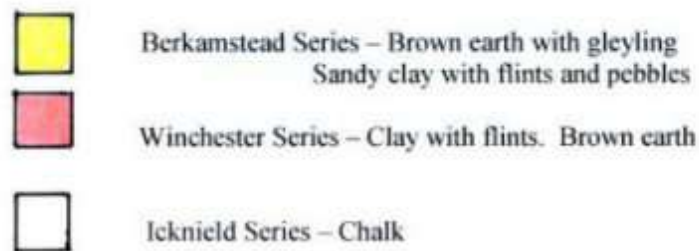
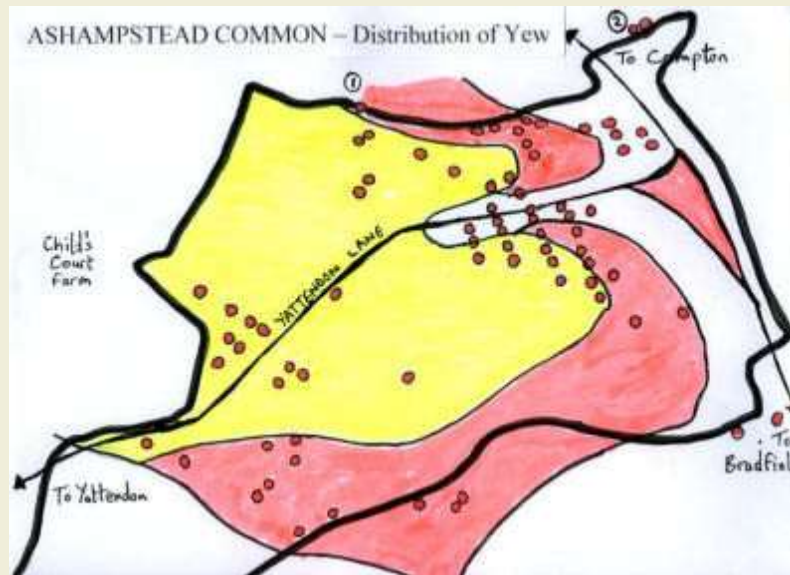


The Yews of Ashampstead Common, Berkshire

by Dick Greenaway MBE



The map covers an area of approximately 1250m x 900m

- (1) Deer Park Pale – photo 1
- (2) Extension of Deer Park Pale – photos 2 and 3

Location

Ashampstead and Burnt Hill Commons consist of about 80 hectares of mixed woodland lying roughly ten miles west of Reading, Berkshire (UK) and close to the north of the M4. The soils are very mixed ranging from infertile acid Berkamstead Series to calcareous Icknield Series where the solid geology of chalk is close to the surface.

Historical background

There is reason to believe that the Commons were pasture woodland until the mid 13th century when they were enclosed by the lord of the manor to form a deer park. The park pale, consisting of a substantial bank with an internal ditch, is still traceable for 5.5 kilometres. It appears to have been extended to the east by an owner who died in 1609.

The yew trees

The yews are confined to the eastern part of the Commons (see distribution map) and are particularly, but not exclusively, associated with the chalky Icknield Soils.

They range in girth from 5.64m to new plantings established after the destruction of the 1990 storm.

Two of the yews provide valuable evidence for the date of the deer park and for the date of the extension. The first (1 on the map) has a girth of 5.64m.



Ashampstead Common's largest girthed yew

Using Paul Tabbush's dating curve published in *The Ancient Yew*, this gives an age of at least 800 years and an establishment date in the 13th century. Since it is actually growing on the park pale bank, the bank must be at least of 13th century origin. The yew may thus have been part of a hedge along the crest of the bank.

Another yew, (2 on the map) growing on the bank of the deer park extension, has a girth of 3.53m indicating an age of 400 - 475 years and thus an establishment date in the late 16th century. This too may have been part of a hedge crowning the bank. It also indicates that the bank dates from at least the 16th century.





Yews growing on the park pale extension in an area locally known as The Junipers.

The recent felling of a mature yew which was growing in a patch of yew wood on Icknield soils has provided a slice of the trunk. This has allowed a ring count against girth to be made. The girth was 6' 1" and the ring count gave approximately 197 but it is intended to polish the slice and to refine this figure. Recent plantings have been heavily grazed by deer. They were planted in plastic mesh tree shelters and the deer have nibbled the shoots to the outside of the shelter leaving the tree looking like a loo brush and preventing further growth. By way of an experiment, the shelters have been removed from some yews and they have been replaced with a metre high fence of chicken wire running clear of the tree, other neighbouring trees have been left in their mesh shelters to serve as controls.



After two years the fenced trees are growing strongly and have lost their loo brush form whereas the trees in shelters are still being grazed and are no larger. It is planned to put fences around the remaining yews when resources are available. A recent project to provide veteran trees for future generations includes four yews. A collection of twenty two interesting trees has been formally identified. The trees will be preserved and managed to provide contributions to the next generation of Ancient Trees. An explanatory leaflet has been published which includes photographs of the trees and a map showing their locations. It has been heartening to see family groups using the leaflet as a 'treasure hunt' and searching for the trees. Interviews have shown that the yews are particularly admired.