

The Medieval Yews of John of Gaunt's Deer Park and the surrounding area

By Peter Andrews

John of Gaunt's Deer Park and J.P. Williams-Freeman

I came across my first reference to old yews at John of Gaunt's deer park in *English Downland* (1936) by H.J. Massingham. In *The Ancient Yew* (2002), Robert Bevan-Jones relates the discovery in 1912 of old yews growing on the boundary banks of John of Gaunt's deer park. The original source of information for both authors was J.P. Williams-Freeman's book, *Field Archaeology As Illustrated by Hampshire*, published in 1915. This book still provides an excellent, easy to read guide to historic sites across Hampshire.

J.P. Williams-Freeman, a doctor by profession, recognized that keeping records of old yews (even those of no great girth) on earthworks might provide information of historical importance to researchers of the future. As well as yews on the boundary banks of the deer park he reported yews at nearby Danebury Hill and Merton Castle.

When J.P. Williams-Freeman visited the deer park, he walked from the hamlet of Horsebridge through idyllic water meadows towards King's Somborne from where he could view the southern boundary bank. In his book he wrote, 'Walking up through the meadow, we see the bank at its best on the right-hand side, where it stands in places 12 feet in height, and is crowned in one place by a fine yew, 15ft. 9in. in girth at 3 feet from the ground'.

A mile to the north of the southern boundary, J.P. Williams-Freeman also recorded old yews on the boundary banks of the appropriately named Yew Hill. He wrote, 'These yews, which are of great age, may be the descendants (but are most probably the originals) of ones planted in the thirteenth century when the park was made'. 'They are not of very great size on this exposed hill, the largest only measuring 12 feet in girth at 3 feet from the ground'. 'They show what is of course well known, that yew is not poisonous to deer under ordinary conditions'. 'The boundary of this part of the park is merely a broad bank about 3 feet high, and from an earthwork point of view is not worth the climb'. The uninteresting nature of the archaeology on Yew Hill suggests to me that J.P. Williams-Freeman spent little time exploring the northern boundary bank, otherwise he would surely have recorded the larger yews I will describe later. The yews he measured were almost certainly those on the surviving part of the eastern boundary bank.

At the English Heritage National Record Centre in Swindon, I found the surviving boundary banks clearly shown on large scale early editions of the Ordnance Survey maps of the King's Somborne area. These maps were made from an 1870 survey and would have been an invaluable resource to J.P. Williams-Freeman during his study of the deer park. When I compared the old map with a current Explorer map showing the deer park, I saw that even in this rural area there had been much change since J.P. Williams-Freeman visited. On top of Yew Hill behind How Farm was a Tarmac works with a quarry. Along the course of the southern boundary bank where J.P. Williams-Freeman recorded his solitary large yew, a row of houses had been built. I could find no recent information on the yews recorded here by J.P. Williams-Freeman and decided to visit and find out what had become of them.

Yew Hill consists mostly of two very large arable fields lying to the south and east of the Tarmac works. Surprisingly there are still yews growing along the surviving boundary banks marked on the map. I obtained permission to climb up from Hooper's Bottom to view the yews on the northern boundary bank.



From below, the closely planted line of yews looked particularly impressive high on the ridge. The owner informed me that only a few of the yews that had been planted on the continuing eastern bank were on her land. The other yews here, beyond the fence line, were on the land owned by Tarmac, for which permission would be needed to visit.

Fig 1. Yews mark the northern boundary bank on Yew Hill, seen from Hooper's Bottom

Reaching the ridge near the top of the hill, I found that a number of the old yews on the northern boundary bank were larger than I had expected. Many of these old yews had been pollarded a long time ago. The two largest were growing close together and both had a girth of 16 feet at 3 feet from the ground. Each of these yews, like most of the others, showed considerable storm damage, one had a solid lower trunk but the upper was missing. The other, a low pollard, had split in two. Another with a girth of 15ft (4.57 metres) and much of its trunk of dead wood had only two branches showing signs of life (see fig 3, the yew in the foreground). Despite the many storms which have battered the old yews in this exposed spot, they had not fallen, demonstrating the yew's ability to adapt to adverse circumstances.



