



Blossom and Thorn, a hedgerow homage

An exploration of the extraordinary and humble hedgerows of the National Forest with artist Ruth Singer. Over the coming months, we will be meeting with hedges along the National Forest Way and sharing their stories. From this gathering of hedge learning from old maps, observation and emotional connection, Ruth will create an artwork to be shared within an ancient hedge at Timber Festival.

This project is just looking at hedges alongside or close by to the National Forest Way long distance footpath which travels through the National Forest area. Please just report hedgerows along this route.



Join me in
exploring
hedges...





Hedgestories



Blossom & Thorn is about celebrating the overlooked and under-appreciated hedges of our National Forest landscape. Woodlands and large, veteran trees tend to get a lot of our attention, while humble hedgerows are a little forgotten but can still hold amazing *hedgestories*. This is an artist project, not a botany or local history project so the aim isn't to catalogue and collect every single piece of information on every mile of hedge. I am interested in what you think of the hedges you meet on your walking journeys. Are the hedges you come across healthy and flourishing or neglected and threadbare? Are the trunks old and gnarly or young and lithe? What is the character of the hedges on the section of the National Forest Way that you walk? Are there any hedges at all? Have hedges been removed? Have hedges turned into lines of trees?

This is a guide to exploring hedges from the perspective of this project. It's not a complete guide and I don't need you to be an expert in anything before you start, except perhaps be an expert in being curious, looking and thinking about the hedges you meet. This booklet shows some examples of hedges but you will come across ones which have a different feel to these, and yours will mostly be in full leaf and / or flower, whereas I prepared this in early spring when most of the hedges were bare.

Winter hedges are best for seeing the structure, the trunks and branches and spotting where there are signs of hedge laying in recent years or decades ago. It's very hard to date hedges and a formula based on the number of species in a particular length has now been proved incorrect. For this project we don't need such hard facts, but I would like to know how many old, gnarly and once-laid old hedges you come across. Personally I love the older and gnarlier hedges with real character and long lives and it's them I want to celebrate and encourage you to notice and share.



Hedgestories



I'm also interested in lost hedges, ones where there are a couple of trees left marking a line across a field or ones hidden inside woodland where the boundary has long fallen out of use. Hedges can also hide in full view where they have become linear woodlands with mature trees and shrubs growing tall and untamed. You might like to use an old map of your area to see where hedge lines have gone. OS maps from the 1960s can be useful as so many hedges disappeared post-war. That's also when hedge-laying skills started to die out as farm labour became more expensive and machinery took over so it can be used as a very rough date for when a hedge might last have been laid.

