

The Yew in Scotland

Why Scotland's yew tree heritage is of national and global significance
Presented by Paul W. Greenwood



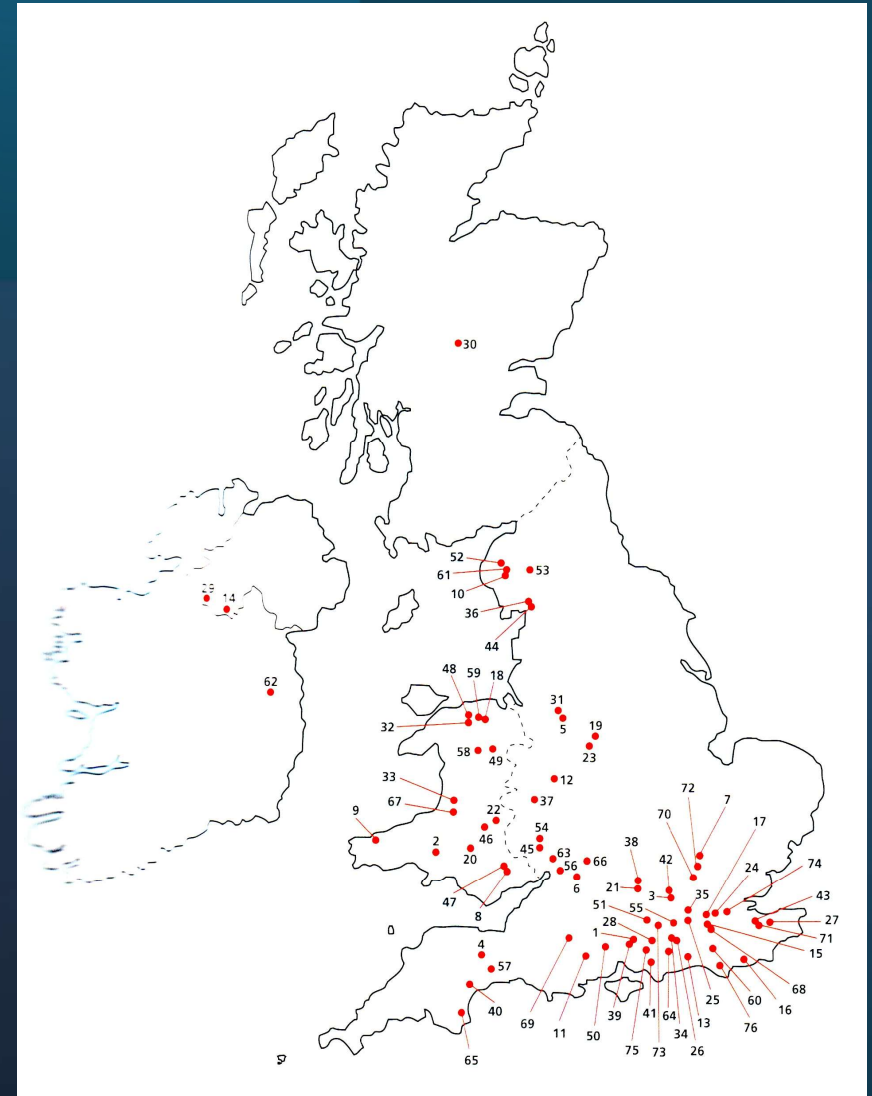
A Grand Illusion

In 1994, the gazetteer of ancient yews in *The Sacred Yew* (Chetan and Brueton, Penguin Arcana) had 4 entries for northern Britain, including Fortingall.

In 2018, *The Immortal Yew* by Tony Hall (Kew) featured 76 yew sites in the UK and 58 (76%) are in churchyards.

Fortingall is the only Scottish site included. The map of the featured sites gives an impression that Scotland has no yew sites to compare with those listed, apart from Fortingall. This shows the influence upon mainstream media and public perception to assume that the UK's ancient yews are primarily trees with large girths in churchyards in southern England and Wales. They are, but not quite. In Scotland, the majority of ancient yews are not found in churchyards, and some are huge but in a different way. The history of Scotland's yew heritage is different from the rest of the UK and consequently is overlooked and underappreciated in comparison. This needs to radically change if the yew is to be better appreciated and protected in Scotland.

