Marion Shoard
Writer | Broadcaster | Lecturer
www.marionshoard.co.uk

'Hands off the British Hedgerow'

by Marion Shoard

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In our hedgerows this weekend, meadow brown butterflies will be fluttering over the lady's bedstraw and enchanter's nightshade which have now succeeded the primroses and bluebells of springtime. Whitethroats and wrens will be feeding their young in the dense foliage recently decked out in billows of pale pink dog roses and plates of deeply scented cream elder. Soon the sinister berried spikes of cuckoopint will appear, as a bewildering variety of hairy caterpillars settle down to pupate.

All of these things have been happening in Britain's hedgerows for a very long time. Some of the hedgerows now standing were carved from Britain's original wildwood to act as prehistoric field edge markers, others to act as boundaries for Saxon villagers. Others are a continuing testimony to the enclosures of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, when sheep, Thomas More's "eaters of men", drove our peasant forebears from the land. So on top of their wildlife and landscape value our hedgerows' location and composition have much to tell us about the lives of our forebears. They are a national treasure. As the naturalist Richard Jefferies put in 1884: "Without hedges, England would not be England."

By that definition, an awful lot of our country has been stolen from us over the past few decades. Between 1947 and 1985, 109.000 miles of hedgerow were torn down. A fifth of the remaining hedgerows in England and a quarter of those in Wales have been lost over the past six years.

The consequences for the landscape are apparent to all who take a walk across the featureless prairies which yearly extend their grip over more and more of Britain. It is not only the matchless intimacy of our countryside which is going, but its variety as well. At the same time, once common plants and animals knitted into our national folklore, literature and imagination are being evicted from their ancient homes. "Unkempt about those hedges blows/An English unofficial rose," wrote Rupert Brooke in his home thoughts from Prussia in 1912, but dog roses are disappearing from great tracts of England, along with primroses and violets. The springtime songs of whitethroats are no longer heard in some areas, while peacock, brimstone and brown hairstreak butterflies, pipistrelle bats and even dormice are becoming rarer.

Who cares? The answer includes one perhaps unexpected figure. At the Conservatives' manifesto launch in March, John Major surprised political pundits by declaring a passionate interest in hedgerows. His manifesto promised measures to protect them, and Mr Major predicted that these would help his own campaign in his Huntingdon constituency. The pundits mocked, but as on so much else, perhaps he was wiser than they. Hedgerow loss prompts more letters of complaint to the environment department than almost any other subject, and Huntingdonshire has suffered as much as anywhere. Against the national trend, Mr Major increased his majority in Huntingdon.

The prime minister's interest in hedgerows may be more than a knee-jerk response to constituents' gripes. Commentators searching for the secret of his bafflingly successful political style have identified a political role model. Stanley Baldwin was another plain-looking, plain-speaking pragmatist whose apparent inoffensiveness masked a matchless grasp of the governance of Britain. For Baldwin, fomenting affection for Britain's countryside was a means of forging national unity. "To me. England is the country, and the country is England." he said in one of his most famous speeches. "'The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy ... These things touch chords that go back to the beginning of time. They ought to be the inheritance of every child born into this country."

It is easy to see how traditionalist, cricket-loving John Major might also see the preservation of the countryside as essential to creating "a nation at ease with itself". That must mean saving the hedgerows which define the character of that countryside. However, the task he has taken on is hardly less challenging than reining back the public sector borrowing requirement or salvaging Maastricht. The forces which have laid the hedgerows low are, if anything, growing even stronger.

Before the war, farmers saw hedgerows as valuable agricultural infrastructure, providing stockproof field boundaries, shade for cattle and a windbreak for crops. Post-war methods have made hedgerows a mere nuisance. The modern farmer wants large fields in which large machines can manoeuvre easily, and to control grazing animals he prefers fences, which can be moved. Hedgerows, therefore, are grubbed up relentlessly. Now agricultural production is being cut back as subsidies are withdrawn, but our hedgerows are not necessarily going to benefit. If farmers are to "set aside" 15 per cent of their land, they are likely to try even harder to maximise production on the remaining 85 per cent. Where land goes out of farming altogether, new users may be as reluctant as farmers to retain hedgerows. The golf boom is claiming much redundant farmland, but landscape engineering takes precedence over preserving inherited features. Developers wanting planning permission for housing remove hedges to make it harder for planners to say their land is "too rural" to be built up.

