

# The Windrow

Newsletter of The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland

No 7 December 2013



Julien Dupré

Bringing in Loose Hay — see page 4

## Scythe Fairs 2014

West Country Scythe Fair,  
Langport, Somerset, 15 June 2014

[www.thescytheshop.co.uk/festival.html](http://www.thescytheshop.co.uk/festival.html) [www.greenfair.org.uk/](http://www.greenfair.org.uk/)

Eastern Counties Scythe Festival  
Wimpole Cambs, 28-29 June

<http://sadeik.wordpress.com/blog/competitions-at-wimpole/mowing/>

## Courses in 2014

Most scythe teachers have not yet finalized dates for scythe courses next year. We will publish a full list in the next *Windrow*, in the spring.

Clive Leeke has courses on 4 July and 9 August in the Oxon/Berks area [Clive@austrianscythes.co.uk](mailto:Clive@austrianscythes.co.uk) 0118 947 0298, [www.austrianscythes.co.uk/training%20courses.html](http://www.austrianscythes.co.uk/training%20courses.html)

Simon Fairlie has courses in May, July and September in Dorset — see [www.monktonwyldcourt.co.uk/](http://www.monktonwyldcourt.co.uk/)

You can contact a teacher near you by going to the courses page of the SABI website:

<http://scytheassociation.org/courses/>

## SABI Winter Gathering

25-26 January 2014

This is a meeting of the committee and the more active members of SABI to discuss the past year and plan the year ahead. This is a small informal weekend at John Letts' place in Buckinghamshire when we also find time to eat, drink, play music and make bread. If you would like to become more involved in scythe activism over the next year then you are welcome to attend, but please apply well in advance as places are limited.

For more information email: [jbletts@btinternet.com](mailto:jbletts@btinternet.com)

## CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

A Scythe for all Seasons: p 2 •

Bits and Bobs: pp 2-3

How to Make and Manage Loose Hay: p 4

River Weed Cutting: p 6 •

George Peterken's New Book on Meadows: p 7

More on the Anglo-American Scythe pp 9-10



# A Tool for All Seasons

**The first half of an article  
Gill Barron penned for  
Smallholder magazine.**

The hay is in now, the barn is full, and we hang up our scythes with mixed feelings of relief and regret. We were starting to really get into the swing of it. Between us we've cut more than two acres, and, with lots of welcome help, turned it again and again; cocked it up, and bundled it home on our backs, tied up in bedsheets. We have three Jersey cows to feed through the winter, and it's a wonder how they manage to eat (and waste) that much hay. We have done it all using only that great neglected energy source, human muscle power, and modern, highly efficient scythes. With this sort of technology, there's nothing to go wrong.

It's hard to put away a tool which produces so much satisfaction, but luckily a scythe isn't just for the haymaking season. In winter and early spring there are tussocks and rushes to decapitate, easily sliced when frosty. Blackthorn and brambles in hedge-bottoms are exposed to the extra-sturdy bush blade, a sort of billhook-on-a-stick (no bending). In the Norfolk Broads

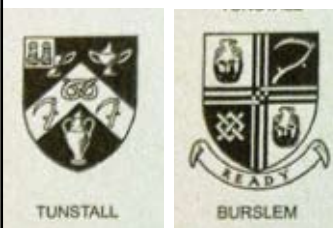


and elsewhere, reeds for thatching are cut in February; clearing coppice undergrowth, ditches and river-weed can all be done by scythe in winter. On into spring and summer, in the garden there's lawnmowing and path-trimming to do. Horticulture offers a host of uses, from harvesting spinach to mowing green manures. And later in summer, topping thistles is a great job for the cool of the evening.

But perhaps autumn is the season when the scythe really comes into its own. All those late-season weeds which now crowd every nook with dusty vegetation go down at a single swish of the blade, while prickles and burrs are kept at arm's length. In the orchard,

mowing under the trees makes a carpet for windfalls, now easily gathered. Bracken and overstood grass can be harvested as bedding for stock. All year round, the chore of keeping the ground under electric fences clear of shorting-out weeds is swiftly done. In other words, a scythe is as versatile as its user's needs require.

## I-Spy Corner



Jez Hastings, former SABI treasurer, who has moved to Stoke on Trent reports that the city's coat of arms gives as much weight to a scythe (and hence to farming) as it does to the pottery industry for which it is renowned. Two of its "five towns", Tunstall and Burslem have scythes on their coat of arms as well.