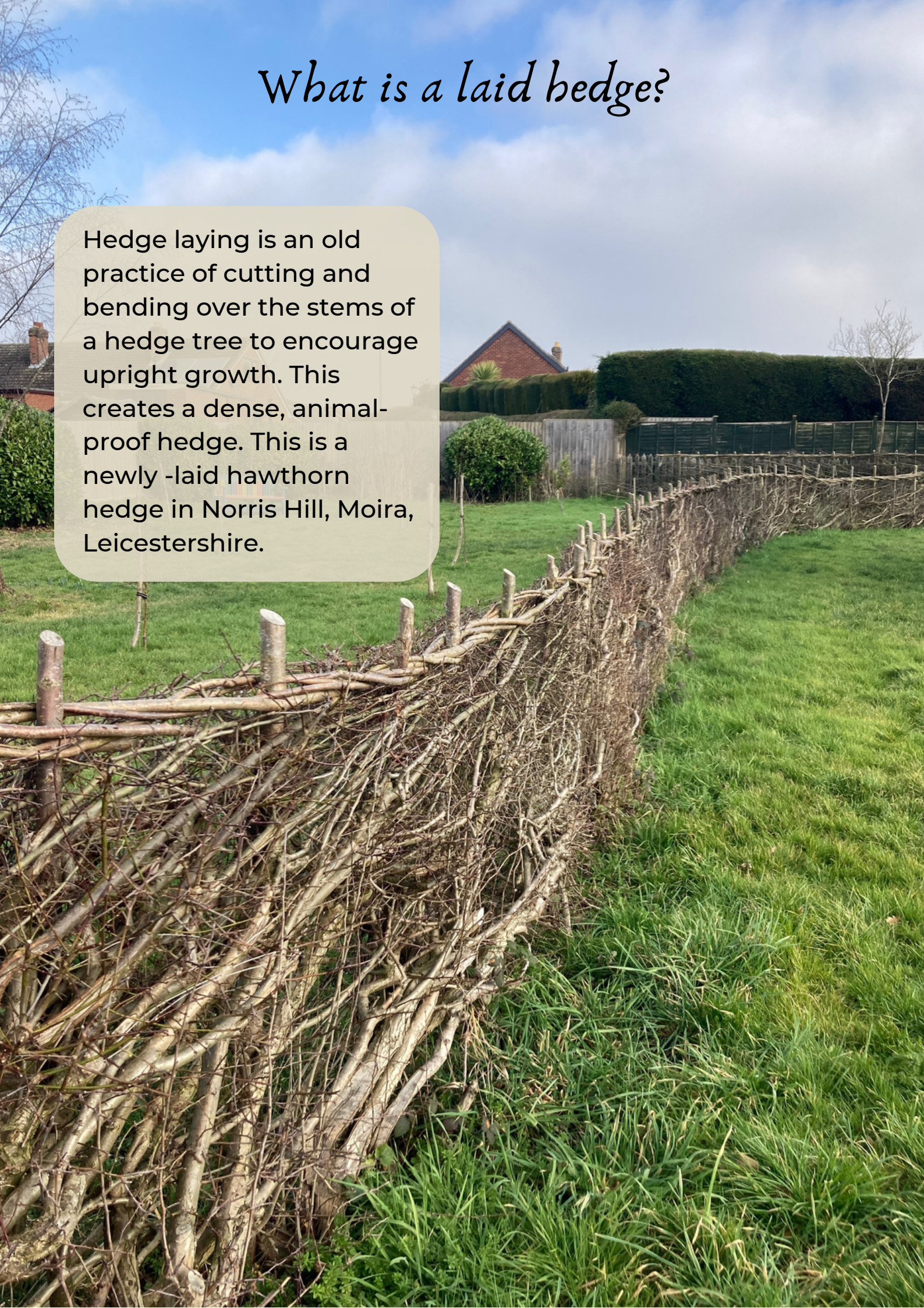
I've included most of the common hedge tree / shrub species in a short guide in this booklet. It is very basic and if you want to identify species I recommend taking a tree guide with you as well to double check. Many of the Midland's hedges are hawthorn and blackthorn, along with elderflower / berry and ash. It's not essential to identify every species you come across but it's definitely interesting to know if you find hedges that are a majority of one species or another and what species are more common in different areas of the National Forest.

There are of course other kinds of boundaries which you may see on your hedge-adventures. Dry stone walls can sometimes have hedge trees along one side. Hedges are often repaired with fencing where they have become gappy, and barbed wire has replaced the thorns of older hedges. In some places, particularly around ancient woodlands, you might see a hedge on a bank, alongside a ditch marking a very old boundary.

I hope you enjoy getting to know the hedges you find on your route and continue to explore hedges and their stories long after this project ends.

