Proposed Hedgerow Manifesto for Monmouthshire

Monmouthshire's roadside hedges are of immense natural value: many of them are ancient boundaries that have been known for generations. They provide an increasingly important refuge and food for an abundance of wildlife, and an important part of the natural landscape that we all enjoy.

Hedges provide links between areas of vegetation: these are corridors for wildlife, critical for the movement of animals and the continuation of viable populations.

Hedgerows deserve to be cherished and carefully maintained.

Hedges are important

- They guard against soil erosion by rain and in times of flood.
- They offer shade for farm animals.
- They give protection from the wind.
- They provide food for insects, birds and small mammals, and a safe haven for them to live.
- They are valuable wildlife corridors, linking areas of vegetation.
- Bats use hedges to move between sites.
- They form a treasured part of our landscape where we live and work, and are appreciated and enjoyed by many people.
- They are part of our cultural history - hedges in Monmouthshire are commonly over 500 years old, providing boundaries to land, fields, parishes and gardens.

Plants that are characteristic of Monmouthshire hedgerows include alder, ash, bramble, dogwood, elder, elm, field maple, hawthorn, holly, honeysuckle, small leaved lime and spindle berry. Their flowers provide nectar and pollen that feed insects, while their fruits, berries, seeds and nuts provide food for birds and mammals throughout the winter. Dried stems are

important for overwintering insects, while the hedges themselves provide crucial cover and shelter for wildlife, and are important roosting places for birds.

According to the RSPB, hedges may now support up to 80% of our woodland birds, 50% of our mammals and 30% of our butterflies.

Well-managed hedgerows benefit farmers, land owners and gardeners

1. Increased populations of insect pollinators to improve yields of insect pollinated crops
2. Increased populations of natural predators
3. Increased protection of resources, assisting soil conservation and reducing run-off
4. Diversification of income, including agri-environment payments.

In 2014 Monmouthshire County Council adopted a Pollinator Policy, to care for insect pollinator populations. In this Hedgerow Manifesto we describe best practise that we hope will be widely adopted by Monmouthshire's Council, farmers, landowners and gardeners who have responsiblity for maintaining Monmouthshire's hedgerows and roadside trees.

Proposed regime

Bee Friendly Monmouthshire recommends that hedges be trimmed only in January and February of every third year. This will enable the hedges to provide maximum wildlife value while also maintaining the shape and integrity of the hedge.

This may be summarised more simply:

Never trim hedgerows when they are green, when they contain flowers for insects, or food for birds.

Maintenance of hedges

Left alone, a hedgerow will continue to grow upwards and outwards and will eventually become a line of trees. Where farmers keep cattle or sheep, a good hedge is essential, for although wire fences are more readily erected, they do not provide shelter like a hedge. Techniques for managing hedges include laying, trimming and coppicing - described below.

Hedges flower better when they are cut less often because most of the trees and shrubs in hedgerows cannot flower on stems that have grown for less than one year. Therefore cutting hedges every year means that wildlife is deprived of flowers, nuts and berries.

Our recommendation for best practise is hedge cutting on a three year rotation. This will allow hedgerow shrubs to flower and to produce maximum fruit and seeds, while it will also enable the hedge's good shape and density to be maintained.

It is important also not to trim all the hedges in an area in the same year. Therefore cut adjacent lengths of hedge in different years, or do not trim hedges on both sides of a road in the same year.

Time of year

Hedges must never be cut during the bird-nesting season March-August (see below). Outside this season hedges should be cut only when they contain **neither flowers for insects nor food for birds.** In practise this means January or February, when all seeds and berries have been eaten and before nesting begins.

Exceptions

Exceptions are the road-facing sides of hedges that need to be trimmed for safety reasons.
Also if the hedge contains very fast growing species such as ash, sycamore or willow, it may need more frequent cutting - in this case, cut the sides of a hedge every year - but cut the top only every third year, and only in January or February.

Machinery

Most hedgerows in Monmouthshire are trimmed with tractor-mounted hedge-cutting flails. This mechanised cutting can achieve satisfactory results if done correctly i.e. cutting twigs rather than major stems. Trimming should follow the direction of any previous hedge laying to minimise damage to the wood. The flail trimmer is designed to cut through material up to a maximum of 2cm thick. When it is used on thicker stems the result is damaged, split stems that are susceptible to fungal diseases, particularly if this is repeated annually. A healthy hedge can normally recover well from severe cutting; however repeated, over-zealous cutting will gradually cause a hedge to die off. A tractor-mounted circular saw should be used where thicker growth needs to be cut.

