

Cranborne Chase

By Peter Andrews (Extract from www.ancient-yew.org)

The study of an ancient yew wood

Thomas Hardy wrote of Cranborne Chase in his novel, *Two on a Tower*, 'a country of ragged woodland, which though intruded on by the plough in places, remained largely intact from prehistoric times, and still abounded with yews of gigantic growth and oaks tufted with mistletoe'.

Historically Cranborne Chase, a hunting domain of kings and nobles, covered parts of Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire. To gain an impression of the large size of the Chase, the area forms a rough quadrangle with Shaftesbury, Salisbury, Ringwood and Wimborne at the four corners. Physically this region is a chalk plateau bordered by the valleys of the Stour and Avon. Where clay with flints mantles the chalk, the Chase is heavily wooded. Cranborne Chase was disfranchised in 1829 and remains a relatively unknown and therefore less frequented part of England.

All the ancient yews are found in an area of the eastern Chase and here the wealth of yews includes all of the following: an ancient yew wood and other huge trees on downland hilltops, yews growing in a hidden grove, yews next to sites of antiquity, and also those in hedgerows by footpaths and those marking boundaries. Westwards in the vast woodlands of Rushmore and Ashmore, and on the chalk heights of Win Green and White Sheet Hills, ancient yews are presently unknown. Ancient yews are slow growing trees, particularly those in exposed places and on poor soils. A Chase hillside yew, 22 feet in girth has only increased by one inch in the last 88 years. From the late Saxon period the ancient yews growing here were protected when much of the land became large ecclesiastical estates, and doubtless as excellent horticulturists, the monks planted others. When the monastic lands were dissolved, the yews fell under the guardianship of wealthy landowners, a situation which continues to the present day. Other yews were planted, including many in the 18th and early 19th century to shelter the droeways, as well as landscape specimens, trees for our future appreciation.

Hidden along footpaths and in woods of the Chase, other yews await discovery. One private estate is reported to have at least one large ancient yew. An elderly naturalist wrote in 2000 of her father's work on the estate and of her lost childhood: 'This great park, the playground of my childhood, a paradise of chalk wild flowers and butterflies is no more. The great expanses of grassland are now partly arable and partly used for pheasant rearing and there is no public access. However I imagine the oldest yew known to me is still there. It was hollow in my childhood and I used to play house in it. It was

seldom visited, in fact solitude and silence, save for the humming of bees and high pitched serenades of grasshoppers and bush crickets in the grassland around my 'yew', are what I remember of summer in that vanished parkland.' For now this and other yews must remain hidden.

The Yew Grove

Near Cranborne in rural Dorset there is a yew grove of great antiquity. Five of Thomas Hardy's 'gigantic yews' grow with others in a small wood which lies on a calcareous loam. The impressive size of these woodland yews and a close examination of their trunks reveal them to be of considerable age. The largest yew here is 23 feet in girth and has a big internal stem inside a hollow shell that has disintegrated. The few pieces of the inner shell that remain have become encompassed by new wood over a long period of time. Close by a pollarded yew is only slightly smaller in girth.



The largest yew in the grove at sunrise, with the strange Butcher's Broom growing beneath it.

At the north end of the copse above a farm, there is a storm battered yew with broken branches and a thin foliage; this tree seems to be struggling. The aged trunk with a girth of over 20 feet, also contains a large internal stem. Nearby in a dell is a contrasting yew that is strong and healthy. This male yew has a clean reddish bole measuring over 18 feet around its base, but the girth rises steadily to give this tree a huge appearance. The thick vines of traveller's joy, known locally as devil's guts, hang from its many branches. The fifth and last ancient yew in the grove is another fascinating example of the yew's regeneration ability. The trunk of this yew has completely disappeared leaving a substantial central inner stem surrounded by a ring of others.

These internal stems are all that remains of a possibly much larger yew. A number of other yews in the copse, some reaching 14 to 15 feet in girth, are likely to be descendants of the far older trees.

