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The Theft Of The Countryside

by Marion Shoard

(Maurice Temple Smith, 1980)

Sample Chapter
3: Hedgerows

Hedgerows provide the framework of the English countryside. In the form in which we know them in Britain, hedgerows exist in only a handful of other spots around the world, principally central Tasmania, Normandy, Ireland and New England. Hedgerows have defined field and territorial boundaries in our countryside from Saxon times. And the pattern they have imposed on our fields, built up gradually over thousands of years, does more to distinguish our landscape than any other feature. By providing abundant cover, hedgerows have made England's wildlife richer by far than that of other lands: the primrose and the violet, the hedgehog and the dormouse owe their abundance to the hedgerow; and it is our network of bushy hedges which has made England par excellence the country of small songbirds. Most important of all, however, it is the hedgerow that has given our landscape the peculiar intimacy that distinguishes it from all others. As Richard Jefferies wrote in 1884, `without hedges, England would not be England'.

Today, however, our hedgerows are disappearing fast. Farmers removed a quarter of the hedgerows in England and Wales between 1946 and 1974, about 120,000 miles in all, or 4,500 miles a year.' The loss is continuing, as the hedgerow gets in the way of a wide range of new agricultural techniques. In 1978, 74 miles of hedgerow in England and Wales were grubbed out in the course of preparation for new drainage schemes alone to stop their roots fouling new drains.

The regional variations that provide much of the subtlety of our countryside are intimately bound up with differences in the composition, shape and layout of hedgerows. The low, square, beech hedges of Exmoor are quite distinct from the tall hedgebanks of Devon and Cornwall, as the oak studded hedges of the Weald are quite unlike the straight hawthorn and ash hedges of the Midlands, and these distinctions are vital to the differences in the character of these areas. Geology, geography and biology all play a part in distinguishing these hedge types from each other, but the most important distinguishing feature is age. It is a popular misconception that the basic structure of the lowland landscape is only two hundred years old, a creation of eighteenth-century enclosure. Our different kinds of hedgerow illustrate perhaps better than any other landscape feature the basic law of landscape history that everything in the landscape is much older than it seems.

The 18th century enclosures, which divided up the old open-field parishes, had a widespread effect only on that part of England where the open-field system was well-established the Midlands'. Outside the heart of England, in such counties as Northumberland, Durham, Suffolk, Essex, Kent, Sussex, Devon, Cornwall, Cheshire and Lancashire, the open-field system had never had the hold it achieved in the Midlands and by the beginning of the 18th century most of the hedgerows that survive today were already in existence, created from the times when the first settlers enclosed fields from the forest. Even in Midland counties like Oxfordshire, Leicestershire and Warwickshire many hedgerows date back much further than the eighteenth century. Half of Oxfordshire's hedges pre-date the Georgian and Victorian periods, according to landscape historian Frank Emery. He calculates that 15 per cent of Oxfordshire's hedge-miles marked out fields carved straight out of the great forest that once clothed almost all of Britain. Some of these hedges are more than one thousand years old; early enclosure of common fields and more forest between 1450 and 1750 account for the other 35 per cent.' By the 18th century most of the hedgerows that survive today were already in existence.

Most of our hedges, then, have quite a history. To see how variations in this history condition landscape, we could do worse than look at the countryside of Shropshire.

In north-eastern Shropshire, parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth century created a landscape of fields bounded by a geometrically regular pattern of hawthorn hedges and wide, straight roads. This area has none of the intimacy of central and southern Shropshire. We find here a mosaic of smaller, irregular fields, bounded by sunken lanes and thick hedges, dating largely from the medieval enclosure of individual fields direct from the untamed forest wilderness. The rocky Stiperstone Hills in the west of the county are characterised by circular, roughly built stone walls: sixteenth-century sqatters, who were often miners working part-time as farmers, enclosed islands of the rough grass heathland with walls of stones gathered from the land.

Shropshire has done well to hold on to as varied a landscape as this. In other areas, where, of course, stone walls have suffered the same fate as hedges, monotony has taken over.

