



More on Hedge Laying

Hedges have long been a vital landscape feature in Britain and are regarded as a characteristic feature - both natural and man-made. In the West Country in particular, hedges (in all of their forms) can be traced back to very early settlement and the raising of livestock. In the Midlands and Eastern England much of the hedgerow pattern seen today is an outcome of planned 'enclosure' and is part of the man-made landscape that has been a part of English agriculture and estate management since the early 18th century at least.

A management technique to maintain dense and stock-proof hedges is to 'cut and lay' the hedge at regular intervals - this would often coincide with the crop/livestock rotation; as a key function of well maintained hedges was to provide stock-proof fields - to prevent livestock straying or escaping - this necessitated good management and part of this was to 'lay' the hedge on a regular cycle to ensure that it was thick at the base, had no gaps and was indeed 'stock-proof'.

It is obvious that if hedges are not cut at all you end up with a row of trees - and if they are trimmed to the same height each year all of the growth will occur near the top and the bottom will become sparse. The outcome is an ineffective hedge both as a barrier and for nesting birds. So that is why a hedge is laid - if done on a regular cycle a hedge will be effective and 'last forever'.

Traditionally - particularly since the Parliamentary Enclosures after 1760; hedges divided land between owners and sub-divided land into manageable parcels for the individual landowner or tenant. This gave rise to much of the lowland landscape of Britain that is still evident today. It was, and to some extent is still characteristically English - a French traveller journeying from London to York at the end of the 18th century commented that the countryside appeared 'as a rectangle of greenery enclosed by a hedge, then another and so on...'. This would have been very unfamiliar - but had he been travelling in upland areas of the southwest - the field layout would resemble Brittany or southwest France.

Also, well-managed hedges provided long term resources of timber for other uses; hazel for hurdle making and where such specimens were retained to provide a supply, substantial timber for construction. Many references can be found in literature, both in fiction and in rural recollections - an informative example is found in 'The Book of Gorley' by Heywood Sumner (written around 1905) about an area of the New Forest in Hampshire...

'there is fine hedgerow timber on the south and west sides of the common - mostly Oak on the hills and Elm in the valley. This timber owes its existence to the custom of (the landowner) who always gave 1d per plant to the hedgers on his property when they left a well-grown young tree in making (cutting and laying) the fences (hedges)'. So as well as maintaining hedges for the reasons given above, long term provision of timber was a 'co-product' in today's language.