

Yew Tree Cottage; the yew in local place names



Yew Tree Cottage, Broughton, Hampshire

Introduction

This study of yew names given to houses, roads and places in a single English county began in May 2006 as a response to a single sentence in a book on yew trees.

The book was “The Ancient Yew” by Robert Bevan-Jones (*Windgather press, 2002*) and amongst its text was virtually a throw-away line suggesting that there could be 200 Yew Tree Cottages in England and that yew named farms and pubs could have a long history.

Now I knew of such a cottage near me and I liked the idea of searching out place names of yews to see if they might lead to interesting trees. Yew Tree pubs and farms sounded promising too, especially the former. For I realised I might be able to discover both an ancient yew and enjoy a pint of real ale at the same time!

As it turned out, this search did not result in me finding many new locations for ancient yews; although my ulterior motive of finding a veteran yew with a pub and a pint was indeed an enjoyable success. Nevertheless, what I began to discover about place names were interesting results unlike what I had expected. Much like most searches really; what you often find turns out to be something you weren't looking for.

My self selected aim was to look for imposing yew trees at place names and buildings named after yews throughout Hampshire. And to see if I could discover any historic significance linking the tree and the place. It proved only a partial success.

To start with I found it difficult to investigate local place names with any scientific certainty. Place names are by their very nature idiosyncratic; they appear to reflect a variety of stimuli acting upon a host of people across many centuries. And, of course, new names are continually being added. House names in particular seem not to have attracted serious study, possibly because house names tend to change with new owners.

Nevertheless, I eventually traced over 300 place name references in Hampshire, including far more Yew Tree Cottages than I had suspected. Whilst their locations led to fewer truly ancient yews than I had hoped, a range of smaller scale discoveries were revealed; which were very pleasurable to uncover. Let me explain further...

The Scope of the Search

Throughout Hampshire yews are frequent and locally common, especially on our chalk soils. So when I searched for villages or towns on maps and road names on street atlases I expected quick results which I hoped might indicate the existence of prominent yews in the urban scene as well as in the rural landscape.



Road sign on approach to Ewshot, but sadly not a yew to behold.

Of towns or villages only 2 yew sounding villages exist in Hants. Ewshot and Ewhurst are the 2 locations concerned and their names sound impressively old. Both locations are in the north of the county and both settlements are small. Ewhurst is scarcely a hamlet, more an estate with a park dating to the Georgian era. Sadly, a site visit there revealed no large yews in the neighbourhood. Ewshot, near Farnham is a small, well wooded village but I found no large yews there either. In fact I located both a yew tree cottage and a yew tree house there but neither had yews. Not a very satisfying introduction to my project.

Landmarks

There are few geographical place names marked on maps in Hampshire that relate to yews. Two Yew Hills, a Yew Tree Heath and a Yew Tree Copse: there are many more oak and ash landmark names than yews in existence.

A Yew Hill is at Compton, south west of Winchester and the hill is topped by a fenced copse of yews. This copse is marked on the 1872 OS map and seems not to have changed in size since. The trees are not ancient; the largest girth I found was little more than 10'0". However the locality was rich in yews, large trees can be found in hedgerows beside tracks leading to the Hill, and also at a Yew Tree Cottage and a Yew Tree Farm nearby. So whilst the copse was a sterile thicket of yew rather lacking in interest, the adjacent hedgerows and buildings had far more character

Another Yew Hill is found near Kings Somborne, west of Winchester. See Peter Andrew's article on the Ancient Yew Group website for more details of this hill and the fascinating yew trees associated with the nearby John of Gaunt's medieval deer park close to King Somborne.

Yew Tree Heath is in the New Forest. On the first series OS 1" map, circa 1800, a single yew tree is actually named on the map in one location. By 1872 maps indicate this one tree had become 'Yew Tree Heath' and so it remains known. Today this heath looks one of the most open, barren parts of the New Forest. If yews once existed here they appear to do so no longer, hollies are present but not yew. As heathland, the New Forest is typically scarce in yews. The exception being the Sloden Inclosure a fascinating area with a history that implies the veteran yews found here could have been introduced. They certainly look in terminal decline.