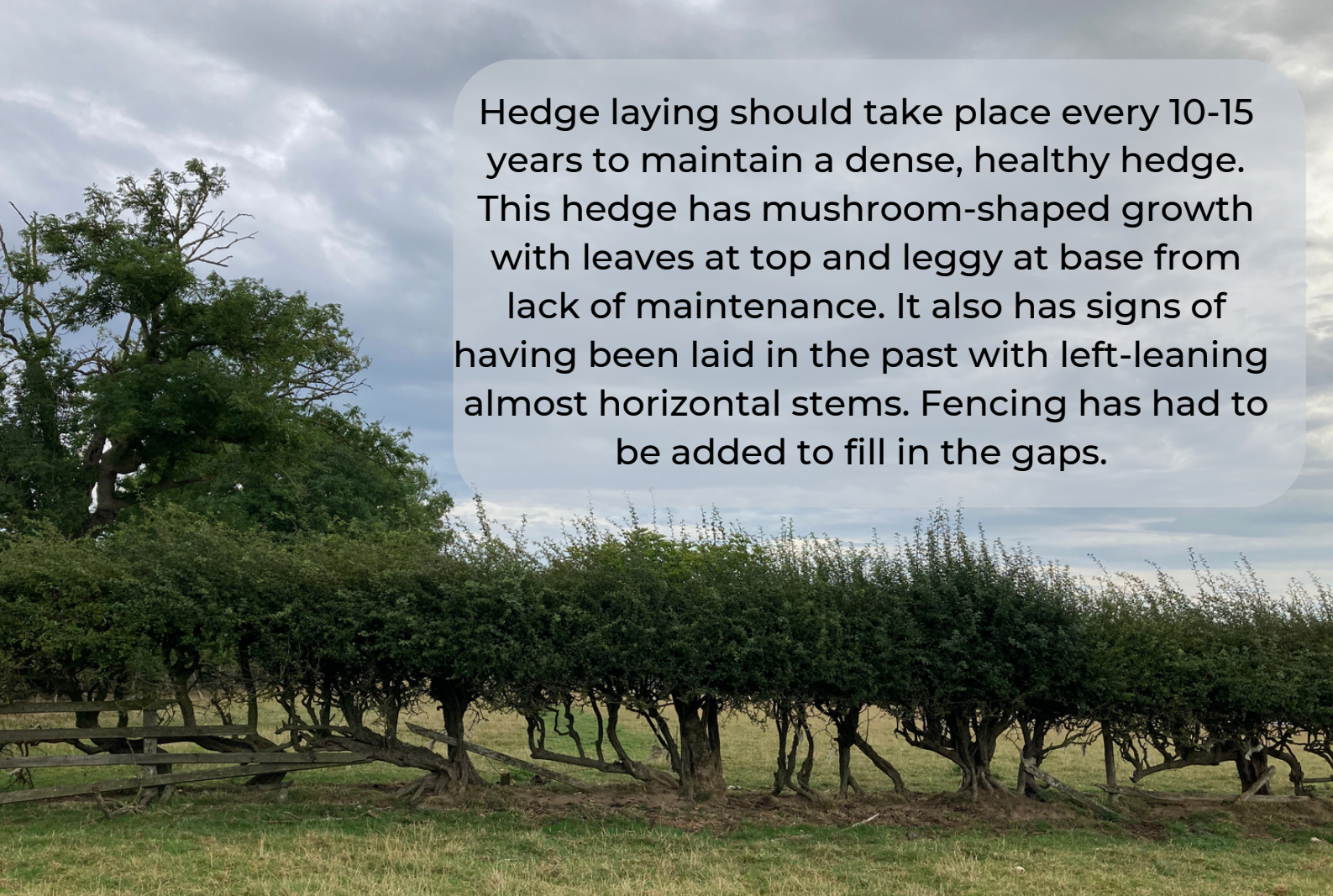
What is a laid hedge?

Hedge laying is an old practice of cutting and bending over the stems of a hedge tree to encourage upright growth. This creates a dense, animal-proof hedge. This is a newly -laid hawthorn hedge in Norris Hill, Moira, Leicestershire.






Hedge laying mostly died out in the mid 20th century and is only practiced by a handful of specialists now. Some older hedges can show signs of being laid decades ago. Characteristic signs are horizontal stems with new upright growth. Even older former hedges can turn into trees with distinctive elbows or bends in the lower trunks.



Hedge laying should take place every 10-15 years to maintain a dense, healthy hedge. This hedge has mushroom-shaped growth with leaves at top and leggy at base from lack of maintenance. It also has signs of having been laid in the past with left-leaning almost horizontal stems. Fencing has had to be added to fill in the gaps.



Blackthorn & hawthorn are very common hedge tree in the midlands. Blackthorn flowers early in the spring so will be over by now but Hawthorn is also known as May blossom and should be in bloom when this project is running. New hedges are often a single species while older ones may be more varied.

Nowadays, most hedges are maintained by mechanical cutting and hedges can get leggy at the bottom and dense on top. This elderflower tree was laid many decades ago and has horizontal branches which are now a long way off the ground, leaving gaps at the base.





This is a very overgrown hedge which is turning back into trees because it has not been trimmed or laid.

Newly planted hedges need trimming to keep them as hedges or they quickly turn into a row of trees like this one.





This recently-planted hawthorn hedge has been trimmed to create a good hedge shape. You can often spot a new hedge from the tree guards left behind protecting the young trees

