

Latest Yew Discoveries

Ancient Yews (likely age 800+) and Veterans (likely age 500+) continue to be discovered and added to our database and website. Most of the yews first recorded in the writings of 19th century travellers have been located, as have those that appear in Botanical Society records, such as those kept by the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Society. More recently the *King's England* series by Arthur Mee and the detailed records of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) have helped us locate previously unrecorded yews. Although such sources of information are now largely exhausted, significant old yews continue to be discovered. Below are some of the most recent:

In September, we heard that two old yews had been found growing on a motte in Shropshire, visible both from the road and the nearby 12th century Middleton Chapel. The privately owned Scheduled Monument is described in *Discovering Shropshire's History* as 'an unusually small example of a medieval motte (earthwork castle), with steep, stepped sides, this may have been a watchtower rather than a castle'. Since the circular motte is 20 metres across it was puzzling that yews in such a prominent position were neither mentioned in 19th century publications nor in Andrew Morton's 1986 *The Trees of Shropshire*. The explanation is that the mound and adjacent land had become so overgrown that once the yews could no longer be seen, they were forgotten. It was the persistence and hard work of Henry Chance, who spent many weeks clearing away the undergrowth, shrubs and many trees, that these aged yews were discovered. They might otherwise have remained hidden for centuries more. Since old yews at archaeological sites have not always received favourable treatment, it is possible that they owe their continued existence to having been hidden for so long.



One of the two veteran yews at Middleton Motte, Shropshire
(Tim Hills)



One of the six veterans found on the slopes at Railford Bottom, Wiltshire
(Peter Norton)

Research Reaps Reward

In Priors Dean churchyard in Hampshire is a 25ft girthed ancient yew. Less well known is the group of yews by the side of a sunken lane, one of several minor roads leading towards this remote church. In October, Peter Norton recorded 7 yews, and in doing so discovered two to be veteran. Yews at Whatley in Wiltshire were first noted in Chetan and Brueton's *The Sacred Yew* (1996), which describes a grove of 'about 100 trees; pollarded to 3ft from the ground about 600 years ago, threatened by nearby quarrying'. During several visits Peter Norton explored most paths in the area, searching in vain for the elusive grove. His journeys were not entirely wasted, for he discovered a significant cluster of yews at Railford Bottom. In spite of the steep and sometimes precipitous limestone slopes we were able to record 16 individuals, of which no fewer than 6 are classified as veteran.

Tree Hunt Treasures

In 2010 The National Trust owned 630,000 acres of land, so it is not surprising that old yews are to be found on some of their estates. Ancient Tree Hunt member Nick Brown discovered two in Holesack Wood on the Sizergh/Brigsteer estate in Cumbria. One is a magnificent ancient specimen, in excellent condition and with a girth of almost 24ft, while nearby is a veteran, blown down about 100 years ago but 'still very much alive'. On the Croft Castle Estate in Herefordshire, Andy Gordon recorded several old yews for the Ancient Tree Hunt. Among them I was able to confirm two fine ancient and one veteran yew.

Success in Somerset

Finally to churchyards, where it is still proving possible to find previously unrecorded old yews. In August a 19ft veteran was discovered by Sue Smith at Tickenham in Somerset. At the time of her find I had just embarked upon one of my many retirement projects - to document the churchyard yew population of Somerset - and this news provided welcome encouragement.