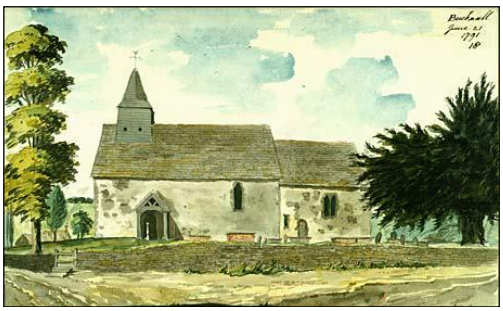
SHROPSHIRE'S CHURCHYARD YEWS

painted by Rev. Edward Williams M.A. more than two hundred years ago
photographs by Tim Hills between 1997 and 2012

Between 1786 and 1791 Rev. Edward Williams made a record of most of Shropshire's parish churches. He was described in *The Gentleman's magazine vol 153* as "an excellent draughtsman" who had also "studied much of botany". We are told in *The annals and magazine of natural history, zoology and botany -vol 1 p183* that his studies included "a catalogue of all the plants which he had detected during many years' careful herborization of the county of Salop" for which "his accuracy is well known, and perfect reliance can be placed on any plant which he recorded."

Williams' work thus gives us a rare opportunity to see some of Shropshire's churchyard yew trees as they appeared two hundred and twenty years ago. These four examples give us reason to be confident in the accuracy of his recording. The yew at Boningale (left) now has a girth of about 13ft, while that at Bucknell (centre) has a girth of about 19ft, and the Norbury giant (right) has a girth above 33ft.



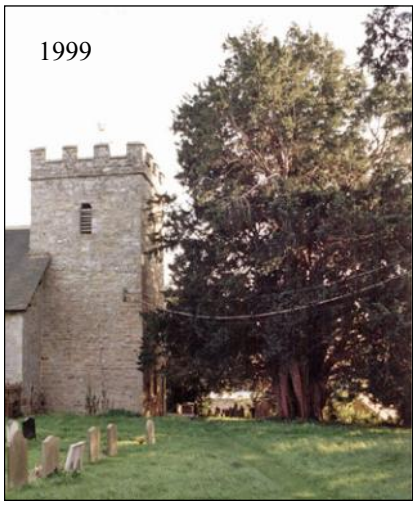
His attention to detail is illustrated in this example at Tasley. In the painting we can clearly see that sections of the bole are leaning outwards, a process which has led to the distinctive yew we see today.

On the following pages, the yews in Williams' paintings are seen as they appeared 220 years ago and as they are now.

We are grateful to Shropshire Archives for granting us permission to use their material in this format.

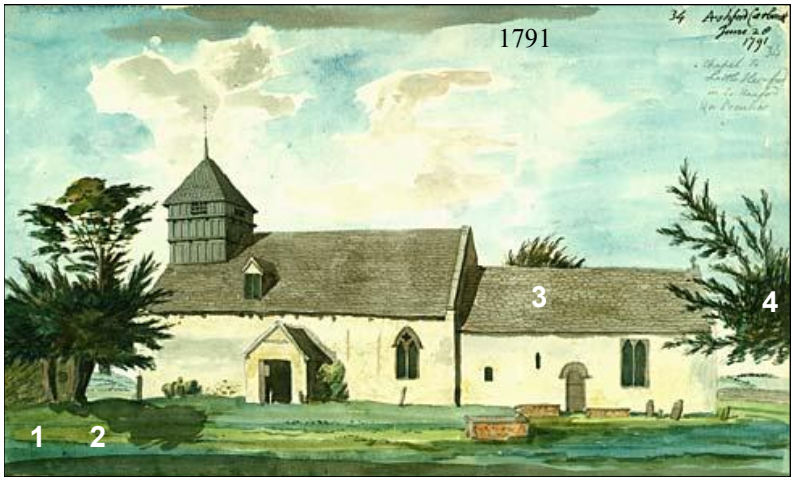
ACTON SCOTT St Margaret

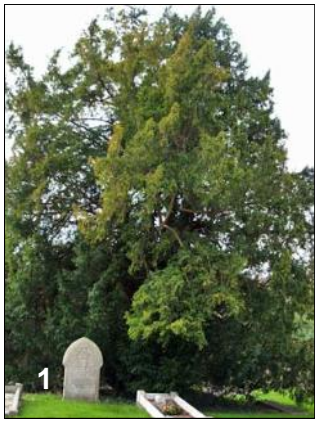
Of thirteen yews growing in Acton Scott's churchyard, the oldest six are found west of the church. Two of these appear in Williams' painting, one by the boundary wall, the other close to the tower. Girth of this ancient hollow specimen by the tower was 20' 4" at 1' in 2012.



