

11-ROBERTVILLE

The hedge-lands around the High Fen - a unique human landscape!

To cycle the Vennbahn route is to experience a series of distinct man-made landscapes such as seldom occur in close proximity: on the Belgium-Luxembourg border lie the idyllic contours of the Our valley, while on the Belgian-German border, to the north, the harsh, horizontal range of the high-altitude wetland forms a dramatic contrast to the vertically bordered, meadow hedge-lands all around. Hedges give a landscape a very specific visual stamp, whether in Germany, Belgium, Normandy or the South of England. When considered together with the house-high beech hedges that adorn the villages and farms, the hedgerows of the Fen foreland have a quite particular charm. But hedgerows are not only an aesthetic element in a landscape, they are, above all, an ecological system that can best be understood as a symbiosis of human activity and requirements with the needs of the natural world.

Hedges, the “fingers of the forest” in a cultivated landscape

Hedge-bounded cultivation was once the standard for many countries. In the early middle ages, hedges separated pasture from arable land, as the common grazing of valleys and woodland became established. Later on, hedges were used to demarcate proprietary rights to tracts of land, small or large. In the 20th century, barbed wire began to replace the hedge as pastoral boundary. In recent decades, the need to maximise farm profits and raise productivity has led to a significant reduction in hedgerows as economically unviable. Their function as boundary and protection for cattle has also lost importance since the 1970s. However, in recent decades, they have been making a comeback. Along the Vennbahn route, the hedge landscapes are primarily in the Monschau district and in the Belgian villages between the river Warche and the High Fen.

Hedges protect and connect biotopes, even maintaining inter-species frontiers

Hedges create a rich and diverse federation of biotopes. They are home to insects, bats, butterflies, hedgehogs and reptiles. Deer, fox and hare value them equally for the cover they offer and the variety of entrances and exits they can conceal. Regional birds, such as the song-thrush, the woodpecker, chaffinch and blackbird find therein not only a rich and varied diet, but also a nesting place to raise their young. And barnyard hens and cocks seek them out for protection, shade, shelter and a place to hunker down in comfort in some cosy den. The very word “hedge” carries the meaning of protection, territorial border and rampart: everything it offers to the animals that live there. When the territories of two species meet in a hedgerow, they can maintain an extended boundary and share a linear corridor without causing one another difficulties, thus protecting natural diversity. In this way, hedgerows are an example of how to benefit from sharing and transcending limitations and boundaries, a perfect metaphor and a lesson in practical wisdom.

Pastoral hedgerows – impressive total length and often featuring full grown trees

Before the days of barbed wire, hedgerows were living boundaries, delineating property and giving shelter and nourishment. Their height was calculated to afford the passing farmer a view of his livestock. Some hedges have “grown out” in places into small coppices, or single beech trees stand out at more or less regular intervals. Such outgrowths today offer a source of firewood in times of high energy prices. In 1985, the North Eifel Nature Park took a census of its hedgerows. The results were impressive, and not only with regard to the more than 1000 locations where hedges stand and the total land area of 2,700 km² that they cover. For if you were to lay them all end to end, the resulting “great hedge” would stretch 700 kilometres from Cologne to Munich. This hedgerow survey is currently the basis for the North Eifel Nature Park hedge protection programme.

Hedges also protect Vennbahn cyclists!

Hedgerows offer Vennbahn cyclists a valued service, the thick hedges break the force of side winds. Experts consider that a good hedge slows a wind down by half. And the crowns of the outgrown trees serve as an umbrella in bad weather.

House hedges, treasured protectors of property

The house or courtyard hedges are a particularly impressive example of how nature can adjust, or be adjusted, to climatic conditions and barren soils. These beech hedges protect farms and their courtyards at all times of year: in winter they are a shelter from icy winds coming off the nearby Fen and act as an insulator to slow heat loss, in summer they offer shade and cool on torrid days. House hedges are generally grown on the prevailing wind side and can even break the force of storms. Wind-screening the courtyard, in combination with the deeply descending mansard roofs of the Eifel houses, guarantees the best possible natural insulation. This in turn cuts energy costs, making a most modern virtue of an old tradition. Many householders, such as Clemens Braun of Bickerath, are particularly proud of their hedges. Despite his advanced age, he still cares for and cuts his hedge himself. And once again, it has been voted the best in the village. During the war, the hedge was half burned down, but proved its will to live, in time coming back fully to its former glory. Perhaps, suggests Herr Braun, it enjoys the attention: "Hedges are hungry for life, too", he says.

