

Devon hedges: a focus for learning and connecting with nature

The Devon hedge offers many exciting opportunities for learning, study and community involvement, for people of all ages and backgrounds: this section describes some of these.

Our hedges provide opportunities to get out and about in the countryside, to learn new skills and facts, to explore new places, and to improve physical fitness. Even in our towns and cities there are hedges which can serve very well as outdoor classrooms. Furthermore, there's much scope for everyone to discover new things about our hedges and hedged landscapes.

Most years the Devon Hedge Group holds a Devon Hedge Week, usually in the autumn half-term, during which individuals and organisations run events for members of the public and others. If you are interested in hedges and want to become involved, this is a good way to find out what is happening across the county, and where you might contribute. Even better, consider holding an event yourself! Details are given on the Group website www.devon.gov.uk/hedges

Hedge ownership

Most hedges are privately owned, so please be sure to ask the landowner or farmer for access permission and their agreement to whatever it is you propose to do. Many landowners and farmers are proud of their hedges and will only be too pleased to assist if asked, and may appreciate help finding out about their history, nature, etc, or with their management. Hedges are well known and liked by most people, and fostering understanding of the land management, wildlife and other benefits of hedges is good for community relations.



Hedge-related events are held frequently throughout the county, especially during Devon Hedge Week.
©Robert Wolton

Learning opportunities

For students of all ages, hedges offer learning opportunities across many subjects, from ecology and wildlife, through history and geography, to art and mathematics. Ten *Lines of enquiry* are given on the Devon Hedge Group web pages, and its popular *Hedgeucation* leaflet aims to enthuse and educate children about Devon's exceptional hedges. Together these two resources have ideas about the ways hedges can be used in a fun and engaging way for education. In addition, some of the suggested fun activities in Danks & Scofield and Cornell could be adapted for hedges.



Hedges can be used to teach many subjects, including art, history and maths, as well as biology. ©Sue Wheeler



Hedge steeping (laying) training events and competitions are popular and fun. ©Robert Wolton

Developing hedge skills

Hedge steeping (the Devon term for laying) is a traditional rural craft that requires much skill to do it really well. Practised by an expert, it's as much an art as a practical method of rejuvenating a hedge and keeping it healthy. However, even with just a day or two's training, most people will be able to do a reasonable job, and gain a lot of satisfaction as well as exercise in the process. Training courses are arranged by a number of organisations in Devon, especially the Devon Rural Skills Trust and the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association. These cover ways to turf or stone face the banks that form the core of Devon hedges as well.

Courses, workshops and events in other hedgy matters, such as finding and recording wildlife, dating hedges, evaluating their importance or assessing management requirements, are also provided from time to time, and often advertised through the Devon Hedge Group web pages.

Hedge surveys

We have little information about the extent, special features or health of hedges over most of the county, and further local surveys are much needed. These can be at the farm, parish or any other level: there are ample opportunities for community and

volunteer involvement. Surveys that are carried out systematically, based on random sampling or complete censuses are especially valuable, since these will allow future changes to be detected and quantified.

A *Hedgerow Survey Handbook* is available which contains a tried and tested procedure for local hedgerow surveys (see *Further information* on page 5). Although it may seem complicated at first sight, in practice volunteers can use it with just a little training. The great advantage of following the method it recommends is that the results can be compared with those from elsewhere in the country. Even better, it's linked to an online database which makes entering, storing and analysing data much easier. The method can be expanded to cover particular local circumstances or interests, such as historical or landscape aspects. Between 2007 and 2009 the method was used by Devon FWAG and Exmoor National Park to survey 10 parishes in Devon.

While detailed surveys are the only way to record properly the structure, species and management of hedges, fixed point photography can be used to demonstrate large-scale changes over the years. These photos can form part of a local landscape or hedge recording project.

Hedges are very prominent features in the farmed landscape and their appearance changes dramatically over the seasons and according to management regime. They are excellent subjects for artists and photographers, who may be interested in recording certain hedges or hedged landscapes over time. There is plenty of scope for hedge art and photographic competitions.

Hedgerow trees

Devon's hedgerow trees need help if we are not to lose many over the coming years and decades. Too few new ones are being allowed to grow to replace those that die or have to be felled. At the time of writing this section (2014), ash dieback disease seems likely to make this situation much worse.

Individuals and local communities working with farmers can really help here, by selecting and tagging young trees to grow without cutting. A key point is that selected trees need to be looked after for several years after initial tagging, to ensure that they are easily visible to the operator of hedge trimmers until big enough to be obvious. Further information is in section 12, *Hedgerow trees*.

We have virtually no records of what Devon's hedged landscape looked like before Dutch elm disease struck, although we know that the impact was dramatic. This vividly demonstrates the importance of countryside surveys - without them changes can often go undetected, let alone quantified. Surveys and photographic records of hedge ash trees are likely to be especially pertinent, and local communities are strongly encouraged to record them, at least along parish lanes.