ASHFORD CARBONELL St Mary

When Williams painted this scene he was able to incorporate four of Ashford Carbonell's five old yews. It is unfortunate that tree 3, which grew on the north side, was unnecessarily felled in 2011. Geoff Garlick's photo of 2003 is one of the last to be taken of this ancient tree. All 4 yews had girths between 18' and 22' in 1998.



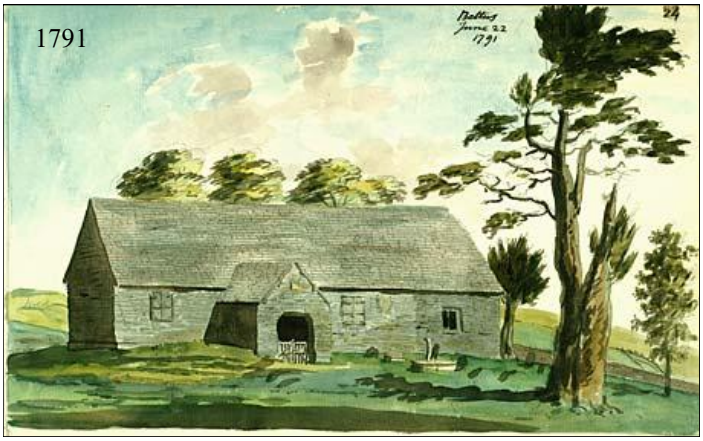


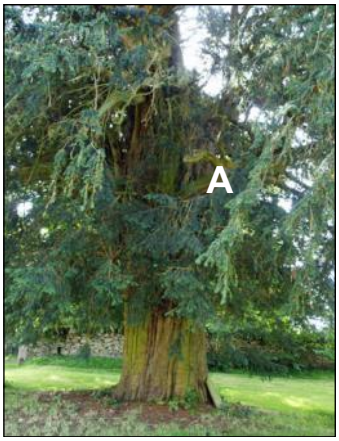
ASTON BOTTERELL St Michael and All Angels

This yew was still standing in 1939 when Mee described it in *The King's England* as "an ancient yew with two trunks". In 2012 all that remains are these pieces of stump. In 50 years time they too will be gone, leaving Williams' painting as the only pictorial record of the tree. The reason for its felling is not known.

BETTWS-Y-CRWYN St Mary

This village, close to the Welsh border, is above 1300' and one of the highest settlements in England. Its remote mediaeval church is situated on an old drovers road and is sometimes known as the shepherd's church. The large yew in the foreground shows signs of damage, reputedly by lightning, and more than 200 years later it is possible to see the split (A). The tree now has a full flourishing crown and a girth of 13' 11" at 5' in 2012.





BILLINGSLEY St Mary

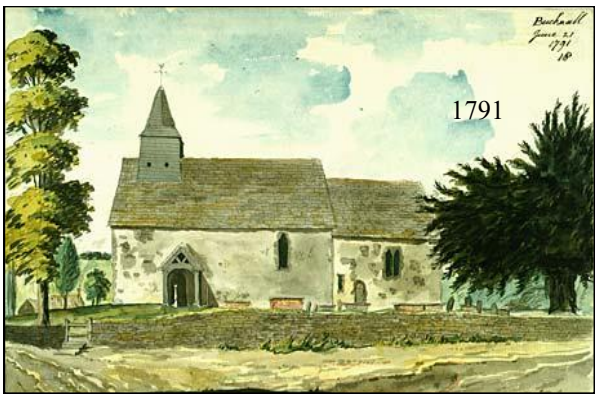
Two old yews grow in the churchyard**.** The hollow yew shown here is a ancient male tree with a girth of 16' 6" in 1998. It is seen at the far left of the painting, outside of the church's south porch.

