

Hedgelaying Yorkshire Style

Contributed by Dunc

The art of hedgelaying is an ancient one, it is used to keep hedgerows vigorous with dense growth from the bottom of the hedge, thus forming a strong barrier for livestock. Different parts of the United Kingdom have developed their own styles and the variety can be quite notable. The only system I am familiar with is called the 'Yorkshire System' and that is the one I will be describing.

However it was not until the Enclosure Acts of the 1700s, which changed the medieval system of 'strip' farming for one where a person's land was in one piece, that what we call modern hedgelaying began. The new system meant that a farmer or land user really had to fence his or her property in as a unit for proper identification. Since wire was unknown the boundary was usually created by planting thorny bushes, Hawthorn and Blackthorn were favourites. However in only a few years these plants grow beyond a hedge and gaps appear at the bottom between the trees which means that it is no longer an animal proof hedge.

The solution is to lay the hedge.

Laying a hedge is exactly what it says, you take a young tree, for that is what they have become, and lay it at an angle of approximately 45 degrees to the ground. Since you cannot simply push the tree over ways must be found to make it tilt and yet still keep it alive and flourishing, for the object is always to keep the tree alive. To that end the greatest care must be taken to leave sufficient outer bark so that the tree continues to receive nutrients. Hedges can only be laid during the dormant season, trying to cut an actively growing tree would cause it immense harm as the sap would leak out and the shock might actually kill the very thing you are trying to save. Also during the active period, birds are nesting and the disturbance could interfere with their breeding cycles. In fact hedgelayers are sometimes asked why they are destroying creature habitat. They are doing no such thing, they are actually improving it. When a hedge becomes what are in effect a row of trees then several points must be made;

- a) The bird nests are more open to attack by predators who simply scale the easily accessible trunks, they are normally used by rooks, crows and magpies, all of whom can just as easily use much higher trees for their nests.
- b) The spaces between the trunks offer no sanctuary for small animals, insects etc.

Tools

Modern hedgelayers use a variety of tools, including power saws. Some purists say that power tools should not be used, and indeed in most competitions they are not allowed, but of course if one has hedgelaying as a job then power saws are almost a must, on time considerations alone. My friends and I, although we do not work for free, do it for pleasure, all remuneration we receive is given to various charities. Many of the tools described have been around for hundreds of years and are still appropriate for the task today;

Saws

Various types including, if you can afford it, a two handed saw. This tool can make short work of thicker trunks and you always cut as you are pulling the saw toward you. By various types I mean bow type saws, the average tenon for example is not suitable.

A small pointed saw is always handy, when you work with Hawthorn and Blackthorn as they become so intertwined that it can be difficult getting between some of the branches.

Saws are of course used to actually saw part of the way through a trunk, the cut being almost always horizontal and as close to the ground as possible, or to remove branches and impediments that hedgelayers come across. They are also used to cut the tops off the stakes, at an angle to allow rain run off.

Axes

Again a variety ranging from small hand axe to the large seven pounder.

The smaller axes are used to trim small branches etc from the trunk. The larger axe is used to attack larger trunks where the power of a sweeping axe is more effective than a saw. The cut here is almost always an angled cut from above and can be very powerful. Commonly a saw cut is made about three quarters into a trunk and then the large axe is used to

cut in from a higher angle, thus chopping a wedge from the tree trunk.

Billhooks

A variety of these tools exist and they are almost all named after counties, we of course use the Yorkshire model. Billhooks are lighter and can be used with one or two hands. They fulfil the same functions as a light axe and are ideal for trimming small branches from trunks or for cutting into slimmer trunks in a similar manner to the large heavy axes. Where they have the advantage of the small axe is that they are very thin bladed and can get into small gaps where an axehead might not penetrate. When swung from above they actually punch above their weight and can inflict a savage cut into a tree trunk, their long blade assists in this action.

Loppers

These are rather like a pair of heavy duty scissors with extremely long handles. Some even have telescopic handles for reaching branches at heights well above that of the average person. They are used for trimming the smaller branches, those that do not require the services of a saw. Loppers will usually cut through branches up to one inch thick with little trouble, the cut should where possible be at right angles to the branch otherwise the blades can bend and the tool become useless.

