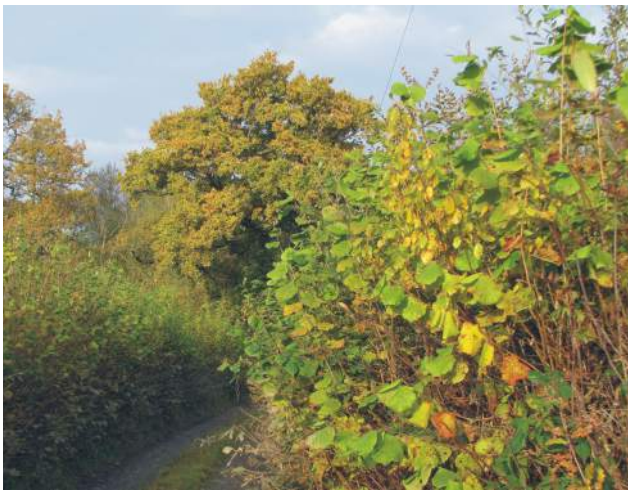
Devon hedges: an introduction

Hedges define the landscape and reveal the past history of Devon's countryside. The cultural landscapes they create are world class. ©Robert Wolton

Hedges shape and define the character of the Devon countryside: they link us to the past and are an asset for the future. They underpin a cultural landscape which is exceptionally well preserved in a northern European context, and that is the envy of other countries. The field patterns they create are part of the very essence of Devon, giving the landscape a unique distinction, memorable to resident and visitor alike. Their weave forms an ancient, diverse and intact net that spreads across the length and breadth of the county, broken only by the two moors. They are surely world class!

Fortunately, Devon has escaped some of the more extreme forms of landscape change experienced in other parts of lowland Britain. Even so, large numbers of hedges were removed during the last century, especially in the decades after the Second World War, in response to agricultural intensification and mechanisation, urban expansion and road development. Now hedges are much better protected and more highly valued by farmers: it is rare for them to be removed except as part of a built development. As a consequence, Devon still has some 53,000 km (33,000 miles) of hedge, more than any other county in England. Just as remarkable, the great majority of these hedges are said to be species-rich because of the wide variety of different native shrubs and trees they contain: Devon has about 20% of all the species-rich hedges left in the UK!

This introductory section provides an overview of Devon's hedges, outlining their character, uses and importance, past and current management, health, and key challenges. Most of the topics are covered in more detail in other sections.

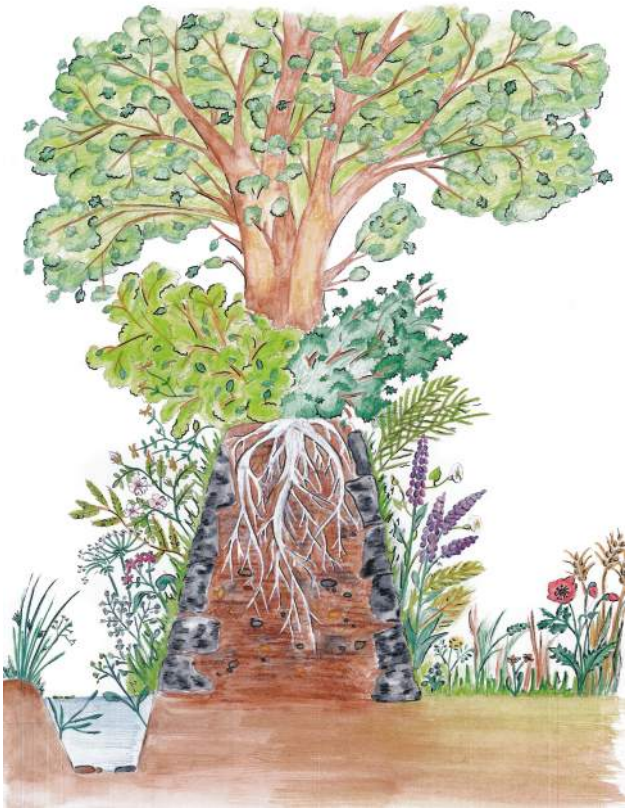


Nearly all Devon's hedges are on earth banks, are ancient, and have many species of tree and shrub.
©Robert Wolton

