Hedges – Why bother?

Dick Greenaway

Hedges are a nuisance. They have to be cut and the cuttings puncture your tyres. Surround the patch with larch lap and paint it green!

But hedges DO make a difference. Get to somewhere where you can see a decent chunk of your area and look at the field pattern. Then mentally remove the hedges. What you have left is not Berkshire or south Oxfordshire. Possibly parts of Yorkshire, but not 'Oxon or Berks'. So hedges are important in giving landscape an identity.

Of course they also have the severely practical function for which they were originally designed of keeping stock in and intruders out. But in addition to that they provide a record of the development of the landscape and are very important homes, routeways and sources of food for the local wildlife - particularly for birds, small mammals and insects. For example, it has been estimated that 50% of British plant species (flora) live in hedges, and that 50% of British butterflies are associated with hedges. A quarter of bird species considered as important under the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan are closely associated with hedgerows for nesting and feeding.

Hedges are almost an eco-system in their own right. The nectar and pollen of hedgerow species feeds the early insects, which in turn feed the nestlings of birds nesting in the hedges. The fallen leaves and deadwood in the hedge bottom are eaten by invertebrates – which, in turn, are eaten by hedgehogs and so on. A species rich hedge in autumn is a veritable larder of winter food with scarlet hips and haws, pink spindle berries, black

dogwood berries, wild cherries and wayfaring tree berries and blue black sloes with the fluffy white, seed bearing old man's beard draped over all. Late ripening ivy berries fill a hungry gap in late winter.

Because this importance was recognised and because hedges were disappearing at an alarming rate, legislation was introduced to control their removal. In the 1980's some 5000 miles of hedges were being removed every year as farmers rearranged their farms to suit the use of ever larger machinery and as towns expanded and roads were widened to accommodate a growing and increasingly mobile population. The current regulations are The Hedgerow Regulations 1997. They set out the historical and wildlife criteria for defining an important hedge and define how they are to be protected by the planning processes. The criteria are complex and it is not proposed to go into them in detail, but they define an important hedge and describe the method for surveying a hedge to record the important features. Basically, an important hedge is species rich in both the shrubs that make up the hedge and in the ground flora. It has standard trees scattered along it and forms the boundary of a site known to be ancient. It is also accessible to the public by being alongside a road or a path and forms an important visual element in the landscape. It is valuable as a connexion between habitats and it will link to other wildlife habitats such as woods or ponds. Few hedges will have all these features, but the degree to which they have them defines their importance.

Hedges go back a long way. The name comes from an Anglo-Saxon word 'hege' and 'old hedges' are mentioned in many early boundary descriptions, some of which date from the 8th and 9th centuries. Many of these boundaries – still lined with hedges – can still be

identified. Hedges go back even further than that. Roman writers on agriculture give instructions on the planting and maintenance of hedges, and give the impression that it was an established practice in the 1st century BC.

Hedges were formed in three basic ways. Firstly, they were created by a process called 'assarting'. This was the clearing of a patch of woodland to form a field leaving a narrow strip of the wood as a shaw or shelter belt between the new field and the existing fields. Over the years this strip could be nibbled away by ploughing until it became narrow enough to be managed as a hedge. But it would still contain all the ground flora of the original woodland. These are particularly valuable hedges. Secondly, hedges can be planted. Records of planted hedges go back at least to Tudor times and show that mixtures of several species were commonly used when planting a new hedge . The hedge bottom of a planted hedge will contain the ground plants of the field being sub-divided. These will not be the woodland species – bluebell etc – but may contain dog's mercury as a sign of anciently disturbed land. The heyday of planted hedges was after the Enclosure Acts were passed in the late 1700's and 1800's when millions of acres of Open Field were divided up with straight hedges. Many firms were founded to supply hedge sets for these. Thirdly, hedges can be self sown. A fence put up in an open area reasonably close to a source of seed will soon acquire a hedge as birds, which have fed on the local berries, perch on the fence and deposit seeds with their droppings. By mapping the species contained in a hedge – both the shrubs and the ground flora – it is possible to see how the landscape developed. In my own parish of Ashampstead many of the roadside hedges contain a woodland ground flora of bluebells, wood anemones etc. - all plants which, if