Yew Tree Heath, bare of yews and, to be honest, of much other interest...

Yew Tree Copse was more interesting, it is a neglected wood SW of Romsey; it even hosts a Yew Tree Cottage within it. This is an ancient copse, it is remarkably similar in size and shape to the wood shown on the very first Ordnance survey published before 1810 and named on the later the 1872 map. Today it looks little different to many other ancient Hampshire woods; yews are present as occasional woodland trees. The yews I found here were mature, the largest a multi-stem female of 13' girth. There appeared to be little sign of active woodland management, it looks more a scene of benign neglect; but an intriguing wood nevertheless. It is an ancient wood in terms that Oliver Rackham would recognise; its understory is typical of hazel coppice with an oak, ash, and maple canopy.

Roads named after yew trees

I found 22 roads in Hants bearing 'yew' in their title eg Yew Tree Road, and there are another 4 related names, ie Ewhurst Rd., Ewhurst Close, a Ewshot Lane and an Iford Court. The majority of these roads are 20th century constructions, as the frequent use of the suffix: Drive; Court; Close, Place or Gardens tends to indicate. The older roads, which can be confirmed by their presence on first series OS Maps, are very few: I could only verify six with any real confidence, Ewhurst Road and Ewshot Lane, both leading to the settlements mentioned above; and also 3 Yew Tree Lanes, and a Yew Tree Road. These latter Lanes and road proved of most interest, they also bear properties linked to yews; either yew tree cottages, a farm or a pub.

It is apparent that most yew tree road names are relatively recent, due to the huge growth in house and road building in the 20th century. Nevertheless, it was interesting to discover that yews are still being used to name our places. But do large yew trees grow in these modern roads?



Yew Tree Avenue, Cowplain. Not aptly named

As I had noted when visiting both Ewshot and Ewhurst, the use of the yew name is not a reliable guide to the presence of the tree. I now discovered that in suburban locations the use of road names could also be misleading. Groups of road names often appear in built up areas for no apparent reason, presumably because some agent chooses a generic name to embellish a number of very similar streets. Consequently in Cowplain, near Waterlooville, a Yew Tree Avenue is beside a Willow Tree Avenue; Cherry Tree Avenue; Rowan Avenue; and also a Pine Tree Gdns and a Conifer Close. There is no relevance to the presence of any of these trees, except perhaps for some Prunus species planted in gardens in Cherry Tree Avenue. This habit is not new. The Victorians were probably the first builders to regularly name a succession of streets in our cities after a common theme, as street names commemorating battles in the Crimea still testify.

Fortunately, in a significant number of cases, in about a third of the streets I have so far visited, it is reassuring to note that mature yew trees do indeed survive in yew entitled streets and I think it very probable that these yews would have been the spur

to the naming of the road. Since many of our suburban developments are generally lacking in character, it seems highly likely that, when building a new road, a property developer looks for some local clues to name their estate, so the presence of a notable tree species in the vicinity is probably sufficient for the roads to be so entitled. In fact the trees I found surviving in roads were never ancient but were invariably mature, the largest girthed tree I found is a 12' specimen in a hedgerow at Fair Oak, opposite the entrance to a modern Yew Tree Close. Significantly such trees appear to be valued by their local residents. Whilst measuring such yews in a road at Horndean, a house owner came out because she thought I was sizing up the tree to fell it.



A 1984 road in Horndean, with 2 mature yews that are appreciated by residents

Most notably of all, in one specific location near Swanwick, a prominent yew of almost 11' girth with an impressive canopy has clearly lent its name to two old houses and two very recent roads; a Yew Tree Drive and a Yew Tree Court. The houses date back to 1759 but how old their names are is not known. But this yew has formed a distinctive local landmark for many years and today is still being appreciated. It remains an impressive tree; I will refer to this location again in this article.



