

5. Yews and Other Veteran Trees



This sheet explains the importance of yews, our partnership to promote them and guidelines on how to manage ancient yews and other veteran trees.

FLAGSHIP SPECIES

'A small country full of ancient yew trees, such as Britain, is becoming a true Noah's Ark. Such tree stands are becoming (if they have not always been) far more significant than local or regional places of interest, and should be – as the equivalent of architectural World Heritage Sites – legally protected as Green Monuments.'

Fred Hageneder – Yew: A History

Globally veteran and ancient yews are threatened. On a world stage the most significant refuge for these trees is English and Welsh churchyards, where around three-quarters of Britain's oldest yews are found (numbering around 800).

These ancient yews are one of the distinctive features of the British landscape.

The yew tree is a flagship species of Caring for God's Acre, and we are working with the Ancient Yew Group to protect and promote them.

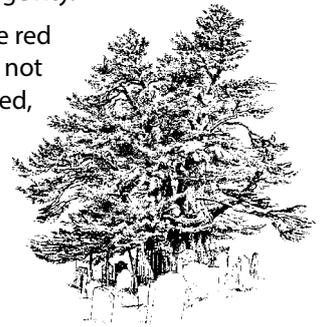
KNOW YOUR YEW TREE

There will always be speculation about yews and why so many are found in churchyards. Poisonous to livestock? Welcome decoration for the midwinter and Palm Sunday? To Celtic people yews were sacred trees and symbolic of everlasting life. There are thought to be many sites where the yew tree predates the Christian church.

- The common yew *Taxus baccata* is the most widely found with the Irish yew *Taxus baccata 'Fastigiata'* planted more recently.
- Yew trees tend to grow in a 'normal' tree shape until about 600 years old when they often hollow out and thicken around the base and trunk in an uneven, lumpy way.
- Boughs which bend or partially snap and then rest on to the ground will take root and act as stabilisers for the tree. Boughs can also send down 'aerial roots' which take root or fuse with the main trunk. This regeneration followed by new, young growth makes a yew tree virtually immortal. It also makes it difficult to predict age accurately.
- Experts estimate age using a variety of ways including

investigating old maps, looking up tree records, measuring tree girth and looking at the growth form. Several yew trees are believed to be well over 2000 years old and there is no known limit to how old they could live.

- Yew wood is particularly strong and yews are resistant to disease, aiding their longevity.
- Most of a yew tree is poisonous. The red flesh or 'aril' of the berry however is not and, provided the seed is not crushed, berries can be eaten and passed through some animals causing no harm.
- Yew bark and foliage have current medicinal uses and an alkaloid extracted from yew called Taxol is used in cancer treatment.
- Male and female flowers are found on separate trees (dioecious) so they maximise fertilisation opportunities.



Yew

HELPING YEW

- Never assume that a yew is dying or dead. Many can carry a lot of deadwood, can look 'untidy' or have discoloured needles but will still recover and regenerate.
- If a yew has been regularly trimmed then you can continue to do this, if not DO NOT start pruning, trimming or pollarding yews. Leaving them alone is the best management unless a tree expert specifies otherwise.
- If boughs are collapsing remember that they are able to then take root and regenerate. If they are causing a problem and cannot be allowed to collapse then prop them up. Do not prune them off. A good tree contractor or arborist will be able to help and advise.
- Ivy can smother the crown, adding weight and cutting out the light. It can also hide tree defects, the identification of which are important when assessing tress. Although ivy has wildlife benefits (see sheet A8, Creating a Wildflower Meadow and Helping Wildlife) remove it from yews. Do this work cautiously with hand tools so as not to damage the tree, using a tree contractor if climbing is involved. N.B. there can be bats and nesting birds within yews, particularly those with a thick growth of ivy; see sheet B3, Bats in the Belfry before doing anything which may disturb them.

MANAGING CHURCHYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS

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- Keep the ground clear beneath a yew, removing railings, grass cutting piles and shrubs like holly, elder or hazel. One of the best things you can do is to mulch under yew trees. Use wood chip or leaf mulch and spread it canopy wide. Make sure that the mulch is not touching the trunk however. Mulch can be a few inches thick, replenish it every few years. Never fill the cavity of a veteran yew with rubbish, grass cuttings or use it as a storage space.
- Tell people how amazing a tree it is! NB If you have a famous yew with a lot of visitors try to discourage them from compacting the soil beneath the canopy.

OTHER VETERAN TREES

Burial grounds often have other species of veteran tree. Whilst these won't be as old as the oldest yews they may well be many hundreds of years old and magnificent specimens in their own right. They are likely to have a whole range of other plants, lichens, birds and other animals living in and on them.

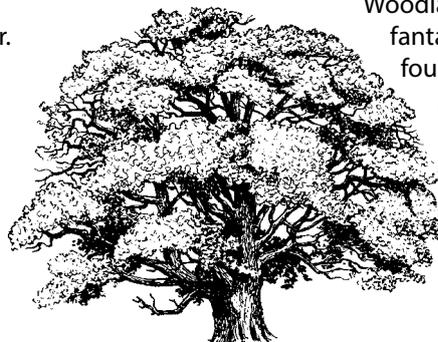
Veteran trees may have:

Deadwood within the crown of the tree plus holes, flaking bark and crevices containing a range of fungi, beetles, bats and birds.

Epiphytes growing on them – these are plants such as ferns, mosses and lichens which grow on the tree with no connection to the ground.

Hollowing of the trunk to give a cylinder.

Like yews, many other tree species hollow out as they become ancient. This is a natural process and does not weaken the tree, in fact it may strengthen it; a cylinder is a strong shape.



Pedunculate Oak

None of these features are a problem; they are part of the natural aging process and give character and interest to a tree.

If you have veteran trees in your burial ground then work closely with your tree contractor or arborist.

Deadwood

Deadwood within a tree is excellent wildlife habitat. Invertebrates live in or on deadwood, as do fungi, as well as more visible creatures such as woodpeckers. There may be areas within your site where deadwood within a tree is quite acceptable and other areas where it is hazardous, such as over a path.

Consider deadwood carefully, seek advice from a tree surgeon or arborist and only remove if necessary from a safety point of view.

If you do identify problems with a tree, maybe there are signs of stress or disease – it does not mean that the tree will have to be felled. A good arborist or tree contractor can advise you and should explore all other options before deciding to fell a tree. It may be possible to simply remove the dead parts, or reduce the size of the crown, (see sheet A6, Practical Management of Trees and Shrubs).

Recording Veteran and Ancient Trees

The Ancient Yew Group, Ancient Tree Forum and Woodland Trust keep records of these fantastic trees and these records can be found on the Church Heritage Record and Church Heritage Cymru. Have a look on the Churchyard page to see where they are known to occur.

Useful contacts

Ancient Tree Forum, www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk

Ancient Yew Group, www.ancient-yew.org

Arboricultural Association, www.trees.org.uk

Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Church Heritage Record www.facultyonline.churchofengland.org/churches

Church Heritage Cymru www.churchheritagecymru.org.uk/

The Woodland Trust, www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

Useful reading

Veteran Trees: A Guide to Good Management – Natural England publication

Yew: A History – Fred Hageneder, The History Press Ltd



Alder