



SOMERSET - non-churchyard yews



by Tim Hills

The oldest yews in Somerset found outside of churchyards

Location	Tree Category	Ownership/Responsibility
Asham Wood, nr Whatley	Veteran and notable - woodland	
Bickenhall	Notable - former religious site	Woodland Trust
Bourton Combe	Veteran and notable- limestone combe woodland	
Brockley Combe	Notable - limestone combe woodland	
Burrington Combe	Notable - limestone rock and scree	
Chalice Well, Glastonbury	Notable - garden	Chalice Well Trust
Chapmanslade	Veteran - boundary and route marker	Berkley Estate
Cheddar Gorge	Notable - limestone gorge	
Cheston Combe, Backwell	Veteran - limestone combe woodland	
Claverton Manor	Veteran - garden	The American Museum
Compton Dando	Veteran - Wansdyke, an early medieval construction	Landowner not known
Langford	Veteran - by old farm buildings converted to dwellings	
Leigh Woods	Veteran and notable - limestone woodland	
Marston Bigot	Ancient - formerly a churchyard yew	
Pilton	Notable, possibly ancient –garden of mediaeval house	House owner
Taps Combe, Brockley	Veteran - hill fort	
Tintinhull - Cedar Court	Notable - garden	National Trust
Wellington	Notable, possibly ancient - formerly an historic estate	
Winscombe vicarage	Veteran - formerly a churchyard yew	

2006: The two largest yews to be found in this area are on the plateau in Asham Wood. A GPS or local knowledge is needed to locate the trees.

Both are male, the largest girthing 17' 6" at 2'. It is a fine expansive solid looking tree with many branches from 8' upwards. A 'tent' made out of material cut from the woodland had been built nearby and the area was strewn with beer cans and the remains of fires. There were also goat skulls, both on the ground and lodged in crevices in the tree. Grid reference: ST71327 45857

The smaller yew at ST71110 45932 measured about 13' 3" at the ground. It is a solid many branched tree that leans slightly.

BICKENHALL

Map 193/ST28651965

1958: Swanton : I am indebted to the Rev.J.L.Marshall, Rector of Staple Fitzpaine, for the following interesting notes-sent in October, 1954—on a hitherto unrecorded yew in Bickenhall Old Churchyard.

"Its girth at ground level is 27ft 6 ins.; at 3ft. it is 13ft 5. It seems to be hollow from the roots, but whether it is so in fact is very difficult to say with any accuracy. At 3ft. from the ground it has a waist, so) (and the trunk, before any branches or side shoots appear, is quite 7ft. In height. Its umbrage is 50ft. in diameter. None of the branches is propped. There are no visible remains of the church which once stood there."

2006: It is evident that the erroneous measurement of 27' 6" came from an attempt to take the tape around its spreading roots. 14' 9" at 3' is a more realistic girth. Although the tree appears to be solid, a hole near the ground shows it to be hollow.

2009: The female tree had been much reduced. We must assume that the Woodland Trust, who own and manage this site, had a good reason for such drastic branch removal.



2007: Park at ST509690. Follow path westwards to where it meets the woodland. Take the right (straight on) path. It passes an old quarry set back 20/30 metres from the path to the left, before going downhill where it is joined from the right by another footpath. At this point take a less well defined path to the left and uphill. Here is found the tall male tree, shown right, girthing 17' 6" and by far the largest in this area.

Return to the valley and continue uphill. The valley sides become increasingly steep. Several 12'/13' specimens are noted, as well as this faller, which has made an arch over the path for many years.