BONINGALE St Chad

The yew grows SE of the church. It appears solid from the road, but its north side has become hollow. Girth in 2012 was about 13'.

BUCKNELL St Mary

Williams' painting shows one of the two ancient female yews that grow at the east end of the church, with a girth 18' 7" in 1999. By that time its appearance has changed dramatically with the development of several upright branches. It was perhaps inevitable that storms would eventually cause the loss of these branches and by 2022 the yew's appearance has returned to what we see in 1791.



BURFORD St Mary

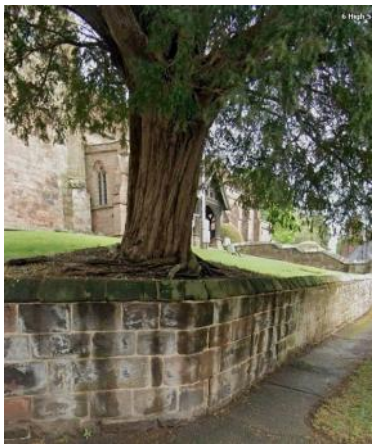
In 2002 I recorded this yew, growing east of the church, with a girth of 12’ 1’’. Ivy filled its crown and covered its bole.

CAYNHAM St Mary

This ancient male, standing alone in 1791, now grows at the end of a line of younger yews. Inside its solid looking bole is a gap where internal structures can be seen in the decaying heartwood. Girth in 2000 was 17' 4".

CHESWARDINE St Swithun

Of the two yews painted in 1791, only one has survived. It is seen in these Google Earth images.



CHURCH PULVERBATCH St Edith

The watercolour is dated 20th May 1790. Tower, nave, chancel and north arch were rebuilt since then and perhaps the trees shown in the painting were damaged during the reconstruction and replaced at a later date. The tree on the left in the painting has been replaced with a young yew, while the yew tree on the right has been replaced with a cedar.

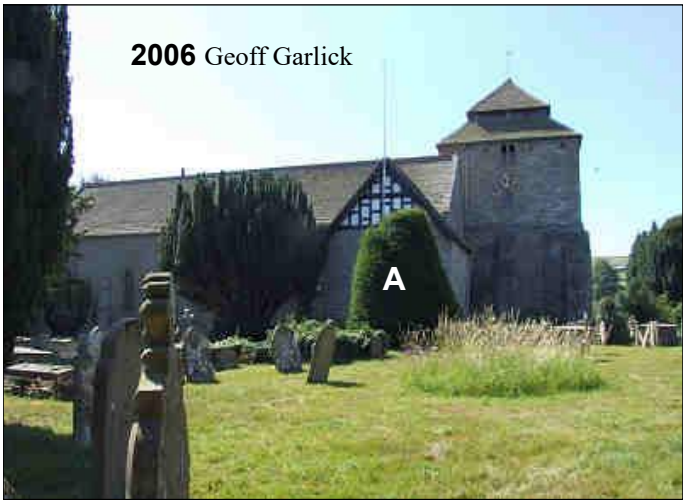
CLEE St MARGARET

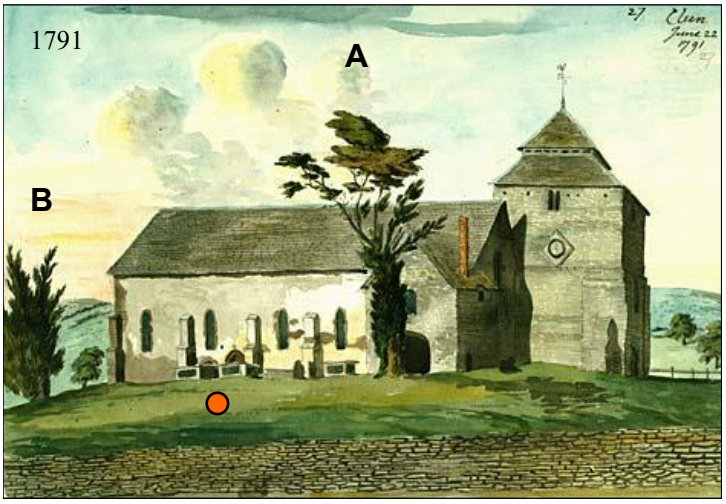
The male yew, with a girth of 14' 4" in 2009, grows outside of the south porch. Today its branches dip towards the ground, and tombstones are propped against the bole.

