

DEVON'S HEDGES

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History of the Hedge in the Devon Landscape

Hedges are one of the most significant elements in the Devon landscape, contributing not only to the present day beauty and sense of place, but forming a living part of its history. As a human creation, the pattern and form of Devon's hedges records the development of its unique rural landscape. From Bronze Age 'reaves' to Medieval 'strip fields', Devon has a wealth of archaeologically important hedges, often still in use today as part of traditionally managed fields on the farm. Older hedges can hold important evidence for the archaeologist; in particular, where a buried soil is preserved beneath the earth-bank, this may provide a 'time-capsule' of fossil pollen which can be scientifically dated to the origin of the hedge or reconstructed to form a historic snapshot of the local vegetation.

Devon contains many of the oldest hedges in the country. Widespread and early field enclosure during the Middle Ages (AD 1250-1450), means that as many as three-quarters of existing hedges could be of medieval origin. Many have since been modified, others entirely lost, but the 'mighty great hedges' observed by John Hooker in AD 1599 have essentially remained, to become a symbol of Devon's enduring appeal, as well as a living connection with its past. This information sheet provides a simple history of hedges in the Devon landscape and outlines some of the sources of information which can be used in studying them.

Ancient Hedges

A number of Devon hedges incorporate earthworks that were already old by the time they were integrated into a field, such as at Stoke Rivers, North Devon (Fig. 1). They can include the former ramparts of Iron Age hillforts (c. 700 BC – AD 50), for example at Stockland Little Camp, East Devon. Even earlier settlement enclosures or field boundaries, like coaxial field systems on Dartmoor, can date back over 4000 years to the Bronze Age or Neolithic period. Other prehistoric hedges preserve ancient land divisions, for instance the Dartmoor 'reaves' (systems of long parallel boundary banks) are known to date from the Middle Bronze Age

(c.1400 -1000 BC) and many are still part of present-day field boundaries.

'Haga', the Old English word for a hedge or fence, is first documented in Anglo-Saxon charters. In Devon, these legal documents often describe the boundaries of manorial estates. The latter sometimes survive as existing parish boundaries, representing some of the oldest hedges in the County. With limited historical and archaeological evidence from the later Anglo-Saxon period (AD 800–1066) in Devon, it is difficult to know how widespread hedges were, but the typical landscape of dispersed farms, embanked roads and manorial estates is thought to have emerged at this time. Turner (2007) suggests that some 'boundary hedges' mentioned in charters from Devon may have marked the outer boundary of 'open strip' fields. These were large, cultivated fields of communally farmed 'open strips'. Recent pollen research by Fyfe (2006) has found that cereal production especially, increased significantly in lowland Devon at this time. A rare example of 'open strip farming' still survives today at Braunton Great Field, North Devon. As the narrow strips were ploughed over time they took on a typical curve at one end, where the oxen were turned. A 'reversed-S' pattern often developed when ploughed in both directions.



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Fig. 1 Stoke Rivers prehistoric settlement. Living hedges may incorporate much older features such as the bank in the south-eastern quadrant of this prehistoric enclosure. The rest of the enclosure boundary is visible as an earthwork, though much reduced by ploughing. A medieval road has later been built across the enclosure.

Medieval Enclosure

The celebrated Devon historian, Professor W.G. Hoskins (1954), suggested that the period between AD 1150 and 1350 was one of great colonisation of the Devon countryside when the characteristic landscape was born, 'the lanes, the small irregular fields, the great hedgebanks...'. A distinctive part of south-western farming was the relatively early enclosure of open strips into 'strip fields' by about AD 1450. In other areas, identified by Rackham (1986) as 'planned countryside', common open fields persisted far longer. The strip field enclosed several strips to produce a long, narrow enclosure which was often part of a strip field system, for example at Sheepwash (Fig. 2). Turner (2007) writes that on average the strip field was only 30m wide by 140-200m long. Strip fields were once widespread across Devon, but most have been altered or lost. Many hedges however, still have the distinctive curvilinear form of an 'open strip', indicating their medieval origin. Other medieval enclosures have very irregular hedges, which may have developed piecemeal over time, for example from woodland clearance or as a result of hedge or settlement loss which often produces a distinctive 'kink' in the hedge.

In a recent history of Devon husbandry, Stanes (2008) suggests that enclosure of fields with hedges would have been considered progressive husbandry by medieval landlords. Though an initially arduous task, hedge creation allowed better selective breeding and disease control for stock, which was not possible on common land. Hedges had other important benefits, including the regular production of hedgewood fuel. Hedge tree species were also selectively grown for tool-making, hurdles and a multitude of other everyday uses.



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Fig. 2 Medieval Strip Fields at Sheepwash, Devon

Hedges were valuable, managed assets and part of a distinctive, south-western farming now known as 'convertible husbandry'. Within this, the hedge was part of a 10-20 year cycle of alternating pasture and cultivation. Initial hedgelaying or coppicing of a mature hedge was often followed by cultivation of the adjacent fields. After a few seasons, the crop yield declined and the field reverted to a grazed pasture 'ley', by which time the renewed hedge had grown to provide adequate shade and shelter for stock, as well as a barrier of thick shrubs.

