



HOW TO LOOK AFTER A CORNISH HEDGE

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Purposes of hedges / trimming / the murderous flail / how & when to trim / hand-trimming by hook & crook / using secateurs / layering and selective coppicing / repairing hedges / casting up / nesting birds & the law / fencing

The ordinary care of a traditional hedge in Cornwall is similar whether it is a Cornish hedge, a stone hedge or a turf hedge. It comprises trimming any woody growth from the sides of the hedgebank; discreet management of tree or scrub growth on top of the hedge; casting up fallen soil on to the hedge to preserve the structure and renew the cycle of growth; repair of the structure, including gaps which have to be rebuilt, and fencing against livestock. The purposes of the hedge are four-fold, and each needs its own aspect of care. It is a landscape component, a wildlife resource, a historical monument, and a barrier against wind, floods and livestock.

The hedge in the landscape.



Well cared-for hedges are a credit to the farmer, enhance the Cornish landscape and encourage wildlife.

The essential requirement is for the hedge to remain in existence together with traditional hedge furniture, eg a stone stile or gatepost, and to be free of alien wildlife, especially non-native plants. Additional fencing is acceptable provided it is unobtrusive. Bushes and tall trees on hedges are a very desirable component of the sheltered lowland landscape. Naturally wind-sculptured trees are essential to the character of upland and cliff landscape. Between these extremes, selectively coppiced trees on the hedge withstand wind and bring shape, variety and seasonal change into the landscape view.

A home for wildlife.

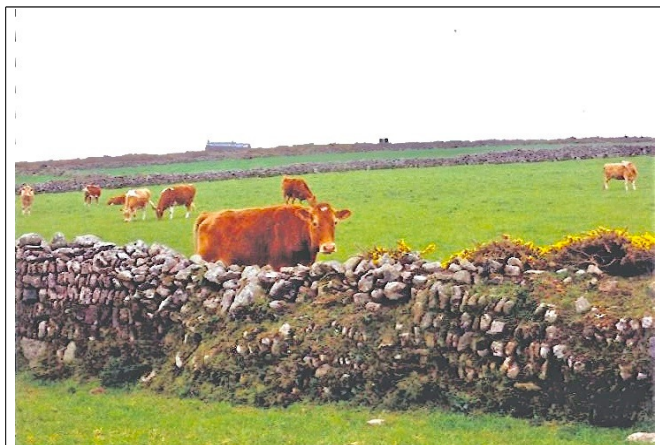
Each style of hedge, linked in with its location and its maintenance has its own, probably unique, mixture of plants and animals. A stone hedge, apart from being kept in repair, and removal of any invasion by brambles or gorse, needs no other maintenance. A Cornish or turf hedge requires a certain amount of trimming to preserve its structure. The way that this is done affects much of the wildlife for better or for worse.

The growth on the sides and on the top of a Cornish hedge should look completely different. Along the top should be stiff, shrubby, woody growth, from brambles and wild roses through gorse, thorn and grown-up ivy to actual trees. On the sides, growing from between the stones and along the bottom, should be soft green herbaceous growth, mainly the leafy tufts and rosettes of wild flowers, mixed with ferns and some grasses of the finer kind. If a hedge has the same brambly growth of gorse, thorn, ivy, nettles, coarse grasses etc, on the sides as the top, it has been badly treated, its biodiversity will have been lost and the stonework will be in poor, damaged condition. [See Cornish Hedges Library “Restoring Biodiversity in Cornish Hedges” for how to take remedial action.]

Once this has been rectified, or if the hedge is not in this parlous state, it is easily kept in good condition by the way the growth is managed yearly. The two most important rules are that the hedge is trimmed only in winter, ideally in January and February, and that only the woody growth is trimmed, never the soft green growth or its seeding heads and dead stalks. The wild flowers, ferns and grasses have to be left to themselves to cycle naturally through their growth and decay round the year. Trimming them off kills them out and the invasive weeds take over.

The preservation of ancient monuments.

Some of our hedges are over four thousand years old and their continued existence relies on their structure being maintained. Although many of these hedges may have been rebuilt over the millennia, they are likely to look no different today than they did when first built because the stones are the same, and later hedgers have followed the original style. Internally these old hedges may preserve traces of earlier structures. Turf hedges have no external stone structure,



Mediaeval Cornish hedge. Most of our hedges are very old and should be cared for with respect for their antiquity.

but may contain relics of an earlier stone hedge. Ancient field patterns are preserved by gurgoes (pronounced gurjey), remnants of old boundaries. Even our newer hedges are likely to be a couple of hundred years old, dating from the heyday of the mining industry in the 18th and 19th centuries. On farms the need to repair the historical structure should be avoided by fencing. Tree-roots should not be allowed to burst the sides of the hedge or mature trees to be blown down by a gale. Control of rabbits is important. [See Cornish Hedges Library "The Curse of Rabbits"]

Enclosure of farm livestock.

