

## A visit to 3 of Shropshire's extraordinary churchyards

### Monica Perez Vega

In 2024 Monica Perez Vega, an artist now living in London, visited three of Shropshire's ancient yew sites. The trip was inspired by the Ancient Yew Group website and the paintings of churchyards and their yew trees between 1787 and 1791 by the Reverend Edward Williams.



I had a lovely day visiting a few of the ancient Church Yews scattered across Shropshire with a friend, Carolyn Morton. We began by consulting a lovely little artefact provided by the Ancient Yew Group that documents the Churchyard Yews of Shropshire through the paintings of Reverend Edward Williams. I mapped out 29 churches from this document; starred my top eight, and we settled on three for the day. You really don't realise the time it takes to get between places on those tiny, albeit, adorable country roads. At least the weather was with us; it really was a beautiful day. The first church visited was St. Mary's at Billingsley, seen above in 1790.



Here, there were two magnificent Yews and a sign posted by Caring for God's Acre, which I learned is a conservation charity for Burial Grounds across the UK. They help to 'preserve rare species of plants and wildflowers and advise on management of grassland to encourage wildlife whilst still allowing access to visitors and relatives.'



According to St. Mary's website:

*"The church was present by 1140 but the use of the churchyard as a sacred space may be much older than that. The two ancient yews could easily be 1000 years old. Yew, as an evergreen and a symbol of rebirth, was regarded as sacred long before Christianity. There also was a well just outside the churchyard, in the lane. Wells, if they are shallow, are also often considered as holy places, communicating with the underworld and may be associated with the ritual deposition of precious objects. A bronze age axe head was found not far from the well. We also know from aerial photographs that there was an iron age or Roman farm close to the church. Thus it is certain people were living close to the churchyard long before the church was built and this spot may long have been considered as special."*



I've heard different stories about why Yew Trees are part of Church graveyards. King Edward I of England ordered yew trees to be planted in churchyards to protect the buildings, and possibly to deter grazing animals with the toxic tree. The Christian church commonly overtook pre-existing sacred sites and often yew trees pre-date their neighbouring chapels, churches, and cemeteries. It is believed that since ancient times, the yew has been a symbol of the transcendence of death. Their branches may grow long and replant themselves. Their internal bark can die whilst the outer regenerates. They are poisonous but also have healing properties. They are still, quiet and dark. They are hollow, allowing for sanctuary, and their branches fold you in like a tiny chapel.







The second church visited was St. John the Baptist, Kenley, the site of five yews. Its largest is seen here, close to a wall which has had to be rebuilt to allow for the yew's growth. This tree, west of the church, is seen in Revd. Williams painting.





Kenley has five old yews, of which three are classified as ancient.





After taking in the sights we ventured on to our last site: the church of St Mary Magdalene in Ashford Carbonell, home to 4 ancient yews, where we fell completely in awe.



The photos don't quite capture how big these beauties truly are. They appear like giant shrubs, but walking beneath them, we were completely engulfed. A woman walking by with her dog stopped to see what we were up to and said that she had lived there 30 years and never thought to venture into the branches. We showed her the magnificent hollow and she too was awestruck. We could suddenly see how these trees could be sacred sites, as we stood wrapped in their silent embrace.







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