A fine roadside yew, girth 10'11" at Swanwick in a prominent location

Yew Tree Cottages

Searching for house names isn't easy; after a struggle to find helpful websites I was finally directed to a local authority intranet database of addresses which proved invaluable. I also made use of 'Hampshire Treasures' a publicly accessible database that categorises mainly older properties and a range of other historic features, such as listed buildings, ancient monuments etc in Hampshire.

Incidentally, this database gave me a diverting insight into the popularity of house names. Rose Cottage (368 occurrences), unsurprisingly seems to be the most common name. Also popular are: Cherry Tree Cottage (174); Ivy Cottage (112) Oak Cottage (97) Willow Cottage (69) and Holly Cottage (67). However, Yew names appear to more popular than most

I eventually located over 200 yew named cottages and I visited many of them. As I carried out this fieldwork I began to realise that even useful databases have their weaknesses; they always need updating to correct omissions, new names and mistakes. But one simple solution was obvious: ask the owners of Yew Tree Cottages if they know of others in the area. They often do, as they occasionally get misdirected mail. (Don't we all?). As a result I discovered yet more yew entitled dwellings. However, as I found out by visiting, these properties did not always display yew trees.

Yew Trees in the Garden

As you might imagine, the existence of a Yew Tree Cottage does not guarantee the presence of a yew in its garden. Surprisingly, many 'Yew Tree Cottages' appear to have no yews that they are named after; this is particularly noticeable in the New Forest. Nevertheless, in about 4 out of 5 cases, when I've visited a Yew Tree Cottage I've found a yew, or more than one, nearby.



Bramdean, two Yew Tree Cottages are named after this tree



Upper Swanmore, by the garden gate.

Of the yews found at Yew Tree Cottages many were mature trees with large canopies, but their girths rarely exceeded 10'. Whilst a few were clearly old with noticeable rot, I only found two truly ancient yews. One of 18'5" grows in a garden/hedgerow at Upper Swanmore and the other is a 19'6" girth tree that has given its name to two properties, No 1 and 2 Yew Tree Cottages, Bramdean.

Clearly searching for ancient yews at Yew Tree Cottages is not going to reveal spectacular results if I've visited over a hundred properties and only found 2 genuine ancient trees. But yews can be significant for other reasons than size and age; they can have other characteristics to enjoy.



A suburban yew in the pavement at Lee-on-Solent, all neatly turned out.

The Suburban Yew

Searching for mature yew trees in suburbia is an odd experience; like coming across a friend in a city, unexpected, and curiously more rewarding than one expects it to be. A few of such suburban Yew Tree Cottages are old buildings, now surrounded by modern estates, whilst most are more recent buildings which have been built close to older trees that predate them. Both make one wonder about how the locality must have changed during the lifetime of the tree. Sometimes it seems the tree itself is suburbanised; clipped and trimmed to be on its best behaviour.



King Somborne, Yew Tree House with a '7 ringed yew'

Yew Topiary

One of the most charming discoveries I found during my site visits was that Yew Tree Cottages would sometimes contain interesting examples of topiary in their garden. Indeed, since England is a nation of gardeners, I generally found that owners with yews in their garden were usually delighted to talk to me about their garden and their trees. Some have good reason to be proud of their topiary.

Sadly, at King Somborne, another such 7 ringed yew used to exist nearby at a Yew Tree Cottage but I was told its owners felled it in 1979. Why? Because surveyors found that the roots were coming up in the back garden and might be interfering with the foundations of the cottage. Yet it is a 16th Century cottage – which had survived well enough until 1979. A plague on building surveyors for blaming all such ills on trees.

History of Yew Tree Cottages and their Yews

On finding such yews, one wonders how long have the cottages been named after their yews and how old are their trees? Look again at the topiary of the King Somborne yew illustrated above; its stem is narrow, below a girth of 4'. Yet the owners are certain the topiary is at least 100 years old. I was shown a photo from the 1930's that showed the yew virtually unchanged. Clipping yew foliage certainly rejuvenates the trees growth so I would expect getting reliable age estimates from girth sizes of regularly clipped trees will be misleading. The annual tree ring growth must be extremely small.