Meanwhile Gill Barron has sent us a photo of the sign of the Man and Scythe in Bolton, which was founded in 1251, making it one of Britain's oldest pubs. Does anyone know of any other "scythe" pubs?



## SCYTHE SHOP NEWS

### The Dalek

The feedback from those who have tried out the "Dalek" peening machine mentioned in Windrow 5 has not been brilliant, and I myself have had problems with it, so I am no longer stocking it.

### Quality Control

One or two teachers reported some quality issues with a few of the blades last year, so we have engaged Christiane Lechner to carry out some independent quality control at the Fux factory before blades are sent out. She is also doing this for at least one other scythe importer in Europe. If anybody has any concerns about the quality of the blades and other goods supplied, do please get back to me.

### Call for Regional Scythe Distributors

Sales of scythes have increased by about 50 per cent over the last two years and we are keen to get as many scythes as possible distributed regionally rather than centrally from our depot in Dorset. At the moment some people are driving over 250 miles just to buy a scythe with an hours' tuition.

Currently we have regional distributors in the West Country, Wales, Cumbria, South East England and Central East Scotland but we are keen to cover the other areas of the UK and Ireland. Distributors must have had training and experience in Scythe use, and preferably attended the teacher's training course at the West Country scythe fair. If you think you might be interested please get in touch.

Contact Simon: [chapter7@tlio.org.uk](mailto:chapter7@tlio.org.uk) 01297 561359

## Why Are Snaths Bent?

There is currently a minor controversy among scythe nerds as to whether the curvaceous "American" snath is a traditional item (conceivably dating back to "sneds" made from wiggly hedgerow wood) or a later sophistication devised by companies to convince mowers that they needed to buy something better than anything that could be found in a hedgerow.

In defense of the latter theory Steve Tomlin cites the website of the US tool firm Lamson: "Silas Lamson was the inventor of the curved scythe snath, an innovation that allows the worker to stand fully erect, making it easier on the back. This had a dramatic impact on agriculture. In 1834, he started Lamson & Goodnow in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts to produce his curved scythe snath."

Hmm. The firm that bears the Lamson name can hardly be considered an objective observer. And as Chris Riley remarks "Can we be sure that Mr Lamson didn't get the idea from an English variant?"

Well it could even have been Welsh. W Davies' 1810 survey of the agriculture of North Wales states that the light crops of grass on the uplands were mown outward, with a "straight handled keen-set" scythe using an uplifted stroke, whereas the heavy crops of lowland meadows were cut inward, with a crooked-handled scythe, using a steady thrust that, on returning, licked the swath from the standing hay.

None of this sounds terribly convincing. Does anybody else have any evidence to support either theory?

<http://www.lamsonsharp.com/store/pg/10-Our-History.html>; Davies cited in G Peterken,

### Film on Mowing Wheat

Stephen Simpson writes: Readers of the Windrow who grow cereals maybe interested in a short film I put together titled, "Exploring Small Scale Grain Harvesting". The YouTube video looks at scything wheat and introduces a grain cradle adapted from a traditional Slovak style bow. You included an earlier experimental version of this cradle in your article on cradles in Windrow 3. The film shows how to assemble and adjust the cradle, which is made from green hazel and a length of bent copper pipe. It also examines the effects of mowing style on getting the wheat to fall neatly in the windrow and the final section looks at gathering the wheat.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF0kdhIcG7U>

### Gardener's Blog

Scythe websites and blogs continue to proliferate. Here is a charming blog from an enthusiastic convert, Rachel the Gardener:

<http://rachel-the-gardener.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Scythe>



Cows in an English litter meadow deciding that the hay is too crap to bother with.

## Litter Meadows

George Peterken in his book *Meadows* has a section on litter meadows, which he says "we have largely lost sight of" in Britain, but which are still part of the scene in central Europe. These are meadows mown not for livestock fodder but for bedding, and tend to be on wet rank land. Since "straw" rather than high nutrient hay is the desired product, they tend to be mown late in the year. In Switzerland, current regulations preclude mowing them before 1 September, so the first dry day in September becomes "national litter-mowing day" – which Peterken remarks is "an ironic comment on the habitat-uniformity this generates".

Litter meadows probably do not date back to antiquity. In mediaeval times such areas would have been common grazing, and most neighbourhoods would have been growing grains to provide straw. It was the enclosure of common grazing, together with the reduction of grain growing in areas devoted to dairy that generated a need for litter meadows – though that need presumably disappeared in the UK with the arrival of the 22-ton straw lorry.