Hedges in west Cornwall are constructed on quite a different pattern from those in the rest of England. In the Land's End peninsula in particular they are typically very old (their bases are estimated to date in some cases from the Bronze Age). Here hedges consist of stone-faced walls filled with earth, with a drainage ditch on either side, and on top a carpet of thick turf and wild flowers (brightly-coloured cranesbills, stitchworts, campions and harebells) crowned by gorse and hawthorn bushes. Here in the westernmost tip of England, conditions were too exposed for hawthorn hedges and hedgerow trees. But stone-based hedges could be put up simply from boulders cleared off the small, irregular fields they bordered.

These hedges are themselves of great historical interest, but even more ancient remains lie underneath many of them - the remains of Iron Age villages, burial chambers and subterranean refuges. When the hedges are removed, as more and more of them are being, these archaeological treasures go too. At the moment there is almost nothing to prevent a Cornish farmer from bulldozing away all the ancient hedges on his land if he wishes to. Uprooting a Cornish hedge is deceptively easy: without tree or hawthorn roots to anchor it to the earth, all that is needed is a powerful bulldozer and somewhere to dump the stones. Twenty-three miles of hedge were taken out in an eight-square-mile area of West Penwith near St Buryan between 1888 and 1976, according to Nicholas Johnson of the Cornwall Committee for Rescue Archaeology, who estimates that more hedges were removed in West Penwith during the thirteen years between 1963 and 1976 than were grubbed out during the seventy-five year period up to 1963.4

The impact on the landscape of hedge removal can be seen clearly at Trevorian Farm just outside Sennen Cove. In the early 1970s, two farmers from Kent bought six farms near the Cove covering a total of about 900 acres, the largest of which was Trevorian. In order to clear a path for the machines which were an essential feature of their plans to grow cereals, carrots, potatoes and bulbs, they cleared away eleven miles of hedgebank, thus increasing field sizes eightfold. Of course, it would be unreasonable to demand the preservation of all existing hedges. But too many operations like that at Trevorian will rob Cornwall of part of its identity. Trevorian is already indistinguishable from many farms in the east of England.

Cornwall is only one area whose regional character is disappearing with its hedgerows. The Vale of York, central and southern Devon, the Northumberland plain, central Herefordshire, the Lake District's Eden Valley, the Weald of Kent and Sussex, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire are just some of the areas suffering in this way. In Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and even the Cotswolds you can now drive for miles and not see a single substantial hedgerow; this is one reason why these areas now seem almost identical.

The impact of hedge removal on a landscape does of course vary widely. If there are plenty of hedges to start with, it is easier to bear the loss of a few. But the bulldozer is not respecting such niceties. The Worcestershire countryside has been turned into much more of a prairie than neighbouring Herefordshire has. But this is not because hedgerow removal has been taking place faster in Worcestershire. It is because Worcestershire started with fewer hedgerows. The county lost an estimated 1,087 miles of hedgerow between 1900 and 1976 whereas farmers in Herefordshire managed to clear away an estimated 3,730 miles during the same period.' Worcestershire may have lost a third as many hedges, but it misses them much more.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was on the arable lands of East Anglia and, to a lesser extent, on the mixed farming lands of southern England that most hedge removal was taking place. Hedges were removed to create more cropland and to make way for the big new machines in which arable farmers were investing heavily. The doubling of England's barley acreage in the 1950s was just one sign of an aggressive drive to squeeze more out of the English soil which spelt doom for hedges. Hedgerows are of no real use to the arable farmer: in the past they may have helped stop soil erosion by acting as windbreaks, but now this can be achieved more efficiently by the application of mulches and oils to the soil surface. The arable farmer has no call for stock-proof barriers and little need for the proprietary boundary that many hedgerows originally provided. Hedgerows need maintaining and they harbour `pests'. So our arable farming lands (especially those in Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Humberside) have been stripped of a large proportion of their hedges: 45 per cent of Norfolk's hedgerows (a length of 8,000 miles) were removed by farmers between 1946 and 1970, for example .6 Many of those that remain have been cut right down to a level about two feet off the ground, at which they cease to fulfil any real landscape or wildlife function.

