

# An Introduction to Devon Hedges



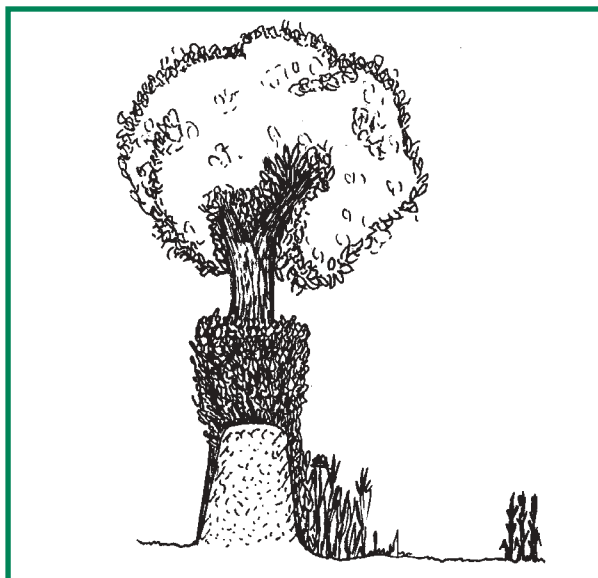
Hedges, established for agricultural reasons, shape and define the character of the Devon countryside. They provide a historical record of the changes in land use across the County over the last millennium. Indeed the field patterns they produce are part of the very essence of Devon, giving the countryside a unique distinction, memorable to local and visitor alike.

This introductory section provides an overview of Devon's hedges, describing briefly their character, value and methods of management. Many of the topics within this section are covered in more detail elsewhere in the book.

## *The Devon hedge*

In contrast to hedgerows in other parts of Britain, the Devon hedge consists of an earth bank, faced with stone or turf, which usually has bushy shrubs growing along the top. The true Devonian refers to these structures as hedges – even when there are no shrubs. Although less traditional, the term 'hedgebank' is also used. A number of other hedge terms are unique to the County; for example, 'steeping' is the Devon name for hedge-laying. Hedgerow trees are an integral and prominent feature of many Devon hedges (see pages 23-26).

Across Devon there are great variations in the style and structure of hedges which reflect their age, origin, and management. Ancient banks or 'reaves', often lacking any shrubby cover other than gorse, are laid out in straight lines on parts of Dartmoor and



*The components of a Devon hedge: bank, woody shrubs, hedgerow trees and uncultivated margin.*

represent some of the earliest hedge-type structures in the County. Massive hedgebanks line mile after mile of sunken lanes in areas such as the South Hams. On the high ground of Exmoor, the Blackdowns and Dartmoor, the hedges are typically wall-like structures, stone faced and often topped with beech.

## *Farming and practical value*

Devon's hedges were constructed first and foremost for agricultural purposes. The thick and bushy growth of a well-maintained Devon hedge provides an effective stock-proof barrier, particularly where the bank is upright and intact. Their shelter value for stock and crops can give important protection against the wind. In addition, the earth banks of a Devon hedge are effective in controlling soil erosion and run-off, particularly from tilled slopes during the wet winter months. Edges and unsprayed field margins can help pest control by supporting populations of predatory insects which prey on crop pests. Historically, hedges and hedgerow trees

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provided a source of farm wood and their foliage was eaten by grazing stock – such uses have little value today.

### *Archaeological and cultural value*

As boundary features, hedges contain the history of the landscape. They may record decisions on land division going back thousands of years. For the archaeologist the structure of the bank is important, often containing or burying material which throws light on past conditions and land use. They sometimes follow the ramparts of hill forts or the banks of historic or prehistoric enclosures. Hedges also form parish boundaries and have symbolic or cultural significance.

### *Landscape value*

Hedges make the Devon landscape what it is today: beautiful! Indeed, they are essential to local distinctiveness. For example, in the Blackdown Hills the ancient, irregularly shaped and mixed hedges of the valley slopes contrast markedly with the grid pattern of the younger, beech-dominated hedges of the plateau. Hedges have other, modern day, uses. Their bushy growth can provide an effective filter against air pollution, especially alongside busy roads. They also make effective shelters and screens for houses, orchards, farm buildings and industrial sites.

### *Wildlife value*

Many rare and threatened species are associated with Devon hedges: greater-horseshoe bats and cirl buntings in South Devon, the dormouse on the Blackdowns and brown hairstreak butterfly on the Culm Measures of northern Devon. More important is the value of hedges for a vast range of more common wildlife species, particularly in areas of intensive farming.

### *Changes to Devon hedges*

Devon has escaped some of the more extreme forms of landscape change, experienced in other parts of lowland Britain. However, large numbers of hedges were removed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and rates of removal accelerated after the Second World War due to agricultural intensification and mechanisation, urban expansion and road development. More recently the net loss has started to slow, with many farmers attaching increasing importance to their hedges.

A far greater threat to Devon's hedges is the change in management practices that has been

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*A hedgebank full of spring flowers.*

experienced in recent times. The traditional forms of hedge maintenance based on regular steeping, 'casting up' (repair of the bank), and hand trimming have largely stopped due to the high costs involved. At the same time, higher stocking density has increased erosion problems on the earth banks. Despite the practicality and efficiency of the flail for regular hedge trimming, to maintain the hedge in the long term it must eventually be steeped and cast up. Little grant aid is currently available to farmers to help them pay for this work and many of the necessary traditional skills have been lost. The future conservation of Devon's fine hedgerow resource is reliant upon the widespread recognition of the need for a balanced approach to its management and appropriate practical support for landowners and farmers to achieve this.

### *Further reading*

1. Hoskins, W. G. 1992. *The Making of the English Countryside*. Hodder and Stoughton.
2. Rackham, O. 1993. *The History of the Countryside*. J. M. Dent.
3. Maclean, M. 1992. *New Hedges for the Countryside*. Farming Press.

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