

IVY ON OLD YEWS - to leave or to remove?

By Tim Hills



Ivy out of control at Harbridge, Hampshire © Tim Hills

“Ivy had twisted up to the very summit, and looked well, the lighter shiny green leaves among the dark of the needles. But I realised that the ivy had to be stripped right off and out.....even up there, when you are in the wind and heavy among branches much thinner than the wrist-thick ivy which strangles them.....at last the yew grows again visibly from the mealy base to the apex of its pyramid. One feels that a resolution of evil has been accomplished. Death has been destroyed. At first, it is true, when you have wheeled away all the debris, the yew will look naked. By consolation comes the first sunlight on the uncovered trunk....”

Gardenage (1952) Geoffrey Grigson



Ivy under control at Bettws Newydd © Tim Hills

A few strands of ivy on a yew bole is not a problem. It becomes a danger when allowed to grow up into a tree and bush out. If allowed to progress this far ivy may cause two problems, the weight of its foliage and the shading out of the tree's own leaves.

For those needing to make a case for the removal of ivy from an old yew, the following may help.

Ivy “can smother the canopy and kill trees, so removing the basal ivy stems (in 20cm lengths to stop them re-grafting) will kill off the ivy above in the canopy”.

Russell Ball - *Some Management considerations for our Ancient Yews*

“Ivyshould be removed, as it can weaken the tree’s system, and its weight makes the tree more vulnerable to storm damage”.

Allen Meredith - *Caring for Yews*

“.....in a gale a tree that is heavily laden with ivy is like a fully-rigged ship, unable to lower its sails. Over it goes!”

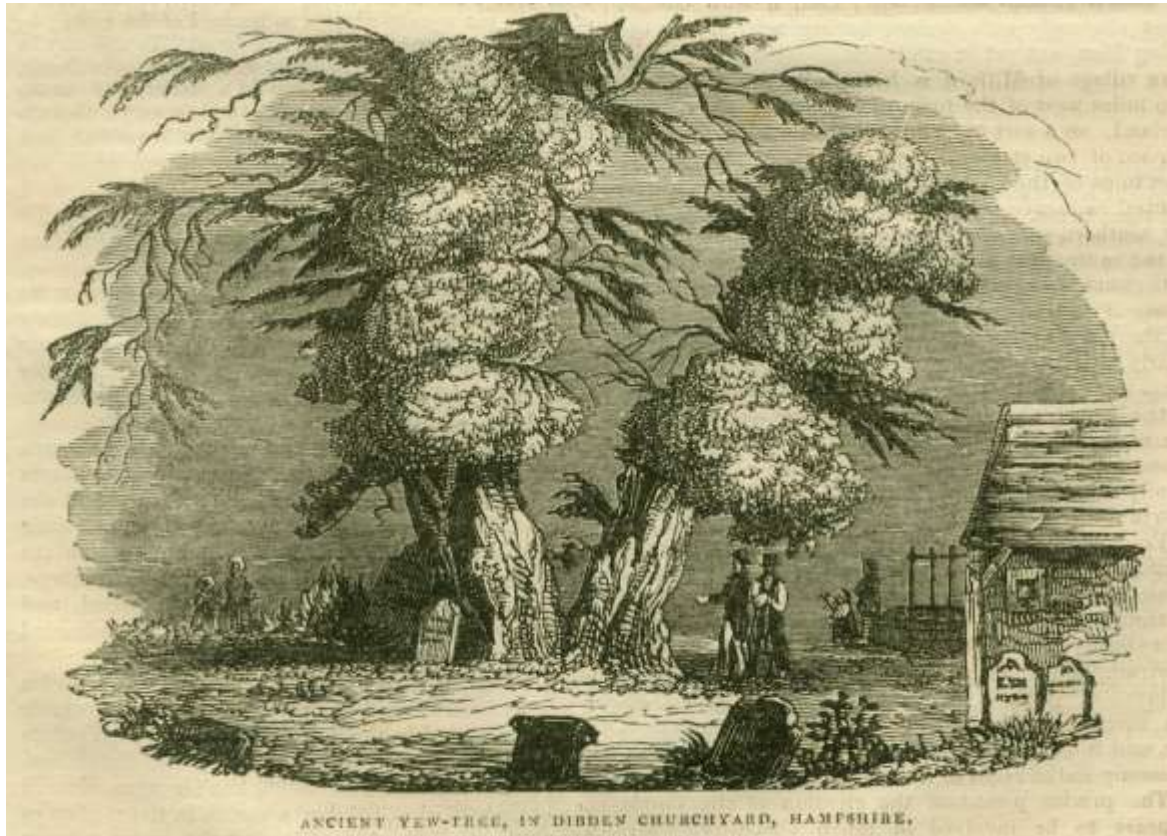
Jennifer Sandy - Richard Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*

“When clearing ivy from fallen trees I have found that the weight of ivy exceeds the weight of the host.” N.J.Burrell - Richard Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*

“The dead leaves can’t drop from the host and the ivy will put its roots into the rotting debris.” Tree surgeon Simon Russell - Richard Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*

“I spent several weeks climbing into the yew trees in our churchyard and cutting down the ivy, which had such a grip that in some cases I had to use a crowbar to remove it....It had left deep weals where it was wrapped round the branches.” R.Chilver - Richard Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*

One of England’s largest recorded yews used to grow in the churchyard at Dibden, in Hampshire. *The Saturday Magazine* of February 4th 1837 described the ivy filled yew (pictured below).



The Dibden Yew in 1837

“Its hollow trunk still supports three vast stems, and measures below them about 30 feet in circumference, a girth which, perhaps, no other Yew-tree in England can exhibit.”

The engraving clearly shows that the tree was carrying a huge weight of ivy on its split trunks and the article describes “...the singularly large stems of ivy which had grown up against the interior portions of the trunk. One of these ivy stems measures two feet in circumference at the base, and after ascending seven feet, this gigantic parasitic sends out fantastic limbs, which, entwining around its antique supporter, had in many parts entirely overshadowed its decaying branches”.

Although the article goes on to suggest that the tree was only held up by the ivy, it is almost certain that the increasing weight of ivy eventually contributed to its collapse. My thanks to Allen Meredith for providing a copy of this 1837 document.

When the health of a 500 or 1000 year old tree is threatened, the ivy should first be cut and later carefully removed from its branches. It should be borne in mind that ivy grows successfully on hundreds of thousands of trees. Birds, bees and other insects will not be deprived of food or habitat if ivy is removed from a few hundred of these rare, ancient and irreplaceable specimens.