

## **“An Old Hedge in Lacey Green”**

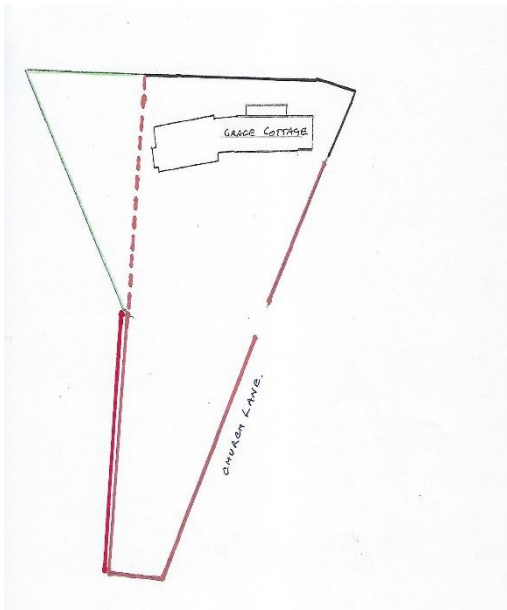
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## An old hedge in Lacey Green

### Background

Grace Cottage is in Church Lane, Lacey Green, Buckinghamshire. The original cottage was built in about 1877 and was the gardener's cottage for the estate next door where the house was built in the 1830s after the Princes Risborough Enclosures. The current size of the plot is about 2/3rds of an acre and a very large hedge surrounds a significant proportion of the garden. At its widest the hedge measures over 12ft wide down to something over 8ft at its narrowest point and it is over 8ft high in most places. Grace Cottage is in a Conservation Area and the hedge is identified as a feature that must be conserved.



This diagram shows the current cottage and land and the red line indicates the existing hedge. An additional piece of land was acquired and added to the plot in the 1970s and the new hedge around this is shown as a blue line. The dotted red line indicates where the original hedge was before it was removed after the purchase of the additional plot. The black line indicates a fence. Church Lane, which runs down the right-hand side of the diagram, is a relatively recent lane established after the [Enclosure Act of 1823](#). Until then the land within the red lines was Common Land but as part of the Enclosure Act it was allocated to two people in return for them giving up their Common Land rights. It is virtually certain therefore that the hedge that runs down

Church Lane was planted in the 1820's as was required post Enclosure Act.

This leaves the hedge on the other side of the garden, shown as a double red line and which pre-Enclosure Act would have been the dividing line between the Common Land and owned or farmed land. The hedge is large (deep) and it appears to be full of a wide variety of trees and shrubs. This raises two immediate questions:

- i) Is it an old hedge?
- ii) If so, was it planted or is it a woodland relic?

### Is it an old hedge?

To answer this question, it was necessary to refer to the research carried out by three scientists at the Monks Wood Experimental Station of Nature Conservancy in Huntingdonshire. The Monks Wood Station was set up to study, amongst other things, the effects of pesticides on wildlife. Since pesticides are used mainly on agricultural land and wild life lives largely in hedgerows on agricultural land, it made sense to start by studying hedgerows about which very little had been written at that time.

In their book *Hedges*, published in 1974, Drs Moore, Pollard and Hooper describe their work and amongst other conclusions they highlight and describe the following:

- i) Hedges were erected for a variety of reasons but including both stock (animal) retention and the clear identification of land boundaries.
- ii) During their research they concluded that of the 500 or 600 plant species about half were sufficiently frequent to be considered as possible hedgerow plants. However, a much smaller number appeared regularly in hedges.
- iii) Their research found both a wide range of species and a significant difference in the number different species, in a large selection of hedges.
- iv) It then started to become clear that old hedges may contain more species than new hedges.
- v) To test this theory, they dated, by an objective method, 227 old hedges that still existed, with the help of the County Archivists in Devon, Lincolnshire, Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire and Northants.
- vi) They then visited these hedges and counted the number of species in 30-yard strips and proved that there was a very strong correlation between number of species and age.
- vii) They devised an equation to calculate the age of the hedge relative to the number of species in a 30-yard stretch as follows:

$$\text{Age of hedge} = (110 \times \text{number of species}) + 30\text{years.}$$

- viii) However, they admitted that this was not an exact or precise science and in older hedges it could be 200 years out either way. They carried out further research in a more limited area to try to eliminate some of the variations due to climate, soil and hedge management and they produced a new equation:

$$\text{Age of Hedge} = (99 \times \text{the number of species}) - 16$$

- ix) They then concluded that as “a rule of thumb” it was possible to date hedges by assuming 100 years in age for every species type.
- x) They qualified this by adding that this was based on the assumption that the first planting of the hedge contained only one species, owners had not added other species and the hedge was not near a wood.

