



# HEDGES IN THE CORNISH LANDSCAPE

© Robin Menneer 2007. Revised 2023.

*Physical origins of hedges / history of landscape / types of hedge / landscape losses / neglect & mismanagement / what is a view? / Cornish hedges prevent erosion and flooding / trimming / walkers, riders & motorists / lack of sympathy / lines on maps / victim of poor taste / passing on traditions / maintaining hedges / stone stiles & iron gates / the future.*

The hedges in Cornwall are different from those in most of Britain. The typical Cornish hedge, a hedgebank built of stones and earth with trees and scrub growing on top, defines the Cornish landscape. The north-western coast is open to the Atlantic gales, affected for miles inland by the battering of salt winds and heavy rains. The bushes and trees present their crouched backs to the prevailing weather, making most of their growth on the sheltered side and giving the characteristic slanting, windblown look to the landscape. To the south-eastern side of the hills the landscape is softer and greener, with tall trees in the valleys and luxuriant growth on the hedges. The county enjoys a more southerly latitude than the rest of the country, combined



*Typical Cornish field hedge.*

with the influence of the Gulf Stream, resulting in a mild maritime climate. The colourful greenness of Cornish hedges is related to the warm damp winters and summers without many droughts. The granite uplands are often shrouded in clinging mists or drenched with long-continued rains, with nearly twice as much rainfall as the sheltered lower parts. This feature combined with the great antiquity and the complex geology of our hedges gave them a vast diversity of natural life, with a widely-varying appearance in the landscape.

## THE STOUT LADY AT THE BALL

The volcanic action that made the rocks and hills of Cornwall was described by Baring-Gould, in the year 1899 in a way that would certainly be frowned-upon in these more sensitive times as not 'politically correct', but nonetheless is picturesque and graphic. His analogy was of a stout lady at a ball, dressed in slate-grey satin. 'By nature and age, assisted by victuals, she was

un-adapted to take violent exercise. Nevertheless dance she would. Dance she did, till there ensued an explosion. Hooks, eyes, buttons yielded, and there ensued an eruption of subjacent material. In places the fastenings held so that the tumescent undergarments foamed out at intervals in large bulging masses. This is precisely what took place with Mother Earth in one of her gambols. Her slate panoply gave way, parted from N.E. to S.W., and out burst the granite, which had been kept under and was not intended for show. Her hooks and eyes gave way first of all in South Devon, and out swelled the great mass of Dartmoor. They held for a little space, and then out broke another mass that constitutes the Bodmin moors. It heaved to the surface again north of St. Austell, then was held back as far as Redruth and Camborne. A few more hooks remained firm, and then the garment gave way for the Land's End district, and, finally out of the sea it shows again in Scilly.'



*Granite intrusion, exposed by weathering, forms rugged hilltop in West Penwith. Wooden stile is non-traditional in Cornwall and looks wrong in this granite landscape. Cornish hedges like this one should have stiles of the same local stone.*

This volcanic upheaval happened about 250 million years ago, resulting in our landscape of rugged granite-topped tors and broad hills separated by steep-sided valleys. The description of the stout lady is novel, though not strictly accurate, as rather than bursting out the eruptions cooled beneath the up-heaved sedimentary rock layer, which afterwards was reduced by erosion to expose the granite core. Around the granite there is a belt of metamorphic rock, violently heated and hardened by these eruptions. Outside of that are the altered remains of the softer sedimentary rock, locally called *killas*, which has been eroded away over the millennia. This geological process has provided us with the great variety of stone found in Cornwall, and the materials for building hedges that blend naturally with the landscape. Until recently, how the individual Cornish hedge is built was always related to the local stone.

## HISTORY OF LANDSCAPE

The land-form of Cornwall would be bare and bleak if deprived of the apparently random field divisions provided by our traditionally unkempt hedges. They are the most prominent feature in the Cornish landscape, estimated to total about thirty thousand miles in length. Many are alongside a public highway, whether it be road or footpath, and they are seen every day by most people. To have an understanding of our hedges and landscape, one needs to know about the distinctive culture and history of Cornwall, which was mapped as a separate country from England until the Elizabethan era. For centuries, tin and other metal streaming, cliff workings and hard-rock shaft mining went on side by side with farming, and much mine spoil was used in building hedges. Today almost every valley and moor, throughout most of Cornwall, would show evidence of previous mining activities and their production needs, if it were not for the obliterating effects of modern machinery which has 'tidied up' the buildings and burrows. Early mining activity from the bronze age onwards denuded Cornwall of woods in the demand for charcoal for smelting, so hedge trees for the production of timber and wood were a major part in the economy. Today most of the trees in the landscape are in the hedges.

Our earliest hedges are probably 6,000 years old, with new hedges still being built in the same styles. Older hedges are often unrecognised. These are the crooked ones, snaking across the landscape in bends and kinks which show their antiquity. Throughout Cornwall, hedges can be variously identified with Bronze Age smallholdings or Mediaeval open-field systems, with deer parks, mining, transport, farming and other activities. These, imposed and super-imposed on the landscape, have in time formed a pattern combining the haphazard and the regular, showing elements of many ages as the durable nature of the Cornish hedges' construction has allowed them to outlive the centuries.



*Ancient stone hedge rebuilt by unemployed miners. In rebuilding, the kinks typical of prehistoric hedges showing where other hedges have been removed to enlarge the originally tiny fields, were smoothed out into curves.*

Cornwall, with its individual geological, social and industrial history, developed differently from the ordinary English rural landscape, retaining a far higher proportion of anciently-established hedges despite the obliterating surface activity in the busiest mining areas. As historical structures, hedges give evidence in their siting, shape and size and in the pattern of stone cladding. Their structure sits on earlier land use, sealing it into the ground and protecting it against casual interference. They contain material which may have historical importance, and support vegetation that reveals the earlier nature of the land. All of this adds up to a distinctive landscape.

## TYPES OF HEDGE

There are three distinct types of hedge in Cornwall. The Cornish hedge is the commonest type. The stone hedge is mainly confined to the higher hills and cliffs, while the turf hedge is more usual in East Cornwall, where the land was less heated and eroded, mining activity consequently less, and the surface stone less abundant. Sometimes a turf hedge has partial stonework, and cross-sections of hedges cut when laying pipelines or other works have shown many a hedge starting as a turf hedge, then later converted into a Cornish hedge by the addition of stone cladding, and vice-versa, where turf has been used to enlarge a low Cornish hedge. Academics sometimes refer to the Cornish hedge as the Celtic hedge. Similar hedges appear along the Atlantic seaboard as far north as the Orkneys and to the south mainly in the Channel Islands and Brittany. Most of these may be seen as degenerate Cornish hedges, being lower or less structured than the average hedge in Cornwall, and more mixed with the ordinary English type of hedgerow. Cornwall, at the centre of the Atlantic arc, with its fine examples, has the greatest concentration of locally-diverse types of these hedges surviving in Britain today.

