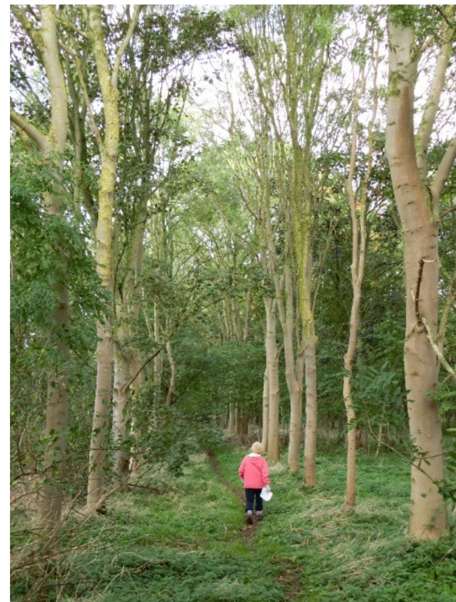
The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about TREES and HEDGEROWS

This article refers to just a few species of tree and shrub. It will be expanded over time. We would welcome any contributions of photos or text.

Ash trees

The underlying geology of an area gives the backbone to its landscape, whilst the soils influence what grows there. The local calcareous soils suit Ash trees which are a major component of our woods, coppices, hedges and waysides. Those shown here stand beside the Turpin Trail in Hempstead. The ash tree's leaves make it easy to identify.



Ash is a host to a number of creatures, some of which are specific to this tree species.

Ash produces a useful wood which burns readily and makes excellent handles for tools. Because of its flexibility, ash is also a component of the structures on which church bells are hung and is therefore important in upholding the peculiarly English tradition of change-ringing.

Sadly, ash trees are under attack from a virulent disease called Ash Dieback. This was first noted in the UK in 2012 on imported trees and is now widespread. The disease is caused by a fungus which spreads throughout the tissues of the tree interfering with the transport of water, causing stress and death. Its symptoms are more readily observed in younger trees as the foliage withers and turns black as it dies; beneath the bark the infected tissue is black. In mature trees the annual growth rate is minimal as the trees struggle to combat the damaging effect of the fungus. At the moment, all we can do is wait as we do not know how quickly these trees may die, but the potential loss of so many ash trees will have a major impact on the appearance of our landscape.

The Woodland Trust expects 80% of the country's ash trees will be lost.

Evergreen trees

England's native evergreen trees include the Holly, Scots Pine, Yew and Juniper. During the chillier winter months these can provide a welcome leafy contrast to the stark silhouettes of the deciduous trees which have shed their leaves. The red berries of the Holly contrast with its dark prickly leaves and are carried on the female trees. They provide useful food for hungry birds at the turn of the year.

The sombre needle-like foliage of the Yew covers a red trunk that can become deeply furrowed with age. The branches of a female Yew will be studded with many red arils, cup-like berries, each surrounding a green seed. The fleshy arils attract birds and the green poisonous seeds inside pass through the bird's digestive system to germinate elsewhere. The Yew's foliage is toxic, so they are not welcome in areas where livestock could browse them. Scots Pine needles are acidic and can damage thatched roofs. Examples of fruits are shown below: holly on the left and yew on the right.

Yews are exceptionally long-lived and are often associated with ancient sacred sites. Old churches and their surrounding burial grounds are a significant feature of the Hundred Parishes and the majority contain one or more venerable Yew trees. Since the Bronze Age, Yew has been the favoured wood from which to make longbows. They were a key weapon of the English army during the Middle Ages, particularly in battles during the Hundred Years War.

Determining the age of such trees is difficult as they grow slowly or may be hollow, but it is possible that some may pre-date the adjacent building. For example, the large Yew beside Thorley Church, shown here, is considered older than the 13th-century building.

In the 18th century, clipped Yew hedges were a feature of formal gardens surrounding fine houses. They were frequently included in 19th-century cemetery plantings, often alongside weeping trees which symbolized grief. Bridge End Gardens in Saffron Walden has clipped Yews in the Dutch garden. Today there is a vogue for intricately clipped Yews in tubs to add a formal note in small town gardens or pedestrianized urban sites, but they lack the status of our mature Yews.

In the quieter corners of most parishes, the Yew stands as a symbol of longevity, ready to sprout as the days lengthen with the arrival of the New Year.

Hedgerows

Hedgerows are a significant feature of our agricultural landscape and were planted in the past as boundaries. They also 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 recognized 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".

Thorny blackthorn and hawthorn made a stock-proof barrier, with hazel, holly and spindle colonising later. Ash, elm, field maple, hornbeam and oak trees were integrated into such hedges and these nurtured specimens were managed as pollards, being cut off at head height on a regular cycle. In 1778 it was recorded that 85 percent of the hedgerow trees in Barwick in the parish of Standon were pollards, so these would have stuck up at regular intervals above the hedges.

Some of the cut material was used as leafy hay for winter feed for livestock. Once the nutritious leafy branches of ash or elm had been eaten, the twiggy leftovers became excellent dry kindling. Larger poles were used for fencing, building repairs, handles or fuel. Timber trees in hedges were usually felled after about 50 years growth. Oaks provided structural material; elms became floorboards, coffins and especially weatherboarding (where it can be identified by its distinctive wavy grain).

Historic surveys of the numbers, species and value of trees on many estates are lodged in record offices. Oak, ash and elm trees were an essential part of the local economy.

Today, the situation is very different with the significant loss of hedgerows and the trees within them.

50% of hedges were lost between the late 1940s and early 21st century as farmers enlarged fields so bigger machines could operate, with the occasional forlorn oak tree as a feint 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.

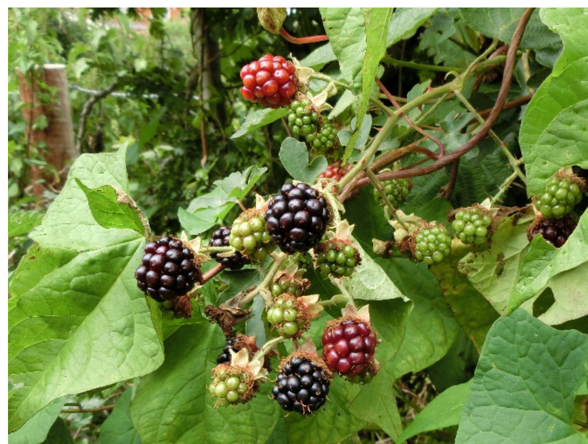
Most surviving trees are old oaks or ash, growing as uncut pollards with spreading crowns. Any mature elms are extremely rare after the ravages of Dutch Elm Disease which spread through the UK between 1967 and 1990.

Today, hedges are again valued as wildlife corridors and as a way to lock up carbon. There are encouraging signs of new hedgerow planting.

Many of our footpaths follow field edges beside hedgerows. In summer, blackberry blossom is often in evidence – this bush attracted a gatekeeper butterfly.

If the weather conditions are right, autumn walkers may be in for a treat. The weather pattern also affects the development of sloes on blackthorn hedges. If the weather is just right, these blue berries can develop in abundance and be picked in the autumn and turned into delicious sloe gin. Autumn hedgerows may also yield plums and gages.

Pictured below, on the left are sloes, apples and rose hips; on the right blackberries.



If you go out walking in the autumn, consider taking a bag or container in case the tempting fruit in the hedgerow is too good to resist – but watch out for wasps who also like ripe fruit !

Please see our separate article on Woodland.

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