However conditions are ripe for a revival of litter meadows in the UK. The price of straw has rocketed recently, partly because of the prevalence of dwarf barley and other grain crops, and it can be higher than the price of hay in the West Country. At the same time increasing acreages of grass are being mown late in the season, for biodiversity reasons, and the managers of this land are hard put to find a use for the hay. Perhaps bedding is the answer.



Mowers pose during the filming of a scythe sequence in *Far From The Madding Crowd*

## Reaping Memories

This message accompanied Colin Yandles application for SABI membership application as an 86th birthday present.

"My father was a farmer and I learned how to use a scythe from him. He was semi-retired on an all grass farm when the Second World War started, as a result of which he had to plough up some fields to grow crops including oats and barley. In those days you had to do two or three rounds of the outside of the field with a scythe to "open it up" so that the horses pulling the binder could get round without trampling any of the crop underfoot. I helped with this during the school holidays, including gathering up the corn by hand into sheaves and tying them using some of the long straws.

A few years ago Kew Gardens was growing a patch of wheat that they were going to cut and tie by hand. When I got there they were using some sort of continental scythe - good for cutting weeds - so I told them "That's not the way to do it - you need a bow (to lay the corn out neatly for hand-gathering and tying)".

The following year they rang me up to say "You were going to make us a bow". I had not made a bow myself, so I buckled and bored a hole in the shaft of the scythe with a brace and bit. I took a shoot of dogwood from the garden and inserted one end in the hole, tying the other to the shaft with baler cord. I went over to Kew Gardens a day or two later and did a bit of cutting- it was a wonderful feeling, how it all came back to me after so many years. Some girls were gathering up the corn and tying it into sheaves for me to set up in stooks.

In due course the BBC broadcast "A year at Kew Gardens" and lo and behold there was my scythe being wielded by one of the Kew staff. They had shortened and flattened my bow, to make it more effective. It also appears in "A Year at Kew" by Rupert Smith published by BBC books.

I still cut my lawn occasionally with the scythe."

Contributed by membership secretary Chris Riley (edited text).



# Loose Hay

**If you make hay on a small scale, you will need to decide whether to handle the hay loose or whether to bale it.**

## Advantages of Small Bales

There are many advantages to baling the hay, which is why most people do it. Here is a list of the main ones

- Bales are quicker to move around than loose hay.
- Bales can be stored in a smaller space than the same weight of loose hay.
- Bales are easier to take out of a stack than loose hay.
- Bales are easier to sell.
- It is easier to estimate the amount of hay stored in the stack; and easier to calculate the amount of hay you are giving an animal.
- Bales are useful for makeshift seats, walls, barriers, etc
- You are never short of a piece of string.

## Advantages of Loose Hay

Nonetheless, for someone dealing with small quantities at a time, there are advantages to loose hay. Because all the hay I make is used on the farm, I find it more efficient to shift and store all my hay loose, for these reasons:

- There are no labour costs of baling.
- If rain seems imminent when hay is dry on the field it is often quicker and more reliable to cock it up and get it in loose than to locate the contractor with the baler, or bale it by hand;
- If, in the expectation of rain, you bale hay when it is a bit too wet then you have to break the bales open again, which is a hassle and an expense — whereas if you stack loose hay when it is still a bit too wet it is relatively easy to spread it out again after the rain has gone.
- A truss of loose hay is easier and more comfortable to carry over a distance, especially up hill, than a bale of equivalent weight.
- Most people nowadays cannot pitch a bale above their head onto a stack, whereas anyone who moves hay with a pitchfork can select the amount of hay they feel they can manage.
- Loose hay, when cocked or stacked, is more beautiful to look at than baled hay.
- Loose hay makes a comfy bed for sleep and sport.

## Plastic Bales

Arguably there is one other advantage of baling. That if rain is threatening and the hay isn't quite dry, you can wrap the bales in plastic and make haylage.

I'm not so sure this is an advantage. When the weather is uncertain, the natural human instinct is to play

safe and wrap, whereas statistically it is probably better to take a risk (this is how insurance companies make money). More often than not either the rain doesn't materialize at all or it else is so modest as to inflict less damage upon the hay than the substantial cost of getting the bales wrapped at £1.30 apiece, handling giant plastic maggots with no grips for the hands, disposing of the waste plastic, and going the extra mile to trash the planet.



## Tips for Handling Loose Hay

The main tool is the two-pronged pitchfork. You cannot get decent pitchforks in country stores these days, it is far better to try and find secondhand old ones which have much finer tines. There are two main sizes. Those which are about five inches between the tines are best for tedding and moving hay around in the field, and also for short staple hay. Those which are closer to eight inches between tines are better for shifting serious volumes of hay from one place to another.