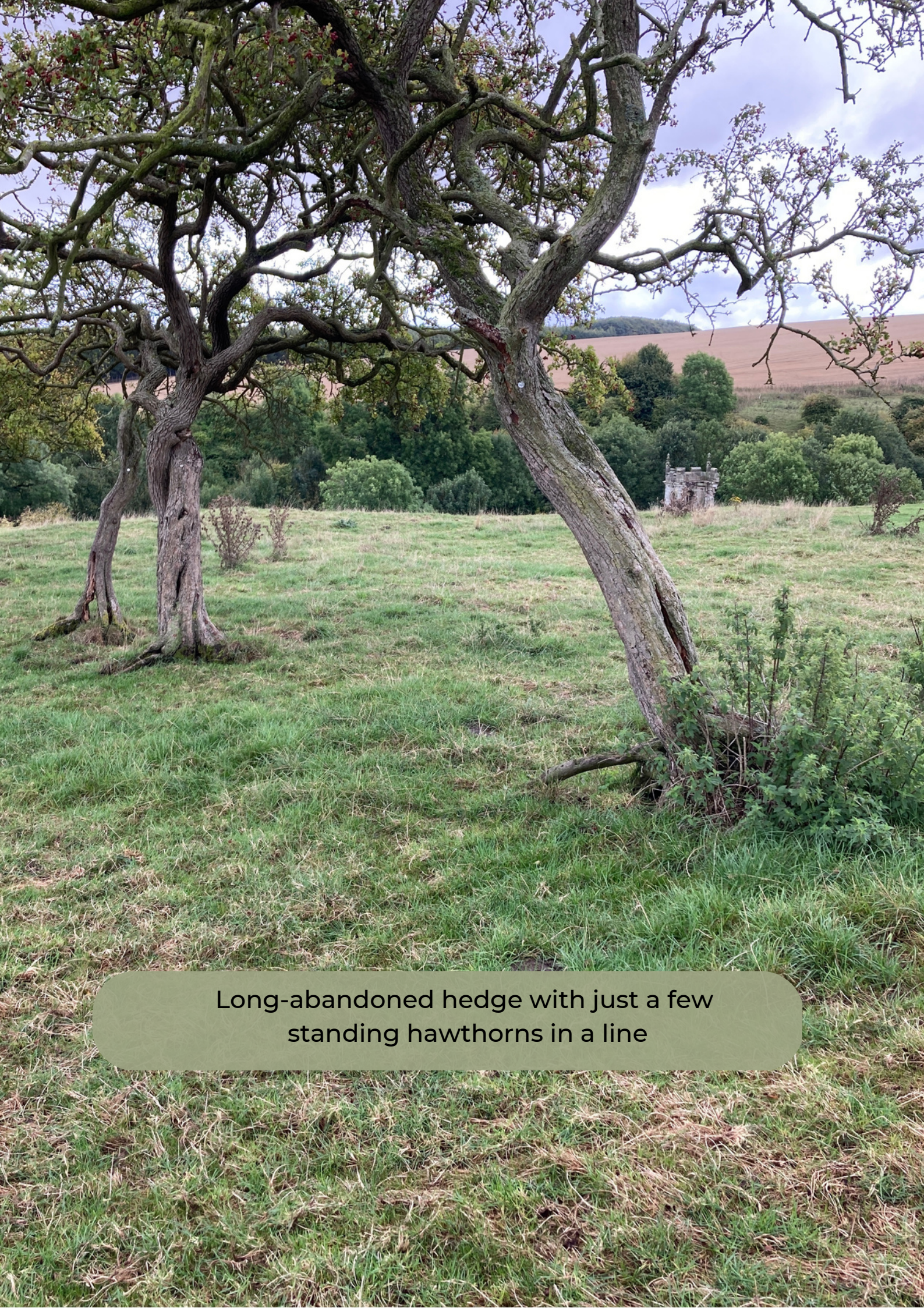


Gappy and poorly maintained hedge with leggy growth and bushy tops





Gnarly old ash tree in a hedge line which was probably laid and then abandoned a long time ago



Long-abandoned hedge with just a few
standing hawthorns in a line

Newly laid hawthorn hedge
in the National Forest






Once a hedge,
now grown into
mature trees
shrubs



Dense, trimmed hedges on both sides with lots of undergrowth between path and hedge base - shown in spring after winter trimming (above left) and late summer growth (right)





Older hedges often have standing single trees along their line. This is an ash tree. Oaks are also very common hedge trees.



A large tree standing alone in a field is often a remnant of a lost hedgerow. You might see a few in a line or a trace of the old hedgerow joining others



Hedge laid in the last 10 years and almost ready to be laid again



Over-trimmed ash hedge creating 'knuckles' in the stems by repeated cutting in the same place / same height

Tree, shrub and plant species found in hedges



Ash. Common hedge shrub and also common as a standing tree in a hedgerow



Oak. More often appears as a standing tree in a hedgerow.