Shape

The minimum height for a hedge is two metres. The wider and denser the hedge, the better. A thick hedge provides the integrity needed by the farmer, as well as nest sites for birds and small mammals. Ideally it should be fenced

on the field side if there are grazing stock in the field. An 'A' shaped hedge is of most benefit, providing good shelter, stock-proofing and wildlife value. This allows a wide base to be developed and if the top is not trimmed, then hedgerow trees can develop. A wide, dense hedge is of greatest value for wildlife. Some birds are ground-nesting, for example partridges need good cover at the base of a hedge for nesting.

Restoration of hedges

As hedges grow, they gradually become more tree-like and less bush-like; gaps tend to appear lower down and the hedge ceases to provide an effective barrier. Ideally the hedge should be allowed to grow sufficiently tall so that it can be laid, both to fill in the gaps and to ensure the long term viability of the hedge by promoting vigorous regrowth from the base of the hedge.

Nesting birds

Birds' main nesting time is 1 March to 31 August. It is very difficult to know when birds are nesting in a hedge, in some years many species are still nesting well into August. If nesting birds are present, any work which might harm them or their nests is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Hedge laying

Hedge laying is a country craft which has been practiced for centuries and remains relevant today because there is no machine which can replicate the work of the hedge-layer. Cattle and horses lean against hedges and make gaps, while sheep push through hedge bases. The cut stems are bent over at an angle, and prevent sheep pushing through, while the stakes driven into the hedge, and the binding along the top, make the fence strong to resist the weight of cattle or horses.

Throughout the UK there are different styles of hedge laying - the Monmouthshire practise is to have a double brush hedge with stakes driven in at an angle of 35°, 30 inches apart. Dead wood is used inside the hedge to protect the regrowth from being browsed by stock. The dead wood and live pleachers (layed stems) are bound down the centre line, with the top and side of the hedge being trimmed. Laying the hedge tidies it and encourages the shrubs to regenerate, keeping the hedge bushy and healthy. Regular trimming will keep the hedge in good order for up to fifty years, when it may be appropriate to lay the hedge again, or even to coppice it.

Coppicing

Coppicing a hedge i.e. cutting it off completely just above ground level is a valid way of restoring hedges where the temporary loss of the hedge is acceptable. Coppicing will often take place in conjunction with the planting up of any gaps in the hedge and is the best treatment for very overgrown hedges. Where hedges are to be coppiced, sections should be done over years so that there is no long period with them all cut.

Boundary trees

Large trees within hedges are known as boundary trees, and these support considerable biodiversity. There should be no cultivation or weed control within three metres of the base of the tree, and cutting should be limited to work essential to the safety of people or livestock. Where feasible, fallen branches should be left inside the hedge to help conserve dead wood that supports invertebrates and fungi. If they must be chipped, the chippings should not be spread over banks or verges. This practise does not favour wild flora.

Saplings in hedgerows

Saplings that are suitably situated to grow into a boundary trees should be retained - as they grow they provide song-posts for birds. Mechanical hedge cutting can reduce the number of saplings so take care to protect from trimming by marking in a way that can be seen from the tractor cab.

Filling gaps in hedges

When planting to fill gaps in hedges use native plants of locally common species. In Monmouthshire these include ash, blackthorn crab apple, dog rose, dogwood field maple, hawthorn, hazel, holly, oak, small-leaved lime and spindle berry. When planting within an existing hedge, to give the new plant a good start, thoroughly clear the gap of vegetation and cut the hedge plants on either side back to healthy growth. Do this in winter when the ground is not frozen between November and March. Keep your new plants free of competitive weeds and water them often until they are well established.

One plant which may be cut out of a hedge is elder since it grows faster than all other hedgerow plants and crowds them out. It is also very brittle and less use within a hedge needed to provide a stockproof barrier.

Hedgerow plan

It is best to draw up a simple plan of hedges showing the three-year trimming rotation, to share with hedge-trimming contractors.

