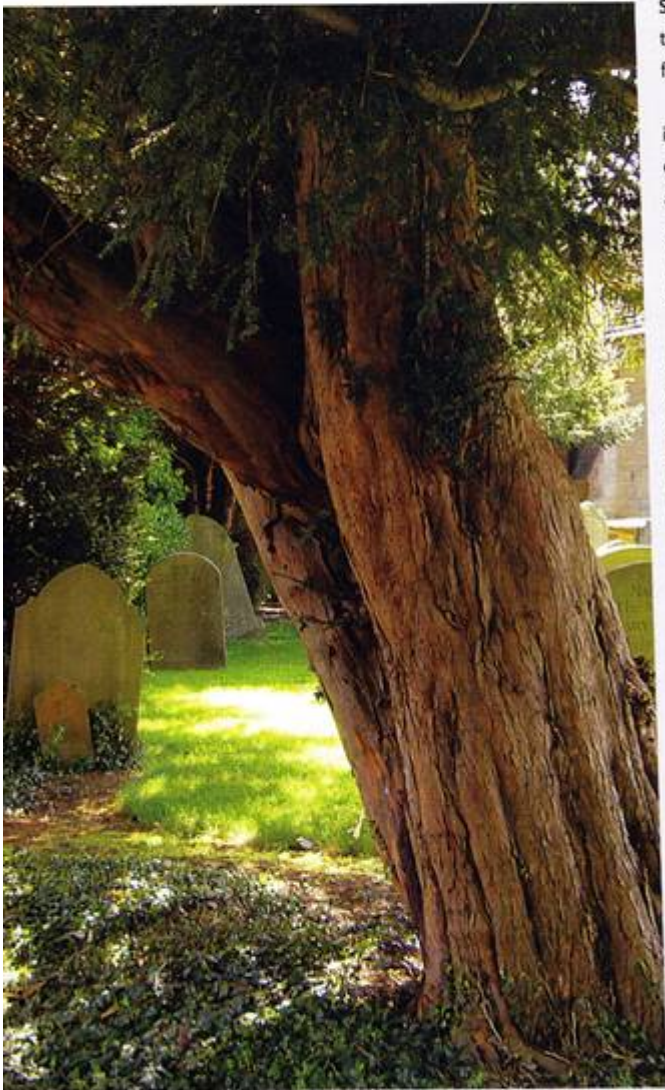


Every month, Chris Catling throws the spotlight on one of those little known, yet tirelessly dedicated, voluntary heritage societies thriving in Britain today...

The Ancient Yew Group



ABOVE The association of yew trees with churches and sacred sites is very ancient.



For further information:
www.ancient-yew.org

Second only to the churches alongside which many stand, yew trees are probably the oldest upstanding feature in the UK landscape. The precise dating of yews is fraught with difficulty, but botanists now agree that many exceed 1,000 years in age.

The theory that ancient yews mark the sites of Anglo-Saxon church foundations is not borne out by the archaeology in England, but in Wales there are numerous examples of yew trees with a 10m girth (estimated to be at least 1,300 years of age) alongside churches named after 6th- and 7th-century saints. So strong is the association that some archaeologists propose the very existence of an old yew in Wales and the west of England probably indicates the site of a lost early Christian chapel or hermitage.

Another oft-repeated 'fact' is that yews were planted in churchyards to provide the material for long bows and arrows. If so, the planting was more symbolic than practical, as the demand for yew wood far outstripped what English churchyards could supply. In his fact-filled book *Yew: A History*, ethno-botanist Fred Hageneder says that whole yew forests from Poland to the Carpathians and south to the Bavarian and Austrian alps were destroyed by the demand for yew staves in the Middle Ages, and that firearms replaced longbows in the 16th century not because they were superior in firepower and accuracy, but because there was no tradable yew wood left in the whole of Europe.

Vital statistics

This might help to explain why the British Isles has by far the majority of the world's ancient yews (and 85 per cent of those are in churchyards), which makes the UK a Noah's Ark for their conservation. The Ancient Yew Group (AYG) is the body that co-ordinates efforts to record these ancient yews and monitor their health, collates historical references to yews and brings yew tree enthusiasts together, as well as raises public awareness of the trees' international importance.

The AYG's website has a gazetteer of more than 1,300 ancient, veteran and significant yews, along with instructions for would-be yew-tree spotters on how to find and record old yews; this stresses records of yews that no longer exist are also valuable for assessing the scale of loss and survival. There is a mass of information on dating yews (by measuring their girth, though this is complicated in the case of very old yews that lack a standard cylindrical trunk and have become fragmented), and on caring for them.

The FAQs section also tells you where you can find the oldest yews in your county; what it doesn't spell out is that browsing this site can become addictive – once bitten, you will find it difficult not to want to know more about a remarkable tree that provides a living link between our own time and the landscapes and beliefs of the past.

Is there a society that you would like to see profiled? Write to lisa@archaeology.co.uk