

# A Guide to Ancient and Veteran Churchyard Trees



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## INTRODUCTION

These magnificent trees epitomise the British churchyard and their significance cannot be overstated. They instil in us a sense of awe and wonder and our minds boggle when we think of the moments in history these incredibly ancient beings have witnessed.

Whilst churchyards contain many different veteran trees, it is the yews that are particularly special. Globally, veteran and ancient yews are threatened; however, amazingly, on a world stage the best refuge for these trees is English and Welsh churchyards. It is here that over three quarters of Britain's oldest yew trees can be found, with Welsh churchyards being particularly significant and some trees believed to be several thousand years old.

Perhaps you are the current custodian of one of these remarkable trees which deserve to be celebrated, and we want to support you in this important task! This factsheet will help to unlock the richness of the yew's natural and cultural history, as well as other species of veteran trees. It will delve into the folklore surrounding these magnificent trees and explore some modern and ancient uses. Finally, it will provide practical advice on how to look after your yew tree and give you information on other ancient and veteran trees that you may have on your site.

In addition to the information included in this pack, there is a range of books, websites and organisations that are packed full of further information and support:

### Websites and organisations:

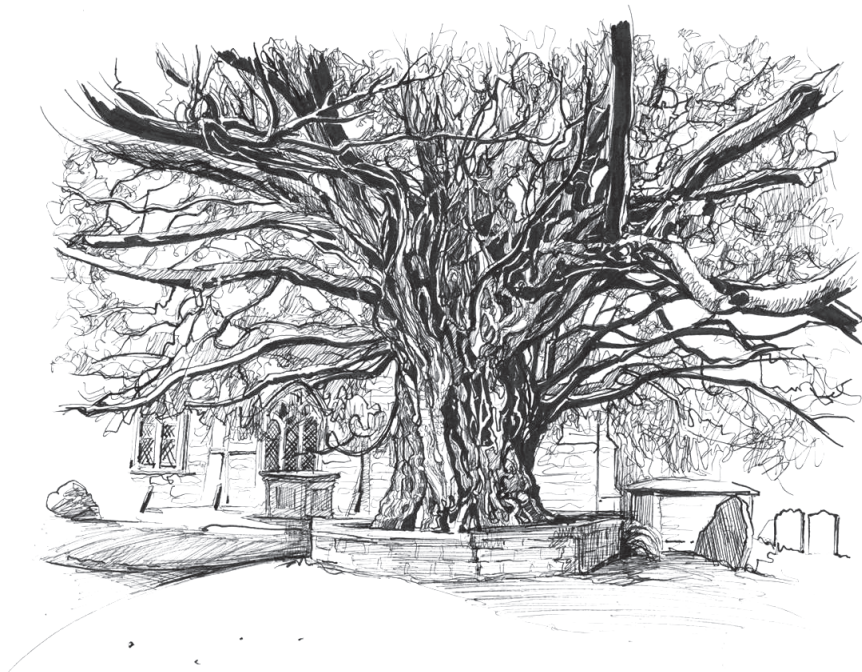
- **Caring for God's Acre** works nationally to support groups and individuals to investigate, care for, and enjoy burial grounds and graveyards. Our website

has links to downloadable action packs including 'Inspecting and Caring for Trees' and 'Yews and Other Veteran Trees' as well as a guide to exploring the biodiversity of veteran and ancient yews: [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk)

- **The Ancient Yew Group's** website is the leading information portal and database on yew trees, containing information on 1,500 ancient and veteran yews. It includes an interactive map and information on known trees in England and Wales, articles and research, practical guidance for recording yews and a video on managing them: [www.ancient-yew.org](http://www.ancient-yew.org)
- **The Ancient Tree Forum** seeks to secure the long-term future of ancient trees through raising awareness of their value and promoting best management and conservation practice. The website has numerous resources including a series of veteran tree handbooks, downloadable guidance on managing ancient and veteran trees and a series of practical management videos covering topics from crown reduction to risk management: [www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk](http://www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk)
- **The Woodland Trust** aims to see a UK rich in woods and trees. Their website has accessible information on all species of native tree. It also hosts the Ancient Tree Inventory where ancient trees are mapped and records can be added or explored: [www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)

### Books:

- **Silva.** The Tree in Britain by Archie Miles
- **Yew.** A History by Fred Hageneder
- **The Ancient Yew.** A History of *Taxus baccata* by Robert Bevan Jones





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## DISCOVER MORE ABOUT ANCIENT YEWS

*Taxus baccata*, known as the Common, English or European yew, is an evergreen tree in a separate family from, but related to, true cone-bearing conifers. With a sombre appearance and uneven crown it has dark green needle-like leaves which grow in two rows along a twig. The underneath of the needles is paler with a raised central vein. It has reddish-brown flaking bark and the trunk and branches often have a fluted appearance. Mature yew trees can grow to 20m or more and they are very long lived so often develop burs, buttresses and hollows. Yews flower in early spring and the male and female flowers tend to be on different trees. The male flowers are tiny clusters of pale yellow stamens and the female flowers are inconspicuous oval green structures set in the leaf axils. They are wind pollinated and the fruits ripen in October to give bright crimson fleshy cup-like berries, each holding a dark green seed within.



Nowadays, there are many different forms and colours of yew. One, known as the Irish Yew, is increasingly common in churchyards. It originated in Fermanagh, where, in around 1760, a gardener came across 2 young yew trees of a very upright (fastigate) manner. Cuttings were taken and despatched widely, and now all fastigate yews can be traced back to the Fermanagh trees. The more upright shape makes it suitable for trimming and shaping. Although these trees look neat and tidy, they lack the majesty and mystery of the ancient yew in its natural form.

### What is an ancient or veteran yew?

Yew trees are naturally very slow-growing long lived trees. Indeed, they are the oldest trees in Britain. The terms ancient and veteran refer to a tree which, because of its significant age, size and condition, is of exceptional biodiversity or cultural value. As far back as

the 17th century observers were intrigued by the great girth of yew trees and began to record and measure them.

