

Hedgerows and hedgerow trees

Skills in hedge laying started to get lost after WW2 and by the 1970's the loss in hedgerows was happening at an alarming rate. Skills in hedge laying and hedgerow maintenance were in danger of been lost forever. Out of these concerns was born the National Hedge laying Society, plus the development of grant schemes to encourage the restoration and positive management of hedgerows.

Maintenance of hedgerows is now part of good farming practice and the skills of the hedge layer are in great demand.

Why are hedges laid?

Laying hedges is just one of the techniques in managing hedgerows. Other techniques include "Trimming" and "Coppicing" (Cutting off at ground level to encourage the hedge to regenerate). Left unmanaged a hedgerow will continue to grow upwards and outwards and eventually become a line of trees.

Hedgerows have either evolved or been planted usually to create and maintain stock proof boundaries. They are also excellent wildlife habitats and corridors and form part of the fabric of the landscape.

A well-managed hedgerow is thick and bushy, an impenetrable barrier to sheep and cattle and a haven for wildlife. Cattle will lean against a hedge and make gaps whilst Sheep push through the base, hedge laying prevents this. The cut stems, which are bent over at an angle, prevent the sheep pushing through the stakes driven into the hedge and the binding along the top makes the fence strong to resist the weight of cattle. Laying the hedge also tidies it up and encourages the shrubs to regenerate keeping the hedge bushy and healthy. Once a hedge has been laid regular trimming will keep it in good order for up to 50 years when it may be appropriate to lay the hedge again, or even coppice it.

To find more about hedgerows and the different styles of management go the National Hedgelaying Society website <http://www.hedgelaying.org.uk/styles.htm>

More details are available via www.hedgeline.org.uk

<http://www.hedgerowharvest.org.uk/>

Hedgerow features important to wildlife

Different features of a hedgerow will be important to different species. The more **diverse** in composition a hedgerow is the more species it is likely to support due to a diversity of flowering and fruiting times. In general, **native hedge plants** such as **blackthorn** *Prunus spinosa*, **hawthorn** *Crataegus monogyna*, **hazel** *Corylus avellana*, **dogwood** *Cornus sanguinea* and **field maple** *Acer campestre* will support many more species than non-native plants such as garden privet, *Ligustrum ovalifolium*, leylandii and sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*. **Older hedgerows** often contain a large amount of **dead wood** and **plant litter** within the structure of the hedge and can provide a valuable habitat for many invertebrates (which in turn will attract predators such as bats, shrews and birds) and cover for small mammals.

Hedge bases are an important feature and provide a buffer zone to protect root systems and which can be an important habitat in its own right.

Management practices are crucial to the maintenance of a healthy hedge beneficial to wildlife: **hedge laying**, where the layed stems die off as the new shoots grow provides a source of dead wood. **Coppicing**, where stems are cut just above the ground, can provide a new lease of life to seriously damaged hedgerows. The **timing** of management is important to get the best from a hedge and avoid disturbance to animals breeding or over-wintering. The **cutting cycle** will determine the availability of fruits and flowers in a hedge; typically a cycle of two to three years is most beneficial for wildlife.

Cultural and historical importance

The UK is rightly known throughout the world for its rich and varied patterns of hedgerows, a part of our cultural and landscape heritage which ranks alongside great cathedrals, quaint villages and spectacular coastlines.

There is a popular belief that most hedgerows are recent additions to the countryside, having been planted across an open landscape under the Enclosure Acts of the early 19th Century. In fact, at least half our hedges are older than this, and many are hundreds, some even thousands, of years old. In Devon for example, we believe that over a quarter of our hedges are more than 800 years old - that's older than many parish churches - and some are underlain by banks built in Bronze Age times four thousand years ago. Others are older still, being remnants of the original wildwood that covered Britain and Ireland before man started to carve out his fields.

So, a great many of our hedgerows are ancient and of historical interest in their own right. This is particularly true where they mark parish boundaries, ancient monuments or other such features. Often beautiful old veteran trees, their lives prolonged by repeated pollarding over the years, reveal the great age of hedgerows and their importance to our ancestors.

