

THE FOUNTAINS ABBEY YEWS

Compiled by Tim Hills

The Fountains Abbey Yews, frequently referred to as the Seven Sisters, have been recorded and venerated for centuries. Here once stood a group of seven trees “so near each other as to form a cover almost equal to a thatched roof.” Five of the seven still stood when Strutt recorded this scene early in the 19th century. Although Strutt was a landscape painter and etcher rather than a botanical draughtsman, his recording of other well known yews is so accurate that we can be sure that these too present a good likeness. In the engraving below Strutt has included thick branches freshly cut from one of the yews; he was all too aware of the “despoiling axe” and of limbs “torn away for petty purposes.”



These appear in various editions of *Sylva Britannica* between 1822 and 1838. Both images may be subject to copyright.

The last of the Seven Sisters

Only two of the Seven Sisters remain. The largest (right) was measured in 2002 as 21' 9" at 1', bulging to above 30' at 5'. Next to it is a propped yew, with parts lying on the ground. This is more difficult to assess, but is likely to be fragments of a once larger tree.



Edwin Pretty –2009



Tim Hills - 2002

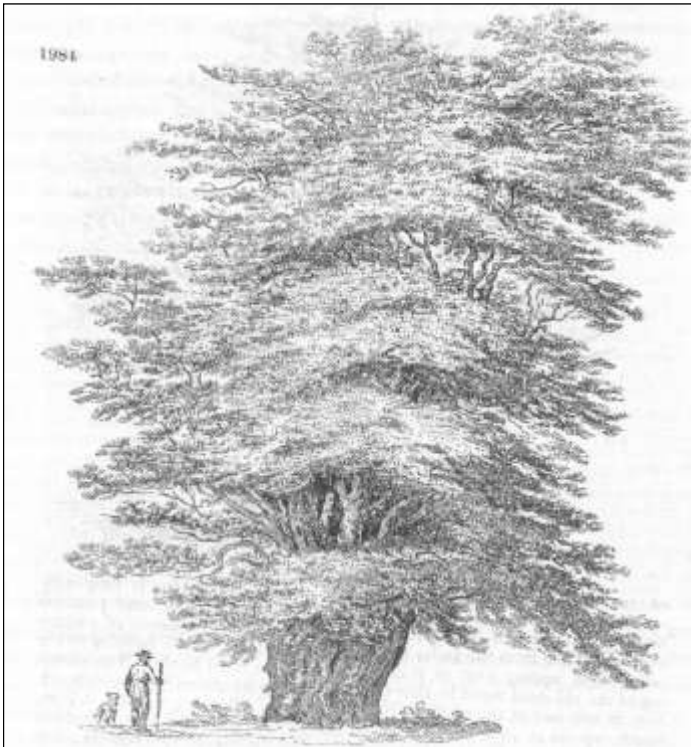
Allen Meredith, whose years of research features in *The Sacred Yew* by Chetan and Brueton, visited Fountains Abbey in the 1980s. He was searching for ancient yews that appeared in historical records he had researched. At his first visit in 1983 he was surprised to find nobody who had heard of or could remember anything at all about any old yew trees. Using some of the records that appear later in this article he searched the landscape, looking for the 'declivity' (downward slope) of a hill overlooking the Abbey. Here he found these two yews "one surrounded by undergrowth of nettles, elder etc. and near a stone wall."

During a second visit on 2nd January 1984 he recorded that "the largest yew measured about 22 feet in girth at two feet from the ground, and at four or five feet up the girth increased to at least 25 feet. I did not measure at this height due to undergrowth, the tree appeared quite healthy with the usual hollows and decay for such an old tree. The other yew is almost in a prone position, despite its state is recovering very well, but may need a little support, much decayed yew wood near this tree, hopefully this will be left alone, as it shows part of the original trunk, the ancient remains are evidence for future investigation. A farm building is opposite the yews. It's almost certain that these two are part of the original seven."

Meredith also noted that both survivors are female.

Thanks to his discovery that two of the Seven Sisters had survived, the National Trust are now aware of their significance. At the end of a lengthy correspondence, NT adviser on Conservation and Woodlands (January 30th 1985) wrote: ".....to make quite sure that all concerned are aware of the importance of these trees I have sent copies of your letter and of the map to the Land Agent who manages Studley Royal, and have asked him to.....take any steps necessary to preserve them for as long as possible."