This, combined with the keeping-out of wild animals and neighbour's grazing stock, was the first reason for having a hedge. Today this can in theory be done with a wire fence, but in

Cornwall's climate the hedge gives vital shelter for crops and livestock, conserves moisture and prevents run-off, erosion and flooding. These assets, increasingly valuable in the face of the weather extremes of climate change, can be affected for better or worse by the way in which the hedge is maintained.

A tenant should be careful in deciding his hedge maintenance policy. His tenancy agreement with his landlord will almost certainly contain clauses relating to the hedges on the farm; but if it is silent, the law assumes that the tenant has certain duties in the care of his hedges. Some farm agreements were drawn up in the days of increased food production at almost any cost, and may still contain some of these outdated clauses. In summary, the amount of dilapidations for which the tenant is liable at the end of a long tenancy is the cost of making good, but should not exceed the amount by which the value of the landlord's property is reduced due to the poorly-maintained hedges. As the cost of accumulated repairs nowadays is likely to be high, rather than wait to the end of the tenancy, a tenant is well-advised to get his landlord's prior written consent for matters which may contravene his tenancy agreement.



One of the great benefits of the Cornish hedge is the shelter it provides against Atlantic gales.

TRIMMING

In the past, each public road had its road-man who lived locally and was responsible for a certain length of the road. The road-men trimmed the hedges in winter with sharp hand tools, kept the verges clear and made sure that the drains worked in storms. Most of them were in tune with nature and trimmed the hedges carefully, selectively removing a minimum of plant material so as to keep the wild flowers, insects and bird life. Nowadays a small gang, armed with lorry, tractor and flail, has charge of a large area and the local contact is no more. They visit regardless of weather or season, and usually succeed in removing lorry-loads of soil to be dumped elsewhere, or flailing the hedge so close that some of the stones are loosened, later to fall down and be taken away, while the wildlife habitat is wrecked and degraded.

In pre-mechanisation days when hedges were trimmed by hand with a slasher (a heavy curved blade on a long handle) or by a hook and crook, a farmer's reputation within his local community depended as much on how well he looked after his hedges as on the quality of his livestock and crops. With an approximate ratio of one farm worker for every 10 acres (4 ha), hedge trimming was a task which easily fitted in between the normal weather-dependent activities, and kept the workers in winter. Nowadays economics dictate a ratio of one farm worker (usually the farmer himself) to more than 120 acres (50 ha). Hedges have to be trimmed mechanically and there is no time available for frills.

First came the finger-bar hedge trimmer. Post-war this was seen operating in winter in conjunction with some hand-work in trimming hedge-top bushes and trees. Its clean-cutting action was an excellent substitute for hand-trimming on the hedge sides, taking off the bramble and woody growth such as gorse and thorn, while leaving untouched the green grassy and

wildflower growth to live and produce its benefits through the four seasons. An adaptation of the classical finger-bar hay mower, the trimmer consisted of a reciprocating scythe blade mounted on a steel arm attached to the tractor and was initially powered by a separate petrol engine, and later on by the tractor hydraulics or power take-off. For smallholders, the local farm machinery manufacturer Teagle (of Blackwater, Truro) designed and sold a unique hand-carried version that was driven by a Villiers two-stroke engine via a chain drive.

In the 1970s, the familiar circular saw was fitted at the end of a mechanical arm, and driven by the tractor rear power take-off. This was a fearsome device which would trim branches of 4 inches (100mm) diameter, propelling the severed parts at high velocity in all directions. The author saw one in operation on a farm near St. Ives with this circular blade which rotated at high speed. This detached itself, flew off and cut into the tractor rear wheel and tyre, only just missing the farmer operating it. He never used it again. This device has been superseded by heavy-duty finger-bar trimmers which safely cut branches of up to five years' growth without simultaneously mashing up the invertebrate population, and which are recommended for use on hedges in Cornwall, being much kinder to wildlife and infinitely better for the hedge's structural and habitat maintenance.

Mechanised trimming is a boon to farmers and contractors, but the modern flail-mower unfortunately gives too easily a tidy and urban-like appearance to the farm at a reasonable cost. The habit has arisen of trimming too tight on sides and top, too often in summer, which severely damages and degrades the hedge. This is needlessly expensive for the farmer. The shelter and nutritional value of hedges for crops and livestock has been thereby reduced, and wildlife and landscape amenity often entirely lost.

