

SLAGging the Boundaries of Clifford

This highly interesting and revealing talk was given by Barry Wright and was a report on work he did after his interest was aroused by the Walking the Boundaries event of 2009. Barry has started work in Clifford by studying two boundary hedges, and presented evidence suggesting how the individual species came to be present and drew conclusions about when they arrived.

Barry's new approach of SLAGging is the basis of work towards a PhD that he is doing at Sheffield Hallam University. The name stands for Species, Location, Abundance and Grouping. These are the aspects considered in interpreting the results of his new HEDGES technique, which stands for Hedgerow Ecological Description Grading and Evaluation System.

The first academic work relating the number of species in a hedge to the age of the hedge was done in the 1970s and resulted in the Hooper Rule for Hedgerow dating. This suggests that the number of species that can be found in a 30 metre (~100 feet) length section of hedge increases by one every hundred year. But who is it that comes along on the 100th anniversary and sneaks another plant type into the hedge? This is plainly a loose basis on which to work, as it depends (amongst other things) on how many types of plant were included in the original hedge!

The other generally-accepted basis for assessing hedgerow importance appears in the Hedgerows Regulations and the Hedgerow Survey Handbook, which state that the section of hedge to be studied is the second 30 metres from the end, which is to say: skip the first 30 metres but looking at the next 30 metres tells you all about the whole hedge. This might be acceptable to a statistician, but a historian would want to look at the whole hedge and find all the information it offers. The Hedgerow Regulations define the rules applied when a farmer (or developer) applies to remove a hedge, so we may have an interest in getting more accurate results than this supplies.

Barry describes these 30-metre studies as a Level 1 survey. Level 2 for Barry would be a walking survey of the whole length of a hedge, noting what species were seen. But the level 3 survey is Barry's new technique and involves studying every plant in the whole length of the hedge, usually splitting it into 4-metre sections and recording every plant type found – shrubs and would-be trees in the hedge, wildflowers, etc in the hedge bottom and full-size trees as well.

Many of the trees he noted in the hedges he studied have been there a long time, as they are marked on the 1909 Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 1:2500 map. It is safe to assume that the hedge is at least as old as the tree in it.

Barry usually starts with Parish Boundary hedges as these are likely to be the oldest hedges around; then he moves on to hedges identified by local people as being boundaries of the oldest fields.

Barry showed us slides of his results on two hedges – the boundary line next to the path that leaves Bramham Road at Bramham Primary School

(sometimes known as Gypsy Lane), and the footpath the far side of the new Local Access Road towards Collingham, which is inspiringly known as Clifford Footpath No 2.

The hedge varieties that Barry found, in order of popularity, are: Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Hazel, Dogwood, Holly, Ivy, Spindle, Guelder Rose, Barberry, Spurge Laurel and Grey Willow. In the ground flora he found Ramsons, Bluebell, Lords & Ladies and Dog's Mercury. The maps Barry produced showed the locations of each species, the number of plants of that type and whether they were spread-out individuals or clumps. Clifford Local History Group now has a set of Barry's prints.

Comparing the accuracy of the various types of survey on the first part of the hedge beyond the Local Access Road, average Hooper Rule value for the whole length of the hedge was 6.2 (indicating that it is 620 years old); the Hedgerows Regulations 5.6 and the Hedgerow Survey Handbook rules gave an answer of 6 species. Barry found 12 species in that hedge. In the other hedge the next section, Hooper Rule gives 5.2 species (400 years), the Hedgerow Regulations 5.6 species; the Hedgerow Survey Handbook 6 or 5 species (depending which end you surveyed) but Barry found 12 species.

Barry's history is as a plant specialist, and he knows a lot about the rate at which different plants spread. This is controlled by the various methods by which plant types move – seeds falling from flowers or being carried by animals, etc. He found lengths of dense holly in some places, and estimated that it would have taken about 1000 years for a single plant to have spread so far.

Similarly he found spindle bushes in some places, and asserted that this also indicated that the hedge is at least 1000 years old. Guelder Rose was also present in one place, and this is another indicator of great age.

Also he found Barberry in one place. This is very rare in Yorkshire. It is thought to have been introduced since Roman times, but systematically removed in the 1800s as it was found to harbour black rust which affects wheat.

In general Barry found many more species present than any of the other techniques discovered. Also Barry concluded that parts of these two hedges are "ancient" (which in this context means pre-Conquest). This fits with the maps we already have which show the township boundary to have kept the same shape since before the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Barry has only studied two hedges, somewhere around a third or a quarter of the whole length of Clifford Parish boundary. Anyone interested in helping survey the rest of the parish boundary hedges should contact Liz Pennington, Secretary of Clifford Local History Group (☎ 845575).