



Argyll and Highland Field Research Autumn 2021

**Conducted by Paul Greenwood and Bryony Smith of
Scotland's Yew Tree Heritage Initiative (SYTHI)**

**Supported by the Tree Register's Vicky Schilling
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Draft Report (V.3): 17th December 2021

Summary of Objectives:

- Confirm and record yew trees at various significant sites in Argyll and Highland
- Confirm the existence of a possible old arboretum at Inverawe House
- Confirm and record an old walnut tree at Ardchattan Priory Garden
- Confirm and record three trees in a historic garden at Achnacloich

Contents:

1. Inverawe House: pp. 3 – 5.
2. Ardchattan Priory Garden: pp. 6 – 10.
3. Blarcreen House: pp. 11 – 15.
4. Esragan, Ardchattan: p. 16.
5. Glen Ure: pp. 17 – 18.
6. Kinlochlaich Walled Garden: pp. 19 – 21.
7. Bernera: pp. 22 – 27.
8. Ballachulish House: pp. 28 -30.
9. Inchree, Wade's Walk: p. 31.
10. Cona Glen: p. 31.
11. Sutherland's Grove: p. 32.
12. St Mary's church (Horsley Cottage) Strontian: pp. 33 – 35.
13. Achnacloich Walled Garden: pp. 35 – 39.
14. References: p. 40.
15. Appendix A: p. 41.
16. Appendix B: p. 42.
17. Appendix C: p. 43.
18. Acknowledgements: pp. 44 - 45.

Part 1: Inverawe House, Taynuilt, Argyll PA35 1HU

Date: Sunday 26/09/21

Grid Ref: NN 064 434

Coordinates: 56.435442, -5.210684

Objective: Establish if an old arboretum exists

Conditions: Wet and heavily overcast with brief spells of sunshine

“The original Inverawe House has been altered and expanded much over the years. One Laird who carried out many improvements was Major Duncan Campbell of Inverawe who also sent barrels of seeds and young trees back from his final voyage to America, which ended in his death at Ticonderoga in 1758.” (1)

Enquiries with onsite staff upon arriving at the south-west facing Inverawe House drew a blank that the remains of an old arboretum were here dating to the latter half of the 18th century, as none had ever heard one mentioned as existing here. We did take photos of what planting there is, and it seems that a tall standout fir or cypress with storm damage might be worth further investigation, but we could not access it as all the plantings are in strictly private areas.



Fig. 1: The tall cypress or fir to the west of Inverawe House

However, as shown in the photos, a view of the area to the west in front of the house shows considerable variation of foliage colour and morphology in the trees in the close planted area to the north-west (left of the house) which we were unable to access.

We also noted that a banked area of land facing south in front of the house had been cleared and presumably of some trees and partially turned into a pig pen but included an area of specimens of recent plantings.



Figs. 2 (above) and 3 (below): Planting areas to the west of Inverawe House



Young trees are also seen as specimen plantings in the fields between the house and the river, and we would recommend a visit by the Tree Register.



Figs 4 (above) and 5 (below) show young plantings to the south of Inverawe House



Part 2: Ardchattan Priory, Ardchattan, Oban, PA37 1RQ

Date: Monday 27/09/21 and Thursday 30/09/21

Grid Ref: NM 971 349

Coordinates: 56.462811 -5.295195

Objective: Confirm and record any yews and an old walnut tree.

Conditions: Stormy

"Ardchattan Priory whose yew trees (Taxus baccata) according to other accounts, were inspected by Robert the Bruce and cut to make at least some of the longbows used at the Battle of Bannockburn."

Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 62. 2004. Page 35.

Ardchattan Priory is a private residence in the hands of Clan Campbell with gardens open to the public. The site was established in 1230 or 1231 for the Valliscaulian Order of monks and ceased to be a monastery in the Reformation of 1560 but a garden has been here for over 700 years (2).

On a stormy day of torrential rain eight yews noted as A – H were found in parkland between the roadside boundary wall and track to the house. Not all are the same age.

From the entrance and planted parallel to the wall are five small yews of which A - C are male, D - E female. Low bushy growth prevented any girth measurements. They were planted in the mid - 19th century according to the residents of the house.

Of the other three (F - H) F and G are further east in the parkland and H is next to the track on the border of the private area in front of the house.

Yew F, female, measured 386 cm @ 10 cm and 381 cm @ 80 cm before it bifurcates.

Yew G, female, measured 300 cm @ 150 cm where an accurate girth measurement was not compromised by spray and ivy.

Yew H, female, has a poor canopy due to repeated storm damage but is responding via bushy regeneration occurring on the lowest sections of the trunk.

Girths were recorded of:

366 cm @ root crown

318 cm @ 50 cm.

328 cm @ 100 cm, the highest available point below bifurcation.

The origin of the yews F – H is not known to the residents of the house. However, girth measurements suggest a planting period *circa* 1700 making them too young to belong to the monastic period.



Fig. 6 (above) Yew F and Fig. 7 (below) Yew G Ardchattan Priory





Fig. 8 (above) and Fig. 9 (below) Yew H Ardchattan Priory

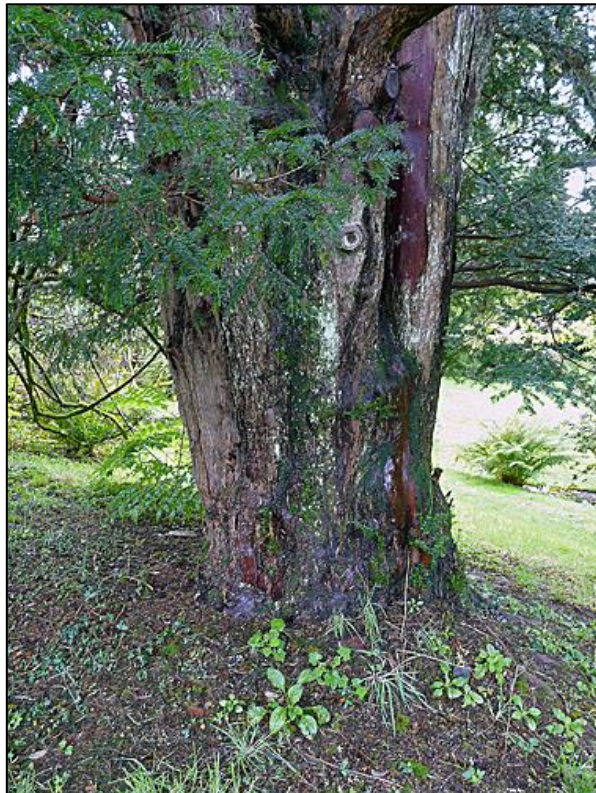




Fig. 10: Yew H, Ardchattan Priory

Around the southern and western border of the Monk's Pond are 6 yews (I – N) but three are stumps (I - K) cut down around 10 years ago, though all are regenerating. All 6 were planted in the mid-19th century.

