

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.

We are working with The Conservation Foundation and the Ancient Yew Group to encourage an appreciation of these magnificent trees and to promote good management.

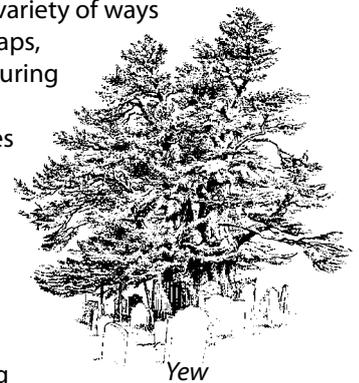


KNOW YOUR YEW TREE

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 lean on to the ground will take root. 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 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 and drought, 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.
- 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 surgeon or arborist will be able to help and advise.
- Ivy can smother the crown, adding weight and cutting out the light. It can also wrap around boughs restricting growth. Although ivy has wildlife benefits (see sheet A8, Helping Wildlife) remove it from yews.

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Do this work cautiously so as not to damage the tree, using a tree surgeon 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.

- Keep the ground clear beneath a yew, removing railings, grass cutting piles and shrubs like holly, elder or hazel. Give the yew space to grow and to be seen by visitors. 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!



OTHER VETERAN TREES

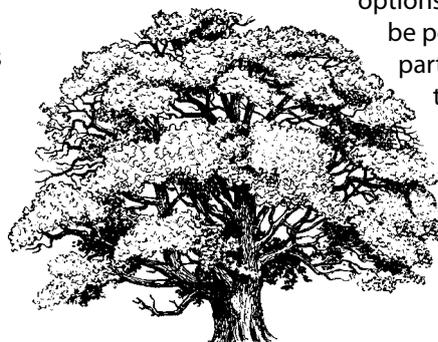
Burial grounds often have other species of veteran tree. Whilst these won't be as old as the oldest yews they may well be many hundreds of years old and magnificent specimens in their own right. They are likely to have a whole range of other plants, lichens, birds and other animals living in and on them.

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



Pedunculate Oak

does not weaken the tree, in fact it may strengthen it; a cylinder is a strong shape.

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 surgeon or arborist. Some light tree surgery may be helpful to keep a tree safe and to prolong its life but take a thoughtful approach, tending to leave well alone when possible.

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 dead wood within a tree is quite acceptable and other areas where it is hazardous.

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 – perhaps it contains deadwood which is over a path, 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 surgeon 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, to reduce the size of the crown, to pollard it or even to coppice the tree (see sheet A6, Practical Management of Trees and Shrubs). If the tree is a yew then the best advice will usually be to leave well alone unless unsafe.

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
- Conservation Foundation, www.conservationfoundation.co.uk
- Local Authority Tree Officer
- The Tree Council, www.treecouncil.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