The three main types of hedge have a different look in the landscape. Stone hedges echo the outcropping rock and moor-stone on the hills. Turf hedges often grow luxuriantly with tall trees and massed bushes, giving a look of the wilder of English hedgerows. Cornish hedges have the most diverse appearance, a variable mixture of trees, bushes and wild flowers, quite often with the stone construction showing to picturesque effect.

The granite hedge may be thought of as the true Cornish hedge, being the most conspicuous especially on Bodmin moor and in West Penwith. Hedges built of sedimentary rock are probably as numerous but the stone is often hidden by the luxuriant plant growth in these mainly more sheltered parts of the county, as is usually the case with turf hedges for the same reason. Elsewhere a variety of local rock types are used as available, the most intractable being those without an obvious grain, such as “blue elvan”, quartz and others used mainly in the areas once the centre of industry where hedges were built of mining spoil. Such is the geological variety that the type of stone, and the styles of building that naturally go with it, are keenly evocative of local areas.

It is a great pity, especially with the value to tourism of 'spirit of place', that new hedges of sedimentary rock are being more frequently built in igneous areas. This outrages both tradition and the visible landscape. A shale hedge in an area where not only the existing hedges but all the older buildings and the naturally outcropping stone are granite, looks as out of place as an ugly modern building; equally a massive granite hedge would look wrong if transported to the slate country in North Cornwall. Local distinctiveness in the hedges is so much a part of the diverse character and mystique of Cornwall that the poor specifying of inappropriate stone, gradually bringing a sameness to much of our roadside landscape, is to be deplored. [See Cornish Hedges Library “Geology and Hedges in Cornwall”.]

### LANDSCAPE LOSSES

There were many changes in the Cornish landscape in the last forty years of the 20th century, most of them inextricably linked with hedges, and most, unfortunately, to be regretted as visually impoverishing. Most widely-recognised is the loss of the tall elm trees along so many hedges, which nearly all died in the devastating 1960's epidemic of Dutch Elm Disease. Robbed of their stately forms the landscape immediately appeared flatter, more empty and more mundane. Instead of encouraging elm regrowth, the emphasis later was on planting trees, unfortunately mainly conifers which have a deadening effect on the play of light and shadow, which is a key element of the maritime landscape, unlike the elms which once enhanced it.

Less sudden, but equally degrading, has been the enlargement of the intricate patchwork of small fields by slow, sporadic but inexorable removal of hedges. While this has been less drastic in Cornwall than in some other agricultural areas, as the county kept for much longer its small family farms and traditional livestock farming, more than enough have been removed to affect the landscape, often unevenly. Insidiously, much of the hedge removal happened after it had slowed down or virtually ceased in other parts of Britain.



*These fields have not been 'improved', so they still keep the traditional Cornish look with their attractive shapes, natural hedge growth and subtle colouring of turfy grasses.*

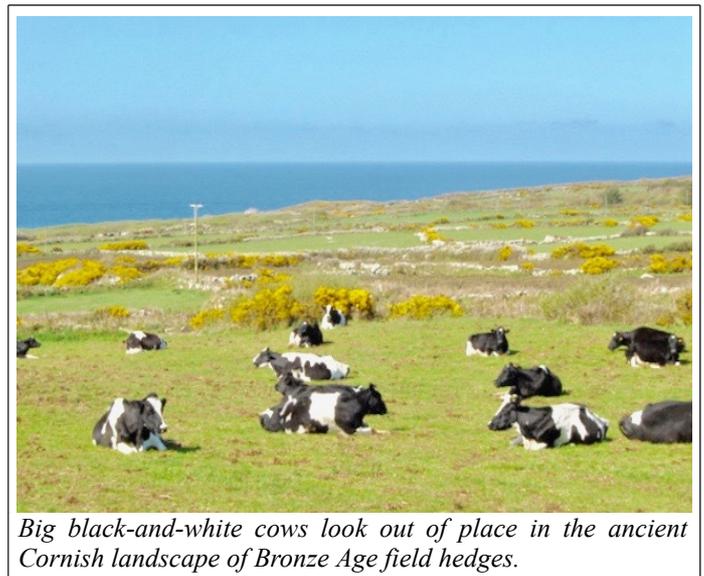
In company with this, the nationally-driven farming changes steadily erased the many colours and seasonal patterns of the 'patches' in the patchwork, where almost every

field used to appear different from its neighbour. In the place of half a dozen fields cycling through the spectrum of colour and pattern of natural pasture, with mixed livestock grazing and various crops at different stages of growth, are now usually two or three big fields of rye-grass alternating with icy polythene or transient brown earth announcing a whole-farm monoculture of potatoes or wheat, with the occasional glaring contrast of luminous yellow rape. This may be agriculturally impressive, but visually it is a poor substitute for the old-time landscape with, speaking fancifully, its patchwork counterpane of so many subtle shades of fabric; green velvet embroidered with golden, white, ochre, brown or black animal herds, interspersed with the grey-green brocade of brassicas, mauve- or white-dotted green cotton prints of clover or potatoes, pink or purple plush of flowering hay grasses, silver-green watered silk of barley, brown or gold corduroy of plough or stubbles, and floral tapestry of wildflower-strewn fallow. Sic transit gloria mundi.

At the same time, the economic pressure for more production caused the ploughing-up, burning and over-grazing of huge areas of the remaining heathland, so the mosaic of heather and gorse, moorland grasses and mosses on the hilltops, once blending with the colours of the fields and the stony hedges and outcrops of rock, largely disappeared under monotonous green ley or invasive bracken.

In the face of these unarguable economic changes, often much regretted by the farmers themselves at the time, there was all the more reason to keep the natural beauty and colour in the hedges. Sadly, a worse enemy, as causing more permanent and difficult damage, came in the 1970s in the shape of the flail-mower, bringing another severe reduction of variety and biodiversity. The natural shapes of hedgetops were reduced to a flattened semi-uniformity, the many-coloured wild grasses and flowers on the hedgebank sides overwhelmed by the flail-induced dark and dingy green of ivy and rank weeds. Added to the deadly greens of conifer trees and rye-grass leys, and the change from golden Guernsey cattle to black-and-white Friesians, the warm, sunny and richly-colourful Cornish landscape beloved of artists seemed to be half-rubbed-out and smeared over with a dirty brush.

The likelihood is that it will never fully recover, despite many efforts at conservation. Does it matter, when the county still retains a greater-than-average diversity and a more intact hedge network than many others, and tourists still enjoy its beauty? Yes, because it has been a modern example of the speed with which precious things are lost, and a reminder of why landscape matters.



