

The Ancient Yews of Cranborne Chase

by Peter Andrews

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy wrote of Cranborne Chase in his novel, *Two on a Tower*, ‘**a country of ragged woodland, which though intruded on by the plough in places, remained largely intact from prehistoric times, and still abounded with yews of gigantic growth and oaks tufted with mistletoe**’.

Historically Cranborne Chase, a hunting domain of kings and nobles, covered parts of Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire. To gain an impression of the large size of the Chase, the area forms a rough quadrangle with Shaftesbury, Salisbury, Ringwood and Wimborne at the four corners. Physically this region is a chalk plateau bordered by the valleys of the Stour and Avon. Where clay with flints mantles the chalk, the Chase is heavily wooded. Cranborne Chase was disfranchised in 1829 and remains a relatively unknown and therefore less frequented part of England.



The Great Yew of Cranborne Chase

All the ancient yews are found in an area of the eastern Chase and here the wealth of yews includes all of the following: an ancient yew wood and other huge trees on downland hilltops, yews growing in a hidden grove, yews next to sites of antiquity, and also those in hedgerows by footpaths and those marking boundaries. Westwards in the vast woodlands of Rushmore and Ashmore, and on the chalk heights of Win Green and White Sheet Hills, ancient yews are presently unknown. Ancient yews are slow growing trees, particularly those in exposed places and on poor soils. A Chase hillside yew, 22 feet in girth has only increased by one inch in the last 88 years. From the late Saxon period the ancient yews growing here were protected when much of the land became large ecclesiastical estates, and doubtless as excellent horticulturists, the monks planted others. When the monastic lands were dissolved, the yews fell under the guardianship of wealthy landowners, a situation which continues to the present day. Other yews were planted, including many in the 18th and early 19th century to shelter the droveways, as well as landscape specimens, trees for our future appreciation.

Hidden along footpaths and in woods of the Chase, other yews await discovery. One private estate is reported to have at least one large ancient yew. An elderly naturalist wrote in 2000 of her father's work on the estate

and of her lost childhood: 'This great park, the playground of my childhood, a paradise of chalk wild flowers and butterflies is no more. The great expanses of grassland are now partly arable and partly used for pheasant rearing and there is no public access. However I imagine the oldest yew known to me is still there. It was hollow in my childhood and I used to play house in it. It was seldom visited, in fact solitude and silence, save for the humming of bees and high pitched serenades of grasshoppers and bush crickets in the grassland around my 'yew', are what I remember of summer in that vanished parkland.' For now this and other yews must remain hidden.

The Yew Grove

Near Cranborne in rural Dorset there is a yew grove of great antiquity. Five of Thomas Hardy's 'gigantic yews' grow with others in a small wood which lies on a calcareous loam. The impressive size of these woodland yews and a close examination of their trunks reveal them to be of considerable age. The largest yew here is 23 feet in girth and has a big internal stem inside a hollow shell that has disintegrated. The few pieces of the inner shell that remain have become encompassed by new wood over a long period of time. Close by a pollarded yew is only slightly smaller in girth.



The largest yew in the grove at sunrise, with the strange Butcher's Broom growing beneath it.

At the north end of the copse above a farm, there is a storm battered yew with broken branches and a thin foliage; this tree seems to be struggling. The aged trunk with a girth of over 20 feet, also contains a large internal stem. Nearby in a dell is a contrasting yew that is strong and healthy. This male yew has a clean reddish bole measuring over 18 feet around its base, but the girth rises steadily to give this tree a huge appearance. The thick vines of traveller's joy, known locally as devil's guts, hang from its many branches. The fifth and last ancient yew in the grove is another fascinating example of the yew's regeneration ability. The trunk of this yew has completely disappeared leaving a substantial central inner stem surrounded by a ring of others. These internal stems are all that remains of a possibly much larger yew. A number of other yews in the copse, some reaching 14 to 15 feet in girth, are likely to be descendants of the far older trees.

