

A slice of Britain

Rachel Shields
in Herefordshire

Horizontal rain is lashing into my face. It's the kind that doesn't care whether you close your eyes: it just drives under your eyelids. We're in a muddy field in Herefordshire, people retreating, tortoise-like, into waxed jackets and sheltering under flat caps. Axes and chainsaws lie untended, woodchips fly through the air; it is the 31st National Hedgelaying Championship.

More than 400 people have gathered to watch 120 competitors battle for the title of hedgelaying's supreme champion.

Urban types could be forgiven for thinking this is another obscure, eccentric British pastime to rank alongside bog-snorkelling and the charmingly-named Abbots Bromley horn dance. But this is a celebration of one of the key skills of British farming and land management. Once a practical way of keeping livestock in fields, hedgelaying is now also an art form, a conservation issue and – to judge from the set jaws and furrowed brows of the judges – a fiercely competitive issue.

The site of the contest – which looks, to my townie eye, much like any other field – has been carefully selected on the basis that it contains 1,200 metres of pure, unadulterated hedge. Just as you would never see Wimbledon tennis legends playing on yellowed, lumpy grass, hedgelaying championship require a long stretch of "consistent hedge".

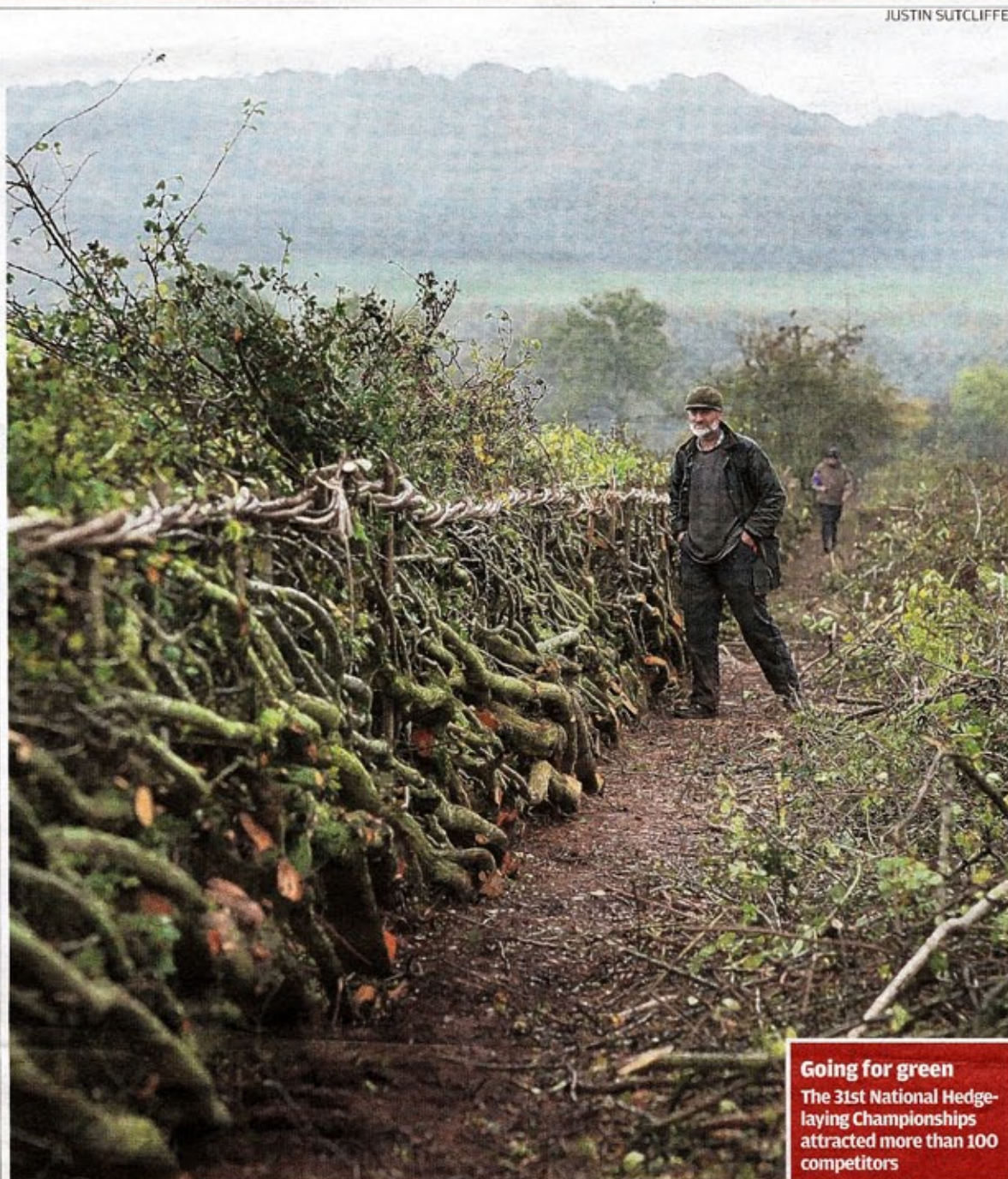
Although, as a competition venue, Turnastone Court Farm, Vowchurch, in Hereford, is pretty near perfect, attendees admit that the site lacks some of the glamour of last year's venue: Sandringham. While the Prince of Wales might currently be trying to concrete over half of Dorset with expansions to his model town, he is also a patron of the National Hedgelaying Society (NHS), and in 2008 allowed it to conduct the championship on his estate.

