

# YEW TREES IN CHURCHYARDS IN EAST SURREY

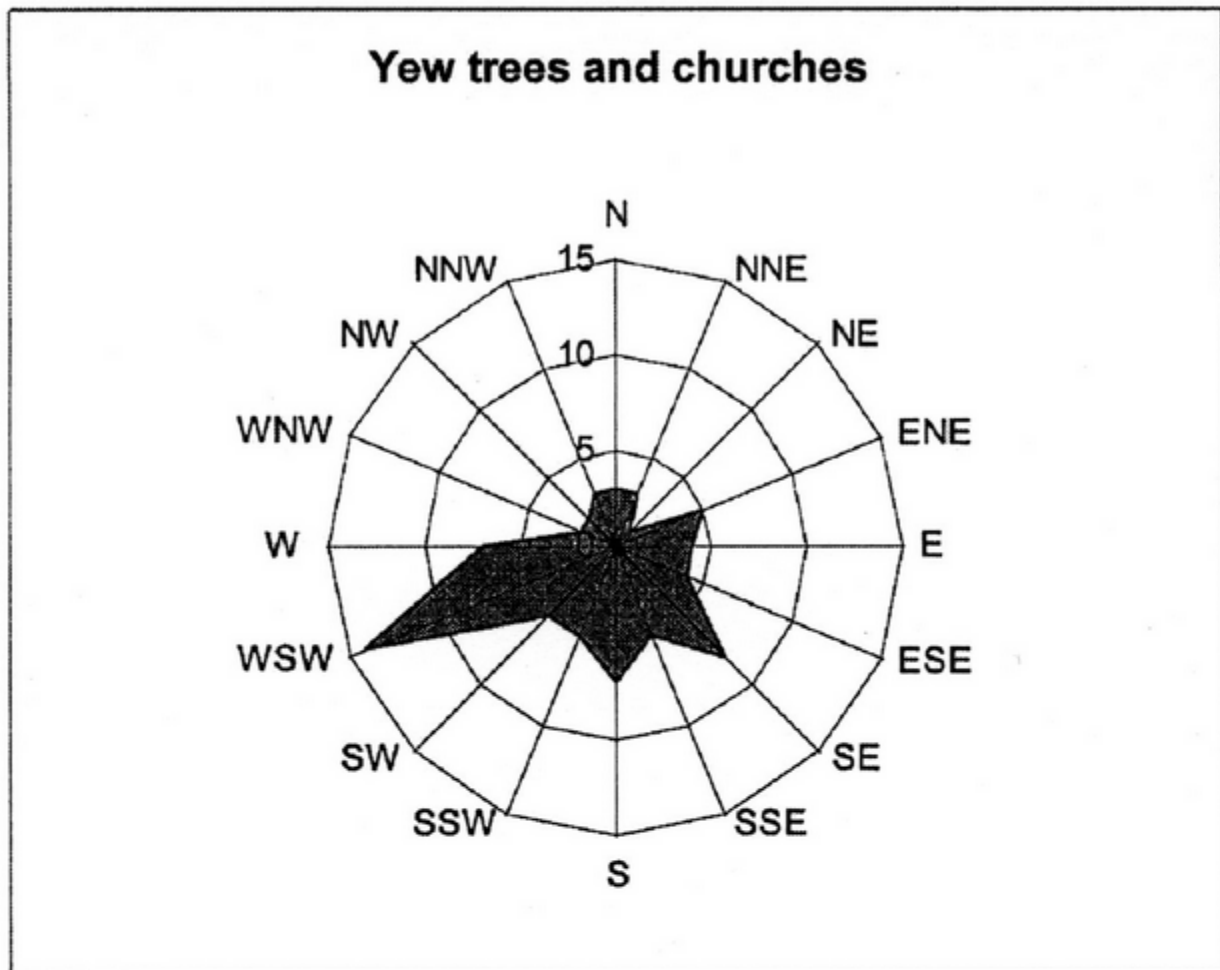
*By Jane McLauchlin*

**M**ost churchyards have one or more yew trees, which may be very large. There is much speculation about their age and the reasons why they are associated with churches. There must have been very good reasons for planting such a tree, so poisonous to animals such as cattle (Cooper & Johnson 1988). Several possible explanations have been suggested—

- '...if the Yew be set in a place subject to poysonous vapours, the very branches will draw and imbibe them, hence it is conceived that the judicious in former times planted it in churchyards on the west side, because those places, being fuller of putrefaction and gross oleaginous vapours exhaled out of the graves by the setting sun, and sometimes drawn by those meteors called *ignes fatui*, divers have been frightened, supposing some dead bodies to walk, etc.' (Turner 1664).
- they were planted for making longbows. Although these were usually made from yew, most wood was imported from Europe, especially Spain and Italy, and from as far afield as Poland (Hardy 1992).
- they were planted for decoration for the church, as an emblem of mortality or as shelter for the congregation (White 1789). These all sound plausible, as even a small tree could be regarded as an emblem and provide foliage for decoration, especially as this is available all year from the evergreen tree. The tree would have to grow quite large before it can provide much shelter, but the dense evergreen foliage provides good shelter from rain and wind. Grigson (1958) also records that in Wiltshire and Dorset, yews were planted beside farmhouses and cottages on the side of the prevailing wind, providing a double shelter, both practical and magical or symbolic.

In 1880, Mr E Straker recorded the measurements and positions of churchyard yew trees in 36 churches in east Surrey (Straker 1882). Gwyneth Fookes measured all these trees again in 1994, and reported the measurements of the trees in the Bourne Society area (Fookes 1996). The distribution of the orientation of the trees relative to the church (those measured by Straker, not all of which are still there, and other trees in the same churchyards recorded by Fookes), a total of 78 trees, are shown in the figure.

## LOCAL HISTORY RECORDS



The largest proportion of the trees are to the WSW of the church. There are only a few in the northern quarter, but some trees are situated in every direction. This would support the idea that they were planted to shelter the church or its users from the prevailing wind. The yews are likely to have been planted, rather than to predate the church. Yews can grow quite quickly, especially when young, and even very large ones, up to about seven metres (23 feet) in girth, could be no older than the church (McLauchlin & Fookes 2003).

However, there may be a more pragmatic reason for the position of yew trees. Churches usually face the east; tradition has it that mediaeval churches were constructed with the chancel to the east for symbolic reasons, or because many were built on pagan sites where there was a tradition of praying towards the sunrise (Friar 1996, Morris 1989). Churches were built in the northern part of the churchyard plot, so that they did not cast their shadow on the wooden or stone cross which marked the early site for worship (Friar 1996). In these cases, there would simply be more room to plant what would become a very large tree in the southerly part of the churchyard.



Photo: Jane McLauchlin

**St George's Church, Crowhurst, with its famous Yew to the ENE**

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