

from FLORA of CARDIGANSHIRE (a draft)

by A.O.Chater May 2008

***Taxus baccata* L.**

Yew Ywen

Although Yew is frequent throughout the lowlands, not only in churchyards and in estates and gardens where it has obviously been planted, but also in hedges and woodlands where it is often obviously bird-sown, it seems unlikely to be native in the county; the map covers all these occurrences. Nowhere is there anything approaching a Yew wood. Salter (1935) wrote: "Chiefly in churchyards. No appearance of being native", so maybe it has increased in hedges and woods since his time. Seedlings though have very rarely been recorded. Many ancient and impressive trees occur, chiefly in churchyards rather than in Nonconformist chapel graveyards where the Yews, if there are any, are usually 'Fastigiata'. Most of the old estates have good, but not outstandingly large, trees. In the following account the most interesting of the churchyard trees are described in alphabetical order of sites, followed by other notable trees arranged under river catchments. I have discussed the possible ages of some of these trees in the introduction. Yews have always had a remarkably stimulating effect on the imagination, and the Cardiganshire ones are no exception. Even more than Oaks, they have inspired conjecture and poetry over the last six centuries.

Churchyard Yews:

Eglwys Fach SN685955. The westernmost and biggest of the Yews shading the path to the church is a male tree, 372cm girth in 1992.

Eglwys Newydd or Hafod SN768737. There are six Yews here, the girths of the largest in 1983 being: SE of chancel, 309cm (at narrowest point); S of chancel on slope, 412cm (at 1m up); and SW of chancel, 664cm girth (at ground level), with two trunks above which were 404 cm and 430cm girth. The similarity of girths of these four trees strongly suggests that this last pair represents two fused, rather than one split trunk, and that all were probably planted at about the same time, perhaps when the church was founded in 1620.

Gartheli SN586567. Evans (1903) wrote of this church that "At the end of the eighteenth century the building was in ruins, so much so as to be unsuitable for marriages to be solemnized in it, and accordingly they took place in the graveyard under the wide branches of the old yew which still flourishes, and is as full of life as ever." This tree, on a walled mound SE of the chancel, was 333cm girth in 1980, but was in poor health and was cut down in 1985, when a piece of the hollow trunk 6cm thick, 5cm in from the outside, had 136 annual rings. A replacement was planted SSW of the porch in 1985.

Lampeter SN575483. Fenton (1917) wrote in 1804 that "in the churchyard, which is large there are a few very old yew trees", and Meyrick (1810) wrote that the churchyard was "plentifully supplied with the venerable yew." Smith (1878) visited the church "to see the great Yews" and said that "The two Yews are of considerable size, but hardly comparable with others in the Principality", and illustrated "the one on the right of the footpath from the town. When I visited it, all the lower boughs were hung with pickaxes, shovels, rakes, trestles, ladders, &c., reminding the spectator of heathen fetish worship." Cornish (1946) mentions the churchyard Yews here. There are now 14 substantial trees in the churchyard, five male and nine female. The largest is the middle one in a row of three S of the church nave, a female, 497cm girth and 15m tall in 2006; the S-most tree E of the main path near the S gate, a male, was 325cm girth (at 1m up) in 1983, and 372cm girth (at 1m up) and 13m tall in 2006. It is curious that Smith mentioned only "two Yews" as several others are now almost as big as the two measured above.

Llanafan SN685721. Meyrick (1810) wrote that "An avenue of yew trees leads directly to this [south] transept from the entrance of the church-yard." It was still there a century later when Horsfall-Turner (1903) described the church as "hidden by a dozen yew trees of finest growth, forming an avenue to the door and shading the grassy mounds; one of them measures over five yards [455cm] around," and Evans (1903) wrote that "An avenue of ten yews leads directly to this [south] transept door from the entrance to the churchyard; and two other yews - the ages of which can be counted by centuries - stand faithful guardians of the Bonsall and other graves in this secluded God's acre." Cornish (1946) mentioned the Rev. J. Aubrey (vicar of Strata Florida at the time) reporting "Very fine yews" here. Evans's two yews remain, one as a hollow, partly burnt stump beside the Bonsall graves E of the church that in 1978 was 440cm girth (at 30cm up), with a piece 10.4cm in radial thickness having 98 annual rings. The other is a multi-trunked female tree on a mound NE of the chancel that, assuming it is all one tree, was c.750cm girth at soil level and 8m tall in 2005. The only others present now, probably too small to be relics of the avenue, a male S of the nave and a female SW of the porch, were 188cm girth (at soil level) and 8m tall, in 2005, and 171cm girth and 7m tall in 2005, respectively.

