BERKSHIRE'S CHURCHYARD YEWS

Linda Carter considers the status of Berkshire's ancient yews amongst their younger counterparts

White Waltham's lapsed pollard yew ©L. Carter

In 1995 'The Living Churchyard Project' group held a training day at White Waltham in East Berkshire. This churchyard is home to one of our iconic ancient yews, terribly damaged and infinitely contorted with age. It was this first unforgettable sighting of an ancient yew that sparked a volley of questions, the most pressing of which was 'How unique is this tree?' The quest for the answer took me to every churchyard in Berkshire over the next three years, recording the entire population of mature yews.

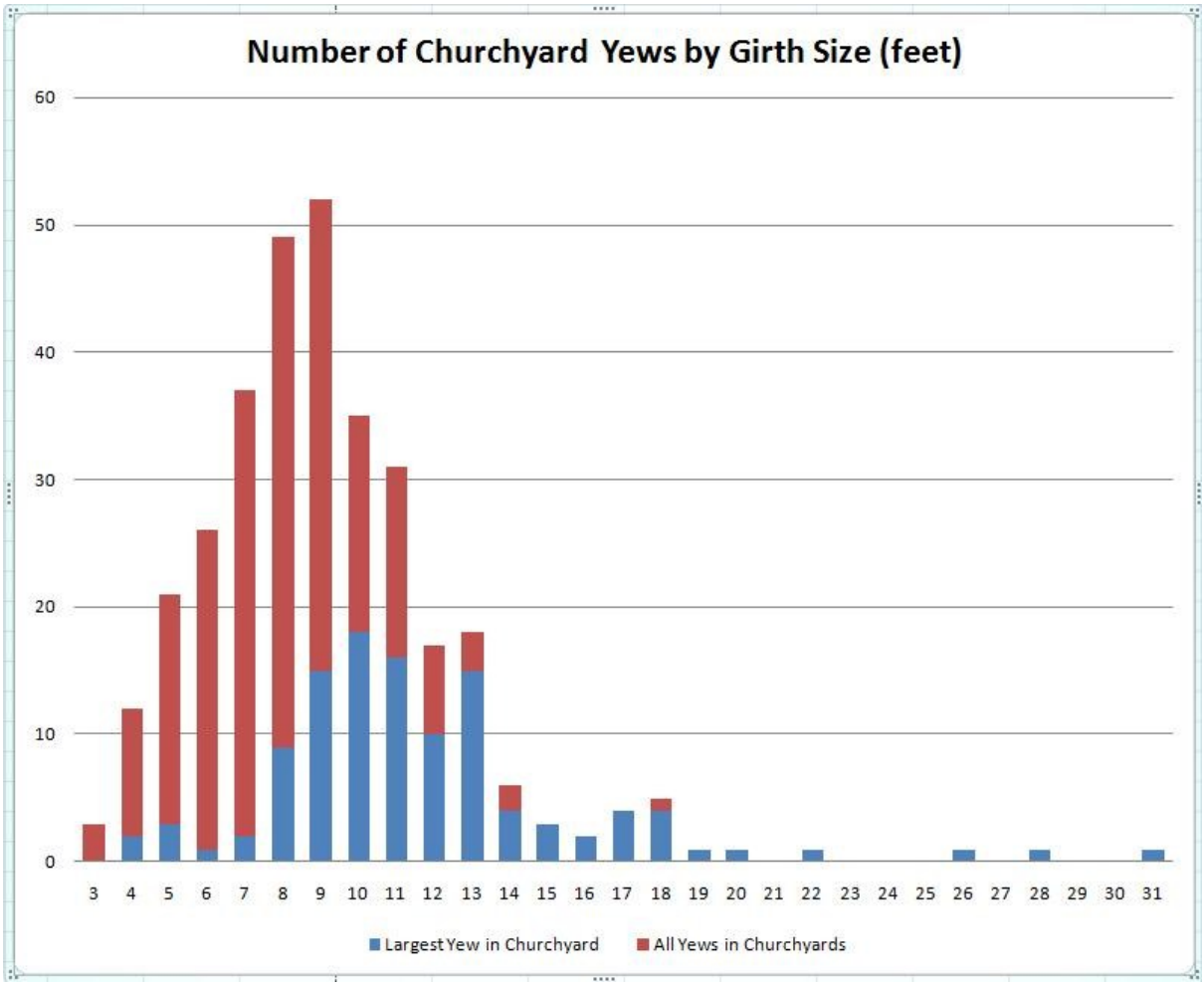
Method of Survey

All sites indicated as 'places of worship' on the 1:50 000 Ordnance Survey maps were visited. Records of Berkshire yews were gathered for 125 Church of England churchyards, plus Newbury Roman Catholic Church and Finchampstead Baptist Church. Two further sites were included: Arborfield ruined Church and Ankerwyke Medieval Priory. Inevitably, a large number of site visits were made to non-conformist or other church sites where there were no yews, especially in urban areas such as Slough, where 29 of the 33 places of worship were without yews.