These Strutt engravings (c 1822) appear to show the same tree. Its position in relation to the “paltry little stable” seen in the engraving on the right and in the recent photo below suggests that this is the large yew still standing today.



As well as his drawings/engravings of the yews at Fountains Abbey, Strutt also made the following observations, as relevant today as they were nearly 200 years ago.

“.....It is such thoughts as these that invest the venerable Yew Trees, the silent witnesses of the changes of time, and the decays of nature, with so much interest, and renders their preservation so desirable. They do not, however, appear to be treated with the reverence due to them: a low wall hides their weather beaten boles on the side where they would otherwise be seen to the most advantage, and a paltry little stable is erected almost beneath their branches; on which, worst injury of all, the marks of the despoiling axe are but too visible, and the ground underneath is strewn with fragments of larger limbs, probably torn away for petty purposes, to which meaner wood might have been applied with equal utility.”

Other yews at Fountains Abbey

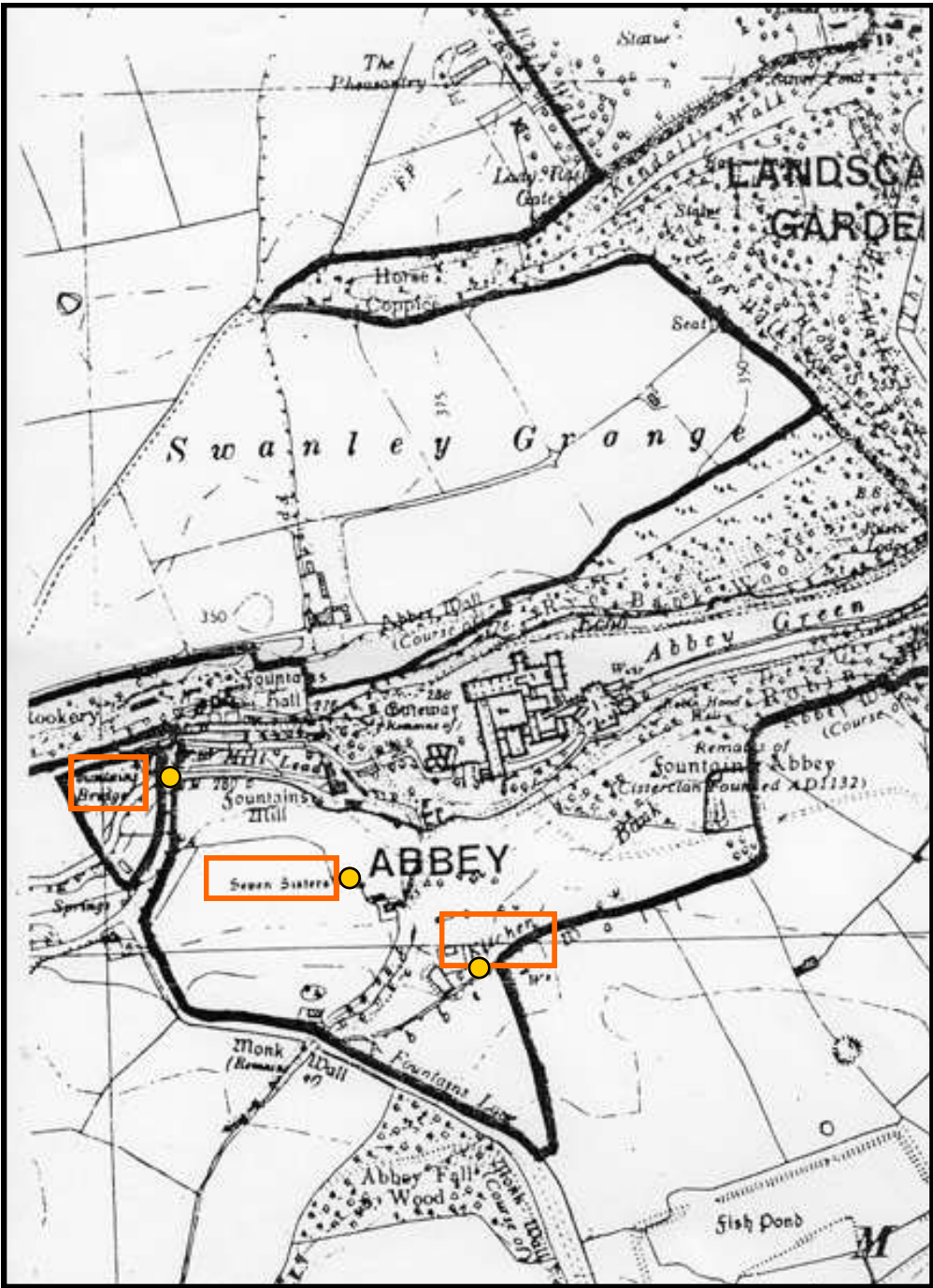
As well as the Seven Sisters, we know that there were once more yews to be found in this area. Miss H.M.Wilmhurst, writing in 1952 (source unknown) provides the following information: "I left the old tree near the bridge, passed a second, which an estate worker told me had once been blown and restarted itself from a branch, he also showed me where a third had flourished and on up the hillside through a farmyard to where the second of the original sisters still thrives, together with another yew, not quite so large."

