

The Longleat Yew at Temple Farm in Wiltshire

Temple Farm is one of a cluster of buildings that have now become part of the Longleat Estate. In different accounts the location has been called Corsley, Temple and Whitborne Temple. When I was invited to visit the tree in 1999 the Estate Manager requested that it should in future be recorded as the Longleat Yew.

The earliest record is a girth measurement of 32' 7" in 1780, as noted in *The Sacred Yew* (1994) by Chetan and Brueton.

In *Arboretum and Fruticetum* 1838 the diameter of the trunk is given as 10' 4", which equates to a girth of about 32' 6". This account gives an age of 300 years to the tree, surely a printing error, since in the same article are 200 year old yews with diameters of 1' 9" and 2'. John Lowe includes this tree in his 1894 *The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* and records a girth of 31' at 3'. He quotes the age given to the tree by Loudon in *Arboretum and Fruticetum*, but was too polite to disagree with it, merely adding an exclamation mark of disbelief: "Said to be 300 years old"! (Loudon 1838)".

The most comprehensive description of this tree appears in *The Journal of Forestry and Estate Management*, volume 1 May 1877 to April 1878.

REMARKABLE YEW TREE.

Sir, Since reading the interesting account of ancient yew trees in your last issue, I have carefully measured a grand old specimen growing on the Longleat estate, and perhaps a record of its dimensions may be acceptable to your readers. The site occupied by this veteran yew is a portion of Temple Farm Garden, Corsley, adjoining Longleat Park ; and I may as well mention that it is indebted to the upper greensand formation for the sustenance which has been the means of building up so bulky a specimen of the vegetable kingdom. The measurements are: Height, 50 ft.

Girth of butt at the ground level, 33 ft. 7in.

Girth of butt at 1 ft. above the ground, 29 ft. 2 in.

Girth of butt at 4 ft. up (or the smallest girth), 24 ft. 5 in.

Length of butt, 6 ft., where it divides into several limbs ; the two huge central limbs girth 12 ft. 7 in. and 12 ft. 9 in. respectively ; these latter, by a strange freak of nature, again unite at 6 ft. up, and are there grafted together in Siamese twin fashion ; the diameter of spread of branches from north to south is 52 ft., and from east to west 57 ft. ; and the circumference of the widest spread of branches is 168 ft.

This fine old yew is still healthy and growing, its head is very dense and full of leaf. Viewed from one side, it exhibits a perfect pyramid of dark green foliage, being broad at the base and gradually tapering to a narrow top, but on looking at it from the opposite side, it is more shouldered, and presents a flatter and more irregularly conical form. The butt, to all outward appearance, is sound and solid, and tolerably round, save above two of the large roots, where it bulges out slightly.

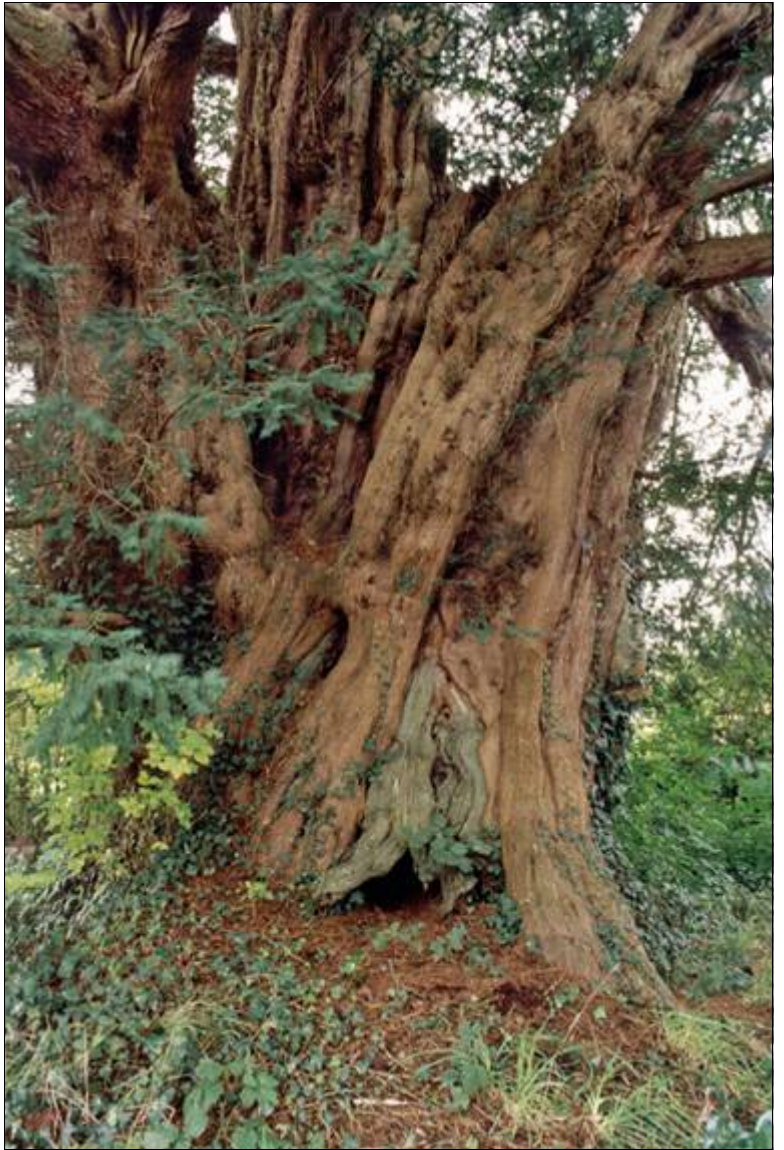
The age of yew trees, growing under favourable circumstances, and when in healthy growth, may be approximately guessed by allowing 100 years for every foot in diameter of stem, therefore I should guess this tree to be not less than from ten to eleven hundred years old. I have recently grubbed out a quantity of shrubs that were growing round it, so as to encourage it to renew a lease of its life for another century or two, forked the ground over a spit deep under and some distance beyond its branches, and afterwards spread a good thick layer of road parings over the surface. This I have no doubt will prove very beneficial to its roots, and promote its healthy growth for many years to come.