Fig 2. One of the largest northern boundary bank yews - 16ft in girth

The thin chalky soil on top of the northern boundary banks has eroded away to expose the upper roots of the yews growing here. These roots have spread out over the bank and down its sides. Many of the venerable yews have 2-3 younger yews of various sizes growing close to their aged trunks. The appearance of the younger yews here convinces me that they have grown from aerial roots sent down by the old yews to anchor themselves to the bank. The branches embedded in the bank have broken, or in most cases, been cut away. Although the young yews are now separated from the parent tree, their roots have become intertwined, helping to strengthen both.



Fig 3. Medieval yews on the northern boundary bank

I obtained permission from the manager of Tarmac on Yew Hill to record the yews on the eastern boundary bank. I would have to access the yews here from the crop field due to a sheer chalk bank above the road within the works. The manager explained that Tarmac were under obligation to protect the yews during the building of the plant 30 years ago. The deer park's eastern boundary bank would have continued southwards down the hill to King's Somborne. This part of the bank, along with any yews that were growing on it, had vanished when the deer park was broken up for farmland during the mid 17th century.

The largest yew I recorded on the deer park's low eastern bank was 13ft. 6in. (4.11 metres) at 3 feet from the ground. Six other yews here had girths in the region of 12ft (3.66 metres). Those yews growing directly above the quarry were unfortunately covered in a chalky white dust. The yews on the eastern bank grow on the highest and most exposed part of the hill and it is possible that the largest specimens here are equal in age to those on the northern bank.

Many of the yews on the eastern bank have been pollarded, the time of planting suggesting pollarding for bow staves. Much of the western slopes of Yew Hill was quarried away during the building of the Andover to Redbridge railway. In one of the few places where the original part of the hill has survived, I found a few old pollarded yews, one 14ft. (4.27 metres) in girth. In my opinion these yews are remnants of deliberate plantings within the once well wooded deer park.



Fig 4. Old pollarded yew on the western slopes of Yew Hill

A closer inspection of the current O.S. Explorer map showing King's Somborne revealed that sections of the southern boundary bank could be traced to the front gardens of the houses here. Leaving King's Somborne village along the busy Romsey road, we discovered a section of the high boundary bank in a garden, complete with the large yew recorded by J.P. Williams-Freeman. The owners, justifiably proud of the yew had fittingly called their house Yew Bank. They knew that the yew was growing on the deer park's historic boundary bank and were pleased to hear something of the old tree's history. Together we measured the aged trunk at 3 feet from the ground and recorded a girth of 16 feet, nearly 5 metres in girth.

The yew had grown only 3 inches since J.P. Williams-Freeman's measurement of nearly a century ago. The trunk of the yew has become a hollow shell and through a gap could be seen a large internal stem. I explained to the owners how in time the shell of the old trunk would break away and the inner stem would become the new tree. They agreed with the need to record their yew now, so that any visiting researchers of the future, finding an apparently young yew here, would know its true age.

The owner mentioned that the yew had remained unchanged in the 30 years that she had lived in the house. She also told an enchanting story about the old yew, from a time when her children were young and had birthday parties with their fiends, many who came from the village. Before the party began she would hide bags of treats inside the old yew and among its branches for a treasure hunt later in the day. During the game the children would discover their treasure in the yew, which became known as their magic tree.

Before leaving King's Somborne I paid a visit to John of Gaunt's palace site behind the church in the village. Black's Guide to Hampshire (1897) described 'time-honoured yews flourishing about the ruins' of John of Gaunt's palace, which was later rebuilt into a manor house and was still standing in 1734. By 1840 the remains were only 14ft high when it was demolished, and the material used to construct the nearby school and flint walls around the church. Any old yews growing here may have been cleared away at the time. King's Somborne Palace is now recorded in the Ancient Yew Group's Gazetteer as a 'lost yew' site.