Accurately estimating the age of old yew trees is often not possible because the trunks become hollow, fragmented, or multiple trunks merge so the annual rings cannot be counted or the girth easily measured. Using supporting archaeological evidence some have estimated that individual trees may be two thousand years old or more, but it is now thought that this is an exaggeration and a more realistic estimate of our oldest living trees is around one to two thousand years old.

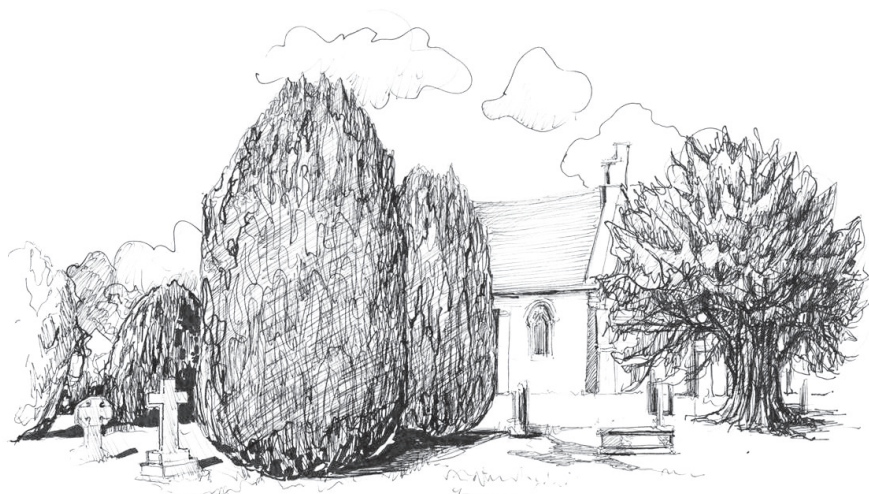
The Ancient Yew Group have provided guidelines on the classification of veteran and ancient yews:

- Ancient: 800 years old or more, or with a girth of 7 metres (23 feet) or over - the girth of a tree is usually measured at 1.3 metres (4 feet 3 inches) height.
- Veteran: Over 500 years old, and may be up to 1200 years with a girth of 4.9 metres (16 feet) or more.

On their website, the Ancient Yew Group list the ancient and veteran yews that have been recorded in British churchyards. There are over 300 churchyards in Wales and 1000 in England with at least one ancient, veteran or notable yew tree (notable being over 300 years old). In Wales 423 churchyard yews are listed as ancient or veteran whilst in England it is proportionately lower at 554.

The ancient yew tree, with its hollow trunk and dense evergreen foliage is a sanctuary for wildlife, providing year round shelter and, despite its known toxicity, even a food source for some. Although native to Britain it is also found across much of Europe, western Asia and North Africa.

The yew is an incredibly slow-growing and hardy tree that can tolerate a wide range of soils and harsh conditions. It does not, however, tolerate extreme



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water logging. In the early stages of its growth (which may be as much as several hundred years!) the tree develops a broad trunk, but as it ages the heartwood starts to die and the tree hollows. This is a natural process and not a sign of an ailing tree. Indeed as the centre of the tree decays it releases minerals into the soil beneath that can be recycled by the tree. It also sends down aerial roots to provide support for the crown. An aerial root may grow through the decomposing heartwood resulting in a new stem inside the hollow of the old one.

The hollow trunk provides protection from extreme weather and is an ideal nesting site for birds and wild honey bees as well as a roosting site for bats.

It may provide shelter for mammals such as hibernating hedgehogs, whilst dormice may spend the winter in a deep sleep beneath the gnarled roots.

Almost every part of the yew is poisonous to wildlife

and this may contribute to the trees longevity. The only edible part of a yew is the red flesh of the berry, known as the aril, which surrounds the stone. The stone itself is toxic and can be fatal if chewed or swallowed by humans.

The fleshy berries are often eaten by birds such as blackbirds, waxwings, thrushes and fieldfares. Whilst most birds disgorge the seeds some are known to eat them with no ill effect.

Perhaps the best known is the hawfinch, which may visit yews in good numbers. They crack open the nut-like seeds and eat the kernels, leaving a scattering of seed cases on the ground beneath. Indeed, churchyards become a favourite place for birdwatchers in the late autumn as they try to catch a

glimpse of these elusive birds. As well as birds, foxes, squirrels, badgers and small mammals such as dormice occasionally eat the berries.

The leaves of yew are also toxic and known to kill cattle and horses. Sheep and goats don't seem to be as badly affected and deer can break down the poisons and will eat yew foliage freely. There are notably few insects that feed on yew although many will use its evergreen foliage and bark crevices for shelter throughout the year. One exception

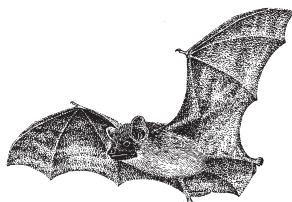
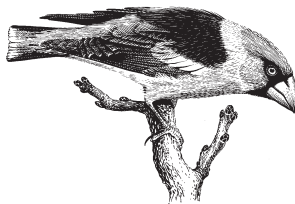


is the yew gall midge (*Taxomyia taxi*). This tiny fly is unlikely to be seen but it is dependent on yew. It causes the leaves on the tips of the growing shoots to become clustered, forming a single gall which surrounds the fly larva. Often known as artichoke galls, the outer leaves are dark green and the inner ones almost white. The galls eventually turn brown and can stay on the plant right through to the following year.

Due to the toxicity and the deep shade beneath its canopy not many fungi and lichen species are associated with yews compared to other old trees. However, there are several striking fungi that are worth looking out for. Chicken-of-the-woods is a bright orangey yellow fleshy bracket fungus. It appears in the summer but can remain on the tree till late in the year, fading from orange,

through yellow to a dirty white. Although good to eat, it is best avoided if found growing on yew due to the toxins in the wood. Another striking group of fungi found surprisingly often beneath churchyard yews are the earthstars. As their name suggests, these unusual fungi have a distinctive star-shaped brown or cream fruiting body, but are well camouflaged and require careful searching. Several different species of earthstar may be present beneath a single tree. One fungus, the root killing *Phytophthora*, is the only species that is known to cause the death of whole yew trees. It is a microscopic organism and there are no specific signs of the disease or treatment for it.

