

# Hedgerow History

Hedges are a lot older than you may think. They have been part of the landscape for many hundreds of years.

The word hedge comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'haeg' or 'haga' (over 1000 years ago). This was once the word for our commonest hedgerow tree the Hawthorn, which made up much of an Anglo-Saxon hedge.

Many hedges were planted in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century but at least half our hedges are much older than that.

In the county of Devon for example, it is thought that over a quarter of the hedges are more than 800 years old - that's older than many parish churches - and some are growing on banks built in Bronze Age times four thousand years ago. Others are older still, being the remains of the original wildwood that covered Britain before man started to make his fields.

The age and type of trees in a hedge are a good indicator of how old the hedge might be.

Hedges were for marking ownership boundaries, paths and lanes and for keeping livestock in or out of fields.

More recently they were replaced by wire fencing or removed altogether. Between 1950 and the mid 1970's many hedges were dug up to make larger fields and space for large farm machinery. This was particularly so in the East of England.

Many hedges are now being replanted. They are important for wildlife and look much more attractive!

There were also other major uses for hedgerows in times past. Those were as a source of firewood, for providing shelter from wind, rain and sun for crops, farm animals and people, and as a source of food, for example nuts, fruit and fungi. I am quite sure that most of you have been blackberry picking along a hedgerow in autumn.

The hedges in and around the Fairfield Nature Reserve are old too, and can be seen marked on old maps. The hedge lined path from the canal at Aldcliffe to Sunnyside Lane is very old and would have been used by travellers going to and from the castle and Priory church.

Walk along it at some time and imagine that you are one of those travellers! Look out for some of the old hawthorn trees.