Until the 1970s, on the other hand, dairying remained a form of farming that really helped conserve the landscape against unwelcome change. For the last few years, however, the dairy farming areas of England have been subjected to even more dramatic change than arable areas. For now a revolution in dairy farming has touched off a new wave of hedge removal that is beginning to wipe out the distinctive character of parts of our non-arable areas. In these places, hedgerows are as redundant in cattle country as they are on arable farms. Dairy farming is particularly widespread in England: a majority of British farmers depend on it while more than half of the land in England and Wales is occupied by farms on which milk production is the major interest. Counties in which dairying is the dominant type of farming include Cumbria, Cheshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Avon, Somerset and Dorset.

Two new practices are taking grip. The first is paddock grazing. Farmers are replacing the old natural pastures with specially developed strains of grass, sown as a virtual monoculture, which are converted to milk more quickly than the original grasses. But these new pastures do not protect the underlying soil from trampling in the way that natural grass pastures do, since they lack the thick matt of interwoven roots of our natural pastures: they consist simply of bare earth and blades of grass. For this and other reasons, farmers are anxious to minimise the amount of trampling the new pastures receive. So they try to direct grazing by confining the animals to small paddocks, moving them on to another paddock every day or two, or even twice in the same day. For this system, they require movable field boundaries. Post and wire fences can meet this need, hedges cannot; so hedges are being replaced. In winter the animals subjected to paddock grazing are kept indoors and fed on silage (fermented grass) which was cut from the fields in summer and stored until needed. The second new method in dairying involves carrying this idea to its logical conclusion.

To control the feeding of cattle even more precisely, farmers in some areas no longer risk allowing their cattle to stray out of doors at all. Instead, the cows are housed together in sheds and fed on grass harvested from the fields where the cattle once grazed, supplemented by concentrates brought in from outside. Under this system, hedgerows just get in the way of the big machines harvesting and fertilising the grass.

Somerset is one county where paddock grazing is likely to gain a stronger and stronger grip. A study in 1972 revealed that on one 265-acre dairy farm near Crewkerne, two and a half miles of hedgerow had been removed so that grazing could be reorganised: the old nine-acre fields bounded by hedgerows made way for fields nearly five times as large divided up into much smaller areas by movable wire fences.'

The advantages of paddock grazing for farmers are only marginal, however, if they exist at all. Observation by the Ministry of Agriculture showed very little difference in either total milk yields or cow weight changes during the grazing period when cows in paddock grazing were compared with others in extensive grazing systems.' Nor are wire fences any cheaper to maintain than hedgerows: maintenance costs for wire fences are actually higher: 75p per chain for fences compared with 73p per chain for hedges since fences need replacing every twenty years.' Nonetheless, more and more farmers are switching to controlled grazing systems, with encouragement from the Ministry of Agriculture in the form of advice and grant. (The cows, by the way, much prefer traditional extensive grazing, and therefore produce more milk, according to one Ministry of Agriculture study. " But we can hardly expect their views to carry much weight if even the human community fails to make its voice heard in these matters.)

The Weald of Kent and Sussex is one area that looks particularly vulnerable to a switch to `battery dairying'. Secrecy is the key to the charm of the Weald. And it is the wide, thickly timbered hedgerows of the Weald, locally known as `shaws', that shelter the Weald's secret delights. For thousands of years the heavy clay soils and the marshy character of much of the land made it difficult to clear through the efforts of men and animals alone. Early settlers were forced to leave wide belts of wood around the tiny fields they managed to carve out of the primeval forest, called in Saxon times ‘Andredsweald’, or the land where nobody dwells. Many `shaws' are relics of this ancient forest. At the moment only the walker who takes to the Weald's dense web of public footpaths can really penetrate the secrets of this area, for only walking uncovers the wealth of surprises that lie hidden behind the shaws and close-spread coppices: hundreds of ponds, little rivers, rushy fields thick with orchids, yellow flags and ragged robin, churches, stately parklands, timber-framed manorhouses with encircling moats and, most beautiful of all, the long, narrow hammer ponds. If the hedgerows and shaws are cleared away - as they are being cleared over larger and larger areas of the Weald - the discreet charm of these features will evaporate.