During the first half of the last century, the yews grew here in hazel coppice with oak and the occasional field maple and ash. The coppiced woodlands of this area were traditionally used for hurdle making, but with the decline in this trade, the coppice was replaced with cash crops of quick growing conifers. Only the woodland margins and other small areas survived the clear felling, a sad reminder of their former glory. Thankfully the yews were spared in what must have been a deliberate policy of the estate to safeguard these ancient trees. Today, with incentives from the government, the estate is replanting parts of its woodlands with the original hardwoods.

When I found the yews in the summer of 2005, they were almost hidden by larch trees, but a year later many of these had been felled. Revisiting the yew grove in the spring of 2007, the felling of many of the closely planted conifers had brought forth a spectacular resurgence of the ground flora. A beautiful carpet of bluebells lay throughout the woodland with a fine mixture of other wild flowers including wood spurge, ramsons and woodruff. All these wild flowers in southern England are recognized indicators of ancient woodland and in the past a regular rotation of hazel coppicing would have produced similar displays. The most unusual plant here is butcher's broom, which is able to grow under the dark shade of the yews. Butcher's broom is a strange evergreen member of the Lily family, with very sharp leaves and large shiny red berries.

Ann Horsfall is a widely experienced field naturalist, botanist and lecturer who has extensively studied the distribution of the Dorset flora and a history of the county's woodland. The yews she has seen in other Dorset woods are not ancient and appear to have been planted or introduced by birds.



Detail of ancient yew in the Cranborne grove

Early one morning before dawn, I walked up from Cranborne to the yew grove. The clear sky held a promise of watching the rising of the sun. A low mist hung across the fields in which hares and roe deer were busy feeding. As I approached the wood a group of fallow deer moved away from the shelter of a yew. Entering this mysterious wood, I sat beneath an ancient yew and listened to the crescendo of the dawn chorus with the scent of thousands of bluebells sweetly perfuming the air. As the sun rose slowly on the horizon and shafts of light pierced the woodland, transforming the aged trunks of the yews from darkness to a reddish glow, I took a series of photographs. Satisfied, I rested again to contemplate the yews, thinking that perhaps in the distant past of a forgotten age, others once visited these trees at sunrise.

The Great Yew

After spending an idyllic summer's morning on the downland of Cranborne Chase in the early part of the last century, W.H. Hudson wrote '**Just as the air is purer and fresher on these chalk heights than on the earth below, and as the water is of a more crystal purity, and the sky perhaps bluer, so do all colours and all sounds have a purity and vividness and intensity beyond that of other places**'.

Not far from where Hudson visited, in a remote hilltop field, a great ancient yew looks out to a panoramic view of the downland and woodland of Cranborne Chase. Despite growing in an exposed situation, this is a magnificent tall and spreading yew. The extraordinary bleached and skeletal trunk has a girth of over 26 feet at its base, but there is evidence that it was once larger. A more accurate measurement for this male yew is I believe at a height of both two and four feet, either side of a bulge, where the bole reaches 28 feet in girth. During a recent visit, I found that in the severe gales of the previous few days, a branch had fallen from the upper canopy, which is thinning out due to such occurrences. I also saw that the spray had been cut right back on the upper bole and it was now possible to look inside its hollow interior. At the very heart of the yew were two large squat internal stems. The vast hollow trunk together with the internal growth help to anchor this mighty tree during the frequent storms which sweep across these chalk uplands.



The trunk of the 'Great Yew'

The great yew grows on clay with flints, which in this location cover the chalk. Gorse growing on these chalk hills is a good indicator of this type of slightly acidic soil and here the plant occurs in quantity along the borders of the adjacent woodland. Growing on this windswept downland on a poor soil, the great yew must have a very slow growth rate. This is highlighted by another large yew growing in a similar situation on the south-eastern boundary of Cranborne Chase. Here an ancient yew is also growing on an impoverished soil, the acidic Reading Beds, which in this region intrude into the chalk. In 1919 the writer and archaeologist, Heywood Sumner (1853-1940) measured this fine yew and recorded a girth of 22 feet at a height of four feet. At the same height in 2007, I found that the girth had only increased by one inch. In the 88 years since Heywood Sumner came here the yew appears to have been practically dormant on its hillside, and how long the tree has remained in this state is impossible to say. Dating ancient yews, by whatever means, cannot take into account that the tree's girth might not increase for decades or even centuries, while the tree is sustained by growing internally. In my estimation, the great yew may have an age of at least two thousand years.