CLEOBURY NORTH St Peter and St Paul

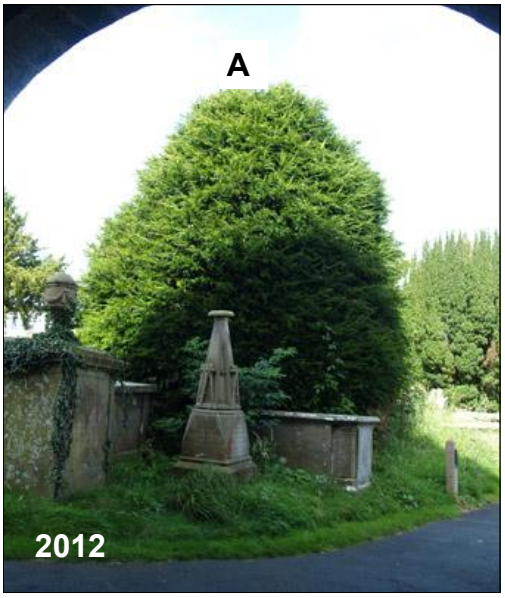
The male yew (A) grows on the south side of the church. In the painting it has been moved to the right to avoid obscuring the building. Girth was 12' 9" in 2012.

CLUN St George



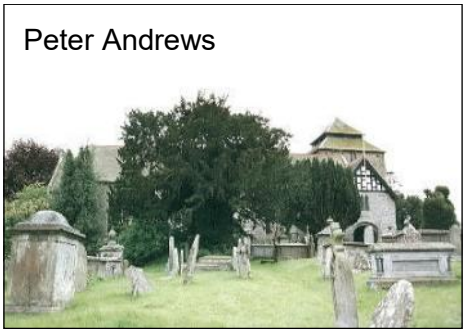


Williams has shown Clun's two significant yews, each growing on the north side of the churchyard. The red circle marks the approximate location of one of the twenty largest girthed yews in England. It seems likely that Williams has moved it to the new position (B) for the painting.



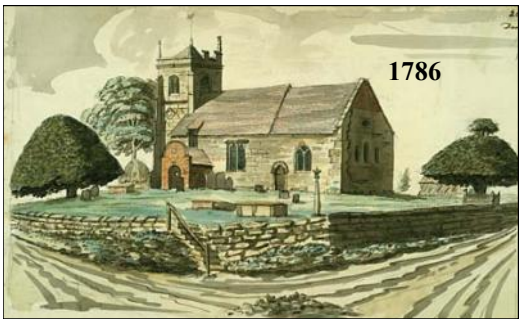
Tree A is seen above in 1998, with its impressive, stocky 19' bole. In a remarkably short space of time it has become covered in dense foliage, and it might be some time before the bole is visible again.

Tree B is seen below, a tree of fragments with a combined girth of over 34'.



DAWLEY MAGNA Holy Trinity

The clipped yews found today have small girths for trees in the likely age range of 270/300+ years. Observations of the rate of growth of many of the clipped yews at Painswick in Gloucestershire show that trees treated in this manner have a lower than usual girth increase.



DONINGTON St Mary

The yew grows SW of the church and close to the present porch. It is seen in 2012.

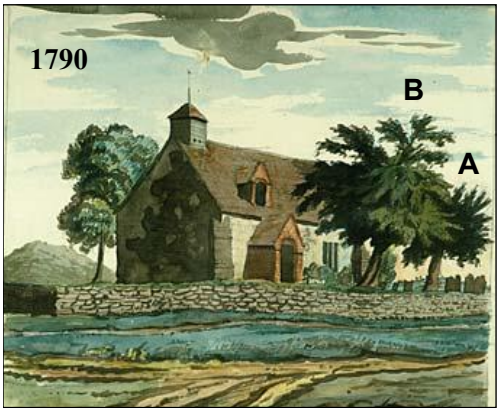
EATON-UNDER-HEYWOOD St Edith

The yew at (A) appears to be in the same position as in the painting. Its small girth however suggests that it was planted more recently, perhaps as a replacement for the original tree.