In this account Wilmhurst obviously regards this "old tree near the bridge" as one of the Seven Sisters. The bridge however is about 200 metres from the site of the Seven Sisters (see map p5), so if the original seven did grow in close proximity to one another, then this single tree near the bridge was not one of them. An account of 1851 (see p8) backs this up, describing it as one of "coeval antiquity" with the Seven Sisters. Because this tree grew by the path leading to the Abbey, it is perhaps not surprising that visitors in search of the seven sisters looked no further than this. Even the postcard above (c1920) described it incorrectly as "The last of the Seven Yew Trees."

The last known written record of this tree, also from 1952, described it as a "large one in chains and supports, found near the bridge." We do not know when it finally succumbed, nor whether it was to old age, the elements or the axe.



There are no obvious signs of the tree Wilmhurst described as having “blown and restarted itself from a branch,” but the “place where a third had flourished” might have been this stump, discovered in 2008 by Edwin Pretty. He found “a lone yew on an ancient boundary” with an estimated girth of about 12ft. “There is a natural spring nearby, and there may be an historic connection between the two. I wonder if, at one time, there were seven springs in the field as there are still several to be seen today.” The stump is found approximately 180 yards south of the famous two trees; “from memory, I estimate that it is located just below the 'K' in kitchen (see map below) on the south Abbey wall..... about 100 yards from the road-side gate.”



Earliest account of yews at Fountains Abbey

At what stage the title of “seven sisters” was given to the group of yews is not known. The first account of yew trees at this site goes back almost to the founding of the Monastery in 1132. A record contained in *Foundation history of Fountains (Narration de fundatione Fontanis monasterii)* is attributed to Hugh – monk of Kirkstall. Some go as far as to say that Hugh received verbal accounts from a monk called Serlo, who was reputedly so old that he could have witnessed first hand the events of 1132/33, but it is thought more likely that Hugh would have relied on written documents rather than oral testimony. (Janet E.Burton *The Monastic Order in Yorkshire 1069-1215*)

Hugh’s contribution, contained in a detailed account from 1758 written by Dr John Burton in *Monasticon Eboracense*, is quoted by many 19th century historian/botanists. It is reproduced below as it appears in Gilpin’s *Remarks on forest scenery* 1834.

“At Christmas, the Archbishop, being at Ripon, (anno 1132) assigned to the monks some lands in the patrimony of St Peter, about three miles west of that place, for the erecting of a monastery. The spot of ground had never been inhabited, unless by wild beasts, being overgrown with wood and brambles, lying between two steep hills and rocks, covered with wood on all sides, more proper for a retreat for wild beasts than the human species. This was called Skeldale, that is, the vale of Skell, a rivulet running through it from the west to the eastward part of it. The Archbishop also gave to them a neighbouring village, called Sutton Richard.

The Prior of St Mary's, at York, was chosen Abbot by the monks, being the first of this monastery of Fountains, with whom they withdrew into this uncouth desert, without any house to shelter them in the winter season, or provisions to subsist on; but entirely depending on Divine Providence.

There stood a large elm in the midst of the vale, on which they put some thatch or straw, and under that they lay, eat, and prayed, the Bishop for a time supplying them with bread, and the rivulet with drink. Part of the day some spent in making wattles, to erect a little oratory, whilst others cleared some ground, to make a little garden. But it is supposed that they soon changed the shelter of their elm for that of seven yew trees, growing on the declivity of the hill, on the south side of the abbey, all standing at this present time, except the largest, which was blown down about the middle of the last century. They are of extraordinary size. The trunk of one of them is twenty-six feet six inches in circumference, at the height of three feet from the ground; and they stand so near each other, as to form a cover almost equal to a thatched roof. Under these trees, we are told by tradition, the monks resided, till they built the monastery; which seems to be very probable, when we consider how little a yew tree increases in a year, and to what a bulk these are grown. And as the hill side was covered with wood, which is now cut down, except these trees, it seems as if they were left standing, to perpetuate the memory of the monks' habitation there, during the first winter of their residence."

