



# REPAIRING TURF HEDGES IN CORNWALL

© Robin Menneer 2006. Reviewed 2023.

*Traditional turf hedge repair / causes of gaps / when to repair / step-by-step instructions to repair a gap / repairing after a tree has fallen / working with a tractor.*

## TRADITIONAL REPAIR OF TURF HEDGES

In remembering life on a farm in the late 19th century, W. J. Clarke wrote in the Old Cornwall Magazine in 1931 about repairing a turf hedge : "Usually, hedging was carried out in a lay field that was going to wheat next year. First, a space of hedge was cleared of all fuzz, brambles and thorn, excepting the plishers, left standing at intervals, they would cover when the bean was laid. These plishers were the best of the new saplings. The top of the hedge which had suffered the wear and tear of weather, cattle, and sometimes traffic, was next pulled out fair with the biddix and bashed down tight with the butt of that useful implement. Then we started turfing-up with tabs neatly cut by a shovel until the required height was reached; all the time filling with earth and rubble. (An unwritten law is, that you can take three feet of your neighbour's soil to make up your hedge.) The bean was then laid, subject to the rooted belief that one must never cut hood (wood), kill a pig, or have one's hair cut save on the growing of the moon. The plisher, or standing wood, was cut on a long slant partly through, trimmed to requirements and bent gently down on to the hedge (always, if possible, with the course of the sun) after which more tabs were laid to keep it in position."

This was a good description of how to repair a turf hedge but it requires detail, point by point.

*"(An unwritten law is, that you can take three feet of your neighbour's soil to make up your hedge.)"*

For boundary hedges, the unwritten law is usually that you can take up to six feet of your neighbour's soil to make up your hedge, depending on circumstances. After all, the repair is to his benefit too. A Cornish hedge bank has a legal width (in contrast to an English hedgerow which has none) and may be owned wholly by the owner of the land on one side or on the other, or half-and-half with the boundary going down the middle. [See Cornish Hedges Library "Who Owns that Cornish Hedge?"]. This means a landowner or tenant may have one, both or neither side of the hedge to maintain. How much of the neighbour's land is available to dig tobs from is often spelled out in the title deeds, but a minimum of three feet would be assumed if the deeds are silent.

*“Usually, hedging was carried out in a lay field that was going to wheat next year.”*

Gaps in a turf hedge will occur by natural erosion over time, especially if casting up and minor repairs are neglected. Gaps are also likely to have been made by farm livestock, in which case the field on one side at least is already in grass. If made by people, the field may be being cropped, and still the gap has to be repaired. In this instance, tobs have to be cut elsewhere and brought to the site. This is not ideal as the extra handling usually means that many of the tobs get damaged and are difficult to use. Tabs, as Clarke calls them, tobs or tobbans are heavy lumps of turf dug with the Cornish shovel at least six inches (15cm) thick, best cut diamond-shaped as this makes them easier to lay together and build.

Major repairs to turf hedges are best carried out in autumn. At this time the earth is likely to be neither too dry nor too wet to work, and by Christmas the repair will have settled in without having to contend with extremes of weather.

*“First, a space of hedge was cleared of all fuzz, brambles and thorn, excepting the plishers, left standing at intervals, they would cover when the bean was laid. These plishers were the best of the new saplings.”*

The space of hedge would be cleared up to 3 or 4 feet (1m) each side of the gap, as well as in the gap itself, and trimmed out so that no growth gets in the way of the hedger. Plishers are the young growths of trees and bushes, usually hawthorn or blackthorn - these are the best - which will be amenable to bending down across the gap when it has been mended. Ideally they should be about 6 feet (2m) tall and a couple of inches (about 4-10cm) girth at the base.

*“The top of the hedge which had suffered the wear and tear of weather, cattle, and sometimes traffic, was next pulled out fair with the biddix and bashed down tight with the butt of that useful implement.”*

Traffic means people. Nowadays damage to the hedge side may also mean impact by vehicles. A biddix or beddax, tubble, piggle or prong is a tool similar to a mattock and is used to clear off the gap to a good earth face all round. The earth must then be rammed down tight on top and into the hedge sides, advised here as using the reversed end of the mattock hilt, as in ramming the fill of a Cornish hedge. Failure to get the earth properly consolidated will cause the repaired gap to collapse later on.

*“Then we started turfing-up with tabs neatly cut by a shovel until the required height was reached; all the time filling with earth and rubble.”*

A strip of turf is cut parallel with the hedge line, 6 inches (15cm) wide and 6 inches deep with the shovel held at a slight angle (about 10°) into the ground. (For extensive repairs along the hedge the strip can be ploughed out). Then the strip is cut up by shovel at an angle of about 60°, at intervals of 8 inches (20cm) to make diamond-shaped tobs.

Each tob is dug up with the shovel, and with the tob still on the shovel blade, is placed in the hedge gap with the grass side outwards and level with the existing turf face. The shovel is used in one operation because if the tob is lifted in the hands or on a fork it will break up. The horizontal courses are laid level, with the diamond-shaped tobs half overlapping each other, and the courses are staggered, as in bricklaying, so that the heavy centre of the tob is laid above the join between tobs in the row below. This gives strength and helps the tobs to knit more quickly.