Yew L, male measured 157 cm @ the root crown as higher measure not possible.

Yew M, male measured 138 cm @ the root crown as higher measure not possible.

Yew N, no measurement possible.



Fig. 11: Yew stumps I – K, Ardchattan Priory

The available girth measurements confirm a mid-19th century planting date, as advised.



Fig. 12: Yew L – N, Archattan Priory

Based on information received prior to the visit, more yews were said to be at site of an ‘ancient church’ 2 km from the Priory, but further investigation later in the week (30/09/21) when the weather had improved found none.

The walnut tree (*Juglans regia*) we were looking for stood at a corner of the Monk’s Pond but blew down about 10 years ago according to the residents. The stump remains in situ. A replacement has been planted nearby but this was only advised after the visits, so no photographs of it were possible.



Fig. 13: Stump of walnut tree, Ardchattan Priory

Part 3: Blarcreen House, Inveresragan, Ardchattan, Oban, PA37 1RG

Date: Monday 27/09/21 and Thursday 30/09/21

Grid Ref: NM 98052 35027

Coordinates 56.466896, -5.262165

Objective: Confirm and record existence of potentially ancient yew

Conditions: Stormy with brief sunny spells and heavy showers

An old Gaelic poem reads:

“Bow of yew from Esragin (sic)

Eagle feather from Loch Treig

Yellow wax from Galway Town

And arrow-head made by Mac Phederan”

A copy is in Blarcreen House, a late Victorian mansion now a hotel. Access to the yew is strictly by arranging prior permission from the website at www.blarcreenhouse.com. The yew, a considerably storm damaged male, stands in a paddock north of the house and despite its battered appearance, there is plenty of healthy foliage in the regenerating canopy as seen in the eastern side.



Fig. 14: View of yew looking from the west, Blarcreen House



Figs. 14 and 15: Views of the yew showing its condition today (above) and how it was at least over 10 years ago (below). Image courtesy Blarcreen House archive



The trunk bifurcates at 50 cm high into two stems and both are a mixture of exposed decaying sapwood and fluted bark. The southern smaller stem is hollowed at the base. It is believed to be in one way or another the last survivor of the ancient yews of Esragan, and as the poem shows, an area long celebrated as a centre of excellence for medieval longbow manufacturing.

The yew was fenced off about ten years ago by the current occupiers of the house to protect ponies and horses from grazing on it. Consequently a dense extent of brambles and nettles and other plants have established themselves around the base of the yew making a full girth measurement impossible at present. The fencing is no longer needed, and the area will be gradually cleared to the base of the trunk in the coming months.



Fig 16: Overgrown area around the of the yew Blarcreen House after partial clearance

After clearing away some of the undergrowth only a partial girth measure of 290 cm was possible at the time and was taken at 50 cm high below the bifurcation. This approximates to 50% of the girth and suggests the full girth at 50 cm high is at least 500 cm and possibly 600 cm or slightly more.

Yews on Inchlonaig, an island in Loch Lomond subject to wet, exposed, rainforest climatic conditions similar to Esragan, are known to have girths of 500 cm and are 700 years old. They were planted in the early 14th century on the orders of King Robert the Bruce to replace those he had harvested to make longbows for use at Bannockburn. When the king harvested yews upon the lands of Ardchattan Priory for the same purpose 700 years ago, this happened in Esragan, which is still on the Priory's lands. No doubt his harvest probably included yews which may well have been ancient or exceptional at that time.

Unlike his replanting programme on Inchlonaig, there is no evidence he did the same to any extent at Esragan.

Around 15 metres south from the yew are two small decaying stumps of probably Irish yew (*Taxus baccata fastigiata*) planted in a row in a formal garden.

They may belong to the late 19th century when the house was built (*circa* 1896) and planting Irish Yew was fashionable and had been for some time. The number of late 19th century and Edwardian houses in the UK which were planted with Irish yews in garden and parkland areas

runs into the many thousands. These yews were felled long before the arrival of the current residents of the house, but exactly when is not known, nor if they were Irish yew or not.



Fig.17: Yew stumps Blarcreen House

Considering its size and condition clearly implies this yew is, one way or another as local traditions state, the last survivor of the celebrated yews of Esragan. Whether it was a naturally seeded sapling and was too young for the military needs of 700 years ago; or a later progeny from seed or cutting from the last remnants of the population and planted near a farmstead over 600 years ago; or a later farmstead was established near to an extant yew 500 years ago or so or slightly later is not known. Of course all this is speculation at present pending further research. What is known is that there has been some type of dwelling here for at least 400 years. Whatever its exact age or origins may be this yew surely has a place as a living legend in the natural and cultural history of Scotland.

Thanks to the generosity of the residents we were able to obtain four samples of wood of approximately 26 cm (widest) diameter and 2 – 4 cm thick, from a branch which snapped off in a storm around five years ago. It had to be cut off to preserve the further stability of the yew. It had been stored under the yew ever since and had not seasoned fully and was damp when cut revealing interesting fungal growth patterns which may have affected structural integrity of the branch enough to cause it to fail. We collected the samples three days after our visit.

Sample A has been sent to Toby Hindson of the AYG and his initial analysis pending a report included the following:

“11th October - This is, as far as I can tell, the first Scottish West coast yew ever to be analysed using dendro. It's the most northerly for sure.

13th October - Pre-analysis check at medium resolution (should show virtually all rings) gives a count over 250.

14th October - 250+ rings from that point is a pretty good sign of a very old yew. The branch grew to the sampling point in the latter half of the 1700s.

31st October - Extensive work on the branch round has failed to produce a chronology that matches any other, so I can't cross-check or verify what I've done. This happens sometimes, and in some ways it's unsurprising because this is the first Scottish West coast yew ever investigated. I'll hold on to the results for now, as more samples come in I may get some material I can use to do a mutual cross-check..... the branch does date to before 1750 (the most central material is missing) and taking onto account the sample point the yew itself is certain to date to earlier than 1650.”

An origin pre 1650 confirms this yew is older than the largest yews at Ardchattan priory and is the oldest of its kind (so far found) remaining in the Esragan area.

Sample B is for the Tree Register to investigate and archive if required.

Sample C is to be retained in SYTHI's sample archive.

Sample D is to be sanded and waxed and returned to Blacreen House so it can be retained at the site.



