

The Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland

John Lowe – published in 1896

John Lowe produced the first systematic study of old yews found in Britain and Ireland. This article reproduces the photographs and prints that illustrate Lowe's book, and where available includes a photo of the tree taken 100 years later. The following places are featured:

Albury Park, Borrowdale, Brockenhurst, Cherkley Court, Coniston (Yewdale), Crowhurst, Druid's Grove, Leeds, Painswick, Patterdale, Penrhyn Castle (Llandegai), South Hayling, Tisbury, Trentham (Hanchurch), Warblington, Wilmington

by Tim Hills



ALBURY PARK, Surrey



Yews are plentiful in the vicinity of Albury Park, with exceptional specimens at Newlands Corner, one of England's few remaining ancient yew woodlands. Other yews in the area were noted by Julia Cartwright in 1890, and in *The Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury* she observed that yews were to be found "at intervals along the ridge from St Martha's Chapel, by Weston Wood and the back of Albury Park." However the precise location of this yew remains a mystery and we do not know whether it has survived. Girth was recorded by Lowe as 22' at 3'.

Also of note in Albury Park is a row of yews, thought to have been planted by Evelyn in the 17th century. In 2006 this consisted of 119 trees and 37 stumps, some with sections of growth rings that could be counted, suggesting that the original planting might well have been more than 300 years ago.

BORROWDALE, Cumbria



Lowe's photo shows only three of Wordsworth's *Fraternal Four of Borrowdale*, since the 4th was blown down in a wind storm in December 1883. It was certainly as large as the remaining three, described by O.Ashe in 1890 as follows: "vast was its diameter, like the entrance to a cave, and not a small one." The girth of trees 1 and 2 is about 16', while that of tree 3 is closer to 25'.

The Borrowdale yews in 2002



Tree1 >



< Tree 2



< Tree 3 >



BROCKENHURST, Hampshire

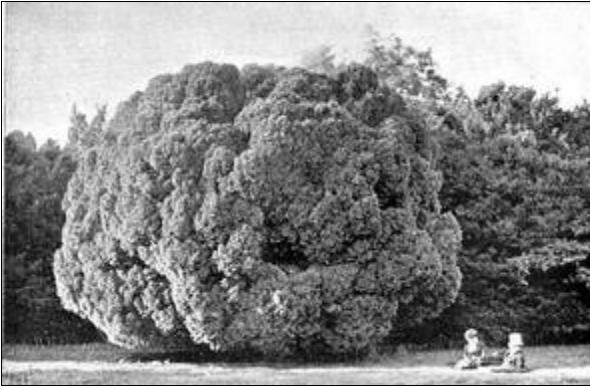


Throughout the 19th century, Brockenhurst was known not only for its old yew, but also for a large oak, whose stump fills the foreground of Lowe's photograph. In 1793 the yew was recorded in Warner's *Topographical Remarks* with a girth of 15'.

In 1895 it girthed 22' 4" at the ground and 18' at 3'. Lowe points out the deceptive nature of ground measurements, suggesting that the recorder "could not have had a very extensive knowledge of trees of this kind."

In 1998 the following girths were recorded: 21' 5" at 1', 20' 9" at 3' and 21' 6" at 5'. Although this appears to be a solid tree, and has a skin of living wood for most of its circumference, it is completely hollow.

CHERKLEY COURT, Surrey



The Cauliflower - A.Dixon



The Queen - A.Dean

The Cherkley Court estate is in private ownership and I have not had the opportunity to investigate its yews. It has been reported that both 'The Cauliflower' and 'The Queen' were alive and healthy in the 1990s.

Below is Lowe's report:

"In the grounds of Mr. Abraham Dixon there is a group of yew-trees covering ' 90 to 95 acres,' forming, I believe, part of the old estate of Ashurst, which in 1780 comprised about 542 acres, 'mostly a rabbit warren with a great number of yew-trees and pollards. The knots of the yew made fine wood for veneering. Mr. Boxall sold five hundred yews at ten guineas each.'

This is now, perhaps, the finest collection of yews in existence. The trees are in great measure closely packed in a valley in front of Mr. Dixon's house, so closely, that in the heavy fall of snow which occurred on the 26th and 27th December 1886, and was succeeded by a sharp frost, the trees were covered, it was possible to walk about amongst the trees underneath the snowy canopy. Fourteen large yews were broken down by the weight of snow and a storm of wind which succeeded it. Some of those remaining are of great size and remarkable form. Two of these, named 'The Queen' and 'The Cauliflower,' are especially beautiful; the former is 23 feet in girth and 32 feet high; the latter 16 feet in girth and 24 feet high. The closeness of its foliage gives an extraordinary resemblance to a gigantic cauliflower. It is, I believe, perfectly unique in character.

Besides these, there are others of large size.