THE MURDEROUS FLAIL

The flail mower has been in general use for nearly 50 years. Many people know no other, although modern finger-bar hedge trimmers are available. Most farmers, because of cropping rotation, mild climate and hedge structures, have to trim their hedges regularly but there is no mechanical justification for an annual trim. The modern farm flail cuts a 1.3m (4'3") swathe and severs branches of 4 - 6cm in diameter which represent about four years of growth of, for instance, blackthorn and sycamore, varying in locality.

The flail is a brutal machine which has a tearing, not a cutting, action. It causes excessive sap bleeding and the smashing of woody growth allows easy entry for disease. The damage done to the animal and bird population is catastrophic, as its cyclonic hammering obliterates the invertebrate life. Thousands of species which live in the vegetation are massacred by the flail.

The flail encourages tight trimming which causes hedges to dry out in the summer; some do not recover full moisture for several years. This desiccation and prevention of seeding causes a serious reduction in plant species and deterioration



The flail mower has had a disastrous effect on the wildlife and on the structure of the Cornish hedge.

of the hedge structure by consequent erosion of inter-stone packing material.

The mulch resulting from flailing has a smothering effect on delicate plants, and acting as a nitrogenous green manure actively encourages the spread of rampant species; eventually these, especially ivy, take over the whole hedge. The natural flora with fine matted roots which bind the stones in place is replaced by heavy strong-rooted weeds which loosen the stones, causing the structure to fall apart.

To reduce wildlife loss and mulching damage, if the flail must be used it should be done only in winter, less often, more lightly, alternate sides of the hedge in different years, taking woody growth off the sides of the hedge but not touching the soft growth, and not making a horizontal cut across the top.

HOW AND WHEN TO TRIM

There are four actions which help to conserve the wildlife and protect the hedge's structure from the worst of the damage the flail causes. All of them save money:

Trim alternate sides of the hedge in different years

Trim in winter

Trim as seldom as practicable

Do not trim too close

Most hedges need not be trimmed until the growth is at least four years old. Instead of trying to trim the sides to a uniformly close cut of 10-20cm (4"-8"), the tractor-driver should be content with a variable cut of 25-45cm (12"-18"), usually driving faster and saving money whilst increasing the range of hedge habitat. The object is just to skim off the excess woody growth instead of giving a tight and tidy "short top and sides". Trimming around telegraph and other poles in a treeless hedge is cheaper when done without slowing down to do it too neatly; the resulting informal scrub growth around each pole is useful to wildlife and it tones down the effect of a naked pole in the landscape. The two sides of a hedge usually grow at different rates, so trimming both sides together can be uneconomic. Trimming both sides and the whole of the top at the same time is devastating to the invertebrate life and most of the birds. It is a simple matter to trim alternate sides in different years. By doing this, some of the wildlife is able to survive on the untrimmed side on each occasion of trimming.

Another problem of the flail is that it encourages woody growth such as gorse and thorn to grow into a spreading mat on the side of the hedge. This is very bad for the hedge structure as it eliminates the herbaceous flora and grasses which are vital to hold the stones firmly in place with their fine matted roots. For the same reason it is catastrophic for wildlife diversity. This effect can be eased by lifting the flail where areas of short herbaceous growth and wild flowers still remain, leaving them untrimmed, and cutting out the heavy scrubby mat of woody growth to expose the stone and give herbaceous plants a chance to regrow.

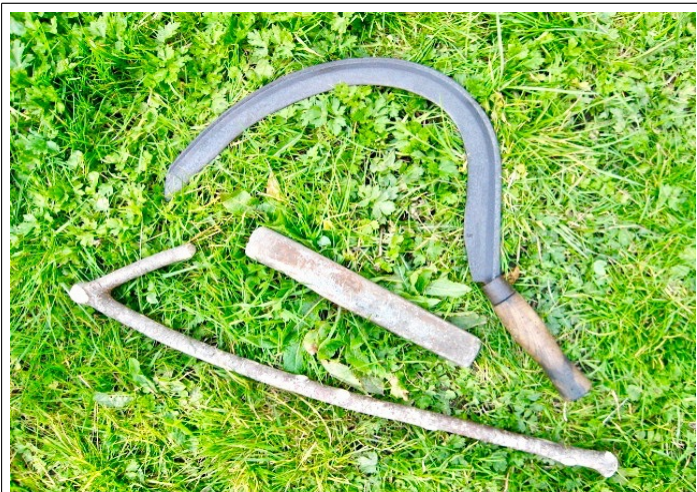
On sheltered farms where growth is rapid, half of the fields are trimmed round in one year, the other half the next year; thinking of the fields as a chessboard, trim round the black squares one year, the white squares the next. In this way, no hedge gets both sides trimmed the same year. Where growth is slower and a longer interval is appropriate, the same technique

applies, but leaving two or more years between trimming the black squares and the white.