Yew trees aren't just sources of food and shelter. Trees are nature's most effective way of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. As they grow, the carbon is locked up in the trees' roots, trunk and branches. The carbon stays there for the lifetime of the tree, and so by looking after our old trees as well as planting new ones, we help in the fight against climate change.





## ANCIENT AND VETERAN TREES THROUGH TIME

Yews have witnessed some monumental moments in our history. A yew was said to have sheltered Robert the Bruce, it was beneath the branches of a yew that the Magna Carta was sealed and possibly the same yew was the meeting place where Henry VIII wooed the young Anne Boleyn. Yews are often found in the wider countryside as boundary marker trees, but perhaps of most interest is their association with sacred sites, not just in Britain, but throughout Europe.

Yew trees are known to have occupied ancient burial sites as far back as the Neolithic period, although whether or not they were deliberately planted is unclear. It is also thought that they are associated with Druidic sites of worship. To the Celts yews were sacred trees, symbolic of death and resurrection. This belief may stem from the fact that drooping branches of old trees can root and form new trunks where they touch the ground. The Celts were well aware of the dark side of the yew. Julius Caesar narrates that Cativolcus, chief of the Eburones poisoned himself with yew rather than submit to Rome.

It is known that early Christians converted the sites of pagan temples to Christian churches and it is likely that yew trees already present were retained. Only a few examples are known and such pre-Christian yews are

very rare and of extreme national importance. Most existing ancient and veteran churchyard yews were planted around the time of the Christian consecration of the churchyards in which they stand – these may be as old as Saxon or Norman but many are more recent depending on when the church was built. In tenth-century Wales, the penalty for cutting down a consecrated yew was one pound – far more than most people earned in a lifetime. The Ancient Yew Group has proposed that churchyard yews should be treated as artefacts of historic significance, equal to that of other original parts of the church building and its setting.

There will always be speculation about why yews are planted in churchyards. One widely cited reason is that it is poisonous to livestock and was planted to prevent grazing of the site, although occasional grazing in churchyards was not uncommon. On a more practical level, in 1307 Edward I decreed that groups of yew trees should be planted in all churchyards to protect the fabric of the church from high winds and gales. Others say they were planted on the graves of plague victims to protect and purify the dead. One particular yew tree that dominates a churchyard in Ceredigion, next to the Abbey of Strata Florida, was planted by Cistercian monks on the grave of Dafydd ap Gwilym, a famous Welsh poet who died in the fourteenth century, possibly from the Black Death. But, as seems typical of the origins of most churchyard yews, even this is



*Pulpit yew, North Wales.*

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disputed, with another nearby Abbey claiming that Dafydd was buried there.

In Christian tradition the yew tree with its evergreen leaves and long life is a symbol of immortality, whilst the red heartwood and white sapwood has been said to represent the blood and body of Christ. For many centuries there was a widespread custom of carrying yew branches on Palm Sunday and it was also traditionally burned to make ash for Ash Wednesday rituals.

Some yew trees have played a more active role in the church. For example, it was the custom for funeral processions to pass through the hollowed trunk of the ancient Fortingall Yew in Scotland. This tree is believed to be one of the oldest living trees in the UK, so old that its original trunk has long since split and it now resembles several smaller trees. The Pulpit Yew in North Wales is home to an outdoor lectern. Steps lead through the hollow of the tree up to a raised seat and podium and legend has it that John Wesley once preached here. Ancient yews are frequently hollow and were even used as homes by some early monks in Ireland and Wales.

Yew produces a remarkably hard and durable timber giving rise to the saying that 'a post of yew will outlast a post of iron'. Indeed, the world's oldest known wooden artefact is a 250,000-year-old yew-spear, fashioned before modern humans existed, which was found in Essex. Yew's water resistant qualities mean that it has been used for house foundations in Venice, wine barrels in Ireland, and in Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, the Anglo Saxon burial ship was found to contain a yew bucket.

The different physical properties of the heart and sapwood give yew strength and flexibility. This makes it the best timber for making bows. The earliest known example of a longbow was found in the Alps with a natural mummy known as 'the iceman Otzi'. His bow, 1.82m long, was made from yew and dated to around 3300 BC. The English/Welsh yew longbow was believed to have originated in the Welsh Marches in the 12th century, and although it was speculated that churchyard yews may have been planted to provide wood for this weapon, timber from the continent was considered superior for bow making. Certainly, from the end of the 13th century significant quantities of yew staves were being imported for this purpose. By the 16th century the demand for yew bows across Europe was so great that the population of yew trees crashed and old yew trees are now rare on the

continent.

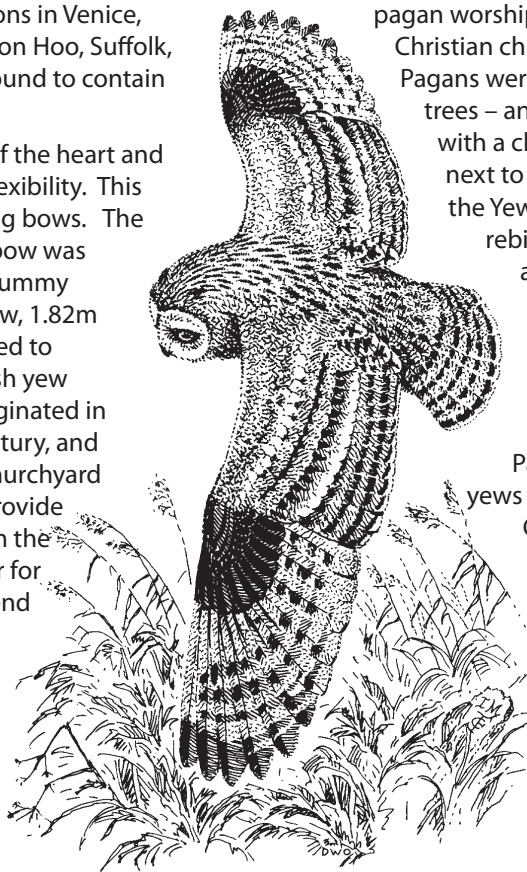
Despite the dark nature of the tree, yew wood is a fine grained, quality timber with a beautiful array of colours. It is used in cabinet making, for veneers and inlays and is favoured by wood turners. The heartwood is streaked orange, black, red and purple whilst the sapwood is pale cream. Clusters of pinprick knots, internal voids and curled grains add interest, but also make it challenging to work.