Hedge fuel for all

There's much opportunity for local communities to work together with farmers over hedges, the farmers getting their hedges rejuvenated by steeping or coppicing and the local community a supply of free firewood as well as a chance to develop new skills, to meet and chat with like-minded people, and to take exercise. The alleviation of rural fuel poverty may be another benefit. The Devon Hedge Group and Dartmoor Circle have shown that such partnerships, between farmers and communities, can be successful given clarity on responsibilities and expectations. They have produced a toolkit which covers all relevant aspects, including health and safety, training and insurance - see *Further information* on page 5 for details.



Recording hedgerow trees such as this fine ash, a species threatened by disease, provides very valuable data. ©Robert Wolton



Community 'woodfuel from hedges' events, like this one at South Brent, provide not just logs for the fire but also a chance to socialise and to take exercise. ©Robert Wolton



Clive Pig, professional storyteller, telling one of his hedge stories to children from Hatherleigh primary school.
©James Bird, Okehampton Times

Hedge history

Many individuals and communities are interested in the history of their local hedged landscapes, and this is a very fruitful area to explore. There are a number of clues that can be gathered about the age of an individual hedge or hedge network:

- Is the field pattern irregular or ordered with the hedges following straight lines? The former are likely to be medieval, the latter more recent. The Devon Historic Landscape Characterisation mapping completed in 2005 suggests the age of hedges across the county based on field patterns. The Devon Historic Environment Record which includes these maps can be viewed online at www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment
- Are there any historical documents or maps available? The parish tithe maps, dated around 1840, are a very good first port of call and can be accessed through the Devon Record Office, part of the Devon Heritage Centre. Most tithe maps are available to view on line at www.devon.gov.uk/tithemaps
- How many woody species are there in the hedge? Studies by Dr Max Hooper suggest that in a given 30 m stretch of hedge each shrub species represents around 100 years of growth; older hedges may contain more shrub species due to natural dispersal. However, considerable care in interpretation is necessary, as species establish naturally at differing rates. Furthermore, some species may have been deliberately planted, especially in the pre-industrial period (and in more recent years). 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.

- Are there any plants present which are ancient woodland indicators? Some woodland herbs like bluebell and dog's mercury, or trees like wild service, are very slow to colonise new habitats and are indicative of ancient hedges.
- Does the hedge contain ancient trees or coppice stools?
- If the hedge is on a slope, is there a marked build up of soil, effectively a terrace, on the uphill side, suggesting considerable age?
- Perhaps the hedge incorporates parts of archaeological or historical sites, or has been cut by a more modern feature of known age? For example, some field patterns are known to be pre-Roman because they are dissected by Roman roads. Information on Devon's historic sites and monuments can be accessed through the Heritage Gateway www.heritagegateway.org.uk

More details on much of this can be found in section 2, *Devon hedges and their history in the landscape*.



Ancient trees with rot holes and other veteran features, like this oak demonstrated by Nigel Adams, are of considerable wildlife and historical importance, and so well worth recording. ©Robert Wolton

Further information

1. Cornell, J. 1998 (Second edition). *Sharing Nature with Children: the classic parents' and teachers' nature awareness guidebook*. 20th anniversary edition, Dawn Publications, California.
2. Danks, F. & Schofield, J. 2006. *Nature's Playground: activities, crafts and games to encourage children to get outdoors*. Frances Lincoln Ltd, London.
3. Dartmoor Circle. 2012. *Woodfuel from Hedges: a tool-kit for communities*. www.dartmoorcircle.org.uk
4. Defra. 2007 (Second edition). *Hedgerow Survey Handbook: a standard procedure for local surveys in the UK*. www.hedgelinek.org.uk
5. Devon Hedge Group. Hedge trail leaflets. Three recommended walks through attractive countryside to learn about hedges at Buck's Mills near Clovelly; at Parke near Bovey Tracey, and at Denbury near Newton Abbot. Downloadable from www.devon.gov.uk/hedges
6. Devon's hedges learning resources. www.devon.gov.uk/hedges
7. Pig, C. 2012. *The Westcountry Rambler and The Higglety-Piglety Hedge*. Two video stories for children about Devon hedges. www.devon.gov.uk/hedges
8. Pollard, E., Hooper, M.D. & Moore, N.W. 1974. *Hedges*. The New Naturalist 58. London: Collins
9. Vancouver, C. 1808. *General view of the agriculture of the county of Devon: with observations on the means of its improvement*. David & Charles, London & Newton Abbot.
10. Wheeler, S. & B. 2012. *An oral history of Devon's hedges*. (Two highlight videos.) www.devon.gov.uk/hedges