GREAT HANWOOD St Thomas

In 1939 Mee recorded a church “sheltered by many old yews higher than itself, one with a fine ribbed trunk.” The yew is seen here, SE of the church. In 2003 its girth was exactly 14' at 1'.

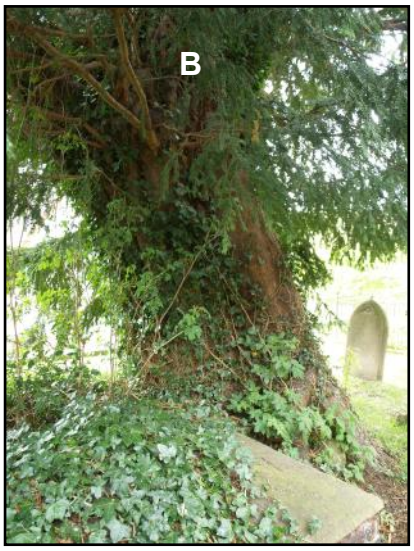
HABBERLEY St Mary



In 1790 two yews growing side by side are included in the painting.

Tree A has lost half of its bole, and a prominent internal stem is now seen on the outside of the tree.

Tree B is solid looking with a girth of 13' 1" in 2003. Thanks to Williams we now know that the tree was already leaning in 1790.

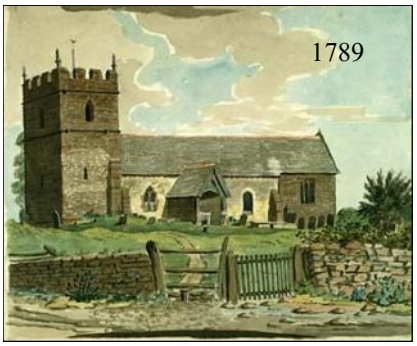


HARLEY St Mary

As well as this illustration, there is a record of the tree in the 1852 *Gentlemans magazine*, which describes it as a “venerable yew-tree of large girth”.
In 2012 the male yew has a girth of 13' 9" at 3'. It is a thick skinned hollow tree growing on a mound.

HOLDGATE Holy Trinity

This unusual male yew grows ESE of the church. Girth in 2003 was 12' 9", but the tree has been larger, with internal growth now appearing on the outside of the trunk.

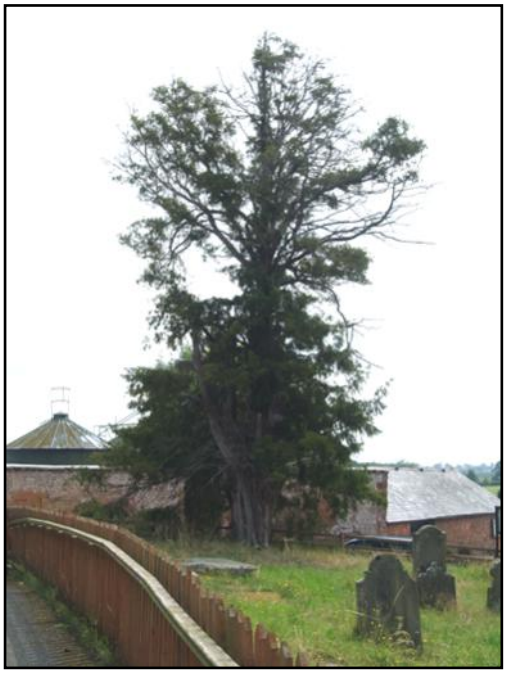


HOPE BAGOT St John the Baptist

This ancient female yew, with a girth of 24' 2" at 1' in 1997, grows north of the churchyard. A spring below the tree was once thought to have curative properties and attracted so many visitors that some routes leading to the site were marked with yews. Many of these have unfortunately been destroyed.

