

## Looking after hedges

A well managed hedge should be thick and bushy from the base upwards. They provide an impenetrable barrier to prevent cattle and sheep straying from fields or entering fields where they should not be!

They provide an important habitat for wildlife, providing shelter and protection from predators, food and cover for nesting birds.

Maintaining a good hedge will often involve using a country craft called hedge laying.



Laying the hedge involves part cutting the stems close to their base and bending them over at an angle along the hedge in the direction away from the prevailing wind and then securing it with stakes. The stems are still alive and new shoots will grow from these stems resulting in a much thicker and healthy hedge. It is surprising how quickly the new hedge grows.

Once a hedge has been laid, regular trimming will keep it in good order for up to 5 years when it may then need some relaying.

Hedges can only be laid in winter before birds begin nesting. If it is done in January or February then berries and nuts will be available for birds and animals through the late autumn and early winter.

There are many metres of hedge in the nature reserve to be restored. Much of the hedging has not been managed in recent times resulting in them growing upwards and outwards with thin and straggly growth.

### **'Lollipop' hedges**

You may have seen hedges that have been cut flat along their top and sides with a mechanical cutter instead of being laid. Although quicker, this is not a good way to create and maintain a healthy hedge. Cutting a hedge back to the same height each year in this way produces fewer flowers, fruits and berries.

It results in top growth but little growth at their base. Their appearance has given them the name 'lollipop'.

### **Things for you to do**

When you are next out in the countryside take a look at a hedge. Can you see if the hedge has been 'laid'.

Can you see where new shoots have grown from the laid branches?

The hedge should have good growth from its base. Look for a hedge that has been cut with a mechanical cutter. It will probably not have a good base and have fewer plants growing there.