All that remains today of the palace are a few grass covered mounds and banks. Hampshire County Council have set up some excellent information boards detailing the history of both palace and deer park. It was here that I saw for the first time the name William de Briwere, who created the deer park in 1200, when it was known as How Park. It appears that naming the deer park after King's Somborne's most famous resident, John of Gaunt, is comparatively recent.

John of Gaunt (1340-1399) inherited the manor of Somborne through an advantageous marriage, which also saw him become the Duke of Lancaster. John of Gaunt was the fourth son of Edward III and his eldest brother was the Black Prince. John of Gaunt was really the power behind the throne during the reign of Richard II. In the year that John of Gaunt died, his son deposed Richard II and became Henry IV (1399-1413). The manor of Somborne with the deer park now became a Royal Estate and so it remained until fairly recent times. It is documented that there were still 200 deer in the park as late as 1591. Some of the pollarded yews may certainly date from the time of John of Gaunt, but in my opinion it was William de Briwere who was responsible for the planting of the oldest yews on the deer park's boundary banks.

William de Briwere and How Park

In the year 1200 William de Briwere was given a charter by his good friend King John to hunt hare, fox, cat and wolf in How Park at Somborne. William de Briwere soon availed himself of this permission, enclosed How Park and stocked it with deer. The boundary banks of the deer park enclosed an oblong area of 400 acres. Much of the western half of the park comprised the low lying water meadows of the River Test. The name of the park comes from a William de Ow, who was given the manor of King's Somborne shortly after the conquest.

The original name of the deer park is retained locally in How Farm on Yew Hill, which was built on the site of William de Briwere's hunting lodge. There is still a sign to How Park at King's Somborne by the old road to Stockbridge.

William de Briwere came from obscure beginnings but is known to have followed his father to become chief forester of the Forest of Bere. At some point he was noticed by Richard I and became a trusted loyal justice and administrator. Among other offices, he was at times sheriff of many counties, including Nottingham, while Richard Coeur-de-Lion was on crusade: this makes him Robin Hood's notorious adversary. In 1190, for services rendered, William de Briwere was given the important manor of Somborne with much of its hundred from Longstock in the north to Romsey in the south.

It is said that William de Briwere was much disliked and an extortioner, but that he knew his place and was one of the few men that the untrustworthy King John greatly admired. Through his friendship with King John and a marriage to the daughter of the Earl of Devon, William de Briwere would become one of the most wealthy and powerful men in the realm. In 1201 he founded a priory of Augustinian monks at Mottisfont, a few miles to the south of King's Somborne. At Mottisfont I have discovered a number of old yews, at least one of which may be of comparable age to those at the deer park.

Mottisfont Abbey, William de Briwere and the Yew

Opposite the walls of Mottisfont Abbey a number of yews have been planted by the roadside to mark its boundary. Today these yews stand on the edge of the village gardens. The largest was planted at the north end of the Abbey by the old road to King's Somborne. This impressive yew has a girth of nearly 17ft. (5.18 metres). Its trunk is hollow with a clearly visible long thin internal stem. I suspect that William de Briwere had the yew placed here to mark the site of his priory and to purify its boundary. The other nearby yews could date from the same period but were probably added at a later date by the monks. Nearby on the outskirts of the village on the edge of a narrow lane leading to the Abbey, another old marker yew is found.



Fig 5. Trunk of old yew with internal stem at Mottisfont, Hampshire

I believe that William de Briwere planted yews for both practical and spiritual reasons. Not only would the yews at the deer park provide shelter for his deer, their position high on the hill would provide a highly visible marker that this was his land. To many in medieval England the yew was still revered as a sacred tree. To the English nobles the yew would seem to have mythical qualities because in the hands of their highly skilled archers the yew longbow would win them many battles. I am convinced that William de Briwere held the belief of the ecclesiastical orders that the planting of the Sacred Yew would ward off evil and protect the people living within its boundary. In 1215 King John and William de Briwere, at the Barons' insistence, signed the Magna Carta and it is significant that the place chosen was either under or within sight of the Great Yew at Ankerwyke. In 1200, the year that William de Briwere built his deer park, he also fortified a hill at Ashley above Kings Somborne.