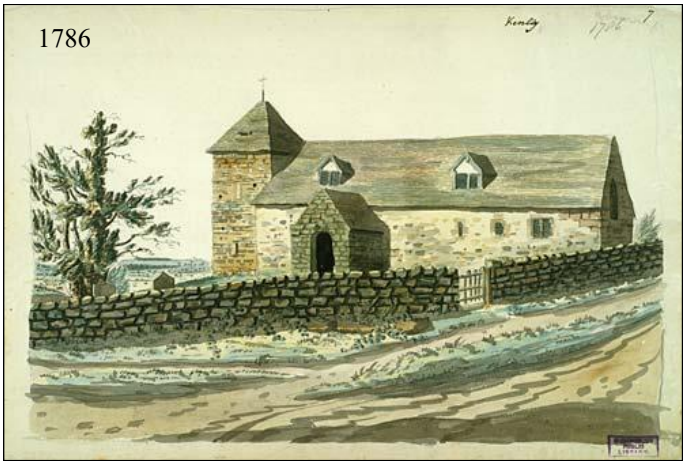
HORDLEY St Mary the Virgin

July 2014 - Tim Hills: There is a gap of 225 years between the painting by Revd. Williams and the photographs. Girth of the tree now is 10' 8".



KENLEY St John

In 2012 five yews are seen in this churchyard. Williams has included the oldest of these, this ancient female growing in the wall west of the churchyard.

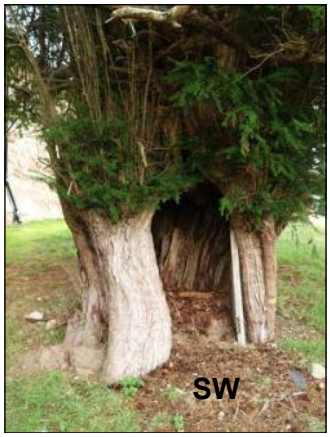


LEEBOTWOOD St Mary

This appears to be a large girthed yew close to the church porch. It no longer exists.

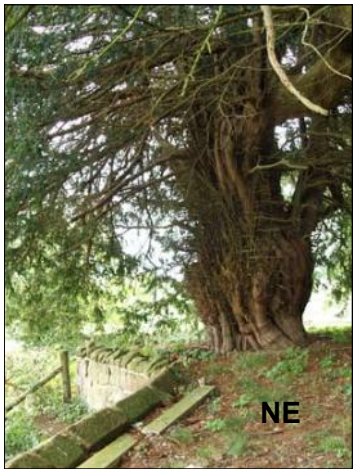
LITTLE NESS St Martin

No fewer than 21 yews ringed the churchyard in 2007. The two shown here are its most exceptional specimens, each appearing in Williams' painting.



Both trees are male and grow SW and NE of the church. The tree SW girthed 15' 8" and is hollow with a piece of old door frame attached from a time when the tree was used for storage.

The tree growing NE is solid looking with hollow spaces. Girth was 16' 2".



LOUGHTON

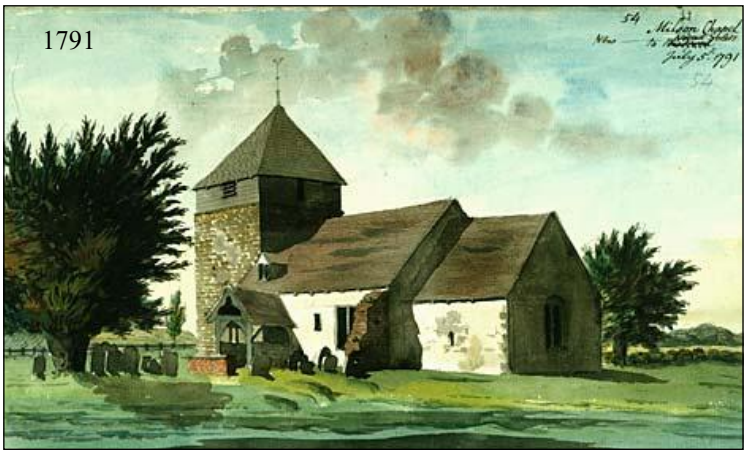
This ancient female yew, with a girth above 30', grows at the east end of the church.

MELVERLEY St Peter

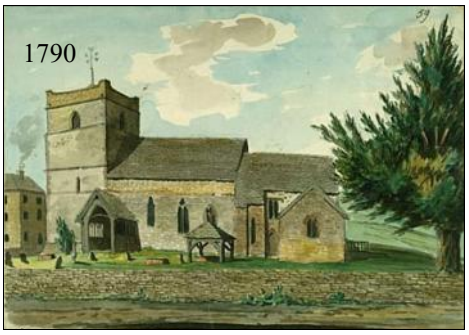
Two notable yews once grew here. A tree SE of the church that fell in a storm c2016 does not appear in the painting. The tree on the north side, just visible behind the church, had a girth of almost 14' in 2002.