The profiles of 457 yews were gathered. For each churchyard, every tree was plotted on a sketch map and ascribed a number. Wherever possible sex, girth at around 4'0" + (1.22 + metres), condition of the trunk and crown, associated and competing species were recorded.

Yews of All Ages

Berkshire in 1997 was not known to be rich in ancient yews. However, given the whole population of churchyard yews, it was possible to put this assumption in context. Girth size is a useful way of ranking yews. 327 trees had recorded girths, whilst the remaining 130 were shrubby in form or had excessive adventitious growth, and a few were inaccessible.



Note: Blue (the largest girth trees) is overlaid on red (the entire population of recorded yews)

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The graph plots the number of yews (vertical axis) with measurable girths (horizontal axis). Girth size is indicated in 1'0" (0.30 metre) blocks, starting at 2'1"-3'0" (0.63-0.92 metres) and finishing at 30'1"-31'0" (9.17-9.45 metres). The results demonstrate a steady rise in numbers of trees with a girth 3' 1"-9' 0" (0.92-2.74 metres), 57% of the population. Many of these yews represent Victorian landscaping in churchyards and their planting dates are likely to be available through Church records and worth investigation.

The number of trees drops sharply to girths 9’ 1”-11’ 0” (2.75-3.35 metres), 20% of the population, again for trees with girths of 11’ 1”-13’ 0” (3.36-3.96 metres), 11% of the population , and finally for the 13’ 1”- 31’ 0” (3.99-9.45 metres), 8% of the population. The sharp drop that occurs at 13’1”-18’0” (3.99-5.49 metres) should be considered with caution, as it encapsulates only 19 living yews. Yews with a girth in excess of 18’0” (5.49 metres) are rare indeed in Berkshire and these 6 individuals are described below. This ‘stepping’ factor in the girths of ageing yews represents either periods without planting of yews or exceptional losses of yews, possibly due to climate deterioration. If this is replicated in other surveys, it may represent hitherto unrecognised dynamics in the population of our churchyard yews.

Looking at the Largest Yew in Each Churchyard

Of the Berkshire 127 churchyards recorded, 38 have only 1 yew and a further 25 have only 2 yews (50% of churchyards). Trees with the largest girths, known for 117 of the churchyards, are shown on the graph. The girths in this population rise steadily from 7’ 1” (2.14 metres) to 10’ 0” (3.05 metres) and would show a steady decline and levelling off at around 13’ 0” (3.96 metres) were it not for the rise in number of yews of girth 12’1”- 13’ 0” (3.66-3.97 metres). This represents only 7 trees in a count of 117 and may not be significant. So in Berkshire, the levelling off to minimal numbers of surviving yews, those that have outgrown all others in the population, starts at 13’3” (4.04 metres) with the Easthampstead yew, a girth much smaller than might be expected.
The sharp reduction in numbers of yews with a girth exceeding 13’0” (3.97 metres) means that just 21 of the largest trees in churchyards have reached and maintained this size. 4 more long-lived yews are fragmented and reduced, and 2 are still visible as stumps. In Berkshire these trees, though many are relatively modest in girth, are the ‘special’ few.
More difficult to evaluate (except speculatively by their large root systems and position in the churchyard) are those, such as the Eton College Chapel yew, that appear to have been razed to ground level and regenerated from surviving cambium as shrubby specimens.

Eton College Chapel’s massive shrub yew ©L. Carter

Ancient and Venerated Berkshire Yews

The 6 biggest girth living yews in Berkshire are well known and written about in detail elsewhere but it is worth summarising them individually in their Berkshire context.

ANKERWYKE This yew no longer grows in consecrated ground but is on the site of the Priory of Benedictine nuns, founded by Henry II. Interior roots run down within the vast hollow shell of the original trunk, serving to stabilise and nourish the crown. In 1996 the girth was recorded as 30'9" (9.37 metres).

LANGLEY MARISH Protected behind railings, the original trunk of this yew (girth unknown) decayed so long ago that the void has been filled by several vigorous, partially coalescing stems. The girth was reported by Allen Meredith to be 28'0" (8.54metres).

WHITE WALTHAM This yew, pictured at the head of this article, was cut to head-height as a pollard. The vigorous (and unbalanced) limbs growing from the knuckle at the top of the trunk are typical of a lapsed pollard. The girth in 1996 measured 26'0" (7.92metres).

SHOTTESBROOKE The Shottesbrooke yew was cut much lower down the main stem than that of White Waltham and was sprouting vigorous adventitious shoots to generate a new crown. In 1996 the girth measured 21'10" (6.65metres).