Human beings have an instinctive need to know that those essentials to survival - shelter, food and fuel - are always near at hand; and this begets a basic love and need for the beauty that this provision for our livelihood creates. In our civilised state we have translated this into the pleasure we feel in a traditionally-farmed landscape, with its natural growth of hedges where these essentials of life are represented. We may know intellectually that 75 acres of polythene sheeting provide sustenance in the form of an earlier crop, but we do not instinctively know it, and not even the most practical among us would call it beautiful.

## NEGLECT AND MISMANAGEMENT

Natural and economic changes go on all the time in our landscape, and are not necessarily for the worse. While the visual effect may not be the same, it may have its own attractions as long as certain natural laws are met. An example is the more recent replacement of many of the pedigree Friesians by an assortment of Continental breeds of cattle, with the happy result of bringing back a variety of natural hide colourings to blend and tone with the tawny colours in the Cornish landscape; as does the revival of interest in 'rare breeds' of livestock. These atone somewhat for the recent rapid reduction in numbers of cattle due to economic strictures on dairy and beef production, and the longer-ago disappearance of pigs and poultry from our fields into intensive housing. The trend to grant-aid for conservation and amenity aspects of farming rather than forced production may opportunely reverse some of the less desirable landscape effects of the recent half-century. Cornwall's hedges are a key to recovery.

This unique heritage has been too much taken for granted, and accordingly has suffered from abuse, neglect or misguided care. Trimming with flails has reduced too many hedges to a boring urbanised appearance, and has wiped out far too much of their flora and fauna and their contribution to the landscape. Misguided maintenance blurs the different visual effects that the many styles of hedge have across Cornwall, as bushy tops are removed and flail-induced weeds overrun the hedgebank. Revival of the flowering plants and trees in the hedges would do much to restore our landscape; naturally 'untidy' Cornish hedges are a precious asset in our villages and countryside. [See CHL "Restoring Biodiversity in Cornish Hedges"]

Neglect of repairs to the stonework is another serious threat to traditional field boundaries, as in time they become ruinous. The two-pronged action by government agencies of financial incentive for retention and maintenance, and of the law against removal, is having an influence in those parts of Cornwall where they operate. Unfortunately, maintenance and restoration of hedges are often defined as separate and unrelated functions; this causes administrative confusion in both central and local government. There is misunderstanding regarding the difference between a hedge and a hedgerow. A clear definition is in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (5th edition, 1966): hedge n. Fence of bushes or low trees living or dead, or of turf, stone, etc.; hedgerow, row of bushes forming hedge. So a hedgerow is a hedge, but a hedge is not necessarily a hedgerow. Judgement in a court of law has been given that the hedgerow of trees and bushes along the top of a Cornish hedge is protected, thereby protecting the supporting hedge of earth and stonework too.

## WHAT IS A VIEW ?

As well as neglect and ignorant vandalism of existing hedges and loss of them to intensive farming economics, many people are worried about the actions of those who are responsible for altering our landscape, usually for commercial reasons, though sometimes in a misguided attempt to improve the view. It is worth considering what is desirable in a view of the countryside, especially in an area that encourages tourism. A view should appear permanent, reflecting constancy and stability, but have components involving change that are novel, pleasant and unexpected. Movement and change interest the eye, so there should be animal life, plants and trees. The sense of natural motion is also given by lines that are gently and variously curving without hard edges, and with a predominance of horizontal over vertical lines. The way texture is seen across the view should be varied and outlines of objects should be seen more by

changes in the textural contrast than by obvious hard lines. The natural physical features should be allowed to state their identity of place, giving a harmonious whole, without obtrusive interruption by incompatible shapes, colours or patterns. Preferably there should be a little more detail than is expected and special items of interest should be separated from each other, balanced by what lies between. Lastly a view should have happy associations. Our eyesight deteriorates with age, halving in effectiveness between adolescence and middle age, while associations accrue. In viewing the landscape, particularly on a misty day, the memory and imagination of parents is likely to play a greater part in what they perceive than what their children might see.

Hedges generally meet these requirements, and in Cornwall they are outstanding. The viewer knows that many are ancient (seeing constancy and stability), and that their look alters with the seasons (involving change). They are novel, different from English hedgerows, pleasant, and unexpected to first-time visitors. The variety of plants on the hedge-sides and the bushes on the hedgetops give a meandering look, and an ever-changing texture without hard visual edges. The hedges run more or less horizontally and gently emphasise the lie of the land. For movement there are cloud shadows passing across the land, windblown trees in the hedges,

grasses ripple and there are birds flying and cattle grazing the fields between. Always there is something to discover when looking at a hedge in more detail; patterns of stone, forms and shadows of trees, colours of flowers, animal life.



*Hedges emphasise the lie of the land and, with trees, livestock and cloud shadows give movement and interest to the view.*

Visitors and children are left with fond memories of the beautiful floral display and the approachable wildlife in our hedges, and of picnics taken in the shelter of a friendly hedgebank. They enjoy using the variety of stone stiles on their walks, finding they often get a good view from the topmost tread, and are charmed by the discovery of unusual items of

interest such as Celtic crosses in the hedge. The tendency for fields to be made larger with fewer hedges in the view, and with less farm livestock moving around, is much regretted. In many parts of Cornwall's interior, away from the sea, the network of hedges alone gives form, content and interest to the view, following the gently-rounded undulations of the hills. These beautiful hedges with their floral and tree cover have been voted by visitors to be the best attraction in Cornwall. Nine out of ten people think it is important to keep the countryside the way it has traditionally been maintained.

## HEDGES PREVENT SOIL EROSION AND FLOODING

Aside from the normal visual effect in the landscape, hedges have an important role to play in the prevention of erosion. Everyone hates to see huge ruts in fields where run-off has carried away the topsoil, and to find swathes of silt across the roads following heavy rain. Cornwall's substantial hedgebanks, whether of Cornish, turf or stone construction, are far more effective than the English hedgerow in stemming wind-drift of dry soil and the downhill

movement of water and silt across the fields. Where hedges run across the slope, the surface water is held in a series of long pools behind each of the great bulwarks they form, until it sinks safely into the subsoil. The removal of field hedges in recent years has caused serious flooding in some villages and on roads where it had not happened before, with the evidence of silt to show whence the water came. Cornish hedges, or at least turf hedges, now these latter are so economically built using a swing-shovel, should always be used in place of wire or post-and-rail fences. Even low hedgebanks, of perhaps only half to one metre high, make a considerable difference to field run-off, as well as their extra contribution to biodiversity and landscape.

We must avoid the removal of hedges and their substitution by fences or plain thorn English-type hedgerows without hedgebanks, not only for the loss of wildlife value and distinctive local landscape but because these lack this stabilising effect against erosion so essential in Cornwall, especially now in the face of climate change extremes of weather. The thin layer of soil on a steep land is at the mercy of wind and rain sweeping in from the open sea. These elements gave us our distinctive landscape, in which wire fences, wooden stiles, garden shrub or tree hedgerows and the various modern building and boundary types imported from other areas of Britain, look out of place and are functionally inept. In this climate the posts rot, the wire rusts, the wooden stiles become dangerously slippery, the heavy-topped trees blow over, and the modern building materials soon become tatty. In Cornwall's ancient landscape these things appear stark and alien, lacking sympathetic lines and compatible textures and exposing their poverty of substance.