A Lost Giant at Ashley and the Yews of the Surrounding Countryside.

Shortly after William de Briwere completed his castle at Ashley, he had a church built in its outer bailey. Today all that remains of the castle are the earthwork mound and ditches, now thickly covered in yew and ash. The church itself seems unchanged and looking around its damp and musty interior, I was astonished to find a photograph of a large yew lying on its side in the churchyard, having fallen during the severe storm of 1990. The villagers had simply called their unfortunate tree the 'Great Yew', and from the photograph it certainly looked much larger than the surviving churchyard yew. Another photograph in the church shows the small community gathered together in the churchyard a year later to plant a cutting from the ancient yew, this is still thriving. It is fascinating to contemplate that William de Briwere chose to build his castle with its church on a hill at the site of an old yew tree.

Along three miles of the boundary between the parishes of King's Somborne and Ashley, an extraordinary number of yews have been planted. From the appearance of most of these I would suggest that the majority are later plantings than those in the nearby deer park. William de Briwere gave the land at Ashley towards the living of the monks at Mottisfont. During the reign of John of Gaunt's son, Henry IV, Somborne became a royal estate. The yews were probably planted by the monastic order to separate their land from that of the King.

Two larger and possibly older yews on the parish boundary mark the crossroads where the road from King's Somborne leads uphill to Ashley. The two yews here have the dense spray which is a characteristic of regularly cut roadside yews and are thus impossible to measure. These two old yews are separated from the others on the parish boundary, but form part of a long line of yews that follows the road eastwards below Ashley before turning southwards along an ancient trackway, then east again across the West Forest of Bere. This forest is now a large private estate and the boundary yews that cross it may be older. One of the estate yews is marked on an early edition O.S. map made from an 1870 survey. I have only been able to view a few of the yews on the estate from a distance, being unable to gain access. From the West Forest of Bere, there are fine views to the south of the dense yew stands on Beacon Hill.

Yews at Stockbridge

North of How Park, William de Briwere enclosed a smaller area for deer which has become known as North Park. The now empty farm here was built on the site of a hunting lodge. Four old yews have been planted by the roadside just outside of the farm. Another large spreading yew stands slightly to the east of the farm by an old trackway. The yews here reach 14ft. (4.27 metres) in girth and stand very close to the Stockbridge/Kings Somborne parish boundary.



Fig 6 . Yews at North Park

Not far from North Park on the edge of Stockbridge Down, five yews of similar girth grow on the Stockbridge/Little Somborne parish boundary. As at Ashley, much of the land at Stockbridge was given by William de Briwere to the monks at Mottisfont. Just outside of the village of Stockbridge on the edge of the King's Somborne road, a yew stands alone in the middle of a small roundabout by a group of houses known as the Milsons. During my research I discovered that William de Briwere had a large mill in the water meadows near the village. His son, also named William, gave the generous gift of the mill to the priory at Mottisfont. I believe that this might be a yew planted by the monks to mark their important acquisition. This large spreading tree has a girth of 15ft. (4.47 metres).



Fig 7. The Milson Yew, Stockbridge

It is written that William de Briwere at certain times liked to dress and live as a monk in the three Abbeys that he founded, perhaps as a penance for misdeeds. After his death he was buried under the high altar in his Cistercian Abbey at Dunkeswell in Devon, a county in which he also held vast estates. Both the Abbey at Dunkeswell and William de Briwere's tomb were totally destroyed in Henry VIII's dissolution. It is a fitting memorial to this remarkable man that so many of the yews that he and his monastic orders planted remain today.

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