

# Devon hedges and their history in the landscape



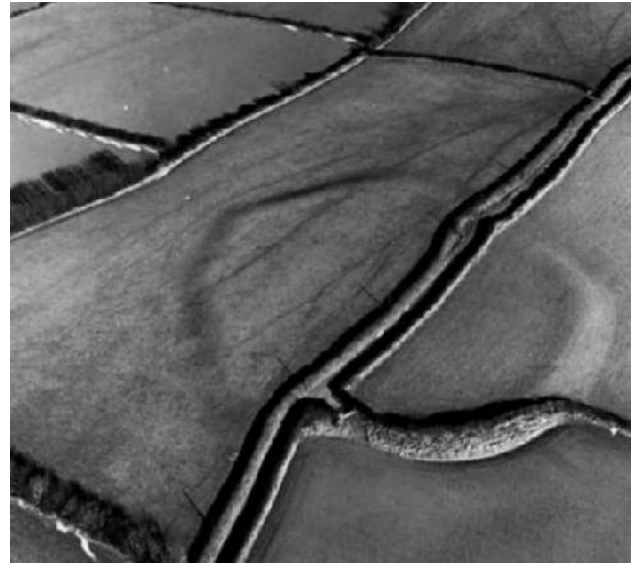
*Iron Age field patterns at Deckler's Cliff, Prawle.*  
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**H**edges are one of the most significant elements in the Devon landscape, contributing to the present day beauty and sense of place, and forming a living part of its history. As a human creation, the pattern and form of Devon's hedges record the development of its unique rural landscape.

Devon contains many of the oldest hedges in the country. Widespread and early field enclosure during the Middle Ages (AD 1250 - 1450) means that as many as three-quarters of existing hedges could be of medieval origin. Many have since been modified, others entirely lost, but the “mighty great hedges” observed by John Hooker in AD 1599 have essentially remained, to become a symbol of Devon's enduring appeal, as well as a living connection with its past.

From Bronze Age reaves to Medieval strip fields, Devon has a wealth of archaeologically important hedges, most still in farming use today. Older hedges can hold important evidence for the archaeologist: in particular buried soil preserved beneath the earth bank may provide a time capsule of fossil pollen which can be scientifically dated to the origin of the hedge or reconstructed to form an historic snapshot of local vegetation.

This section provides a brief history of hedges in the Devon landscape and outlines some of the sources of information which can be used in studying them.



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

## Ancient hedges

Some Devon hedges incorporate earthworks that were already old by the time they were integrated into a field, such as at Stoke Rivers, north Devon (above). They can include the former ramparts of Iron Age hill forts (c. 700 BC - AD 50), for example at Stockland Little Camp, east Devon. Even earlier settlement enclosures or field boundaries, like coaxial field systems on Dartmoor, can date back over 4,000 years to the Bronze Age or Neolithic period. Other prehistoric hedges preserve ancient land divisions, for instance the Dartmoor reaves (systems of long parallel boundary banks) are known to date from the Middle Bronze Age (c.1400 - 1000 BC) and many are still part of present-day field boundaries.

Haga, the Old English word for a hedge or fence, is first documented in Anglo-Saxon charters. In Devon, these legal documents often describe the boundaries of manorial estates. The latter sometimes survive as parish boundaries and are among the oldest hedges in the county. With limited historical and archaeological evidence from the later

Anglo-Saxon period (AD 800 - 1066) in Devon, it is difficult to know how widespread hedges were, but the typical landscape of dispersed farms, embanked roads and manorial estates is thought to have emerged at this time.

Turner (2007) suggests that some boundary hedges mentioned in charters from Devon may have marked the outer boundary of open strip fields. These were large, cultivated fields with communally-farmed open strips - a rare example of open strip farming still survives today at Braunton Great Field, north Devon. Recent pollen research by Fyfe (2006) has found that cereal production especially increased significantly in lowland Devon at this time. As the narrow strips were ploughed over time they took on a characteristic curve at one end, where the oxen were turned. A 'reverse-S' pattern often developed when ploughed in both directions.

## Medieval enclosure

The celebrated Devon historian Professor W.G. Hoskins (1954) suggested that the period between AD 1150 and 1350 was one of great colonisation of the Devon countryside and it was when the characteristic landscape was born: “the lanes, the small irregular fields, the great hedgebanks...”.

A distinctive part of south-western farming was the early enclosure, before about AD 1250, of open strips to produce long, narrow enclosures, for example at Sheepwash (below). In other areas, identified by Rackham (1986) as 'planned countryside', common open fields persisted far longer. Turner (2007) writes that on average the enclosed strip field was only 30 m wide by 140 - 200 m long. Such fields were once widespread across Devon, but most have been altered or lost. Many hedges, however, still have the distinctive curvilinear form of an open strip, indicating their medieval origin. Other medieval enclosures have very irregular hedges, which may have developed piecemeal over time, kinks, for example, arising through woodland clearance or hedge or settlement loss.