- (1) Shows two distinct trees which have grown together at 3 feet from the ground, measuring at this point 18 feet in girth; they separate again at 5 feet and divide into numerous branches, making a fine head of foliage about 25 feet high.
- (2) Is 11 feet at the ground and 15 feet at 3 feet.
- (3) Is 13 feet 8 inches at the ground and 20 feet at 4 feet.
- (4) Is 13 feet 7 inches at the ground and 19 feet 11 inches at 3 feet.

Both the two last show an extraordinary amount of welding; No. (3) having twenty-two distinct buttresses, each ending in a stem above the height of 6 to 8 feet from the ground. These measurements were made in April 1890."

CONISTON, Cumbria



The large piece of stump (A) is all that remains of this once fine yew, apparently felled in 1896. The date of the engraving is not known, but the tree at that time appeared to be in excellent health, so the reason for its felling remains a mystery. A young yew (B) has been planted to take its place. I saw no evidence to back up the suggestion that it might have sprouted from the roots of the original tree. The land belongs to Yew Tree Farm and is now managed by the National Trust.

From a block kindly lent by the Editor of 'The Garden.'

CROWHURST, Sussex



When Lowe was told that this yew was said to be 3000 years old he replied, "I will believe almost anything of a yew-tree, but not quite *that*."

DRUID'S GROVE, Surrey



Lowe's photo shows 2 yews growing close to each other, each with a girth in 2003 of about 21'. The one nearest to the camera is also seen in Ian Robert Brown's photo (2008).



LEEDS, Kent

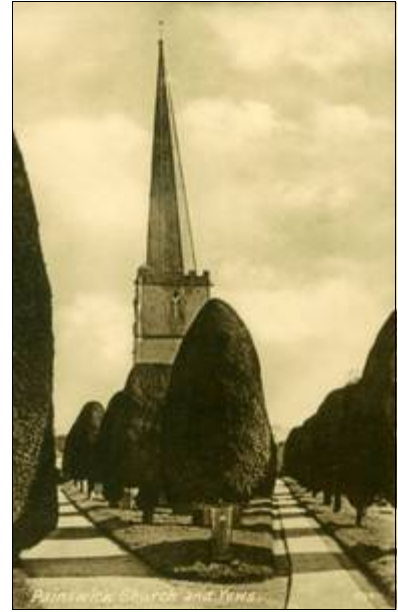


Cliff Hansford

Lowe described "a very old tree, now in its decadence, a mere shell of the original trunk remaining.....there is not very much of the top remaining; it must have diminished largely within the last sixty years." Girth was recorded at that time as 28' at the ground and 32' 6" at 3'.

The Leeds Yew provides us with evidence of an ancient yew's ability to renew itself following a period of deterioration. In this instance the tree now supports a full crown of thick foliage.

PAINSWICK, Gloucestershire



Lowe's photo is shown above left, while in the postcard on the right the trees are perhaps 30 years older. According to Mee, writing in *The King's England*, two dozen of the trees date back to 1774. In 2007 a sample of 15 of these had an average girth of 3' 9", while trees of the same age growing under normal churchyard conditions would be expected to have a girth closer to 8'. It would seem that clipping not only inhibits natural growth, but also reduces the normal annual increase in girth.

PATTERDALE, Cumbria



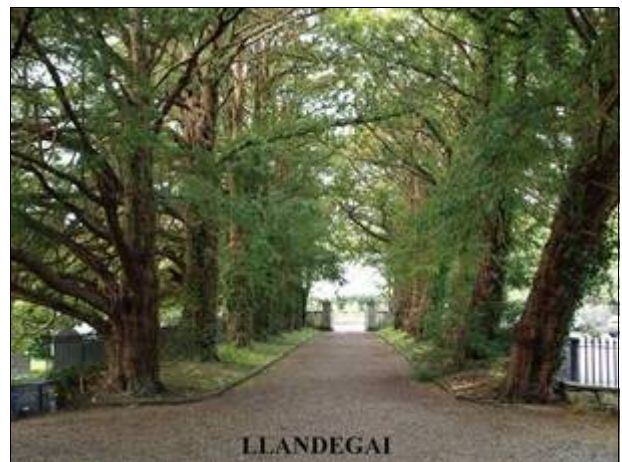
Lowe: "This remarkable tree....was blown down in 1883, being then.....much decayed. The girth at 3 feet from the ground was about 16 feet. The bole was about 6 feet in length."

The photograph, below right, taken 120 or so years after that on the left, demonstrates how long it can take yew sapwood to decay.



PENRHYN CASTLE, Gwynedd

Yew Avenue near Penrhyn Castle



The fine yew avenue was traced to Llandegai churchyard.

