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Ambiguities of the hedge: an exercise in creative pleaching¹ – of moments, memories and meanings

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a range of published material on the English hedgerow, and its ambiguous role in both landscape history and contemporary countryside management. While there is a strand of recent landscape history scholarship that can be stridently critical of the hedge as a *technology of subjection*, connected invariably with Parliamentary enclosure and proletarianisation, the English hedgerow is also an iconic symbol of rural tranquillity, and mainstay of many conservation and biodiversity agendas, with hedge-laying — the practice of constructing a living hedge — championed as a key item of rural craft heritage. Making space for a dynamic biography of hedges and hedge-laying, and reflecting on an auto-ethnographic account of working on a particular hedge in Warwickshire, this paper explores the possibilities for an account of hedgerows that can steer a pathway between narratives that are critical of *hedges-as-enclosure*, and a conservation ambition that might seem to preserve hedges in aspic.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

A critical strand of historical scholarship has long had processes of enclosure within its sights. For E. P. Thompson (1980, p. 218), enclosure was, famously, a “plain enough case of class robbery”, while Matthew Johnson (1996, p. 44) saw enclosure as an “iron cage, whose frame was cast along principles of class relations and profit”. More recently, enclosure has been cast as a broader and more durable idea. Michael Watts (2004, p. 51), for instance, sees it as a *particular spatiality of nature*; a “process of simultaneous natural, physical and socio-cultural transformation”, while Vasudevan *et al.* (2008) portray enclosure as a *technology of subjection*, which acts to foreclose alternative forms of sociality. As a by-product of this strand of investigation into rural enclosures, hedges and hedgerows have had a lot of bad press, and through a powerful link between historical and contemporary investigatory work (e.g. see Watts 2004; Blomley 2007; Vasudevan *et al.* 2008; Netz 2004), the hedge has ended up standing for a generalised technology of division: *a thorn in the flesh; a painful jab* (Netz 2004). Mirroring the manner in which hedges became seen as the hated symbols of enclosure, therefore, much of the academic debate about the vagaries of enclosure as a process ends up casting the hedge as a generic instrument of oppression; an unyielding and constant boundary through which subjugation is practised.

Within a largely separate literature, however, hedges are valorised as emblems of rustic tranquillity, and a means through which environmental sustainability objectives can be reached. The roots of this outlook are founded in such publications as Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* and can perhaps be seen in Pollard, Hooper and Moore’s book, *Hedges*, which appeared in the New Naturalist series: “we should do all we can to retain these simple farming tools which are often useful and are usually beautiful and interesting and steeped in history” (Pollard *et al.* 1974, p. 221). For many modern agri-environmental schemes therefore, hedges must be preserved — they are part and parcel of guiding biodiversity agendas and green corridors, which must be protected and conserved (see also, for instance, Dirkmaat 2003). As a highly valued element of bucolic serenity and safe haven for a plenitude of treasured flora and fauna, the hedge is composed as an ideal of rural form and safeguard from the cold straight lines of factory farming. Hedges appear to be important resources in discussions of ecosystems services, and reflect vital country skills that comprise an essential heritage of place and nation. Hedges, in other words, are crucial icons of the (English) rural aesthetic, with all the baggage that the phrase heralds (Riley & Harvey 2005).

This paper explores these apparent contradictions, through reflecting on the direct experience of working on a living hedge. Steering a pathway between narratives that seem to cast a critical eye on *hedges-as-enclosure*, and a countryside conservation agenda that would seem to risk treating the hedge merely as a museum piece to be stabilised, the paper promotes the hedge as a dynamic lens through which both a critical landscape history can be explored, and a living and forward-looking landscape engagement can be celebrated. Reflecting on some academic and popular discourses of the hedgerow, therefore, this paper explores how the practice of hedge laying navigates between being a continuing imposition in the landscape and on common rights, and a re-assuring and vital rural craft skill that is central for a vast array of conservation agendas.

Following a short review of how hedges have been defined, the paper interweaves accounts of some of the author's practical hedgerow experiences and anxieties with a range of academic and poetic accounts of hedges and hedgerows. Rather than providing a singular narrative of the hedge, the paper makes space for a more dynamic biography — or life history — of the hedge. Rather than casting it as either a tool synonymous with dis-possession and enclosing practices, or as a one-dimensional aesthetic prop for the English Countryside, the paper makes the case that hedges and hedgerows can provide a prompt for more progressive landscape management in the future.

WHAT IS A HEDGE?

I have always had an ambiguous relationship with hedges. As a student who had read the work of scholars such as E. P. Thompson with relish, hedges were to be viewed with suspicion; as symbols of oppression and proletarianisation. As a keen outdoors enthusiast and conservation volunteer, however, hedges provided the scenic backdrop for outdoor experiences; where we would go to collect blackberries and sloes; they afforded a sanctuary for wildlife and were an icon that called for protection against the untrammelled advance of mechanised factory farming. They were beautiful; they were *the countryside*; they were sunshine and holidays. These apparent contradictions between the hedge as an agricultural tool and boundary that might act as a technology of subjection and an item to be treasured for aesthetic and cultural reasons is inadvertently hinted at by Pollard *et al.* (1974) in the ambiguity displayed in their attempts to provide a definition of a hedge:

... in all the definitions [of the hedge], there is one common theme, that of protection, of setting limits (Pollard *et al.* 1974, p. 21).

... the hedge today has become so much more than a boundary and a living fence (*ibid.*, p. 210).