once destroyed never return. These plants are recognised by English Nature as Ancient Woodland Indicator Species and can be used to identify ancient woodland relic hedges as well as ancient woods. As the map shows, it is clear that many of the roads around the parish were cut through woodland and the fields developed alongside them later – leaving a strip of woodland and an undisturbed strip of land to become an ancient hedge. In some parts of the parish, notably in the north east, the whole area appears to have been cleared and the roads to have developed from tracks crossing the open fields since they contain only field flora in the hedge bottoms. The same technique indicates that the parish boundary was marked out through woodland. We are fortunate in having most of the original boundary bank around the parish. Parishes are thought to have been defined in the 9th or 10th centuries and Ashampstead's banks are massive in places and still crowned with hedges containing ancient coppice stools. Coppice stools are the still living stumps of hedgerow trees that were deliberately cut off at ground level so that they would produce many stems. Repeated cutting keeps the stool alive almost indefinitely and results in strikingly shaped stumps. The very richness of the woodland ground flora in the hedges on the boundary banks also indicates clearly that they are derived from woodland. The length of bank separating us from Streatley along the Southridge road is well worth a visit in May or early June when it is covered in bluebells, aenemones, woodruff, dog's mercury, yellow archangel and many other flowers.

There are ways to estimate the age of hedges, but they have to be used with care and supported by several sources of evidence. 'Hooper's Hedge Hypothesis' was developed by Dr Max Hooper after many years of studying hedges known to be ancient. He proposed that a 30 metre length of hedge would acquire a new hardwood species for

every century of its existence. This has been interpreted as meaning that by counting the number of species you can estimate its age. This is not what he proposed and obviously only works if the hedge started with one species! It does not apply to hedges formed from woodland or to hedges planted with more than one species. Elm in a hedge can cause problems. Elm spreads by suckering and can rapidly take over an ancient species rich hedge turning it into a single species hedge.

This is why the hedge bottom plants are so important, because they can indicate the degree of reliance which can be placed on Hooper's Hypothesis for that particular hedge. It is very sad to see Countryside Stewardship officials advocating spraying off the hedge bottom before replanting and gapping up thus destroying this evidence and reducing the beauty, utility, historical and wildlife interest of the hedge. It was not considered necessary in the past – why should it be now?

To really estimate the age of a hedge you need other evidence in addition to the species count. The best source of evidence comes from early maps. Early maps held by some of the large estates can give a great deal of detailed information. Other sources of early maps are the local Record Offices – in our case the Berkshire Record Office in Reading. In Berkshire the first map of real use for hedge studies is the survey by John Rocque published in 1761. This is sufficiently detailed at 2" to the mile to show individual hedges and these are shown with a special hedge symbol to differentiate them from un-hedged boundaries. However, one must not expect such an early map made with primitive equipment to match a modern map. Nevertheless, used with care and tied in to features such as roads, churches and surviving old houses, the maps can be used to confirm the existence of a modern hedge in 1761. Pride's Survey of 1791 seems mainly to be cribbed

from Rocque and does not add much. The first really detailed and accurate surveys in many parishes are the Tithe Award Maps of the 1840's and these are superb. They are directly comparable with modern mapping but do not indicate whether a boundary was hedged or merely fenced. Without doubt the best maps are the First Edition Ordnance Survey Large Scale Maps (about 1850 – 1880) which clearly show hedges with every standard tree in the hedge! In the opinion of many people involved in landscape studies these are the best maps ever produced by the Ordnance Survey. By using a combination of evidence from early mapping, from early documents and from field study it is possible to make a case for the age of a hedge, but it should be remembered that the age can rarely be more than an estimate. It is not unusual to see dates for hedges quoted to a year in local history studies. Given the uncertainties described above these will almost never be sustainable!

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) are currently sponsoring a nationwide study of hedges and the local Wildlife Trusts are providing volunteers and training and co-ordinating the results. The intention is to provide the planning authorities with a database of information about hedges which will allow them to make informed judgements when dealing with applications for hedgerow removal. It will also provide a benchmark against which future studies can be measured to estimate the changes taking place in our countryside, and of course it will provide a valuable source of information to the landscape historian.

So hedges really are better than larch lap or barbed wire – even if they do have to be cut!

Sources:

'Fields in the English Landscape'	Christopher Taylor	London 1975
'The History of the Countryside'	Oliver Rackham	London 1986
'Hedgerow'	Eric Thomas & John T White	London 1980
'Hedging – a practical handbook'	Alan Brooks & Elizabeth Agate	
	British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BCTV)	
'Hedgerows of England'	The Countryside Agency	May 2000
'The Hedgerow Regulations 1997'	The Stationery Office Statutory Instrument 1160	