

EXCEPTIONAL YEW TREES

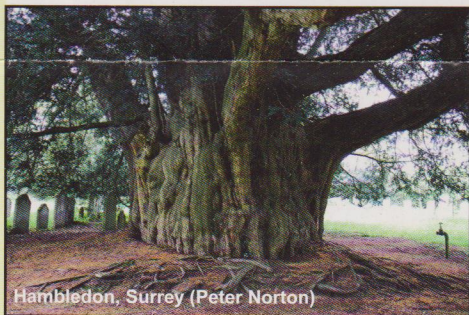
Toby Hindson and Tim Hills

The exceptional yew trees of England, Scotland and Wales by Andy Moir, Toby Hindson, Tim Hills and Richard Haddlesey, was published in the Royal Forestry Society's *Quarterly Journal of Forestry* in July 2013. The article can be read on the Ancient Yew Group website, www.ancient-yew.org under the heading Yew Articles → Journal.

The article was based on the analysis of 2,760 records of live yew trees recorded at that time in the Ancient Yew Group database, and from this information a 'unique population' of the most significant specimens was categorised by girth as follows:

717 Veteran (5-6.99m), 204 Ancient (7-8.99m) and 55 Exceptional (≥ 9 m) yew trees.

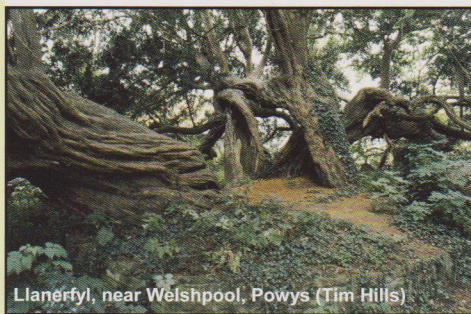
Those of you familiar with the Ancient Yew Group's classification of yews, based on many years of research carried out by Toby Hindson, will be aware that Ancient yews are regarded as having a likely age of 800 years +, while Veterans have a likely age of 500+.



Hambleton, Surrey (Peter Norton)

Our classification Veteran is slightly different from the standard definition, being based on the girth rather than the condition of the tree, but respects Alan Mitchell's observation that yews are generally hollow or rotting out by the time they measure 4.57 metres.

So what is it that makes a small number of yews Exceptional when they reach a girth of 9m? Research to date indicates that the yew cannot be aged by measuring girth with the same confidence that one has when measuring for instance an oak, and so an exact age cannot ever be calculated for yews in this way. It also follows that the larger the tree becomes, the greater is the possibility of error.



Llanerfyl, near Welshpool, Powys (Tim Hills)

What we can be sure of is that in reaching a girth of 9 metres a yew will have had substantial periods when girth increase will have virtually ceased – for instance during extreme canopy retrenchments and other factors affecting the bole. Our first indication of these extended growth stalls comes from historical girth records. These have been verified by repeat measures carried out during the last two decades and enable us to realise that the last two metres of girth on a 9m yew (from being a 7m girthed Ancient) is very hard won, and that the processes involved may take many centuries. So yews that have achieved this girth are demonstrably of extreme age, as well as being different in character and complexity from most of the Ancient specimens. Hence the need for this further category.

Can we give this new category a minimum age? Unfortunately, while we can be 90% certain that a Veteran is at least 500 and an Ancient at least 800, it is not yet possible to give a likely minimum age for Exceptional yews. For the time being 'very, very old' will have to suffice.