Safety

Anyone who takes part in hedgelaying should always wear heavy duty gloves, industrial standard if you can get them. The thorns on our trees can be up to three centimetres long, getting one stuck into your skin is no laughing matter and they are the very devil to get out again. I have had to wait three weeks for a large thorn to work its way out of my body. Secondly, heavy duty footwear. Steel toecapped wellingtons are favoured by my group and they can be a godsend if a heavy branch falls on your foot. When I first started hedgelaying, some six years ago, I foolishly decided that my normal green wellies would suffice, needless to say I learnt a very painful lesson when a large thorn went straight through them and left me limping for a week. A thick cap is also recommended as it is commonplace for small, and some not so small branches and twigs, to fall on your head. Some groups insist that their members wear safety goggles, there is merit in this idea although I prefer to tilt the peak of my cap forward since the main problem for me is the sawdust getting in my eyes when someone above me is sawing wood. You must always be conscious of what your companions are doing, this is particularly true if they are wielding tools. All the tools we use are sharpened regularly and are extremely sharp. It is also true if someone is working above you, beside the obvious danger of a branch landing on your head there is also the problem of an eye full of sawdust, dirt, or even a stick on your eye. Believe me a thorn in your eye would do you a lot of damage.

Now that we have dispensed with the problem of having your head caved in or your eye poked out, how exactly do we lay a hedge?

The Decision

Is this hedge worth laying? Some are quite frankly not worth the bother, they have been neglected for many many years and have become massively overgrown. The trunk can be as high as 20 to 25 feet high and with considerable girth. I watched a group try to lay such a hedge and it was dangerous, it took them ages to cut into these thick trees. They could not control the heavy trunk when they had cut in, several trunks crashed to the ground and were severed from their roots, and in the end the group abandoned the whole project. I often drive past the scene of this desecration and the trees are still lying there

Tree state. We recently looked at a job and on first glance it appeared suitable. The area however was thick with nettles which had not quite died off. They were about four feet or more high and effectively obscuring the lower part of the trunks. Luckily we cleared the nettles and discovered that many of the trunks were so rotten that they could not possibly survive our efforts. It would have been impossible to lay this hedge, we advised the owner that the only thing she could do was have it ripped out and plant a new hedge.

Yorkshire Style

As I stated previously the only method I am familiar with is the Yorkshire Style, even then we are not purists, we do not normally have a top rail for example. In this style the tree is usually shorn of a fairly large amount of material which we do not need, that which we chop off is called 'brash'. Most of the brash is piled up in some nearby open space, on the owners land, and later burnt as a huge bonfire. We then lay the trunks at an angle. of approximately 45degrees or even less. On one or two occasions we have had so much material to work with that we could lay them almost level and still have loads of growth. When laid the branches which have been left are then woven around each other to form a good solid looking hedge, all branches which grow downward are cut off as we only want upward growth. This weaving process rejoices in the name of 'pleaching', or at least it does in this part of the country.

Every metre and a half or so we hammer in stakes and these both support the hedge and keep it growing in more or less a straight line. The stakes are also ideal for bending the supple trunks and branches round thus making a very firm

almost semi rigid hedge. When a hedge is completed it will look very bare for the rest of that winter but, come the spring and you will see green shoots all over it, before you know it there will be birds nesting in it and little animals and insects living under and on it

That's really all there is to hedgelaying, it is a great way to spend a day out in the fresh air, get some exercise and help save the environment. The photographs will show you what the hedge looks like at various stages and they come courtesy of my mate Frank Firth.

Anyone who thinks they would like to have a go at this noble art can contact any of the below mentioned bodies for further information.

The National Hedgelaying Society

The society has a range of leaflets and books on the subject and will also give details of courses and hedgelaying societies and contractors near you.

The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers(BTCV)

They have available a Hedgerows pack of leaflets and a book called, Hedging - a practical handbook

The Council for the Protection of Rural England

They have available a "Hedgerow Action Pack" with details of how to help with a national survey of hedges.

The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group(FWAG)

National Agricultural Centre

Stoneleigh

Kenilworth

Warwickshire CV8 2RX

Phone 01203 696699

They publish a series of booklets about hedges and field boundaries.

Disclaimer

I disclaim all responsibility for any errors in this document, they are only my views as an amateur on this skill. If you do decide you would like to practice please seek the advice and help of someone who knows what they are doing.

SAFETY MUST ALWAYS BE UPPERMOST IN YOUR MIND

Written by Jim Duncan