

THE ANCIENT YEWS OF BRITAIN – OUR NEGLECTED HERITAGE

By Fiona Anderson

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As a new website is launched dedicated to veteran and ancient yews in the British Isles, Fiona Anderson traces the history of our interest of yews and discovers that not all is well with our oldest and most mysterious trees.

William Wordsworth was one of the first people to realise that there was something special about yews. 'There is a Yew-tree, pride of Lorton Vale,' he wrote in 1803, 'Which to this day stands single, in the midst/ Of its own darkness, as it stood of yore.'

Though half the size today, due to storm damage, the tree is still standing, as it has for at least a thousand years, in the midst of its own darkness in the village of Lorton in Cumbria. In the 17th century George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, preached under the tree, and in the 18th century John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, did likewise.



Most yew trees, though, are not lucky enough to have poets to eulogise them, or preachers to help them into the history books. Some have died or been felled, and many have simply been forgotten. Now a new group, the Ancient Yew Group, has been formed to search out and record the surviving old yew trees of Britain and Ireland, to highlight their importance and to encourage their proper management.

In the 17th century the writers John Evelyn and John Aubrey wrote about the size and age of old yews, and travellers such as Thomas Pennant did the same in the 18th century. In the 19th century botanical societies and botanists recorded old yews, and in 1890 Robert Hutchison wrote *On the Old and Remarkable Yew Trees in Scotland*.

The first person to record the locations of nearly 200 notable yews throughout Britain, however, was John Lowe, whose *The Yew Trees of Britain and Ireland* was published in 1896. Vaughan Cornish's *The Churchyard Yew and Immortality* followed in 1946, and EW Swanton's *The Yew Trees of England* in 1958, but it was not until the 1980s that yew trees began to capture widespread public imagination. This was due mostly to the work of one man, Allen Meredith, who claimed to have received information about yews in his dreams. For 15 years he followed up references and visited and measured hundreds of yews.

Meredith took his work to David Bellamy and in 1987 Bellamy's Conservation Foundation launched a campaign – still running today – to encourage the protection of ancient yews. The following year *Country Living* magazine asked its readers to report old yews, and many previously forgotten yews were brought to light.

Meredith's work was taken up by the media and culminated in 1994 with the publication of *The Sacred Yew*. Written by Anand Chetan and Diana Brueton, the book summarised Meredith's findings to date, and included a list of 404 ancient yew sites in Britain where the trees, he estimated, were more than 1,000 years old.

Many of the trees recorded by previous researchers were no longer to be found. A few had been blown down or damaged in storms, but most had been felled. The need to preserve the remaining trees became increasingly apparent.

In 2003 a number of yew enthusiasts, who had been following up and adding to Meredith's list, decided to pool their efforts and form the Ancient Yew Group. With support and funding from the Tree Register of the British Isles, they have now produced a website, www.ancient-yew.org, which contains details of 837 'ancient, veteran or significant' common yews, *Taxus baccata*, so far identified in England and Wales. Scotland and Ireland are still to come. Also documented are 170 'lost' yews – those which have previously been recorded but which no longer exist – although this number is expected to grow.



Of 39 'vast Ewgh trees' recorded at the time of Henry VIII only 2 remain. © Tim Hills

All known yews thought to be at least 500 years old are described on the website, together with some younger yews with historical significance or a known planting date. The website contains measurements of the trees, condition reports, historical information, management advice and a wealth of other yew information, together with, thanks to support from the Conservation Foundation, photographs of 650 of the trees.

The Ancient Yew Group's Tim Hills, who has visited most of the yews on the website himself, says that many more trees remain to be rediscovered. He still has a list of 400 possible old yew sites in Wales and southern England that need investigation, with more to come in northern England and Scotland.

The distribution of old yews in Britain, however, is far from even. Of the 200 largest old yews in England and Wales, 79 are in Wales. Powys alone has 43, and there are a further 20 in the border counties of Herefordshire and Shropshire. Old yews can also be found in most of England's southern counties, but are especially prolific in Kent and Hampshire. Strangely, however, Cornwall and East Anglia are thought to have none.

No one has so far been able to explain fully this curious distribution, as yews grow on almost any soil except for acid peat, and tolerate wind, cold and atmospheric pollution.

The age of these venerable old trees is difficult to estimate with any accuracy, but Tim Hills of the Ancient Yew Group believes that it is reasonable to assume an age of 500 to 600 years for many trees that are five metres in girth, and 700 to 1000 years for six-metre trees.

Much bigger trees – and a number of trees have a girth of more than ten metres – are clearly much older. But yews naturally become hollow with age and then dating them exactly by counting their annual rings, or by any other method at present, is impossible. The growth rate slows or even stops as the tree ages, and upland trees never grow so big as those in softer climates. Both John Evelyn and John Aubrey measured the giant Crowhurst yew in Surrey, and records show that it grew just 18 inches in girth in 354 years.



The Crowhurst, Surrey yew in 1999 © Tim Hills

The oldest yew in Britain is considered to be at Fortingall in Perthshire which is usually estimated to be anything from 3,000 to 5,000 years old. The oldest, but not the biggest, yews in Wales are thought to be growing in churchyards at Llangernyw in Conwy and Discoed in Powys, while among several contenders for the title of the oldest yew in England are the Crowhurst yew in Surrey, the Tisbury yew in Wiltshire and the Linton yew in Herefordshire, all of which have been estimated by some people to be as old as 4,000 years.

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