Despite its toxicity, yew has traditionally been used in herbal medicine to treat a variety of ailments from chronic bronchitis to heart conditions. However, in modern times its best known use is in the treatment of cancer. The active chemical (an alkaloid given the trade name Taxol) was originally extracted from the bark of the yew. It is used as a chemotherapy drug to treat numerous cancers including breast, ovarian, bladder, prostate, and lung. The drug is mostly synthetic now, but yew clippings can still be used in the process and drug companies and research laboratories still buy the foliage, in bulk.

So why have churchyards become the main sanctuary for ancient yews in the UK and even in Europe? There are many different theories and the main one is all about winning friends and influencing people. When Augustine came to bring Christianity to Britain in 597 AD he was given the task of bringing the Pagan faiths to an end in a sympathetic and sensitive way.

In 601, Pope Gregory suggested that places of pagan worship could simply be converted into Christian churches. So they headed to where Pagans were already gathering – near yew trees – and rather than replacing the yew with a church, they simply built a church next to it. The Pagans had long revered the Yew tree as symbolic of death and rebirth and used their branches and foliage for ceremonial occasions. This symbology was incorporated into Christian traditions. It meant that existing yews were protected and, as Christianity ran parallel to Paganism in the early stages – yews were planted in churchyards as Christianity spread.

Another moment in history that helped protect churchyard yews was that when Henry IV ordered his royal bowyer 'to cut down yew or any other wood for the public service' he explicitly exempted the estates of the religious orders. So yews in churchyards avoided this spate of felling.





## MANAGEMENT AND LOOKING AFTER VETERAN TREES

### Management

The yew tree's slow growth and resilience mean that it is generally a trouble-free tree.

As a general rule, the tree should be left undisturbed, but it is recognised that there are times when intervention is needed. The Ancient Yew Group has brought together a video with common sense advice on issues ranging from the treatment of ivy to looking after the root system.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMJfkhjypJw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMJfkhjypJw)

- Never assume that a yew is dying or dead. Many can carry a lot of deadwood or hollows. They 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. Although ivy has wildlife benefits, do remove it from old yews. Do this work cautiously with hand tools so as not to damage the tree, using a tree contractor if climbing is involved.
- There can be bats and nesting birds within yews, particularly those with a thick growth of ivy. Bat roosts and birds when nesting are protected by law so before carrying out work on ancient and veteran yews, ask a qualified bat worker to assess for the presence of bats. It is advised to remove ivy by cutting a section at the base and waiting for it to die back gradually (this may easily take 6 months) rather than pulling it off – therefore it is not an overnight disruption to either birds or bats.
- Keep the ground clear beneath a yew, removing railings, grass cutting piles and shrubs like holly, elder or hazel. However, a mulch of well-rotted wood chip or leaf litter can be spread under the tree and may be beneficial. Always make sure that the mulch is not piled against the trunk.
- Never fill the cavity of a veteran yew with rubbish, compost, grass cuttings or use it as a storage space.
- Look after the roots of the tree. It is important not to compact the soil beneath old trees for example by parking vehicles under them or having large gatherings beneath.

The principals used for managing ancient yew trees can be applied to all species of ancient tree.

### Legislation and protection relating to trees

Many different laws deal with trees and what you can or cannot do depends on the law and the situation. The most likely protection for churchyards yews will come from the burial ground being in a Conservation Area or through a Tree Preservation Order (TPO).

**Conservation Areas** are designated by local authorities for building and landscape conservation – the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance. Any trees in a designated conservation area are protected in the same way as trees with TPOs, so you must seek permission from the relevant Local Authority before carrying out work on them.

**The Tree Preservation Order** is an order made by a local planning authority to cover individual trees of exceptional amenity value. Permission is required from the local planning authority for any work to be done on the tree (including felling, pollarding and crown thinning) and heavy fines are given for not gaining permission. Potentially dangerous limbs and trees can, in theory, be removed without permission, but the onus is on you to prove that there was a hazard prior to removal.

Other site designations such as **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** may also limit the operations that can be carried out. If you are unsure about the status of trees which you intend to prune or fell (or if you simply require further information) you should contact your council.

**Protected species.** It is important to note that some species associated with trees, such as dormice and bats, are also legally protected. This includes damaging or destroying places that animals use for shelter, protection or breeding. Anyone wishing to undertake an operation affecting such species must apply for a licence from the Nature Conservation Agency.

The legal responsibility for trees will vary across different areas and different types of burial site. In a Church in Wales or Church of England site for instance the Parochial Church Council is usually responsible for trees and will have guidelines as to when to inform the Diocesan Advisory Committee before starting work.

## FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE OF YEW

Much of the folklore and mystery that surrounds the yew tree is of a dark nature, like the tree itself, and witches, ghosts and demons are said to hide amongst the foliage. Sylvia Plath says of the yew *the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence*.

Yew trees are sometimes known as the guardian of the dead, with many viewing the tree as a symbol of mourning. Their link to death was widely held historically, with an old saying that if yew is brought into a house, or cut down and damaged, a death will occur within a year.

Our ancestors viewed the yew with suspicion believing its roots preyed upon dead bodies lying in the graves below. Some say they held the corpses in place by spreading a new root into each mouth. The tree is sacred to the Greek goddess Hecate, said to be the liberator of souls after death. Her yew tree is believed to root into the mouths of the dead in order to remove the soul.

Such relationship between yew and death are frequently referenced in early and modern literature.

*Old Yew, which graspest at the stones  
That name the under-lying dead,  
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,  
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.*

Tennyson, In Memoriam

Shakespeare's Macbeth concocted a deadly drink from *slips of yew, silvered in the moon's eclipse*.