Anyone who has sheltered beneath the thick foliage of a healthy yew will have experienced how rain is deflected to the outer extremity of the canopy, and be aware that a grove could provide shelter for many people. Also our knowledge of the possibility of great ages for some yews means there is no reason why there could not have been a grove of already well established yews in the 12th century, a fact acknowledged by many later writers and botanists.

Historical accounts of the yews at Fountains Abbey

The following are some of the accounts gathered by Meredith and others.

1650 approx

The largest yew is blown down – in *Monasticum Eboracense* by Dr John Burton (1758) is the following information: “.....all standing at this time, except the largest, which was blown down about the middle of the last century.”

1770

In the 1776 edition of Evelyn's *Sylva*, Dr Hunter notes that: “There are six remarkable trees of this sort now growing on the hill above Fountains Abbey near Rippon, which in 1770 measured in circumference, (1) 13 ft (2) 18ft (3) 19ft (4) 21ft (5) 25ft (6) 26ft 6in, under these very trees a number of monks resided until they built the monastery of Fountains in 1133.”

1808

The Monthly Magazine Sept 1st p183

“There are now growing within 300 yards of the old Gothic ruins of Fountain's Abbey..... seven very large yew trees, generally called the Seven Sisters, whose exact ages cannot be accurately learned, though it has been handed down from father to son that these seven yews were standing in the year 1088. And it is said, that when the Great Fountains Abbey was building, which is 700 feet long, and was finished in 1283, the masons used to work their stones, during the hot summers, under the shade of these trees. The circumference of the Seven Sisters, when measured by a curious traveller, were of the following sizes:—The smallest tree, round its body, five yards twelve inches ; four others are from five yards and a half to seven yards and a half; the sixth is nine yards and a half and the seventh is eleven yards and nineteen inches in circumference, being two yards and ten inches larger than the great yew-tree now growing in the church-yard at Gresford.”

1820

J.G.Strutt recorded the largest yew with a girth of 26ft 6ins at 3ft from the ground.

1843

The Penny Magazine

“The dimensions of the tree in the cut are as follows; height fifty feet, girth at three feet from the ground, twenty-two feet eight inches; at five feet, twenty-six feet five inches. It is the largest of the remaining five, and forms the end of the row. There is reason to believe that the fine old tree represented in the cut was planted before the Saxon period of our history was brought to a close by the Norman conquest.”

1856

A Guide to Ripon, Harrogate, Fountains Abbey, Bolton Priory, and Several places of interest in their vicinity by John Richard Walbran

“On a little knoll, above the mill, stands the remnant of the YEW TREES, that are said, by tradition, to have sheltered the monks before the erection of the Abbey; which, in some measure, they may be said to have survived. Their original number is forgot. From the appellation of " the Seven Sisters," by which the trees are always known, they may not have lately exceeded that number ; though one of coeval antiquity stands at the south end of the Abbey bridge near the mill..... One, and the greater part of another, fell in the great gale of the 7th of January, 1839. Another rears but a withered sapless trunk. The rest vegetate with astonishing vigour, and last year bore their accustomed supply of berries; though their giant stems are but mouldering skeletons.

Candolle, deriving his information from Pennant, who stated, that in 1770 one of them was 1214 lignes in diameter, supposes that they were then upwards of twelve centuries old; but, as we cannot ascertain when they ceased to expand, and the process of decomposition commenced, this computation probably falls far short of their actual age. The tortuosity of their rifted boles forbids an accurate measurement, but one of them is at least 25 feet in circumference.”

1857

English and Scottish Sketches

Oliver Prescott Hiller - 'An American'

"The building was erected : the Abbey nourished in grandeur for several hundred years : it has now gone to decay, and nought is left but its ruined walls. But the old yew trees (or some of them) still stand, and still are green. Such are the works of man, compared with those of God. One of these yews is remarkable: though still living, it is a mere shell; but, what is interesting, two young shoots have sprung up from its roots within the body of the tree, and attaching themselves to the trunk, seem fondly to cling to it and hold it up. What prettier emblem could be pictured of filial duty and affection! This tree, in the opinion of M. de Candolle and other eminent botanists, must be some 1300 years old: it is the most interesting specimen of the yew species in England."