Fig:18: Sample A from the yew at Blacreen House. Section was taken from the cut branch seen in Fig. 14 above

Part 4: On the B845 approx. 0.5 km east from Blarcreen - Esragan, Ardchattan, Oban PA37 1RG

Date: Monday 27/09/21

Grid Ref: NM 980 350

Coordinates 56.464318, -5.256040

Objective: Confirm and record existence of 'old' yews in woodland

Conditions: Clear and sunny

Three yews noted as A, B, and C are situated in a close growing triangle on top of a man-made construction implying they were planted here. As advised later at Blarcreen House, this point in the road was once forked, with the track diverging from the B845 leading to an upland area in the woodland once used for charcoal burning.

Of the three trees, yew B (impossible to determine its gender) is a stump but with some healthy spray of regrowth.

Yew A, female, measured 215cm @ 100 cm.

Yew B, a stump, not practical to measure and not possible to determine gender.

Yew C, female, measured 163 cm @ 100 cm.

The measurements suggest all three are 19th century plantings, possibly as route marker trees.



Fig 17: Yew A (left) Yew B (right) and Yew C (centre) background, Esragan, Ardchattan

Part 5: Glen Ure (Valley of the Yew) Oban, PA38 OBQ

Date: Monday 27/09/21

Grid Red: NN 054 478

Coordinates: Not applicable

Objective: Confirm and record any yews in the glen

Conditions: Wet and overcast with brief sunny spells

We were unable to gain full access to Glen Ure, due to industrial activities strictly involving authorised access only and the site was closed. A detailed scan with binoculars saw no yews in the areas of natural forest we could see in the glen. What appeared notable was an extensive area of Scots Pine on a hillside leading into the glen from the west.

However, after we returned home, we were contacted by email by Gordon Gray Stephens of www.nativewoods.co.uk, a friend of the managers of Kinlochlaich Walled Garden. He advised that there were individual yews and groves alive ten years ago in an area of Glen Ure we were unable to see and access, as it was 2km further into the glen from our position and obscured by the terrain. Gordon kindly provided a detailed map reference of the location, and a return trip is the only way to confirm if the yews still exist or not, as a search on Google Earth has already proved inconclusive.

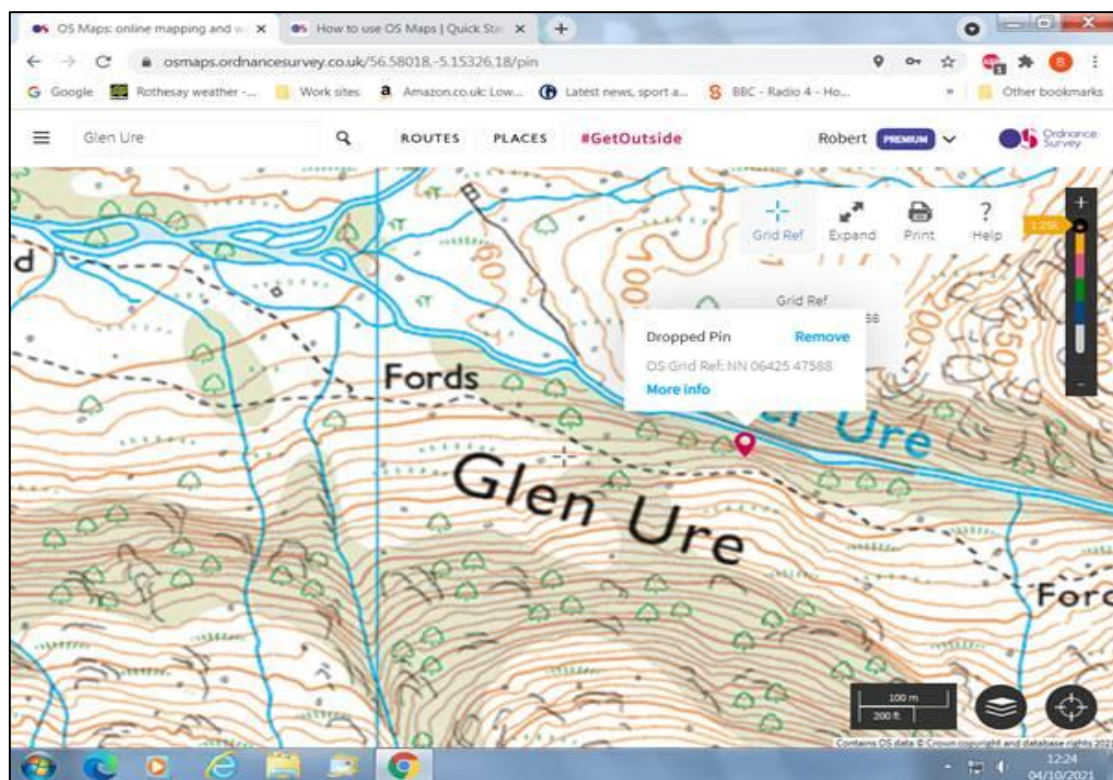


Fig. 18: Map section (pinned area) of location of yew groves 10 years ago in Glen Ure

Gordon is involved in Scotland's Rainforest Restoration project in Argyll and the West Highlands and is keen to include yew in the program. SYTHI had a successful and inspiring meeting with Gordon via Zoom on 14th October to discuss how our extensive research could support the proposal. We have since provided Gordon with a 10-page draft document supporting why the yew should be included and are currently awaiting his feedback. Support for the case for inclusion of the yew is seen in the following quote:

" Hindson and Moir 2021 unpublished.

There is no negative dip in response to the extreme summer of 1976 in the Scottish dendro record. That implies that yew is a good tree to resist climate change in Scotland. The English record shows a strong negative response."

On the single-track road heading to Glen Ure about a mile from the entrance to the glen, we photographed a striking avenue of Irish Yew (*Taxus bacatta fastigiata*) at Invercreran Lodge, consisting of an estimated 60 trees.



Figs. 19 and 20: Above and below, avenue of Irish Yew, Invercreran Lodge, Glen Ure



Part 6: Kinlochlaich Walled Garden, Appin, PA38 4BD

Date: Tuesday 28/09/21

Grid Ref: NM 937 462

Coordinates 56.566147, -5.355815

Objective: Establish and record any yews or other trees of note

Conditions: Dry and sunny

This is a small walled garden open to the public incorporating a garden centre in the grounds of Kinlochlaich House, built circa 1830 with the gardens dating to 1790.