Bram Stoker uses the yew to set an eerie graveyard scene in Dracula:

*Never did tombs look so ghastly white. Never did cypress, or yew, or juniper so seem the embodiment of funeral gloom. Never did tree or grass wave or rustle so ominously. Never did bough creak so mysteriously, and never did the far-away howling of dogs send such a woeful presage through the night.*

More recently, in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, the evil Lord Voldemort had a wand made of yew. Its particularly dark and fearsome reputation was reputed to endow its possessor with the power of life and death.

But it is not all about death. In Celtic mythology yew is strongly associated with longevity and resurrection. The Druids held the yew tree sacred and believed it would keep away evil forces. It was said that yew wood could banish negative influences and purify a space.

The belief that yew protected the Christian church is demonstrated by the story of a yew tree at a cloister in Brittany. It was always regarded as sacred and the Princes of Brittany were said to offer prayers under it before entering the church. Apparently, no birds ate of the berries and no one dared touch the tree. One day, a local band of pirates came to cut bowstaves from the branches. Two of them climbed into the tree and met their inevitable fate. They fell from the tree and were killed.

Yew, it is said, can give the power of love divination. A maid must pick a yew sprig from a graveyard in which she has never before set foot. If she sleeps with this beneath her pillow she will dream of her heart's desire.

At Samhain, a Gaelic festival marking the beginning of winter, a little yew bark can be added to a herbal incense burner or a branch can be thrown into the bonfire whilst calling on the spirit of an ancestor who has passed to another world.

Several stories surround specific churchyard yews. At Ystradgynlais, groundsmen keep the yews pruned because a local legend states the world will end when the smallest yew in the churchyard grows as high as the belfry. In Pembrokeshire, the 'Bleeding Yews of Nevern' have blood-red sap dripping down the trunks and it is said that they are bleeding in sympathy with Jesus' death on the cross. In Devon it is said of the veteran yew in Stoke Gabriel:

*Walk ye backward round about me,  
Seven times round for all to see;  
Stumble not and then for certain  
One true wish will come to thee.*

There are many other references to the yew in literature by authors such as Coleridge, Keats, T.S. Eliot and Thomas Hardy, but perhaps the most famous mention of the tree is the poem 'Yew Trees' by William Wordsworth (1770-1850). This combines not only the yew's links to death but also longevity, hope and celebration.



## OTHER VETERAN TREES

Ancient trees of many types have been central to communities down the ages and across the world. They are used as places to gather, play under and shelter and are often seen as landmarks. The UK has the largest and best array of ancient trees in north-west Europe and it is hard to imagine our countryside without them. As well as yew there may be other ancient or veteran trees in your churchyard or burial ground, such as oak, lime, beech or ash. Whilst yews are the longest lived, other trees such as oak and sweet chestnut trees can live for 1,000 years or more.



## What is an ancient or veteran tree?

There is no strict definition as to what age a tree must be to be considered ancient, as each different tree species has a different size range and typical life span. A 600-year-old oak tree would qualify, as would a 300-year-old beech, whereas a birch tree may only need to be 150 years old. All, however, share the fact that they are very old examples of that species, and they will be characterised by their relatively large girth, the presence of rot holes, hollows and a significant dead wood component. Once a tree enters old age its crown may become smaller and branches may touch the ground - sometimes described as growing downwards. The Ancient Tree Inventory list the following features to look out for:

- Crown that is reduced in size and height
- Large girth in comparison to other trees of the same species
- Hollow trunk which may have one or more openings to the outside
- Stag-headed appearance - look for dead, bare, antler-like branches in the crown
- Fruit bodies of heart-rot fungi growing on the trunk

- Cavities on trunk and branches, running sap or pools of water forming in hollows
- Rougher or more creviced bark
- An 'old' look with lots of character
- Aerial roots growing down into the decaying trunk.

The presence of these features is a part of the natural aging process and not an indicator of poor health. The trees are built to cope with them. It is actually the dead and decaying wood, the hollows and the fungi that make these old trees much richer in wildlife than when they were in their prime. They are considered to be one of the most important habitats that exist in Europe and it is vital that we look after them.

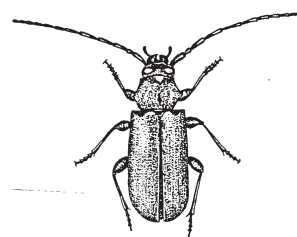
## Natural History

As with the yew, the hollows and cavities provide valuable shelter for a range of wildlife. However, whereas the yew has very few other species that are associated with it (due to its toxicity) other ancient trees host a huge and significant wealth of biodiversity.

Fungi are crucial in creating this important habitat and they live on all parts of the tree, including the roots and leaves. There may be large numbers living on the tree at any one time even though only a few may be visible in the form of their fruit bodies. Some may fruit rarely, if at all, so may not be obviously visible to the naked eye.



The hollowing of the trees is caused by heartwood decay fungi. These break down the old wood that the tree no longer needs, allowing the nutrients to be recycled. Some such as chicken-of-the-woods are found on a range of tree species, including yew. Others such as the oak polypore are only found on old oaks whilst the rare beeswax bracket fungus is only found on old beech trees.



Other fungi form associations with tree roots. Large numbers of these fungi may be found beneath trees including the striking red and white spotted fly agaric fungus (associated with birch).

One well known fungus associated with trees is the honey fungus. This first infects the tree roots but then invades the trunk. It is characterised by tough, black, bootlace type 'roots', growing between the bark and the wood, which cause wood decay. The fruit body is quite variable but has

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a honey-coloured, slightly scaly cap. By the time the fruit bodies are seen, the damage to the tree is often so great that the tree may die.

Many invertebrates live on both fungi and trees. Indeed, once the fungi soften the wood the tree becomes host to an even wider range of species, many of which are increasingly rare. In the UK there are over 650 species of beetle alone that are associated with dead and decaying wood. Many are extremely small and may never leave the tree, whereas others are large and colourful such as cardinal and longhorn beetles. Some beetle larvae create tunnels in the wood and when they emerge as adults they leave exit holes. These holes are often then used by solitary bees and wasps for nesting.

