

Behind me snaked the knitted weave of a GG, well laid, hedge. Before me the untutored hedge grew black and thick, well-nigh impenetrable. Sunk in my inner cyberspace, I hefted my bill hook and mused.

There is something about the shape of a billhook, something purposeful about the balance weight, the beak curve of the hook (on some models), the reassuring grip of the smooth wooden handle. I purchased mine by mail order from Morris of Dunsford in Devon. Richard Morris and his nephew run this well-established firm making hand tools including a huge range of billhooks. These range from £30 upwards (even for used models), forged by traditional methods in a lovely Devon village. They still use the original water driven power hammers (another place for a GG group visit).

I love the way that these tools take on the characteristics of local countryside practice depending on variations of materials used and regional traditions. On my hedge laying course at Botley Manor Farm I much enjoyed using the Yorkshire billhook a long handled job you can hold with two hands applying double force. Talking of these county names there is a copper tube joint (you say lead pipes and copper tubes) called a Yorkshire, but that was on my “plumbing for dummies” course (and another story).

The beauty of these tools and their design is that they were developed over possibly hundreds of years based on empirical ‘research’ that means, according to my dictionary, derived from experiment and observation rather than from theory. It takes years of practice and reflection to do this. Theory is a lot quicker. If the tool did the job you did not change the design. If a sharper point or a smaller blade at a different angle worked better you incorporated it by getting the village smith to add or subtract the changes. This is personalising the tool, fitness for purpose.

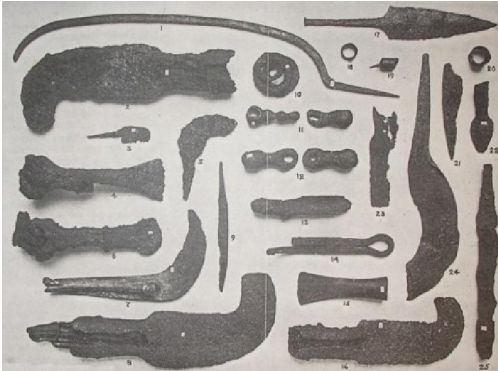
What does not change is the force and presence of Nature. Hedges grow thick if left untamed whatever the century, overhanging branches thrive, rain-sodden banks come back every season. Boundary enclosure maintenance may change over the years but the bush and scrub grow quickly if left unmanaged. Here is continuity.

Thus we have the billhook, continuity of design for continuity of purpose. We can see this in the extant medieval examples in Oxfordshire County Museum at Woodstock and gloriously in the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading (more places to visit-Julia/Eric to arrange for social/educational purposes?). I tried to zoom in on my screen to the countryside scenes depicted on that paean to rural life, the Luttrell Psalter, now in the British Library. Dating from somewhere between 1320 and 1340, it was produced as a book of psalms commissioned by Sir Godfrey Luttrell, lord of the manor of Irnham in Lincolnshire. The harvest scene shows peasants cutting wheat with a sickle almost exactly the same design as the modern one and not far from looking like an extended billhook.

Practically all of our modern landscape is man-made, changing through the ages. Climate may alter over hundreds of years but Weather is constant. As is the geology the underlying soil that determines land management and practice, another constant. Meanwhile the force of Nature, the cold, the heat, the growth of wanted and unwanted plants and trees goes on. Tools, hand or machine, used a million times by mankind are one of the key intervening features between those constants and those variables to produce the managed landscape we call the countryside.

Thus direct contact between Man and Nature, the physical dimension, wind and water, the renewal of Life, is the same as it ever was (give or take GM crops, polytunnels and hydroponics). And that takes us neatly back to good old Green Gym as we approach our 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Roman and pre-Roman Billhooks.



A wide variety of sizes and shapes of blades survive from the Roman period, both in the UK and continental Europe. Handles were fitted by tang or a socket, and in some cases the handle has survived relatively intact (e.g. Glastonbury (UK) or Pompeii (IT)). The same shape may be found over a wide area, even several countries, or just limited to a small locality.

Image - Pre-Roman era, Iron Age, tools, including several billhooks, from the Glastonbury Lake Villages in Somerset, England.