Traditional farmers kept the old custom of trimming their hedge sides only when the land is ploughed in rotation and when corn is harvested. On most farms this would have resulted in only one side of the hedge being trimmed in any one year, with the other side taking its turn another year, and several years passing before each hedge side was trimmed again. This, as practised on a mixed farm, is ideal for conservation, but relies on good hedge structure and reasonably slow growth. With changes in agricultural policy and whole farms being put into arable, traditional hedge maintenance too often goes by the board and hedges may either be entirely neglected or over-scalped by flail in one farm-wide operation, according to the convenience of the current tenant.

Some householders and even a few farmers spray their Cornish hedges' sides instead of trimming, using a systemic herbicide to destroy plant growth behind an electric fence. This is bad practice because, apart from the overall ecological damage, spraying kills out the plant species which maintain the inter-stone packing material of the hedge. Stones will fall out and the hedge structure start to collapse. Where a previously-fertilised or much-flailed hedge is infested by aggressive plant species (eg nettle, hogweed, winter heliotrope) there is no advantage in spraying these to hasten natural regeneration, because nature itself will do the job better as the high fertility diminishes, if the hedge is left to recover by ceasing to use the flail and keeping fertiliser away from the hedge by leaving a field margin. Exceptionally the spot-spraying by a lance sprayer of difficult invasive plants (eg Japanese knotweed) is legitimate provided the correct narrow-spectrum chemical is used. There are regulations for disposing of such problem species.

HAND TRIMMING BY HOOK AND CROOK



Old hook of ideal weight and balance for trimming hedge sides. Sharpening stone is essential. This rook is cut from sycamore, but blackthorn is better, being tough and long-lasting.

The traditional use of a hook aided by a crooked stick to trim hedge sides every winter is a simple and cheap way of looking after a Cornish or turf hedge. Second-hand hooks of the old sickle type may still be purchased. The old ones may seem heavy but are just the right weight for trimming hedges. Modern grass-hooks are lighter but may not be strong enough to cope easily with the tough growth of brambles and thorns. A sharpening-stone is needed, as for a scythe, and can be bought from the local farmers' suppliers; the secret of easy trimming is to keep the hook sharp.

The crook cannot be purchased. It is a hooked stick cut from the hedge, shaped like the tick that a teacher uses to mark homework. It should be about 20 inches (50cm) long with a short 45 - 60 degree side branch of about 6 inches (15cm). The crook is used in one hand to lift up or hold the growth while it is cut by the hook in the other hand. Some hedgers use a similar stick but with a forked end instead of a crook; this uses a different hand action which some

prefer. With a little practice, using a hook and crook is as quick and as easy as a strimmer, and avoids expense, noise and pollution. Used correctly in winter, it is much better for the hedge and its wildlife as it cuts cleanly, without damaging the green herbaceous plants, and leaves a consistent length of about 12 inches (30cm) of growth. The strimmer, especially in summer months, cuts too tightly, its lashing action destroys far too many invertebrates, and like the flail converts the essential herbaceous growth, which should be protected from trimming at all, into a green mess which harmfully enriches the hedge.

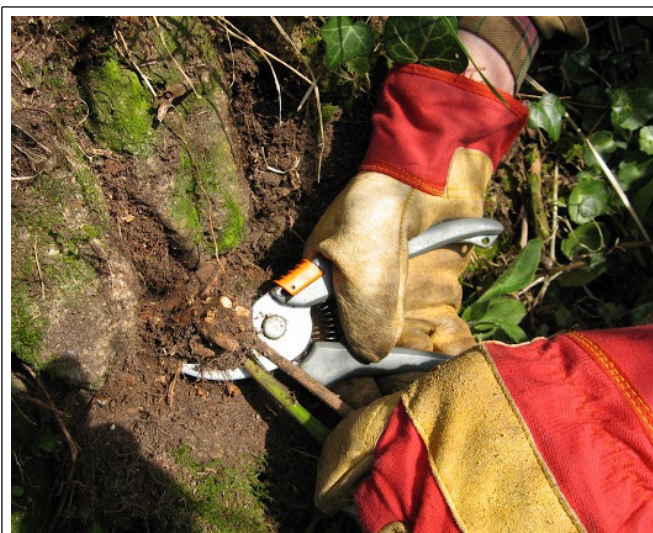
USING SECATEURS

The most caring way for householders to look after the wildlife and structure of a Cornish hedge is to remove the coarse, invasive weeds (eg ragwort, Japanese knotweed), by hand-cutting. Nettles are best pulled off in the spring; wear protective gloves. Excessive ivy may need to be removed by cutting through the stems and peeling the growth away, taking care not to dislodge the stones. Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) is subject to regulations for disposal. A small amount can be sun-dried and burnt, but if you have a problem with it, contact Cornwall Council for advice.