Checking how long yew tree cottages have been so named has proved problematic. Some I found were newly named and a few were recently built. Most of the owners I interviewed did not know the history of their property, and those that did had only hearsay evidence.



Crawley, 10'10" girth



Swanwick, 10'11" girth, see also under road names above.

I only met one owner, in Crawley, who had thoroughly researched the history of his house with success. He told me it was first recorded as Yew Tree Cottage in 1785, though the house was probably older. His yew has a girth of 10' 10" at ground level. The owner knew of no other yew ever being present on site. So the question remains, is this yew big enough to have lent its name to the cottage 220 years ago? See the Crawley picture above. The jury is still out...

Yew Tree Farms

The Swanwick yew offers a more convincing case of being old enough to lend its name to a local farm. Whilst nearly 11' in girth this tree looks to be a veteran, it is hollow and grows close to a Yew Tree Farm dated 1759. Despite its roadside location this tree has lasted well; it is certainly a survivor, its new brick wall must have cut off many roots, tarmac covers part of the root plate but it thrives still. Unfortunately it is not known when the farmhouse was named after the yew tree.

Maps aren't much help either; the building is marked but not named on earlier maps.

Another Yew Tree Farm near Southampton can be tracked by maps; it is so entitled on modern maps but can be found on the 1872 OS Map as a Yew Tree House. Interestingly, this Farm is accessed along a Yew Tree Lane and the earlier map also shows a Yew Tree Cottage nearby. This cottage no longer exists; it was probably demolished when the present 1960's council housing development was built. The only yew to survive in this location today is a hollow, decaying tree of 9' girth in front of the farm. Yet this building dates back 400 years; one wonders how long it has been named after a yew; how old the surviving tree is and whether other yews were once present. Sadly it seems unlikely we will ever know.



Yew Tree Farm, Southampton, present on the 1st series OS map.

Of the 20 Yew Tree Farms I have so far located in Hampshire, I have visited 15 to date. Most are no longer working farms but their farmhouses or out buildings have become desirable residences. The name of Yew Tree Farm is often retained and what is more, farm buildings when sold off sometimes inherit this yew title. Consequently, one yew name can, so to speak, germinate others. So today we can find a yew tree farm (or farmhouse) next to a yew tree cottage or similar. Examples of this trend occur at Goodworth Clatford, Hollington, Langrish, Awbridge and at Ball Hill etc.

The situation at Goodworth Clatford near Andover typifies how farms today often reflect the changes in modern agricultural ownership. This small village is similar to many in Hants, except in that it hosts 6 properties all named after yews. As well as a Yew Tree Farm it boasts a Yew Tree Farmhouse, a Yew Tree Cottage, The Yews, Yew Barn and a Yew Bank - all within half a mile of each other, with even a road named Yew Tree Close, a modern cul-de-sac. Upon investigation, the YT Farm and YT Barn turned out to be both modern barn conversions of a Victorian farm, now called YT Farmhouse. This house was apparently separated from the original farm some twenty years ago and sold off. Nearby a 'Yew Bank' and adjacent 'The Yews' look to be Victorian agricultural cottages, which now form desirable houses. Whilst some 200 metres away lays 'Yew Tree Cottage', an old thatched property that historically is the oldest and most interesting of all; for this was once the original Yew Tree Farm, whose farmland was used to build many of the village's modern houses.

Yet in this village, around all these properties, is little actual evidence of yew trees today. The only genuinely old tree was a veteran female yew in the back garden of the once farm that is called Yew Tree Cottage. Unfortunately, the owners I spoke to were recent residents; nobody was able to explain the history of the farm's dismemberment and how so many yew names were adopted. I assume the veteran yew at Yew Tree Cottage begat the naming process and as properties were split up the name was retained. But other old yews might once have been present and now lost, who knows?

