The ITCHEN ABBAS yew between 2010 and 2024 - Peter Norton

Itchen Abbas takes its name from the river beside which it stands (The Itchen), together with the manor that was owned by the Benedictine Abbey of Nunnaminster, founded by King Alfred the Great's wife, Ealhswith. It was also known as St Mary's Abbey until the dissolution, but the Abbey mill and other parts are still in use today by Winchester council.

The present church at Itchen Abbas is Victorian, built on the site of a Norman church, which may itself have been built on the site of the earlier Saxon wooden church, of which nothing remains.

In the churchyard and beneath the shadow of the yew are many graves, one of which is that of John Hughes, a gypsy and horse thief who was caught stealing in the village of Itchin Abbas and was hanged at Westminster for horse stealing, and is said to be the last man in England hanged for that offence (March 1825).

I first visited Itchin Abbas in October 2010 and discovered six yews, with the largest east of the church, male with a girth of 26' 1" at 6" from the top of the mound (farthest point away from the church and the yew's east side). On the path leading to the porch was a male which girthed 9' 0" at 1' and four young yew to the west of the church.

This ancient male yew has had huge side limbs removed, which can be seen in the photographs. The crown has been reduced in height since earlier historic photographs and looking around today some of the lower branches are also hollow. All in all this tree does look in fairly good condition.

Whatever this yew's age - which in the grand scheme of things matters not - it has seen the rise and fall of empires. Whichever way you look at it, this mysterious, gnarled, ancient tree has captivated many people in its vast lifetime and will continue to do so long into its future.

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