

# Hedges for wildlife



Plumpton is well endowed with a network of hedgerows - some are tall, some are short, some are gappy, some are thick and dense, some are rich in species while others are poorer. On one of my fairly regular walks I always find plenty of interest in the hedges that border the east and west sides of the wide, old drove road between Deans Farm and Shergold's Farm. Both hedges are rich in tree and shrub species: blackthorn, hawthorn, holly, hazel, field maple, dogwood, wild privet, ash, elm and hornbeam. They are punctuated occasional by well-grown trees of Oak, Ash and Field Maple. At this time of year there are festooned with strings of the bright red fruits of black bryony (the only member of the Yam family in Britain), shiny black fruits of wild privet and masses of blackberries and sloes.

Some stretches are dominated by suckering elm, the sorry remnants of what once must have been some lovely mature elm trees. In the 1960s an outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease arose from the introduction of infected elm logs imported into Britain. The disease is caused by an aggressive microscopic fungus, which blocks the tree's vessels, and is spread by bark beetles, which lay their eggs under the bark of elms. Within a decade around 20 million English elms out of the UK population of 30 million were dead. In southern Britain the epidemic took rapid hold in the mid-1970s leading to the death of most mature English elms by the early 1980s. But when an infected tree is killed some roots survive and from these grow a thicket of young elms. They remain healthy until they reach a certain size and then they can be detected by and infected by the bark beetles. While there are a couple of dead young elms, which have succumbed in the recent past, two of the trees in the hedgerow have attained quite a height and although they look healthy overall, one has a few defoliated twigs at its top – the first signs of the disease.

These hedges must be quite old - lining an ancient green lane as they do and being present on maps of the early 1800s. Other hedges in the parish are more recent, having been planted when the Common land was enclosed in the 18th century or earlier. They were often planted with one species - often hawthorn or blackthorn. Max Hooper, in the book *Hedges* (1974), said that one could estimate the age of a hedge by counting the number of woody species in a 30 yard stretch and adding 100 years for each species. His research was carried out in areas (not including Sussex) where he knew the ages of hedges from documents and maps. His method was adopted enthusiastically but later came in for much criticism because it didn't work

in all regions. It is only a rough method and should always be backed up by documentary evidence.

A fine example of it not working in our parish is demonstrated by the hedges to the south of Inholmes Farm on both sides of the road. These have an average of eight woody species per 30 yards but they must date from the time when the road, once wide and muddy, was made narrower by selling off the roadside waste and given a hard surface in the late 1800s. Comparing modern satellite images with the 1841 Tithe Map show the original width of the road and the positions of the new and original boundaries.

So, how good are Plumpton's hedges for wildlife? Some are great and some rather neglected. An important function of hedgerows is the safe corridor that they can provide for animals moving between woodlands. The best hedges are thick with wide bases, giving lots of cover for birds, and there are many that fit that category. They are better for wildlife if they have a good number of tree and shrub species, which will provide a range of nectar and fruits over a long season. Hedge verges are also important - giving cover and food for invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians, birds and small mammals, while a fringe of wild flowers and grasses helps to conceal bird nests from predators. There is lots of advice on-line on managing hedges to keep them dense, flowery and fruitful - see for example <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/advice/conservation-land-management-advice/farm-hedges/the-value-of-hedgerows-for-wildlife/>. Managing hedges to maintain ideal conditions for many species is a tricky balance but one rule to be adhered to is not to cut in the bird-besting season between 1 March and 31st July.

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