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Derbyshire Wildlife Trust is a registered charity with more than 9000 members supporting its work to protect the county's wildlife.

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To find out how to join, visit our website or phone 01773 881188.

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Further Information

Rackham (1986) *The History of the Countryside. The classic history of Britain's landscape, flora and fauna.* Phoenix Press, London.

Brooks & Agate (2001-2003) *Hedging—a practical handbook.* BTCV. Available online at <http://handbooks.btcv.org.uk/handbooks/index>

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Hedgerows are an integral part of our historical landscape. They parcel up the countryside, creating the patterns that shape the distinctive character of the English lowlands.

As well as their historical and cultural value, hedges are also of great importance for wildlife. Over large stretches of the intensively farmed lowlands hedgerows are the most significant wildlife habitat. They provide an essential refuge for many woodland and farmland species and act as wildlife corridors, allowing dispersal and movement of species between other habitats.

ancient hedgerows



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Ancient hedgerows

The earliest known reference to hedgerows is made by Julius Caesar in records of his campaign in Belgium in 55 BC, describing how *'they half cut young trees, bent them over and interwove branches along them,'* thus creating an impenetrable barrier.

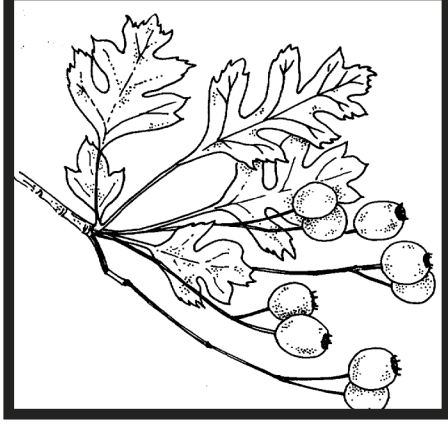
It is likely that there have been hedges in one form or another in Britain ever since the first agricultural fields were carved out from the 'wild wood'. Certainly by the time of the Anglo-Saxons, the use of rows of interwoven branches as barriers to keep grazing livestock from destroying crops and to delineate ownership was already familiar. Our ancient hedges may still grow on the same boundaries followed by these original Anglo-Saxon *hegeræwes*.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the parliamentary Enclosures Acts saw the enclosure of the commons, as the large fields were subdivided into individual ownerships by the planting of many thousands of kilometres of hawthorn hedges.

How old is my hedge?

In the lowlands of much of England, it is possible to make an estimate of the age of a hedgerow from the species composition of the hedge. This is done by multiplying the average number of woody species per 30 metre stretch of hedgerow by 100 years, give or take 100 years. Hence a hedge with an average of 6 woody species in a 30 metre stretch is likely to be between 500 and 700 years old. This is known as 'Hooper's Rule'.

This system does not work with newly planted hedges, which are often planted with many species. Another problem comes when old hedges are invaded by Elm suckers, which come to dominate, thus giving the appearance that the hedge is younger than it actually is. Hooper's Rule does, however, appear to be reasonably accurate for most hedges more than 100 years old.



Loss of hedgerows

After the Second World War, the desire to make Britain self-sufficient saw a revolution in British agriculture. In a concerted effort to increase agricultural production, fields were drained, the use of chemicals increased, livestock was replaced by cereals and thousands of miles of hedgerow were grubbed up to convert the small fields of traditional mixed farms into larger, more efficient units.

In 1947, there were an estimated 662,000 kilometres of hedgerows in England. By 1993, that figure had more than halved to 328,800 kilometres.

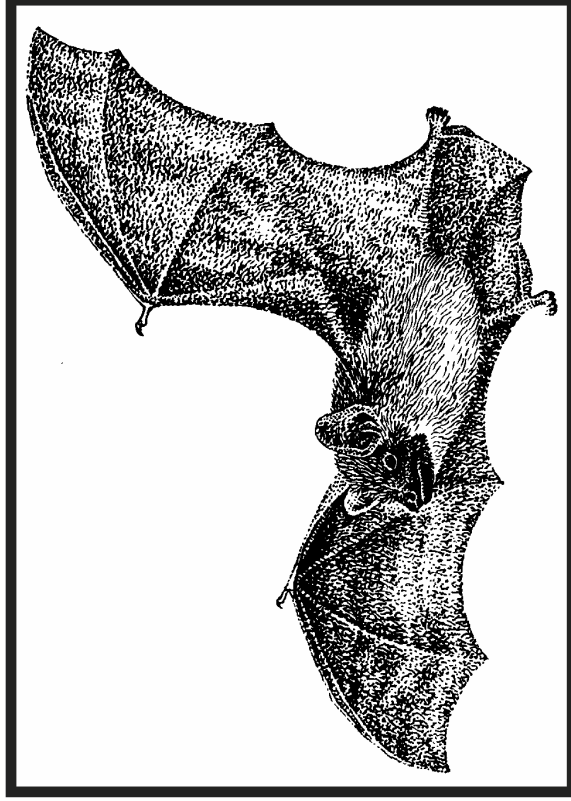
Why are hedges important?

Hedges are extremely valuable habitats in their own right, as well as acting as wildlife corridors, allowing dispersal and movement of species between other habitats.

Over 600 plant species, 1500 insects, 65 birds and 20 mammals have been recorded living or feeding in British hedgerows. The greater the variety of trees and shrubs that make up a hedge, the more species are able to survive in it. A hedge made up only of hawthorn is capable of supporting fewer species than an otherwise equivalent mixed hedge. The presence of an increased diversity of plants and invertebrates also acts as a more constant source of food for the range of other animals that feed upon them.

The value of hedges increases with their size and complexity. In some ways this is obvious: the larger a hedgerow is, the more space is available; the more complex the structure of the hedge, the more potential habitats there are for species to inhabit and the more protection the hedge provides to nesting birds.

The wildlife value of a hedge is not just limited to the hedgerow itself. Associated features, such as the hedge bank, ditches, sheltered field margins and hedgerow trees all increase the value of the hedge as a whole.



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