This changing fashion for cherishing or despising such countryside elements as hedges and hedgerows is not a recent thing, and perhaps can be partly related to the changing attitudes to tree management that Petit and Watkins (2003) charted with respect to the practice of pollarding. Petit and Watkins (2003) outlined how changing attitudes towards pollarding should be seen in the context of broader agricultural viewpoints. On the one hand, there was a debate about the benefit or detriment of pollarding in terms of tree management. On the other hand, however, there was a broader context of landscape aesthetics, the rise of the picturesque movement, together with the practical requirements of timber for the Royal Navy. Furthermore, as Petit and Watkins (2003) make clear, the debate was often made more complex with respect to the differing requirements of a landlord and a tenant, with a tenant undertaking more intensive management as a means of producing firewood, while a landlord might desire hedges to produce economically lucrative timber. In other words, what seem to be purely agricultural and estate management debates must also be seen within wider debates about the meaning and health of the British countryside and the two fields do not always sit easily together.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (online, 2016 accessed 19/12/16), a hedge is a “row of bushes or low trees (*e.g.* hawthorn or privet) planted closely to form a boundary between pieces of land or at the sides of a road: the usual form of fence in England”. What I find particularly interesting in this OED definition is the way that the two prime examples noted (hawthorn and privet) each represent an epitome of a specific type of hedge that supports the notion of it being a technology of subjection; with the hawthorn being the exemplar hedging plant of the (Parliamentary) enclosure Movement, and the privet hedge being the stereotypical icon of an apparent middle class obsession with privacy in English suburbia. At the end of the OED definition, however, the hedge is described as “the usual form of fence in England”, which suggests both a sense of ubiquity of it being a boundary, but also suggests a certain national identity, perhaps that *England* is part-defined through the hedge-as-fence. Such an outlook is supported through the Wikipedia (online, 2016, accessed 19/12/16) definition:

A hedge or hedgerow is a line of closely spaced shrubs and tree species, planted and trained to form a barrier or to mark the boundary of an area. [...]. Hedgerow trees are both an important part of the English landscape and are valuable habitats for wildlife. Many hedgerow trees are veteran trees and therefore of great wildlife interest.

The Encyclopædia Britannica (online 2015, accessed 17/11/15) notes that: “In Britain, hedgerows have been a feature of the countryside since the enclosure movement”. Such a general description hides a great deal of regional and temporal variation, with many parts of Britain being hedged long before the enclosure movement (Pollard *et al.* 1974; Barnes & Williamson 2006), but the suggestion of the hedge being a generic feature of the British countryside, as well as being inexorably associated with the enclosure movement is interesting. Notwithstanding the generic connection to the British countryside, however, most commentators also point to the widespread destruction of hedges since the Second World War, which leaves its easy connection to the British countryside somewhat truncated, at least in some parts of the country. Pollard *et al.* (1974, pp. 55–6) note that “1950 may be taken as the time when the hedge landscape, largely intact after centuries of evolution and reflecting in all its variations the social and geographic factors which formed it, was on the brink of [a] period of change”. At this time, Pollard *et al.* (1974, pp. 59–63) estimate that there were probably around 500,000 miles of hedges in England

and Wales, but the period up to 1970 saw a reduction of around 5,000 miles of hedge per year. The exact figures are very difficult to estimate, but all commentators tend to look on this period of destruction with regret

Hedges are a valuable resource; of wood and shelter; a hiding place and home for wildlife; a source of biodiversity; and a support of identity; of succour and wellbeing (see Plate 1).

There are approximately 33,000 miles (53,000 km) of hedges in Devon, which is more than any other county. Traditional farming throughout the county has meant that fewer Devon hedges have been removed than elsewhere. Devon hedges are particularly important for wildlife habitat. Around 20% of the UK's species-rich hedges occur within Devon. Over 600 species of flowering plants, 1500 species of insects, 65 species of birds and 20 species of mammals have been recorded living or feeding in Devon hedges (Wikipedia, accessed 19/12/16).

Plate 1. A hedgerow landscape, Devon. (Author's photograph).

[Hedges] have a central place in English culture, have given their name to numerous plants and animal species, and have been incorporated into many phrases and expressions: we talk of hedgehogs and hedge sparrows, or particular issues being “hedged about with doubt”, or of people “hedging their bets”. Above all, hedges are vital to wildlife conservation, for in a countryside which is, for the most part, intensively farmed, hedges provide one of the places where a wide variety of plant and animal species are able to survive, and also form corridors along which they can move, and colonise new locations (Barnes & Williamson 2006, p. 1).

HEDGED IN DOUBT: ENCLOSURE ANXIETIES

On Whitsun Bank Holiday, in May 1992 I went to north Devon with the University of Exeter Conservation Volunteers for a weekend of footpath maintenance. We spent the night in sleeping bags on the floor of a village hall, and the next day we went out to the site — a beautiful hay meadow with a footpath running through. As is often the case on such conservation camps, someone in the group knew a lot about wild flowers, and someone else was a butterfly enthusiast. During each break in our work, we found a nice patch in the middle of the meadow and ate our sandwiches, and drank our tea while one of the resident experts pointed out varieties of wildlife — in this beautiful meadow that no-one but the owners would soon be allowed to enter: our task of footpath maintenance was to erect a wire fence around the edge of the field, close to the hedge, to stop any walkers from getting *in* to the field. And, as a keen student of E. P. Thompson and others, *I refused to do it*.

After a bit of negotiation, my friend ‘Jack’ and I spent the weekend putting in a nice wooden gate at one end of the field. I liked the idea of putting in a gate, and hated the thought of building a barrier. I was determined that I wasn’t going to spend my Bank Holiday weekend fencing off a beautiful field from members of the public. A wire fence is not a hedge, but these memories cause me to reflect again as to the purpose and meaning of a hedge

A hedge is a tool; a piece of technology for the purpose of control. It is a sign and marker for others to see, of legitimacy, of privacy, of ownership. It both stands for property and *is* property; it is a capital investment, an aesthetic resource. It derives its name from the Old English *hecge*, and, along with several distinctive variants of boundary names (such as *haga*, *hay*, *haw* and *hayes*) can be found in many place names across England (Hoskins 1988, p. 198; Hooke 1989, pp. 123–9). In its role of being an element of technology for the purpose of control — as an enclosure — the hedge brings baggage.

Enclosure (when all the sophistications are allowed for) was a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a parliament of property-owners and lawyers (Thompson 1980, p. 218).