The Yew Heywood Sumner measured in 1919

In the surrounding countryside other yews have obviously been planted as markers along boundaries and footpaths and to shelter the droveways. Many younger yews have seeded in woodland and on downland by birds eating the fleshy red fruits of these planted trees. On a large expanse of nearby unimproved chalk downland, yews have been able to grow because the grassland is no longer used as a large sheepwalk. Given the yew's high toxicity to livestock, it is nothing short of remarkable that this huge yew has survived on downland where there has been a long history of the grazing of cattle and sheep. To have reached such a size in this location, this yew must always have been a highly venerated and protected tree. Such protection may indicate that the yew was planted, perhaps to mark an important event or boundary, or quite possibly this tree is an indicator of a lost settlement.

It is always a privilege to visit this ancient yew and spend some time in the quiet sanctuary of this lovely place. Here I began to realize what an amazing number of events, through times of peace and war, this yew has stood silent witness to. It is staggering to think that this yew may have been here when the smoke was rising from the cooking fires of the Celtic, Durotriges settlements on these hills. In antiquity these open grasslands had a much higher water table and therefore a much higher population. Today the yew grows in an arable field, part of a large private estate. There is no reason to believe that this great patriarch yew may not survive for millennia, for within the tree is the power of immortality.

The Yew Wood

The Wiltshire antiquary John Aubrey, who often came riding across the downs of Cranborne Chase was the first person to mention this yew wood, for in 1685 he wrote

‘Yew trees naturally grow in chalkie countrys. The greatest plenty of them, as I believe in the west of England is at Nunton Ewetreets. Between Knighton Ashes and Downton the ground produces them all along; but at Nunton they are a wood’.

On the extensive chalk plateau, although well managed, Aubrey’s yew wood is the nearest thing we have in Britain to the dense yew groves that covered parts of the downland of this region in the early Neolithic. The yew wood is encircled by the earthworks of our prehistory, built when much of the woodland was cleared. There are Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age tumuli and Grim’s Ditch, which is now thought to have been a huge livestock boundary enclosure. Grim’s Ditch, which was built in the later Bronze and early Iron Ages, forms the northern boundary of the wood. Stretching for miles across the downland, an old track passes along the western edge of the wood and here this is part of the county boundary.

Many of the yews have girths between 17 and 18 feet, but a few are larger in what may be the oldest part of the wood. Young yews are rare here, deer eat any seedlings and branch layering is suppressed. It has been said that because many of the yews are pollarded, the wood has its origins during the years of bow mania. A number of strangely shaped low pollards and coppiced yews along the western edge of the wood probably date from this period, but the inner core of larger trees may easily predate that time.

One acquaintance with the yew wood was on a bleak winter’s afternoon. Entering the yews dark shade, all was still and silent. Nothing grew under the yews closed canopy and I moved freely through the ancient groves. After aimlessly wandering, I came to the centre of the wood where the path was overshadowed by an avenue of huge yews. Where the avenue ceased, I found a clearing with a line of three yews, two with large cavities showing internal roots, the other a very fine tree with the greatest girth of any yew in the wood, measuring 21 feet. While I rested here at the heart of the yew wood, two roe deer, unaware of my presence, passed slowly through. The unwelcoming harsh screech of a jay broke my peaceful spell, a tawny owl called and the approaching gloaming beckoned. Reluctantly I left this enchanted wood.



Two of the yew woods ancient trees, the yew in the background is the largest here.

