

It was in this poem that Wordsworth described the yew at Lorton Vale as ‘a living thing, produced too slowly ever to decay’, and the ancient yews at Borrowdale with their ‘huge trunks’ and ‘growth of intertwisted fibres serpentine, up-coiling, and inveterately convolved...’ There can be no doubt that Words-

worth understood this tree’s strength, its strategies for survival and its extreme longevity.



In 1819 Wordsworth was given the sum of £20 (equivalent to £800 today) by his friend Sir George Beaumont, for a local use of which he ‘thought proper’. He resolved to plant yew trees in the churchyard at Grasmere, requesting that they ‘be taken care of hereafter when we are all gone, and some of them will perhaps at some far distant time rival in majesty the yew of Lorton and those which I have described as growing in Borrowdale where they are still to be seen in grand assemblage’.

Borrowdale’s Yews as Wordsworth might have known them

We can be sure that top quality young trees would have been selected and all possible measures taken to ensure that they would thrive. To ensure success Wordsworth had ‘four pretty strong large oak enclosures made, in each of which was planted, under my own eye and principally if not entirely by my own hand, two young trees, with the intention of leaving the one that throve best to stand’. The care lavished on these trees was such that every one of the 8 yews flourished, so Wordsworth had four more enclosures made, planting in each ‘a tree taken from its neighbour’. All continued to ‘thrive admirably’ and the fences were able to be removed.

Because of the attention these trees received they show the fastest consistent rate of growth of any yew population yet measured over this time span, with girths between 9ft 6in and 12ft in about 200 years. At nearby Towned, owned by the National Trust, a dozen yews were planted in 1737. Average girth of the 7 survivors here is only 8ft 6in, showing a more typical growth rate of only 9mm per year, about half that of Wordsworth’s pampered yews.

At the time of his death in 1850 Wordsworth was Poet Laureate, and his burial plot beneath one of the yews he planted and nurtured became a place of literary pilgrimage. We can be sure that his trees continued to receive preferential treatment long after his death, and would appear to do so even to the present day. There is no reason why they should not still be growing in 500 years from now, fulfilling Wordsworth’s wish – or perhaps it was a prophecy - that they might one day ‘rival in majesty’ the Borrowdale Yews.