Ewelme

In the first really spring-like weather of the year our early March session at Ewelme started with the sighting of a kingfisher, one of a pair whose territory is below the bridge. He watched us from afar while one group cleared out watercress as usual and another reduced two clumps of bulrushes in the centre of the stream. A third group shovelled out ‘glub’ (Tom’s description) from the verge by the bridge in readiness for an application of scalpings which will firm up the ground where the path begins. Julia

Joint Session - Burnt Platt

We were joined by members from Abingdon, Bicester, Newbury and Thatcham Green Gyms for a heather regeneration

scrub bash and path widening session. Everyone had a great time and coffee and cakes came from everywhere. There was even some delicious home made marmalade on sale from Bicester!

Cleeve Court

At the end of April we worked in the beautiful Loddon Lily area of Cleeve Court water meadows. The lilies have been spreading well and we uprooted as many nettles and other unwanted invaders as possible to allow the bulbs to regenerate

without being shaded out or starved of nutrients.

At a later session we carried on with the burning of cut material, reinforcement of the stockade and building a dead hedge around a coppiced Hazel. The stockade is now growing well because we used freshly cut willow stakes as the support posts!



## Joyce Grove

Julia has taken pictures of us all working really hard pollarding Prunus and Sycamore, and lopping back Laurels along the track which runs parallel with the school grounds.



Afterwards we went to see the Pocket Handkerchief tree (also called the Dove tree and the Ghost tree), *Davidia involucrata* which is covered in its "hankies" or more correctly, Bracts. It was a sight to behold. Susan



## Grey Hone Wood

We revisited Grey Hone Wood at the end of May to continue cutting down young self-seeded conifers at the plantation edge.



It was heartening to see how the light brought in by our previous clearances around the ponds had encouraged foxgloves and ferns to spring up everywhere. The ponds themselves were no longer dank, sporting fresh green vegetation and lively insects (note to self: apply insect repellent before donning GG gear). Julia



## Nuffield Place and Park Wood

Some people cut down the holly bushes whilst the remainder of us dragged them a long way across the field to the bonfire site. So lots of walking which I always like. Sadly we weren't allowed a fire today as Nuffield Place has already opened to the public. I was surprised how many cars there were when we got back to the car park. Lovely cake from Diane as sustenance mid-way through the morning and plenty of people to talk to, a grand total of fifteen today.



We often take our friends for a walk from Nettlebed to the best bluebell wood in the area, but today I had the great pleasure of helping to tend it. The bluebells were already starting to flower and there were wood anemones out too. We were celebrating GG's 17th birthday in suitable fashion by holly "bashing", which means lopping, sawing and stacking. Prizes should have been awarded to all those, like Barry, who managed to get out the whole plant complete with roots. Tony Chandler set the example by creating a wonderful hedge of the lopped holly branches and even joked that we should be clipping it. There were about 14 of us including, Nick Odell all the way from Dorset. Yummy bread pudding from Diane sustained us during the second half of the morning. Thank you to all leaders for such a lovely morning. Susan



## Nettlebed

Green Gym at work on 30 April, levelling and surfacing the path to the playtrail. Elizabeth



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# Green Gym



## Sonning Common

# "THE LOPPER"

full of little cuttings.

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## Unusual Happenings on Peppard Common

We gathered on the ski slope in the pre-coffee session and then the Heather regeneration area at the top post coffee, to do a summer bracken bash, raking the brush-cut areas and a general path tidy. For a change, this summer, it was a beautiful hot sunny day. Tony 'spotted' a single Common Spotted Orchid at the bottom of the slope, it is great to see the wild flowers returning to an area that was overgrown with rank vegetation not many years ago. The Heather has been thriving now that it has been released from the clutches of the Bracken.

At coffee time John Hasler presented Tony with a beer mug and gift voucher from Black's in recognition of his long-term (15 years) service as Green Gym tools officer. It is hard to think how anyone could better his care of our tools. However, he has decided it is high time to pass on the tools officer baton (or sharpening stone) to someone new. His meticulous organisation of the tool shed means that whoever steps into his shoes will now have a much easier task in carrying on the good work.