It seems yew woods are not to everyone's liking. Local Wiltshire writer, the late Ralph Whitlock wrote, 'Yew trees are even more inhibitive of the woodland floor vegetation than are beeches. In a mature planted yew grove nothing else grows, and there is not even a covering of dead leaves to hide the chalk. The atmosphere is eerie, even sinister'. Although the ground flora is nonexistent under the darkest groves, many animals and birds inhabit the yew wood. A badger sett has been built under several yews and such is the power and tenacity of these animals, they have removed pieces of roots obstructing their tunnelling without any apparent harm to the trees. Hares often take shelter here from the surrounding downland and will browse the yew, as do the roe deer which are often seen here. The varied birdlife includes sparrowhawk, mistle thrush and goldcrest and the cavities of the yews provide nesting sites for tawny owls, and roosting places for bats. In Autumn, flocks of fieldfares and redwings visit to feed on the yew arils, as do a number of our resident birds.



An avenue of ancient yews

A smaller yew wood lies half a mile to the north. Many large yews here were victims of the great storm of January 1990 and their decaying stumps are a stark reminder of that terrible day. Only two pure areas of yew remain and here the largest is 17½ feet in girth. This small wood is exclusively managed as a pheasant reserve and there has been less tidying up of the yews to provide cover for the game birds. Dense undergrowth and ash saplings quickly take advantage of the clearings created by fallen yews. In one such clearing two old yews have long clean boles that are almost hidden by branches hanging down due to storm damage. Where these branches have touched the ground they have layered, rooting at intervals to produce a number of young yews that have formed a circular grove around the parent trees. In the same clearing a fallen yew, victim of a long forgotten storm, has sent up a several vertical trunks, while the uppermost branches have layered to add to the marvellous array of regeneration. Both yew woods are part of a private estate.

Yews at Sites of Antiquity

Hambledon Hill, Dorset

Above the Stour Valley on a spur of Hambledon Hill below a hillfort, a pure yew wood clings to a steep southern slope. Martyn Waller of Kingston University has used peat deposits at the southern base of the hill to produce a pollen and vegetation history of the area. From about 3400 BC to 2000 BC the hill was covered by dark yew woodland. One can only wonder at the size of those Neolithic yews. A painting of Hambledon and Hod Hills by Heywood Sumner shows a fragmentary yew wood with open areas of scrub that today are completely covered by yew. Ann Horsfall believes the present yew wood has its origins in the later medieval period and an inner core of old coppiced yews does suggest this. A stunning photograph of this private yew wood taken at sunrise by Edward Parker graces the cover of Fred Hageneder's ground breaking new book '*Yew- a History*'.



The Yew wood on Hambledon Hill

The Winklebury Scragg, Wiltshire

Augustus Henry Lane Fox (1827-1900) inherited the large Chase estate of Rushmore at Tollard Royal, on the simple condition he took the name of Pitt Rivers. General Pitt Rivers is regarded as the father of modern archaeology. He started his pioneering first season's work in 1881-1882, close to his home at the promontory Iron Age hillfort of Winklebury. During the excavations, the general opened a number of British barrows and removed an ancient yew tree. The yew grew on top of the round barrow at the edge of the hillfort and was a prominent landmark. It was carefully maintained by the people of Berwick St John, the village at the foot of the down, who held that its existence was a charm against witches and evil spirits. Pitt Rivers had suggested to his hired colleagues that the contents of the barrow would be spoiled by the tree's roots, and went ahead with the yew's removal, much to the indignation of the local people. Close to where the yew grew the general surprisingly uncovered a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Because the yew was called a scragg, it is usually thought to have been a dead tree, but growing in such an exposed place, the yew may well have been damaged and hollow but still living. The yew was mentioned in Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* of 1839, indicating that it was alive then. To appease the villagers, a local dignitary reinserted the yew in its barrow, but no trace of the tree remains today.

Whitsbury Castle, Hampshire

Exploring this beautiful countryside is a constant delight and ancient yews still turn up in unexpected places. During a recent visit, a previously unrecorded yew with a girth of 21 feet was found growing just below the top of the steep ramparts of the Iron Age hillfort of Whitsbury Castle. This is a significant find because yews of this size now only survive on one other British hillfort, at Merdon Castle, also in Hampshire. Surprisingly, this yew was not mentioned by the county archaeologists, J.P. Williams Freeman and Heywood Sumner, who were friends and both came here and usually recorded old yews that they found at sites of antiquity.

