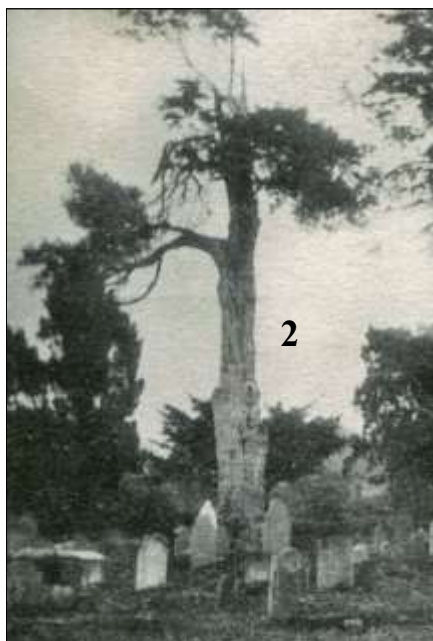


Overlooking this site is Conygar Hill, a small prehistoric fortress, with a barrow in the centre of the encampment.

In 1791 Collinson's *History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* recorded '3 very large yew trees: the first of which standing westward is 19' in circ. at 7' from the ground, and timber for near 60' high. Second is 18' round at 4' height, and runs that size for near 20'; the height of the top most branches, which are widely spread, is 70'. The third, which is entirely a shell, is 15' round at 3' and continues that size to a height of 18'. Near the door there is a fourth, but much smaller than the rest. They altogether exhibit a very remarkable picture and are doubtless upwards of 500 years old'.

This site has lost two of these remarkable trees. The 19' yew 'standing westward' was probably lost before 1861, when *Kelly's Directory* described only 'two very beautiful yew trees'. The second lost yew is number 2 in these photos and drawings, and today only its stump remains, SSW of the church. In May 1889 Lowe described it as 'one of the most remarkable I have seen, as it has a straight trunk of about 20' high, measuring at the ground 17' 3", at 3', 15' 10", and at 6', 14' in girth'. By 1941 Mee's *The King's England* noted that the tree was 'nearly bald, with only a little tuft on top'. By 1955 Rev C du Heaume informed Swanton that the tree, though still standing, was quite dead. 'I would say it never grew after 1889'.

The stump that remains has a girth of about 16' and Rev C de Heaume is probably right in saying that it ceased to grow at the end of the 19th century.



Portbury's surviving ancient tree, numbered 3 on the previous page, has an internal stem (A) that was of such interest to the early understanding of how these trees constantly regenerated, that much has been written in learned journals of the day.

In the 1838 *Arboretum and Fruticetum part 111* is the following description:

'In the churchyard of Portbury, near Bristol, are two very lofty yews, much longer in the bole than usual. One of these, in August, 1836, had a small branch from the base of a bough, which had shot downwards into the decayed top of the trunk ; and which, on being pulled up, proved to be a perfect root, upwards of 3 ft. in length. This singular circumstance will explain the origin of the inner trunks of yew trees, as exemplified in that of Mamhilad, already described, p. 2077. When the top of the trunk becomes cracked by the action of storms upon the boughs, the rain finds access, and, in time, causes decay; and the dead leaves and dung of bats and birds, &c., falling in, combine with the rotten wood to form a soft rich mould, into which a bud shooting out from a neighbouring part (if not actually covered by the mould) is naturally drawn by the moisture and surrounding shade, and transformed into a root. As

