

# THE LOST KILMINGTON YEWS (Devon and Wiltshire)

## Kilminster, Wiltshire

In Chetan and Brueton's *The Sacred Yew* (1994) is a gazetteer entry for a male yew with a girth of 22' growing south of the church at Kilminster, Wiltshire.

Wiltshire's Kilminster is just a mile from the Somerset border, so it is perhaps not surprising that the entry for its church should appear in the 1836 *History and antiquities of Somersetshire* by William Phelps.

Phelps described St Mary's church as follows: "The tower contains three bells; the date of the largest is 1584. In the churchyard is an ancient raised tomb, and a venerable yew-tree." This no longer exists and there is no known pictorial record.

## Kilminster, Devon

It was in 1890 that the following account appeared in *The Western antiquary: or, Devon and Cornwall notebook* / edited by W. H. K. Wright v.1 1881/82 Vol X July 1890/July 91:

"In the churchyard at St Giles, at Kilminster, there is an old yew-tree. It is hollow, and the curious features about it are the twisted saplings, which spring from the roots, and using the body of the decayed tree as a wall up which to run, carry sap to the branches above. In the time of the Saxons there was a great fight in this neighbourhood, and tradition says that the name Kilminster is a corruption of Kil-maen-ton, or the town at the stony burial place. The local belief is that this yew-tree was planted at the time to mark the site of the slaughter; if so, it is hundreds of years older than the church."

*Notes and Queries for Devon and Cornwall* published its first volume in 1900. In article 33 on p74, the following is recorded, taken from Pulman's *Book of the Axe*, p717:

"I also give a list of the headstones in the churchyard, not omitting to observe that the yew tree is an arboreal curiosity and very old. Within its hollow trunk are twisted stems, thrown up from the roots, through which sap is conveyed to the branches – a curious effort of nature to supply the place of the decayed trunk. Tradition says that the yew was planted long before the church was built to mark the spot at which vast numbers of those slain at the Battle of Brunenburgh were buried." The popular belief that Kilminster derived its name from so many "men" being "killed" there has long been exploded, and all modern authorities agree in thinking that the Battle of Brunenburgh took place somewhere in the North - probably not far from the Solway Firth. This old tree, however, was of interest from the tradition associated with it as well as from its venerable age."

A later edition of *Notes and Queries* reported that "by now only a stump remained, described as an arboreal curiosity and very old. It fell on the night of 3rd/4th March 1935."

The 1897 sepia print shows the yew, its decayed trunk revealing an impressively large internal stem.

The photo suggests that, like the Wiltshire yew, its girth was around 22' girth, but allowing for the lost portion of the bole, would have once been closer to 25'.