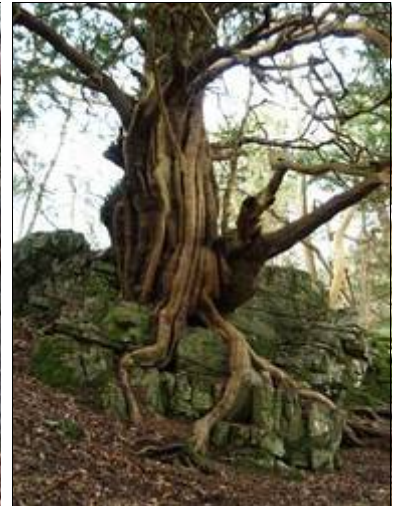
BROCKLEY COMBE

Map 172/ ST485664

In May 1795 Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in *Brockley Coomb*

‘From the deep fissures of the naked rock
The Yew-tree bursts! Beneath its dark green boughs
(‘Mid which the May-thorn blends its blossoms white)
Where broad smooth stones jut out in mossy seats,
I rest’

Most of the old yews can be found by taking the public footpath running to the south of and parallel to the road through the combe.



BURRINGTON COMBE

2007: A limestone combe a few miles from the better known Cheddar Gorge. The road through the combe is very busy. Dozens of yews grow on the slopes and cliff faces. In the photo below centre is the cleft in which the hymn *Rock of Ages* is supposed to have been written. Yew trees grow at the top of the cleft.



2006: The largest yews at this site are a pair of male trees girthing between 8' and 10', found at the south end of the garden near to the Holy Thorn. Among the several yews on the eastern edge of the garden is this old yew whose two trunks have grown together again.



It was at Chalice Well that a remarkable find was made – see p157 of *Excavations at Chalice Well, Glastonbury*. “..the layer continued to a depth of 11ft 9 ins.; on the lowest part of the layer was a remarkable find, the stump of a yew-tree, which had the remains of roots and was apparently *in situ* where it had formerly grown; it may have been an ancestor of the yew trees which grow by the well at the present time.”

Professor R.D.Preston, F.R.S. of the Astbury Department of Biophysics, Leeds University, wrote (16/6/62) as follows: “The water content of the wood turns out to be 730% which would date the wood back to early Roman times. The general appearance and feel of the wood also suggest to me that this wood dates back to about 300 A.D. This is of course on the assumption that the wood has been lying under water-logged conditions continually since burial and that there has been at no time any bacterial or fungal attack. I can see no signs of any such attack at the moment.”

The wood stump has been kindly conserved by Taunton Museum, and in 1964 was displayed at Chalice Well.

2005: Here, at 97', is the tallest yew so far recorded in the British Isles. It is on the border of Somerset and Wiltshire, and on private land which forms the boundary of the Berkley and Longleat Estates. It grows almost at the summit of a finger of high ground which is reached along a sunken lane. Walking from the foot of the hill the tree is not seen until the final turn in the path, when it is about 100 yards away.

Girth of this solid tree was 15' 9".



CHEDDAR GORGE

Map 182/ST475475

2005: The yews here have not been surveyed, but there are many growing in the area, some in precarious locations on cliff edges, others accessible by scrambling over the rocky landscape.

CHESTON COMBE

Map 172/ST495680

2005: A limestone combe on the SE side of Backwell. To the south of the road in a predominantly yew woodland are three large yews (2 male, 1 female) with girths between 13' and 16'. On the opposite side of the combe and visible from the road is a male yew with a girth of about 15'.

CLAVERTON MANOR

Home of the American Museum

Map 172/ST784640

2005: The only large yew on the estate grows to the right of the path leading from the car park to the manor house. The head gardener explained that it would have probably been a self seeded tree in an area of many yews, and that when the house and drive were constructed about 180 years ago the tree was probably cut right back leaving little more than a stump. The branches appeared to be this sort of age. Girth was 17' 3" at 1'.

COMPTON DANDO

Map 172/ST645650

2003: This yew was discovered by archaeologists as they explored the route of Wansdyke, "a long ditch and bank, also known as a linear defensive earthwork.....Wansdyke is dated to the Dark Ages, roughly between 400 and 700 AD." It was originally a large bank with a deep ditch, running from east to west.

The female yew has hollow spaces and a large gap in which internal growth can be seen. There was some fire damage in its hollow. Girth: 17' 6" at narrowest.

LANGFORD

Map 182

A368 below the slopes of Dolebury Warren

2003: This female yew, in excellent health, forms part of the wall separating garden from field. The house was previously farm outbuildings.