A male yew stands outside the garden, on a verge next to an old outbuilding at the eastern side of the house. It has historic storm damage resulting in a thin crown and it has similar canopy morphology to Yew G which stands nearest to the house at Ardchattan Priory. Girths recorded suggest this yew is of late 18th or early 19th century origin from the measurements taken which were:

235 cm @ root crown

252 cm @ 50 cm

274 cm @ 100 cm, the highest available point below the bifurcation



Fig. 21: Yew at Kinlochlaich Walled Garden



Figs. 21 and 22: Trunk (above) and canopy structure (below) of yew Kinclochlaich



At the centre of the garden and according to the garden centre's manager the feature around which the garden was designed and very popular with young visitors, is an Irish yew (*Taxus bacatta fastigiata*) which has been pruned and trimmed into a dome of topiary. It is believed by the garden manager to be around 200 years old. It has a circumference of 22 m 11 cm @ 100 cm and an estimated maximum height of 4 m.



Fig 23: Dome of Irish Yew topiary with Bryony to give scale, Kinlochlaich

The garden manager also advised there were no old, exceptional, or rare species, The most exotic attracting the attention of most visitors is an Indian Bean tree (*Catalpa Bignonioides*). We did record a tall specimen of what we misidentified as Leyland Cypress but have since been advised is a Thuja (probably *Plicata* the Red Western Cedar) a grove of three at the entrance to the garden and in case of interest the biggest girth measured 400 cm @ 150 cm.



Fig. 24: Thuja with Bryony to give scale, Kinlochlaich

Part 7: Bernera, Lismore, Oban, PA34 5UH

Date: Tuesday 28/09/21

Grid Ref: NM 795 392

Coordinates: 56.494483, -5.579599

Objective: Establish if St Columba's Yew still exists and record it

Conditions: Windy with showers and extended sunny spells

Bernera is a tiny, uninhabited tidal island off Lismore in the Firth of Lorne. It was on Lismore in the 6th century the Irish Christian missionary St Moluag established his mission. He was a companion of St Columba and legend has it that St Columba (or perhaps St Moluag, or both) preached and created a cell on Bernera underneath a huge yew tree. It became popularly known as St Columba's Yew.

The yew was felled in the 18th century by the Campbells of Loch Nell in Argyll and its wood used to make a staircase in their castle. The castle burned down about a century later, but the staircase apparently survived. However enquiries made with the current owners of Loch Nell discovered that the yew staircase was finally lost in a fire only a few decades ago. On the Loch Nell official website is a claim that the building stands upon a 6th century 'Columban' cell. (3) (4) (5)

Various reports were made in recent decades that the yew survived the felling and had regenerated in a creeper like manner along a cliff, but searches made by many people had failed to locate it. Enquiries made prior to the visit with our guide Bob Hay (author of *Lismore: The Great Garden*, Birlinn Ltd., 2015) had confirmed he knew of two yews, but they appeared to be small bushes growing at the top of a cliff. Nevertheless the question was were either of these yews connected to the legendary yew. If so, and part of the post 18th century regeneration, it would mean they were part of a yew with a root system certainly 1,400 years of age minimum.

The yew was said to have been large enough in the 6th century to shade and shelter large congregations of people, hence the size at that time implies a possible age of 2,000 years old today. If so, this would put the age on par with the broad consensus that the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is at least 2,000 years old and Robert the Bruce's Yew at Stuc an T'lobhairt, above the eastern shore of Loch Lomond south of Tarbert, said to be big enough 700 years ago to shelter King Robert and 200 of his followers, could be *circa* 2,000 years old.

That a yew can grow big enough to shade and shelter large numbers of people is proven today by the Great Yew of Ormiston, East Lothian. It is said that over 450 years ago this yew was used to gather sizeable congregations under its boughs to hear the radical ideas of the Scottish Reformation promulgated by George Wishart and John Knox. Accessing Bernera is dangerous and only possible at low tide across a narrow neck of rough rocks with deeper water either side and should only be attempted with a guide, in our case Bob Hay of Lismore Heritage Centre and Iris and Lorna of Explore Lismore. Even at low tide, as we found, strong winds can cause swells strong enough to knock a person off their feet and wading across such a short space is a precarious experience, moreover when carrying sensitive technology such as cameras and

mobile phones. Waiting to cross in comparative safety meant the time window on the island was compromised and reduced to just over an hour. From the narrows a rocky path takes about 20 minutes to reach an area below the summit and above a sheer cliff about 30 ft (10 metres) high. we found, strong winds can cause swells strong enough to knock a person off their feet and wading across such a short space is a precarious experience, moreover when carrying sensitive technology such as cameras and mobile phones. Waiting to cross in comparative safety meant the time window on the island was compromised and reduced to just over an hour.



Fig. 25 View of Bernera (above) and Fig. 26 waiting to cross the narrows (below)



From the narrows a rocky path takes about 20 minutes to reach an area below the summit and above a sheer cliff about 30 ft (10 metres) high.

On reaching the spot we found two female bushes of yew growing about 10 metres apart poke through a tangle of thick vegetation including brambles and young trees which mostly appeared to be ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). It is not possible to get very close as the surrounding vegetation on the clifftop overhangs the sheer drop and is dangerous to explore. It is obvious that these two bushes are not creepers and have distinctive stems although these were not fully visible from the viewpoint. Given that previous searches in the 1990's found this yew growth impossible to find is understandable as it may not have been as visible then as it is now.



Figs. 27 and 28: The two sections of yew, Bernera



Fig. 29: Second section of yew showing the beach area below the cliff, Bernera

As time was at a premium both to recross the tidal narrows and then drive to reach the ferry back to the mainland, Bob had suggested he left to retrace our steps and then divert to reach the shoreline beneath the cliff, so we could obtain an assessment of the site from below as well as above. Although the area at the base of the cliff is surrounded to some distance by thick undergrowth, he could confirm what looked like a trunk was growing from the cliff and the bushes were the tops of stems and not separate trees. The yew is historically described as growing from a cliff overhanging a level area leading to the shoreline. Nearby was a shingle beach where boats could be easily drawn up and the topography of the site fits this description exactly. The fact that both stems are female suggesting they are the same tree, is more supporting evidence that this was what we were looking for – St Columba’s Yew but also the Holy and Noble Yew of Bernera.

Given the well-known propensity of the pre-Christian Druid culture to utilise yew trees or yew groves, it is possible this yew was known and revered by the Druids prior to the establishment of the mission of St Moluag and why archaeological investigation of the site is imperative.

Since the visit Bob has advised he will organise the clearing of the dense undergrowth at the base of the yew over the coming months and this will enable a look for archaeological evidence (Bob has extensive archaeological experience investigating the history of Lismore) that a monastic cell or retreat was indeed here, as traditions maintain during the period of St Moluag’s and St Columba’s missions.