Seedling trees (eg sycamore) and scrub growth (eg bramble, gorse, blackthorn) are removed from the sides of the hedge as soon as they appear, by cutting off each plant close to its roots with secateurs or loppers. Growth on top of the hedge should be left to grow naturally, only cutting out or selectively coppicing if necessary to prevent wind-rock or undue shading, and to keep growth bushy rather than leggy.

In removing the unwanted coarse weeds and scrubby growth from the hedge side, the herbaceous plants (wild flowers and grasses) are left untouched. In this way the flowering plants are uninterrupted in their annual cycle, the hedge looks attractive at all times and with this selective cutting-out of scrub the growth never needs trimming back wholesale. The herbaceous growth seeds itself for a continuance of flowering plants and then dies back naturally during winter, ready to grow again next spring.

For those less interested, an easy rule-of-thumb for keeping a garden hedge tidy is to cut summer bramble whips or other obtrusive growth back, using secateurs, leaving flowering plants untouched, and to give a general tidy each winter by trimming back to 12" (30cm) with a reciprocating garden hedge-trimmer. In sheltered localities, flowering foxgloves and greater stitchwort are useful indicators of good management, on more-exposed hedges common violet and sheep's-bit scabious should flourish in quantity. Wild flowers coming into bloom through August and September are also a good indication that you are allowing the full annual seeding cycle.



Hand-trimming brambles in Cornish hedge. Here left hand holds down bramble stem while root is severed below the lump at base of stems, so the plant will not regrow.

If your hedges are impoverished by poor maintenance and you are interested in restoring their stone-binding species, correct trimming will encourage these, though the seedbank will be depleted and may need help. A little wild seed might be collected from common, freely-seeding species such as red campion, bluebell, herb robert and foxglove nearby, if your hedges lack these. Buying wild flower seed can be a doubtful practice as some will be the wrong strain for the locality and/or unsuitable to grow in a Cornish hedge. Go to specialist providers of responsibly-sourced British wild-flower meadow seed, whose stock should include the flower species and the kind of grasses that will flourish in your hedge.

Don't buy flower meadow mixtures, as these contain far too much grass, usually 80/20 grass to wild flower seed. This is the wrong way round for Cornish hedges which would naturally be more like 80% wild flower species to 20% grasses. Find a source that sells packets of individual species, and choose grass species from the fescues, bents, and other native grasses such as sweet vernal, crested dogtail, hair grass and slender foxtail, and as many as you can afford of different wild flower species. Species such as common yellow toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*), tufted vetch (*Vicia cracca*), betony *Stachys officinalis*, self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*), sheep'-bit scabious (*Jasione montana*) and field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) are sold by specialist firms. To know more species that are suitable to buy, go for any that appears in the Cornish Hedges Library's "Checklist of Cornish Hedge Flora", to suit your type of hedge.

Don't scatter the seed along the hedge face and hope it will grow. Make little pockets of earth in the crevices between stones, plugging below with a bit of turf to prevent your softened earth and seed from washing straight down from the hedge next time it rains. In suitable crevices sow a tiny pinch, no more than three or four seeds. Either sow into the hedge in this way, preferably in autumn in imitation of nature's own way, or raise the seeds as plug plants and bed them into the hedge crevices in spring. Make sure they don't dry out before they are established. [see CHL "Restoring Biodiversity in Cornish Hedges".]

LAYERING AND SELECTIVE COPPICING

In the past the growth on top of many of the hedges was coppiced or layered, or rarely (in East Cornwall) cut-and-laid, about every ten years. Layering is not to be confused with laying. Layering the growth, that is bending it down and burying the tip to take root, was commonly practised in Cornwall, unlike the conventional English cutting-and-laying. A nick in the underside of the twig where it goes into the earth can help it to root, and placing a stone on it keeps it down. Layering was routinely used as a means of filling gaps in the top-growth to improve stock-proofing. Generally the growth on the hedge-top was done the year the field was ploughed out of grass, so by the end of the four-year rotation when the field was in grazing again, the new bushes would have sprung up from the layers to fill the gaps.