If you want to move hay a distance of up to about 40 yards it is quickest to move it

## Measuring Loose Hay

One of the difficulties with loose hay is measuring how much you've got. It's easy to count up bales and multiply by 20 or 25 kilos. A stack of loose hay is harder to estimate, because it will gradually sink in height over several weeks, and it is more compressed at the bottom than at the top. The matter is important if you want to work out if you have enough fodder to feed your stock over the winter

One man working in the hay trade in the early 20th century, interviewed by George Ewart Evans commented:

"You got to be very clever to measure a stack of hay up, to judge the proper weight of it. But when you were right in the trade you could go and measure up a stack of hay 26 or 27 tonne to within about 3 hundred weight each way. . . . You could tell in a minute whether there was any weight in the stack. You could use your own arm and push your arm in a loose stack."

In the absence of this skill, North Dakota State University has some useful tables for calculating the weight of stored fodder from the volume.

- Loose hay 450-600 cubic feet per tonne.
- Loose straw 670-1000 cubic feet per tonne
- Baled hay 250-330 cubic feet per tonne
- Baled straw 400-500 cubic foot per tonne.

Weights and Measures of Common Feed, NDSU, [www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/ansci/livestoc/as1282.pdf](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/ansci/livestoc/as1282.pdf)

## The Windrow 7

with a pitchfork. Pull the hay into a neat cock, tall not broad, then plunge the pitchfork into the middle, ideally until you can feel the teeth meet the ground. Then somersault the pitchfork through 180 degrees, as though it were a Highland Games caber, so that the top end of its handle is standing on the ground and the fork holding the hay is in the air. Then place it on your shoulder with the cock of hay above your head. You should be able to carry about 15 kilos like this.



If you want to move hay further than this and haven't a cart or trailer, then a double bed sheet works well (see photo). Lay the sheet on the ground; pile the hay on it neatly, squash it down; tie two opposite corners of the sheet together and pull tight; then tie the other two opposite corners together. Then hoist it onto your back. A double sheet will carry a bale's worth of hay if well squashed, and it is a good deal more comfortable to carry than a bale.

## Stacking Loose Hay Outside

My method is this. Get four pallets and arrange them in a square, about eight foot by eight foot and level. This is big enough to take about one tonne of hay (approx two thirds of an acre up to one acre). In the middle of the four pallets drive a five or six foot fencing stake about 12 inches into the ground. Pile the loose hay up on the pallets, placing it around the edge of the pallet base, not in the middle. As you pile on the hay, the middle fills up of its own accord and having more hay at the edges than in the middle keeps the stack stable, and helps stop the hay sliding out.



Hay dealers in Norfolk in the early 20th century, would carry hay loose from the field and stack it in their yard. Only later would it be baled in the hand-powered baler pictured above and transported to Norwich for sale. The picture on the right shows a barbed rod used for extracting samples of hay from the centre of stacks. Pictures from George Ewart Evans, *The Days That We Have Seen*, which has a 30 page chapter on "The Hay Trade".

## December 2013

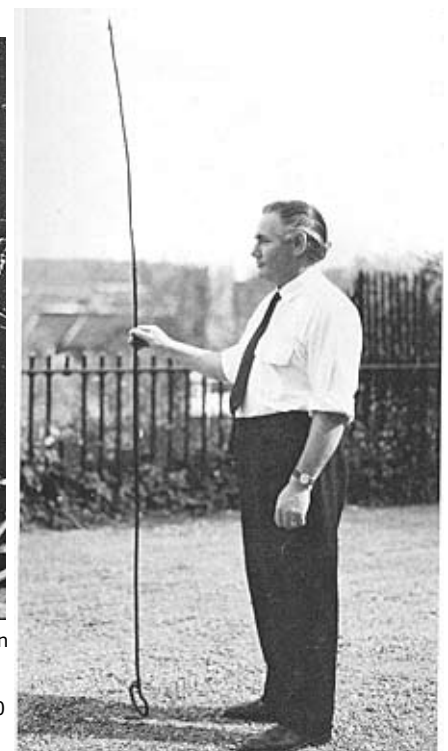
When hay has reached within 9 inches of the top of the post, get another post and lash it onto the first one so that the post reaches nine or ten feet high.

Keep piling up the hay. As well as the people bringing the hay to the stack, you will need one person on top compressing the stack and another pitching the hay up, and ensuring that the sides go up vertically. From time to time the pitcher needs to rake the sides vigorously, otherwise the whole stack starts to balloon.

