

Hedge-laying in East Ham – a traditional country craft

By Peter Williams

This article by Wren Group member Peter covers some work he has done recently at East Ham Nature Reserve. He is grateful to Penny Evans who directed the work and taught him the basics, having done a hedge laying course at Field Studies Council (FSC) at High Beech in Epping Forest and features in the photos below.

The East Ham reserve is in the churchyard of St. Mary Magdalene, a Norman church circa 1130AD. It is one of the largest churchyards in London. In 1977 the 9.5 acre site was turned into a Nature Reserve and was managed by Newham Council until 2009 when it was taken over by Community Links as the council's managing agent. In 2015 it was taken over by ActiveNewham as agent after Links pulled out. Newham Green Gym, which began in 2004 is the only conservation group regularly maintaining the grounds, meeting every Wednesday and the last Saturday of every month throughout the year.



The hedge before laying – note the large gaps and the high vertical growth, hard to cut and manage (February 2016).

The reserve has a significant hedge made up mainly of hazel and hawthorn. Prior to this recent work it had got a bit out of hand and was proving hard to maintain by Green Gym. Hedge-laying is a country skill typically found in England and is used to achieve a number of goals:-

- To form a livestock-proof barrier.
- To help rejuvenate an ageing hedgerow by encouraging it to put on new growth and by helping to improve its overall structure and strength.
- To provide greater weather protection for crops and local wildlife.
- To provide a pleasing screen to a garden or field.

Laying hedges is just one of the techniques which can be used to manage hedgerows. Other techniques include trimming and coppicing. Coppicing involves cutting stems off at ground level to encourage the hedge to regenerate. Left unmanaged a hedgerow will continue to grow upwards and outwards and will eventually become a line of trees.

Where farmers keep cattle or sheep a good hedge is essential - although barbed wire fences can easily be erected they do not provide shelter like a hedge. Hedges are important for our wildlife, environmental, heritage and scenic value. A well managed hedgerow is thick and bushy, an impenetrable barrier to sheep and cattle and a haven for wildlife.

Cattle will lean against a hedge and make gaps whilst sheep push through the base, hedge laying prevents this. Cut stems are bent over at an angle, secured with stakes and in some styles binders along the top, so creating a living, stock-proof barrier.

Hedge-laying is the only hedgerow maintenance method currently available which promotes regrowth from ground level and which will ensure the health and longevity of the hedgerow. Once a hedge has been laid regular trimming will keep it in good order for up to 50 years when it may be appropriate to lay the hedge again.

Below are various pictures that hopefully illustrate the theory behind laying a hedge and what it should look like when it's finished;

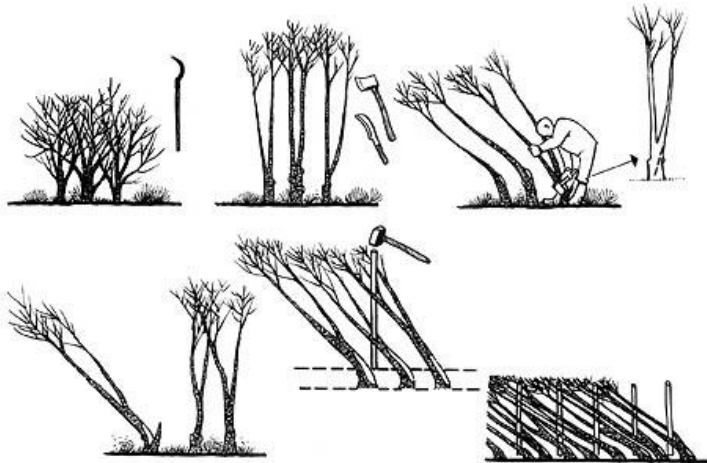


Diagram 1 - Hedge laying basics

Stage 1: involves taking out any surplus material including previously poorly done attempts to lay this hedge. You get rid of a lot of verticals you don't want but keep a small number that are then cut in a special way and then bent over very carefully. This is called laying the hedge.



The first cuts from the base of the hawthorn or hazel (February 2016).

This is shown diagrammatically below

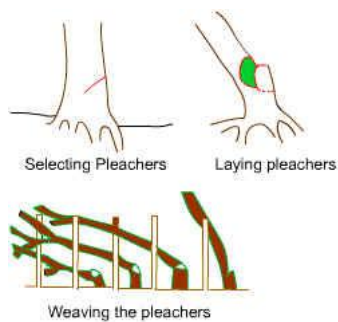


Diagram 2 - Hedge pleaching techniques

The basic idea behind pleaching is chop down the back side of the stem using a bill hook (see tools below). The next stage is then effectively bending the stem over until it's resting either on the floor or the last stem to be laid. Doing this keeps the tree alive; however once it has been laid it will throw up a lot of shoots thus making a very thick hedge.

Great care needs to be taken making these cuts – cut too little and the branch is very hard to bend over. Cut too much and there is a tendency for it to be too weak and to snap. The idea is to leave a thin joint that is alive and allows the plant to regenerate. It is rather like a hinge of living material. The thicker hawthorns proved hard to cut to a good hinge and we lost one or two in the process.



Another view of the cuts – note the billhook painted yellow bottom left, and the axe. The mallet like tool is used to insert temporary vertical stakes to hold some of it in place. Note the graves on the left as this is a churchyard. There is a lot of ivy that had to be cleared first (February 2016).

Stage 2: having cut and laid down the hedge to one side it is then important to weave the living strands round one another, to achieve a dense texture that will be stock proof and have a pleasing visual aspect as well. This is called “making the hedge”.



Making the hedge – again note the temporary stakes to hold it in place. Because the early spring in 2016 you can clearly see the hazel and hawthorn coming into leaf – the cutting and laying to the side does not kill the plant as long as you keep the hinge in place (March 2016).



Sharpening the stakes which was done in February 2016. The poor state of the hedge when we started can clearly be seen in this picture. Surplus and dead material has already been cut out here.

Stage 3

Having laid and made the hedge it is then important to put the vertical stakes in placed spaced about 18 inches apart, as they give the hedge strength and support. The final stage is to weave in non-living wood at the top of the stakes to give added strength and resilience. These are called weavers. Finally the stakes are trimmed off to an even height to look neat and tidy.



All that remains to be done is trimming the vertical stakes. The new growth is the hedge is clearly visible (early April 2016).



The finished hedge- any unruly side branches are tidied up and smaller branches are encouraged to growth downwards rather than create new and rapid vertical growth. This hedge should now require minimal maintenance for a number of years (early April 2016).

Conclusion

A well laid hedge is a wonderful site in the English countryside. It is a labour-intensive process (this short section took Penny and Peter's unskilled hands about six weeks at 2 hours a session). There are different traditions and techniques in different English regions, and hedging was a key winter activity for generations of farm labourers in the season where there was not much field work. It created a living barrier to control stock but an accidental by product was increased biodiversity and the unique appearance of the English countryside with its small neat fields and wonderful hedgerows. Indeed field boundaries in this country can be dated by counting the diversity of species in the hedge and it is now know that some of the boundaries go back hundreds if not thousands of years especially in western and upland areas on Britain untouched by the parliamentary enclosures of the 18th century.

Peter and Penny hope to be back in 2017 to lay another section of East Ham's hedge.

References

<http://www.hedgelaying.org.uk/about-hedge-laying.php>

http://www.shropshirehedgelaying.co.uk/what_is_hedgelaying.php

Dating hedges

<https://hedgebritannia.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/how-to-date-a-hedge/>

see also a classic "The Making of the English Landscape" by WG Hosking