Shrubby growth on the hedge top is allowed to grow naturally, with occasional pruning to reduce any leggy growth that might lead to the bush rocking in the wind and possibly loosening the top courses of stone. The trimmings from hedge-top pruning were used in faggots, cut in winter and stored over the next summer to dry before use. Traditionally trees on the top of the hedge are allowed to grow up and are controlled by selective coppicing. The experienced hedger selected the trees that he wanted to encourage, and sometimes would plant some of his preference, eg oak, wych elm or ash. He trimmed the sides of the hedge and allowed the trees to grow out of the middle of the top of the hedge. If allowed to grow out of the edge of the hedge-top and the sides, their branches would soon interfere with horses and machinery and, on Cornish hedges, their roots would eventually push out the stones. They would also shade out

and weaken the herbaceous growth necessary to bind the stones.

A modern version of the traditional hand-finish for Cornish hedges is where the top of the hedge is trimmed each side at an angle of roughly 60 degrees so as to leave about one to two feet (0.25m to 0.5m) width untrimmed along the centre of the hedge top. This technique ensures that the natural tree growth emerges along the centre line of the hedge, making management of the hedge sides easier. This centre strip grows, untrimmed, into a line of bushes and trees, making a haven for wildlife and a good shelter-belt. It is much cheaper to establish and maintain than isolated "tagged" trees, which are unsuited to the Cornish landscape, have a suburban look, and can cause wind turbulence in the field, while the trimmed-down hedge between is poor habitat for wildlife.

When the size of any tree trunk is "as thick as a man's thigh at breast height", it should be individually cut down at 18 inches (0.5m) above the bank-top; otherwise the tree will get too high for the hedge. The roots of over-sized trees may become too big for the hedge and its stones get pushed out and down into the field; or the tree may rock or be blown down in a gale and destroy a length of the hedgebank. In the more sheltered parts of Cornwall there is less danger of this, and the risk can be balanced with the beauty of mature trees in the landscape.



Wind-slanted trees should be left untrimmed.

Exposed field hedges need only a sloping cut on the down-wind side, leaving the centre of the hedge to battle upwards against the salt-laden wind. The slanted tree-tops should be left untrimmed as they form the natural Cornish landscape, and in these conditions seldom grow too big. Their vitality is low in balance with the conditions and trimming them off with the flail not only makes an ugly shape that will not reform but is likely to reduce the tree's strength to the point where it will die.

Many farmers allow their hedges to grow untrimmed. Livestock enjoy the shelter, but blackthorn, bramble, elm and seedling sycamore are invasive, so have to be controlled by the yearly pasture-topping in autumn. Because little light gets to the actual hedge side, it loses its herbage and root-binding, so is liable to break down if assaulted by livestock and may need protection by wire. In these situations barbed wire or netting cannot be erected properly, but can be adequately secured. The conservation value of this style of hedge management is good for arboreal wildlife, though it will suppress wild flower growth.

Rarely, perhaps in some urban situations, it is not possible to allow trees and large bushes on top of the hedge. To preserve the hedge structure, not less than three feet (1m) of top growth should be left above the hedgebank. [See CHL "Trees on Hedges in Cornwall"]

REPAIRING HEDGES

Small-scale repairs when weaknesses or gaps first appear are far quicker and cheaper than letting the hedge deteriorate to the point where it needs substantially rebuilding. Replacing a loose stone in passing often saves hours of work later on. The traditional farmer would notice when the side of a Cornish hedge had lost its batter and started to bulge, the shape slowly becoming convex. This most often happens when the rab behind the stones was not packed in

tight enough, allowing the hedge to slump in response to the weight above, or rain-water to loosen the stones from behind. If not attended to at this early stage, the instability gradually gets worse and the repair job more costly. Almost certainly at least one of the stones in the bulge will be slightly loose, meaning that it is on its way to dropping out of the hedge. Now is the time to knock back the stones with a club hammer, starting with the loosest in the middle and working outwards in a circle until solid hedge is reached. The stone must be driven in by about half an inch (12mm) at a time, then doing the ones around before coming back and knocking each in again. The job is finished when no stone can be knocked in any further. If the stone is soft and liable to crack or crumble a wooden block should be used as a shock absorber. Some granites are inclined to crumble, and a badly decomposed hedge stone may start a weak spot with the stones around it loosening. It can be removed and a good one fitted and knocked into its place.