As each course of tobs is laid, the space behind the tobs is filled with earth which must be well rammed behind each tob. This is vitally important, otherwise the tobs will fall out. A club hammer, or a half pickaxe handle, held upright, is usually used for ramming.

The batter profile is built in an inwards (concave) curve. This batter is very important for the stability of the hedge. At a quarter of the height of the hedge, the inward batter should be one-eighth of its height, eg in a four-foot hedge, the hedge face at one foot from the ground slants inward by six inches. Thereafter the batter gets gradually more vertical until three-quarters up the hedge when the inward curve should be one-quarter of its height. The top quarter of the hedge side should be vertical, so the top of the hedge is half the width of the base.

The rest of the hedge is likely to have lost its concave batter over time, now having a uniform slope or even a convex or bulging profile which is on its way to falling down. The batter in the repair has to be adjusted at the sides of the gap to meet the existing hedge securely. In repairing a wider gap, the correct concave batter in the centre of the repair can more easily be achieved. Working in as much as possible of a proper batter is one of the skills of repairing a hedge and is more difficult to do properly than building a new hedge.

When the sides of the hedge are made up, tobs are laid on top of the hedge, which should be built up in a domed shape with its height at the middle of the hedge being one-third of the width of the hedge top.

*“The bean was then laid, subject to the rooted belief that one must never cut hood (wood), kill a pig, or have one's hair cut save on the growing of the moon.”*

The exact meaning of bean is not clear, it may be a variation of byan (in Cornish = little), or a corruption of “bine”. The inference here is that it is the small under-wood that is laid down as a basis on which to lay the plishers. The word “bean” is said also to apply to the withy strip used to bind a bundle of faggots or beansticks, so it may apply to any bundling or tying down of brushwood or sticks.

There was an old belief that things grow better during the waxing of the moon. For further information see "Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture" by Rudolf Steiner, published in 1993 by Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Kimberton, Pennsylvania, USA.

*“The plisher, or standing wood, was cut on a long slant partly through, trimmed to requirements and bent gently down on to the hedge (always, if possible, with the course of the sun) after which more tabs were laid to keep it in position.”*

The plishers, being partially-severed growths, are bent down and anchored on to the hedge-top by tobs being placed on some of the main branches, resulting in these rooting into the top of the hedge where the gap used to be.

Temporary fencing should be provided to protect the newly-repaired hedge. Smearing it with dung discourages cattle from pulling at the tobs until their roots have knitted. If the land is intensively grazed by modern farm stock it may be economic in reducing repair needs to protect turf hedges permanently with suitable fencing.

## REPAIRING AFTER A TREE HAS BLOWN DOWN

The first thing is to decide whether to remove all of the tree. Sometimes the cut-down stump can be put back whence it came, making the repair of the hedge much simpler and cheaper. The branches are sawn off, leaving about 8-10 feet (3 metres) of trunk, and the tree is then levered up with a digger, pivoting on its remaining roots in the hedge. Once the hedge is re-consolidated and repaired around it, the trunk of a broad-leaved tree can be reduced to coppice-height and as it regrows it will firm its root-hold. A conifer will not regrow but this procedure may still save a major hedge repair and the standing trunk as it rots makes good wildlife habitat. Eventually it will collapse gently without harm.

Otherwise the tree has to be cut up and removed. Often the rooted end of the trunk is still lying in the hedge top or side, and must not be pulled off with a tractor because of the additional damage it will do to the hedge. Leaving the trunk where it is, the tree has to be sawn up, starting with the branches. Then the trunk is sawn off where it is and the roots severed, leaving just the base of the stump which can be lifted off the hedge with a front-end loader. The larger roots should be removed, as far as possible, where they will get in the way of the hedge

repairs.

Now the site is prepared by clearing up all the displaced earth and turf and piling it to one side. In doing this, the gap has to be cleared down to undisturbed compacted soil, ready for rebuilding.

As the tree fell, its roots will have loosened the structure of the hedge for some distance each way. The gap must be cleared as far as this disturbance goes, or another gap may form later on. Some of the remaining tree roots may need to be sawn or chopped off and removed.

Then the gap can be repaired in the same way as an ordinary gap.

## WORKING WITH A TRACTOR OR DIGGER

A farm tractor with a front bucket, or a small digger is useful when repairing or building turf hedges, but there is always a temptation to use it in a way that is bad for the hedge.

For mending gaps, just to scoop up the hedge debris at the foot of the hedge, or bring a load of earth from elsewhere, and dump it willy-nilly into the gap is very quick, but guarantees that the gap will not mend properly and will soon need attention again.

The tractor/digger should be used only to cut out turf to use in repairs. The tractor bucket or a small digger can be used economically to cast up turf hedges, at about one metre a minute. Turf and earth is lifted from along the foot of the hedge and placed along the top. This should be done at intervals of five years or so, or as soon as the hedge shows signs of eroding from the top. Neglect of this old practice contributes to the hedge's falling into disrepair. [See CHL "Building Turf Hedges in Cornwall"]

---

*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.*

### **Titles of papers available at [www.cornishhedges.co.uk](http://www.cornishhedges.co.uk)**

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