Image Credit Tony Hall, *The Immortal Yew*



HMP Castle Huntly, Longforgan Aberdeenshire: This colossal layered yew has the greatest area of any yew, as found so far, in the UK, Europe and possibly Asia. It is bigger and heavier than a blue whale and measures around 2,500 sq. m (0.25 hectares) which is over half an acre. It is rare because it is one of the very last of its kind. This is what a yew becomes over the centuries, if given an opportunity to fulfil its 'immortal' life – which is difficult to achieve in an average sized churchyard.





HMP Castle Huntly: Walking through a yew tree wonderland. A small sample of this immense grove and bearing in mind that everything seen here is one yew tree.



HMP Castle Huntly: The astonishing, confounding sight at the centre of the grove - the shattered, battered and almost decapitated trunk responsible for creating a grove capable of giving shade and shelter to many hundreds of people.



The Great Yew of Ormiston, Ormiston, East Lothian: Possibly 1,000 years old, this ancient layered yew was known to the 16th century leaders of the Scottish Reformation, George Wishart (a Protestant martyr) and John Knox, who preached to large crowds beneath its boughs. It was here Wishart gave his last sermon before his arrest. John Knox was a tutor to the children of Ormiston Hall's owners, the Cockburn family, and so he knew the yew well and of its fame, even then, as a local landmark.



The Great Yew of Ormiston: Under the canopy is a clear, open space with a large, spreading and fluted trunk at the western end. Some of its branches are supported by scaffold poles. Another truncated trunk grows about 20 metres away and it is not known if both are the same yew. Around the main trunk are 22 stems of layering, including one which is male.



John Knox's Yew, Finlaystone House, Renfrewshire: In 1556, John Knox performed the first Holy Supper of the Reformation under this ancient yew tree, but not where it is now. In the early 20th century, it was moved 100 ft (30 m) to accommodate building works and has survived, despite storm damage to almost half its canopy. Given John Knox's links to the Great Yew of Ormiston, perhaps utilising this yew for a sacred ceremony was not only due to physical practicality for shade and shelter, and that it was metaphysically fit for purpose.



**Whittinghame,
Stenton, East Lothian:**
This immense, layered
ancient yew on the Balfour
estate, has a canopy with a
circumference of 400 yards
(365 metres) and which gives
the yew a pyramidal profile. It
is famous because, under its
boughs, Lord Morton and his
fellow plotters allegedly
hatched their plan to murder
Lord Darnley, husband of
Mary Queen of Scots, in 1567.



Whittinghame Yew, East Lothian: When Thomas Pakenham featured the yew in *Meeting with Remarkable Trees* (1996) he had to crawl uphill through a tunnel for about 30 yards (25 m) to reach the trunk. Since then, the estate have kindly created a framed corridor through the layering to accommodate visitors.



Whittingehame, East Lothian: The central space around the mighty trunk has an average radius of 10 yards (3.5 m) before the cascade of branches reach the ground and layer. This creates a dome supported by a single great pillar, reminiscent of Yggdrasil. Unlike at other ancient layered yew sites, there is no adventitious growth on most of the layered branches. This emphasises the weft and weave of the bare branches creating forms which writhe, twist and 'dance' - the surreal created from the real - and are a feast for the eyes and imagination.



The Craigends Yew, Craigends, Houston, Renfrewshire: On the banks of the River Gryffe, is a layered yew though to be 800 years old. This may link to a 12th century Norman knight, Hugues de Paduinan, when he was granted lands here and gave his name to Houston (Hugh's Toun).