[Enclosure is] an iron cage, whose frame was cast along principles of class relations, of farming for profit [...]. [Enclosure] brings a different way of signifying meaning, a different relationship between elements of the landscape, the social practices carried out within and constituting that landscape, and the everyday and overt symbolic meanings that the landscape carries (Johnson 1996, pp. 44, 76).

[Enclosure is] a process of simultaneous natural, physical and socio-cultural transformation: a particular spatiality of nature. Enclosure is a powerful historical fact and the carrier of a dense cluster of meanings that refer to a spatial process: land formerly open is now enclosed (the hedgerows and fences are its markers). Place and territory is reconstituted through boundaries, property lines and markets. But enclosure was simultaneously a loss of rights, obligations and responsibilities. Enclosure involved loss of open commons; it wrought a sort of confinement, dispossession, incarceration, privatisation and social transformation all at once (Watts 2004, p. 51).

In other words, hedges are representative features of an essential alteration in society that was communicated by a fundamental modification in the material landscape. Hedges are thus cast as items that any scholar who is critical of how socio-economic relations have developed over the last few hundred years ought to be suspicious of. Hedges restricted movement and represented a loss of rights, which was socially directive, producing an “emergent set of social hierarchies that rested on developing conceptions of private property” (Blomley 2007, p. 5). By reducing opportunities for alternative means of existence, hedges turned people into wage labourers. Hedges took away rights and customs, and demanded adherence to an economic system of Mercantilism and capitalism. Hedges were a powerful machine, which wrought momentous transitions through material imposition.

Maybe I am getting carried away and over-determining the power of these lines of shrubbery? This is a material imposition that is actually very mundane. We are talking about a patchwork of green fields, with cows and sheep: a rural arcadia of peaceful contemplation and serenity — not a nasty string of barbed wire or an electric fence. But of course, the hedge’s mundane obviousness and ubiquity makes it easy to overlook (Blomley 2007, p. 5), and when you start to look at things more closely, the parallels with barbed wire and electric fences seem to gain greater credence. Indeed, as Reviel Netz (2004) shows, the distance from a fence around a field of cows to a Soviet gulag or Nazi concentration camp can be alarmingly short (see Plate 2).

Plate 2. Blomley (2007) equates thorn hedges with organic barbed wire. (Author’s photograph).

HEDGING PRACTICE

In March 2014, I went on a hedge laying training course to find out how to build and maintain a hedge — not just *any* hedge, but a traditional quickset Midland hawthorn hedge; exactly the type of hedge that divided the open fields in the early modern transformation of the English countryside.

At least we’re not working with blackthorn; their thorns are poisonous ... I’ve seen peoples’ hands puff up within minutes of being scratched by blackthorn (John; Hedge laying trainer) (see Plate 3).

Plate 3. Whitethorn scratches (despite heavy leather gloves) – at least it wasn't blackthorn! (Authors' photographs).

This was part of the safety talk at the beginning of our weekend course on hedge laying. John was a local man who had been teaching courses on rural skills for decades and now he had a section of about 100 yards of overgrown hedge, a group of eleven beginners to teach basic hedge laying techniques, and two days in which to do it. There were loppers and saws, mallets and stakes, and a selection of lethal-looking slashers and billhooks (see plate 4). I was quite surprised at the speed of which he went over the safety procedures of using these tools: “don't do anything stupid” was the basic message. Unless something unusually dramatic occurred, the injuries would be certain, but minor — thorns embedded in the hand and scratches on the flesh. Just as with the hedge itself, the wounds would be ubiquitous and mundane. But at least we are not working with blackthorn. We were working with hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), aka whitethorn or may (see McDonagh & Daniels 2012: 109)

Plate 4. Setting the scene: with axe, slasher, billhook and saw, the first task was the clean the hedge. (Authors' photographs).

Laying involves a number of distinct procedures. The hedge is first hacked back rigorously with a billhook and any lateral suckers removed. So too is dead material and any unwanted species. ... Next, the principal stems are cut roughly three-quarters of the way through, at an angle of between 45 and 60 degrees and at a height of between 5 and 10 centimetres above ground level: they are then bent downwards at an angle of 60 degrees or more so that each 'pleacher' (as the principal stems are usually called) overlaps its neighbour (see plate 5). In the spring, when growth resumes, a thick, impenetrable wall of vegetation is created (Barnes & Williamson 2006: 2).

Plate 5. Laying the pleachers. (Authors' photographs).

It struck me that our gloves were red so as to hide the trickles of blood! Effective hedge-working requires you to lean in, against the thorns, and marshal the various stems, branches and suckers. It goes against what your brain is telling you to do. Reaching in, grabbing and holding clumps of thorn; trying to work yourself into a position where you can use your right hand to achieve the necessary cut or the vital yank. Taking gloves off in order to use the billhook or saw effectively; remembering to put gloves back on when you need to clutch at a branch or sprig of thorn. Thick gloves and solid boots are required; a good hat is obligatory; eye-protectors recommended; leather trousers, socks, shirt, wrist bands and full mask is yearned for. Even in the cold, this is hot work. Sometimes I was thankful for being tall and right-handed; sometimes I wished to be small and left-handed, as I contorted myself into position to make the vital pleach that would impel living matter to bend and break to my will (see plate 6).

Plate 6. Practical hedge work. (Authors' photographs).

A sense of order is created at length, with agency knowingly given to elements of the hedge: *he wants to go down there; he will fill that gap well; he wants that bit cut off him; he just needs a tug to get him going*. This is not an immediate transition, but one that requires some creative imagination — of how shapes might fit together; how the direction of a semi-felled branch might sit; where a surplus of thorn might be thinned out; or where gaps can be filled with still-living material made pliable. It requires a deftness and flexibility of human hands and limbs to manipulate the limbs and thickets of living trees and shrubs.

Plate 7. Stakes are hammered in, a cubit's width apart. (Author's photograph).