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To stem the tide of hedgerow destruction, far-reaching action will be needed. Mere preservation orders, like the tree preservation orders already available for individual trees, would not be enough, since hedgerows require maintenance if they are to survive. As a hedgerow grows taller, the shade of the canopy thins out growth at the base, and what was once a hedgerow becomes simply a line of trees, losing its special character and usefulness for creatures such as dormice. Farmers used to keep hedgerows in shape by periodically trimming them, coppicing them (cutting them back so they can regenerate) or laying them (slicing part-way through the main stems of the young trees and knitting them together). Without some such supportive action, even nominally protected hedgerows would deteriorate.

Mr Major's government has made its first moves. Already the agriculture ministry offers 40 per cent grants for the planting of new hedges, the replanting of extensive sections in a gappy hedge, and hedgerow coppicing and laying. On Monday the environment department will unveil the centrepiece of the prime minister's manifesto pledge, the Hedgerow Incentive Scheme.

The new scheme, to administer be administered by the Countryside Commission, will provide grants to farmers who agree to ten-year programmes of hedgerow restoration and management. Over the next three years, £3.5 million will be made available. The scheme is supposed to be followed by a separate system designed to enforce hedgerow protection on owners not reached by the incentive scheme There will eventually be a notification system requiring landowners to inform their local authorities of any intention to remove a hedgerow. Councils will then have 28 days in which to slap on an order forbidding the landowner to proceed, where they consider this appropriate.

Will these arrangements, incremental and meticulous in the Major manner, save our hedgerows? Sadly, no. Like so much else in the sphere of environmental policy-making, they provide the appearance of action rather than the solution of a problem.

The incentive scheme is all very well, but if we are really to rely on bribing landowners to preserve our heritage, then £3.5 million is spit in the ocean. The notification system is at present only a proposal, although a private member's bill sponsored by Surrey East’s Peter Ainsworth, embodying a similar scheme, may help to ensure that it comes about. Unfortunately local authorities are unlikely to make enough use of the powers a notification system would give them. Many rural councils are dominated by the very landowners whose freedom of action would be severely curtailed by the energetic use of hedgerow preservation orders. Even where such orders are made, landowners will be able to circumvent them by allowing protected hedgerows to disintegrate over time through neglect.

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What is required is a rather different approach, but one for which we already have a model in the built environment. Where a building is deemed to be of environmental for importance, it is listed, not by the local authority, which may be leaned on by the owner, but by a national agency responsible to David Mellor's Department of National Heritage. The owner of a listed building is not only forbidden to destroy it but required to maintain it at his own expense. There are a few grants available, but most are means-tested and cover only 40 per cent of costs. If a particular owner cannot pay his share, he must sell to someone who can afford to play custodian of the national heritage. This system has saved our most important buildings from what would otherwise have been certain devastation over the past 60 years.

A hedgerow listing system, even if it were backed only by the government's modest £1 million a year, could guarantee the future of this vital landscape feature. Farmers would, of course, complain about the imposition of a new financial burden, but so did urban landowners when the listed building scheme was introduced. There is no point in preserving the farmers if their preservation results in the countryside's destruction.

Hedgerows, protected by listing, could lend character not only to our farmed countryside, but also to the new post-agricultural landscape. They could become familiar features not just on golf courses and in theme parks, but also on housing and commercial estates. The role which hedges can play in built landscapes was recognised as long ago as the 1930s, when Welwyn Garden City was designed around existing historic hedgerows, to considerable effect. Some other towns, Leicester and Reading for example, also embrace old hedgerows, and these are a most effective form of the urban green space which planners now consider a vital amenity for all towns and cities.

It would take only a simple Hedgerows Bill to launch a hedgerow listing scheme. The Department of National Heritage stands ready as the natural agency to implement it. Of course, the farming and landowning lobbies would put up a fight, and the agriculture ministry would, as usual, back their cause. So will we see the listing scheme on which the future of our hedgerows may depend? That depends upon John Major.

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