

Here's Looking at Yew

The yew has survived the great climatic changes of our planet – fossils date back more than 140m years. Many yews we see today are more than 1,000 years old. Its longevity attracts more folklore than any other tree.

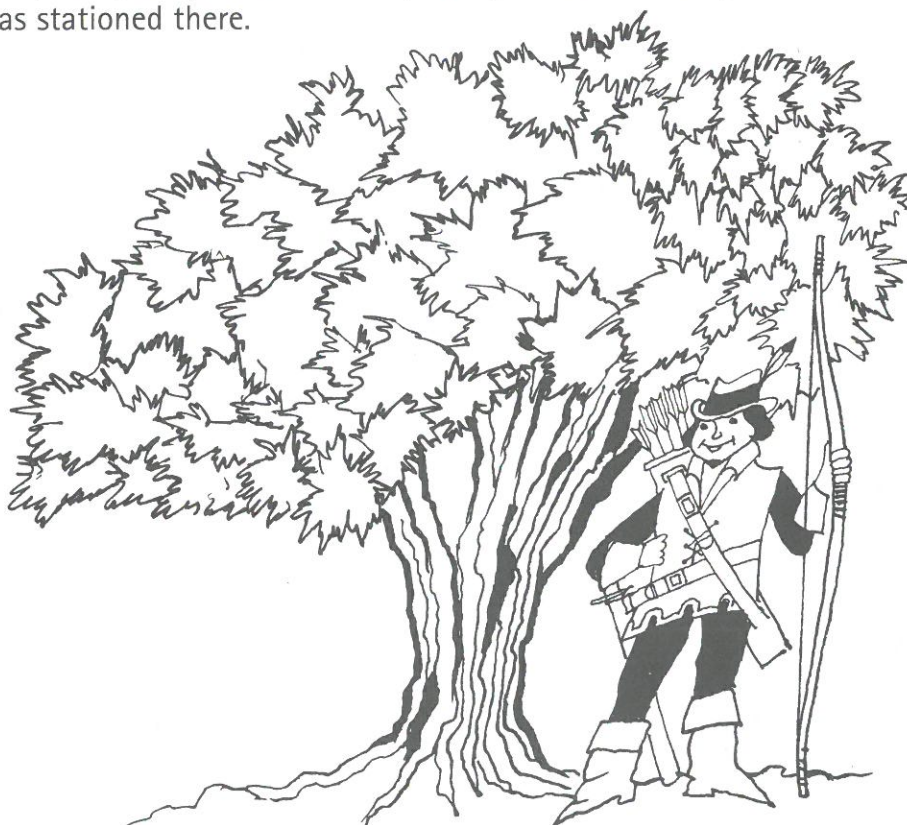
The age of a yew can be determined by its trunk – its girth increases by a foot every 30 years. A yew whose trunk measures 25 feet will have stood since the first millennium.

There are seven species of yew. *Taxus baccata* is native to the UK and grows best on limestone and chalk soils. The beautiful dense, deep golden timber with its red core is easy to carve and was used to make wheels, cogs, axles, spoons, bowls and even the body of the lute.

The Vikings trusted hard-as-iron yew nails to hold ships together, and yew weapons can be found in museums across the country. The oldest wooden artifact found was a spear made of yew, 150,000 years old and buried in peat in Essex. A 90,000-year-old yew spear was found preserved in peat between an elephant's ribs in Germany. But it was the yew's unique combination of hard heart and springy outer wood that armed English archers with the famous longbow.

The Yew in History

- Three English kings died from arrows fired from yew bows: Harold, Rufus and Richard 1.
- The Magna Carta is believed to have been signed by King John under the Ankerwyke Yew in the village of Wraysbury, near Windsor, in 1215.
- The Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is up to 5,000 years old and reputedly marks the birthplace of Pontius Pilate, whose father was stationed there.



- 1 Explain how you work out the age of a yew tree. What does the word 'girth' mean?

1

2 marks

- 2 Describe the yew timber. What has it been used for and why was it picked over other timbers?

2

4 marks

- 3 In times past yew trees were used in shipbuilding. Which parts of the ship were made from yew? Why was yew chosen for this function? Which invading civilisation used these ships?

3

2 marks

- 4 When was the Magna Carta signed and by whom? What connection does this event have with a yew tree?

4

2 marks

- 5 In the extract it says 'A 90,000-year-old yew spear was found preserved in peat between an elephant's ribs in Germany'. Do you find this information surprising? Explain your answer.

5

3 marks

- 6 'Longevity' means long life. Find this word in the text. What is it used to describe and why is it used?

6

2 marks

Total marks