Sometimes these features are rooted out along with the hedges. Hedgerow removal rarely occurs alone. In the Weald it is usually accompanied by drainage as part of a general tidying up operation. As a Ministry of Agriculture official put it to me: when farmers are installing drains they usually `take the opportunity' of removing hedgerows.

Dr Peter Brandon, who has studied the evolution of the Wealden landscape in detail, has estimated that shaws (characteristically full of bluebells, wood anemones, celandines and campions), other hedgerows and copses will almost certainly disappear from all but the marshiest parts of the Weald by 1990 unless action is taken to control their destruction. `The loss of shaws is particularly disturbing since ... these are amongst the oldest regional characteristics of the Wealden landscape', he wrote in 1974. `The landscape of the Sussex Weald is a priceless national heritage which will be visually degraded and its record of historical development on the ground largely destroyed unless some inducement is offered to farmers for retaining something of its present character.' As woodland is cleared, ponds and marshes drained, streams canalised or piped underground, grass reseeded, wire fences and lines of gleaming silos added, the land loses its Wealden feel and becomes just like any other stretch of the England of the 1980s.

Hedgerows, especially the thicker specimens- Wordsworth called them 'little lines of sportive wood run wild' - are a microcosm of the natural world. Deep down among their tough, ancient roots and in the recesses of their thorny, intertwined boughs, our common mammals have their home and refuge - the hedgehog, vole and mole, the field-mouse, harvest mouse and dormouse, the stoat and the weasel, the common shrew and Britain's smallest mammal, the long-nosed pygmy shrew which weighs less than a fifth of an ounce. These animals are just one part of the web of life for which our hedges provide a haven. Preyed on by owls and kestrels, they themselves find food among the multitudes of slugs, snails, spiders and insects which in their turn feed on the disorderly tangle of shrubs, trees and creepers that crowd along our hedgerows. Rupert Brooke in 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester', written in 1912, captures the unique character of our English hedgerows when comparing their vitality with the dreary monotony of the German landscape:

Unkempt about those hedges blows

An English unofficial rose.

In his day, Cambridgeshire hedges would have teemed with holly, hawthorn and honeysuckle, wayfaring tree and woody nightshade, whitebeam and the spindle tree; in the autumn they would have been aflame with the bright, glossy reds, yellows, blacks, browns and russets of the fruits and seeds of these wayside plants, the whole array clothed in the feathery white seeds of old man's beard looking like long strands of sheep's wool caught on the rose briars. Today, hedgerows in Cambridgeshire are few and far between. A survey of an area in the north-east of the county in 1972 found that 40 per cent of the area's hedgerows were taken out between 1945 and 1972, or thirty-five miles in an eight-square-mile area." Most of those that remain have been cut back severely.

If England continues to be denuded of hedgerows at anything like the rate of the last thirty years, the populations of 250 of our plant species will be severely diminished, according to Dr Max Hooper of the Nature Conservancy Council." Continued hedgerow removal could well lead also to the extinction in parts of the English countryside of 30 plant species, says Dr Hooper, including such attractive plants as the tiny green moschatel appropriately known in some areas as fairy's clock, the sweet violet, the vivid blue greater and lesser periwinkles, golden rod, hedge bedstraw and lady's bedstraw, scented agrimony, and shrubs including crab apple, the wayfaring tree, dogwood and the spindle tree.

Hedge removal is as yet threatening no animal species and only three plant species with extinction in England, for hedgerows are not an exclusive habitat for most of our wild creatures: they also live in woodland or shrubland or on rough grassland. But these alternative habitats are disappearing too. And in view of this, hedgerow removal is in the end likely to be accompanied by the disappearance from many parts of our countryside even of common species, from wild roses to celandines and badgers to dormice.

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