

THE HUNDRED PARISHES SOCIETY

www.hundredparishes.org.uk

Hedges have long been a significant feature of our landscapes. They reduce erosion and offer shelter and forage for livestock and wildlife. Over the centuries, nuts, berries, and herbs from the hedgerows have provided food and natural remedies too. Woody material cut from pollarded hedgerow ash, elm and oak trees was once used as fuel or turned into useful objects.

Hedges go back a long way: Roman farmers favoured a living hedge to mark out boundaries. Their value was recognised in 1567 guidance from the court at Felsted: “Any persons breaking any hedge or stealing wood be put next Sunday or holiday in the stocks for 2 hours at the least”.

50% of hedges have been lost since the late 1940s as farmers enlarged fields so bigger machines could operate, with the occasional forlorn oak tree as a faint reminder of a lost hedge. The former layout of hedges in any parish can be seen in 19th century tithe maps; comparison with current aerial maps will demonstrate what has been lost. The consequent loss of habitat is often blamed for reduction in species and biodiversity.

Today, hedges are again valued as wildlife corridors and as a way to lock up carbon. There are encouraging signs of new hedgerow planting, for example in Saffron Walden and beside the B1051 between Broxted and Thaxted.

This summer, blackberry blossom has been much in evidence in the hedgerows so Autumn walkers may be in for a treat. Look out also for sloes that can be turned into delicious sloe gin. Many of our footpaths follow field edges beside hedgerows. If you are not yet familiar with the Society's walk routes, please download one from our website – there are many to choose from and they range from 1 mile upwards.

Tricia Moxey, Trustee