Further agricultural improvements from the fifteenth century onwards, especially by richer estates, led to the regularisation of many small medieval enclosures into larger 'barton' fields. Soil fertility was also improved by spreading Devon marl (alkaline clay) and sea sand. Large-scale sheep farming satisfied the high demand for wool and the increasing importance of cloth production and export to the wealth of the County. Stanes (2008) records that on a visit in AD 1645, Oliver Cromwell was heard to declare, 'I have been in all the counties of England and the Devonshire husbandry is the best'. The Devon hedge was an important and enduring part of this distinctive farming.

Historical documents from this time provide some insight into the construction of Devon hedges. For example, records of Tavistock Abbey (Finberg, 1951) indicate that in AD 1465 the granting of a farm lease nearby specified the construction of a ditch four feet wide and deep, the earth being piled up into a bank and planted with hawthorn and coppice wood. Devon hedges could be a formidable barrier to stock. Marshall (writing in AD 1796) describes a typical hedge in west Devon as, 'a mound of earth, eight...ten...feet wide at the base...and nearly as much in height...It is covered in coppice woods...which are cut at fifteen or twenty years growth, and...together with the bank, form a barrier more than thirty feet high'. 'Hedgewood,' he further notes, 'is looked up to as a crop and is profitable as such'.

Parliamentary Enclosure

The Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which did so much to change the face of the English countryside, had a lesser effect on Devon. Hoskins (1954) notes that, 'there are no parliamentary acts for the enclosure of open fields in Devon, but there are 71 awards among

the county records dealing with wastes and commons'. Between AD 1802 and 1874 many of the moors and heaths of the Blackdown Hills and Haldon Hills, amongst others, were enclosed. The new, large rectangular fields were very noticeable in the landscape, for example on Stockland Hill (Fig. 3), and the hedges were often planted with a single shrub species such as beech.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the sum total of hedges in Devon was thought to be between 50,000 and 60,000 miles. Rackham (1986) suggested that after around AD 1870, there was little change in hedge numbers across the country until the end of World War II. However, recent historic landscape study in Devon (Turner, 2007), has shown that there was already moderate hedge removal by 1945 and this accelerated after the war with farm mechanisation and modern food production. Today, the sum total of Devon hedges is thought to be around 33,000 miles, suggesting almost half may have been removed or declined during the modern period. Despite these losses, hedges remain a prominent and characteristic feature of the Devon landscape.

Studying Devon's hedges

Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)

Hedges are an important component of the historic landscape. Devon County Council (supported by English Heritage) has recently undertaken a county-wide mapping project to characterise historic elements in today's landscape, using historic ordnance survey maps, aerial photographs and County Historic Environment Record (HER) sources. The Devon Historic Landscape Characterisation



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Fig. 3 Field patterns at Stockland, East Devon. In the foreground, the irregular fields are of medieval or earlier date. In the upper part of the photograph, the very regular field patterns show 'parliamentary enclosure' on Stockland Hill, which took place as recently as AD 1860. Before then, the higher ground on this Greensand ridge was open rough ground.

(HLC) mapping was completed by Dr. Sam Turner in 2005 and can be viewed online at: www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment. The findings of HLC were later developed in Turner's book 'Ancient Country: the historic character of rural Devon' (2007).

HLC suggests that most hedges in the modern Devon landscape were in place by the Middle Ages (AD 1250–1450). The pattern of fields and the woodlands, farmsteads and parishes which developed were built on elements from earlier ages, and these in turn have been affected by more recent industrial and agricultural changes, including mining and forestry. HLC was designed to record and map a sequence of historic and modern character types, such as 'medieval enclosures based on strip fields' or 'modern settlement'. Devon hedges are an important component of most historic landscape character types, and the often high percentage of field boundary loss (including orchard enclosures), since the late nineteenth century is also recorded by HLC.

Shrub species diversity

Hedge shrub species diversity has also been used to study the history of the Devon hedge. Early studies by Dr Max Hooper (Pollard et. al. 1974) suggested that in a given 30 metre stretch of hedgerow each

shrub species represented around 100 years of growth; older hedges may contain more shrub species due to natural dispersal. However, considerable care in interpretation is, of course, necessary, as species establish naturally at differing rates. Furthermore, hedge species may have been deliberately planted in older hedges due to the many uses of hedgewood, especially in the pre-industrial period. Charles Vancouver, describing agricultural practices in Devon in the nineteenth century, noted how hedges in the Blackdown Hills were planted up using a collection of species from local woods, commons and rough ground. As a result, these hedges comprise five or six species even though they are little more than 100 years old.

Documentary sources

Documentary evidence provides an excellent record of changes in the pattern and extent of field boundaries in Devon over time. Most comprehensive are the Parish Tithe Maps and Apportionments which show field and parish



photo © Devon Record Office

Fig. 4 Managed hedges, hedge-trees and strip fields at Langdon. Detail from the Calmady estate maps of Langdon and Down Thomas (Volume of thirty-four maps AD 1788-1789. Calmady, 6107M. Devon Record Office)

boundaries in around AD 1840, while earlier records survive occasionally in Anglo-Saxon charters, glebe terriers (church land inventories) and old estate maps. The latter can include detailed records of hedged landscapes, such as the Calmady maps (AD 1788-1789) of the Langdon and Down Thomas estate in South Devon (Fig. 4). Many of these historical documents are available to view at the Devon Record Office and West Country Studies Library in Exeter. Finally, comparison of modern records with earlier ordnance survey maps and aerial photographs, shows how field patterns have continued to evolve to the present day.

Bibliography and Further reading

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