We also have a rich tradition of different hedgerow management techniques, particularly of hedge laying, and this too is an important part of our cultural heritage, one which helps to give both a sense of continuity and one of place to local communities.

Further reading

- Oliver Rackham. *The History of the Countryside*. 1986. Dent and Sons, London.
- E Pollard, M D Hooper and N W Moore. *Hedges*. 1974. New Naturalist, Collins, London

Landscape importance

The networks of hedgerows, and in some places dry stone walls, that cover so much of our countryside pick out changes in topography, soils and underlying geology, and define current, and often past, patterns of agriculture and other land use. Together with woods, roads and settlements, they give character to the landscape and impart much local distinctiveness.

Just imagine a countryside without hedgerows. How featureless and bland it would be!

Hedgerow trees

Since the late 18th century the abundance of hedge trees has dramatically declined. Periodic changes in farming techniques and agricultural needs, increased use of machinery, hedge removal, Dutch elm disease, neglect and lack of replacement have all taken their toll on the hedge tree population.

Why hedge trees matter

Hedgerow trees are important for several reasons. In the past they were highly valued for timber and with changing emphasis on renewable energy may once more come be useful for fuel. In livestock areas they are significant for shelter and shade, especially so as the climate changes and our summers become hotter, our winters wetter and we have more storms and gales. They are of great importance for wildlife and in some parts of the country they are notable as a source of fruit and other ingredients for food and drink. Trees in hedgerows often also screen eyesores and unsightly developments, and can protect privacy. Many of our most valued landscapes are dependent on hedgerow trees – without them, huge tracts of countryside would be bleak indeed.

The hedge tree population

In ancient hedges trees were selected and grown for a variety of specific uses. Oak, ash and elm were grown for timber amongst other purposes and appear to have been the commonest hedgerow trees. Willows and poplars were also frequent hedge trees and these species were often pollarded. Some minor trees species including field maple, aspen, holly and hornbeam also appear to have been specifically grown in hedges. In some places beech became a widespread hedge tree, and Exmoor's landscape is famous for its 19th century beech hedges.

Along with timber species many fruit trees were also grown such as crab apple, wild cherry, hazel, elder and wild pear. These trees provided food in the autumn when other food supplies were beginning to run short.

Britain's hedges contain an important collection of mature, over mature and ancient trees. In fact 30% of the hedge tree population is over 100 years old (CS2000). Part of the reason for this is the historical management they received. One of the main management techniques employed historically has been pollarding, which involves cutting the crown off a young tree at around 1.8-4.5m (6 to 15 ft) from the ground leaving behind a permanent trunk. Pollarding retains the tree in a state of greater vitality by interrupting the normal aging process and, since the crown is smaller, reducing the likelihood of storm damage. Pollarding trees has therefore allowed many to grow for several hundred years and some for much longer

Why hedge trees are important for wildlife

Hedge trees provide a whole range of habitats in one small area. Together with the hedgerow, they provide shelter, food, nesting sites, song posts and hiding places, as well as stepping stones between woodland habitats. Many farmland birds use

hedgerows trees: buzzards build their nests in the canopy, while woodpeckers and tree sparrows breed in holes. Bats, including rarities like the barbastelle and Bechstein's, roost in crevices and tree holes. The trunks of veteran trees can support rich lichen communities. Butterflies like hairstreaks may be seen foraging for honey dew from aphids and laying their eggs high up in oaks and elms.

Rotting wood in living and standing dead trees within hedges is especially important for providing habitats for a wide variety of dead-wood beetles such as the lesser stag-beetle (*Dorcus parallelipedus*) and others, some of which are very rare

The Forest of Bowland AONB runs a Traditional Boundaries programme that includes grant aid towards positive management of drystone walls and hedgerows. Also as part of this programme training courses and support towards competitions in the skills of drystone walling and hedge laying are run.