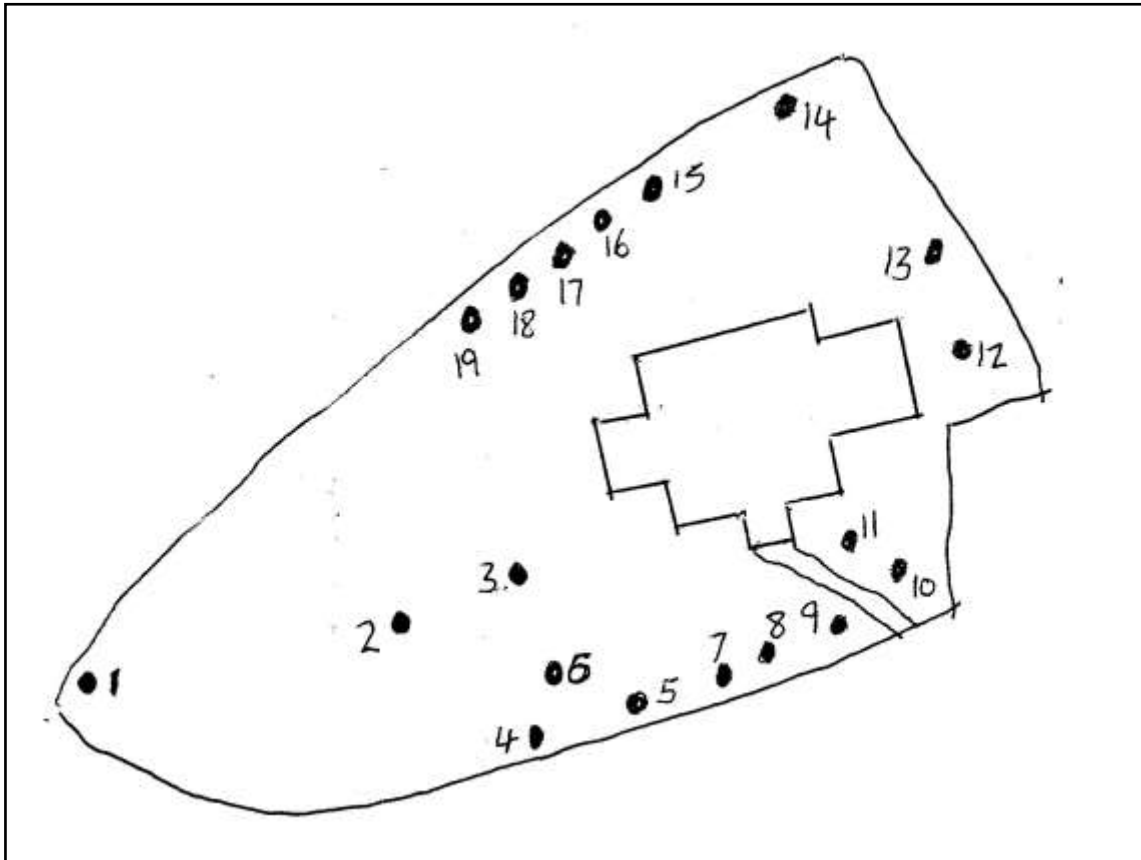


the fissure widened and deepened, by the slow but sure process of decay, this root would descend and thicken, till it ultimately fixed itself in the soil below. After a lapse of, perhaps, several centuries, decay, gradually advancing, would at last reach the circumference of the trunk, and produce a rift on one side: through this the rotten mould would fall out, gradually exposing the root it had conducted downwards; and the combined influence of light and air, acting upon its juices, would cause it to deposit annual layers of true wood, and to be covered with a true bark. Meanwhile it would have shot up a stem near its point of union, and have formed

for itself an independent head and branches. All this is in strict conformity with the known laws of vegetable physiology; and some similar process has produced the peculiarities already described in the Mamhilad and Llanthewy Vach yews. In the Portbury tree, the same process is shown in its earlier stage; and these examples make it probable that, under favourable circumstances, the yew has the power of thus perpetuating itself. If so, it may be said to have a new claim to be considered the emblem of immortality. There is no doubt that, barring accidents, the inner trunks of the two old yew trees at Mamhilad and Llanthewy Vach will survive as independent trees when, centuries hence, the surrounding walls of their original boles shall have completely disappeared; and, should no record of their true history exist, an observer then will be quite unconscious that they are but portions of some former trees, the germ of which existed, perhaps, 3000 years ago ; for the lateral scar, which would for a while mark the point of union, would, in time, be closed up and buried beneath new deposits. (Abridged from *Mag. Nat. Hist.*, vol. i. new series, p. 90.)'



In 2013 nineteen yews were recorded in Portbury churchyard as follows:



Tree 1, female, at the furthest west end of churchyard. A young tree with main stem and side limb developing at the ground. Girth of about 3' around main stem. Bark particularly flaky.

Tree 2, male, similar to tree 1 with side limb but 100/150 years older. Girth of 9' 6½" around main stem and 11' 7" round trunk and limb.





Tree 3, male, tall and narrow, growth restricted by the circular bench. Girth of 9' 4" at 3' 6" above the seat.

Tree 4, female, by lych gate. Three trunked, which would have been 4 or 5 but for the removal of branches which would have grown too close to path and gate. Ivy had been cut through. Girth around all 3 stems at the top of the cut off section was about 10'.



Tree 5, female, twin trunked above 2', with a small new branch developing at the tree's base that might eventually make it three trunked. As is usual with trees near walls, the soil has built up on the wall side. Girth (over thin ivy) at 1' above ground at the front of the tree and excluding the new stem was 12' 11". Including the stem it was 13' 2".

Tree 6 is the ancient male described on page 2.

Tree 7 is the stump on page 1.



Tree 8 (left) is female, competing with rampant holly and covered in ivy. Girth guide 8' 6" to 9'.

Tree 9 (right) is female and found on the west side of the gate leading to the church porch. One particularly large branch on west side has been removed as well as many smaller higher branches. Girth was 10' 11" just beneath sawn off branch, but below this the tree is narrower, estimated as 9' 6".



Tree 10, male, divides into several trunks at a height of 4'5". Girth 7' 11" at 1' over some ivy. No photo.

Tree 11, female, is seen in three photos below. It grows close to church on east side of the south door. The nature of this tree and its position inside a circular wall suggests that it might be the third exceptional yew mentioned by Lowe and other writers. Although not of great girth now, it is a yew that has hollowed and split into two horse shoe shaped sides, which join at a height of about 10'. In one of these sides are internal stems. The tree was unfortunately in danger of being overwhelmed by ivy.



Tree 12 (left) female, due east of the church is unloved and scrappy. Girth was about 9' over ivy.

Tree 13 is male (no photo). It has a single stem to 9' and a girth of 7' 9" at about 1'. Low twiggy growth will eventually make this impenetrable.

Tree 14 (right) is female and the first of a line of yews on the north perimeter. Girth was 8' 1" over thin ivy. At 6' it develops 3 upright branches.



Tree 15 is a fallen male still connected to its root system. There is plenty of room for it to be left to grow in this position. No photo

Tree 16 is a young male with a spreading trunk. No photo



Tree 17 is this young male (left) with a girth of 2' 5" at 1'. It is single stemmed to 3' then divides into two.

Tree 18 is male with a girth of 8' 2" at 1'. It might prove difficult to measure in future as thick side branches are developing at a height of about 2'.



Tree 19 is a young female whose trunk has been taken over by ivy.

