

Ancient Yew Group

Tim Hills

Welsh border yews

The border separating Wales from England runs for approximately 160 miles from the Dee estuary in the north to the Severn estuary in the south. For many miles it follows river or stream and occasionally it flirts with a section of Offa's Dyke as it winds among remote hillsides. It is never far from the site of ancient (likely age 800+) or veteran yews (likely age 500+), with no fewer than 13 ancient and 19 veterans recorded within 5 miles of the border on the Welsh side. We travel from north to south calling in briefly at each site. We also take a look at the latest developments in the management of these exceptional trees.

Graves of the dead

Starting at Gresford is a mighty ancient yew with a girth of almost 9m growing behind protective railings in a churchyard shared with 33 younger yews. Old postcards show that it has been protected in this way since at least Victorian times. When measured in 1808 it had a circumference of 'seven yards eighteen inches at 1ft and nine yards nine inches at 5ft'. At that time it was reckoned that the yew had only 100 further years of life before it would drop its 7 major branches 'amongst the Graves of the Dead'. Today it carries at least 8 major branches!



The mighty yew at Gresford today (Photo: Tim Hills) and in Victorian times.

Seven Wonders of Wales

Overton is another yew prolific churchyard, so famed in 1802 for being surrounded with 25 yew trees that it was described as one of the Seven Wonders of Wales. Only one of its yews is of great age, an ancient tree that in 1999 was supported on four props, placed to prevent a large hollow fragment from falling across the path. By 2004 railings had been placed around the tree to help further protect the ancient fragments.

Jewels in the crown

More worthy of the title 'Wonder of Wales' is Llansilin, without doubt one of the jewels in the crown of Welsh churchyards. Growing here are no fewer than 6 ancient or veteran yews. There were once even more; an article in the 1871 *Bygones* telling us of 'eight of the finest' as well as three younger yews. At that time they were measured 'wherever the bulk appeared to be greatest between the ground and 4ft' and the girth range of the largest 8 was between 13' and 22' 6". Today the 6 largest yews, measured to obtain their lowest girth, range from 18' to 26'.

The two veteran yews at Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain were also mentioned in the 1871 *Bygones*. They might not have the wow factor at this moment in time but, as with all yews, they have the capacity to live for many more centuries and their appearance will be much altered by the time the year 2500 is reached.

The ancient hollow yew at Buttington does have the wow factor, consisting of a thin skin for 7m of its 8m circumference, with the missing section allowing access to its interior. In the 1881 *Collections Historical & Archaeological*, its girth was reported as 23' near the ground. Today that girth is closer to 28'.



The yew at Buttington (Photo: Tim Hills)

Roman antiquity

Six more ancient or veteran yews are found at Trelystan, Churchstoke and Hyssington, before we arrive at Heyope, where one of its two veterans has a particularly impressive and striking columnar form. It was here that Ancient Yew Group member Paul Wood made an unexpected find: "I looked up inside the tree on the north side and noted something orange - a two eyed mouth end of what turns out to be a Roman period phallic handle. I am informed this dates to the mid to late 300s AD. One other example is known from a site near Wrexham which securely dated that example. How it got into the tree is a mystery. It was three quarters encased in rotting yew but I have concluded that it has been there for a considerable period of time to be firstly grown over by the tree which then rotted inside.

Could this have been a Roman site that later became christianised with the planting of the yews as part of the process? Has this piece of ceramic been brought up from the depths and placed in the tree? It is of course possible that it was bought from another site and offered to the established tree a few hundred years ago."



The yew at Heyope (Photo: Tim Hills)

Whitton is another site where records inform us of the loss of old yews. The 1970 Brecon Yew Survey reported four trees with girths of 26', 18', 13' and 10' 3". The only significant yew that remains today has a girth of about 23'.

Category of ancient-exceptional

At Discoed are three extraordinary ancient yews. Of the two growing in the churchyard, one has a girth of more than 11 metres, placing it in the category of 'ancient-exceptional' – an accolade given to only 18 Welsh churchyard yews. Yews in this category are likely to be 1000 years of age and more. The third is found 500m west of the churchyard, on the road towards Maes-Treylow. Here, a well preserved section of Offa's Dyke comes down from the hills to cross the river Lugg. The 8m girthed yew that stands by the Dyke was no doubt once a route marker.



Two of the extraordinary yews in Discoed churchyard (Photos: Tim Hills)

Majestic Wye Valley

The border now follows the Offa's Dyke path along the Black Mountains ridge. Here, nestling beneath the steep slopes, is the exceptional site of Capel-y-ffin, with its semi-circle of 7 veteran yews, each one measured in 1871 by members of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club. At Llanvihangel Crucorney, below Ysgryd Hill, a half shell is all that remains of a veteran yew, while south of Monmouth at Penallt, a fine ancient yew with a girth of 7m stands high above the majestic Wye Valley.

Protection of a priceless heritage

For the last few years work has been under way to obtain greater protection for churchyard yews in Wales. It is fortunate that the Church in Wales has a management structure that places its churchyards under the watchful eye of a single Property Services department. This department has a record of every known ancient and veteran churchyard yew, information also held by each diocesan Archdeacon. When a church considers that work needs to be carried out on one of the named yews, they approach their Archdeacon, who consults with Property Services who, in turn, contact the Ancient Yew Group to establish the best way forward. Finding a core of tree specialists to advise on work that needs to be carried out is in progress, but we are confident that we are, at last, seeing an end to unnecessary losses of these historic trees in Wales.

Administration

Four of the churchyard sites in this article are not overseen by the Church in Wales, those at Discoed, Trelystan, Churchstoke and Hyssington. They all come under the umbrella of the Church of England and the administration of the Diocese of Hereford. The Ancient Yew Group is hopeful that a similar level of protection can now be arranged for churchyard yews in English dioceses and it plans to provide each Diocese with the information and photographs we have about their significant yews. It is hoped that they will be able to respond in the same positive manner as the Church in Wales.



Yews at Trelystan (Photo: Tim Hills)

For more information and photographs about Welsh border yews go to:

www.ancient-yew.org



The Ancient Yew website is supported by The Tree Register