



OLD CORNISH HEDGING COMPETITIONS

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Cornish Hedges Library founder Robin Menneer asked retired master craftsmen about the hedging competitions which were held usually at the ploughing matches. They were widely held around Cornwall in the stone country using the native stone of the area.

Work would start around 9 - 9.30 am and finish about 4 pm. Each competitor was allocated a length of hedge side, usually eight feet long, which they began by taking down. They had to re-set the grounders, and the hedge was built to the standard five feet high to the top of the top row of stone. The number of rows depended on the size of the stone, usually between five and eight rows. Sometimes a pier was laid on the flat between each hedger's piece and the next. Most of the competitors finished, though with not much time to spare. They would not stop for lunch, but took a pasty in the hand. The last row of stone was usually put on in the last half hour, with any spare time used to dress the stones for a neater finish.

There was a class for juniors, but after three wins they had to go into the open class. One hedger told us that when he first went in for the juniors' around 1960 there would be seven or eight entrants, with perhaps twelve or fourteen in the open if there was a good turnout. Originally there was a variety of classes: the Royal Cornwall Gazette in October 1913 reported on the ploughing match and hedging contest held at Ruan High Lanes, where local Tregony men had won prizes in the Stone Open, Jack & Joan Work, Upright Work and in Casting & Rising Hedge classes.

The first prize at the hedging competitions carried a silver cup, often a handsome trophy in recognition of a great Cornish skill, and the families of men who took part still have a modest pride in the display on their sideboard. By 1970 the numbers had dropped off and the competitions finished about 1973 or '74, the last one believed to have been held at St Columb.

In the early 2000s a surprise gift arrived for the Cornish Hedges Library from the nearest branch of the Dry-stone Walling Association. One of their Mendip members had spotted an old photograph in an auction sale among a lot of other papers, some of

Cornish origin. The auctioneer would not split the lot but allowed a photocopy to be taken, and this was kindly sent down to us. What a thrill to see this rare picture of a hedging competition, taken somewhere in Cornwall in about 1890.

The picture shows the crowd watching the work of several hedgers of varying ability. Clearly the winning hedger is in the foreground, with his piece built with the stone well-sorted and laid in pitched level courses to the proper traditional curved batter. This batter is enshrined in the CHL's Code of Good Practice for Cornish Hedges, as relayed from champion hedgers still living in the 1990s with their experience and training linking directly back to 19th century hedgers. It is a fantastic stroke of luck to have this picture confirming their testimony.



There is so much of interest in this picture. At first glance it appears the contestants are building a retaining hedge, but from the position of the audience on the far side it is possibly one side of an existing hedge, perhaps partially retaining the rising ground on which the trees are growing. It may be that the bank was cut back to make a place for a new retaining hedge to be built. In a competition all the hedgers need to be on one side, able to work at their own speed without reference to an opposite number on the far side. Usually this would be achieved by taking down one side of an existing hedge at the competition site, for the competitors to rebuild.

The stone they are using here is not easy to recognise. It appears pale in colour, almost white like some granites, but much of the foreground man's stone is of thin flat form, with no real suggestion of excessive dressing of the stone showing in chips on the ground, while at the same time the scattered stone is of a more lumpy shape. Compared

to the hedger's white shirt it looks a creamy beige shade. The outlandish thought occurs, could this be feldspar, which has a fairly flat cleavage and could perhaps, despite a tendency to crumble under pressure, be split to form narrow pitchers? The further away hedgers appear to have used more lumpy pieces of stone, suggesting the winner would be the man who dressed his stone into the finer, more slender pieces. Feldspar often features in Cornish hedges especially in the metamorphic zones, but not usually much of it in proportion to the other mixed stones used. If only the location of this competition was known - an entirely white spar Cornish hedge is extremely unlikely and would be a sight worth seeing, if still in existence.

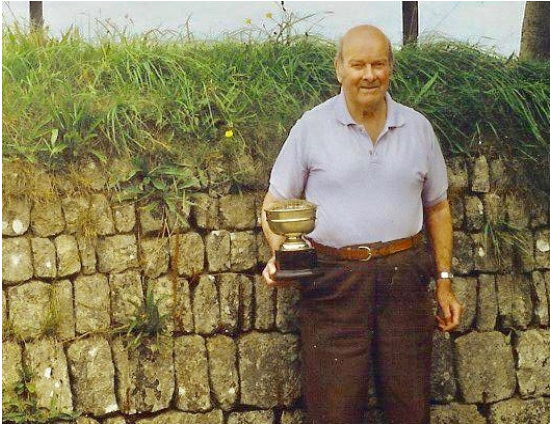
Today a Health & Safety conscious spectator might be horrified by the complete lack of protective gear, and the cavalier attitude of the unchecked crowd walking over broken stone. The fact is that Cornish hedgers always worked this way, barehanded and in everyday clothing, and accidents, serious or otherwise, were more or less unheard of. Prior to the 21st century no hedger ever wore gloves – the very idea would have been anathema, and perhaps with good reason they would declare gloves to be a cause of poor workmanship and accidents by interfering with the deft use and grip of the hand. And to be fair, they generally did keep all their fingers and toes with them for life.

Another odd fact to the modern eye is the absence of any female figure. In those days hedging, even as a spectator, was entirely the preserve of the men and boys.

Enlargement of the winning hedge shows the batter curve. With the way the hedger is standing, interestingly his shadow clearly marks the profile of the hedge. Compare with the CHL Code profile, to the specification advised by majority consensus of skilled traditional hedgers in the latter half of the 20th century, held up to a retaining hedge built around the same date as the photograph of the competition hedge. The picture has been reversed to assist the comparison. A tracing of this profile laid over the photograph of the winning hedger exactly fits the profile of his hedge.



With difficulty the hedgers pictured below were persuaded to appear with some of their trophies from the hedging competitions. In acknowledgement of the modest character of Cornish hedgers generally, it is hoped that the late Roy Neale (left) and Norman Matthews (right) would not have minded appearing here too for the historical record. Mr Matthews is holding one of his trophies in front of St Buryan cricket ground, one of the hedges he built.



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