COMBE The Combe yew, close to the west end of the Church, was exceptionally tall and sending up long vertical branches above its canopy to compensate for its position in reduced light. In 1997 the girth measured 19'0" (5.80metres).

SUNNINGHILL The shell supporting the crown has succumbed to rot on the north side leaving a broad top-to-bottom void. There has been major limb removal to keep the yew from the wall of the Church. An iron hoop, fitted long ago round the top of the main stem, was intended to keep the crown intact. In 2000 the girth measured 18'1" (5.51metres).

OARE At Oare, the stump has been taken down to ground level but remained measurable at ground level, girth 20'0" (6.10 metres) in 1997.

Variable Stages of Life in Yews of 13’1” – 18’0” (3.99-5.49 metres)

Just as there was great variability in the most ancient of Berkshire churchyard yews, so there was considerable differences between the trees of lesser girth. The most strongly represented was the group with hollow but intact trunks. Midgham, (girth 17’4”, 5.28 metres in 1997), Winkfield (girth 17’3”, 5.26 metres in 1996), Ufton Nervet (girths 16’9”, 5.10 metres and 13’6”, 4.11 metres in 1996), Welford (girth 16’6”, 5.03 metres in 1997), Swallowfield (girth 16’5”, 5.0 metres in 1996), Aldworth (girth 15’4”, 4.67 metres in 1997), Wasing (girth 14’9”, 4.50 metres in 1996), Pangbourne (girth 13’8”, 4.18 metres in 1995) , Waltham-St-Lawrence (girth 13’8”, 4.18 metres in 1996), and Easthampstead (girth 13’3”, 4.04 metres in 1996) all share this character.

The yew at Upton Slough (girth 15’2”, 4.63 metres in 1996) was single-stemmed and a pollard.
A further 4 individuals divided into two stems near ground level. These were yews at Arborfield Church ruins (girth 16’9”, 5.10 metres in 1997), Ruscombe (girth 14’4”, 4.37 metres in 1996), Langley Marish (13’8”, 4.18 metres in 1996) and Catmore (girth 13’6”, 4.11 metres in 1997).

Partial trunks remained of the yews at Sandhurst (from 3 remaining stems the estimated maximum girth was 18’0”, 5.49 metres in 1996), Horton (with a 7’0”, 2.13 metres in girth fallen portion gave an estimated girth of 18’10”, 5.74 metres in 1995) and Windsor St John (with one stem removed, estimated maximum girth 14’6”, 4.42 metres in 1996). The bowed, collapsed shell of the famous Aldworth ancient yew (surviving) measured 28’0” (8.53 metres) in 1971 before being brought down by a gale in 1976.