Courting Tree of Whitsbury, Hampshire

Reaching the wooded ridge of Whitsbury on a hot summer day in 2007, we were astonished to find an enormous yew. The trunk of this tree has almost split in two, and being covered in much ivy and twiggy growth, is very difficult to measure. Below a height of three feet, it girths approximately 28 feet, but above where four huge limbs have replaced the upper central trunk the tree is smaller. The large measurement gives a true indication of the age of this yew, for it includes the far older original part of the trunk. This solitary male yew grows by the path leading to the British hillfort of Whitsbury, a short distance away.



The Courting tree, the huge yew of Whitsbury

Whitsbury Castle, with its recently discovered ancient yew, encompasses Grim's Ditch which forms a boundary of the yew wood to the north. Grim's Ditch exits the hillfort's south eastern corner and continues along the ridge, passing just beneath the large yew. Parts of this earthwork remain in woodland nearby. On the Whitsbury ridge, the Reading beds again meet the chalk and the yew grows on the much poorer acidic soil. There is a possibility that this yew tree was here when both the hillfort and boundary ditch were still in use, and may belong to their history. The Romans occupied the hillfort and it was again used by the Romano-British when the legions were recalled from this country. Together with Clearbury Rings, the massive triple defences of Whitsbury Castle held up the Anglo-Saxon invaders for fifty years or more. During the long period when the hillfort was in use, the ridge would have been cleared of most of its woodland and the yew tree may have grown in an open area. The yew is well known to local people who call it the Courting Tree. A large hornets nest inside the hollow trunk would certainly deter any romantic liaisons there now.

Duck's Nest Tump, Hampshire

On the top of the Duck's Nest Tump, a Neolithic long barrow near Rockbourne, a large yew sprawls across the earthwork like a giant spider. The yew was recorded by J.P. Williams Freeman, and its presence was often felt by the solitary figure of Heywood Sumner as he worked on his dig at the nearby deep blue Spring Pond. To H.J. Massingham, who liked an old tree as much as he liked an old barrow, it was a 'priest like yew rising from the undergrowth covering the mound'. Reaching the earthwork's centre through dense stinging nettles is no easy matter, but once here it can be seen that the large yew has been cut down a long time ago and regrown as a coppiced tree. Judging from the thickness of its many limbs, this must be a far older tree than the other yews which grow on the mound. The yew's large dome shaped crown is quite a landmark when seen from the heights of Damerham Knoll in the west.



The Yew on Duck's Nest Tump

Knowlton Circles, Dorset

At Knowlton on the eastern boundary of the Chase, a line of ancient yews cross a Neolithic henge site. The alignment of Bronze Age round barrows to the south indicates that the henge had a long period of ritual use. Beginning in Saxon times, the Knowlton court of the hundred met here and the Normans built a church in middle of the only complete earthwork to have survived the plough. The now ruined church, which may have replaced an earlier one, belonged to the village of Knowlton, which was situated nearby on the banks of the River Allen. Together with its close neighbour, the settlement of Brockingham, Knowlton was depopulated by the Black Death of 1348 and abandoned.



The church or middle henge, which is under the guardianship of English Heritage, has two ancient yews close together on its outer embankment. There used to be a third yew here but it was damaged by fire and removed. The yews continue across arable fields to end in the middle of the north henge, which is now only visible in aerial photographs in times of drought. Recently there has been concern about the amount of chemical spraying of the crops grown in these fields and the effect it is having on these yews. Robert Bevan-Jones in *The Ancient Yew* (2002) believes that the yews, which reach 23 feet in girth, are the remaining part of a hedgerow boundary and are Anglo-Saxon boundary markers. Allen Meredith's gazetteer in Chetan and Brueton's *The Sacred Yew* (1994) considers the yews to have a far greater age. Whether boundary and church markers or an earlier processional way, the ancient yews greatly add to the atmosphere and veneration of this sacred place.