SOUTH HAYLING, Hampshire

From a photograph by Mr. Scorer, Havant



The yew continues to be propped, and in addition a metal fence has been erected around the tree. In places the weight of the leaning limbs has caused the tree to become impaled on its protective railings. Girth is above 33 feet.



TISBURY, Wiltshire



This is surely one of the more bizarre attempts to manage an ancient yew. Writing in 1834 Sir T. Dick Lauder said: "There is now standing, and in fine foliage, although the trunk is quite hollow, an immense yew-tree, which measures 37 feet in circumference and the limbs are proportionately large. The tree is entered by means of a rustic gate; and seventeen people lately breakfasted in its interior."

A measurement of 31 feet at the ground was given to Lowe by Rev. Henry Morland in the 1890s. A considerable amount of young growth around the trunk was noted, and this might account for the exaggerated girth recorded in 1834. Internal growth was also noted, gradually filling the cavity, for now there was only room for nine persons to stand inside.



When the yew was filled with concrete, the internal growth would have been overwhelmed and lost its capacity to sustain parts of the tree. In spite of this the yew continues to thrive and today has a full head of healthy foliage. Many churchyard yews have fallen victim to bonfires lit in their hollow centres; the Tisbury Yew at least cannot suffer that fate.

TRENTHAM, Staffordshire – now known as Hanchurch

Morris's *County Seats of Great Britain* (1880) described twenty-three yews planted on the four sides of a square field. All have survived to the present day.

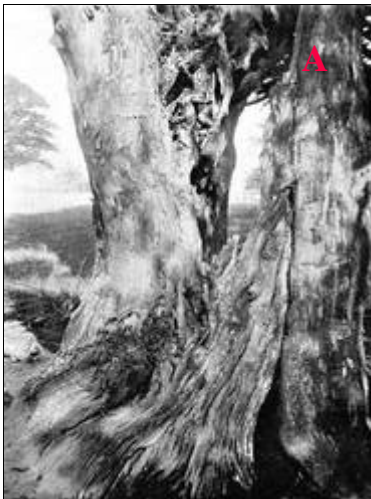
The vicar of Trentham, Rev.E.Pigott, sent Lowe photos and measurements of 3 of these, (A) with a girth of 16' 3" at the ground (B) 12' 9" at the ground and (C) 33' 4" at the ground, narrowing to 17' 6" at 3'.

Pigott added that "the oldest of them all stands not with these but in Trentham Churchyard." This no longer exists.

Tree C is recognisable by its position on the edge of a slope and its vast root system. Girth around its roots of 33' 4" led to the tree's mistaken inclusion in Lowe's list of the largest girthed yews in England and Wales.



Tree (A) as it is today is shown below centre, its girth still about 16'. It has not been possible to select a tree which corresponds with (B).



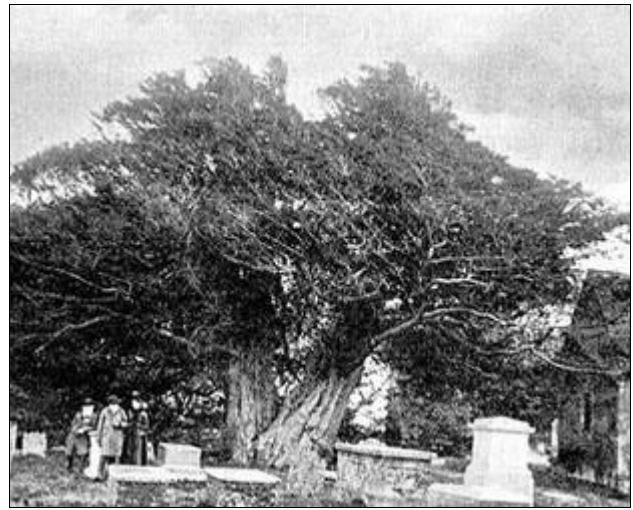
WARBLINGTON, Hampshire



If evidence were needed of the slow, almost imperceptible changes to the trunk of an ancient yew, it is surely provided by these photographs, taken more than 100 years apart.

There is a difference of almost 10 feet between girth recorded at the ground and at 5'. Lowe erroneously used a girth of 30' at 5' to include the yew in a list of the 27 largest girthed yews in England and Wales. A figure closer to 20' is a truer reflection of this yew's stature.

WILMINGTON, Sussex



There has been much debate as to whether these two trunks were once joined as a single tree. I am not alone in thinking that they bear all the hallmarks of a single tree which became hollow, then split into two fragments which became separated, and have since gradually healed to give the appearance of two trees.

Above left shows the yew in 1850, while in Lowe's photograph the trunks are beginning to lean.

Wilmington knows the importance of looking after its historical landmarks, and perhaps the nearby 'Long Man of Wilmington', firmly grasping two long poles, provided the inspiration for supporting this yew.