MILSON St George

The ancient male yew consisting of two fragments grows south of the church, to the left in the painting. Its girth in 1999 was 19' 5". The painting also shows what appears to be a younger yew on the north side.



MUNSLOW St Michael



An ancient male yew grows at the boundary wall, SSE of the church. Like so many old yews planted at churchyard boundaries, it is now causing damage to the wall. Girth in 2012 was about 17’.

NORBURY St Mary

This enormous ancient male yew, with a girth above 30', grows on the south side of the church. There was a wall/seat around the tree in 1790, which will have been renewed on many occasions as the bole expanded. The 1999 photo shows that the wall again needs attention.

QUATFORD St Mary Magdalene

The male yew grows at the highest point of the churchyard, SE of the building. Girth in 2007 was about 14'.

SIDBURY Holy Trinity

This split, hollow ancient male grows east of the church. Morton gave it a girth of 21' 9" in *Trees of Shropshire* (1986).

TASLEY St Peter and St Paul

A female yew, with many branches from a low bole. It grows on the east side of the church. Girth was 16' 2" in 2000.

UPPINGTON Holy Trinity

An ancient female yew SE of the church (A). Girth was 28' 4" in 1999.

There was also a yew at the east end (B) in 1786. It is not known when this yew was removed, but it is thought likely that it took place at a time the church was undergoing restoration work.

WHEATHILL Holy Trinity

Three Yews grow on the north eastern side of the churchyard boundary. This is the largest, engulfed in twiggy growth, brambles and assorted foliage.

WOOLSTASTON St Michael and All Angels

Four yews grew here in 2003. The yew in the painting would appear to be the tree I recorded growing WNW of the church.

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With thanks to the Shropshire Archives Service for allowing these paintings to be reproduced on our website.

Acton Scott: 00012380, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/669) - painted on 31 August 1790
Aston Botterell: 00012559, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16408) - painted on 13th June 1791
Ashford Carbonell: 00012585, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16434) - painted on 28th June 1791
Bettws-y-crwyn: 00012566, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16415) - painted on 22nd June 1791
Billingsley: 00012357, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/646) - painted on 11th August 1790
Boningale: 00012549, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16398) - painted on 14th June 1791
Bucknell: 00012552, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16401) - painted on 21st June 1791
Burford:
Caynham: painted 1791
Cheswardine:
Church Pulverbatch:
Clee St Margaret: 00012368, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/657)- painted on 18th August 1790
Cleobury North: 00012377, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/666)- painted on 27th August 1790
Clun Shropshire Archives 6001/372/3 painted on 22nd June 1791
Dawley Magna: 00012430, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16278)- painted in 1786
Donington:
Easton under Haywood: 00012498, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16346) - painted on 13th August 1789
Great Hanwood:
Habberley: 00012337, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/626) - painted on 24th June 1790
Harley: 00012642, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16491) - painted on 16th October 1821
Holdgate: 00012506, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16354) - painted on 25th August 1789
Hope Bagot: 00012582, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16431) - painted on 5th July 1791
Hordley:
Leebotwood: painted 1786
Kenley: 00012417, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16265) - painted in 1786
Loughton: 00012547, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16396) - painted on 13th June 1791
Melverley: 00012340, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/629) - painted on 30th June 1790
Milson: 00012596, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16445) - painted on 5th July 1791
Munslow: 00012389, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/678) - painted on 1st September 1790
Ness Chapel/Little Ness: 00012348, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/637) - painted on 13th July 1790
Norbury: 00012371, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/660) - painted on 25th August 1790
Quatford: 00012363, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/2 (24/652) - painted on 11th August 1790
Sidbury: 00012579, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/3 (264/16428) - painted on 4th July 1791
Tasley: 00012517, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16365) - painted on 3rd September 1789
Uppington: 00012415, Shropshire Archives, 6001/372/1 (263/16263) - painted in 1786
Wheathill: painted 1791
Woolstaston: