

Ancient Yew Group

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The Yew of Newlands Corner & Merrow Down

The old yew groves at Newlands Corner and adjoining Merrow Down have been famous for a long time, and it will come as no surprise that they have received quite a lot of Ancient Yew Group (AYG) attention. Attention is fine, but fame is not. Fame sometimes kills ancient trees, particularly through compaction from foot fall, souvenir hunting and more major wood theft.

The big thing to share here is the growth rates. 24 yews were studied over the two decade period, with girths between 80 and 723 cm. The mean circumference increase was 7mm each year. The largest 8 yews studied, all over 400cm girth, were found to be growing at an average 5.3mm girth increase each year. We found that smaller yews had a far wider range of growth rate than larger



Ancient yew at Merrow Downs (Photo: Toby Hindson)

Precise picture

The AYG studies here have been kept very much under wraps for the 20 years that they have been running for this very reason, but the measuring work has matured and it is now possible to share basic findings. Our work has been centred on two main themes, locating the yews to keep track of losses and to ensure repeatability of our studies (Peter Norton) and repeat measuring over two decades to capture growth rates (Toby Hindson). Work done by Shane Mangan in 1995, recently made available, on the locations of the older yews will also give us a precise picture of attrition from then to the present day.

individuals. The larger trees had shouldered their way into the canopy through time, and were all enjoying a substantial share of sunlight and were growing fairly constantly, if relatively slowly. The smaller yews were found in a variety of situations, partly shaded by other yews, overtopped by oak, growing clear, etc. These yews which had not yet established themselves as permanent primary canopy were strongly affected by their immediate environment. One extreme individual, the smallest at 80cm was heavily shaded and growing at a violent angle away from the canopy of a larger yew and was found to have grown at an unmeasurably low rate, perhaps a few millimetres over the whole two decades.

This picture, once the variables in early growth are accounted for, gives us quite a firm understanding of the ages of these trees. It is well known that yews tend to grow up as a result of the decrease of herbivore activity, and so similar sized yews in the wild are likely to date to the same environmental event. The ages and growth rates of yews thought to belong to the same cohort can be averaged, and a mean growth rate used to find the age of the sample. The oldest cohort of yews at Newlands Corner and Merrow Down has been calculated as originating from about the time of the Norman invasion, that is to say there are, demonstrably, yews at the site which are about 950 years old. There also appears to be a "Black Death" cohort which grew up immediately after 1348. These yews are about 670 years old. Not as old as the 2,000 years guessed at by some authors, nevertheless all of these are, or should be, yews of international standing.

Local objections

This clear understanding leads me on to the strange attitude of the various bodies supporting the planned development of this site as a public amenity. It is a matter of considerable alarm that as I understand it Guildford Borough Council, hand in hand with Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) are looking to put a nature trail in place, build various pieces of play equipment, build a larger centre, start charging for the car park etc., and project an increase in annual footfall of about 200,000. There is an understandable uproar, and local objections numbering thousands have been made, all to no avail.

Sensitive areas

Many questions are raised, but I think the most poignant one concerns the balance between conservation and amenity as envisioned at Newlands and Merrow Down by SWT. Here we have one of the most important ancient woodlands in Britain, containing standing heritage trees which approach 1,000 years in age. Yet I can find no mention of them in the planning, and no amelioration of footfall seems to be planned for the sensitive areas where they grow. Coppice or oldish growth non-ancient woodland would be a great place for the kind of activity centre that the council and Wildlife Trust envision, and such a facility would certainly be of great benefit to the public, but I find it extremely hard to understand how they can think that sensitive ancient woodland is a suitable place to carry out these plans.

Battleground

Here the trees cannot win. If they are made famous they may be over visited and damaged, if they are not considered important the same may happen through ignorance and lack of care. Unaccountably, Surrey Wildlife Trust are now



Wood theft - damaged yew at Merrow Downs (Photo: Toby Hindson)

insisting that we fill out a risk assessment form before measuring any trees or going into the woods to take GPS readings on "their site" and yes, I do quote - which has full public access. Now that footfall is set to increase and "Health and Safety" has reared its head in this ridiculous fashion, how long before an ancient yew is felled because it is "dangerous". This is where the boundary between conservation and amenity becomes a battleground, and I sincerely hope that SWT takes steps to ensure that the possible loss of an ancient yew is a fight that it takes steps to avoid.

For more information and photographs of these trees and sites, as well as other sites recorded by Paul Wood, go to:

www.ancient-yew.org

Information is found on the 'List of Yew Sites' and 'What's New' webpages.