In a more recent history of Devon husbandry, Stanes (2008) suggests that enclosure of fields with hedges would have been considered progressive husbandry by medieval landlords. Though an initially arduous task, hedge creation allowed better selective breeding and disease control for stock than was possible on common land. Hedges had other important benefits, including the regular production of wood fuel, and different species of tree and shrub were grown for tool-making, hurdles and a multitude of other everyday uses.



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

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

Further agricultural improvements from the fifteenth century onwards, especially by richer estates, led to the regularisation of many small medieval enclosures into larger 'barton' fields. Soil fertility was also improved by spreading Devon marl (alkaline clay) and sea sand. Large-scale sheep farming satisfied the high demand for wool and the increasing importance of cloth production and its export contributed to the wealth of the county. Stanes (2008) records that on a visit

in AD 1645, Oliver Cromwell was heard to declare "I have been in all the counties of England and the Devonshire husbandry is the best". The Devon hedge was an important part of this distinctive farming.

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

## Parliamentary enclosure

The Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which did so much to change the face of the English countryside had a lesser effect on Devon. Hoskins (1954) notes that “there are no parliamentary acts for the enclosure of open fields in Devon, but there are 71 awards among the county records dealing with wastes and commons”. Between AD 1802 and 1874 many of the moors and heaths of the Blackdown Hills and Haldon Hills, amongst others, were enclosed. The new, large rectangular fields were very noticeable in the landscape, for example on Stockland Hill (previous page), and the hedges were often planted with a single shrub species such as beech.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the sum total of hedges in Devon was thought to be between 50,000 and 60,000 miles (80,000 and 96,000 km). Rackham (1986) suggested that after around AD 1870 there was little change in hedge numbers across the country until the end of World War II. However, recent historic landscape study in Devon (Turner 2007) has shown that there was already moderate hedge removal by 1945 and this accelerated after the war with farm mechanisation and modern food production. Today, the sum total of Devon hedges is thought to be around 33,000 miles (53,000 km), suggesting almost half may have been removed or declined during the modern period. Despite these losses, hedges remain a prominent and characteristic feature of the Devon landscape.

## Documentary information sources

Old maps, charters and so forth provide an excellent record of changes in the pattern and extent of field boundaries in Devon over time. Most comprehensive are the Parish Tithe Maps and Apportionments which show field and parish boundaries around AD 1840 - these can be found online at [www.devon.gov.uk/tithemaps](http://www.devon.gov.uk/tithemaps)

Earlier records survive occasionally in Anglo-Saxon charters, glebe terriers (church land inventories) and old estate maps. The last can include detailed records of hedged landscapes, such as the Calmady maps (AD 1788 - 1789) of the Langdon and Down Thomas estate in south Devon (overleaf). Many of these historical documents are available to view at the Devon Heritage Centre in Exeter. Finally, comparison of modern records with earlier Ordnance Survey maps and aerial photographs shows how field patterns have continued to evolve to the present day.

## Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)

Hedges are an important component of the historic landscape. In 2005 Devon County Council (supported by English Heritage) undertook a countywide mapping project to characterise historic elements in today's landscape, using old Ordnance Survey maps, aerial photographs and County Historic Environment Record (HER) sources. The Devon Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) mapping was completed by Sam Turner in 2005 and can be viewed online at [www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment](http://www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment). The findings of HLC were later developed in Turner's book *Ancient Country: the historic character of rural Devon* (2007).

HLC is designed to record and map a sequence of historic and modern character types, such as medieval enclosures based on strip fields or modern settlement. HLC confirms that most hedges in the modern Devon landscape were in place by the Middle Ages (AD 1250 - 1450). The patterns of fields and the woodlands, farmsteads and parishes which developed were built on elements from earlier ages, and these in turn have been affected by more recent industrial and agricultural changes, including mining and forestry.



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

## Shrub species diversity

Hedge shrub species diversity has also been used to study the history of the Devon hedge. Early studies by Dr Max Hooper (Pollard *et al.* 1974) suggested that in a given 30 metre stretch of hedgerow each shrub species represented around 100 years of growth; older hedgerows usually contain more shrub species due to natural dispersal. However, considerable care in interpretation is necessary, as species establish naturally at differing rates. Furthermore, a range of trees and shrubs may have been deliberately planted in older hedges, especially in the pre-industrial period, reflecting the many uses to which hedge wood was put. Charles Vancouver, describing agricultural practices in Devon in the nineteenth century, noted how hedges in the Blackdown Hills were planted up using a collection of species from local

woods, commons and rough ground. As a result, these hedges comprise five or six species even though they are little more than 100 years old.

Further pointers on ageing Devon hedges can be found in section 16: *A focus for learning and connecting with nature.*

## Further information

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