And so, the Hooper Rule was born. This formula became popular amongst amateur local historians in particular although many did not appear to heed the warnings that this was a “rule of thumb” only.

However, in the following 20 or 30 years, the Hooper Rule began to be examined and questioned by other scientists. Drs Barnes and Williamson reviewed more than 10 of these critiques in their book Hedgerow History. Whilst one scientist dismissed the original work in total, most were critical only of certain aspects which included the following:

- i) More than one species could have been used when the hedge was first planted.
- ii) Further species could have been added during the life of the hedge.
- iii) Woodland relic hedges may have more species than open field hedges.

- iv) The soil, climate and management can have an impact on the number of species.
- v) Trees were often planted and allowed to grow in hedges to provide wood for heating.

However, most scientists largely supported the Hooper Rule and Dr Oliver Rackham describes his views in his book *The History of the Countryside*. In essence he is largely supportive of the theory but emphasises that it is not precise and has many exceptions.

**Measuring the species in the Grace Cottage hedge.**

To do this a section of the potential old hedge was marked out for 30 yards, as recommended by Dr Hooper et al, and the species were then recorded with the help of a local tree expert. The list of species varies slightly from expert to expert but the list used was as follows:

Alder, Apple, Buckthorn, Ash, Beech, Blackthorn, Briar, Blackthorn, Broom, Buckthorn, Cherry, Cherry Plum, Dogwood, Elder, Elm, Gorse, Guelder Rose, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Hazel, Holly, Hornbeam, Lime, Oak, Scots Pine, Plum, Aspen, Poplar, Privet Wild, Rowan, Service, Spindle wood, Sycamore, Wayfaring Tree, Whitebeam, Willow and Yew.

The results were as follows:

Field Maple
Ash
Holly
Hazel
Hawthorn
Elder
Blackthorn (Sloe)
Wild Cherry
Total 8

Lesley Chapman in her book *The Living History of our Hedgerows* reports that Field Maple will only grow when the hedge is thick enough to shelter their delicate saplings and, for this reason, they will only grow if there are already at least four other species established in the hedge. She concludes that a hedge will be over 400 years old if it has significant quantities of Field Maple in it.

She goes on to explain the following:

- i) Hawthorn – if dominant then probably a new hedge. There is some Hawthorn in the Grace Cottage hedge but it is limited.
- ii) Hazel – indicator of former woodland and of the great age of the hedge. There is a significant amount of Hazel in the hedge.
- iii) Ash – usually deliberately planted.
- iv) Beech and Sycamore – usually deliberately planted. Interestingly, these were not found in the hedge. This is surprising as the surrounding woods to this day contain significant quantities of Beech. After all it was the Beech trees in the Chilterns that were the original source of wood for the High Wycombe furniture industry.

Dr Oliver Rackham also supports the suggestion that Field Maple and Hazel may also indicate the age of the hedge. He reports:

*“Maple is a less good coloniser and are rarely planted, may be the fourth or fifth species in hedges of Tudor age but are seldom found in recent hedges. Hazel is a less good natural coloniser, and is characteristic of hedges which are both pre – Tudor and have at least six other species.”*

Significant quantities of Field Maple and Hazel were found in the hedge and additionally there is a hedge bank on the field side of the hedge and this hints at a relatively old hedge.

**Using the Hooper formula this would suggest that the hedge is about 800 years old i.e. 13<sup>th</sup> Century. However, whilst theoretically possible, this appears to be extremely unlikely.**

To date there appears to be no evidence that there was anyone living in Lacey Green in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century although there is some limited evidence that Loosley Row had been identified as a hamlet.

However, using information obtained from the Historic Environment Records of the Buckingham County Council, based on a survey carried out by an architectural historian, it becomes clear that Well Cottage in Church Lane, which is next to the hedge in question, contains parts that were built in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. If this is correct then it is not unreasonable to assume that there was some agricultural or woodland activity, albeit on a small scale, in this area at the time. If this was the case then it is possible that this hedge was planted to separate woodland or a field from Common Land. Alternatively, the hedge may have been a woodland relic, meaning bushes and small trees left at the edge of the wood after the main trees had been cut down to perform the same role as the planted hedge i.e. to separate the field from Common Land.

**Therefore, a more realistic assessment suggests that the frequency of Field Maple and Hazel indicates that the hedge may be at least 400 years old and the main reason for the large number of species now identified maybe due to the woodland relic effect.**

### **Was it planted or is it a woodland relic?**

This remains a critical but unanswered question. The woodland relic supporters will argue that the quantity and type of plants and bushes are typical of a woodland relic whereas the supporters of the planted hedge will argue that the hedge is very straight and this is seldom if ever the case with a woodland relic.