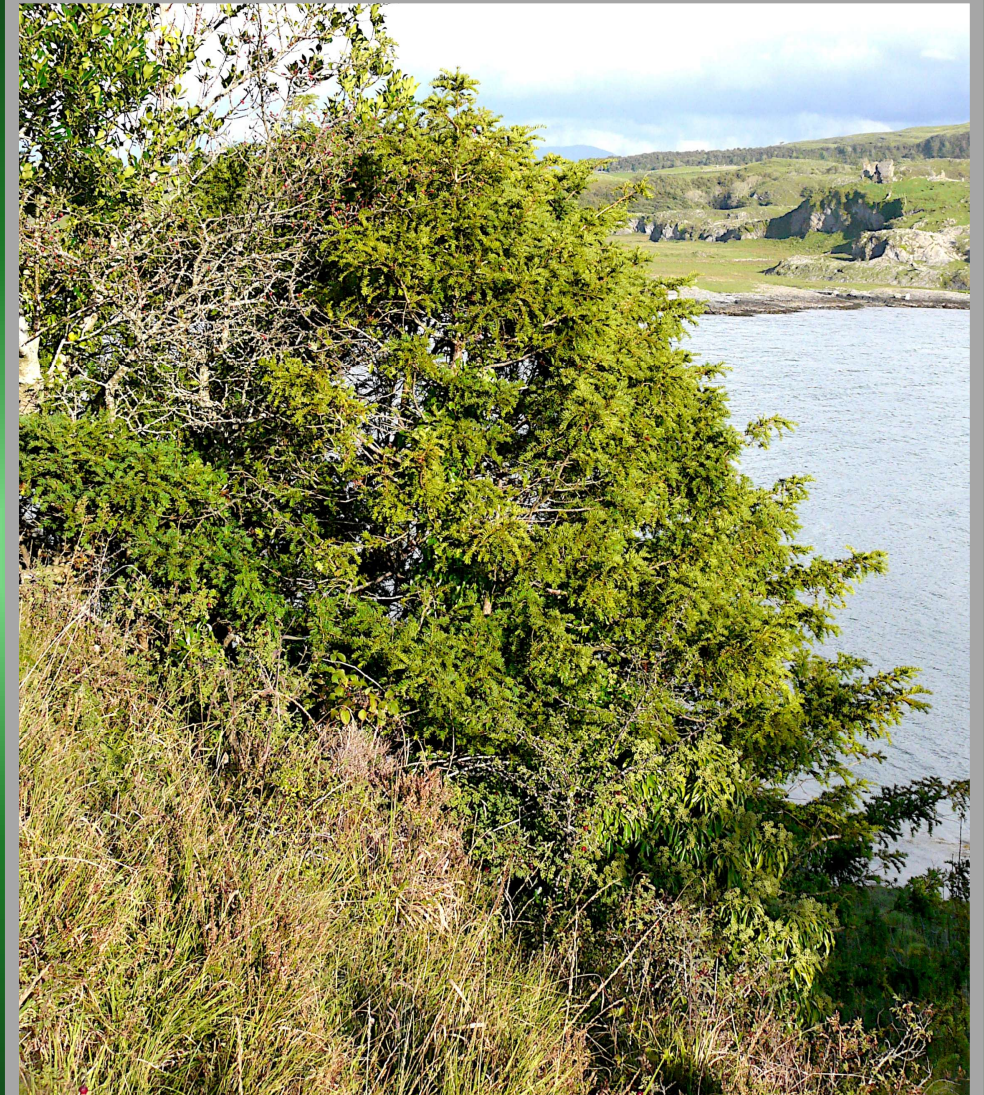
The Craigends Yew: Beneath the canopy is a fractured and collapsed multi-stemmed trunk with a girth at 30 cm of over 8 metres. Some of the surrounding branch layering is affected by its proximity to the River Gryffe, and creates a damp, mossy, jungle-like microhabitat, similar to a rain forest.



St Columba's Yew, Bernera, off Lismore, Firth of Lorn, Argyll. Viewed from the shoreline. Two vertical female leader branches have regenerated from the stump of the yew, which was felled in 1770. Since then, the yew has grown like a creeper along the cliff before reaching for the sky. Photo credit Bob Hay



St Columba's Yew, Bernera: The crowns of the regenerating leader branches emerge from the tangled growth on the 30 ft (10 m) high limestone cliff face.





Bernera Yew Bush: A chance discovery when leaving the island. A small bush of yew, nibbled by sheep, clings to the limestone clifftop, and is probably the result of avian seed dispersal from St Columba's yew. It is hard to imagine how long ago it was when St Columba's yew - which was massive 1,500 years ago - was the same size as this.