After the cleaning, the pleaching, and the laying, a definite order is imposed by the hammering in of stakes, a cubit's length apart, providing a line with which to work (see plate 7). At this stage, you tuck in stray fronds on the inside of the hedge, making it as smooth and shapely as a thorny thicket can be. Rough edges, spikes and jagged sections are made to face outwards, so that as well as being a marker in the landscape, it becomes a fearsome barrier. As a marker, the hedge offers a sign to “unruly folks and theeves, and beasts lying in waite for your Herbes and your Fruites” (Heresbach 1586, cited in Blomley 2007, p. 9). But the hedge needs to be more than a sign – any wooden fence can deliver a signal. A well-managed, living, quickset hedge can grow into an impenetrable barrier (see plate 8):

Heresbach (1586: 50-1) explains how to weave the quick hedge thicker and higher every year, filling any holes with new sets, ‘so that not so much as a small bird is able to passe thorowe it, nor any man to looke through it. ... This hedge can neuer be destroyed’. Markham (1614: 80-1) argues that, without plashing [pleaching], the hedge ‘will decay and grow so thinne at the bottome, that not only beasts but men may runneth through it’. Plashing [pleaching] will make ‘a fence as strong as a wall’ (Blomley 2007, p. 12).

Plate 8. A well-managed hedge can grow into an impenetrable barrier. (Author's photograph).

This is a technology that is quietly effective in its capacity as a material boundary — it really does *hurt* if you try to go through — but perhaps its most crucial element is in the mind. Whatever Heresbach or Markham saw as an ideal in their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises, it *is* possible to see through most hedges, and in reality, most hedges are surmountable by humans (albeit accepting of a few cuts and scratches) while all small birds are certainly able to pass through them. They work through people (and animals) knowing about, and not willing to accept, discomfort and this is operationalised through their very mundane ubiquity. Blomley (2007, p. 12) calls a well-laid hawthorn hedge *organic barbed wire*.

A thorn in the flesh – a painful jab, a wound that worsens the more your resist, a pain that penetrates the mind, so that eventually you do not even try to resist (Netz 2004).

In order to finish off the hedge; make it tight and neat, a series of *hethers* were woven, laced and plaited into the structure. Apparently, this was a distinctive feature of a Midland hedge — an invented tradition with any memory of proletarianisation and dispossession replaced by a sense of regional craft tradition (see plate 9). The hethers provided the definite line; an aesthetic sense of neatness and organised domestication. The hethers showed that the hedge was definitely not *natural*, but an outcome of human endeavour and sign of propriety.

Plate 9. Weaving in the hethers. (Authors' photographs).

An impenetrable boundary, formed from nature that has been domesticated through craft skill. A boundary that bristles and brims with a threat of hurt: *a thorn in the flesh – a painful jab*. It is a boundary with a message that demands compliance. Of course, for a hedge to act as a meaningful agricultural boundary, it must be stock-proof, and the maintenance of this function required the regular management through hedge laying. But this is a boundary that is also made to be crossable — for the right people — by those on horseback, and definitely *not* those on foot. At the final stage of the hedge laying, John made sure that we all cut down the stakes to an even height of exactly 3 foot 6 inches with a measuring stick to help us gauge: “so that it wouldn’t hurt anybody”.

A fence of thorns and spikes, with a message of pain and danger, carefully crafted so as not to hurt anybody? *Of course!* Anyone on foot would be struggling to get past such a barrier, but on a good horse a hedge of 3 foot 6 inches provides good sport. McDonagh and Daniels (2012, p. 111) cite a nineteenth-century report from Northamptonshire in the hunting magazine, *The Field*: “In the Pytchley country you want a good horse; for on a bad one you will see nothing; on a fair one you will lose your nerve, but on the best, you will be able to enjoy

yourself as you can nowhere else in the world”. In other words, the hawthorn hedge provides an insurmountable barrier for those without good horses. For those on foot, these signs of property work through the mind: *do not even think that you can cross this boundary*.

This was a barrier that worked through invoking a sense of confusion and alienation; a dislocation of normality, especially for those for whom the landscape was less an arena for leisure pursuits to be altered, organised and controlled at the behest of individual choice, but rather an intimate locus of social relations: an “interconnectedness between individuals, their social lives and the everyday experiences and knowledge of the landscape” (Whyte 2007, p. 167). As Whyte argues, this was a world in which the building of hedges required a successful negotiation of a range of inherited structures, practices, customs and rights: “in other words, the growth of capitalist methods of production was as much a mediation of the past as it was a forward-looking progression involving “man” in direct confrontation with nature” (*ibid.*, p.168). While aggregate studies may point to the generalities of enclosure across counties or regions, the experience of such hedged impositions were only ever experienced on an intimate basis. Drawing on Ingold and Whyte, therefore, Griffin (2014, p. 77) notes that “land-use changes provoked resistance precisely because they necessarily disrupted the “habitus” of rural workers, transforming the “taskscape” of everyday life”. In a world in which landscapes provide meaning to the practices and customs of everyday life, a hedge can be truly disturbing (see plate 10):

Plate 10. The disorientation of hedges. (Author’s photograph).

The Northamptonshire artist, George Clarke, reportedly lost his way in new enclosures between Scaldwell and Lamport in the winter of 1867. Having been missing all night, a local search party was dispatched who found Clarke ‘in a very sad condition, having got into a part of a field bounded by two fences, which had confused him, and he walked backward and forward until he fell exhausted. A cart was procured, and poor Clarke was taken home, but he was never really well again and died about a year afterwards’ (McDonagh & Daniels 2012, p. 111).

HEDGES IN HISTORY. ACCOUNTS OF POETIC AND PRACTICAL OPPOSITION

These ideas of social dislocation through a feeling of individualised and social sense of loss and alienation are at the heart of many of the more poetic renditions of anxiety over and objection towards processes of enclosure. Many commentators cite the poetry of John Clare for such matters:

These paths are stopt – the rude philistines thrall
 Is laid upon them and destroyed them all
 Each little tyrant with his little sign
 Shows where man claims earth no more divine
 But paths to freedom and to childhood dear
 Aboard sticks up to the notice ‘no road here’
 And on the tree with ivy overhung
 The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung
 As tho the very birds should learn to know
 When they go there they must no further go
 This with the poor scared freedom bade goodbye
 And much they feel it with the smothered sign
 And the birds and trees and flowers without a name
 All sighed when lawless law’s enclosure came
 (*The Mores* by John Clare, 1872 [c.1840]).