That St Columba had a profound spiritual relationship with yew trees is found in part of a verse attributed to him and written before his exile regarding a yew in his native Derry:

“This is the yew of the saints

Where they used to come with me together.

Ten hundred angels were there,

Above our heads, side close to side.

Dear to me is that yew tree;

Would that I was set in its place there!

On my left it was pleasant adornment

When I entered into the Black Church..." (6)

These words raise the compelling question that if St Columba spent time under this yew tree on Bernera, did he experience angels 'within' it too.



Fig. 30: View from below the cliff showing the dark area of yew growth. Image Bob Hay

Leaving aside the anthropological significance to this yew, of most significance is that there is a yew on Bernera in the first place. Although Bernera and Lismore are unusual in that their geology consists mainly of limestone and not formed from the igneous rocks more typical of the west Highland region, this environment is exceptional for yews as it is fully exposed to the

salt laden, Atlantic storm strength winds which continually batter the islands, and would typically induce slow yew growth.

As Bob knowledgeably advised, trees are not traditionally popular in a long history of livestock farming on Lismore and Bernera “because they take up space” so yews may have been here and lost over many centuries. If so, that would make the yew on Bernera perhaps a sole survivor of a very ancient population. However, it could be the only yew there has ever been on Bernera and a result of avian seed dispersal however long ago. This is reasonable to assume, but is not quite so, as we found out.

On our return from the site we were excited to find another yew on Bernera, a tiny bush growing atop a steep cliff a few hundred metres to the north-west of the main site. Given the other yew is female, evidence suggests this bush is a direct progeny of the other and a result of avian seed dispersal.



Fig. 31: Yew bush growing on a cliff top, Bernera

It is genuinely compelling to consider that what is said to have been a huge yew 1,400 years ago began life on Bernera in such a way, germinating upon a cliff and, already in this case, its life has been sculpted by the prevailing weather and possible nibbling by sheep. Not only has an example of yew regeneration apparently occurred on Bernera, since the felling by the Campbells, the unexpected discovery of this other yew is equally significant. This is evidence suggesting the Holy Yew of Bernera has probably produced at least one successful offspring thriving as best it can in such a challenging habitat. This raises the possibility that further exploration of Bernera may find more and Bob will be investigating this exciting possibility in due course.

Part 8: Ballachulish House, Ballachulish, Lismore and Appin, PH49 4JX

Date: Wednesday 29/09/21

Grid Ref: NN 048 592

Coordinates: 56.683599, -5.188500

Objective: Confirm and record a historically significant yew

Conditions: Heavy showers and brief sunny spells

The property is privately owned and hosts a hospitality and accommodation business in parts of the house and our permission to visit was previously arranged. Ballachulish House as seen today was built to replace one destroyed in 1746 which had been the seat of the Stewarts of Ballachulish. The original house dated to around 1640 and is said to be where the decision for the Massacre of Glencoe was made in 1692 (7). A multi stemmed male yew tree stands near to the house.



Fig. 32: Yew at the rear of Ballachulish House

This yew has a place in history involving the notorious assassination in 1752 of Colin Roy Campbell of Glenure, known as the Red Fox, and consigned to history as the infamous Appin Murder, and for which an allegedly innocent man, James Stewart, was hanged. The story inspired Robert Louis Stevenson to write his famous novel *Kidnapped*.

The yew's place in the story is that the murder weapon, a gun, was hidden in the yew after the incident. It was retrieved and is now on display in the museum at Fort William, as advised by the owners of the house and fortunately they are well-aware and deeply appreciate the history of this yew.

It is in fine condition and has a low spread just above ground level of four stems. This suggests it may have bifurcated when very young due to predation probably by deer or rabbits. The stems were recorded as A – D.

Stem A measured 194 cm @ the root crown, 190 cm @ 50 cm and 185 cm @ 100 cm where it bifurcates.

Stem B measured 267 cm @ 10 cm and 280 cm @ 50 cm where it bifurcates.

Stem C measured 175 cm @ the root crown, 162 cm @ 50 cm, 180 cm @ 100 cm and 207 cm @ 120 cm where it bifurcates.

Stem D measured 180 cm @ 20 cm where it bifurcates.

The base of the yew measured 550 cm.



Fig: 33: Stems A (centre left) B (left) C (centre right) and D (right) Ballachulish House

If a yew was here and part of the circumstances of the Appin Murder over 250 years ago in 1752, it suggests a possible connection with the building dating to 1640 or perhaps an earlier one which has left no trace. If it is indeed connected to the 1640 construction it would be no older than 380 years making it just over 100 years old at the time of the Appin Murder in 1752.

If earlier than 1640 that would be within a period when the seat of the Ballachulish (Appin) Stewarts was located here. This branch of the Stewarts is in direct descent from the 4th High Steward Alexander, who died in 1293.



Fig. 34: The yew viewed from the west, Ballachulish House

Note: SYTHI's research into the history and culture of Scotland has revealed curious and compelling historical connections between the progenitor and successors of the House of Stewart and yew trees and the evidence suggests it is a profound, ancient, and highly intriguing relationship. Only recently in 2021 has SYTHI uncovered intriguing information which if true, would be of very significant historical and cultural importance.

Robert the Bruce is thought of as an Anglo-Norman, but this ignores his maternal line descended from royal Irish Gaelic ancestry. Moreover, Irish Gaelic culture had been steeped in esteem for the yew for thousands of years, featuring as it does in major tales of the Mythic Cycle of Ireland involving popular heroes such as Cuchulainn and royalty such as Queen Etain. In some stories the yew acts a portal between the mortal world and the realm of the Shining Ones (*Sidhe*) for both mortals and the *Sidhe* to pass into and return from the Otherworld. Robert the Bruce would be well-aware due to his Gaelic maternal line that in Gaelic Ireland the yew was not 'just' a tree. Being this unique fusion of Gaelic/Anglo Norman ancestry Robert the Bruce on becoming King Robert, was the founder of the Royal House of Stewart (Stuart) but was not its first king, that was Robert II.

Rendered in Irish and Scots Gaelic, Stewart is *Stiubhart* (also *Stiubairt*). Embedded in this name are Gaelic words for the yew – *iubhar* and *iubhair*.