Defining the Devon hedge

In contrast to hedgerows in most other parts of Britain, the true Devon hedge has at its core a substantial earth bank, faced with either stone or turf. Indeed, some Devonians refer to the banks themselves as hedges even when there are no shrubs! Usually though, nowadays, a Devon hedge is taken to be the earth bank together with shrubs and trees growing on top of it. Sometimes these structures are called hedgebanks, or banked hedges, for clarity. Quite apart from the bank and its shrubs and trees, ditches and flower-rich or tussocky grass margins are an integral and important part of many of the best Devon hedges: this guide covers all such features. A *Glossary* of hedge terms is included as a separate section.

Windswept trees like this beech are characteristic of hedges in exposed coastal and upland situations.
©Robert Wolton

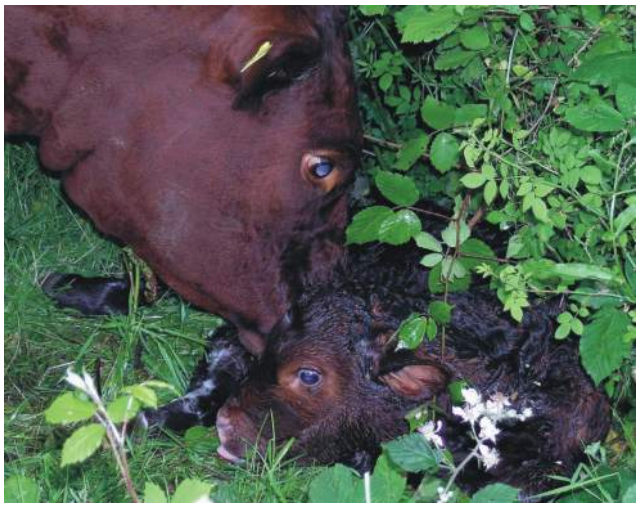


A Devon hedge (or hedgebank) consists of an earth bank faced with either turf or stone together with the shrubs and trees growing on it, and any associated ditches and flower-rich margins.
©Catherine Burgess

The diversity of Devon hedges

Across the county there are great variations in the structure of hedges and in the trees and shrubs which grow on them, reflecting location, origin, age and management. Tall beech hedges are characteristic of Exmoor and high ground in the Blackdown Hills; stone faced banks distinguish Dartmoor hedges and those of the Atlantic coast; willow is common on the wet clay soils of the Culm Measures between the moors; dogwood, spindle and wayfaring tree grow in hedges on limestone outcrops along the Channel coast; elm characterises the Redlands on either side of the River Exe; massive banks line mile after mile of sunken lanes in the South Hams; and wind-sculpted trees with gorse are distinctive of hedges of exposed coasts and uplands. A county hedge map with underlying detail can be found on the Devon Hedge Group's web pages (see *Further information* on page 9).

Farming and other uses



Hedges don't just keep farm animals in the fields where they are meant to be, they also provide valuable shelter from harsh weather and shade from the summer sun, both benefits likely to become more important with climate change. ©Robert Wolton

Devon hedges were constructed first and foremost for agricultural purposes. The thick and bushy growth of a well-maintained Devon hedge provides an effective stock-proof barrier, particularly where the bank is upright and intact. They also provide shelter for both farm animals and crops against wind, driving rain and drifting snow, and shade from the midday sun. They can even help with crop pest control by supporting populations of predatory insects, and improve crop pollination.

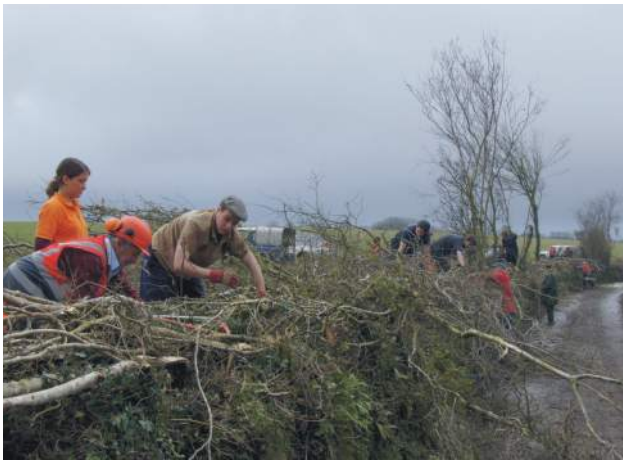
A range of wider benefits to society, called ecosystem services, are delivered by hedges. For example, they help purify the water in our streams and rivers, control soil erosion and reduce flooding. In urban areas their trees and bushy growth can provide an effective filter against air pollution, especially alongside busy roads.

In the past hedges and their trees have been a much valued source of both farm wood and fodder for stock. There has been a resurgence in interest in hedge woodfuel over recent years, with research in Devon and experience from across the Channel showing that most of our hedges can be managed and cropped to produce sustainable and cost-effective biomass crops. The Devon Hedge Group has produced a handbook on this subject (see *Further information* on page 9).

Historical and cultural value

Across the county, hedgebanks document changes in land use covering a thousand years or more! Indeed, the landscapes of Devon can be interpreted through the field shapes created by hedgebanks. Altogether, hedges have much symbolic and cultural significance. Some form parish boundaries, others follow hill fort ramparts, while a few mark the boundaries of historic or even prehistoric enclosures. The Bronze Age reaves of Dartmoor, a series of earth banks, are forerunners to today's hedgebanks and are thought to be as much as 3,500 years old, while two thirds of the county's hedgebanks are of medieval origin. For the archaeologist, the structure of the bank itself can be important, containing or burying material which throws light on past conditions and land use.

Devon even has its own unique style of hedge laying, or steeping as it known here. Such traditional skills are being kept alive by organisations like the Devon Rural Skills Trust and the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association, and, encouragingly, many people are eager to learn them.



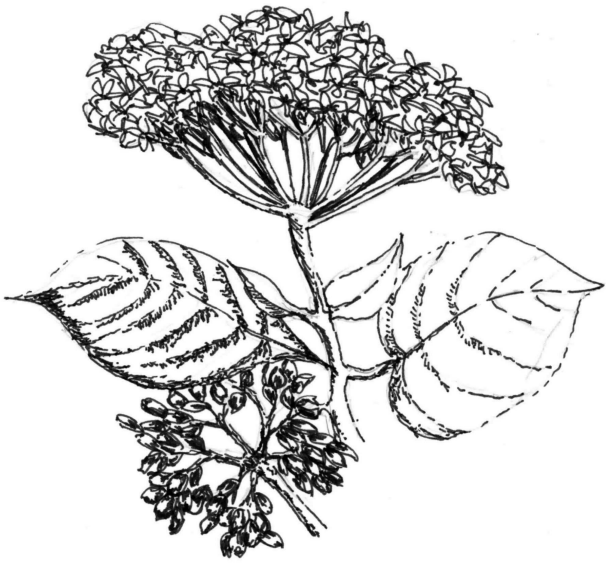
Hedge steeping is a traditional skill which increasing numbers of people are keen to learn. ©Robert Wolton

Landscape value

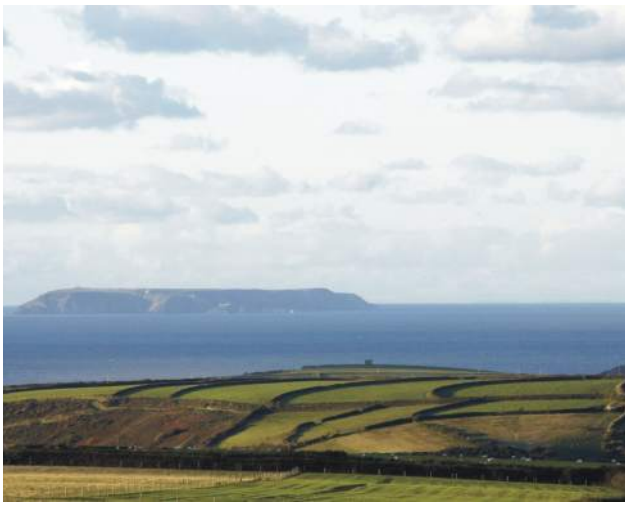
Hedges make the Devon landscape what it is today: beautiful! Indeed, they are essential to local distinctiveness. For example, in the Blackdown Hills the ancient, irregularly shaped mixed hedges of the valley slopes contrast markedly with the grid pattern of the younger, beech-dominated hedges of the plateau. Hedges are also widely used as effective shelters and screens for houses, farm buildings and industrial sites.

Wildlife importance

A great number of plants, fungi and animals depend on hedges to some degree - over 2,000 species have been identified from a single Devon hedge! Many rare and threatened animals are associated with Devon hedges: greater horseshoe bats, cirl buntings, hazel dormice and brown hairstreak butterflies to name just a few. While maintaining a good hedge will not meet all the needs of some of these species, hedges are a vital habitat and refuge for wildlife, especially in areas of intensive farming, and may become increasingly so with climate change.



The wayfaring tree is characteristic of Devon hedges on limestone soils. ©Heather Harley



Evidence of past strip field farming, a characteristic feature of Devon's outstanding landscapes, is often preserved by Devon's ancient hedges, as here at Hartland. ©Robert Wolton

Current hedge health

These days, unsustainable management is a far greater threat to Devon's hedges than outright removal. The traditional forms of hedge maintenance based on a cycle of growth punctuated by regular steeping (laying) and casting up (repair of the bank) have largely stopped due to the reduction in rural workforce and the high costs involved. Instead, there is a tendency for hedges either to be trimmed year after year to the same height or to be neglected altogether, allowing them to grow into lines of tall bushes or trees. Neither of these is good for the health of hedges in the long term: hedges still need to be periodically rejuvenated by steeping or coppicing. At the same time, higher stocking density has increased the erosion of earth banks, necessitating expensive restoration work.

Surveys of 10 parishes scattered across the county between 2007 and 2009 found that the shrub layer of just 35% of hedges was in good condition, although the banks themselves fared better, with 71% being in good condition. More information on this can be found in a Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group report on these surveys (see *Further information* on page 9 for details).

A key challenge is to make hedges a valued, cost-effective, part of the modern working farm. Sad remnants like this will then be a sign of the past, not the future. ©Robert Wolton

Challenges

These are twofold. Firstly, to ensure that Devon's hedges are widely valued by society, their immense contribution to our history, culture, wildlife and especially agriculture fully recognised. And secondly, to find ways of making them a more viable part of working farms, so they deliver savings or income, rather than being seen as a drain on resources. Grant aid from public funds is likely to remain important, but the future of our hedges should not rely upon it. The Devon Hedge Group exists to help the farmers and people of Devon meet these challenges.

Managing hedges for wood fuel can ensure they pay their way. ©Robert Wolton

Further information

1. Devon Hedge Group. 2012. *Devon's Distinctive Hedges.* Map and information on the hedge types most characteristic of each part of Devon.
2. Devon Hedge Group. 2014. *Wood fuel from hedges: How to manage and crop hedges in south-west England for fuel.* Tamar Valley AONB, Devon County Council & the Devon Hedge Group. Available from the Tamar Valley AONB and Devon Hedge Group. 22pp. **www.devon.gov.uk/hedges**
3. Exmoor National Park Authority. Information on managing Exmoor hedges. **www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/communities/information-for-farmers-and-land-managers/hedge-management**
4. Hodgson, C. 2010. *Devon Hedgerow Surveys, 2007 - 2009.* Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group. **www.devon.gov.uk/hedges**
5. Müller, G. 2013. *Europe's field boundaries: hedged banks, hedgerows, field walls (stonewalls, dry stone walls), dead brushwood hedges, bent hedges, woven hedges, wattle fences and traditional wooden fences.* Neuer Kunstverlag, Stuttgart. Two volumes, 632 and 648 pp.
6. Pollard, E., Hooper, M.D. & Moore, N.W. 1974. *Hedges.* The New Naturalist, 54. William Collins Sons & Company, Glasgow. 256 pp.