When viewed from the adjacent field there is a gaping hole where large branches have been removed.

Girth: about 20' at 5'.



LEIGH WOODS

Map172

2004: The yew shown on the right grows on a parish boundary. At one stage the boundary wall and tree merged and for decades had restricted the tree's growth. This is evident when the bole is examined. The National Trust are to be commended for freeing the tree by rebuilding the wall.

The tree is female with a fine expansive crown. Girth was 15' 1" at the ground and 17' 6" at 2'.

The trees below can be seen by parking at ST 553 740 and continuing along the track downhill.



MARSTON BIGOT

Map 183 Church ST755449 Tree ST757452

In 1791 Collinson recorded this "fine old yew with a girth of 23' at 4'." It was around this time that St Leonard's church was moved from its position next to the yew to its present location, so that it would no longer get in the way of the southerly view from Marston Bigot House. We thus have the rare spectacle of an ancient churchyard yew now flourishing in a parkland setting.

Only the first 1' of its bole was visible in 1999. The rest was lost beneath long twiggy growth. From 6/8' and upwards branches spread evenly to give the tree a fine crown.





2001: An enigmatic tree, with 9 separate trunks growing in parallel lines a few feet apart. The location is a garden of a mediaeval house, with a spring and a well close to the trees.

Several possibilities can be considered. The trees might have been planted with the intention of creating a yew feature, though one wonders why somebody would plant two rows of female yews in such a restricted garden space and so close to the house.

Is it possible that the trees have regenerated from the concealed stump of an ancient tree, hidden below many decades of leaf fall. If there was once a single old tree, did it mark the location of a water source en route to Glastonbury?

Girth around all of these trees was about 30'.

TAP'S COMBE

A limestone combe whose name is not marked on the O/S 50000 series, but which has a public footpath running through it. Along with many younger yews are two veterans, one each side of this ancient settlement site. The similarity in size and form would suggest they are of similar age.

172/ST 481 670 Towards the top of the combe the path splits. To the left is a twisted yew and about 20m from here is this fallen decrepit looking yew. It has suffered serious fire damage in the past and its hollow interior was blackened. It once had a small internal stem. New growth is well established on this shell to ensure its future when the old shell decays. It is male with a girth of 16' 10".



172/ST 4765 6715 This female yew swells from its narrowest girth of 16' 1" close to the ground. It is hollow on its NE side with many small internal stems. The hollow closes over at 3/4' into a central main branch.



Tintinhull is a National Trust property. The old yew is found in Cedar Court. Penelope Hobhouse, who used to work at Tintinhull described 'two ancient yew trees' growing on the south side (*Penelope Hobhouse on Gardening*). Another report describes 'the long vista down from the house is famous, as is the pool and cedar court with its ancient Yew tree.' In 1985 Alan Mitchell recorded the girth of only one yew tree as 14' 6".

WELLINGTON

2004: This site is next to a lake that replaced medieval fish ponds and is thought to have once been the site of a natural spring.



The yew (above left) is an enigma. It consists of two lines of stems forming a V shape and with all sections joined. Girth around these female stems is above 30 feet. About 8 ft away a single male yew leans away from the female. Further research would be needed to establish whether these are the fragmented remains of one tree, or were several trees planted to create a bower or other garden feature.

Also in the grounds is a section of very old wall with a yew hedge forming a rectangle around what used to be a bowling green – the trees in this are probably 250/300 years old.

WINSCOMBE VICARAGE

2001: The girth of this yew, 21' 2" at the ground, is almost identical to Winscombe's churchyard yew, which grows only a few yards away. They were undoubtedly planted at the same time and this specimen would once have been growing within the churchyard. When the vicarage was built they did not take into account the fact that the yew would continue to grow, and its trunk now almost touches the house.

In *The Heart of Mendip* (1914) Knight noted the second Winscombe yew in the vicarage grounds. Though visible from the path it is on private property at the east end of the church. I would agree with Knight's description, when making a comparison with the nearby churchyard yew, that it is of 'much more venerable appearance due to abnormal growth caused partly by its stem being partially cut away when the house was built.'