Further information

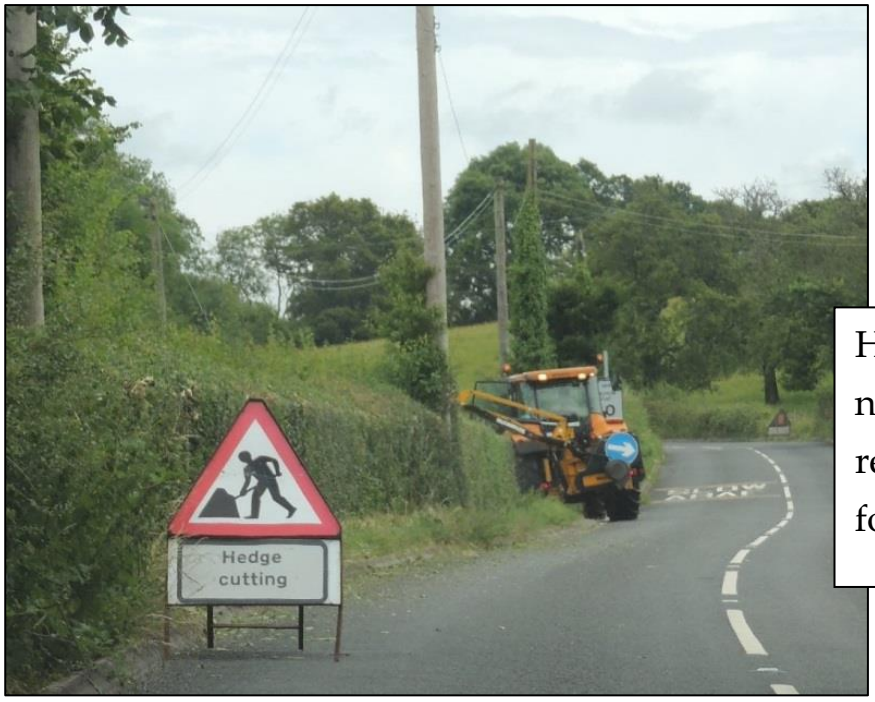
Bee Friendly Monmouthshire	www.beefriendlymonmouthshire.org
Bees *for* Development	www.beesfordevelopment.org
Gwent Wildlife Trust	www.gwentwildlife.org

Hedgerow Maintenance by St Briavels, Hewelsfield & Brockweir Parish Grasslands Project

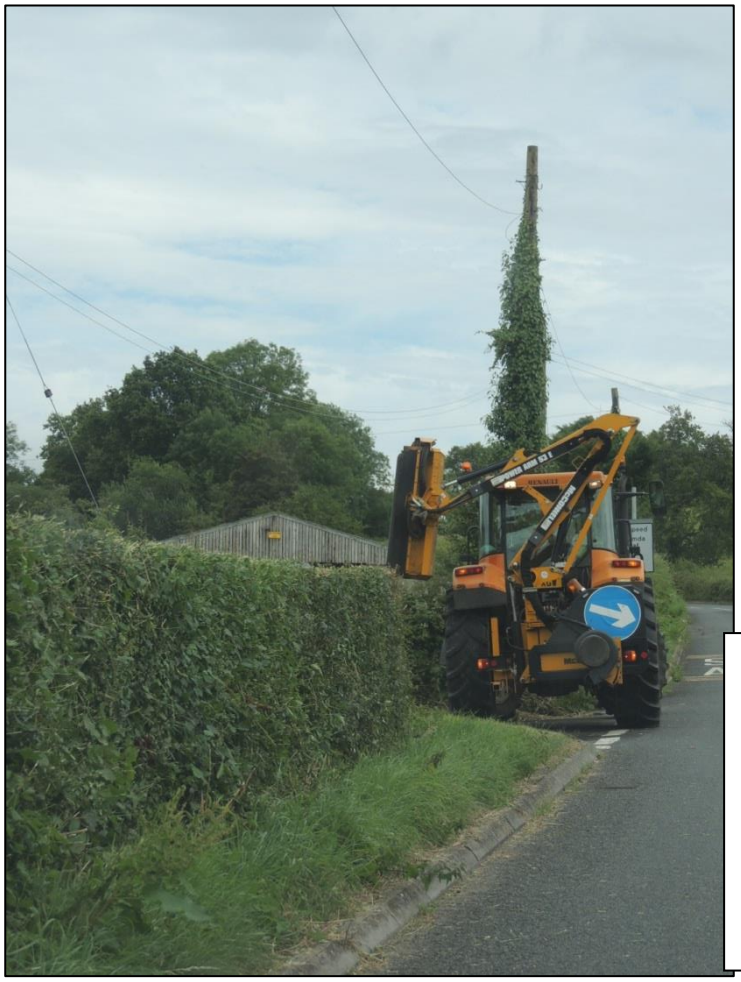
Monmouthshire County Council. Phone the Council on 01633 644644 if you see illegal hedge cutting - i.e. after 1 March or before 1 September. Find your local councillor here: www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/home/local-democracy-and-councillors/people-at-the-council/councillors