Llanbadarn Fawr SN599810. In 1985 there were 32 Yews in the old part of the churchyard, 191-340cm girth, all perhaps planted at about the same time and giving it a character unique in the county. Three of the trees were felled that year. Another was blown down in 2002, and its solid trunk 175cm girth had 104 annual rings, making it the only dated Yew in the county. The three biggest remaining trees, measured in 1985, are one on the N side of the path 28m W of the SE lychgate, male, 340cm girth; the NW-most tree, NW of the church, male, 335cm girth; and one S of the path 25m W of the SE lychgate, female, 310cm girth.

Llandre or Llanfihangel-geneu'r-glyn SN623869. Lees (1878) in discussing the growth of Yews wrote that "in Wales, especially near the coast, this division of the old bole of the tree is very remarkable, for an extremely aged Yew in the churchyard of Llanvihangel-Generglyn, Cardiganshire, shows the original bole divided into twelve distinctly separated pieces to the ground, and thus a considerable space is taken up." What remains of this tree now are three trunks on a slight mound just NE of the church which, if they are the relics of a single tree, must represent a former trunk of some 900-1,200cm girth, 2005 (AOC & JPW). That all three are female supports this view, but it is not impossible that Lees's twelve trunks could have been originally planted to make a ring, or that they were bunch-planted to grow together to form in time an apparent single trunk. In 1967 the largest and only satisfactorily measurable trunk was c.300cm girth at the base. In 2002 the Conservation Foundation put a plaque by the tree, estimating its age at 2,000 years.

Llanerchaeron SN477603. There are four sizeable trees here, all measured in 1993. The one N of the W end of the church was 430cm girth and 14m tall; the one SW of the church was 340cm girth (at the base) and 9m tall; the one S of the W end of the church was 278cm girth (at the base) and 7m tall; and the one S of the porch was 414cm girth (at the base) and 9m tall.

Llanfair Clydogau SN625513. Horsfall-Turner (1903) described the church as "almost overtopped by the branches of a venerable yew of seven or eight yards [640-730cm] circumference, built around the base with rough masonry." This female tree, still surrounded by its retaining wall and in fine health, was 693cm girth (at the base) in 1980 and 714cm (at the base) in 2004 (and 774cm girth at 1.5m up where it is branched into two), and has the greatest girth of any single, intact trunk of Yew in the county. In 1933 heavy snow broke many of the branches and the tree was tidied up by the local blacksmith who reputedly took more wood from it than he should have.



The Llanfair Clydogau Yew in 1999 © Tim Hills

Llanfihangel-y-Creuddyn SN665760. Two of the six Yews here, both on mounds, are sizeable. The one S of the church was 483cm girth (at soil level) and 11m tall in 1992, and the one SW of the porch was 494cm girth (at soil level) and 13m tall in 1992. The small, clipped, barrel-shaped tree at the NE corner is usually home to a colony of Garden Snails *Helix aspersa* (see also the tree on the Ynys-las dunes, below).

Llanfihangel Ystrad (Ystrad Aeron) SN524562. The remains of a female tree E of the church consist of two anciently sawn-off fragments of the original trunk and vigorous new growth, comprising about half the circumference of what was presumably once a single trunk; these remains were 924cm girth (at soil level) in 2006, so the tree must once have been among the biggest in the county. The lesser remains of another tree, also re-growing vigorously, are ESE of the church.

Llangeitho SN621601. One of the best groups of Yews in the county. Lowe (1897) listed four trees here, giving *inter al.* the girth at 3ft. up and height (originally in feet): 426cm, 15m, "Hollow, holding ton of coal for church purposes"; 488cm, 17m, "Hollow"; 426cm, 16m, "Hollow"; 488cm, 16m, "Not hollow; but shoots from ground." Evans (1903) independently mentioned the coal store: "One word as to the yews. They are of great girth, so much so that in the hollow trunk of one of them, a wooden house with door exist, in which more than a ton of coals is kept for the winter use of the church! This too, with apparently no damage to the noble tree, which flourishes, with its comrade in luxuriance and beauty; ornaments befitting the sacred place wherein they have braved the storms of many centuries." Lowe's four trees are still alive, and when measured in 1997 were: NE tree, 484cm girth (at 15cm up) or 551cm girth (at 1.5m up), female; NW tree, 423cm girth, female; middle W tree, 582cm girth (at 30cm up), male; SW tree, 448cm, male, hollow, presumably the coal tree as for many decades until c.1990 it had a door fitted and was used to house the sexton's tools.