Clare’s poetry was a key lens through which John Barrell (1972) examined English landscape representations and W. G. Hoskins refers to quite a lot of John Clare in his seminal *Making of the English Landscape* (1988 [1955], pp. 193–8). More recently, however, John Clare’s *The Mores* seems to have been particularly influential for a

group of geographers in their development of ideas on the meaning of enclosure (for instance, see Watts 2004; Blomley 2007; Vasudevan *et al.* 2008). Another very good example of this style of contemporary critical poetry, largely ignored by historical geographers, is Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770):

Where then, ah! where, shall poverty reside,
To 'scape the pressure of contiguous pride?
If to some common's fenceless limits stray'd,
He drives his flock to pick the scanty blade,
Those fenceless fields the sons of wealth divide,
And e'en the bare-worn common is denied
(*The Deserted Village* by Oliver Goldsmith, 1770).

In Goldsmith's (1996 [1770]) narrative, fenceless commons are enclosed by wealthy property-owners; poor people are marginalised as access to common resources are reduced. Not surprisingly, such a process was resisted (see plate 11).

Plate 11. Holes are appearing in this remnant hedge. (Author's photograph).

The hedge, therefore, could be a rallying point for the disaffected, and a metaphor for the injustices of social division: Gerard Winstanley's *Digger's Manifesto* reportedly lamented that "the Earth (which was made to be a common treasury of relief for all, both beasts and men) was hedged in to enclosures by the teachers and rulers, and that the others were made servants and slaves" (Blomley 2007, p. 16). According to Griffin (2014, pp. 71–6), hedges and enclosures have always been resisted, and he argues persuasively that ordinary people were creative and persistent in their attempts to resist enclosure, using a mixture of mass invasions and demonstrations, alongside more covert operations and secretive practices of direct action.

On the night of 8 August 1795 the gate was 'cut' to pieces and the posts and rails thrown down of a recent small enclosure of waste ground at Fleet End in the township of Newton in the Hampshire parish of Titchfield' (Griffin 2014, p. 67).

On 10 January 1781, the enclosures of Oakly Park on Ludlow, Shropshire, were 'totally levelled', after which, so the report ran, 'the mob proceeded to commence further violence'. On the news reaching Birmingham, three troops of the (mounted) Scotch Greys were duly dispatched to put down the protests (Griffin 2014, p. 74).

At Swyre, in west Dorset, labourer Robert Northover engaged in a one-man campaign to destroy the fences and newly planted quick-set hedges. [He was] prosecuted in 1800 and again, at the age of 60, in 1811 (Griffin 2014, p. 74).

In Houghton, Yorkshire, 'In 1588, more than twenty men from the neighbouring village of North Cliffe had armed themselves with weapons and assembled themselves in a riotous manner ... and 'there in most ryotus and dispitefull mannor did with there swords and pytcheforkes did cut and break down the hedge and cut upp the Earth' (McDonagh 2009, p. 199)

In '1600, hedge breakers at Ingatestone, Essex, were to be whipped until they "bleed well" ' (Blomley 2007, p. 11).

Plate 12. Remnant hedge, Warwickshire. (Author's photograph).

Furthermore, such actions are not only connected to the supposedly classic cases of early modern Parliamentary enclosure (see plate 12). In a review of medieval experiences of hedges and enclosures, notes that “aggrieved cultivators who lost their common grazing sometimes turned to direct action, and destroyed the ditches, hedges and fences” (Dyer 2006, p. 31). In 1290, for instance, the hedges and enclosures of the abbot of St Albans were cast down because they impeded old-established access to common pasture. On this occasion, Dyer noted that “most ‘rioters’ were in fact very restrained, directing actions against the specific hedges and fences to which they were objecting” (*ibid.*, p. 250). On other occasions, however, less precise practices of hedgerow destruction took place:

A jury in Dorset reported to an inquest in 1297 that in January of that year Robert de Wodeton and seven other named ‘malefactors’ pulled down an enclosure bank belonging to Henry Baret at Lydlinch, by force, at night (Dyer 2006, p. 22)

In 1348, a crowd demolished the enclosure and burnt the hedge set up by Adam de Walton, the king’s sergeant at arms on the West Moor in Galtres forest (Dyer 2006, p. 22).

What people were resisting was the process through which the mode of social reproduction transformed from one based largely on common right to one based largely on the power of property, and both enclosers and enclosed knew this well:

Inclosure is the greatest Encouragement to good Husbandry, and a Remedy for Beggary, the Poor being employed by the continual Labour that is bestowed thereon (Laurence 1726, cited in Sevilla-Buitrago 2012, p. 216).

When the commons are enclosed ‘the labourers will work every day of the year, their children will be put out to labour early’, and ‘that subordination of the lower ranks of society which in the present times is so much wanted, would be thereby considerably secured’ (*Report on Shropshire*, 1794, cited in Sevilla-Buitrago 2012, p. 216).

Common rights really were a very important part of the previous system of social reproduction: gleaning grain after harvest might secure a woman enough grain to make bread for a year — the equivalent of seven weeks of an adult male wage; while gathering fuel could be the equivalent to another six weeks of wages (Sevilla-Buitrago 2012, p. 215). But herein lies a paradox — that hedges were an important source of common right, as well as sometimes representing the destruction of common rights. “The hedge [was] used as an instrument of dispossession, [but was also] a vital resource for many of the dispossessed. Used to defend property, the hedge itself became property. Yet the hedge could equally be seen as common property. *Hedgebote*, the right to gather from hedges, was one of the many commons of estover” (Blomley 2007, p. 11). As Petit and Watkins (2003) note, hedges were seen by many as a crucial element in a wider agricultural system, producing much required fodder as well as firewood. Even where people did not have the defined rights to collect wood for fuel from hedgerows it seems easier to collect wood (surreptitiously or otherwise) in well-wooded areas than from regions with sparse resources (see Griffin 2010). In some cases, disputes and even extreme violence occurred *not* in connection to the existence of hedges, but rather to the use of hedgerow resources.