Should the stones be forced out by tree roots (this happens much less than one might think) then the stones have to be taken out, the root cut, and the stones built back. It is more usual that the tree roots in fact bind the rear parts of the stonework together. Today, the common cause of batter loss, weakening and fall of stone is use of the flail for trimming hedge growth. Gaps also start by the loss of stone from the top course, dislodged by animals or by careless people. Rabbit burrows weaken the hedge as earth is mined out, so the holes should be filled with stones and turf well rammed in and stamped down. Repeating this as soon as each new hole is opened deters the rabbits, and maintains a sound hedge structure.



A good farmer-repaired gap (centre, upper four courses) using the original stone which had fallen from the hedge.. Note style of repair matches original, Grassy tobs placed on top.

Livestock damage by rubbing on the hedge or scrambling over it can proceed alarmingly quickly towards demolition. An old sheet of corrugated iron is sometimes invaluable as a temporary shield where stock have rubbed or burrowed, provided it is set out 18 inches (0.5m) to allow growth to re-establish, and removed in time to give light and air to the new plants. Putting up a permanent stone rubbing-post for the cattle keeps them away from the hedge.

Sometimes when heathland is burnt, the fire spreads to nearby hedges and the hedge growth is burnt. This exposes weaknesses in the hedge which, before the fire, were obscured by growth. Unless the farmer quickly puts a fence up or repairs the hedge, livestock soon go a-wandering.

Mending a Cornish or stone hedge requires traditional hand work. All repairs should match the existing style, stone and dimensions of the hedge structure to prevent a weakness at the join. If the structure of the hedge is not kept in good condition by proper maintenance, the work becomes difficult and usually expensive in the end. Rebuilding costs are high, though grant-aid is sometimes available for run-down hedges. A turf hedge can usually be repaired mechanically at much less cost, using tractor and bucket. [See CHL "Repairing Cornish Hedges and Stone Hedges" and "Repairing Turf Hedges"]

CASTING UP

Cornish hedges gradually lose their soil as it washes down to the hedge base. Traditionally this has been remedied by "casting up" by shovel during the winter, usually when the grass field was ploughed for corn, every five to ten years. Earth and turf along the foot of the hedge is dug out with the long-handled Cornish shovel and placed on top of the hedgebank. Casting up restores the earth to the hedge, thus the saying "down six inches, up a foot" ie a six-inch loss of soil from the hedge-top needs casting up a foot high to replace it, allowing for compaction. The earth is dug out for casting up along both sides of the hedge, except on very sloping land where it may have disappeared downhill on the lower side. Here, downhill drift from the land above should have provided enough to do the whole job from the upper side.

First the hedge growth is trimmed so that the job of casting up can be done easily. Tobs or tobans (lumps of turf) are dug along the hedge bottom and as far out into the field as to bring it level, instead of rising slightly to the hedge. If the hedge was a boundary between two farms, a man doing up both sides was allowed to use three feet, or up to six feet in some circumstances, of the turf on his neighbour's side for this purpose. Casting up renews the vegetative cover and therefore the viability of the hedge, and is done when the field is in grass, thus providing the tobs. Using a small digger a turf hedge can be cast up at about three feet of length (1m) a minute.

Neglect of this old practice contributes to the hedge's falling into disrepair and diminishes the diversity of its wildlife.



A last-year's goldfinch's nest a few inches inside the outline of this hedge-top blackthorn bush shows why birds' nests are destroyed by flailing. Luckily this hedge top has not been trimmed for some years, allowing this bird, the first to attempt it here since flailing began in 1972, to build successfully at last in 2007. Sadly, though, no other bird has nested in this mile of hedge since, as the flailing has continued and the top of the hedge has been flailed horizontally.

NESTING BIRDS AND THE LAW

Spring and summer trimming by flail has caused the loss of more than three-quarters of the plant, insect and bird species in many hedges, but to recommend that farmland hedge trimming must be done only in the ideal months of January and February is unrealistic. Sometimes the land is too wet in midwinter to allow the passage of a tractor along the hedge without doing a lot of damage to the ground, and in these fields trimming may have to be done at any time after autumn leaf-fall.

Autumn is the time of berries on which many birds rely for food, so trimming alternate sides in different years keeps half the berries and wild flower seeds for them each year. Spring and summer, March to August inclusive, are the nesting seasons, when trimming cannot safely be carried out. In fact any trimming before Christmas may disadvantage the young birds feeding up to get through their first winter. In the warmer areas, birds are already setting up their breeding territories in February. There is often a mistaken idea that only rare birds are wholly protected, but today even 'pest' species cannot be damaged or destroyed except by special licence under

convincing circumstances.