The 4 Llangeitho Yews in 1999 © Tim Hills

Llangoedmor SN199457. Vaughan (1926), remembering his childhood in the 1870s, described the "solitary yew of immense age and girth" in the open churchyard here. It still stands, a male tree SE of the church, 571cm girth (at the base) and 16m tall in 2005.

Silian SN571512. Three separate trunks on a slight mound S of the church are presumably the remains of a single tree that would have been at least 780cm girth, now healthy and 14m tall, 2006.

Strata Florida or Ystrad Fflur SN746658. There are innumerable references to the Yew trees in this churchyard because Dafydd ap Gwilym, the greatest poet of medieval Wales who died in about 1370, is reputed to have been buried here under a Yew. His contemporary, Gruffudd Gryg, wrote a poem addressing the Yew tree above Dafydd's grave, the first verse of which reads (with a translation by I. & D. Bell):

Yr ywen i oreuwas,
Ger mur Ystrad Fflur a'i phlas;
Da Duw wrthyd, gwynfyd gwŷdd,
Dy dyfu yn dŷ Dafydd.
Dafydd gwedi dy dyfu
A'th wnaeth o'i fabolaeth fu.

[At Ystrad Fflur, beside the hall,
There grows a yew against the wall.
God bless the yew, for it is bliss
To be the house where Dafydd is;
So much of fame the yew tree has
From that great beauty which his youth was.]

John Leland in his itinerary of Wales in 1536-1539 remarked on the great size of the churchyard and wrote that "In it be xxxix. great hue trees" (Smith 1906). Meyrick (1810) firmly qualified this, on what evidence is unknown, writing that "Four and twenty yew trees were once standing in it, though Leland says thirty-nine, of which but few remain, and tradition says, that Davydd ab Gwilym is buried under one of them." Roberts (1848)

bemoaned with obvious relish that "The thirty-nine great yew trees, seen by Leland, are so reduced in number as to be seen like the last of a once flourishing and noble race, mourning in their own decay over the magnificence of the past and the desolation of the present." George Borrow (1862) in his narrative of a walk through Wales in 1854 wrote: "I would give something, said I, to know whereabouts in this neighbourhood Ab Gwilym lies. That, however, is a secret that no one can reveal to me. At length I came to a yew-tree which stood just by the northern wall which is at a slight distance from the Teivi. It was one of two trees, both of the same species, which stood in the churchyard, and appeared to be the oldest of the two. Who knows, said I, but this is the tree that was planted over Ab Gwilym's grave, and to which Gruffydd Gryg wrote an ode? I looked at it attentively, and thought that there was just a possibility of its being the identical tree. If it was, however, the benison of Gruffydd Gryg had not had exactly the effect which he intended, for either lightning or the force of wind had splitten off a considerable part of the head and trunk, so that though one part of it looked strong and blooming, the other was white and spectral... Taking off my hat I knelt down and kissed its root, repeating lines from Gruffydd Gryg, with which I blended some of my own in order to accommodate what I said to present circumstances ..." There are still two yews in the churchyard. Borrow's one, near the N edge NE of the church, although a healthy tree with a well-formed canopy, has a flattened trunk c. 125cm across, 1983, that is clearly just part of the circumference of a once much larger trunk; it was called Dafydd ap Gwilym's Yew into the early 20th century, labelled as such on several picture postcards and other, illustrations. More recently though, perhaps because less of Borrow's tree now remains, the Yew just N of the church is generally known as Dafydd's, with a plaque and many mentions and illustrations in guide books and elsewhere. This tree, a female, is on a square mound enclosed by a mortared wall, and in 1983 the trunk consisted of two large fragments of one hollow trunk, separated at soil level but united at 1.5m up, with the SE half of the original trunk missing; extrapolation of the girth at soil level indicated that it must have been 680-750cm. After being badly damaged in a storm in 2002 most of the side boughs were lopped and much of the shell of the trunk cut away; a sawn section of the shell of the main trunk 14cm thick had 66 annual rings, one 9.6cm thick had 66, one 15.5cm thick had 83, and one 15.3cm thick had 126. Two of the side boughs sawn off close to the trunk had 114 and 207 rings. It should be added that scholarly opinion is divided as to whether Dafydd was in fact buried here, or at Talley in Carmarthenshire, and even whether Gruffud Gryg's poem, the start of the story, may perhaps have been written as a mock elegy some time before Dafydd died.