Star Chamber proceedings record that in June 1524, in Newbold, Yorkshire a group of around 60 villagers assembled to demand their rights to collect turves and thorns from the land of Henry Machell who had recently enclosed land from the common. One of the protesters was Anthony Goddishalf. Henry Machell and his men arrived at the village and ‘violently drue the said Anthony ... hauyng noo maner wepon for his defence, backwarde to a wall ther being, and with a bill then and ther strake the said Anthony upon the hedd in soo pituous wise that the brayne ranne and issued out of the hedd ... by force of which stroke and pitefull wounde the same Anthony, then and ther, immediately, without any woorde speking, fell down and died’ (cited in McDonagh 2009, pp. 200–1).

This is a narrative account of a dispute over common rights, and both sides are described as having ‘bills’ (or billes) — billhooks, which are the key tool for hedge management (see plate 13): Anthony Goddishalf and his neighbours are described as being ‘armed’ with ‘billes, clubs and pitchforks’, while Anthony himself is killed by

Henry Machell and his men, thus: ‘with a bill then and ther strake the said Anthony upon the hedd in soo pituous wise that the brayne ranne and issued out of the hedd’ (McDonagh 2009, p. 200).

Plate 13: Billhook. (Author’s photograph).

Such a view of hedges, I feel, moves us towards more nuanced ground: whatever has been said about hedgerows *representing* enclosure, the pejorative term for most commentators is that of enclosure rather than the being of the physical boundary *per se*. For instance, Vasudevan *et al.* (2008, p. 1644) note that “while enclosure is rightly seen as a technology of dispossession and subjection, it also speaks, we believe, to the foreclosure of alternative forms of “sociality” that strive to imagine and represent that which ultimately is *common*”. In striving for an antidote to such enclosing processes, Vasudevan *et al.* (2008) call for a refusal to be contained, through an *emancipatory moment*, but what does this mean in a practical sense? And how might it involve a hedge? Indeed, can the hedge be re-thought, with new narratives, to be part of an emancipatory solution?

NEVER HEDGE YOUR BETS: MAKING SPACE FOR A BIOGRAPHY OF THE HEDGED ENCLOSURE

It is clear that hedges — as impregnable boundaries and impenetrable barriers, as markers of individual property, and as jealously guarded property in and of themselves — carry a lot of baggage. But I sometimes feel that they are made to bear a lot of weight as well. Furthermore, while there is a good deal of affective power in casting the building of a hedge as a moment of dislocation, dispossession — a fundamental alteration of social relations and decisive transformation of modes of social reproduction — by focusing mostly clearly on the actual act of building barriers and the immediate aftermath (the moment of enclosure), it tends to cast the hedge as an unalterable barrier that is resistant to re-interpretation. What the process of enclosure proverbially sets in stone is not the hedge *per se*, but the new social relations that the building of the hedge represents. A focus on the hedge as an unalterable object, therefore, draws attention away from any potential *afterlife* of the hedge. After all, as the disputes over *hedgebote* — the rights to reap resources from hedges — mentioned above, suggest that hedges did not *always and forever* have the same meaning and carry the same baggage: hedges can be a source of resistant activity as well as an object of resistance. In trying to find an *emancipatory moment*, is it possible to find elements of resistance within the afterlife of the hedge? Not all hedges are the same, and – to put it in a slightly blithe manner — things move on.

While historians and geographers have long been obsessed with the process of enclosure, numerous other changes, operating *after* areas had been enclosed, have contributed to the complex fieldscapes of England. To some extent field patterns have always been in a state of flux (Barnes and Williamson 2006, p. 18).

In the early twenty-first century, some hedges are still very much private property, providing an impenetrable barrier that both marks and protects property. Indeed, moving away from standard conceptions of rural Britain towards an English suburbia, the neatly cut (often privet) hedge remains an enduring feature in both the minds and gardens of many people (see plate 14).

Plate 14: Suburban garden hedge. (Author's photograph).

It is not hedges *per se* but property boundaries that enclose. I understand the connection with enclosure in board terms, but I do not feel that getting to grips with “the materiality of the hedge” is necessarily a very good guide to understanding such things as gated communities (see Plate 15). Not all hedges are the same.

The paranoia of the seventeenth century yeoman, behind the double hedge, compares to the anxieties of the modern property owner, secure (yet always and ever insecure) behind razor wire, alarms and armed response signs (Blomley 2007, p. 16).

Plate 15. Gated community nearby, ironically enough, the meadows of Runnymede (of *Magna Carta* fame), Surrey. (Author's photograph).

While I agree with Blomley's basic comparison (developed in more detail within Reviel Netz's (2004) work on *barbed wire*) between the seventeenth-century double hedge and the twenty-first-century gated community, I feel that the comparison works not through the image of the hedge (as an immovable and unchangeable object) but through directing our attention towards issues of property and rights of way. Maybe the hedge isn't so bad after all — and maybe it can even provide some answers. Indeed, in many parts of Ireland, the hedge conjures up an alternative narrative of the ‘hedge school’ — a hidden and clandestine means of education at a time when it would have been illegal for Catholic children to receive education.

In connection to the farming landscape in Britain, the hedgerow seems to have less and less of a meaningful and specifically *agricultural* role. In a period of relative agricultural depression in the earlier twentieth century, hedges were often simply left, as slowly enlarging derelict or residual land (see plates 11, 12 and 16). After 1945, the connection between hedgerows and repressive enclosure becomes more and more tenuous:

[A]s large machines work most economically in large fields, hedges were increasingly seen as a nuisance, rather than a necessary part of the agricultural environment. They began to be removed wholesale, Bulldozers and mechanical diggers made this a relatively easy task; so too did government subsidies for hedge removal, which began to be paid in 1957. Between 1946 and 1970 around 4,500 miles of hedge were destroyed each year in England and Wales [*i.e.* over 100,000 miles] (Barnes & Williamson 2006, p. 22).