*Wire fence and wooden stile are out of place in Cornwall. They mar the character of the landscape, posts soon rot and stiles become slimy in the Cornish climate, dangerous and difficult for the less-able to climb. Fences allow run-off erosion on the rain-lashed sloping land, whereas a good Cornish hedge prevents flooding and soil movement downhill.*

In building new Cornish hedges straight lines should be avoided by making them meander naturally across the landscape. Traditionally pegs and line were seldom used by Cornish hedgers. A good man can build a dead-straight hedge by eye when required, but in the general landscape field hedges more comfortably follow the contours and irregularities of the land. Existing straight hedges can be made more sympathetic to the landscape by allowing trees and bushes on them to grow to a natural and varied outline.

## TRIMMING

The maintenance of hedges is very important. The hedgebank sides should be trimmed of dead and woody growth in winter with a finger-bar cutter or other clean-cutting implement, leaving the green grassy and herbaceous growth untouched, and letting bushes and trees grow naturally out of the hedgetop, so as to get the subtle changes in texture and outline. This increases the bird population, bringing more and varied movement into the view. Hedges are even more important now that with modern intensive farming we have lost the varied shades and stippling of natural grasses and wildflowers. Old-time pasture fields were any colour except the deadly green of modern rye-grass leys. The tawny chestnut and beige, pinks, golds, greys and

subtle greens and blues, laced with white flowers too, so attractive and natural to the eye, are now conserved in the hedges alone. This attractive effect is lost by repeated flailing, which destroys the natural flora and replaces it with the dull green of rank weeds and ivy as it degrades the hedge habitat.

The viewpoint of the bystander is not always appreciated by people who manage our hedges in the landscape. The hedger sees the length of hedge he is working as an example of his craftsmanship. The farmer sees the hedge as a means of keeping his livestock in the field, and for shelter. These countrymen are familiar with the diverse wildlife in and around the hedge during the four seasons. They see the hedge as being an enjoyable but demanding part of their working conditions. Then there is the contractor hired to trim the hedge who sees it as the job he is required to do. Too often this is specified or understood merely as a 'tidy job' allied to the



*Flail-ruined Cornish hedge now smothered with ivy and bracken, its varied, undulating natural outline of bushes and colourful mosaic of wild flowers destroyed.*

clean upkeep of the road surface or the field. This leads to the close-shaving and horizontal top that is death to wildlife and a visual blight on the landscape.

Today these attitudes must also embrace tourism, on which Cornwall relies for so much of its income. The visitor's ideas may be influenced by television and other media, perhaps in ignorance of the reality of the working countryside. Even so there is no reason why a good compromise should not be made between practical farming and the importance to the tourist of the attractiveness of hedges in the view, and their boon of shelter from sea winds for the lightly-clad holidaymaker.

## WALKERS, RIDERS AND MOTORISTS

Walkers come in two sorts. One sees the hedges and stiles as obstructions to his progress across the countryside towards his mileage goal or destination, and the other, who nowadays makes up the vast majority, enjoys the wildlife seen in the hedges, slowing down or stopping to look at it, while the children love climbing over the stone stiles. Walkers and riders, in seeking to avoid road traffic, find themselves moving alongside sometimes charmingly neglected hedges with a close view of an astonishing variety of plants and animal life. From a car there is an entirely different perspective on the landscape, because of the speed of travel. A walker or rider can appreciate the beauty of a butterfly at rest on a flower, but the butterfly would have to be ten times its size to be clearly seen by a travelling motorist. He flashes by roadside hedges too fast for his passengers to enjoy them, so they may think them a nuisance blocking the more distant landscape. The busy traffic on main roads casts dust and fumes on to the plants growing on the hedges. This has a partially smothering and toxic effect on the sensitive wildlife, permitting only the more robust vegetation to survive, and reducing the quality of the close view. Persistent flailing virtually eliminates wildlife and destroys the appearance, making the hedge look boring. Where the hedges are set back from the road with a wide verge there is more chance to see items of interest, especially if nature has been allowed to have its own way, producing its random arrangement of different forms, colours and textures.

## LACK OF SYMPATHY

It is only since the flail-degradation of the hedges became more apparent that people have been heard complaining that the hedges block the view. The ugly bulk of a much-flailed hedge, weed-infested and square-topped, bears no comparison to the landscape-enhancing charm of the properly-managed Cornish hedge. The problem is that a small minority of people will ignorantly do what adversely affects the majority; they will meddle, so nature is put out of balance and good landscape principles are violated. Government directives and the policies of non-governmental organisations alike tend to filter down from above, through officials and employees who have no knowledge of local conditions, causing sometimes disastrous changes in practice. The approach to landscape or environmental enhancement too often lacks reverence for tradition, antiquity, natural history or social interaction. Without realising it, the person in charge uses the area that he or she grew up in as the standard. If, as is often the case, they are from, or were trained in, other parts of Britain, their perception of Cornwall is likely to be warped from the start. They are often from a town background and lack awareness that, although tidiness may be attractive to them, it does not occur naturally in landscape either broadly or in detail. They may be unable to sit comfortably in an ancient weather-worn place. They may agree that Cornwall has grandeur, natural beauty and a melancholy legacy which should enrich the soul, but they have no innate feeling for it.

When such persons have a hand in managing or improving the landscape, they produce ideas of their own and these usually show the suburban influence. They may regard a prehistoric or a species-rich hedge in the same light as a defunct garden rockery, just a heap of stones to be cleared away for their scheme. An attempt is sometimes made to justify such hedge removal in that it returns the land to its original aspect, but this is spurious as nearly all the other conditions then pertaining have either vanished or have also changed and developed along with the hedges. The hedge is often the last precious remnant of that prior scene, and the only effective screen to some ugly modern development.

Lacking insight into the way the Cornish countryside has evolved, people can only do their best, or as others often see it, their worst; hence the strange way they move in to Cornwall for its beauty and atmosphere, and then do everything to alter and spoil their little bit of it. This, added to commercial exploitation, modern farming and the sometimes misguided efforts of local government and planning, transforms unspoilt features into eyesores. Eyesores in Cornwall are particularly unfortunate as there are so many distant views, enhanced by clear air and dramatic lighting. Much of the glory of the Cornish landscape lies in this climatic influence; deep blue skies, turbulent clouds, and sunshine so strong it gleams brilliantly on the land, side-lighting the hedges like a theatrical spotlight. In these conditions a field enlarged by hedge removal draws the eye like a bald scar in the detail of surrounding fields, and an ugly modernised house or recent building may show the whites of its eyes at ten miles distance. Closer to, the light shows up every tawdry detail of cheap building materials, faded plastic or rust-streaked cement. This is why the Cornish hedges, which form a natural screen and whose detail is delightful, make such a strong contribution to the landscape, and why unsympathetic trimming, in reducing them to dullness and uniformity, is a calamity.