**Yew grove, Ellon
Castle Gardens,
Ellon,
Aberdeenshire:
Consisting of 19
magnificent yews,
the grove is thought
to be 500 to 800
years old. It stands
near the ruins of
the 15th century
Ardgith/Ellon
castle, a home of
the Kennedy clan.**



Ellon Castle Gardens: Selected members of the magnificent and mesmerising grove of ancient yews





The Wallace Yew, Elderslie, Renfrewshire: In the 1800s, this ravaged yew at William Wallace's 13th century birthplace, was described as 'ancient' and comparable in age to the 600-years-old Wallace Oak. When the oak fell in 1856 it was widely reported but no reports since then have announced the loss of the Wallace Yew. Could this yew be the ancient companion of the oak? In the 1970s, the yew was described as 'dense' but since then fires, vandalism and storms have almost killed it. However, its indomitable spirit lives on, and many cuttings have been successfully propagated and planted at various locations across Scotland.



The Wallace Yew, MSPs private garden, Scottish Parliament, Holyrood, Edinburgh

- Cuttings from the Wallace Yew were planted in a limited space which is too small for a yew tree to naturally grow. Once established, they were trimmed to create a hedge. The pyramid shaped profile is symbolic and significant in Freemasonry. There are many cultural traditions in which a yew is the omphalos - a sacred centre - of a tribal area, kingdom or country and is the heart of a spiral around which 'all else revolves'.



The Apprentice Pillar, Rosslyn Chapel and the ancient Roslin Castle Yew: The world-famous pillar is a symbolic depiction of the Norse World Tree, Yggdrasil, which in Norse cosmology is the yew, not the ash. The Sinclairs are of dual Norse heritage. Yew foliage grows in spiralling pairs along a twig and yew cells have a spiral 'spring' in their structure. Public domain image of the Apprentice Pillar

• Rosslyn Chapel, Rosslyn, Midlothian

- In 1890, Robert Hutchison's age estimate for the yew suggested a planting date around 1700. This may coincide with the granting of a charter in 1704, by Queen Anne, to the Royal Company of Archers, who are esoterically associated with Rosslyn Chapel.
- When a reigning UK monarch visits Scotland, the Royal Company of Archers are their bodyguard, in life and after death. This royal duty was introduced by Sir Walter Scott.
- There are burials under the yew, including a caretaker of the chapel's grounds.

