

A beginner's guide to hedgerows

What is a hedgerow?

Firstly, we need to define exactly what a hedgerow is. Natural England provides the following definition:

'A hedgerow is defined as any boundary line of trees or shrubs over 20m long and less than 5m wide, and where any gaps between the trees or shrub species are less than 20m wide.'

Put more simply, a hedgerow is a closely-grown mass of woody vegetation that grows in a line – and it's this being in one long line that makes it different from simply a bush or tree.

A brief history of hedgerows

It's commonly thought that most hedgerows are recent additions to the countryside following the Enclosure Acts between 1750 and 1850, where wide, open spaces were broken up into individually-owned plots. But at least half of our hedges are older than this – and many are hundreds of years old.

Two-thirds of England's landscapes have continuously had hedgerows for a thousand years or more; some hedgerow systems date back to prehistoric times, and most were well established by the Anglo-Saxon period (from AD 410).

Many of our hedgerows are both ancient and historically interesting, especially where they mark parish boundaries and ancient monuments. Often beautiful older hedgerow trees, their lives prolonged by careful management over the years, reveal the great age of hedgerows and their importance to our ancestors.

The oldest known surviving hedgerow in England is in Cambridgeshire - Judith's Hedge, near Monks Wood, which is over 900 years old.



Judith's Hedge, near Monks Wood

"Ancient hedgerow near Monks Wood - geograph.org.uk - 411184.jpg" by Chris Gardiner is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Hedgerows and the climate crisis

The Climate Change Committee has recommended that the extent of hedgerows be increased by 40% as part of measures against the climate emergency. Like trees, hedgerows lock up vast amounts of carbon dioxide and store it in their roots and leaves and in the soil. Hedgerows in Great Britain store up to 13 million tonnes of carbon. As a guide, that offsets a quarter of all the yearly emissions from UK farming.

We hear a lot about planting trees to help store carbon, but hedgerows do this and then pack in even MORE climate benefits; they're easier to slot into the landscape than whole woods (especially into farmland, which is 60% of all UK land), and once in place, they are important for the management of water, pollutants and soil, and for their potential to reduce flooding. Hedgerows can be very effective at promoting healthy soils – which store more carbon; the impact of erosion on unhealthy soils means that they can quickly become a source of carbon dioxide emissions. Hedgerows also prevent loss of soil from fields, either through reducing wind erosion or through acting as a barrier to water-borne run-off; this is particularly so in arable areas, where the land is flat and prone to wind-blow such as in the Fens. In rural areas hedgerows protect crops and animals from extreme weather and in urban areas, they help capture air pollution and lower temperatures.

Hedgerows and nature

Hedgerows are important for nature in their own right – in fact, in huge areas of the country, hedgerows are, quite simply, essential for keeping many plants and animals alive.

A mixture of habitats - woodland, scrub and grassland - hedgerows contain a wealth of different plant and animal species. Over 600 plants, 1,500 insects, 65 birds and 20 mammal species use UK hedgerows – for food, shelter and to move between areas. 130 of the species that have been identified as being a priority for conservation (meaning they are vulnerable, very localised or rare) are closely associated with hedgerows.

A loss of hedgerows, or a decline in their quality and care, would be likely to have a disastrous effect on all these species' populations. As we've changed the land to be used for more and more intensive farming, they're more important than ever, often acting as the last safe place many declining species can live.

Hedgerows and landscape

Hedgerows are the most widespread semi-natural habitat in England. A key part of our landscapes, the networks of hedgerows that cover so much of our countryside pick out changes in topography, soils and underlying geology, and define current, and often past, patterns of agriculture and other land use. They connect us to our landscape's past, giving a sense of continuity and connection to our heritage. They keep our local areas looking distinctive and give us a sense of place.

Threats to Hedgerows

Many countryside hedgerows are protected by law - The Hedgerows Regulations (1997) were the first official rules protecting 'important' hedgerows. An 'important' hedgerow is one that at least 30 years old and which also meets at least one of eight criteria (see https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/hedgerows_regulations_faq_1.pdf for details of the eight criteria). The government has recently announced new hedgerow regulations (which will sit alongside the Hedgerows Regulations (1997)) to be brought into law to protect wildlife. The regulations will include a two meter 'buffer strip' from the centre of hedgerows, and a hedge cutting ban between 1 March and 31 August.

However, local authorities can only say no to a hedgerow being removed if it falls into this 'important' category, which means that we're still losing too many of them. Roads and development, especially on the edges of towns and villages, has meant that hedges are lost; even protections for 'important' hedgerows can be overruled by permission for new developments.

And although many farmers look after their hedgerows well, moves towards more intensive farming mean they can be removed. Others are threatened by being unmanaged and so developing gaps, or overgrowing and turning into trees.

Between 1870 and 1945, there was very little change in the extent of hedges. Between 1950 and 1975, the loss of hedgerows as they were removed to widen fields for food and buildings after the war became, for many

people, the most visible aspect of damage to the English countryside. Since then, even more have been pulled up or turned into rows of trees. One survey showed that between 1998 and 2007, the total length of managed hedgerows decreased by 6.1% (26,000km).

Hedgerows and Nesting Birds

In the spring, many people are concerned about the legalities of hedge-cutting and the impact on nesting birds. Protect the Wild has a very useful article about this on their website -

<https://protectthewild.org.uk/campaign/illegal-to-cut-a-hedge-in-spring-yes-and-no/>

Hedgerows and CPRE

CPRE has campaigned for the protection of hedgerows for many years. We're calling on the government to make changes that will mean many, many more hedgerows are restored or planted. We want to see them commit to working with the landowners who own them to create thousands of miles of new or improved hedgerows – as well as better protecting the ones we have already. The government has made promises to move towards net zero carbon emissions for the country, and for the UK, investment in hedgerows offers a low-risk, manageable and cost-effective way to tackle climate change, boost biodiversity and enhance our landscapes.

CPRE is actively planting and restoring hedgerows across the country, as part of our Hedgerow Heroes project. Thanks to corporate funding, CPRE volunteers in 2021 planted almost 15km new hedge and restored almost 5km.

To find out more, go to <https://www.cprecambs.org.uk/campaigns-countryside/2022/02/21/hedgerows/> and <https://www.cpre.org.uk/explainer/an-insiders-guide-to-hedgerows/>

Sources:

CPRE

CPRE Bedfordshire

Natural England

Hedgelink

The Soil Association

Protect the Wild