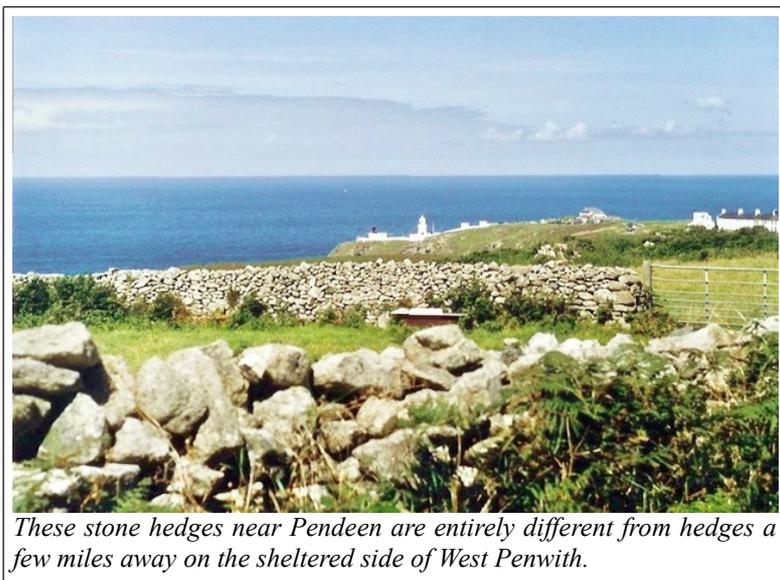
*With the best of intentions, work directed towards tourism can detrimentally alter the landscape that people come to see. While Cornish hedges have been built at this new entrance to a camping park, their style of construction and chosen planting is not traditional and the end result looks suburban and out of character.*

## LINES ON MAPS

Some of the landscape architects and other consultants who come to Cornwall, often appointed to a temporary post on a short-term contract, are faced with the doubtful task of “doing something” about the Cornish landscape. These days a lot of the money comes via grant schemes which are supposed to bring back work and jobs to the Cornish people. Somehow these praiseworthy intentions get converted into a tide of paperwork detailing 'schemes', 'projects', 'studies', 'initiatives' and 'action plans'. Grand-sounding words are written and contracts are prepared for people to put the world to rights. Few of these are seen to be given to local people, the excuse often being that either they are not qualified for the job or that they do not bother to apply.

One of the jobs that falls to these activities is that of having to describe the landscape and then to say what should be done with it. Cornwall's landscape is so rich and diverse that it is impossible to describe it fully and accurately, yet people are asked to do this and publish a report. Being strangers to Cornwall, they have to resort to techniques developed elsewhere, and one of these is called 'Landscape Classification'. This is where the 'expert' looks at an area and decides what is the predominant landscape type. He then decides how big this area is, and marks it on a map, giving it a name. He does this for the whole of Cornwall, neatly parcelling all of it into categories shown in pretty colours on a map. Each category has its name, usually with a long description intended to tell people what is good and what is bad about that particular landscape type. The 'expert' then makes recommendations on how each area should be handled, perhaps hoping that this is where his next contract for work will lie.

One of the failings of this way of doing things is that it relies on 'lines on maps' which



*These stone hedges near Pendeen are entirely different from hedges a few miles away on the sheltered side of West Penwith.*

mark the boundaries of each landscape type. The system seldom allows for changes in the countryside to be gradual. Some maps of Cornwall show the 'West Penwith Moors' landscape type as covering the land west of Penzance, thus classifying the St Buryan area as being similar to Zennor or Gulval, with a line running along the route of the A30 between Penzance and Hayle. The supposition is that west of this line, all the land is much the same, with heathland and rocky outcrops of granite, and that immediately east of this

line, the land is entirely different. Obviously this is not so, as West Penwith has some of the most productive farmland in Cornwall. Seldom do 'landscape types' recognise the local variability of Cornish hedges, which often change in pattern from field to field. Nor do they consider the harmonising influence of these hedges across the whole county. So beware of lines on maps.

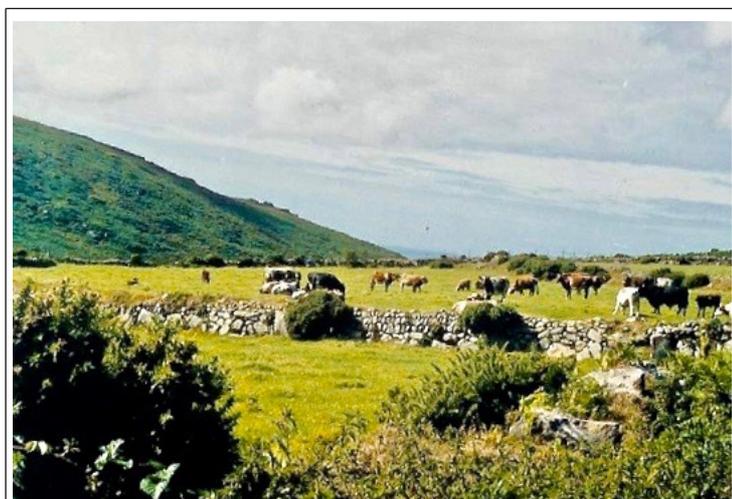
In some cases they are unavoidable, as for instance in delineating special places such as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, an Environmentally Sensitive Area or a World Heritage Site. Even here, it is a pity the lines are absolute, and allow no grading-off. It results too often in losing benefits for equally good parts adjoining, and in allowing offensive development right up to the line.

## CORNISH LANDSCAPE VICTIM OF POOR TASTE

Historically our hedges have been cared for because of the pride of having good hedges. It has been part of the Cornishness of our people that has kept them in such good order. The influx of people from other parts of Britain has, in recent years, increased apace. We used to say "We see them come and we see them go," but nowadays there is a constant flow of people of all income levels who want to live in Cornwall. The problem is that, although escaping conditions that they disliked upcountry, the incomers, by sheer weight of numbers over the years, impose their urbanising culture. The influx of money brought by the tourist trade and retirement has fuelled the commercial speculation that the tourists and retired people themselves would rather not see. When you hear people complain that "Cornwall isn't like it used to be", as often as not they themselves occupy one of the faceless bungalows that have obliterated so many small fields and hedges, and turned little grey hamlets into sprawling white villages lit by an orange glare at night. Landscape should not be thought of as daylight-only. The beauty of twilight and the land beneath moon and stars is also marred by unsympathetic development, especially lighting, which breaks into the natural pattern of dark hills and hedges against the night sky and the stars.

