

FRAGMENTED YEWS in Churchyards

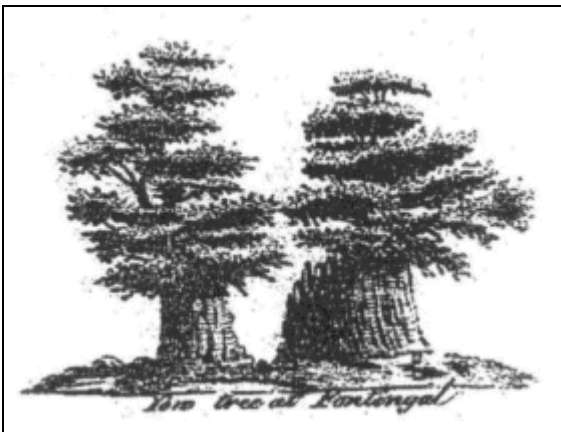
Tim Hills

“Fragmented Yew” has become the term commonly used to describe a yew of which only a fragment (or several fragments) of the original tree remains. In the past, these trees have understandably been described as shattered, broken, split, damaged, ruined, wrecked or decayed. While such words provide an accurate description, they can too readily be interpreted as implying something no longer of worth. The reality is that fragmented yews are some of our oldest trees, often in the greatest need of protection because of their unusual and sometimes unsound appearance. The Tree Council is to be congratulated for including no fewer than 3 fragmented yews in their list of '50 Great British Trees' chosen in celebration of the Queen's jubilee year.

3 of the 50 Great British Trees

These are found at Fortingall, Llangernyw and Ashbrittle and are all male trees.

The yew at Fortingall in Scotland is considered by many to be the oldest tree in Britain, and possibly Europe too. An engraving of 1744 from Pennant's *Tour in Scotland* shows this giant yew, with a girth above 55', already broken into two fragments. The 1822 engraving in J.G.Strutt's *Sylva Britannica* reveals the effects of time, weather and souvenir hunters. A wall and railings around the yew now allow the fragments to grow almost unimpeded, though in 2001 one of them was observed to be growing so vigorously it was beginning to push part of the protecting wall outwards.



The Fortingall Yew 1744



The Fortingall Yew 1822



The Fortingall Yew 2001

One of the oldest yews in Wales is found at Llangernyw in Conwy. Until recently an oil tank stood in the space between the fragments, on the spot where the original tree once grew. Realisation that this was one of Wales's oldest trees encouraged the authorities to site the tank elsewhere. It is unfortunate that much of the dead wood, a source of evidence especially useful to researcher and dendrologist, has been removed.



The Llangernyw Yew 1998

Ashbrittle in Devon is undoubtedly a site of great antiquity, and its yew grows on a tumulus SE of the church. The tree consists of a central stem surrounded by 6 others, the largest girthing 16', evidence that this tree probably fragmented many centuries ago. The circumference of the entire tree is above 40', a measure of the powerful presence of this awesome yew.



The Ashbrittle Yew 1997

The process of fragmentation

Yews in churchyards are unlikely to be left to grow naturally. The oldest specimens will rarely have the appearance of a 'standard' tree, with its cylindrical trunk, tall leading central branch and many lateral branches. It is often the removal of one of these substantial lateral branches, perhaps where it is interfering with access to the church or to graves, that creates a weakness in the tree and begins the process of hollowing. This frequently leads to the classic 'horse shoe' shaped hollow yew. Without a complete circle of growth the forces on the tree inevitably cause it to lean outwards, as shown in this example at Tillington in Sussex. In this instance metal rods prevent the trunk from splitting further apart and fragmenting.



The Tillington Yew 2004

Single fragment examples

At Baschurch in Shropshire only a small section of the original tree is alive. An ingenious way to support this living fragment has been found by setting the dead section in concrete and encircling the whole with an iron band. Although yew decays slowly this can only be a temporary measure and a prop might eventually be needed to support the living fragment.



The Baschurch Yew 1999

Three of the ancient yews growing at Molash in Kent are featured in this article. This example once girthed over 20'. One side has been reduced to a sawn off stump, while the surviving fragment girths about 12'.



Yew at Molash 1999

The yew fragments at Staunton in Gloucestershire and Discoed in Powys each girth above 33'. We can only wonder at their former size and appearance, but can be sure they are among the oldest in England and Wales. The crack down the centre of the Staunton Yew indicates where it is likely to eventually split and become two fragments.