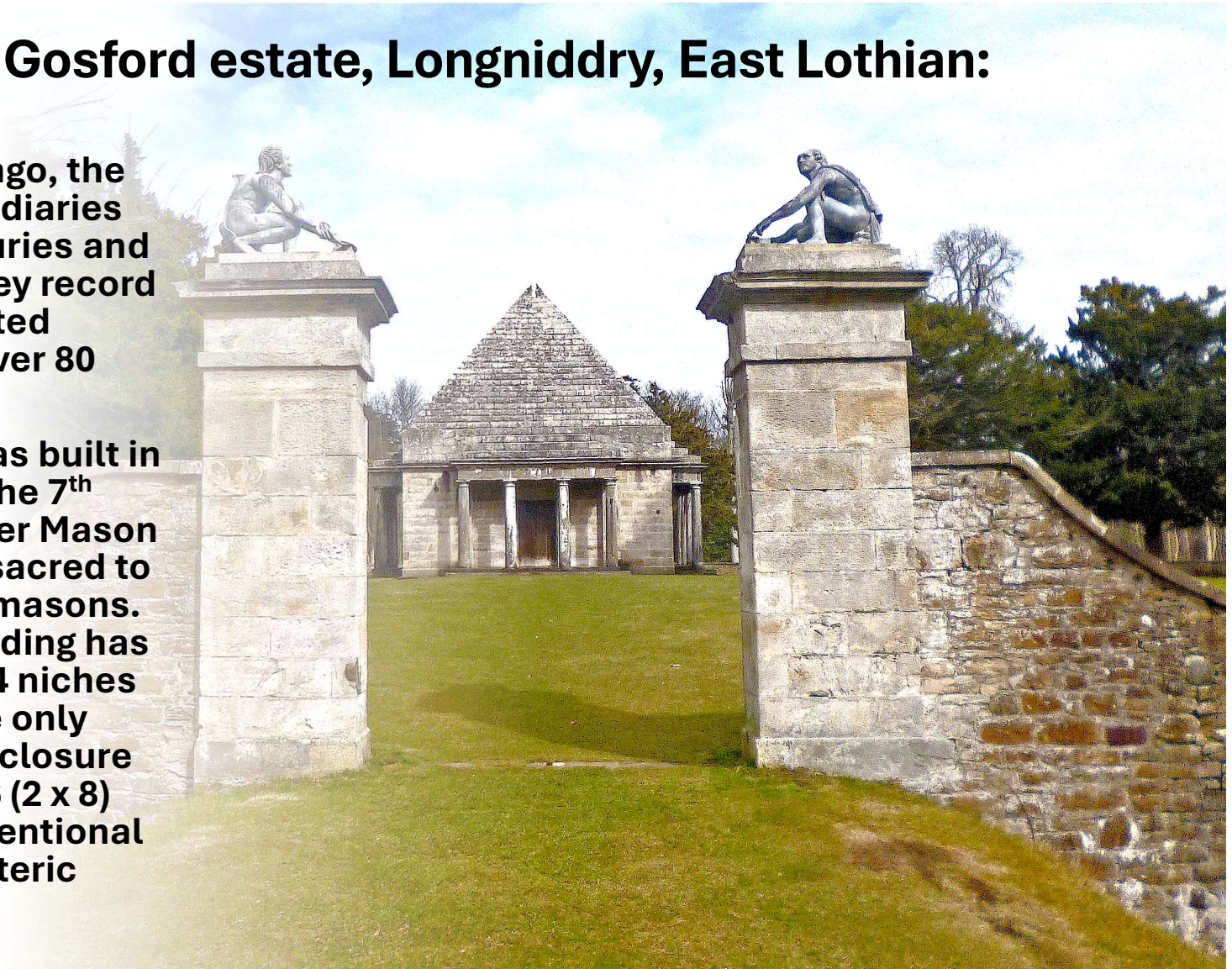


Abbotsford, near Melrose, Scottish Borders: Sir Walter Scott was a hermeticist and author of the four-volume *Hermetica*. Between 1817 and 1824, he created an estate at Abbotsford, featuring yew topiary near the house and extensive yew planting across the estate. This included creating a small woodland exclusively of yew. The path through the woodland is said to lead uphill to where an ancient chapel once stood.



Wemyss Mausoleum, Gosford estate, Longniddry, East Lothian:

- Published around 20 years ago, the Sinclair Wemyss Journals are diaries which were written over centuries and passed from father to son. They record how the Wemyss family assisted refugee Knights Templar for over 80 years.
- The Wemyss Mausoleum was built in 1795 for the exclusive use of the 7th Earl of Wemyss, a Grandmaster Mason of Scotland. The number 8 is sacred to the Knights Templar and Freemasons. The inner chamber of the building has 8 sides and 24 courses with 64 niches giving 1 x 8, 3 x 8 and 8 x 8. The only trees in the circular walled enclosure around the mausoleum are 16 (2 x 8) yews, meaning they are an intentional and functional part of the esoteric design of the site.



Robert the Bruce's Yew, Stuc an t'lobhairt, Loch Lomond, Trossachs National Park: In 1306, a refugee Robert the Bruce and 200 men sheltered beneath this ancient yew after defeats by the English and supporters of John Baliol. Given its current condition, and after severe pruning by Victorians, it is hard to imagine it was once massive enough to do so. But layered yews in Scotland today are big enough to shelter 200 men and more, proving that the legend of the yew's size in 1306 - which must have been considerable - was probably not using any poetic licence.



Inchlonaig, the Isle of Yew, Loch Lomond, Trossachs National Park:
The northernmost island on the loch and inhabited for 10,000 years. Thanks to new owners, the island is undergoing habitat improvements with special concern for the yew population, which numbers close to one thousand trees of various ages and in various conditions. This is a globally unique yew site.



Inchlonaig, The Isle of Yew, Loch Lomond: Just over 700 years ago, Robert the Bruce harvested hundreds of ancient yews from here to make war bows for his archers who fought at Bannockburn in 1314. It wasn't only human lives which paid a price for that victory, yews did too. Afterwards he replanted what had been taken and many of those yews are still there, fortunately having escaped another harvest in the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century.



Inchlonaig, The Isle of Yew, Loch Lomond: One island, one habitat and one of the species of tree which lives there. The incredible natural wonders yew trees can become in Scottish rainforest conditions.