Not helping are the employees of national organisations and central and local government whose salaries give them a higher quality of life in Cornwall as compared with the rest of southern Britain. They are often using Cornwall as a staging post in their career, and witlessly do much harm to local distinctiveness by lack of knowledge and awareness. Most seek to establish, destructively, the way of living that they have experienced hitherto, and because they control funding there is no substantial obstruction to their follies. Their failings are similar to those referred to by the Bishop of Salisbury in 1809 - so, as they say, what's new? : 'In some instances they took matter from such authorities as would have been shown to be false had they been properly examined. Their time was often passed rather in talking of what they had seen than in seeking for and listening to information.' Unwillingness or inability to learn, whether a person is local or otherwise, is a fatal stumbling-block to taste or understanding. As Gertrude Jekyll said of gardening, 'One has not only to acquire a knowledge of what to do, but also to gain some wisdom in perceiving what it is well to leave alone.'

Our hedges must stand firmly in the tide of insensitive change that is sweeping over the landscape. The spirit of Cornwall dwells in the rugged cliffs, wild moors and leafy valleys, rocky outcrops and grey hamlets linked by the patchwork of fields and hedges. It is a wind-enduring land of subtle shades, golden when the sun shines.



*A glimpse of the old Cornwall survives in this herd of mixed cattle-breeds in their traditionally-hedged field near the sea.*

People blindly following commercial propaganda to find outlets for a surplus of time and money are busily cleaning and tidying away the time-proven picturesque qualities of Cornwall's landscape. They are shaving hedges, lawn-mowing acres of once-flowery meadow and grass verge, widening, levelling and straightening out the charming effects of natural evolution. They are laying tarmac or gravel on the ancient track-ways, replacing mossy stone with concrete block, and planting exotics in cottage gardens, hedges and roadside flowerbeds. They are putting up plastic notices to signpost and explain beauty spots,

whose beauty is thereby spoiled, and driving 'nature trails' through once-peaceful woods with the added signs, guide-posts, handrails, ramps, bird-watching hides, toilets and car-parks that destroy all sense of natural environment. They are stripping off lichen-encrusted slate roofs in favour of composition tile, enlarging the old grey cottages and barns and painting them glaring white so the buildings no longer link, visually or historically, with the grey stony network of the surrounding hedges and hills.

A new, vital though unfortunate value of Cornish hedges in the landscape is to hide, or at least partially screen, the results of tasteless efforts at 'improvement', as well as the hideous appurtenances of modern life - the highways, supermarkets and light-industrial buildings, high-density housing and ranks of parked cars. Even the well-meaning fashion for tree planting, which ought to soften some of these unsightly installations, has done Cornwall a disservice. The Council's free trees and the garden-centres' best-selling lines are, more often than not, alien and unsuitable species, many of them useless to our wildlife and visually disturbing with silver, red or yellow foliage - anything but green. Far too high a proportion are conifers. They are steadily infiltrating the semi-wild, natural-looking Cornish landscape and, along with the ubiquitous use of strimmer and rotary mower, turning it into a near relative of a lawn cemetery.

The Victorians had a better idea. They surrounded each new development with a substantial Cornish hedge, planted it on top with native trees and shrubs or allowed it to grow the local species naturally. If only this were always done today.

## PASSING ON TRADITIONS

Cornwall relies on tourism as a major part of its income, and tourists come to Cornwall because it is different. According to a survey in 2002 by the Cornwall Tourist Board, visitors say that the best thing about Cornwall is its landscape, before beaches and commercial "attractions". The retired bring their pension and investment incomes to Cornwall for the same reason, their enjoyment of the wide, varied and often magnificent views, all linked by the ancient hedge network. Throughout the county, hedges are the all-pervading feature of the landscape, and it is the individuality of the different styles of hedge, their climate-healing greenness, their antiquity and their wildlife which remain in the tourists' mind and memory and create an impression which induces them to return, wanting to know more.

The neglect of the extensive Cornish language relating to our hedges and their context is such that the local dweller remembers little, and the average tourist has no knowledge of it at all. Few of the people who actually live in Cornwall realise the extent to which the county's well-being relies on its hedges, including such essentials of everyday life as shelter, flood prevention, screening, security and pest control. These precious multi-functional assets are constantly under threat and subject to unsympathetic change.



*These hedges near St Juliot not only enhance the view, they are the view. Throughout Cornwall the hedges are the principal and most beautiful man-made feature of the landscape.*

New laws are making changes to common land much easier than post-1965. Fencing, temporary or permanent, and thorn hedgerows are likely to be approved for local authorities and the larger landowning organisations. Non-agricultural interests are likely to take control. Day-to-day actions will be controlled by statutory commons' management associations, on which the commoners' interests are likely to be in the minority, being outvoted by wildlife, landscape, historical and tourism representatives. Commoners may have to pay for the administrative costs of this supervision. People will probably have to pay a fee to inspect the Commons Register and other government papers relating to common land, thus restricting public knowledge and participation.

Meanwhile the ever-increasing demand for housing development and other speculation creates an urgent need to protect the old hedges on and around development sites, not only for the recognised wildlife need but as historical evidence of heritage and to protect the landscape against the new intrusion. Whether it is a barn-conversion in the open countryside or neighbourhood housing or commercial development on the edge of villages and towns, new or altered buildings fit much better into the landscape when Cornish hedges are retained or built as property dividers and screens. Local councils should play a greater part in promoting understanding of the importance of our hedges, and must ensure that planning officials negotiate conditions for hedge building and maintenance. [See CHL “Cornish Hedges on Development and Housing Sites” “The Hedge (& Wall) Importance Test”].

With the disappearance of local accents, of dialect and of customs, the building and care of our hedges is becoming more and more problematical. Cyril Roberts, aged 92, a retired champion hedger on the Lizard, told the author in 2003 that “All the good hedgers are in the churchyard.” Many of our living traditional hedgers were trained in the horse-and-cart days and will not be with us much longer, and modern young men are not often keen to tackle manual jobs like hedging. It is hard physical work done in most weathers. Learning to hedge on a farm used to be successful because the farmer always wanted a good job done so that his animals did not escape. Unfortunately many landowners today do not have a local background and cannot recognise poor hedging until it is too late and the bad job that has been done manifests itself in almost immediate problems of collapse.

Many hedgers now only know of one style of hedging, and they do not know that particularly well so their work will not last the couple of hundred years expected of a Cornish hedge before it begins to need repair. Other hedgers have worked only under contract

conditions where the squeezing of costs inevitably makes for poor workmanship. The using of non-local stone, of topsoil as a filler, and building in a non-local style, often without sorting the stone, results in a hedge which has lost its individuality, does not fit into the local landscape or support the local flora, and will not last very long without repair or rebuilding. Cornwall Council in its role as Highways Authority has made great efforts to provide Cornish hedges when widening or building new roads; unfortunately their specification has short-comings, and takes scant notice of local styles.