Today Andrew Francis Stewart is the current head of the western Highland branch of the Stewarts of Appin and his Gaelic title is *Maclain Stiubhairt na h- Apainn* (8)

Part 9: Inchree – Wades Walk, Ardgour, PH33 6SG

Date: Wednesday 29/09/21

Grid Ref: NN 030 634

Coordinates: Not applicable

Objective: Confirm and record a yew mentioned in 2006

Conditions: Showers and sunny spells

A leaflet (Appendix A) published by the Highland Council and Forestry Commission Scotland in 2006 states at a resting point on this walk is “a bench seat by a large yew.”

To our disappointment we found neither after completing the entire circuit of the walk. Enquiries we made on 1st October 2021 with Forestry and Land Scotland by email found that they were surprised by the information in the leaflet, as to the best of their knowledge no yew (or bench) had ever existed at any point on Wade’s Walk and there must have been a misidentification of some other tree as a yew. They could not advise any further.

However, we did note that extensive felling in forestry operations, perhaps since 2006, had occurred up to the borders of the path in many areas along the walk. Further enquiries that a yew may have been lost in forestry operations after publication of the leaflet has been confirmed as not the case by Forest and Land Scotland, so the conclusion is that there never was a yew at the location described in the leaflet.

Part 10: Cona Glen, Highland, PH33 7AH

Date: Friday 01/10/21

Grid Ref: NM 9642 7171

Coordinates: Not applicable

Objective: To see if any yews existed in the glen based on place names

Conditions: Wet with sunny spells

We met the Head Stalker for Cona Glen House who confirmed no yews exist in the glen despite it containing in one locality the names:

Alt an Iubhair (Cliff of the yew)

Coire an Iubhair (Cauldron of the yew)

Eas an Iubhair (Waterfall of the yew)

Leac an Iubhair (Ledge of the yew)

Part 11: Sutherland's Grove, Balcardine Forest, Oban PA37 1SQ

Date: Friday 01/10/21

Grid Ref: NM 9654 4221

Coordinates 56.527786, -5.308973

Objective: To look for a potentially large yew

Conditions: Wet and overcast

Due to a conversation with our accommodation host, he advised that what may be a large yew tree stood on the road approaching the car park and was unmissable, so we decided to investigate. It is certainly unmissable, but it is not a yew, it is a Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) standing upon a slight slope. As it is obviously so impressive and magnificent, we recorded a girth of 680 cm at 100 cm high in case it is not in the Tree Register database. If it is, then the measure and images are useful as an update to its size and condition.



Fig 35: Douglas Fir with Bryony to give scale, Sutherland's Grove

Part 12: St Mary's church, Strontian, Highland, PH36 4HZ

Date: Friday 01/10/21

Grid Ref NM 81570 61560

Coordinates 56.694394, -5.568379

Objective: Confirm and record existence of yew

Conditions: Wet with sunny spells

As Cona Glen had drawn a blank, we looked at other areas within a reasonable distance. An online search of Strontian discovered an image of a yew at St Mary's church taken in 2011 (10). St Mary's church (now a private residence) was built in 1875 near the house of Sir Thomas Riddell (two significant yews exist at Riddell House, Scottish Borders) and there we found a stump of yew in the garden of an ongoing newbuild development project at Horsley Cottage, once on the church grounds. This was all that remains of the yew photographed in 2011. Enquiries into what had caused the felling of the yew received the following reply on 19/10/21 from Grant Stuart, Planning and Environment, Highland Council.

"There was a planning consent in 2018 for a new house (18/03943/FUL) south of Horsley Cottage and I was consulted on the application. I did not have a chance to visit the site but responded on the basis of the Protected Species and Tree Survey provided by the applicant (copy attached). This did not refer to a significant yew on site, but it did include a smaller yew - 15. I've just checked our aerial photography and can see that the yew tree appeared in the garden ground of Horsley Cottage in the 2013 aerial photograph (snip attached) but must have been removed as just the stump appears in the 2016 aerial (snip attached) A sad case of the pre-emptive felling of a tree well in advance of making a planning application. Not a great discovery for us either, but I trust this helps your records."



Fig. 36: Stump of the yew, Horsley Cottage, Strontian

The images are included in Appendix A below and a PDF copy of the Protected Species and Tree Survey by Kate Proctor of Highland Ecology 2018 is available from SYTHI upon request.

Despite our obvious disappointment at finding a stump, we noted a nearby path led to the Community Woodland, originally planted by the Riddell family in the early 1800's (11).

We soon found a female yew in a damp habitat with girths of:

305 cm @ the root crown

285 cm @ 50 cm

286 cm @ 80 cm below the bifurcation.



Fig. 37: Yew in Strontian Community Woodlands

Although it was not possible to measure the stump, as no one was around to ask for permission, photographs suggest the lost yew and its living neighbour could be contemporary in age and possibly dating to the Riddell planting period circa 200 years ago. However, girth measurements of the yew in the woodland would suggest an age over 200 years and, if so, an origin perhaps in the mid-18th century. Details of the yew have been reported to Grant Stuart.

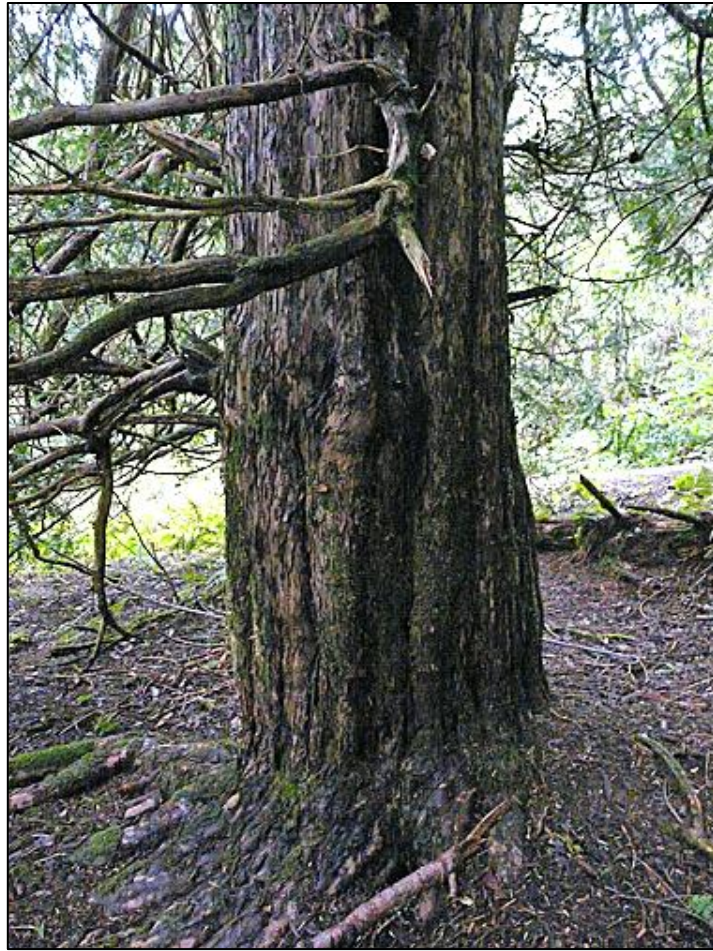


Fig. 38: The fluted trunk of the yew Strontian Community Woodlands

In a curious footnote:

“Sir David (Murray) bought the estate in 1722, after which Sir Alexander seems to have turned away from the Jacobite cause, instead throwing himself into another cause – that of economic and agricultural ‘improvement’ in the Highlands. In 1722 he discovered a substantial deposit of lead ore near Strontian which, after his father had passed the Ardnamurchan Estate to him in 1726, he set about exploiting. On finding that the local people lacked necessary skills, he imported English workmen, housing his employees in a village which he called New York.”
(11)

It is well known that the city of York has an ancient written history dating back to the mid first century AD when the Romans called it Eboracum. This was the Latinised version of the ancient British name of Eborakon meaning ‘fortress of the man of yew’, the man being the legendary king Ebracus or Ebor as later known and said to have founded York around 1,000 BC. The Romans also recorded the native Eborones tribe in the area and Eboracum became the capital of the northern areas under Roman control. Today the Anglican Archbishop of York is officially known as Ebor, “man of yew” and signs official documents as such. It is not known if Sir Alexander Murray knew of this yew connection to York, the Anglican church (and an intriguing link to the York Rite of Freemasonry) but in naming it as he did, he did name it, even if advertently, after the yew tree and a ‘man of yew’.

Part 13: Achnacloich Walled Garden, Connel, Argyll and Bute. PA37 1PR

Date: Saturday 02/10/21

Grid Ref: NM 95538 33931

Coordinates for each tree are given below.

Objective: Confirm and record Dawyck Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawyck') Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and Scot's Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*)

Conditions: Very wet and heavily overcast

Dawyck Beech 56.452738, -5.319463

Appearing to be in fine condition this Dawyck Beech stands on the left of the drive when entering the site, opposite the payment box and entrance to the field used for car parking. It is obviously a damp environment as the tree has an extensive covering of mosses and some epiphyte ferns. The girth measured 310 cm @ 150 cm. There is another young planting nearby about 20 paces further along the road towards the house.

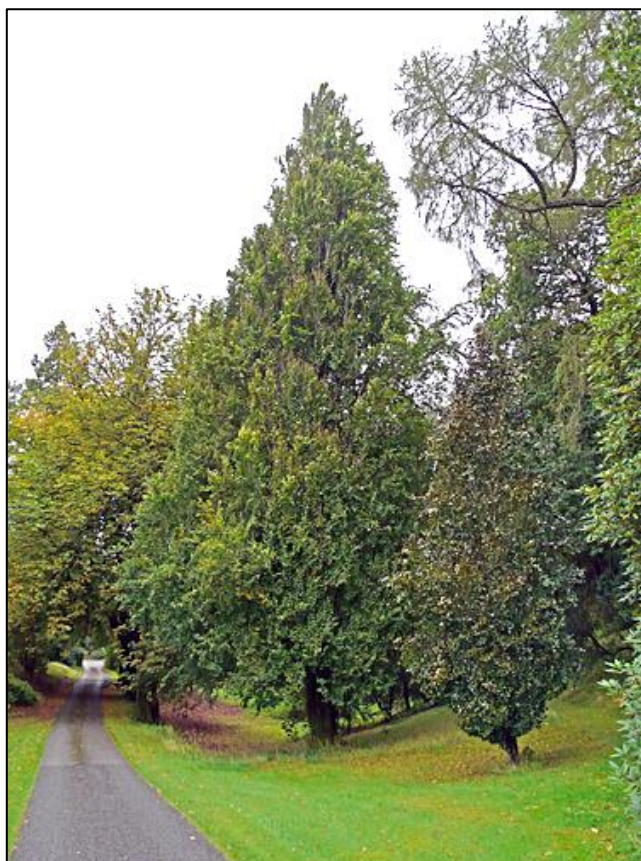


Fig. 39: Dawyck Beech (centre) and younger planting (right) Achnacloich Walled Garden



Fig. 39: Moss covered trunk of Dawyck Beech, Achnacloich

Douglas Fir 56.453564, - 5.319743

A truly unmissable and magnificent tree with astounding, beautiful and mesmerising morphology which grows on the lawn to the left of the approach to the house. It measured 983 cm girth at the root crown.

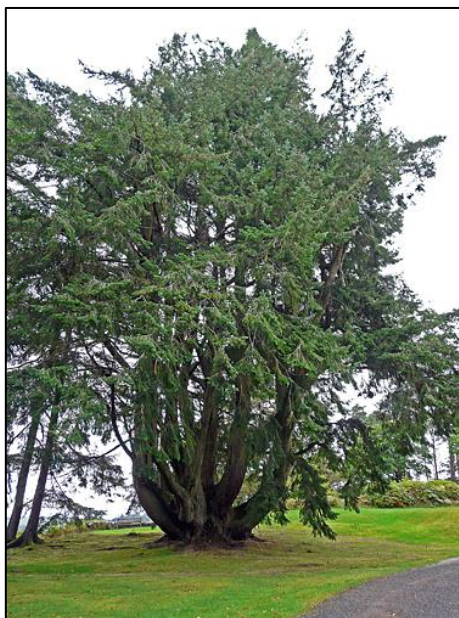


Fig. 40: View of Douglas Fir Achnacloich



Fig. 41: Multiple stems of Douglas Fir Achnacloich



Fig. 42: Profile of base where measurement was taken, Douglas Fir, Achnacloich

Scots Pine 56.454102, -5.317965

A triangle of three (noted as A, B and C) between the house and above the walled garden. Girths were measured at 150 cm and were:

Scots Pine A 347 cm

Scots Pine B 327cm

Scots Pine C 366 cm

Scots Pine C was the tallest and the one we were looking for.



