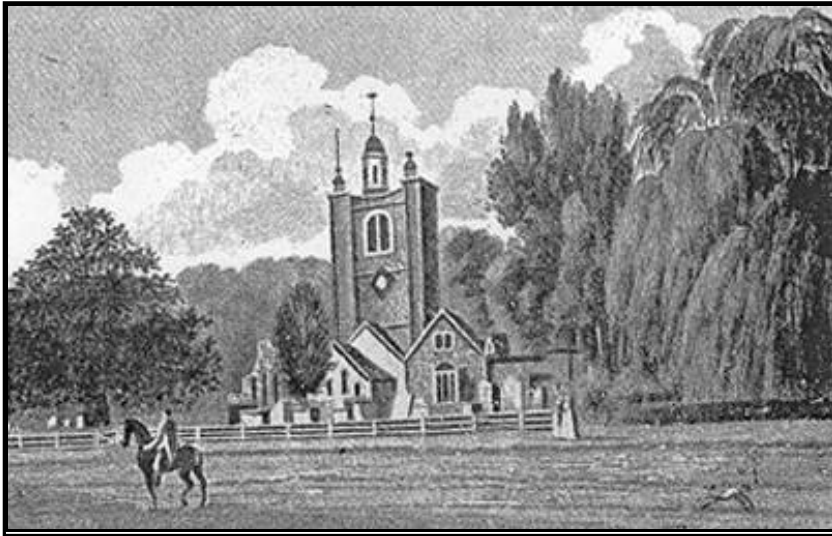
It was Lysons **1795/6** who first recognised this as a significant tree. He described it as Woodford's "oldest inhabitant.....a yew-tree of remarkable growth. Its girth, at three feet from the ground, is eleven feet nine inches; at four feet and a half from the ground, fourteen feet three inches. The spread of its boughs forms a circumference of about 180 feet."²



This **1814** sketch by John Ogborne shows the fine flourishing tree on the south side of the church.³

The **1817** enlargements to the church do not appear to have affected the tree and in **1848** it could still be described as “.....a remarkably fine old yew-tree.”⁴

In **1876** its girth was recorded as 14ft at 3ft⁵, an increase of 2' 3" in about 80 years. The illustrations shown below are thought to date from about this time.



After this time there is a lack of the pictorial evidence, coinciding perhaps with the start of the tree's decline, for in **1889** further enlargement of the church took place. Eileen Ward⁶ reports that the tree was severely lopped during the 19th century to “allow for the building of the south aisle.”

1959 “Recent measurements of the girth show at three feet, fifteen feet one inch and at four and a half feet, seventeen feet one inch. Estimates of the tree's age varies between 400 and 1000 years.”⁷

These measurements show the following increases in girth: of 1' 1" in 83 years (measured at 3') and of 2' 10" in 164 years (measured at 4' 6").

1969 The church was almost totally destroyed following an arson attack,⁶ and although it did not destroy the yew, it was perhaps damage caused at this time that reduced it to “a remnant of a giant yew tree”, though still large enough to shade the south entrance to the church. (**1973**)⁸

Two misleading measurements of the yew, if taken out of context, might lead one to believe that one of the 50 largest yews in Britain once grew at Woodford. Eileen Ward's article ⁶ describes how the yew was "gnarled and leaning with stunted foliage at the bottom with a girth of 30 feet." Winifred Paramour reported that "its lower boughs measure over twenty feet. It had been larger but over a dozen boughs were trimmed off to make way for the enlarged church."⁹

Both are accounts of the yew at some earlier time and my interpretation is that the tree had a vast spread of roots, lower branches and twiggy growth. The girth of 30' must have included this root material, and was perhaps recorded before 'a dozen boughs were trimmed', reducing the 'lower boughs' measurement to 20'. The more realistic measurements however, are those contained in the table below.

| Date | Girth 3ft | Girth 4 ½ feet |
|------|--------------|---|
| 1795 | 11ft 9inches | 14ft 3inches (Lysons) |
| 1876 | 14ft | (Meredith-personal correspondence) |
| 1959 | 15ft 1inch | 17ft 1inch (Gander – original source not known) |

In **1987** the tree was reported to have been damaged by a series of fires "in the ancient cleft" and in this weakened state it was unable to withstand the Great Gale which "finally finished our most ancient of St. Mary's trees."

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¹ An Introduction to the Parish of Woodford: A brief history of St Mary's church, with information about some of the past residents who are commemorated in the church and churchyard. Compiled by Georgina Green. Printed by the Woodford Historical Society 1993

² 'Woodford', *The Environs of London: volume 4: Counties of Herts, Essex & Kent* (1796), pp. 273-287. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>

³ Published in Elizabeth Ogborne's *History of Essex*

⁴ *A Topographical Dictionary of England* pp. 652-54

⁵ Personal correspondence with A. Meredith

⁶ An article by Eileen Ward in the Easter church magazine 2004
www.stmarywoodford.org.uk

⁷ Woodford and its Church. Allan H. Gander, Publisher Rev. J.C. Wansey

⁸ *Woodford: Religious History, A History of the County of Essex; Volume 6* pp. 352-58s
<http://www.british-history.ac.uk>

⁹ St Mary's Woodford by Winifred Paramour, published by St Mary's, Woodford (1994)
Since information and anecdote have freely passed from one publication to another it has not always been possible to pinpoint the date or original source of all quotes.