Aldworth Yew in the early 1970s
Courtesy of J. Marshall

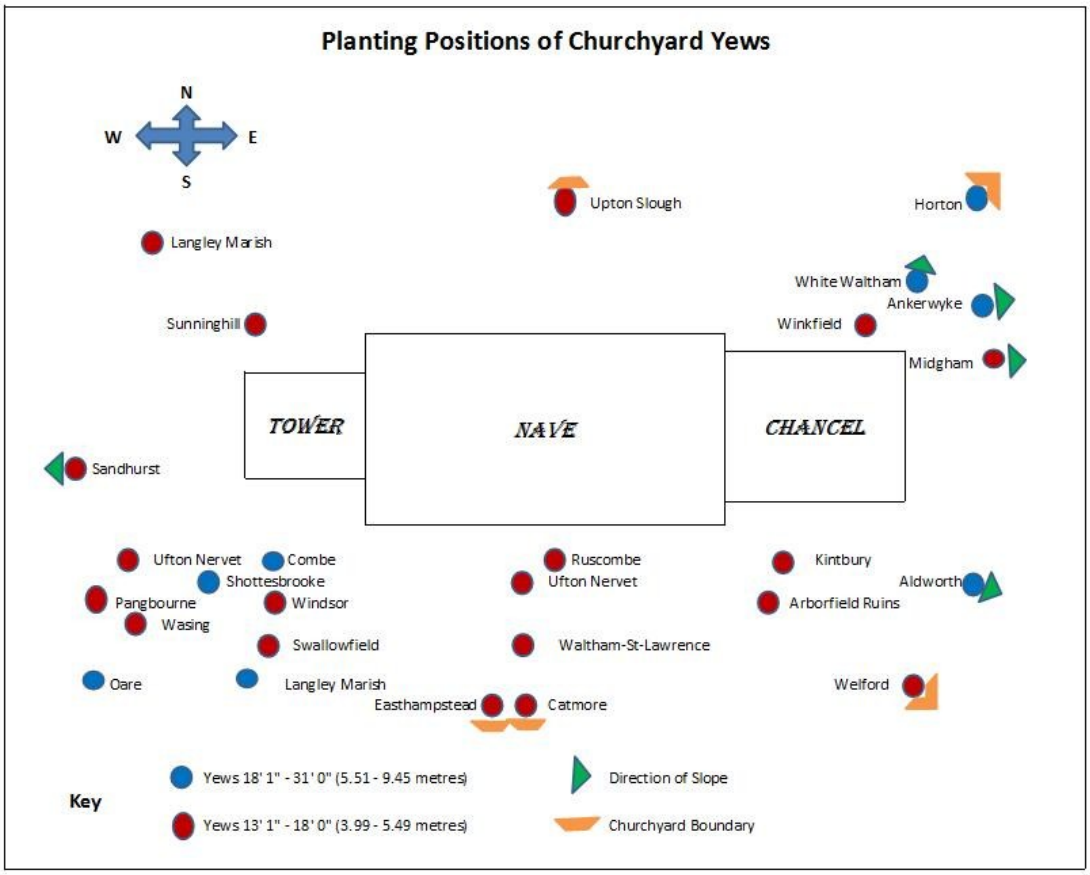
Aldworth Yew in 1999 ©L. Carter

For the Kintbury yew (girth 14’6”, 4.42 metres in 1997) there was no way back. The standing stump hosted its old associate: burgeoning Ivy, *Hedera helix*, crowning the stump in a travesty of its former revered status. Ashampstead had a fragment of yew wood embedded in the early 13th century masonry.

Planting Position in the churchyard

The great majority of Parish Churches across Berkshire had yew trees, old or young or both. Of the 12 parishes without yews, the only area where there was a notable cluster is in the north-west. The 6 parishes of Fawley, Farnborough, East Ilsley (a known 'lost yew' site), Beedon, Peasemore and Leckhampstead were lacking in yews, together with Sulhamstead in the south .

Given the presence of yews in so many churchyards, plotting their positions relative to the Church and churchyard boundaries, gave an insight into the rationale behind their planting positions.



Looking at the ancient trees of immense girth, the planting positions of the yews at White Waltham, Ankerwyke and Aldworth, with Sandhurst and Midgham (outside this category by a mere 1" (2.5cm) and 8" (20cm) respectively) all relate to topography, the lie of the land. White Waltham, Aldworth and Sandhurst were pre-Christian circular sacred sites. All of these yews were positioned on relatively level ground at the brow of the slope, irrespective of their relationship to the position of the Church. This suggests that the yews predate the current Church, as the ground consecrated at the time of the original building was usually incorporated into subsequent Churches. It should be noted that the sample of ancient yews was very small and therefore should be treated with caution.

The Langley Marish, Oare, Shottesbrooke and Combe ancient yews were all situated to the south-west of their Churches. Their planting positions accorded with a continuing tradition of planting to the south and south-west of the Church, where the great majority of parishioners were laid to rest. There may be a link between the oldest yews and the early licensing of Churches for burials which would be worth investigating. Further plotting of smaller girth yews further demonstrated the preference for planting yews to the south and west of the Church.

Yews also stood just within the boundaries, beside the gate to the churchyard. Boundary trees were still standing at Upton Slough, Horton (exceptional in that the Church is situated at the south end of the plot and the yew grows adjacent to the north boundary), Welford, Easthampstead and Catmore.

Beside the footpath to the south porch, there were notable trees at Ruscombe, Ufton Nervet and Waltham-St-Lawrence. There was a marked absence of yews planted east of the chancel window, which faces towards Jerusalem and symbolises The Second Coming.

Males and Females

Arils on a female yew ©L. Carter

The sex of 421 yews was recorded, giving totals of 211 males and 210 females. These figures were so remarkably close they warranted a recount – more than once! However, in a population of 25 of the largest trees, 15 were male and only 10 were female.

Conclusion

From the archive records of 1995-7 unexpected insights regarding the Berkshire churchyard yews emerged. Of a total population of 457 mature yews (327 had recorded girths), only 27 yews had attained a girth exceeding 13'0" (3.96 metres). This resulted in trees of relatively small girth, often without other defining qualities of great age, being considered notable. This number included anomalous ancient trees that had lost part of their original trunk and the stumps of dead trees.

Plotting the planting positions of yews in Berkshire churchyards revealed a non-random pattern comprising those positioned topographically, on the brow of slopes irrespective of the position of their Church, and a second cohort, planted to the south-west and in association with their Church. Smaller girth trees were almost always positioned to the south and south-west of the Church, and never east of the chancel window.

Across the whole population of Berkshire churchyard yews, male and female trees were found in equal numbers, but amongst the biggest yews males outnumbered females 3:2.

Work by a small but dedicated group of volunteers across the country continues. Their work will determine if the findings of this survey of the status of Berkshire's churchyard yews are typical of other well-populated counties in lowland Britain.

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