Safeguard

During the first half of the last century, the yews grew here in hazel coppice with oak and the occasional field maple and ash. The coppiced woodlands of this area were traditionally used for hurdle making, but with the decline in this trade, the coppice was replaced with cash crops of quick growing conifers. Only the woodland margins and other small areas survived the clear felling, a sad reminder of their former glory. Thankfully the yews were spared in what must have been a deliberate policy of the estate to safeguard these ancient trees. Today, with incentives from the government, the estate is replanting parts of its woodlands with the original hardwoods.

Ancient woodland

When I found the yews in the summer of 2005, they were almost hidden by larch trees, but a year later many of these had been felled. Revisiting the yew grove in the spring of 2007, the felling of many of the closely planted conifers had brought forth a spectacular resurgence of the ground flora. A beautiful carpet of bluebells lay throughout the woodland with a fine mixture of other wild flowers including wood spurge, ramsons and woodruff. All these wild flowers in southern England are recognized indicators of ancient woodland and in the past a regular rotation of hazel coppicing would have produced similar displays. The most unusual plant here is butcher's broom, which is able to grow under the dark shade of the yews. Butcher's broom is a strange evergreen member of the Lily family, with very sharp leaves and large shiny red berries.

Extensively studied

Ann Horsfall is a widely experienced field naturalist, botanist and lecturer who has extensively studied the distribution of the Dorset flora and a history of the county's woodland. The yews she has seen in other Dorset woods are not ancient and appear to have been planted or introduced by birds.

Mysterious Wood

Early one morning before dawn, I walked up from Cranborne to the yew grove. The clear sky held a promise of watching the rising of the sun. A low mist hung across the fields in which hares and roe deer were busy feeding. As I approached the wood a group of fallow deer moved away from the shelter of a yew. Entering this mysterious wood, I sat beneath an ancient yew and listened to the crescendo of the dawn chorus with the scent of thousands of bluebells sweetly perfuming the air. As the sun rose slowly on the horizon and shafts of light pierced the woodland, transforming the aged trunks of the yews from darkness to a reddish glow, I took a series of photographs. Satisfied, I rested again to contemplate the yews, thinking that perhaps in the distant past of a forgotten age, others once visited these trees at sunrise.

The Great Yew

Not far from where Hudson visited, in a remote hilltop field, a great ancient yew looks out to a panoramic view of the downland and woodland of Cranborne Chase. Despite growing in an exposed situation, this is a magnificent tall and spreading yew. The extraordinary bleached and skeletal trunk has a girth of over 26 feet at its base, but there is evidence that it was once larger. A more accurate measurement for this male yew is I believe at a height of both two and four feet, either side of a bulge, where the bole reaches 28 feet in girth. During a recent visit, I found that in the severe gales of the previous few days, a branch had fallen from the upper canopy, which is thinning out due to such occurrences. I also saw that the spray had been cut right back on the upper bole and it was now possible to look inside its hollow interior. At the very heart of the yew were two large squat internal stems. The vast hollow trunk together with the internal growth help to anchor this mighty tree during the frequent storms which sweep across these chalk uplands.



The Great Yew of Cranborne Chase

The great yew grows on clay with flints, which in this location cover the chalk. Gorse growing on these chalk hills is a good indicator of this type of slightly acidic soil and here the plant occurs in quantity along the borders of the adjacent woodland. Growing on this windswept downland on a poor soil, the great yew must have a very slow growth rate. This is highlighted by another large yew growing in a similar situation on the south-eastern boundary of Cranborne Chase. Here an ancient yew is also growing on an impoverished soil, the acidic Reading Beds, which in this region intrude into the chalk. In 1919 the writer and archaeologist, Heywood Sumner (1853-1940) measured this fine yew and recorded a girth of 22 feet at a height of four feet. At the same height in 2007, I found that the girth had only increased by one inch. In the 88 years since Heywood Sumner came here the yew appears to have been practically dormant on its hillside, and how long the tree has remained in this state is impossible to say. Dating ancient yews, by whatever means, cannot take into account that the tree's girth might not increase for decades or even centuries, while the tree is sustained by growing internally. In my estimation, the great yew may have an age of at least two thousand years.