Fig. 43: Scots Pine A (left) B (right) and C (centre background) Achnacloich

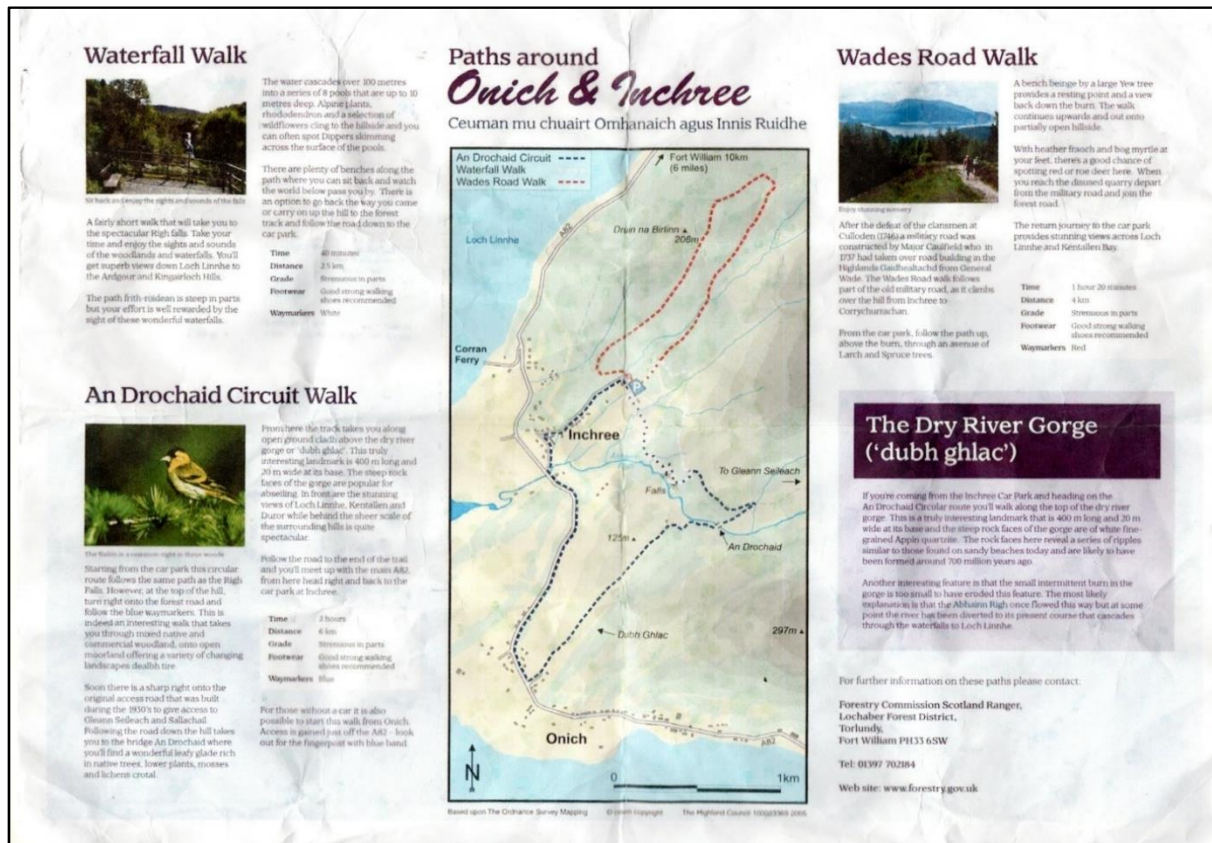


Fig. 44: Trunk of Scots Pine C Achnacloich

Part 14: References:

- (1) <https://www.smokedsalmon.co.uk/inverawe-house-family+pu+house+1>
 - (2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ardchattan_Priory
 - (3) <https://www.thecastlesofscotland.co.uk/the-best-castles/other-articles/lochnell-house/>
 - (4) <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22997/lochnell-house>
 - (5) <https://www.lochnell.co.uk/about>
 - (6) <https://www.derryjournal.com/heritage-and-retro/heritage/st-columbas-day-colmcille-his-own-words-why-i-love-derry-for-its-host-white-angels-one-end-other-2879353>
 - (7) <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23555/south-ballachulish-ballachulish-house>
 - (8) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Stewart,_4th_High_Steward_of_Scotland
 - (9) https://librarylink.highland.gov.uk/LLFiles/216582/full_216582.jpg
 - (10) Quote noted from notice board at Strontian Community woodland site:
“This woodland was originally planted by the Riddell family at the beginning of the 19th century and is known today as a “policy woodland”, making it very different from the surrounding woodlands.”
 - (11) <https://heritageardnamurchan.co.uk/the-landlords/>
- Inchlonaig article: <https://scotlands-yew-trees.org/yews-in-depth/inchlonaig/>

Part 15: Appendix A: Information Leaflet for Wade's Road Walk



The relevant section of the leaflet (upper right corner) map, as well as stating a large yew is at this location, prior states this resting point is reached after the path ascends through avenues of larch and pine which were presumably there in 2006.

As we discovered, there is no woodland here anymore along the steep and rocky ascending path to Wade's Road itself as it has been cleared since 2006. The possibility an 'old' yew of no apparent significance being felled during the forestry operations can be discounted as after further enquiries Forest and Land Scotland have confirmed there was never a yew at this location at any time prior to 2006.

Part 16: Appendix B: St Mary's Church (Horsley Cottage) Strontian:

Aerial images provided by Grant Stuart of the Highland Council showing where the yew stood at St Mary's (Horsely Cottage) Strontian in 2013 (red circle) and was gone by 2016. St Mary's is the building to the north-west of the yew in the image from 2013 with the road in front of it. Horsely Cottage is the building facing the yew just west of north from it.

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Part 17: Appendix C: Yew place names in Strontian and Ardgour, OS Explorer 391:

Alt an Iubhair – Cliff of the yew

Druim an Iubhair – Ridge of the yew

Coire an Iubhair – Cauldron of the Yew

Eas an Iubhair – Waterfall of the yew

Leac an Iubhair – Ledge of the yew

Sgurr an Iubhair – Peak of the yew (722 metres altitude). This suggest at one time yews may have been present on the slopes of the mountain above what is the present habitat limit so far found in the UK *circa* 500 metres in Borrowdale, Cumbria, England.

Sron an Iubhair – Nose (ridge) of the yew

Part 18: Acknowledgements

Paul and Bryony would like to emphasise the encouragement, support and assistance in this field research both in making some breakthrough discoveries about the yews but also giving us the opportunity to experience the stunning beauty of the lands and seas found throughout this this region of Scotland.

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<https://www.lismoregaelicheritagecentre.org/>

Iris and Lorna of Explore Lismore

<https://www.explorelismore.co.uk/>

Estate Office, Loch Nell castle

Fiona Hutchison, Kinlochlaich Walled Garden

<https://www.kinlochlaichgardencentre.co.uk/>

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Gordon Gray Stephens, nativewoods.co.uk

Grant Stuart, Highland Council

Heber Camus, Forestry and Land Scotland

Supporters of SYTHI



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