It is evident that as farms have evolved and changed over time, their names have evolved too. Since large farms are better recorded on maps than cottages, the changes to their names is easier to track. At Awbridge I even found a mapped Yew Tree Farm that is today named Oak Tree Farm. (There is but one mature yew but lots of large oaks.)

Of the 15 farms visited, five had no trees, the rest all retain mature yews. The largest yew is at a farmhouse near Highclere, it is a fascinating 15'4" girth tree with a clipped bell shaped canopy. The farmhouse is timber framed and probably over 200 years old. That was all the owners were able to tell me of their farm. I would guess their yew is at least twice that age.



Yews Old Farmhouse, Hollington, a farm no longer



A remarkable 15' yew near Highclere

Yew Tree Pubs

There are far fewer pubs today than there were a hundred years ago. Pubs names have changed too, as many of us may know from their own local. There are four yew tree pubs recorded in Hampshire, three are still licensed, and the other is now a yew tree cottage. The history of these pubs has been better recorded than that even of yew tree farms. Their public function at the heart of communities has probably been the reason for this. Unfortunately only one pub has a yew that is truly impressive.

The Yew Tree Inn at Highclere is now more of a restaurant than a local pub. Its history has been well researched, originally a terrace of cottages this Inn was first reputedly serving ale in 1620. When it first acquired its yew name is however, uncertain. It was known as "The Pheasant" in the 19th Century. The small, reduced yew at its corner has a girth of 8'4" so is unlikely to predate the building.

The Yew Tree Inn on Hayling Island is at the junction of a Yew Tree Road. The only yew present today grows in the pub's grounds, in rather a cramped site beside a children's play feature. The tree's girth is a mere 7'10" but the pub's name dates back at least to the 1860's, as a charming early photograph displayed at the bar shows. My guess is that either the pub or the adjacent Yew Tree Road once held other yew trees.



Yew Tree Inn, Hayling Island. Note the tree's canopy at the rear.

The last pub, “The Yew Tree”, is hard to find on a minor road in the middle of Hampshire near the hamlet of Lower Wield. But it is well worth a visit. It is reputedly 650 years old, though it was first recorded as a cottage selling ale beside yew trees in 1845. The pub boasts a fine veteran yew, see photograph. Its girth is 15'5” with a hollow trunk clothed in ivy. Both this pub and the Hayling Island pub are unpretentious, old fashioned pubs serving real ale, whose landlords cherish their pub's link to their trees. Interestingly they were both unaware of each others existence.



“The Yew Tree” Lower Wield, a fine fifteen footer at its corner.

In conclusion

So after visiting many yew named sites what have I discovered? Well firstly that Robert Bevan-Jones's estimate of perhaps 200 Yew Tree Cottages in England is a gross underestimate. I have so far traced over 200 yew named properties in Hampshire alone, most of them Yew Tree Cottages. In addition I have located some 18 Yew Tree Houses and another 40 other yew named properties as well as 20 Yew Tree Farms and 3 Yew Tree Inns. There are no doubt more that have eluded me. Although I know of at least 4 previous Yew Tree Cottages that since lost their names in the last 15 years. There are also 22 roads with yew names, and I have traced 3 modern blocks of apartments such as Yew Tree Court.

My second observation is obvious: names often change. House names are the least permanent. On several occasions when arriving at a Yew Tree Cottage or Farm, I found no such name, only to find by enquiry the cottage was once so named but the name was changed relatively recently.

A single example typifies this occurrence. When I visited a cottage in Greywell, I was told by its owner that the building was used as a school in the 19th Century. Later it became 'The Old School House'. It changed its name to Yew Tree Cottage after the war and then changed it again 10 years ago to 'The Old Cottage'. And why? "To avoid confusion" I was told. Since this is a 17th Century Cottage what it was called before it became a Victorian school one can only guess at, it has not been recorded.

