

Yew News

Tim Hills

We will never know whether there was once a time when a yew tree grew in every churchyard in England and Wales. Nor are we likely to discover whether the planting of a ring of yews around a church was also a widespread practice. While there are still many places in all parts of Wales where this phenomenon can be seen, in England only eight sites remain that can boast four or more ancient or veteran yews. It is intriguing and cannot be explained why six of these should be so close to each other that all could be visited in a day, each one being within a few miles of Ashford in Kent.

A visitor to these six sites is rewarded with seeing no fewer than 28 ancient (age 800+) or veteran (age 500+) yews, trees with a combined age of at least 17,000 years.

They are found in the churchyards at Elmsted (4), Kennington (4), Molash (6), Ulcombe (4), Waldershare (5) and Waltham (5). The infinite variety of forms exhibited by old yews is well illustrated, and many can be seen on the Ancient Yew Group website on the churchyard yews page under Diocesan Surveys – Canterbury.



Ulcombe Young Yew (photo by Tim Hills)



Ulcombe Old Yew (photo by Tim Hills)

Young and old in good company

So slow is the change in these trees that what Arthur Mee said in his 1936 *The King's England* is applicable today. At Ulcombe he tells the reader to look out for 'old yew and young yew'. Old yew he describes as 'the finest specimen we have seen in Kent' and as a pair 'their equal is not to be found side by side in any place we know'.

At Molash the 'chief possession is its group of old yews, perhaps the most surprising collection in the country'. Waltham church 'is ringed by a company of great yews', Elmsted has 'old yews', and at Kennington the yews are 'visibly breaking up with age'.

At Waldershare the church is now managed by the Churches Conservation Trust. But who manages 'its chief possessions.....its magnificent yews, two perhaps as old as the Norman Conquest'?