

# THE ANCIENT TREE COLUMN

Each month we feature an ancient British tree.  
This month the Ancient Tree Forum introduces us to...

## KINGLEY VALE YEW TREES, SUSSEX

The yew trees at Kingley Vale make a very impressive sight with their great gnarled trunks and huge twisted branches, many of which have themselves rooted in the soil to form multiple layers of younger yews.

Kingley Vale, to the north west of Chichester, is a National Nature Reserve, a Special Area of Conservation and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It was designated, in part, because of its yew woodlands, which are considered to be the best in Britain – and probably in Western Europe.

Yew forests used to be relatively common before sheep grazing had an impact on the South Downs, and yew woodlands now thrive on areas of chalk downland where there has been a decline in livestock grazing.

Yew is commonly found in woods and hedgerows, but it generally occurs as individual trees rather than as the dominant species. Kingley Vale is particularly special in that the yew woodland is so extensive and the yews are not mixed with other, taller species.

The yew woodlands cover much of the steep southern slopes of the hillside. The most interesting area is the grove at the bottom of the dry valley, where there are around 30 ancient yew trees – some of which are estimated to be over 500 years old. The oldest measure more than 5m in girth. Their contorted shapes make the setting very atmospheric, and it is probably these old yews that have given rise to local stories, which tell of the warlike spirits of a band of Vikings who were defeated in the woodlands and still roam around.

**The Ancient Tree Forum champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees, and provides advice on their value and management at [www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk](http://www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk)**