All Hallows. Dorset

One and a half miles north of Knowlton Circles is another impressive ancient yew site that until quite recently was unrecorded. At All Hallows, a hamlet in the delightful River Allen valley, ancient yews surround a small semi-circular churchyard where the church has vanished. The largest yew here is 29 feet in girth, which I believe dates this site to a pre-Christian period. The 22ft. 2in. yew growing on the opposite roadside bank may suggest this was once a larger burial place. Finding unrecorded yews of this size so close to the well documented specimens at Knowlton was surprising, but what makes All Hallows an even more exciting find are a number of ancient yews marking a disused routeway coming down the hill from that direction. At the bottom of the hill, a huge yew with a girth of 27 feet stands as a sentinel at the southern approach to this unique and enigmatic site. A short distance away, in the tiny churchyard of Wimborne St Giles, there is a magnificent spreading yew with a girth of 23 feet.



Ancient yews above All hallows

Marker and Shelter Yews.

I have previously written an article about the old and ancient yews of this region that have been found on or close to boundaries and by footpaths. Seeking refuge from heavy rain under a big lone yew tree, I was pleased by the amount of shelter its closed canopy provided. On a cold January day in 2007 when the wind blew icy cold over the hills above Cranborne, I came across a weather beaten yew with a girth of 21½ feet. Many of the yew's branches had fallen and those on the tree's western side were dead. Peering through a closely pressed elder tree, I could see that the trunk had several large cavities and internal growth. In spite of the damage, this yew had not fallen and must have endured at least a thousand years of often extreme weather on this open hillside site, producing another very slow growing tree. The yew grows near the Cranborne parish boundary and it is a short distance from Castle Hill, where a court of the hundred met. Castle Hill takes its name from an early motte and bailey stronghold built here by the Normans. One perfect summer's evening when the sun was low in the west, just as we arrived at the yew, the silent ghostly shape of a barn owl flew out of the tree just above our heads.



The storm beaten ancient yew above Cranborne

One notable ancient yew stands in Yew Tree field on the county and Damerham/Cranborne parish boundary. There is a reference to this Yew Tree Field in *English Field Names* (1972) written by the aptly named John Field. This may be the only Yew Tree Field in Britain to retain its ancient tree and therefore it is a boundary yew of great significance. The trunk of the yew shows considerable age and has a girth of 18ft 6in. Not far away two other ancient yews, one with a similar girth, the other with part of its trunk missing, grow by a footpath, close to the same boundary. In my earlier paper, I also mentioned old yews along a track on the Breamore/Whitsbury parish boundary, and recorded two identical yews growing so close together that when approaching them, I thought I had found one gigantic tree. During a visit here, it was pointed out to me that both yews are joined together by one large feeder root lying above the ground. Remarkably one 17 feet girth yew has given rise to a sibling equal in size. The trunks of both yews were hidden and strangled by thick vines of traveller's joy, which have now been removed. I suspect that for this yew to produce a sibling of such size, it is far older than the yews found along the other side of the track, including those reaching a similar girth.



The trunk of the ancient yew in Yew Tree Field

Although not yet ancient, there are a number of old yews here of interest which deserve mention. Recent finds include a big spreading solitary yew with a girth of 17ft 2in near the lovely thatched village of Rockbourne, Hants. This yew marks a footpath close to Sagles Spring, which rises in an alder fringed hollow. High on Damerham Knoll, another lone big crowned yew with a girth of 16ft 9in grows on the parish boundary. This is another impressively sited yew which was first noted from the opposite Whitsbury ridge. In the heavily wooded clay valley between Cranborne and Alderholt there is a hidden farm which is arrived at along a deeply rutted muddy track. The small farmhouse is five centuries old and is concealed behind a yew growing close to the building. This is a big farmyard yew with a girth of 15ft 3in, and a new tree about a hundred years old has arisen from the tree's roots opposite the narrow pathway.



The two strange yews of Breamore on a winter's evening

At Tarrant Crawford, Dorset, in the southern part of the Chase by a clear fast flowing stream, a cluster of medieval farm buildings and a small church are all that remains of a wealthy Abbey which once housed Cistercian nuns. On the Abbey site an old yew with a girth of 14½ feet growing on a chalk bank could be a yew the nuns planted and cared for. Few of the 500 or so Abbey sites in Britain have old or ancient yews and all such trees are historically important.



The Courting Tree – the Ancient Yew of Whitsbury

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