Consequently, such evidence of name changing, combined with the lack of recorded verification of yew named properties before the 1850's leads me to conjecture that probably few yew-names date back beyond 200 years - although, as has been indicated in the text, hard evidence has not been forthcoming.



The much named cottage in Greywell, note the mature, part-clipped, yew alongside

The evidence from the yews themselves indicates that the great majority of trees at yew named sites are mature or younger; I only found a dozen sites where yew girths were about 13' or larger, they include the two ancient yews illustrated earlier. This observation tends to confirm my view that it was the Victorian era which saw a popular rise in naming properties after yew trees. But to draw authoritative

conclusions from this study has not been possible. I can only offer tentative likelihoods, not clear cut conclusions.

Of more significance is the realisation that big, prominent yews do not have to be ancient to be regarded as landmarks and can have an impact beyond the spread of their canopies. This influence can lead to several buildings or roads to be named after them. The Swanwick yew in particular survives to indicate this principle. And despite the habit for name changes, some names stick fast and get transferred to new buildings, as I have shown at yew tree farms but also at cottages such as at Cheriton.

Consequently, for a significant minority of the yews I visited I found them to be of genuine interest for reasons more than just age. Either the tree itself had noteworthy characteristics or its local prominence, or its continuing inter-relationship with man makes them worthy of appreciation. So I have therefore created my own shortlist of significant yews in an appendix, with a remark of why they are worthy of note.

Finally it is clear that at about a fifth of all yew named properties there are no yews present today. One can speculate that the trees have long been removed, but again I have no hard evidence. And why should the yew tree name remain in use if such buildings no longer retain their trees? Inertia or affection for the name perhaps?

Whatever the reason, it is clear that yews still retain their influence in the landscape for people to continue naming new roads or their homes after yew trees. In the 21st century fewer cottages might now be built than apartments. But even new age apartment blocks like to use yew names it appears.



“Yew Trees” an apartment block recently built in Bishops Waltham

Russell Cleaver, June 2007 (to be continued)

APPENDIX: Shortlist of Significant Yews

Location	Significance	Yew Tree Cottages
Ampfield	Topiary; impressive 5 bushes and hedge	
Awbridge	1 female yew; 3 named properties: Y.T.Cottage, House & Barn	
Bramdean	19'6" ancient yew in garden.	
Broughton	Topiary and a tall 12'10" female tree in gdn.	
Bursledon	Tall twin males, each 11'10", 3' apart in front gdn. C16 cottage	
Cheriton	Fine 20m hedge, 13'1" male tree, ex YT Farm, & 'Yew Corner'	
Crawley	Recorded history to 1785	
Hinton Ampner	Veteran male 12'5"; (Nat. Trust)	
Lee on Solent	Suburban clipped tree in pavement	
Lindford	Fine 13'8" female on a footpath beside the YTC	
Upper Swanmore	18'5" ancient tree with tree house in garden.	
Yateley	12'11" male tree of a YTC that was once an inn, then a farm	

Location	Significance	Yew Tree House etc
Kings Somborne	Remarkable 7 ringed topiary, reportedly Victorian	
ditto	"Yew Bank" a house with a 16'1" veteran on an ancient bank	

Location	Significance	Yew Tree Farms
Highclere	Remarkable, bell-shaped crown on a 15'4" girth tree	
Hollington	2 prominent yews beside farmhouse. New 'Yews Farm' next door.	
Swanwick	Prominent male given its name to 2 roads, YTC & 1759 YT Farm	

Location	Significance	Yew Tree Inns
Hayling Island	Yew Tree Lane; 1860 recorded history, earlier pub of same name	
Lower Wield	Recorded history to 1845. Veteran 15'5" hollow male. Fine pub.	

Road with Significant Yews

Road name	Location	Significance
Yew Tree Close	Fair Oak	12' girth tree in hedgerow opposite road entrance
The Yews	Horndean	2 x 10' trees in verge of 1984 road