I also measured a group of six yew trees in Longleat Park. They are more juveniles as compared with the old specimen above mentioned, still, they are very fine examples of tall, healthy, vigorous growing yew trees.

They vary from 40 ft. to 55 ft. high, and girth from 6 ft. 1 in. to 7 ft. 11 in. round the stem at 5 ft. above the ground. The largest specimen, which is 55 ft. high, contains 78 ft. of timber. The soil in which they are growing is a rich loam resting upon a Kimmeridge clay subsoil.

G. B.

In 1931 *Notes and Queries* calls this site Whitborne Temple. In it William Bradbrooke writes: 'At this village there is a yew standing in a garden close to the road. At 3½ft. from the ground, and where the bole is clear from roots and boughs, the girth is 25ft. 6ins. The bole is clean up to 6ft., when it divides into three huge limbs. The umbrage is about 60 yards, and the estimated height about 35ft. The foliage is dense and symmetrical, the boughs extending equally all round the bole. The tree presents a vigorous aspect, but at one place, close to the ground and just beneath a high root, there is a hole leading to a cavity, not of great size. Decay is obviously installed. Allowing an average increase in diameter by 9ins in a century, the tree is perhaps twelve centuries old, or even older -15th August 1927'.



Allen Meredith, whose work inspired *The Sacred Yew*, visited Temple Farm in 1982 when it was still a working farm, and was helped to measure the tree by the farmer, whose family had lived there since 1886. He was told that the tree lost some of its main branches in 1900 and in 1981. His description was of a solid and healthy tree where 'new bark has grown over parts that seem at one time to have been decayed and hollow'.

By the time of my visit in 1999 the farm had been taken into the ownership of the Longleat Estate and I was taken to see the yew by the estate manager.

All of the details noted in earlier accounts were apparent, with 3 main growth areas clearly visible in the photograph as well as the cavity and new wood flowing over dead sapwood. I recorded a girth of 28' 3" at 1', measured just above the root spread.

The origins of the site remain unclear, but the presence of an ancient yew suggests that this place has been important for ten centuries or more. The *History of Wiltshire* states that 'The manor of Whitbourne Temple, which was held in the later Middle Ages by the Hospital of St. John at Wilton, must have formerly belonged to the Knights Templar of Templecombe (Somerset)'.

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Most of this material is available on various websites and I am grateful to Peter Norton for his discovery of the account in *The Journal of Forestry and Estate Management*, volume 1 May 1877 to April 1878.

Recorded girths:

1780	32' 7"		
1836	32' 6"		
1878	33' 7" at the ground	29' 2" at 1'	24' 5" at 4' (smallest girth)
1894		31' at 3'	
1927			25' 6" at 3' 6"
1999		28' 3" at 1'	