The Staunton Yew 1998



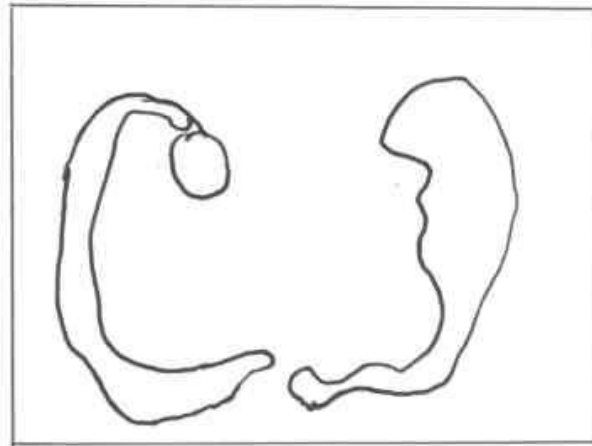
The Discoed Yew 1998

The Rotherfield Yew in Sussex is reluctant to split completely into two fragments. What we see may only be a small fraction of the original circle of growth, but the 13 props behind it are a clear indication of the esteem in which this fragmented tree is held. The church guide describes it as “a miracle of nature that so much can be supported on so little”.



Fragmentation creating 2 trees

There are many examples of yews whose two fragments are sufficiently well developed to be regarded as two trees. It could be argued that the ability to create two or more trees from one is another of the yew's many survival mechanisms. Sometimes the two trees created grow at a similar rate and present an almost symmetrical appearance. The 27ft girthed Stalisfield Yew in Kent offers a good example of this and the cross section included provides evidence that these have developed from a single hollow yew



The Stalisfield Yew with cross-section 2002

This yew at Molash (1999) consists of two fragments with a combined girth of about 27ft, while the individual trunks girth 15ft and 17ft.



There are also instances where one fragment fails. At Overton-on-Dee, where the many yews in its churchyard have earned it the title of one of the “Seven Wonders of Wales”, the oldest yew has its living fragment propped, while the smaller fragment on the left of the photograph is dead. Protective railings have since been placed around the tree.



Overton's largest yew 1999

Each of the two sites below boasts several ancient yews and in both cases it is the largest girthed tree that has fragmented. At Ystradfellte in Powys only a short piece of stump remains of one of its fragments. The reason for it being cut off close to the ground is not known.

At Waldershare in Kent the smaller fragment had leaned into the branches of a neighbouring yew tree. The photo was taken in 1999 but since then the leaning fragment has collapsed to the ground.



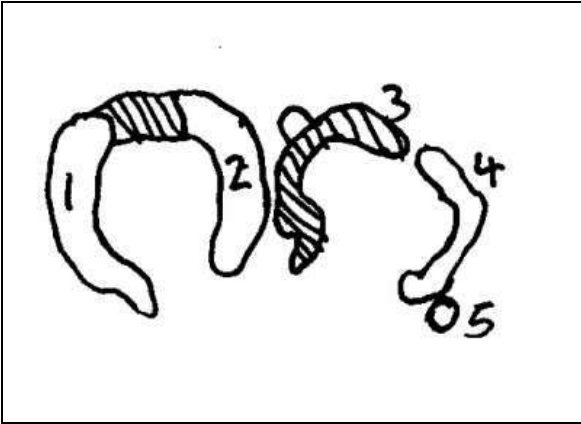
Ystradfellte 1999



Waldershare Park 1999

Interpretation of irregular fragments

The Dunster Yew in Somerset was described in 1898 as a “venerable yew of large dimensions”. Girth around its remaining fragments is over 25ft. The shaded areas on the plan denote dead wood which will decay and leave three separate and oddly shaped trunks growing at unexpected angles in relation to each other.

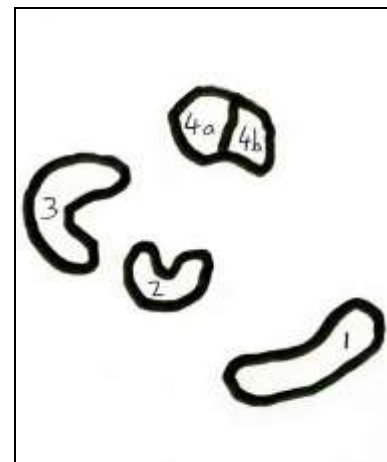


The Dunster Yew with cross section

While dead material still links the Dunster fragments, the Molash yew shown below now grows as 3 completely separated fragments.



