

The Shaston Yew

Shaftesbury, famous for its Gold Hill (Hovis 1973 advert) and its Saxon hill-top town origins, for it's here the town of Shaftesbury probably begins with the decision of King Alfred to construct a burh on the limestone spur, around the late 870s. Then came the first religious house for women, built in the late 880s after Alfred celebrated his victory over the Danes in the Battle of Eddington in AD878 and founded the nunnery with his daughter as Abbess, which went on to become one of the richest religious houses in England until 1539, when it was abandoned during the Reformation.

The Burh stretched out along the limestone spur and at the western edge, tucked away at the top of St John's Hill, is Bury Litton, so marked on maps - an often-overlooked, partially hidden cemetery that holds centuries of mystery.

Believed to be the site of St John's parish church, which was not recorded until 1272, and while there is no mention of a Saxon church, that's not to say there wasn't, as the first churches were all wood, only that the first stone-built church could be attributed to a later king or bishop during the mid-13th century and since been demolished as it was described in 1774 as "ruinated beyond the memory of man," the site was marked by a local cartographer as a churchyard on a 1799 map. St John's Parish was united in the 15th Century with nearby St James's Parish, and the hilltop burial ground served St James's for some period of time until closure. More recently, a radar survey revealed what could be a hidden wall and another mysterious structure beneath the ground. Could these be the last traces of the old church?

But of national importance, still silently growing, a very special and vast venerable male yew tree, a green monument that has borne silent witness to countless generations. Planted by the Saxons, perhaps, or even pre-Saxon, when the Celts first embraced Christianity. Who can accurately gauge the age, as all the elder yew that I have ever seen have been hollow and why would anyone want to drill into a monument such as this just to satisfy oneself as to an age?

Just one look at this venerable male will tell you all you need to know, there is no written history, not that you need something written from long ago to see that this fine unusual specimen is old, very old, its limbs spreading out wide and close to the ground above scattered headstones, Is it regrowth from an old stump or an old hollowing yew that collapsed? It has certainly been like this for long enough for substantial newer upright branches to grow through the tangle of very red old branches and there is even evidence of burning. When you view the twists and turns, the humps and bumps and how the wood flows and the message it gives, well, to those that listen and understand. This is yet another venerated yew with tangible connections to folklore and history, and hopefully, it will be here for others to gaze at and marvel at in a few more hundred years.

Fairly recently a campaign by residents, supported by the town council, was to "care for this peaceful, ancient and sacred site as it deserves" resulted in laurel, which could choke the yews, being cut back, snowdrops planted, and pathways created between the old headstones, and now it's a peaceful green space, perfect for quiet reflection, a haven for contemplation, nature and wildlife.

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