

Hedgerow Heaven

Historic boundaries and wildlife corridors - Bridget Flanagan celebrates our important hedgerows

Cambridgeshire, overall, is not famous for its hedgerows. In the Fens and the east of the county many fields are of vast acreage. The modern machinery used to work this land for grain and other food crops is large for efficiency and economy. Consequently the pre-WWII landscape of patchworks of little fields bordered by hedges, as evidenced in aerial photos and OS maps, is long gone. Reality forces us to outweigh nostalgia as we recognise that domestic food production is ever more essential when global networks and supply chains are ruptured by such horrors as the war in Ukraine.

But away from the intensive arable lands - as we come to the Great Ouse Valley and further west in the county – we find hedges a-plenty. Just north of Alconbury, along the B1090, there is an ancient hedgerow marking a parish boundary. This is ‘Judith’s Hedge’, believed to be the oldest recorded hedge in England at over 900 years old. (Judith was the niece of William the Conqueror and owned nearby Monks Wood). Botanists have developed theories about how a hedge can be dated by counting the variety of species, but they find it difficult to agree one formula for all hedges across the country. And also, the more they look, the more they find older and older hedges.

Farmers have always planted hedges as boundaries and enclosures. And, the thornier the better, which is why the most common hedgerow species are Hawthorn, Dog Rose, Blackthorn and Bramble. But in addition to keeping cattle out or sheep in, these hedges offer a rich harvest – hips and haws for the birds, and bramble berries and sloes for our jams, pies and gin. And a feast for the eyes with white Blackthorn blossom against bare branches in March, then huge clouds of May blossom and the lovely wild roses.

Hedges are linear woods and their structure allows great biodiversity. Birds hide their nests in the safety of dense twigs. Rabbits, foxes, mice and badgers burrow around the roots and travel the corridors of shelter. Invertebrates and insects live and feed here. Celandines, Primroses, Cow Parsley, Daisies, Dandelions, and so many more, flower alongside. Hedges are an intrinsic and essential part of our countryside and landscape – visually, naturally, historically and environmentally: they really do hold it all together.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.

For more information about the Trust please visit

www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk





At this time of year stunning white Blackthorn blossom highlights our mature hedgerows making them easy to spot. Photograph by Bridget Flanagan