It is an offence, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Part 1(1), intentionally to take, damage or destroy *any* wild bird or its nest while being built or in use, or to take or destroy its eggs or chicks. Incidental destruction of any of these, if it could have been reasonably avoided, is also a offence, Part 1(4). For a farmer or a contractor to say that he did not know that birds were nesting in the hedges is not likely to be accepted as a valid defence by the law, as he could reasonably have avoided the destruction by trimming the hedge in autumn or winter.

There is a question mark about the trimming of brambles immediately before corn harvest. Firstly there is the opinion that a small inexpensive modification to the combine works well, and there is no excuse for not fitting it. Perhaps only the longest shoots of the brambles need to be trimmed off, keeping away from the hedge so that the birds may be unlikely to desert their nests or (as commonly happens after any disturbance) be found by a predator. Some farmers do not think that summer brambles are a problem at all.

There is an exception allowing some unseasonal trimming for the highway side of roadside hedges where essential for road safety, such as blind junctions.

FENCING

In today's harsh economic climate wire fencing, perhaps with added square-mesh netting, has become an important factor in preserving the structure and wildlife of many of Cornwall's hedges. At one extreme, a weak turf hedge cannot function properly for livestock without a fence; at the other, a well-built high stone or Cornish hedge, where the top course is out of the reach of livestock, needs no protection. Traditionally, and still with many of the older generation, barbed wire was seen as a public admission of poor farming. Some livestock farmers are still proud that they have no barbed wire fences, though they admit that their policy is uneconomic, even allowing for the cost of wire injuries to stock where fencing is used. On some farms without wire in West Cornwall it has been estimated that typically a length equivalent to the total length of hedges on the farm is rebuilt in the form of repairs about once in 150 years; some vulnerable lengths would have been repaired several times, other lengths not at all. With proper wire protection, the repair need of weak hedges can be much reduced.



Close-wired fence with single strand of barbed wire.

There are several ways of fencing a hedge. The main ones are: close wiring, off-set wiring, out-rigged wiring and electric fencing. The wire must always be strained tight. The secret of doing this successfully is to put the staples in, stopping just short of nipping the wire. Then after a while the wire is re-tightened.

Close wiring

For the best results, wire and netting should be set tight against the hedge. Firstly the side

of the hedge is trimmed. The fencing posts are driven into the ground as close to the hedge as possible with one or two strands of barbed wire added. In subsequent years the hedge is trimmed in the normal way outside the wire. For horses plain wire, never barbed, should be used.

Off-set wiring

Some farmers, particularly those in East Cornwall with low or weak turf hedges, use off-set permanent fences erected at least 3 feet (1m) from the hedge base, the hedge being trimmed behind the wire. To have room for the trimmer to leave a good green plant cover on the hedge, the fence needs to be set out 4 ft (1.2m).

Out-rigged wiring

On Bodmin Moor and in other areas where the rock is so close to the surface that driving fencing posts into the ground is an impossibility, posts may be set horizontally into the top of the hedge. This is frequently met with in other parts of Britain where dry-stone walls predominate and are expected to keep in the hardiest and most agile hill breeds of sheep. With a Cornish hedge care must be taken not to dislodge the surrounding stones when putting in the short posts to carry the wire. If they cannot be driven tightly into crevices, the top two rows may need to be breached to make each hole and then rebuilt solidly around the posts. The posts will protrude about a foot (30cm) from the face of the hedge with usually a single strand of wire.

Alternatively the posts may be driven down into the top of the hedge, standing up a foot or 18 inches with one or two strands of wire, along the middle of the hedge top. Again, care must be taken not to loosen the stone facing to either side when driving the posts. This is most often used for lower hedges with inadequate shrubby top-growth, such as those on the typical old miner's smallholding in the upland areas.

Electric fencing

Sometimes all the hedges on a commercial farm will be protected by a mains-electric fence to the entire satisfaction of the farmer and, more importantly, of his neighbours. Another farmer may have tried electric fencing without success. The difference seems to be that the successful farmer never assumes that all is well, while the other puts too much confidence in his electric fence, often leaving sections dead for days. Certainly, once an electric fence is up, the whole world seems to conspire either to short-out parts of it, or to make a poor connection. On the more windswept parts of Cornwall, keeping plant growth from shorting the wire is much easier than in the lush valleys, but some farmers find it more trouble than others. A permanent electric fence should always be off-set by not less than 4 feet (1.2 m) from the hedge to allow the trimmer to go behind.

Everything depends on the type of livestock which needs to be kept inside the field, out on the common, or in or out of the garden. In this tourist county, where landscape matters, fencing must be as discreet as possible, using materials that will weather kindly, and allowing growth on the hedge to disguise fences in the view. Wooden posts, galvanised wire and black insulators are less obtrusive than some other types and materials.

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