While fiercely competitive, most of the hedgelayers here are united in their belief that they are performing a vital conservation effort. "It is all about conservation," said David Prosser, 73, one of the judges. "Tightly woven hedges allow small birds to nest inside without being eaten by bigger birds, and let animals shelter behind them." In a flat cap, bright green sweater and with eyes magnified behind thick glasses, he – like many attendees – is every inch your stereotypical country character.

Although they have come from all over the country, many have met before on the "circuit": a series of countryside events which include everything from dry-stone walling to competitive ploughing.

In a marquee, competitors and spectators bond over roast dinners and apple pie and custard.

On the face of it, what they are doing sounds pretty simple: dig a



JUSTIN SUTCLIFFE

Going for green
The 31st National Hedgelaying Championships attracted more than 100 competitors



At the cutting hedge of conservation

The National Hedgelaying Championship is much more than just flat caps and chainsaws. It showcases a unique countryside skill that the older generation is determined to pass on to the young

hole, plant a hedge, wield that chainsaw. But most of the men competing here have been hedgelaying for years, if not decades.

And they're part of the export effort. Britain may be the birthplace of hedgelaying, but its popularity has spread to Europe: competitors from the Netherlands caused a stir last year with their European style.

Increasingly, women are making their mark, too. Among the sea of flat caps and booming voices are four female competitors. One of these is Tina Bath, 48, the reigning ladies champion, whose delicate silver earrings and long dark plait mark her out as unmistakably feminine. Unlike her hands, her fingernails are blackened with bruises and dirt.

And unlike many of the competitors today, Ms Bath makes her living entirely from hedgelaying, working as a consultant hedgelayer and teaching the skill to teenagers at a local college. "I used to work as a warden in an area of outstanding natural beauty, but when I was made redundant last year I decided to do hedgelaying

'Hedgelaying is a good way to meet girls. It's like a dating agency'

BEN PRITCHARD
Young farmer

full time," she said. "If you love being outdoors then it doesn't make any difference if you are a woman.

"When you teach people how to do it, you see that everybody has their own style, so in that way it is very artistic."

Nor is it confined to the older generation. While the majority of competitors look as if they have seen a good few seasons tilling the soil, the pastime also attracts young people, who seem to be there to check out each other as much as the hedge work.

"We call it an unofficial dating agency," said 22-year-old Ben Pritchard, who was hoping to win the Welsh Juniors. "Among young farmers hedgelaying is a really big thing. It is as much about the socialising as anything else, and it is a good place to meet girls. We had a summer party and there were 1,300 people there."

For many, the highlight of the day is watching the young hedgelayers collect their prizes. As devotees of a pastime that is dwindling in popularity, most of whom are part of an industry that has been beset by difficulties in recent years, they find it heartening to see the skills they have perfected being passed on to a new generation.

With a drop in government grants for hedgelaying, which are distributed by Natural England, the possibility that these skills will die out with the older generation is a very real one.

"I've laid hedges all my life since I was 14," said 68-year-old Graham Smith. "I love it but this is my last year; it is hard work. I don't have children, so I teach kids in the local community to do it at the weekends. I don't want the skills I've learnt to be forgotten."

The man walking away with this year's title of supreme champion is 45-year-old Andrew Holding, whose Derbyshire-style layering was described by judges as "supreme, smooth, even-cutting, perfectly fitting. He was the best of the best."