The hedge-lands of Monschau district, and the hedge-village of Höfen

The hedge landscape around Monschau is home to a network of many hundreds of kilometres of hedgerow. Old maps already show such a tight network of hedges around Monschau, Höfen, Mützenich and Kalterherberg at the beginning of the 19th century. Since the end of the 17th century, hedgerows in Monschau district have been part of the official rural record. In 1665, an edict was signed for the purpose of protecting and improving woodlands, which required that all fields and pastures be bordered by living beech hedges, rather than wooden fences. Höfen, a village suburb of Monschau, is a prime example of this, demonstrating how hedgerows can change the character of a village into a bucolic hamlet of hedges. The village has been cited several times as a prizewinner in the "Our Village has a Future" competition, twice being awarded a gold medal at the federal level. The villagers are naturally proud of their hedges, some of which have been trained and nurtured to a height of between six and eight metres! Behind these massive living ramparts, 20 thatched timber-frame houses and farms stand discretely in their shelter. These fine buildings are not only protected by the tall hedges, but also by historical preservation order. A five-kilometre-long, hedged path runs through the village, out into the landscape of hedgerows beyond, sheltering humans and their cattle, as well as the region's wildlife.

Hedgerows in Belgium: shorter than in Germany, and with more hawthorn

Among the "hedged villages" on the Belgian side of the border are, most notably, Sourbrodt, Ovifat, Robertville, Outrewarche, Weywertz, Elsenborn and Nidrum. Hedges have developed differently in Belgium, first appearing in the 19th century, parallel with the development of grazing and dairy farming. Compared to their German neighbours, these hedges are a little shorter and feature far more hawthorn. Cows don't like the taste of this shrublike tree, and so the hedges are not grazed.

The life of a house hedge

Hedges are planted in autumn or early spring in one or two rows. After two years, the young twigs are entwined with one another and turned inwards. Stems that are crossed, entwined, gnarled and even grown into one another are a common sign of a mature hedge. After the sixth year, the hedge is regularly trimmed. It is a particular challenge to form the classic gateway arch. This requires making an armature of boards and poles, at a height of about three metres between the two hedge masses on either side of the courtyard entrance. The young beech shoots are then trained, season for season, along this trellis until, after some years, they meet and mingle to form a self-supporting, coherent arch. The wooden armature is simply left to rot away as its purpose diminishes.

Beautiful hedges require care and attention

The care of the hedges is a task both in summer and winter. The annual growth has to be trimmed, ideally in August, after the second breeding season for birds has passed and the young ones are capable of flight. Major cutting back and care of damaged sections is carried out in the winter time,

as lower temperatures diminish the risk of plant infections attacking the beech growth. In olden times, this maintenance was carried out from a tall ladder. It called for strong legs and arms, a cool head, free from dizziness, a steady hand and some artistic ability. Today, the front loader of a farmer's tractor, a fork lift or even scaffolding hired for the occasion provides a less flexible, but safer platform. When trimming, care must be taken to keep the hedge's conical cross-section: at ground level it is about one metre thick, seventy centimetres is ideal at the crown, for a total height of six metres. If the hedge is still to grow higher, it is only cut along the flanks. Once the desired height has been almost attained, the hedge will be top trimmed also, each year a few centimetres less. The offcuts go on the compost. House hedges also need to be protected from unwanted grazing by cows and horses, as these can damage or even destroy a beech hedge. The beech is a sensitive tree, says Udo Thorwesten, an expert on hedges for the urban district of Aachen: "You have to treat them as gently as you would a baby's bottom".

The care of field hedgerows in the Eifel hedge-land

The hedgerow census survey carried out in the North Eifel Nature Park in 1985 serves as a basis for a protection and maintenance programme for rural hedgerows. Hedge owners receive a small subsidy every four years for the care of their hedges. This is a small recognition for the work of maintaining healthy hedgerows. In 2011, eighty clippers tended around 50,000 running metres of beech hedges in 400 locations. In the last 25 years, the North Eifel Nature Park has recognised this contribution with about 2.5 million Euros from the development funds of North Rhine Westphalia. This makes the hedge-care programme the oldest and most successful program for landscape promotion in the North Eifel Nature Park. The Landscape Federation of the Rhineland (LVR) also financially supports the planting of new hedges and replanting of existing ones, via the programme "Measures for the maintaining and restoring of historically and culturally rooted landscapes through the provision of plant material".

Cared-for courtyard hedges are beautiful and vital

With regard to the hedgerow landscape around Monschau, the landscape commission of the urban district of Aachen offers a subvention to help with the maintenance of courtyard hedges. The "hedge commission" rewards the quality of hedges viewed during a tour through the region. Since beauty has to be cared for, the quality of the hedge in question is a primary precondition for it to receive support. Today, a hedge that earns the mark "very good" will receive a support cheque for roughly 25 Euros. This category of hedge must be at least 40 metres long and 5 metres high. For Udo Thorwesten of the urban district of Aachen, the award is a "praline" for those who care enough in the first place, rather than a real incentive. Stefan Pauls, master gardener from Konzen and member of the "hedge commission" fears that younger generations and those with second homes will be less likely to offer the necessary care and attention required. By the way, he offers this tip to Vennbahn cyclists on how to recognise a quality hedge at the beginning of the season: Hedges wait to throw off their brown winter coat in May, before they sprout new greenery. "That's just like with grain," he says, "old life must die for new life to develop!"