



Position statement: Hedgerows

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Hedgerows and hedges

The term **hedgerow**, although used synonymously with **hedge**, incorporates other features within a hedge such as trees, walls, fences and gates. Hedgerows may comprise single-species hedges of recent origin to ancient hedges with high species diversity. This position statement covers all features included in the above definitions.

The history of hedgerows

Hedgerows are a very old way of identifying boundaries and in some cases may even be remnants of the wildwood from which early fields were carved out. They probably became common in the Bronze Age about 1000 years BC. A basic pattern of hedges and fields was established in Anglo-Saxon times about 1000 years ago and in some areas of Britain this pattern has changed very little. Across much of lowland Britain, medieval farming resulted in the creation of many large open fields after the Norman Conquest.

The enclosure of open medieval fields and common lands by the Enclosure Acts passed by Parliament mainly between 1720-1840, resulted in the planting of an estimated 200,000 miles of hedges and a division of the landscape into smaller fields. Hedgerows planted before this period is defined as ancient hedgerowsⁱ. Although hedgerows are an integral part of Northern Ireland's landscape (which has the highest density of field boundaries in the UK) and much of the lowland farmed landscapes of central and southern Scotland, ancient hedges are scarce in Scotlandⁱⁱ and are not thought to exist at all in Northern Ireland where virtually all were planted between 1750 and 1850ⁱⁱⁱ. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan for ancient and species rich hedgerows surmises that some 40% of British hedges, or about 95,000 miles, are ancient and or species rich. Such hedges are concentrated in southern Englandⁱⁱ

Hedgerow planting on a substantial scale ceased before the First World War. After the Second World War, agricultural policy focused on intensification of food production, which brought far-reaching consequences for the countryside. Approximately 118,000 miles of hedgerows have disappeared since 1950ⁱ.

In 1993 it was estimated that about 204,000 miles of hedgerow remained in England and 30,000 miles in Wales. In 1990, a similar estimate for Scotland was 20,000 miles, while in 1991 the estimate for Northern Ireland was 77,000 milesⁱⁱⁱ. The Northern Ireland Countryside Survey 2000 suggested that by 1998 there were 73,700 miles, a net loss of 4% from 1991 to 1998.

Importance of hedgerows

Hedgerows are widely viewed as a quintessential feature of the UK's countryside yet may be locally distinctive, varying from the holly hedges of Arden to the beech hedgebanks of Exmoor.^{iv} They are a defining characteristic of many rural landscapes and they perform a variety of important environmental functions such as screens against bad weather, cover for game, containment and shelter for stock and crops, and windbreaks that help control soil erosion. As man-made features, hedgerows reflect the cultural history of local communities as well as helping to define aesthetically pleasing countryside.

Hedgerows are also important wildlife habitats in their own right.ⁱ Hedgerows are the primary habitat for at least 47 species of conservation concern in the UK, including 13 which are globally threatened or rapidly declining. They are particularly important for butterflies, moths, many species of birds, bats and dormice, many of which are included within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as well as being specifically protected in UK and EU law. Where hedgerows are themselves ancient or are remnants of ancient woodland, they act as a refuge for woodland plants and even ancient trees, which themselves play host to an important assemblage of species. In autumn and early winter hedges offer abundant sources of food for wildlife.

The role of hedgerows as wildlife corridors has long been considered an important function by conservationists. This role is now a cause for debate amongst landscape ecologists, although the practice of linking habitats with new hedgerows remains popular. While there can be little doubt that many mobile species make use of hedges in the landscape, uncertainty about their role as dispersal corridors centres largely on species of conservation

concern. These species, particularly those associated with ancient woodland, are often immobile and are unlikely to use hedges for dispersal unless they are inadvertently carried by mobile species that do use hedges to disperse, such as bats^v.

The need to help wildlife contend with climate change means that there is an increasing focus on improving the resilience of existing habitats by increasing their size and protecting them from damaging activities on adjacent land. There is also a need to increase the permeability of the landscape as a whole to wildlife by reducing the general intensity of intervening land-use, a more effective approach to biodiversity protection than simply focusing on connecting habitats with linear features such as hedges. However, ancient hedgerows may act as important sources of relict species that, despite their immobility, still have the potential for long distance dispersal as a result of one-off chance events that do not rely on normal dispersal mechanisms. Clearly adjacent land use will contribute to the potential a hedgerow has to play as an ecologically important part of the landscape.

Hedgerow losses, neglect and damage

Surveys by ITE^{vi} and by the Countryside Commission^{vii} showed that the net loss of hedgerows due to removal, lack of management and development accelerated rapidly after the Second World War across Great Britain, rising from 2,600 miles per year in the period 1947-1969 to an estimated 5,378 miles per year in 1984-1990. Since 1990 hedgerow attrition has continued, although a further survey^{viii} showed that, largely as a result of public concern and changes in Government subsidies, the rate of removal had more than halved to an average of 2,235 miles per year in the period 1990-1993. During this period the rate of planting exceeded the rate of removal^{ix} but there was also a net decrease in hedgerow length in England and Wales of 11,184 miles partly due to many hedges being reclassified as lines of trees or shrubs. Losses of managed hedgerows appear to have halted by the mid-1990s.

