

Researching & revealing your yew tree heritage



Our yews can tell fantastic stories. As the oldest living thing in our landscape they are a great way to dive into your area's wider heritage, looking at how the growth of your venerable yew links to the wider history of your village or town. You might unearth new information, or see a development in your area's history in a different light.

This is also an opportunity to tell the story you discover to others through a performance, event or publication in your community, by uploading the story online through the 'We Love Yew' website, or another site. Maybe the story could be told in a video, community art, or perhaps a tapestry or poem.

Working together on a research project that links your yew tree with local history can also be a good way to **learn new skills** and bring different **members of the community together**.

This short guide will help to give you some ideas on how to research this story, and articulate it to others. To help with the costs of revealing your yew story to community, download our small grant application form from **www.weloveyew.org**



Researching your yew's heritage



Whether your yew is a few hundred or a few thousand years old, it will probably have witnessed great changes in your area. It may also have its own stories to tell, having witnessed ceremonies or events over the centuries. This short guide will help to provide some tips on how you can delve into researching your yew tree's heritage.



Finding and ageing your yew

You may already know where your nearest mature yew tree is. More than likely it's in a churchyard. However if you don't know of one in your area, you can search online at the Ancient Yew Group's fantastic Yew tree List at www.ancient-yew.org/gazetteer.php

Ageing a yew is a notoriously difficult task, and the only thing that is certain is that the older a tree becomes, the harder it is to estimate its age. This is because by the time the yew's girth reaches about 6 metres (20ft), it hollows out and there are no tree rings to count. Climates can change the growth patterns of a yew, and growth rates vary over time. A younger tree will put on more height and girth while the older the yew becomes the slower its rate of growth around its girth becomes. None the less, an estimate can be made.

If the age of your yew is not already known, you can estimate its age range by taking into account its girth measurement. The dendrologist Dr A.K. Moir gives a rule of thumb of 1 cm of girth per growth year. For example a yew with a girth of 4 metres (13ft) will be approximately 400 years old. You can read more on ageing yews at the [Ancient Yew Group's website](http://www.ancient-yew.org/gazetteer.php).

The age you calculate should be taken with some doubt because of the factors discussed above, but it provides an excellent starting point from which to age your yew. You should also look out for any archaeological features nearby that might help you date a yew, as well as the history of the church itself. Myths and legends concerning the tree are also of interest.

Speak to people

One of the first things to do in your new role as a yew detective is to speak to people. You'll need help with discovering your local history and creating a small group of researchers will make the task easier. When asking people about what they know about the yew, or the history of the area, you can uncover all sorts of unexpected facts, tales and myths!

Get support

Forming an informal group and encouraging others to join in this hunt for historical clues will make researching easier and more fun. You could approach a group at your local church, a local history society, or social club. However you could also advertise for members through a local notice board, school, or group newsletter. You could then divide up tasks, for example some members could look in the local library and archive records, whilst others could research online or speak to people in the community, especially if they or their families have been living there for a while. If you involve a school, students could all ask their grandparents about local history and what they know about the yew in the churchyard.

Ask questions

You never know what hidden gems of information you'll find out when you speak to people, or what clues you might discover! You might hear of an old tale, see a photograph of a churchyard yew in a wedding photograph, or hear of someone else who might know more. So tell family, neighbours and friends that you're researching your yew tree's history and see if they have any information that can help you in your hunt for your yew's story. If you're lucky you'll have a local history society who will hold a wealth of information already on your village, and maybe even some stories about the yew tree. Speaking to them could open up a whole new source of information. Ask the local vicar whose predecessor may have passed on a local story or who might point you in the direction of someone else who knows more.

Explore your services

You'll find a wealth of information on local history at your nearby library or records office. Unfortunately, finding references to a yew could be quite time consuming, but sometimes you can search an archive for keywords to narrow down your search before you get stuck in with scouring books and articles. Also, remember that the yew does not exist on its own – the area has grown and been shaped, as the yew has, over time. Hunting through books and articles is a great way to find out more about the wider history of the area and how it may have changed or the stories it may hold. You can then link these to the yew's development over time.