Yews, Kings and Knights

Before Bannockburn, it is said that Robert the Bruce ordered his men to wear a cloth badge depicting a yew tree or take a sprig of yew with them into the battle. Whether apocryphal or not, the symbolism is significant because Robert the Bruce was a Templar. In 1371, Robert II, grandson of Robert the Bruce, became the first king of the new Stewart monarchy. He was raised as a Gaelic prince on the Isle of Bute. Gaelic annals attest that the father of 'King Arthur' was Iubhair (Gaelic for yew), the High King of Britain which, in English, is Uther - the Pendragon (High King) in the Arthurian stories. A Stewart (Steward) looked after the affairs of the royal household, but it was not a royal position until Robert II became king. Written in Gaelic, Stewart is Stiubhairt: iubhair, the yew, is embedded in the surname of the royal family. The Stewart kings were ideally meant to be the 'royal stewards' of the Scots and their lands - meant to serve them, defend them, and care for them, not rule them. This was the ideal of the Knights Templar's version of a 'kingdom of conscience', which they had created in Portugal. Yew trees are found at the sites of their preceptories at Temple, Midlothian and Maryculter, Aberdeenshire.



Yew: Tree of the Wine Blood.

‘Blood, or even ‘wine blood’ is ascribed to the tree, often in describing the ancestry which runs through its ‘veins’. This may, in part, be an analogy between the sap of the tree and the blood of humans, but it is useful to remember also that wine was made from the sap of some trees...

*Sfuil rìoghail nan Stiùbhart
Ruith an dùthchas 's a'chraoibh*

**And the royal blood of the Stewarts
Running hereditarily in the tree’.**

Michael Newton: The Tree in Scottish Literature and Tradition, PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh.