Plate 16. Remnant hedge. (Author's photograph).

As Blomley (2007, p. 16) notes, at one time, hedges became a rallying point for the disaffected. As we have seen, hedge resources and hedge rights were also hotly disputed. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, hedges became the subject of progressive protest less as a rallying point over common rights, and more as an object of apparent need for preservation (see Pollard *et al.* 1974). Thus, hedges have become a rallying point for biodiversity agendas and even a progressive critique of capitalist-led factory farming.

RALLYING ROUND THE HEDGE

This impulse towards, first, protecting existing hedgerows and second, re-establishing new hedgerows is based upon a mixture of biodiversity ambitions and a public appetite for a particular sort of landscape. While hedge destruction and general deterioration continued into the 1990s, as livestock farmers turned to wire fences as a cheaper method of control, the move towards protecting existing hedges, together with the encouragement of re-establishing hedges gradually took over. The grubbing up of hedges was effectively curtailed with the new Hedgerow Regulations of 1997 (amended 2002), and various incentives were put in place to encourage re-planting (Barnes & Williamson 2006, p. 23). Related to, and very much stemming from, a sense of regret and loss, therefore, is a present concern for hedgerow protection — of celebrating a species-rich habitat, and of active reinstallation of hedgerows as an important element in a vision of the future countryside that is apparently more environmentally friendly and socially sustainable in its form (Harvey & Riley 2005, p 29). Such conservation efforts, however often imply that the landscape immediately before the post-war period of hedgerow removal was a sort of golden age of unchanging tradition. In reality, however, such hedgerows had long since ceased to play a meaningful role on many agricultural systems (see plates 17 and 18):

Father and grandfather said hedging didn't pay, so they just left them, so when I took over they had seventy or eighty years growth on ... They are definitely in better order than they have been for a hundred years, more than a hundred and fifty I expect (quoted in Harvey & Riley 2005, p. 26).

Plate 17: Recently replanted hedges, protected by wire fences. (Authors' photographs).

Perhaps the hedge can be seen as a champion of a different way of imagining the landscape. After all, it isn't as though a non-hedged landscape is somehow more natural. Far from being impenetrable barriers, a walk in the countryside today shows us that hedgerows are more likely themselves, to be protected by an impenetrable barrier in the form of a double barbed wire fence (see plate 18).

Plate 18. Recently laid hedge, protected by a barbed wire fence. (Author's photograph).

Indeed, my weekend training course of the practice of hedge laying was conducted not on a hedge that was ever meant to be a barrier, but on a hedge that was purposely grown in order to provide an aesthetic object and wildlife resource. It did not even mark the boundary of ownership, but rather sat alongside a wooden fence that actually marked the bounds of the property (see plate 19). "In many ways, such current practices as "traditional hedge laying", heavily subsidised through government grants, should be recognised as partially invented traditions to be understood within the context of present-day agendas, wants and hopes for the future" (Harvey & Riley 2005, p. 26).

Plate 19. The completed hedge, with the wooden fence, marking the property boundary, visible behind. (Author's photograph).

Following the work of Harvey and Riley (2005) this calls for us to look at more recent histories of hedgerows, and to reflect further on the possibilities for what the hedge *can* do. Considering the traditional hedge as part of a more sustainable agricultural practice, Harvey and Riley (2005) explored the recent history and experience of hedgerows in Devon through oral histories with farmers. Even where hedges have been in existence for centuries, their meaning, and how they *work* in the landscape has changed considerably, even in the last 50 years. "Hedges have a history. [...] The practices of hedge laying for the purpose of constructing an ecoconservation-minded aesthetic object is both fairly new, and also a reflection of present-day landscape heritage concerns – albeit concerns that are widely supported through academic rationale, public sympathy and government funding" (Harvey & Riley 2005, p. 27).

In other instances, hedgerow maintenance was less about the provision of a stock-proof barrier, and more connected to other farming practices. For instance, the following oral testimony from a farmer (born 1923) locates the hedge in relation to hay-making. With wider agricultural trends moving towards silage production rather than haymaking, one of the fundamental meanings of hedge laying changes:

The hedges would be trimmed and faggots would be used for kindling. Then the trimmings would be gathered up and thrown under the ricks. It all tied in you see? You cleared the field and then trimmed the hedges to lay under the ricks as you built them. It kept the rick up off the floor you see? Stopped it from getting damp (quoted in Harvey and Riley 2005, p. 27).

This need to recognise the wider context and meaning of such landscape features as hedges is well illustrated in the following oral history example from another farmer (born 1926):

They'd got their certain field which they knew would grow good wheat, good barley, good oats, ... and it was all done on a seven year system.

If you said you were going to plough a certain field on your farm, starting, say, from October, whatever wood that was on the hedges would be cut and used for firing. The hedge would be reinstated as a Devon hedge because there would be turf in the field wouldn't there? And you would be allowed to use any turf out of that field because it was going to be ploughed see? And you reinstated your banks.

Then the field would be ploughed before Boxing Day that autumn, and in January, if they wanted spring wheat, he was tilled in January. If not, he was tilled late February, early March for oats and barley and then the following year he would go into winter wheat, which would be tilled in November. [...]

The winter wheat would come off in early July, but then he would be reploughed and put to what we call 'sheep's meat', which is kale, swedes, turnips. Then you'd have two years of barley – that's five years. The sixth year would be oats, and the last year again would be barley with grass seeds undersown on it. In that seven years your hedge would have chance to regrow from where it was laid and that. He would be nice and thick wouldn't he? And you'd get a nice stock proof hedge out of that. ... You also had a crop for firing.

So the hedge would be managed with the field in the rotation. ... On a farm of, say, a hundred and fifty acres, there would be two or three fields done each year. ... It was kept as manageable – an ordinary man could do the job all yourself.