Beech. Not that common in a hedge but sometimes as a standing tree



Apple / crab apple. Various fruit bushes / trees can be hard to identify when not in flower or fruit.



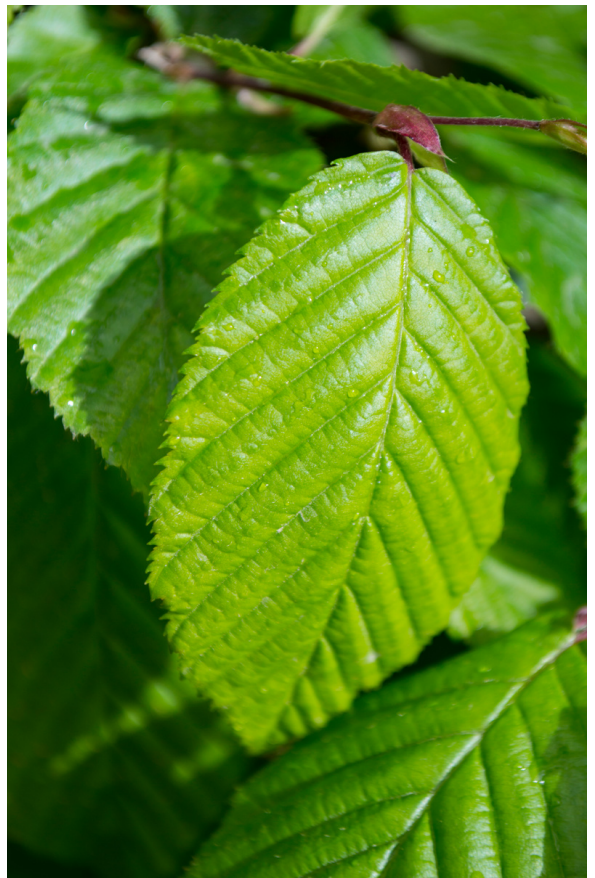
Hornbeam sometimes in hedges



Field maple. Common in hedges. Leaves turn sunshine yellow in autumn but are quite modest in Spring/ summer



Holly



Elm appears in some hedges but can be hard to identify.



Spindleberry (berries might not be out yet)



Blackthorn / sloe. Blossom is likely to be over by now and sloes just starting to form (like small green olives). Distinctive long dark thorns



Dogwood with red stems. Has white flowers which may be in blossom at the moment



Elderflower / berry. It should be flowering at the time of this project



Hawthorn / May blossom. It should be flowering in May. You won't see berries, the image above is to help with leaf ID



Hazel. Catkins probably over and nuts may not be visible yet



Privet - common as a garden hedge plant and sometimes seen in mixed hedges. White flowers may be seen this time of year.



Wild or dog rose, often pink as well as white. Likely to be flowering in hedges in May / June



Honeysuckle is a common climber rambling through hedges and flowering in the early summer

Things to look for

Where is the hedge you are looking at, is it alongside the path or across a field? How many different sections of hedge did you find?

Hedge features to look out for

Trimmed low (you can see over)

Trimmed high (can't easily see over)

Untrimmed and gone wild but still quite hedge-like

Continuous and dense

Fragmented / with gaps

A line of young trees that hasn't been trimmed into a hedge

Recently planted and trimmed into a hedge

Signs of being laid a long time ago or recently

Mushroom-shaped with bushy growth at the top

Thick trunks / stems at the base

Standard (large, older) trees along the hedgerow

Signs of a lost hedge like fragments and lone trees across a field



What species could you identify? Which was most common along the hedge?

What (if anything) was in flower?

Did you see birds in and around the hedge?



What do you think about the hedges you have seen? Do they seem healthy and well-cared for or overgrown and dying? What else would you like to share about your meetings with hedges?

Find Out More

You can walk any part of the **National Forest Way** and look at the hedges along or close to the path. Please keep to rights of way. Take care with hedge plants especially thorns which can be very sharp.

Share your hedge discoveries with me via the website ruthsinger.com/blossomandthorn using the online form or email me ruth@ruthsinger.com

Please send your information by 31st May so I have time to make all your stories into cloth to be woven into an ancient hedge at Timber Festival

Join me at the Festival 7-8-9 July and help share the stories of Blossom & Thorn - volunteers are encouraged to spend a bit of time with the artwork and talking to visitors. Free tickets are available for people contributing to this project, please get in touch to find out more.



ruthsinger.com/blossomandthorn

nationalforest.org/visit/national-forest-way

timberfestival.org.uk



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