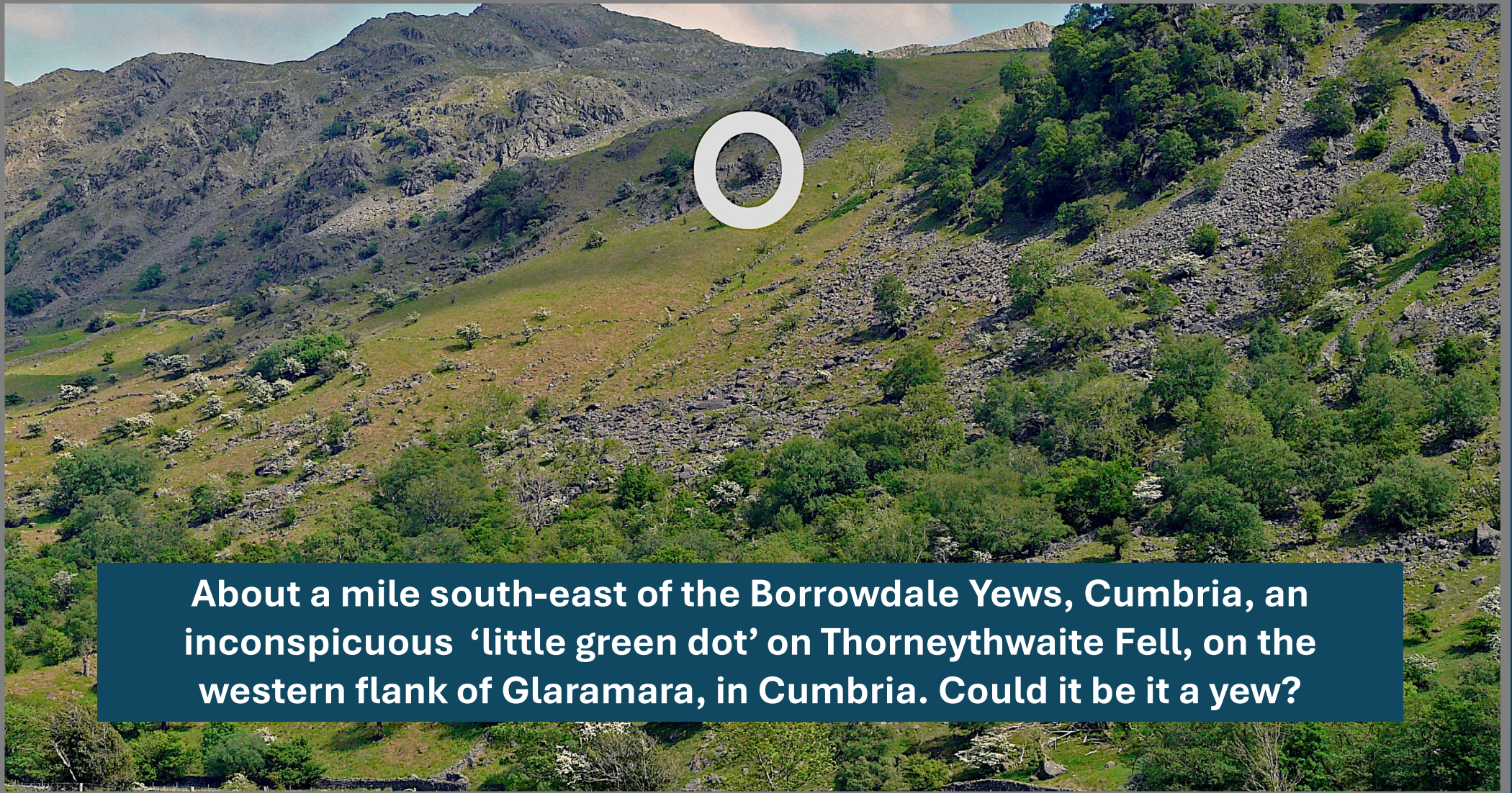


Glenure (Gleann Iubhair) Valley of the Yew, Argyll: On the sides of a steep ravine at the head of the glen, the last remnants of an ancient yew population cling to the mountainside. When the Gaels arrived here about 1600 years ago, they did not rename the valley, just translated it from the Pictish name. Yew wood from Glenure was prized for centuries for Gaelic Highland bow-making and is celebrated in Gaelic literature.



Glenure, Argyll : Not only do these yews survive in such a precarious habitat, they risk predation by wild goats. Yews in such inaccessible, exposed and challenging environments have been scientifically shown to be amongst the ‘slowest growing woody plants in the world’. Could some of these yews be of that ilk?





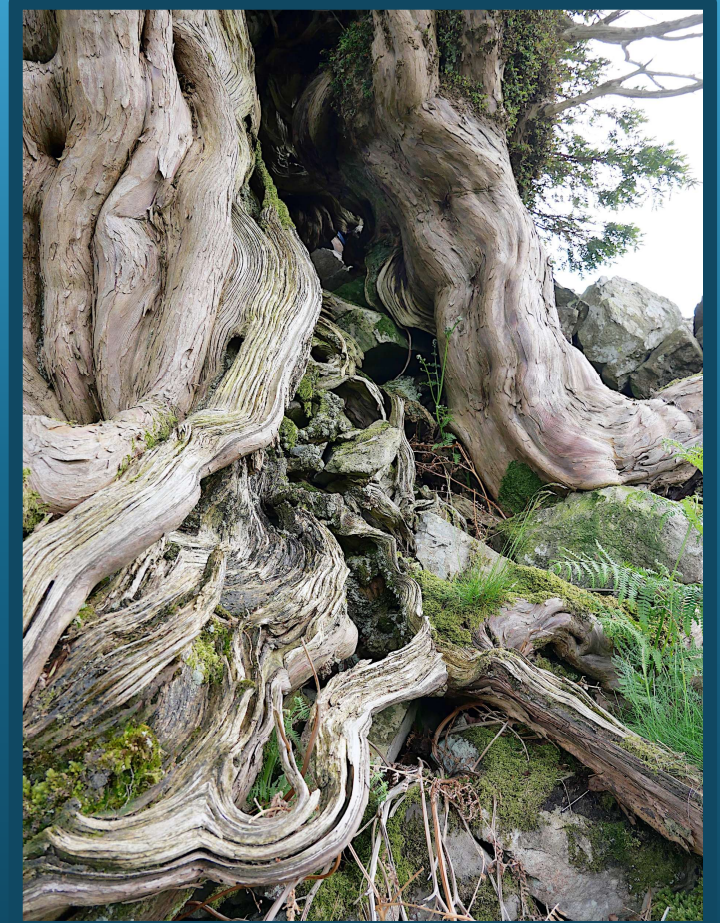
About a mile south-east of the Borrowdale Yews, Cumbria, an inconspicuous ‘little green dot’ on Thorneythwaite Fell, on the western flank of Glaramara, in Cumbria. Could it be it a yew?