*Lambs playing 'king of the castle' have given their local trademark to these picturesque hedges on Bodmin moor. Skilled hedgers and grant-aid are needed for the repair and continuance of this characteristic landscape.*

## MAINTAINING HEDGES

Not all of our hedges are on farms. Many are part of private gardens, others surround commercial and industrial sites including visitor car-parks. Increasingly these sites are a spreading proportion of influence on the landscape. Typically the hedges get less maintenance than those on farms. Damage by people taking short cuts over a hedge is seldom repaired. Another threat is the obsession of some householders to have a too-tidy garden. The hedge stonework is kept “clean” of “weeds” so, robbed of the binding agency of matted plant roots between the stones, it soon deteriorates as the earth fill washes away in the rain. Others fortunately have learnt that the Cornish hedge is a haven for garden-friendly wildlife and that, looked after properly, it enhances their property in the landscape and gives flowers all the year round with minimal maintenance.

The value of wildlife as a whole in our hedges has been underestimated. One difficulty lies in appreciating its diversity, which is particularly sensitive to wrong management. The natural growth of trees on hedges and their traditional management by selective coppicing is disregarded. We see hedges so tightly trimmed that there are no trees at all. We see hedges with trees standing up at regular intervals in a flat-topped flailed hedge, giving an unnatural and ludicrous Toytown image to the countryside. We see hedges racked to pieces when over-mature trees fall to ordinary gales. All these cost the farmer more time and money than if he used traditional methods, which, after correctly trimming woody growth from the sides and now and then selectively coppicing trees on top, rely on nature looking after itself. Unfortunately fewer and fewer people now understand the local practices. Serious basic errors of construction and maintenance are made, often by those who profess to teach others the craft of Cornish hedging and the principles of wildlife conservation. Even now, hedges are too often bulldozed for no good reason.



*Unnatural-looking 'Toytown trees' left sticking up out of ugly horizontally-flailed hedge lose most of their wildlife value. This style of trimming destroys species and ruins the natural outline of the hedge in the landscape.*

## STONE STILES AND IRON GATES

Along with the hedges, the traditional stone stiles, each one unique, that have always been a novel and attractive landscape detail have been allowed to be removed, despite Cornwall Council encouraging landowners to look after their stone stiles. Modifying them for modern conditions is all that may be necessary. To preserve the local distinctiveness essential for tourism, there must be local pride, and this should be encouraged by the larger interests such as Natural England, the National Trust, English Heritage and the landed estates. Each should make obvious its pride in the individuality of its hedges in the different localities where its influences lie. This means working closely with local traditions and local hedgers. The perennial problem of absentee landlords, with their headquarters upcountry, is that of understanding local needs and conditions instead of blindly following a national policy.



*Picturesque, traditional stone stile is in character with local landscape and geology, safe and easy to climb, and will last for centuries with minimal maintenance.*

The replacement of stone stiles in hedges by wooden stiles or kissing gates has been notoriously insensitive and short-sighted. They are alien to Cornwall's climate, culture and landscape, where traditionally gates have been blacksmith-made of wrought iron, and gateposts and stiles always of stone. The old black iron gates are an inimitable part of the landscape, often framing the distant view, with a tangible sense of identity with Cornwall's industrial past. They stand up to the climate, over time, far better than wooden or tubular gates, but many of the survivors are now suffering from neglect. They should be paint-preserved and

looked after with care. There are still options for making the traditional gates, though nowadays this has to be with mild steel. As this naturally rusts, they have to be galvanised, and then painted with a good metal stove paint in the traditional black. Their maintenance then should be little more than for the iron gate, and their appearance in the landscape is exactly the same.

Cornish stone stiles are much easier than the standard wooden stile for less-able or arthritic people to use, an important consideration for access to landscape and countryside by tourists and the high proportion of elderly retired people in the county. Local councils have a role in being seen to be proud of the traditional hedges, stiles and gates in the area and how they differ from next door in terms of landscape and history. The variety of traditional stiles, as of field boundaries, represents local and regional character and distinctiveness. Hedges are the key component of the landscape and their proper care, including their traditional stiles and gates, is vital for their future in Cornwall. [See CHL "Building and Repairing Stone Stiles in Cornwall".]

## THE FUTURE

Looking to the future, we must be sure to keep that local distinctiveness which brings people to Cornwall; but who pays? Obviously the landowner ought to, because the land is his, but things are not as simple as that. Much of farming today does not essentially need stock-proof hedges so who gets the benefit? In all fairness, either the tourists or the local residents should contribute to the care of the hedges via their ordinary taxes to central government, or they should have to pay by some other means, perhaps a tourist tax for upkeep such as that payable on entry to some foreign holiday destinations. The first port-of-call is in the making of central and local government contracts and grant-aid schemes. Some of them allow for new hedges, others are for looking after existing ones but all are, or should be, reliant on the work being done properly, and must be adequate to finance this realistically. The Cornish Hedges Library promotes the Code of Good Practice for Cornish Hedges, and the insistence on this code being followed in all contracts and grant-aid schemes is vital. The Code ensures sound construction of the hedge but does not specify the stone used or the style or pattern of building, as these vary, so they need to be stated in the contract. The stone should be from nearby hedges if these have to be, or have been demolished, or from a quarry supplying the same or similar stone to that in nearby hedges. The style or pattern of hedge building should also follow that of nearby locally traditional hedges.

It is vital to our hedges' future that new people looking for an outdoor career come forward to learn Cornish hedging, which is as much of an art as a craft and the skill cannot be learnt in a contractor's gang. Hedgers who want to work in different localities have to learn several styles of hedging and so will have to gain experience in those localities where the styles are. Most of those styles came about because of the character of the stone available locally, others were the speciality of the local landed estate, or the idiosyncratic style of a local hedger of perhaps several hundred or thousand years ago. These must not be lost, especially styles related to the local stone because they make for a better hedge structurally, as well as in landscape distinctiveness.

Today, with shortage of money and labour, a farmer may farm with run-down hedges, keeping livestock in the field with one side of the hedge protected by a barbed wire fence. Unfortunately this allows the animals to trample the hedge from the unfenced side, so it gradually loses its structure. Sometimes a fence is put along the top of the hedge, allowing stock to break down the stones on both sides of the wire, thus gradually reducing the hedge to nothing. Eventually it is just a low earth-and-stone mound, weathering and trickling slowly out into the field and disappearing. The farmer may omit any protecting fence, with the same result that without ongoing repairs the hedge is trampled down until it is no longer repairable and can only be completely rebuilt. Rabbit control has tended to lapse since myxomatosis, and in places rabbits are now once more exceeding the natural rate of control by predators, such as buzzard and fox, and seriously damaging hedges.