Monmouthshire Meadows	www.monmouthshiremeadows.org.uk
National Hedgelaying Society	www.hedgelaying.org.uk
Hedgelayer blog	www.hedgelayer.freeserve.co.uk

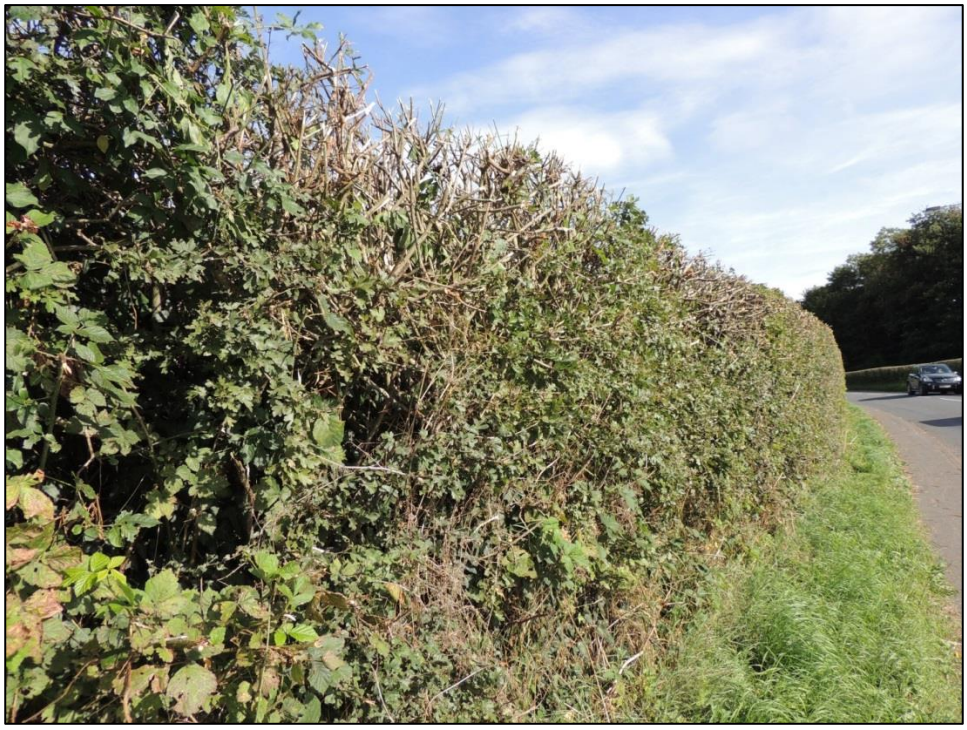
This hedge needs restoration. It was once a laid hedge but now has many gaps and is of little value for stock enclosure or wildlife. It can be restored by layering, by coppicing and/or by planting in the gaps.



Hedge cutting in July harms nesting birds and greatly reduces value for wildlife for the rest of the year.



This type of hedge cutting in July harms nesting birds and greatly reduces value for wildlife for the rest of the year.



Cutting hedgerows in early September removes late flowers and the season's fruits, seeds and berries that sustain wildlife through autumn

Hedgerow cutting in early September removes late flowers and the autumn berries that support wildlife. Many insects are nesting inside hollow stems and twigs - a good reason not to tidy hedges too much.

This hedgerow has been cut in early September - this action has removed late flowers and the autumn berries that would have supported wildlife. Many insects need hollow grass stems and twigs for overwintering

Hedgerow brambles provide flowers and food for insects, birds and small mammals - from early May until late October.

Hedgerow berries support populations of birds and small mammals.

This text has been prepared for **Bee Friendly Monmouthshire** by Nicola Bradbear and Monica Barlow of **Bees for Development**, and Stephanie Tyler of **Monmouthshire Meadows**.