**Thorneythwaite
Fell, Borrowdale:**
What the 'little
green dot' turned
out to be - a storm
ravaged ancient
yew in one of
England's most
extreme and
exposed habitats. It
clings tenaciously
to the steep, barren
slope of talus at
around 800 ft (240
m) high.



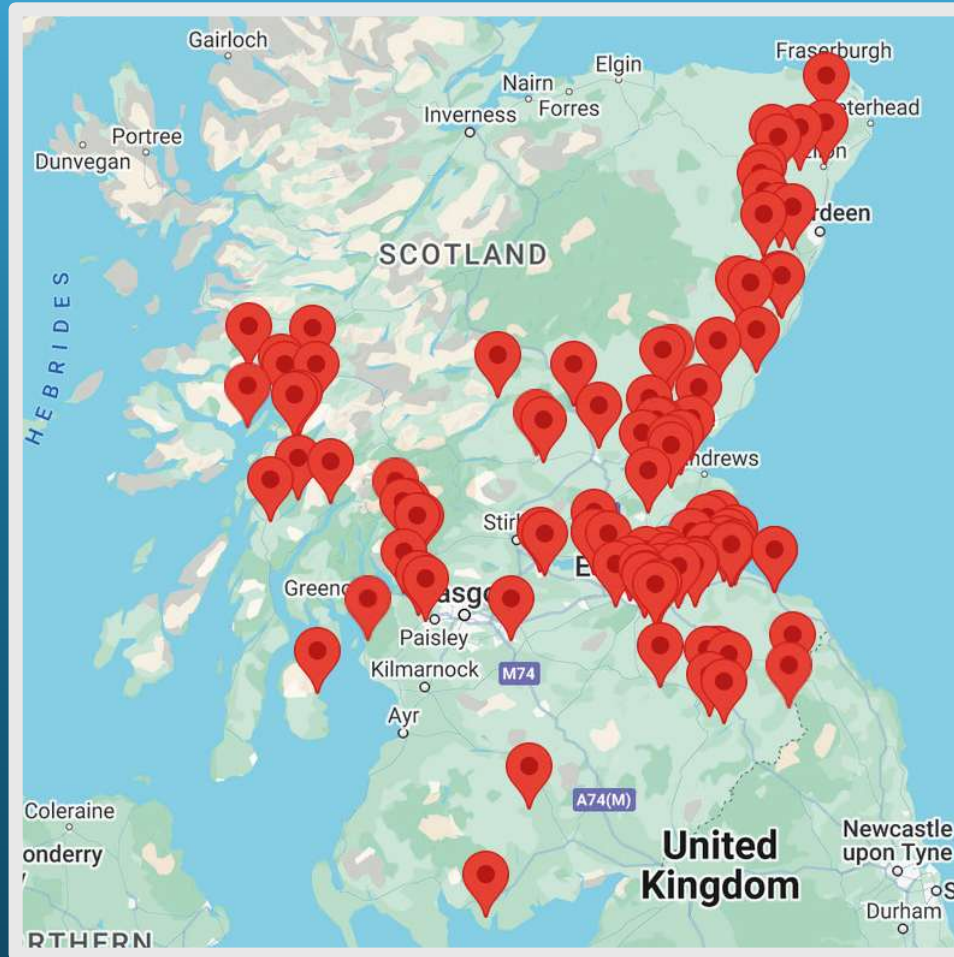
Thorneythwaite Fell, Borrowdale:

The girth, taken at ground level, was exactly 20ft (6.0 m) - but this tells us nothing about how old this yew is, except that it looks exceptionally ancient. Could Scotland's mountains also possess 'little green dots' which turn out to be something akin to this? It's more probable than possible.



Significant yew sites in Scotland in 2025, either confirmed or newly recorded by Scotland's Yew Tree Heritage Initiative (SYTHI).

Around 300 more sites have been noted - so far - which need investigation.



Scotland's Yew Tree Heritage Initiative

Recording and raising awareness of the unique and irreplaceable yew tree heritage of Scotland

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www.scotlands-yew-trees.org

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Coming soon in hardback and
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By Paul Walter Greenwood.

Foreword by Sir Ranulph Fiennes OBE.