1868

Trees of Old England Grindon

"For what more sublime picture of the endurance of God's kingdom could be selected, or what emblem more exact of the immortality of man? To this day stand three old yews beneath which the founders of Fountains Abbey sat themselves down in rural council. Ages have passed away since the sound of vespers fell from those beautiful aisles upon the ear of the wayfarer who lingered to gather cowslips in the meads around, or to note the tender blue of the innumerable forget-me-not, or to mark the flow of the tranquil river, and its darting fishes; - everything is gone now except the sweet and solemn requiem pronounced by ruin, everything except those grand old trees, which seem capable of witnessing the rise and fall of just such another fabric, were some architect to tempt them with renewal of the old magnificence."

1882

Forestry Journal Curious and Historic Trees

"Three of the original yew-trees remain near the ruins of Fountains Abbey in the little valley of the Skell, a beautiful site for the grandest and most extensive ecclesiastical ruins in Great Britain. The valley is now a charming shrubbery attached to Studley Park, the residence of the Marquis of Ripon, well watered by a sparkling stream, from which the monks took the spotted trout that are native to this pure water."

1891

Measured by John Lowe, the results appear in his *The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* 1897.

"Of the six remaining trees which existed in Strutt's time (A.D. 1823) five only existed in 1891, and of these two were dead and uprooted.

No.1 is near the Abbey, at the foot of the hill. From measurements made by myself in 1891, its girth at 3 feet was 20 feet 10 inches; at 5 feet was 22 feet 6 inches : this greater girth is partly caused by the fissuring of the trunk. The tree has been broken by storms, and is much decayed on one side, and has a central dead trunk. From the fact of only one tree being mentioned, I suppose this to be the one referred to by Christison, (*Trans.Bot.Soc.Edin.*, 1893.) which in 1880, on the authority of the Rev. Mr. Brittleton, measured 18 feet 6 inches at 3 feet from the ground. If this is so, it has increased 1 foot 4 inches in girth in eleven years, which is highly improbable, except by means of a widening fissure.

It may be that this tree was one of six mentioned by Evelyn, as it is near enough to be included in the group, although not actually growing on the hill. Of the remaining trees, four still existing, two only are left standing. The largest of these, which we may call No. 2, is not so fine as the preceding, but is still a large tree. It girths at 2 feet from the ground 18 feet 5 inches ; at 4 feet, 25 feet 6 inches. It has two principal branches ; the larger much divided, many small ones and much 'spray.' It, like the foregoing, has a central dead trunk.

No. 3 is a much smaller and younger tree, but it also has a central dead trunk.

Near them No. 4 and No. 5 lie prostrate. It was impossible to measure them with any accuracy, as they lie somewhat deep in the soil and a measuring-tape could not be passed under them, but as nearly as I could determine they were both fully 30 feet in girth at 4 to 6 feet from the base. Above this they narrowed rapidly to half that circumference. They have three or four main branches measuring 20 to 24 inches in diameter at 12 feet from the base.

Judging from these dimensions there is every reason to suppose that the tree figured in Strutt's *Sylva* represents one of these two, but which, it is impossible to say. The one he figures measured 27 feet in girth in 1837, and therefore cannot be any of the other three which are now standing, as they do not come near to this in circumference. It is remarkable that in figuring the one, he should make no mention of the other equally large tree."

1983

Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal purchased from North Yorkshire County Council by the National Trust.

2002

My visit found both trees in fine health and I also noted that 5 new yews had been planted on a strip of land nearby, presumably in an attempt to replace the trees that have been lost and restore the “Seven Sisters”. It was alarming to see work being carried out on the farm building, since the smaller girthed prone tree almost touches its wall. It is to be hoped that the tree will be properly protected for the duration of the repair work, and that the building, which was erected when the yew was already an old tree, is not going to be used in such a way which might endanger the tree.

2008

Edwin Pretty found that the prop supporting the prone tree was bending under the weight. National Trust’s head of landscape, Michael Ridsdale wrote that he had “plans to support that limb.”

There is one additional known yew of note to be found in this area. It is set back from the main walk through the Studley Royal Water Gardens, behind a thinnish yew hedge. Its grid reference is given as SE279688. Competing with beech and sycamore for the last 150 years it has become very tall. It is marked on a 17th century estate map as a “big tree”, so it might well be 500 + in age. Girth is approximately 16ft.