You might also be able to hunt down specific books with information on yews through an interloan library service, or by visiting the British Library in London or Yorkshire. Recent books such as *Yew: A history* by Fred Hageneder can include useful information on yew mythology and history, as can *The Sacred Yew* by Anand Chetan and Diana Brueton, whilst much older books such as John Lowe's *Yew-trees of Great Britain and Ireland* can also provide facts and stories (the latter publication is available free online at [Archive.org](https://archive.org)).

Your local history society could be especially helpful. Sometimes towns and parishes have their own local society, but if not, then your county will almost certainly have a wider group. They often have events which may be advertised on a parish hall notice board, or you can search online for a group. They may have a collection of photographs or reports which could be helpful, and individual members may do their own research or hold a personal collection. So pop along to a meeting and speak to them about what you are doing!

Search the web

The web is an excellent resource for finding information on your tree and local history, as well as general information on yews which might help you find things to look out for in your local yew's history.

A good place to start is to look up your yew tree on the Ancient Yew Group website, where you can find out more information on the tree. You can also use the online map at the Ancient Tree Hunt's website. The Ancient Tree Hunt also has summaries of research on many ancient trees. These websites also provide details of specific publications which you can use to investigate further.

Using a general search engine can be helpful. Type in the name of your area, church or the location of your yew, and add "yew" on the end. Your yew may have been mentioned in an article or on a blog. You could then use more specific search engines to delve deeper. Websites such as Google Books and Google Scholar are useful for searching large archives for specific words.

If you know of a particular publication, even one published centuries ago, you may be able to find it at Archive.org and search for references to your area or yew tree. The archive has many old journals which can include some fantastic letters on tales of yews. It also has the complete text of the book *Yew-trees of Great Britain and Ireland* by John Lowe, published in 1897 (see *Helpful links*).

Helpful links

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| www.ancient-yew.org | An excellent source of information including records on all ancient and veteran yews and numerous articles on the history and management of yews. |
| www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/discoveries/ | Great source of information on all ancient trees, including well researched articles on specific yew trees. |
| www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk | Caring for God's Acre is a charity that values churchyards and burial grounds for their importance to people and our history and wildlife. |
| www.gov.uk/search-local-archives | Find your local record's office |
| www.archive.org | A fantastic resource for searching journals and books, including from several centuries ago. |
| scholar.google.co.uk books.google.co.uk | Google Scholar and Books are both excellent ways of quickly finding publications with useful information or references to your local yew and history. |
| www.local-history.co.uk/Groups | Useful listings of local history groups |
| discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive | Find your nearest Archive or Records Office |
| catalogue.bl.uk | British Library archives for specific publications. You can then request to read them at their London or Yorkshire sites. |
| archive.org/details/yewtreesofgreatb00loweuoft | A freely available digital copy of John Lowe's 1897 publication <i>Yew-trees of Great Britain and Ireland</i> . |

Revealing your yew heritage



When you have unearthed your yew tree's story, you can reveal it to your wider community and online through a collaborative publication, event, or performance. It could be an opportunity to learn a new skill, develop an ongoing interest, or involve people of all ages and backgrounds in the project.



You may want to use the existing skills of others in your community, especially if they are involved with the creative or performance arts in any way. Either way, you'll make the project easier and more enjoyable by getting ideas and help from others. So share your thoughts with other people and see what develops from a collaboration of ideas.

Such collaboration could produce a piece of visual art such as a painting, embroidery or mural. Your local newspaper could be interested in an article, short story or poem as would your local Parish or Council newsletter. You could certainly contact your local radio station as they are always interested in local stories with a human or historical angle.