To try to answer this question it may be helpful to understand the reasons why a hedge was planted or allowed to grow from woodland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It should be remembered that in those days they did not have access to cheap wire netting, barbed wire or posts. Whilst there are a multitude of potential reasons, the main ones are as follows:

1. To define the boundary of a field, wood or plot.
2. To keep animals in.
3. To keep animals out



As can be seen from this map prepared for Lord Cavendish in about 1818, the field was by then a field and not a wood and it was farmed or managed by someone called Wade. It is highly likely, although difficult to prove, that in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century this was woodland. If this was the case then why did they need a hedge? Some local residents were allowed to graze their animals on the Common Land (white in map) and it could be to stop these grazing animals from straying into the wood.

Alternatively, it could have been to stop animals in the wood escaping onto the Common Land. However, what animal could be “grazed” in a wood? The clue to the answer is in the Domesday Book where the Hundred of Princes Risborough, which included what is now Lacey Green and Loosley Row, is described as follows:

*“LAND OF THE KING”*

*Risborough was a village of Earl Harold. It always answered for 30 hides. Land for 24 ploughs; in lordship 20 hides; 4 ploughs there, 30 villagers with 12 smallholders have 20 ploughs. 3 slaves; 2 mills at 14s 8d; meadow for 7 ploughs; woodland, 1000 pigs. In total it pays £47 a year in white silver less 16d; before 1066 it paid £10 at face value. In this manor there lie and lay (the dues of) a burgess of Oxford who pays 2s; further a salt-boiler of Droitwich pays...pack loads of salt; in the same manor was and is a Freeman who holds 3 virgates; although he could sell, he nevertheless served the Sheriff.”*

Notes:

1. Earl Harold - Harold Godwinson (c. 1022 –1066), often called King Harold II, was the last crowned Anglo-Saxon King of England. Harold reigned from 6 January 1066 until his death at the Battle of Hastings in October 1066, fighting the Norman invaders led by William the Conqueror during the Norman conquest of England.
2. Hide – originally the amount of land that could be ploughed in a year using one plough with an eight-ox team. The measurement varied with soil quality and could be between 60 and 180 acres.
3. Slave - a person who was the legal property of another and was forced to obey them.
4. Virgate – a quarter of a hide.
5. Sheriff – the Crown’s deputy and, at the time, the most important executive in each county.
6. Population – the numbers do not include wives and children so the total population may have been between 100 and 200.

It can be seen from this entry in the Domesday Book that the Princes Risborough Hundred contained 1000 pigs and it is known from other documents that they were looked after by swineherds who were slaves. Pigs were often kept in clearings at the edge of the woods with

the animals allowed to wander and search for food (acorns and beech masts etc.) in sectioned areas of the woods.

Additionally, there appears to be general agreement amongst historians that the name Loosley originates from the Old English “hlose + leah”, with “hlose” meaning pig-sty and “leah” meaning woodland clearing or meadow. The origins of the use of “Row” are less clear but one possibility is that it referred to the “row” of piggeries in the lea of the woods around the side of the hill. Alternatively, it may have referred to a “row” of early cottages or hedges in the area but there is no hard evidence to support any of these.

It is possible to speculate that the animals that that were being kept in the woods at the time were pigs, hence the need for a hedge whether it was a woodland relic or a planted hedge.

This is supported by an extract from a document on the Chilterns Conservation Board web site:

*“Pigs were herded through the (Chiltern) woods in the autumn to feed on acorns and beech mast to fatten them up for slaughter. The herding of pigs in the wood was known as pannage. They would provide meat through the winter. The meat was preserved by smoking and salting. Pigs at this time resembled the Tamworth that we know today, covered in hair and with an orange look to the skin.”*

Finally, some much later evidence:



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The man in the centre is reputed to be George Floyd who was born in Lacey Green in 1866 and by 1911 had married and moved to Loosley Row where this photograph was taken. He was 45 years old at the time of the 1911 Census and as the man in the picture could be older than this it is possible that the photograph was taken in the early 1920s. The important point is that it demonstrates that pig breeding had continued in the villages and that with two pigs, this was probably not just for family consumption.

It is possible to speculate that in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century this piece of woodland was used by swineherds to enable them to fatten their pigs in the autumn.

### Conclusions:

It appears reasonably certain that this is an “old” hedge and there is evidence to suggest that it may have been erected or become a woodland relic sometime in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The purpose of the hedge is unclear but it is possible that it was intended to either prevent to pigs straying onto Common Land or to prevent grazing animals on the Common Land straying into the woodland. Highly speculative but in the absence of other evidence it is the most likely conclusion.