Trefilan SN549571. The "venerable yew" mentioned here by Horsfall-Turner (1903) still stands, a male tree 540cm girth and 13m tall in 1993, 530cm girth (at soil level) and 16m tall in 2006, on a mound SE of the church, along with a much smaller one NW of the church.

Trees outside churchyards:

Dyfi catchment. A striking landmark on the Ynys-las dunes SN60649396 is a windblown male Yew, described in 1974 (PFW, *BSBINews* **3(2)**: 19-20 (1974)) as being "five feet [1.5m] long, three feet [0.9m] tall with a flat top some three feet wide inclining away from the coast at an angle of 15-20°. Every shoot above the main plateau of foliage had been salt-scorched." In 2001 it was 4m long and 1.5m tall. It offers a rare refuge in this inhospitable site for a large colony of the Garden Snail *Helix aspersa*.

Wallog catchment. There is a group of five trees by the former fishpond at the bottom of Coed Wallog SN597859, 1985 (APF) - 2005, the largest c.300cm girth in 1997 (AOC & JPW).

Clarach catchment. Williams (1866) fancifully wrote of the Nant Silo valley near Penrhyn-coch : "There is in this valley a farm called Cwmbwa, on which are found the remains of yew trees: there is one solitary yew now left. This will in a measure account for this valley being so well protected by two Forts or Encampments ... as it is well known the yew tree furnished bows for the ancient Britons", and Jenkins (1992) wrote

" 'Cae Ywen' [c.SN647838] oedd yr enw llafar ar y cae a llencyndod mi glywais aml hynafgwr yn tystio ei fod yn cofio coeden ywen yn tyfu ym môn un o gloddiau'r cae hwn, ac ar gorn hynny tybient fod yno unwaith fynwent." See Wmffre (2004) for evidence suggesting that Cwmbwa may be derived from a 14th century personal name (Y Bwa bach, mentioned by Dafydd ap Gwilym) rather than from *bwa* meaning a bow. No Yew is now here.

Aeron catchment. The finest non-churchyard Yew in the county is a male tree in the hedge between the ruin of Pantybeudy, Llangeitho, SN63006077, and the field to the S which is named "Caer Ywen" on the 1791 plans of the Llanfair Clydogau and Llanddewi-Brefi estates (NLW); it was measured as 549cm girth (at 1m up) in both 1978 and 1998, and 554cm girth (at the narrowest point) in 2005 (T. Hills, www.ancient-yew.org) and appears to have been anciently pollarded at 2m up.

In a square walled enclosure in the village square at Llangeitho SN619579 are five trunks, all male and all part of a former single tree planted "some years ago by Mr. E. B. Lawrence, a land owner in the parish" marking the site of the former Capel Gwynfil (Evans 1903; see also Wmffre 2004 p.600 for other references).



The Pantybeudy Yew in 2005 © Tim Hills

Teifi catchment. That there was once a big tree at Argoed-fawr, Tregaron SN678589, unusually with nonconformist associations, is attested by J. S. James, *Hanes y Bedyddwyr* **3**: 411 (1903). He quotes a correspondent writing in 1900 to the effect that 120 years earlier there were walls of an old Baptist chapel, by tradition established by Vavasor Powell (presumably on one of his visits to the county in the 1850s) standing in the yard here and that "Mae ywen wrth dalcen yr hen adfail [A Yew is by the gable of the old ruin]". Horsfall-Turner (1903) perhaps implies that the Yew was there first, invoking "the days when Vavasor Powell preached and founded the Baptist Chapel near the yew-tree of Argoed", as does Rees (1936) in writing of the 1890s when "Many were the surmises concerning the ruinous walls at Argoed, and an ancient yew tree casting its shadow over the ruined pile, seemed to express 'The place thou standest on is holy ground'." The tree has long since gone.