What about organising an event? This need not be such an overwhelming idea if you could take a stand at your Parish or Church summer fair. A photographic exhibition of the yew with some of the archive material you have discovered would spread the word of your research and reach a wider section of the Parish. Or you could hold a photographic or painting competition with the yew as the subject and ask your local mayor to be the judge. If you are feeling particularly energetic you could organise a fun day or tea party with poetry readings, artwork and other items individual members have created related to the yew.

Listed below are a few ideas, but have a think about what skills members of your community have, or might want to learn. You can apply for a small grant of up to £150 from We Love Yew to help cover the costs of articulating your yew tree heritage through art work, a publication, or event.



Producing art work or a publication

- **A yew tree scrapbook** could collate the research you have undertaken but also involve the local school. The children can interview their older family members, especially those grandparents who have lived in the parish and might have had stories from their grandparents. These stories could be collated together with myths and facts collected from other sources. Old pictures of the yew could be combined with new drawings, or paintings by the children, to create a book that could be displayed in the church or school.
- **Textile projects** such as a cross stitching piece of art work could be created, perhaps with the help of a local club or family members. However you could also mix fabrics and textile techniques to create a large collage inspired by the yew, its history and local maps of the landscape

- **A large collaborative mosaic or smaller individual works** can be a good way to encourage your community to get hands on with creating an art piece and brighten up the surroundings. Larger pieces could be permanently displayed outside, or small pieces exhibited as part of a display. Perhaps people could make individual tiles which will then be combined to make a larger piece.
- **Running a workshop** to help people learn a skill whilst each creating an art piece could be a great way to involve lots of people and help them learn a new skill. There may also be a local artist that could teach a watercolour or sketching class, or a craftsman that knows how to do boxwood etching to create prints. You may also be able to hire a specialist to hold a workshop.
- **A small stained glass window** could also be designed and made for the local church to represent your yew story, which is likely to be found in its churchyard. Some organisations run workshops to help communities design and create a window, or you could involve a contractor to create it after the community has come up with a design.



Creative inspiration from the [Ashbrittle Yew Tree Project](#): the primary school designed the stained glass window, a blacksmith made a sign, a craftsman made two benches which depicted their yew, and they also made a walk leaflet, music and a video. *Pictures: Andy McGeeney*

Putting on an event or performance

You may have gathered work from other members of your community celebrating your yew heritage and want to showcase this at an event. Here are some ideas:

- **Photographic or painting exhibition**, of the yew and its surrounding environment of the church and churchyard both of which have their own historical significance and can add a lot to the story of the yew. Together with new photographs you could also include old photographs of the yew and church and these could be old wedding or christening photographs photos. You could also make a book of all the images after the exhibition which could be given to the church or library and in this way your research would add to the archives and local history of your area
- **Tea party and readings**. You could hold a tea party near your yew (in Crowhurst, Surrey, they even used to have tea in the tree!) to bring the community together, and ask the local school and members of the community to create poetry or short stories on the tree. Perhaps a historian could give a short talk summarising how the area has changed during the yew's lifetime. You could combine this with an exhibition with photographs or paintings inspired by the yew.
- **A walk incorporating the history or environment of your area** could start and end at the yew and go on to reveal the wider heritage of the area. As the oldest living inhabitant of your community, the yew has been a witness (albeit silent) to all the changes that have

happened in your area. It would be fascinating to find out the things that haven't changed and make a note of those too.

- **An environmental clean-up in honour of the yew** could be a good way to spruce up your area and get people involved in caring for the community's environment. Perhaps it could end with tea and cake under the yew to thank everyone involved.

Whatever you do, there are a few questions you should consider when organising your event:

Why are you running the event?

You may not be running the event solely to show people about your incredible yew heritage. The main purpose might be to organise something for people of all ages to enjoy together and which would get them more involved with their local history. This might have a knock on effect of encouraging them to take more interest in and care of their environment. As well as providing an opportunity for members of the community to showcase and take pride in their work. It might be for the whole community or specific members (e.g. younger children or families). So think about what you want people to get out of it and who it is for when you are deciding what should take place and how it could be displayed or organised.