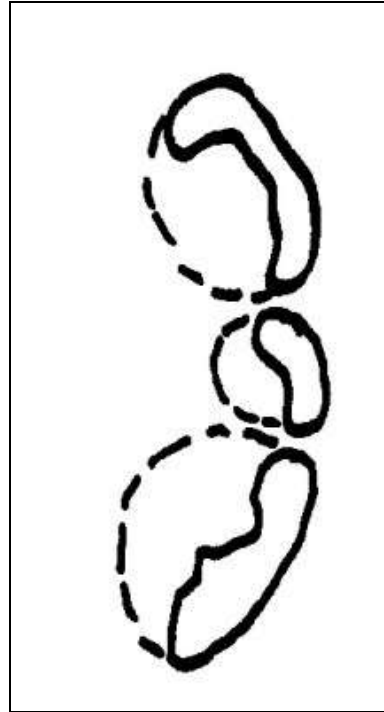
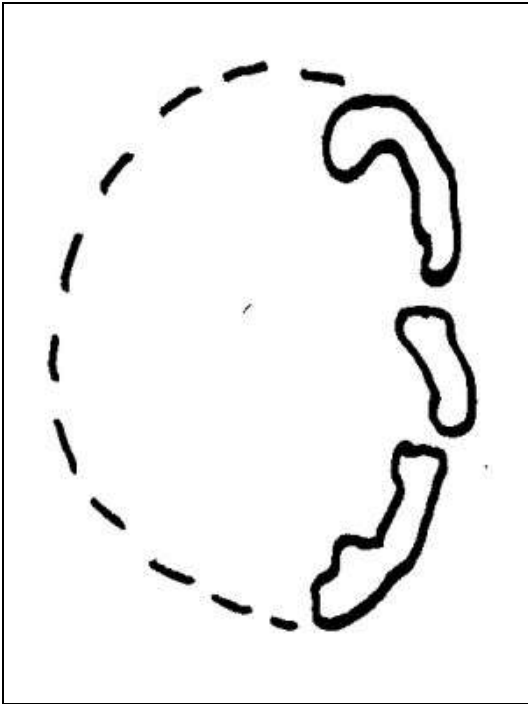
At Kingston St Mary in Somerset 4 fragments remain of the 33ft girthed yew that must have lost its centre centuries ago.



The Kingston St Mary Yew with cross section

At Sandhurst in Berkshire 3 small fragments are all that remain of a yew that probably once girthed about 18ft.

The first drawing shows the possible line of the original tree, the second is an impression of what might happen as each of these fragments becomes more rounded, leaving what appears to be a line of young yews growing close to each other. When looking at any unusual clusters of yews we need to be alert to the possibility that these were once part of a larger ancient tree.



Cross sections of the Sandhurst Yew

Yews on mounds

A number of yews appear as a trio or more of stems emerging from a mound of soil. Two examples are shown below.



Llandinam, Powys 2004



Llandre, Ceredigion 1999

At Mynyddislwyn in Monmouthshire the build up of soil around the trunks is now contained within a wall. A total of 5 ancient yews grow in this remarkable circular site 1000' above sea level, with a Tumulus known as Twyn Tudur (Tudor's Mound) adjoining the churchyard.



It is not always clear how these fragments developed at the edge of a decaying yew that once filled the central space.

One yew or more?

The fragmented yews at Llanerfyl and Payhembury present a conundrum. The Llanerfyl Yew in Powys, known as the Patriarch Tree, is in four fragments, 3 female and the 4th male. It arouses much discussion, but appears to me that the 3 female parts once formed a single tree that long ago split and fell and that the male is a second tree.

Others disagree, arguing that since it is occasionally possible to find both male and female parts on the same tree before fragmentation, so it should also be possible to find both sexes on a tree that has fragmented. Another argument put forward is that of a lightning strike affecting the genetic make up of a tree.



The Llanerfyl Yew 1998

The Payhembury Yew in Devon is recorded as having been struck by lightning. The following is taken from "Travels in Victorian Devon, Illustrated Journals and Sketchbooks 1846 - 1870", compiled by Jeremy Butler from Peter Hutchinson's notebooks.

"We...examined Payhembury Church.....In the churchyard at the north-east part there is a remarkable yew tree of great size. I thought it was four yew trees growing close together with just space enough to walk between the trunks, but the sexton's wife who accompanied us said that it was one tree which many years ago had been struck by lightning and split into four portions down to the ground." (Wednesday August 24, 1859)

In 2006 I observed these four fragments, which appeared to be of similar age, radiating from the centre where the original tree once stood. Yet two are male, a third is female and the fourth was unverifiable. Girth of these fragments has been quoted in the past as up to a massive 46ft. but at its narrowest I recorded closer to 35ft.



Conclusion

In this paper I have shown but a few examples of the extraordinary variety of fragmented yews. It should serve as a reminder of the yew's ability to survive and regrow following a powerful shock, such as the collapse of its crown, the loss of a major limb or a lightning strike. It seems that the only trauma a yew is incapable of withstanding is that inflicted by man - see article "Pollarded to Death" by Toby Hindson or visit the "Lost Yews" page.

Although fragmentation usually signifies an ancient tree it does **not** signify a tree that is past its prime or nearing the end of its life; fragmentation should be considered a normal part of the yew's life cycle.

We have to thank our forebears for not destroying their yews when they looked 'shattered, broken, split, damaged, ruined, wrecked or decayed'. They probably knew more than we do of the yew's ability to regenerate into great trees like that at Ashbrittle.

It is now our turn to allow the more recently fragmented yews to become great trees for future generations to appreciate.