

Devon Hedges and the Modern Farm



Recent years have seen considerable changes in farming practices. This section outlines how farmers in Devon have had to adjust their hedge management to keep abreast of a continually changing business climate.

Despite the publicity surrounding hedgerow removal in recent years, Devon remains a densely hedged county. There has been far less removal of hedges than elsewhere in the country and, for the most part, hedges retain their primary use as stock-proof boundaries. Dairying, together with sheep and beef farming, predominates and farmers need to paddock their animals to ensure efficient use of grazing and to prevent them straying. Most farmers now report they have no intention of removing further hedges, but are concerned about the high cost of keeping their remaining hedges in good order.

An unchanged landscape?

There is a tendency to assume that the Devon landscape has come to us unaltered down the centuries and that the changes now taking place are unprecedented. This is not the case. The countryside is dynamic and is undergoing constant change to take account of the demands and expectations of society. These include cheaper food, higher incomes for those working the land, and an attractive and diverse countryside rich in wildlife.

The last century saw periods of radical change in the landscape of the County, with spates of hedge removal and hedge creation as the fortunes of farming ebbed and flowed. The post-war decades of the twentieth century were another such period. Farmers were encouraged to increase productivity with the help of public grants and subsidies. Indeed, up until 1983 the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food paid up to 30% of costs for the grubbing up of hedges. The wheel has perhaps started to come full circle with grant aid now available for the renovation and re-instatement of hedges. See page 37 for details.

Pressures for change

Although not universally popular, hedge removal is carried out for good reason. Farming, like any other industry, is fiercely competitive and farmers are under pressure to improve the efficiency of their production and reduce their costs. The introduction of barbed wire, mechanical hedge cutters and earth-movers has changed the way hedges are managed. Where field sizes are too small to be farmed profitably, enlarging the field by removing a section

of hedge is often the only economic solution. Clearly there are a number of practical advantages in having large and uniformly shaped fields:

- 🌿 *It minimises equipment turning thus saving time and reducing the the risk of soil compaction.*
- 🌿 *There is less shading of headlands with corresponding loss of crop or grass growth.*
- 🌿 *Savings can be made in hedge cutting and maintenance by having improved access to all hedges.*
- 🌿 *Removal of wide or double hedges can result in significant land gain: the removal of 400m of Devon hedge can free up one tenth of a hectare for cropping.*

However it is also important to remember that hedgerow removal can have farming disadvantages:

- 🌿 *A greater risk of soil erosion on sloping cultivated land.*
- 🌿 *Loss of shelter for stock. A hedge can provide shelter over a distance of between ten and twenty times its height.*
- 🌿 *Reduction of wind speed so improving crop yields, reduction of evapotranspiration and water demand, whilst allowing soil temperature increase.*
- 🌿 *Recent research has shown that hedges can have unforeseen benefits, particularly to arable cropping. The natural predators of crop pests (such as ladybirds and ground beetles which prey on cereal aphids), live in the tussocks of grass and in the shrubs during the winter when fields are inhospitable. Hedges beside*

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Larger field sizes aid economic farm management.

arable crops are a good source of these pest predators and can reduce the costs of pest control.

🌿 *There is considerable wildlife loss.*

Increased mechanisation and reduction in farm labour has inevitably resulted in changes to hedge management on Devon farms. Mechanised hedge cutters have reduced the cost of routine hedge maintenance (and changed the way hedges are managed), but the costs on a modest size farm are still significant. Hedging contractors charging typically £12 per hour can soon make a dent in farmers' profits. Long term management, such as labour-intensive steeping and casting up of even a short section of hedge is not a cheap option but creates a feature of great value.

Society's expectations and demands of the countryside has changed greatly in recent years. Growing appreciation of, and concern for the conservation of the landscape has resulted in an explosion of membership to a wide variety of organisations such as the RSPB, National Trust and CPRE. Legal protection for hedgerows reflects this ground swell of public opinion and the importance that is attached to the place of hedges in the landscape.

Until recently, emphasis was placed solely on increasing farm output. Today, responding to changes within the Common Agricultural Policy, many Devon farmers are joining farm management schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes, sometimes

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Devon hedges can provide shelter for stock and crops.

with educational access. Many are diversifying into a range of tourism related activities and actively encourage people on to their farms to see how they manage their hedges. Many more know the value hedges offer as game cover and manage them accordingly.

In today's changing world, the role of farming is under the microscope. Public expectation is high. Farmers have always worn the badge of good countryside stewardship with pride. Sensitive hedge management can only enhance this reputation still further.

Further reading

1. Rackham, O. 1993. *The History of the Countryside*. J. M. Dent.
2. Schama, S. 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. Harper Collins.

CASE STUDY

John Berry, Billingsmoor Farm, Butterleigh

John Berry, a past Chairman of Devon FWAG, has a mixed farm of 104ha (256 acres) in Mid Devon. He would be the first to admit that he has changed the way he views his hedges. From 1979, when he started farming at Billingsmoor, through the 1980s he removed 2.4km (1½ miles) of hedges. There were two reasons for this: firstly, the slope of many of his fields made him concerned for farm safety and secondly many of the fields had triangular or awkward corners which were very difficult to farm efficiently. Since those days he has planted 0.8km (½ mile) of new hedge and a further 4.1ha (10 acres) of new woodland including many field corners. This, together with other habitat creation work such as the digging of several ponds, has greatly enhanced the wildlife value of the farm.

Mr Berry has also changed his hedge management strategy. Previously all hedges were cut back heavily every year. Over the last ten years however, he has allowed them to grow up and out and now only trims lightly above the level of the previous year. Some hedges are now more than 1m (3ft) wider as a result.

He has also created conservation areas – mainly in wetland sites – where hedges are allowed to grow up untopped, but the sides are trimmed to keep them stockproof. To maintain the high landscape value of the area, saplings have been allowed to develop into hedgerow trees. Mr Berry also traditionally manages some of his hedges. Every year some steeping is undertaken with 0.5km (⅓ mile) completed during winter 1996-7.