In view of the cost of rebuilding, the more usual end result of neglect or damage will be bulldozing and clearance, the stone perhaps robbed for a nearby barn-conversion. It becomes a stark fact that, to keep our hedges in good traditional repair, the farmer has to be paid, less or more, to look after them. Many, especially turf hedges, need to be fenced on both sides. The national farming economy and its attendant farm-gate prices are likely to be based on farms in East Anglia, where one field can be larger than the whole of an average Cornish farm and may have only a single wire fence or thorn hedgerow around it. Even a 100 acre field has, pro rata, less than one quarter of the hedge length of a 5 acre field. More than half our fields in Cornwall are less than 5 acres. The hedges are part of the farmed landscape and the care that a hedge needs is inextricably bound up with the way that the adjoining fields are farmed. The traditional livestock grazing and crop rotation that produced Cornwall's network of hedges is under rapid decline and change, constituting an imminent threat to our unique hedged landscape unless adequate alternative incentives are installed.

From grant-aiding the removal of hedges in the interests of feeding the people after the war, government policy had to turn around to adapt to the environmental concerns resulting in the Hedgerows Removal Regulations 1997. These regulations have had a salutary effect in Cornwall, alerting the general public to the government's policy of stopping hedge removal. While the hedgebank itself was not included under the regulations, the hedgerow of bushes and trees along the top, either existing or with the capability to grow, was provided for, effectively protecting the whole hedge. How the regulations will evolve and be linked to agri-environment



*A sad sight. These fine traditional wrought iron field gates have been sacrificed, to no avail, in the attempt to prevent cattle from damaging the hedge. This kind of dereliction has been too commonly seen during the past few decades, as farming economics have changed.*

schemes in the future is uncertain. The government did eventually realise that hedges often need more money spent on maintaining them than may be justified by their contribution to farming profits. This resulted in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme which designated some grant aid for the restoration of semi-derelict and for new Cornish hedges. Cross-compliance may have halted most of the removal of hedges on farms but will have had no effect on non-farm hedges. The schemes may allow for some maintenance and restoration of hedges but only to a limited extent, and the landowner still has to meet some of the costs without any clear financial benefit. The lack of official interest in the non-farming sector in the preservation and maintenance of hedges is depressing.

With leaving the European Union, it must be realised that new regulations have to take in all factors, especially those regarding the climate crisis, and make financial provision to offset the deleterious effects of modern farming economics on the landscape and functional assets of our hedges. Replacing Britain's lost hedges is the obvious way to reintroduce the equivalent of extensive forests into the ecosystem, while continuing to use the land for food production and housing. The Cornish hedge can have even more potential than the English hedgerow, unless the latter is allowed to grow naturally rather than trimmed or laid, and allowed a margin along each side. Undisturbed grassland is a prime carbon sink, as is deep and flourishing moss. The bank element of the Cornish hedge, overgrown with grasses, wild flowers and mosses, makes up as great an area again as the bushes and trees on top, on the same narrow footprint of land. The whole hedge can boast the combined neutralising virtues of woodland, pasture and peat bog, with a correspondingly high biodiversity, and is worth perhaps three times its base area of any single landscape element. [See CHL "Cornish Hedges and the Climate Crisis".]

For the sake of urgently combating climate change, a massive move to prevent further removal and to reinstate the lost mileage of hedges is needed. Historically Cornish hedges have developed with the centuries, with sometimes radical alteration in the layout and appearance in the landscape. From the jigsaw puzzle of tiny Bronze Age enclosures for hand cultivation, to the infiltration of the English open-field and strip system in the Middle Ages and the enclosure of common lands, and from the Post-Medieval patchwork of enlarged fields with straightened boundaries to modern day hedge removal, each age has imposed new demands. Now the 21st century demands that we repair the errors and exploitations of the recent past to ensure our own future. It is time for the landscape to change again, with many more hedges being built to help meet the planet's urgent needs. The incidental enhancement of the celebrated Cornish landscape will be a welcome bonus.

From the landscape, climate health and wildlife point of view even a ruinous hedge is better than none, so it is vital to protect hedges against being removed, but grant-aid for upkeep is as important. The long-term effect of not keeping hedges in repair is their gradual disintegration until the job becomes so expensive there is no realistic hope of restoring them all. The solution is to make added financial provision for them as a major historical, environmental, ecological, practical and visual asset, and a unique heritage.

---

*You are welcome to download these papers and photographs for your private use and study. If you use any of this material in any other way, the copyright holder and the Cornish Hedges Library must be acknowledged as the source - thank you.*

**The following titles are available at [www.cornishhedges.co.uk](http://www.cornishhedges.co.uk)**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>Advice for Working on Roadside Hedges<br/> Advice for Trimming Roadside Hedges<br/> Building Hedges in Cornwall<br/> Building a Turf Hedge<br/> Building and Repairing Cornish Stone Stiles<br/> Butterflies, Moths and Other Insects in Cornish Hedges<br/> Check-list for Inspecting New or Restored Hedges in Cornwall<br/> Check-list of Types of Cornish Hedge Flora<br/> Code of Good Practice for Cornish Hedges<br/> Comments on the © Defra <i>Hedgerow Survey Handbook</i> (1st Edition)<br/> Comments on the © Defra <i>Hedgerow Survey Handbook</i> (2nd Edition)<br/> Cornish Hedges and the Climate Crisis<br/> Cornish Hedges in Gardens<br/> Cornish Hedges on Development and Housing Sites<br/> Gates and Gateways in Cornish hedges<br/> Geology and Hedges in Cornwall<br/> Glossary of some Cornish Words used in the Countryside<br/> Hedges in the Cornish Landscape<br/> How to Look After a Cornish Hedge</p> | <p>How Old is That Cornish Hedge?<br/> Literature Sources<br/> Mediæval Hedges in Cornwall (450AD - 1550)<br/> Modern Hedges in Cornwall (1840 - present day)<br/> Mosses, Lichens, Fungi and Ferns in Cornish Hedges<br/> Pipe-laying and Other Cross-country Works Involving Hedges<br/> Post-Mediæval Hedges in Cornwall (1550 - 1840)<br/> Prehistoric Hedges in Cornwall (5,000BC - 450AD)<br/> Repairing Cornish Hedges and Stone Hedges<br/> Repairing Turf Hedges<br/> Restoring Biodiversity in Cornish Hedges<br/> Risk Assessment Guidance for Working on Cornish Hedges<br/> Roadside Hedges and Verges in Cornwall<br/> The Curse of Rabbits in Cornish Hedges<br/> The Life and Death of a Flaileid Cornish Hedge<br/> Trees on Hedges in Cornwall<br/> Unusual Old Features in Cornish Hedges<br/> Who Owns that Cornish Hedge?<br/> Wildlife and the Cornish Hedge</p> |
|---|--|