A whole suite of lichens are now recognised as only ever being found in association with ancient and veteran trees. Lichens are very sensitive to their environment and as their habitat declines and/or conditions change many, such as the lungwort lichens, are now under threat of extinction. Lichens on trees also provide important microhabitats and food for small invertebrates, some of which may be rarer than the lichens themselves.

There are things we can do to help lichens such as removing ivy that can shade them (even though it is an important habitat in its own right). It is also crucial to avoid the use of fertilisers, herbicides or pesticides near the tree.

Many species associated with ancient trees, in particular some lichens and invertebrates, are poor colonists and do not spread readily. Ideally, there should be a number of similar trees in the area so that species can move between them, but, if not, you can allow or plant other nearby trees to become the veterans of the future.

## Talking trees

If you stand next to an ancient tree you can't help but feel a sense of wonder, majesty and a powerful connection to our past. These gnarled old beings are the silent witnesses to many a tale – if only they could talk:

In a rural village in Dorset in 1833 a small group of agricultural workers gathered under a gnarled old sycamore to discuss demands for better pay and working conditions. They were arrested, tried, and to great public outcry, sentenced to penal transportation in Australia. Their meeting under the tree was effectively the first ever trade union and a key step for the workers' rights. They were eventually pardoned, and tree is still there today, with a memorial plaque remembering the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

A Staffordshire legend tells of the time when the Earl of Shrewsbury was approached by an old beggar woman for money. He spurned the woman and so she placed a curse on him saying "For every branch on the Old Oak Tree here that falls... a member of your family will die." That night during a storm, one of the branches fell from the tree and sure enough a relative of the Earl suddenly died. Seized by paranoia and convinced that the curse was true, the Earl ordered his servants to chain up all the branches to prevent any more falling. Even today, this mysterious old oak in Dimmingsdale is still bound in rusty chains.

Lady Jane Grey, the 9-day Queen of England, lived in Bradgate Park as a child. When she was tragically beheaded at the age of 16, along with her consort, Lord Guildford Dudley, legend has it that the local folk were so upset that, in an act of loyal defiance, they violently cut the tops of all of the oaks in the park. Today some of these spectacular ancient pollards are hollow and can be accessed through child sized holes or splits – making them favourite dens and hiding places for many local children.

Back in the 17th Century, Matthew Hopkins, known as the 'Witch-finder General' was renowned for the capture, torture and execution of over 100 alleged witches in the east of England. Old Knobbly, an ancient oak tree in Mistley, Essex is believed to have been a sanctuary for hunted witches, with many accused women said to have sought refuge in its boughs whilst escaping the witch hunter.



*Old Knobbly, Essex*



## Surveying your trees, old and young



The Ancient Tree Inventory, hosted by the Woodland Trust is a national database of ancient trees, including ancient yews. The dataset helps us to understand the distribution, biology and ecology of veteran trees and enables recorders to trace individual trees and assess changes associated with particular veteran specimens.

We would encourage you to record and survey ancient trees and your churchyard.

### The key information needed for the Ancient Tree Inventory is:

**Location.** Church/ Burial ground name, address including postcode and ideally a grid reference.

**Public access.** Most Churchyards and burial ground have open access, but some may be private or require permission.

**Species.** There are many tree identification books available but a good starting place in the Field Studies Council fold out chart 'The Tree Name Trail (OP51)' or the Woodland Trust App 'How to Identify Trees'.

**Girth** (metres and centimetres). For trees with a single stem trunk, always measure at a height of 1.3m above ground level. Make sure the tape is level, lying flat against the trunk and not twisted. If the tree forks or abnormally swells around the measuring point, record the trunk at its narrowest point below 1.3m, but note the height at which the measurement was taken. Don't presume the first attempt is correct - measure a couple of times to make sure.

**Height** (metres). A simple way to estimate this is to ask someone to stand against the tree and then estimate how many times taller the tree is than them. Stand back so you can see the whole tree well. Alternatively you can estimate tree height using a stick. Take a straight stick which is the length of your arm from shoulder to hand. Hold this upright with your arm at a right angle to it. Walk away from the tree until the top of the stick

lines up with the top of the tree. Push your stick into the ground at the point where you are standing and measure the distance from your stick to the tree trunk. Add the distance from your eye to the ground (this will be 3 or 4 inches less than your height) and this gives you the height of the tree!

**Condition.** The condition of the tree tells us a lot about its age and ecological value. Look out for these characteristics:

- Decaying wood in the crown: look for dead branches or trees which are stag headed. If you're confident, you can quantify the amount of dead wood in the crown with a percentage.
- Decaying wood on the ground: if there's more dead wood on the ground than you can carry, record it.
- Holes or water pockets: look around the tree and up the trunk to see if there are any holes that would make good homes for birds or bats.
- Hollowing branches: check along the branches for any holes which show that the branch is hollowing.
- Hollowing trunk: an opening or hole in the trunk could show that the trunk is hollowing.

**Form.** Trees come in a wide variety of shapes. This often depends on their age and how they've been used or managed. The most common forms are:

- Maiden: The natural, single stemmed form of the tree.
- Multi-stem: When two or more trunks arise from or near ground level. The trunks may arise from a single tree that has branched at the base, or where a group of trees was planted very close together and has fused at the base.
- Pollard: Trunks which have been cut above the height of browsing animals and regrown with multiple branches.
- Phoenix: Trees which have fallen over or split apart but continue to grow where stems have touched the ground.
- Coppice: A technique where the tree is cut back to ground level, resulting in the growth of many stems from the base.
- Stump: record whether this is low (<4m) or high (>4m)



# Ancient and Veteran Churchyard Trees

**Associated Wildlife.** There is a range of species that may be associated with your tree including:

- **Fungi:** The species that you are most likely to find on yew is Chicken-of-the-woods, a bright orange/yellow bracket fungus. But other ancient trees may have many species. If you can't identify the species still include it as 'unknown'.
- **Epiphytes:** An epiphyte is a plant which grows on another and includes moss, ivy, lichen, ferns and mistletoe. Even if you can't identify the species, still record the group it belongs to.
- **Bats:** Look for evidence of roosting bats which includes: Staining or scratch marks around a cavity or split, bat droppings (like crumbly rodent droppings) beneath a hole, or squeaking sounds, especially on hot days or at dusk.