When will you hold the event?

You may want to tie your event in with a specific anniversary or commemoration. However you should also think about when would be a suitable time for it. To make it accessible to as many people as possible a weekend or bank holiday may be better for larger community events, but an evening might also work if you would like to hold a single lecture or performance. You could also tie your celebratory showcase in with other events, such as an annual summer fair, to reduce the time needed to organise it and the number of people that could take part.

Who will organise it and how much will it cost?

Organising an event can take a large amount of time and effort, so it is always helpful to have a team or committee that you can share the work with. If you can find people who have experience with organising an event then this can be a great help. You might want to get someone who manages a possible venue involved from the start to see what might be practical in the space, what you might need, and who else you need to speak to.

Your event will also cost money, so you will need to think about what costs are involved and who will pay for them. There are a limited number of small grants available through the We Love Yew project for events that involve celebrating the yew heritage, and other funders can also be found in the Helpful links section. You might also run small fundraisers, such as a quiz night, to support the costs of your event, or ask local businesses if they can help with funds or materials.

However you might also be able to get voluntary support from members of the community to reduce the cost. Perhaps there are some keen cooks that can create delicious food for your event, or someone with a large marquee if you are holding it outside. You can advertise online at sites such as Project Dirt put up posters around your community, or a notice in a newsletter or community board such as at a school or hall. Sometimes professional help is essential though, a PA system for a large event would require professional know how.

You never know what hidden talents people possess, so get a list together of what you need (objects, services, etc) and pass it around to see what people can help with.

Permits & Licenses

When you have decided on what your event will involve, you should contact your local council to check what licenses or permits you might need to run it. For example you may need to obtain a Temporary Event Notice, and if you are playing music a PRS License. You will also need to obtain permission to close a road if you want to hold a street party, letting people know about this before hand and safely implementing it. Roads which include bus routes or more major routes will be tricky to get permission for so should be avoided.

Insurance & Risk Assessments

It is important that your event is safe, and you have carried out appropriate measures to ensure this. Obtaining insurance is essential, but it may already be covered by the venue you are using, or an organisation involved in running it. You can find insurance which specifically covers one off events for a lower cost, but you should look at what it covers – make sure it also covers any staff or volunteers involved in the event.

You might also need to complete a Risk Assessment. Do not be put off! Risk Assessments can be a very useful way to check you have thought of everything and that includes what might go wrong. You can download a template from the We Love Yew website to add your risk assessment to, and the LiberTeas web address in *Helpful links* provides a detailed example too.

Recording your event

You may want to record what happened at your event with an article in a newsletter or online, and perhaps include photographs of what happened. The Conservation Foundation would also be delighted to hear what happened, and would welcome any reports or photographs you have to see what went on around the country to celebrate our yew heritage!

Writing about your event can also be a useful way of evaluating what worked and what did not, to see what you could do differently in the future for other community days. You might also reflect on what you personally have learnt or got out of running the event or performance.

Templates

You can download example Risk Assessment and Photography Consent forms for events at:

www.weloveyew.org/WeLoveYew_Template_ConsentForm.doc

www.weloveyew.org/WeLoveYew_Template_RiskAssessment.doc

Helpful links

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| www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/caterers/food-hygiene/charity-community-groups | Advice on food hygiene and catering at community events |
| www.liberteas.co.uk/supporters/help/ | Useful guides on preparing community events from the Magna Carta anniversary LiberTeas project. |
| www.bsmgp.org.uk/Education/Other_Courses.htm | Useful directory of stained glass workshop providers (see “Other stained glass courses” section), however more can be found through a search engine. |
| www.o2thinkbig.co.uk | Small grants scheme by O2 Telefonica for community projects involving young people (aged 13-25) |