Today, neglect of, and damage to, hedgerows have replaced direct loss as the most significant factors affecting the habitat. Lack of traditional hedgerow management such as coppicing or laying has led to hedges growing tall or becoming gappy though this trend is now being reversed through new incentives for positive management. Increased stocking rates, excessive flailing and cutting of hedges down to a metre or so in height, and use of agricultural pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers right up to base of hedgerows has led to physical damage, loss of species and nutrient enrichment, destroying much of the relict interest of ancient hedgerows.

Hedgerow protection

Government policy on hedgerows has come full circle in the last 30 years. Gone are grants to remove hedgerows, now replaced by grants to replace and manage them. In 1992 a Hedgerow Incentive Scheme (HIS) was introduced to fund replacement and restoration of hedgerows if they were long established landscape features, important wildlife habitats, or occurred on degraded landscapes or of particular amenity value. Agri-environment grants in many parts of the UK support the restoration and management of hedgerows. More recently they have been used buffer hedgerows from the damaging effects of some agricultural activity.

The 1997 Hedgerow Regulations^x in England and Wales were an important development. These aim to protect hedgerows in the countryside and apply to any hedgerow growing "in, or adjacent to, any common land, protected land, or land used for agriculture, forestry, or the breeding or keeping of horses, ponies or donkeys". Hedges in these situations – in effect most hedges in the countryside - are covered by the Regulations provided that they are more than 20 metres in length and/or form part of a longer stretch of hedgerow. The Regulations particularly seek to protect hedgerows of archaeological, wildlife and landscape importance. Removal of hedgerows is generally prohibited although in certain circumstances local authorities may issue a 'removal notice'. There is currently no such protection for hedges in Scotland and Northern Ireland. On occasions in Northern Ireland the retention of a mature hedgerow will be made a condition of planning consent.

The value of linear boundary features, such as hedgerows, is specifically identified in Article 10 of the EU Habitats Directive, which requires all Member States to give consideration to linear features in the landscape to improve the integrity of the Natura 2000 site network^{xi}.

The Woodland Trust View

We believe that hedgerows should be protected and conserved as key components of our cultural, landscape and wildlife heritage on the basis of our conservation principles set out in *Seeing the Woods for the Trees*.^{xii},

We wish to see local authorities in England and Wales exercising their powers under the Hedgerow Regulations to the full in order to protect important and historic hedgerows.

We support the planting of new hedgerows and the replacement of those which have been lost as part of action to deliver further aesthetic and environmental benefits in the countryside including as part of our woodland and habitat creation activity on our own sites. We particularly support work in diverse situations such as school grounds and suburban areas where the outcome is to inspire people with the beauty of nature and engage them in environmental action.

From a biodiversity perspective, we believe that existing hedgerows in particular should be cherished where they contain ancient woodland features or ancient trees and/or where sympathetic neighbouring land use enhances their value. Just as with any semi-natural habitat, a new hedge cannot replace an ancient hedgerow and its important relict features, which can never return once lost.

We need to protect existing hedges from damage by livestock or agricultural chemicals, for example, by establishing uncultivated buffer strips as is now the requirement in England under the new cross compliance rules and also through a general reduction in pesticide and fertiliser use. In addition, flailing of hedges during the breeding season or during the autumn when hedges offer vital over-wintering food sources should be avoided at all costs. If flailing is necessary it should be carried out in late winter and done in a way that will not reduce hedgerow dimensions.

We believe that, from a biodiversity viewpoint, creation of new hedgerows should be prioritised to areas where actions are also being taken to ensure adjacent land use is sympathetic. In areas that already have a high proportion of semi-natural habitat, where wildlife has the best chance of being put on a sustainable footing in the face of climate change, planting new hedges may help to improve the ability of wildlife to permeate the landscape and thereby survive.^{xiii, xiv} However, planting hedges to act as simple corridors, without taking adjacent land use into account, will not necessarily help many immobile species of ancient woodland and wider conservation concern.

Fast growing high hedges

Provisions within the recent Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which applies to England & Wales, allow for the reduction of high hedges (greater than 2m) which can be shown to cause a nuisance to neighbours. Whilst this legislation is primarily aimed at allowing reduction in height of fast growing non-native conifer hedges (such as *Leylandii* hedges between gardens), the proposed guidance for the implementation of the Act could also be detrimental to both native evergreen hedgerow trees and shrubs (such as yew, holly, box and Scots pine) as well as woodland edge evergreen trees. We have responded to the Government consultation outlining our concerns.^{xv}

References

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