**Photo:** A full view photo of the tree is ideal. It's also useful to photograph any interesting features of the tree such as holes, hollowing or fungi.

Records and surveys of ancient trees can be added directly to the inventory at [ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/](http://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/). Caring for God's Acre would welcome any lists of species found in your churchyard, including the different trees.

## Annual Tree Inspections

As well as surveying your ancient and veteran trees, you can also keep an eye on the condition of all of the trees in the burial ground, this helps you to alert a tree expert to problems, often catching them early and reducing the likelihood of death or expensive tree surgery by doing so.

Annual inspections can be carried out by volunteers in the summer or autumn. Alternating autumn and summer surveys gives an opportunity to better assess tree health. The surveyor does not need specialist knowledge, qualifications or insurance as long as anything that causes concern is referred to a professional. If the survey is carried out by the same people each year then this gives continuity as you get to know your trees. Take photos which can be included in your survey.

### Inspection checklist

Record whether:

- The tree has grown nearer to existing structures such as buildings, walls, monuments. If so, some pruning may be necessary.
- Saplings have established at the base of walls or monuments. These are best removed.
- Overhead cables are clear of any growth. This would need to be dealt with by a tree surgeon or the power company tree team.
- The tree shape has become untidy or noticeably one

sided. Perhaps a limb has been lost during a storm. Pruning may be necessary or further advice sought.

- Has the ground level changed or soil under or near to the tree been disturbed by either digging down or mounding up?
- Does the tree have a stake or ties, in which case do they need loosening or removing?
- Has any tree work such as pruning taken place since the last survey?
- Does the trunk have holes, cavities or visible fungi at the base? These may require a professional survey.

The tree should then be checked from its leaves and upper branches down to the base looking at:

**Leaves:** are they unnaturally small, sparse or misshapen? Do they fall early and is the entire tree affected? If a tree has small leaves, loses them early in the autumn and then fruits heavily it may be under stress from age, conditions or disease.



**Branches:** check for dead branches, lightning or storm damage, cavities or wounds. Are there hanging branches over paths or car parks? Oak and ash trees can become 'stag-headed' with age but remain healthy. (A stag-headed tree has dead branches near the top looking like a stag's antlers). Are there abrupt bends or rubbing branches? Look carefully at large forks or points where many branches sprout from one point. Large forks in the main stem need careful inspection.

**Bark:** check for fungi, cankers, calluses, and sap seepage, loose or damaged bark.

**Roots:** check for fungi, soil cracks, tree lean.

**Ivy:** if the tree has ivy growing on it has this increased in quantity since the last survey and is it within the crown of the tree? Is the ivy making it impossible to carry out a proper tree assessment?

*These signs and symptoms do not mean that the tree is hazardous or diseased. However, they may indicate that a further inspection is required from a professional. Take photos of trees and features that concern you.*



## **TREE SURVEY: when you need a professional**

As well as annual inspections by volunteers it is prudent to have regular surveys by a qualified arborist or tree contractor with experience and indemnity insurance. Always ask for evidence of qualifications and insurance; a professional person will expect this. Seek advice from the Arboricultural Association or local authority when selecting an arborist or tree contractor.

In general these professional surveys can be done every other year or even every 5 years, but check the terms of your insurance. Discuss the volunteer survey with the arborist and ask if there are any particular features you need to keep an eye on. The information from your annual surveys can then be used to keep the arborist informed about any changes that take place between visits, sending digital photos or copies of your survey sheets.

If your site is large, the site manager and arborist may divide the site into zones. These will reflect the amount of use by the public, the closeness of buildings and other potential targets. Ask your arborist whether zones are appropriate and if so, whether to carry out the volunteer survey more frequently in significant target areas, and less often in other zones.

Make sure that you follow up works identified in the professional survey in a timely manner and that a record is kept of all surveys and also of tree work carried out.



## TELLING THE STORY OF YOUR VETERAN TREES

Telling the story of your ancient and veteran trees may take many forms and can be an important way of communicating the significance of your trees to the wider community. This can often inspire people to be more involved and can certainly help to find future custodians for these magnificent trees.

Here are some practical guidelines for you to consider which may help in creating a plan for telling the story of ancient and veteran trees:

### Who are you telling the story to?

Your church and burial ground is likely to be at the very heart of your community, visited by people for worship, celebration and funerals and remembrance. They are often used as places of peace and solitude in an ever increasingly busy world. Locals can walk there, children can play, and they are often the only local greenspace available for people to enjoy without driving or using public transport. Nature and wildlife are now recognised as playing a vital role in health and wellbeing, so the importance of this greenspace is better understood than perhaps it was previously.

Your church and churchyard can also be an important visitor destination, attracting tourists who are seeking the unique architecture of your church and monuments - research carried out by VisitEngland recently reported that 55% of day trips include a visit to church or cathedral and 83% of people in the UK believe churches are an important part of the UK heritage.

There is an opportunity to encourage all of these different groups of visitors to gaze in wonder at your ancient and veteran trees and associated wildlife.

### Why are you telling the story?

To be in the presence of these magnificent trees is often enough. They can fill us with wonder and amazement just to see and feel them. They do however have a backstory, one which explains their significance in time and place and roots them in context with our own existence. These trees almost command their stories to be told as they often span centuries and they have so much to say.

These trees require special care and attention and by telling their story, we are helping to conserve them for future generations. Any interpretation that you consider regarding these trees might want to inspire people to view them in a different way - more than just a tree, rather a magnificent example of their species, something really quite special. Your next custodian of these trees may be the person who was inspired by their story after reading the interpretation that you produced!

## What to say?

Once you are aware of your audience and have given some consideration to why you want to tell the story of your ancient and veteran trees, we can now move on to what you actually want to say. In general terms, interpretation for the general public should be short and relevant, focusing on some key themes. Some of these themes have already been touched upon in this document such as historical significance, age of the trees, folklore and biodiversity. These four themes should be sufficient to give the reader a pretty good understanding of how special your trees are in a local and sometimes a national context. If you have any local knowledge relating to the trees (particularly folklore), it is always worth including this as this will help connect your trees to people in a slightly more personal way.