(quoted in Harvey & Riley 2005, pp. 27–8)

As Harvey and Riley (2005) record, this outline of a seven year rotation system highlights how hedgerow management fitted into a wider system of agriculture that is now redundant, and in doing so makes something of a mockery of the practice, very common today, of laying a traditional hedge and protecting it with a barbed wire or even an electric fence (see plate 20). The present concern for hedgerow replacement should be viewed within the wider context of the British countryside going through a period of change in terms of its meaning and purpose. The neatly and newly laid hedge that is protected by a wire fence has no meaning or purpose within a seven year crop rotation system, but makes perfect sense in the present climate of countryside and environmental management.

In many ways, there is a sense that these practices of hedgerow protection and enhancement can be seen as an attempt to museumify the landscape: beyond the bounds of the agriculturally meaningful area, and protected by barbed wire to be preserved in the interests of biodiversity and picture postcard manufacturers (see Harvey and Riley 2005, pp. 27–9). Despite the rhetoric of fostering traditional agricultural practice, therefore, these hedges are now emphatically *no longer* agricultural objects. Indeed, since hedgerows are now subject to planning legislation (Barnes & Williamson 2006, p. 23), it might be argued that in some cases, practices of hedgerow protection and enhancement may actually foil some farmers' attempts to integrate their hedges into a sustainable system of agricultural management. Indeed, there is a strong sense of irony in the fact that, in certain cases, hedgerows are now out-of-bounds to farmers who wish to participate in such schemes as Countryside Stewardship: behind barbed wire, such hedges are not to be touched, tainted or brought into any functional agricultural practice (Harvey & Riley 2005, p. 29).

Plate 20. Hedge, protected by electric fence (Devon). (Author's photograph).

CONCLUSIONS

Just as hedges should not be viewed as simply representative edifices of enclosure and dispossession they should also not be seen as one-dimensional aesthetic objects, with a singular narrative and uniform agricultural or ecological function. Indeed, the multiple histories and dating of hedges is something that is often glossed over within both popular representations and policy formulations of hedgerow maintenance.

The act of conservation involves action (or inaction) that is contingent on the agendas of the here and now, and we should recognise that in our efforts to 'preserve' a historic landscape, we are in fact constructing a new

countryside, the meaning of which is divorced from its previous social, economic and cultural context. This is not something that should necessarily raise anxiety – indeed the maintenance of any socioeconomic status quo is often as unwanted as it would be impossible to achieve (Harvey & Riley 2005, p. 30).

Rather than raise anxiety, therefore, this seems to provide an opportunity — perhaps space for that *emancipatory moment* that Vasudevan *et al.* (2008) talk about. Hedgerows do not, by and large, make much economic sense. Whatever they may once have represented, they now no longer represent a “fundamental alteration in the experience of the countryside”, nor do they herald a process of dispossession, proletarianisation and pauperisation. On the other hand, it strikes me that hedges do not best benefit from being treated as an untouchable museum-object to posterity, especially when this posterity includes such a lot of baggage. Such a point is implied by Pollard *et al.* (1974), when they stress the essential agricultural function of hedgerows, alongside a slightly plaintive call that underlines their clear commitment to hedgerow preservation in spite of apparent agricultural obsolescence. Developing the proclamation from Smith and Campbell (2011) that we should not *mourn*, but *organise*, therefore, we should move beyond using notions of nostalgia and regret as guiding principles and instead look forward to creating a world that has both critical purchase with the past, but also a sense of progressive purpose for the future.

Whatever baggage hedges and hedgerows might carry in terms of their historical role in the curtailment of rights and the maintenance of elite privilege, the provision of a more dynamic biography of hedges suggests that things move on, and hedgerows might actually provide a resource for a much broader and plural society. Indeed, the contemporary equivalent of *hedgebote* — or hedgerow rights — might include the enjoyment, health and wellbeing of society as a whole. Rather than a solid barrier, or even a stable motif of a museumified (or mummified) nation, the hedgerow, therefore, acts as an emergent entity of a relational enterprise between humans, non-humans and their environmental context, the good health of which is surely of central concern for everyone.

Looking back to my conservation weekend in May 1992, I think I was right to refuse to install the wire-mesh fence that would prevent access to a wonderful wildflower meadow. But this would have been in consideration of rights to access, rather than the maintenance of a barrier *per se*. And if I am asked to help out with some hedge laying practices — even on a Midland-style quickset hedge — I’ll probably do so (see plate 21, 22 and 23)!

Plate 21. The author “at work”. (Author’s photograph).

Plate 22. “My hedge” (9th March 2014). (Author’s photograph).

Plate 23. “My hedge” (7th June 2014). (Author’s photograph).

NOTES

1 *Pleaching*: aka *plashing*: (verb) “to bend down and cut partly and intertwine the branches of/to form a hedge”. (noun) “a branch partly cut and interwoven to other branches” (Baker 1932).

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Plate captions

Plate 1. A hedgerow landscape, Devon. (Author’s photograph).

Plate 2. Blomley (2007) equates thorn hedges with organic barbed wire. (Author’s photograph).

Plate 3. Whitethorn scratches (despite heavy leather gloves) – at least it wasn’t blackthorn! (Authors’ photographs).

Plate 4. Setting the scene: with axe, slasher, billhook and saw, the first task was the clean the hedge. (Authors’ photographs).

Plate 5. Laying the pleachers. (Authors' photographs).
 Plate 6. Practical hedge work. (Authors' photographs).
 Plate 7. Stakes are hammered in, a cubit's width apart. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 8. A well-managed hedge can grow into an impenetrable barrier. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 9. Weaving in the hethers. (Authors' photographs).
 Plate 10. The disorientation of hedges. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 11. Holes are appearing in this remnant hedge. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 12. Remnant hedge, Warwickshire. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 13: Billhook. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 14: Suburban garden hedge. (Author's photograph).
 Plate 15. Gated community nearby, ironically enough, the meadows of Runnymede (of *Magna Carta* fame), Surrey. (Author's photograph).
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