

Devon's Distinctive Hedges – The background to the project

The essential contribution of Devon's hedges to the county's landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage has been acknowledged for many years. However, before this project there was no published overview of the different types of hedge and where they could be found.

The project identifies the main types of hedges that are to be found in each part of Devon and provides high quality printed and electronic material which celebrates their rich diversity. The Devon Hedge Group hopes that the information will be used to ensure that new hedge planting and the restoration of existing hedges are carried out in ways that maintain the distinctive character of the county's different landscapes. We also hope it will help to keep alive local skills and traditions.

The project was assisted by grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Devon County Council and both the Blackdown Hills and North Devon AONB sustainable development funds. It was managed by the Devon Hedge Group and the work was undertaken by Land Use Consultants, reporting to a small steering group.

The project had three outputs:

- **A large and attractive full-colour poster**
- **A web-based interactive version of the poster**, with additional text and photos on each of the hedge types.
- **Spatial data** for use with Geographical Information System (GIS) software that provides digital information about the distribution of the hedge types, as a technical resource for future work.

The information contained in these outputs was obtained by following these steps:

1. Review of existing information. Published information on the characteristics of Devon's hedges was gathered from a range of sources including local Landscape Character Assessments and the Historic Landscape Characterisation of the county. This produced a database and GIS mapping that recorded the occurrence of 22 different types of hedges, based on dominant shrub species or means of construction, in each of Devon's parishes.

2. Involvement of specialist expertise. A workshop was held in July 2010 with a wide range of individuals with expertise on Devon's hedges. The emerging findings from the previous task were debated and gaps in knowledge identified. Following the workshop a shortlist of types of hedge that are locally distinctive in Devon was drawn up.

3. Public consultation. A web-based questionnaire, publicised through the local media, was used to gather information from interested organisations and from members of the public on the special features of hedges in different parts of the county. A total of 42 responses were received and analysed, feeding back into the database and GIS mapping of hedge types and their distribution.

4. Preparation of the poster and web-based material. Drafts of the poster, showing the distribution of the six types of hedge that are considered to be most distinctive in the county, were circulated to the steering group and other interested people for comment. When these were finalised, the web-based material was developed.

5. Dissemination of results. Five hundred copies of the poster have been printed, for distribution by the Devon Hedge Group and County Council to interested groups and organisations such as schools and libraries in Devon. The web-based material is hosted on the County Council's website (www.devon.gov.uk/hedges) and is also available for circulation as a PDF file. The GIS data are held by the County Council for use in future work on the distribution of different hedge types.

This work has increased understanding of what makes Devon's 53,000 km of hedges so special. It has revealed how their origins and historical development, their biodiversity and patterns, have helped to shape the natural environment, landscape and cultural heritage of different parts of the county.

The project has also shown how much more there is to discover about Devon's hedges. Topics where additional work by groups or individuals would prove fruitful include more detailed mapping of the distribution of key hedgerow species (such as the English and Cornish elms) or rare species that depend on hedgerow habitats (such as the white-letter hairstreak butterfly), and local studies into the links between field boundary patterns and the history of the landscape, from its original enclosure and settlement through many centuries of changing land use. There is also much scope for classifying and mapping the county's hedges at a finer scale.