What you say depends on where you will be saying it (more on this in the next section). For example our website ( [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk) ) has lots to say as we are the national charity for burial grounds. You will notice however that many of our pages have basic information on key themes and we direct people to different resources for in-depth information. This includes toolkits, minifilms and factsheets.

As a rule of thumb, 'less is more', resist the temptation to include everything you know!

## Where to say it?

People tend to think of interpretation boards when asked to think about how to tell a story, but this is only one way to do so, and may well be an inappropriate choice. Putting a board in the vicinity of your magnificent trees can distract from their splendour, could be an expensive option and will be difficult to update.

There are many other ideas for you to consider;

- How about a leaflet? This can go in your church or chapel, in a special leaflet dispenser on your churchyard notice board or in the porch. Leaflets can be distributed locally and can be sent to other heritage related visitor attractions. They can also go onto websites, available to download, and can be updated and reproduced cheaply and quickly, particularly if your leaflet can be printed on a home computer.
- Posters are a good way of conveying information. Posters can again be displayed in your church and noticeboards. Like leaflets, posters can easily be updated and sent electronically to others to share.
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) is a really fast and free way to reach people all over the world as well as within your local community. Social media posts can be easily updated on a regular basis and you can link into national campaigns to help get your message across. You may feel as though you



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don't have the skills or knowledge to develop a social media presence – if that is the case, put the word out through your congregation and perhaps someone will come forward who can help you. It is important to note that if you do create a social media presence, it is most effective when it is updated on a regular basis so that you can maintain interest, so this does need an on-going commitment.

- If you are feeling particularly media savvy, you may wish to contact your local BBC or independent radio station who might come and produce a short feature to be broadcast, particularly if there are stories attached to your particular trees.
- You could join with other sites in your local area to make a 'yew trail' which could link four or five local churches with yews. Marked on a map, this could make a good route for people to walk or cycle between.

## How to say it?

There are many different ways to tell the story of veteran trees.

Some ideas include:

- Consider using images, drawings or illustrations.
- Text should remain the main method of conveying information but keep it simple and brief.
- Keep your interpretation relatively basic but include ways in which people can find further information such as links to your social media sites, QR codes \* or by including links to national organisations.
- If you or any of your congregation (including young people?) have the skills to produce and edit a short film, this can be a really nice way of conveying information – and it can also be hosted on your website or on social media sites.
- Perhaps the most important, tell people about them face-to-face. If you meet visitors, do you point out the trees to them? Could someone lead a walk around the churchyard looking at trees and other wildlife? These are often the moments and messages that we remember the most.

\* This is a machine-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information for reading by the camera on a smartphone

## Getting creative with your veteran trees

Your veteran and ancient trees are a great way to involve people in your burial ground. People have a natural affinity to trees and will readily take part in a wide range of activities and events to celebrate their special status in your churchyard. These events and activities could be open to all ages and abilities and could include:

- Launch a photography competition or celebration with your trees as the main focus. A competition takes more organising as it involves judges and perhaps prizes, but will be popular, a celebration might result in a slideshow of all images submitted, to go onto your website or social media. Both of these could generate some interesting shots which might include; macro shots (the tiny things); the splendour of your trees in all of their glory; how your trees relate to people; the wildlife within your trees; and your trees through the seasons. You could also ask your local community to send in any old images of your trees that may capture them in a specific era, decade or other time frame. Any images sent in could also be used in future interpretation (don't forget to seek permission to use them).
- Contact your local school to see if they would like to come and undertake a topic on your veteran trees. Many areas of the curriculum could be covered, and any work undertaken by pupils could be displayed in the church.
- Hold a Story Telling session underneath the trees. Storytelling is a popular and creative activity and there is likely to be a local storyteller that you can ask to run this.
- Run a guided walk and/or a Dawn Chorus walk with your veteran trees being a feature.
- Hold a nature explorer family activity, again using your veteran trees as the starting point. Things like bug hunts, guessing the age of the tree, the tree through time, basic tree identification, bark rubbing, drawing and painting images of the tree – using leaves and twigs.
- Tree Dressing. This ancient tradition is a great way of celebrating your tree and can include storytelling, dance, music, prayer and hanging ribbons, art or messages in the tree.

Some of these activities can be organised as 'stand alone' events, but you could also consider dovetailing in to national campaigns and initiatives such as:

- Love Your Burial Ground Week  
[www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/get-involved/love-your-burial-ground-week](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/get-involved/love-your-burial-ground-week) (June)
- National Tree Week  
[treecouncil.org.uk/take-action/seasonal-campaigns/national-tree-week](http://treecouncil.org.uk/take-action/seasonal-campaigns/national-tree-week), (November/December)
- World Environment Day  
[www.un.org/en/observances/environment-day](http://www.un.org/en/observances/environment-day), (June)
- Earth Day [www.earthday.org/](http://www.earthday.org/) (April)
- Eco Church Climate Sunday  
[ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/climate-sunday](http://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/climate-sunday)

## Resources

Caring for Gods Acre has some fantastic resources for family and school activities, all within the Resources section of our website ([www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources)). Take a look at the tree sections in our Education Pack (see examples below) which include links to both English and Welsh national curricula.

Other resources include:

- Tremendous Trees [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/13-Wildlife-Safari-Tremendous-Trees.pdf](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/13-Wildlife-Safari-Tremendous-Trees.pdf)
- Green Guardians [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/14-Wildlife-Safari-Green-Guardians.pdf](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/14-Wildlife-Safari-Green-Guardians.pdf)
- The Woodland Trust has lots of lovely tree-based things for children to do. Take a look at the Nature Detectives section of their website [www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)



## And finally

These fantastic veteran trees need help. Caring for Gods Acre is a member based charity and we are reliant on donations to make a difference. Please consider becoming a member – more information on becoming a member can be found on our website [www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk)



THE PRINCE OF WALES'S  
CHARITABLE FUND