

Copy of letter received from Forestry Commission, Alice Holt Lodge, Farnham.
14th January, 1977.

Dear Mr. Williams,

The Hambledon Church Yews. The smaller one is of interest as a remarkably clean, clear, solid bole now 19'11" round (at 5 feet). It has grown only 4" in 17 years. Few trees other than yew could do this and remain alive. Obviously it has slowed with age and may well have started at the standard 1"/year of most trees and many yews, but even if made the first ten feet in 100 years then decelerated ~~slowly~~ gradually, it would have to be by now 400 years old.

The real veteran, 30'6" round at about 2 feet up is typical of many of that sort of size in Churchyards through Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hants., Wilts., Somerset, Gloucester, Monmouth, Brecon, Merioneth and Denbigh. There are very few outside that crescent-shaped band.

It is, as they all are, very very hollow. However, it is the enormous strength of yew wood that enables these trees to hold together like this for centuries. Where the heaviest low branch joins the shell there is a much thickened slab of solid wood, and although the shell as a whole seems thin, it probably has enough strength to hold that crown together. The internal rot will spread only very slowly and each year there is a new skin of strong wood. If growth is a little slower than that on the younger tree, it will ~~be~~ be about a solid inch all round every 25 years, an inch with tremendous tensile strength.

The casualty rate amongst these big hollow old yews is extremely small - I've not known one collapse in my 25 years tree-watching - although they must go in the end.

This tree constitutes no danger, for the big low branches have no distance to fall and would creak and groan down slowly whilst if an upper one ~~to~~ were to fall away it would be cushioned by those below. The only preventive measure which is sometimes done is to support the outer part of the long, low branches by a prop - usually of yew, perhaps a branch cut from the same tree. Bracing with high tensile wire in eye-bolts, used in old oaks and so on, is expensive and not really suitable in this case as it needs balanced branches, rising. The centre cannot be used here as anchor as that would put the added strain on the weakest part of the shell.

In sum, beyond discouraging picnicking or lying about under the tree, it is best left to come slowly to pieces in its own time, and it may take a very long time indeed.

No one could guarantee anything of course, but I think it in the same sort of repair, disrepair and decrepitude as scores more about which nothing is contemplated so far as I know.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

Alan Mitchell.