When the stack is about 9 foot high you can lash on a third post, and keep piling on the hay until the whole thing starts to feel precarious, at about 14 foot. The sides are then raked off plumb and the raked hay pitched up top to cap the rick. Then a tarp is then hoisted up and over the top of the post, the person on the top slithers down the stack, and the tarp is roped off.

The purpose of the post is not only to help stabilize the stack, but also to provide a support for the tarpaulin thus ensuring an air gap between it and the top of the hay. This air gap prevents condensation at the top of the heap, and makes it much easier to extract hay from the top of the stack than if the tarp is sitting directly onto the hay.

There are two ways to remove hay from a haystack. Either you can take it from the top of the stack, or else you can quarry it out from the side using a hay knife. It is all but impossible to pull hay out from the side. If the rick is thatched, rather than covered with a tarp, then you have to cut the hay out with a hay knife. *S.F*





# River Weed Cutting

**Chris Matcham, volunteer water keeper on the River Itchen, explains how scythes can be used to cut waterweeds in Hampshire chalk streams.**

Chalk streams are special. Gin clear, gravel based and naturally nutrient rich they are full of insect life and fish and, during the summer months, prolific vegetation. They are very stable, since they are fed by underground springs and the result is that these rivers (for some reason mostly called “streams”) are often deeper in summer than in winter, unlike other types of river. The management to prevent the resultant flood risk is to cut the in-stream waterweeds using a scythe. However, unlike hay cutting, this management is more like topiary work as the idea is not to cut down the plants, since they provide food for the aquatic insects – mayfly, stonefly, caddisfly etc., and cover for the fish – but to shape them to speed water-flow, reduce the water depth, create “lies” for the fish and to help remove silt, thus exposing the gravel bed, necessary for insect habitat and the spawning redds for fish.

English, or aluminium Turk scythes with a ditch blade, are normally used since the snath is always underwater. Wet weed is very heavy, and as the scythe is used to help “pull off” the weed when it gathers into “rafts”, the European snaths are probably too delicate. Why a ditch blade? Because the tip constantly clatters on the gravels and stones on the river bed. Constant sharpness is not so critical as when cutting grass, as waterweeds are soft, but there are other problems. Working all day up to your thighs in water at 10°C, chest waders are necessary but these can be lethal if you fall over. You have to feel with your feet for underwater trip hazards, maintain your balance and fight the current whilst the water also resists the stroke of the scythe. The technique is often different since some species of water weeds lie horizontally and a downward chopping cut is then used to trim their growth. On some streams, for various reasons, weed cutting is restricted to specific days and this means that if there is a heavy growth it must be cut even if its raining which makes life difficult since it then becomes hard to see what you are doing and you get soaked.

However, in fine weather there are wonderful compensations. The water clears quickly as you work and the plantlife both in the water and on the banks is beautiful. In summer you are surrounded by emerging mayfly and the martins, swallows and hobbies hawking them, warblers provide a constant musical accompaniment, ducks and moorhens clatter around and high above you can hear buzzards with their haunting, mewing call. Watervoles busily swim across using the weed rafts as temporary dining tables, and the sight of a kingfisher flashing past is quite common. This is all possible because, of course, the silent scythe doesn't disturb the wildlife and whilst the work is physically taxing, it is mentally restful.

Some rivers have European designation and protection because of the Water Crowfoot, one of the main wa-



terweeds, a member of the buttercup family with a small white flower and is important for the fish and insects. It is celebrated in a poem by the Victorian poet William Barnes, who wrote in the Dorset dialect and lived among the chalk streams of that county, such as the Frome mentioned in it. It finishes:

But oh! As long's thy buds would gleam  
Above the softly-sliden stream,  
While sparklen zummer-brooks do run  
Below the lofty-climen Zun,  
I only wish that thou could'st stay  
Vor no man's harm, an all men's joy.  
But no, the waterman 'ull wade  
Thy water wi' his deadly blade,  
To slay thee even in thy bloom,  
Fair small-faced flower o' the Frome.

I always feel a pang of guilt as I scythe the lovely white flowers off and my only consolation is that provided I'm doing my work properly I have created a nice fan shape that will have grown so much that by the next month . . . I must do it all again.

## Chain Scythes

One method of mowing waterweed is to link a number of scythe blades together in a “chain” which is towed along the river bed by two men standing on each bank. The photo shows Chris Matcham's chain, made out of old English blades bolted together.

A German firm selling chain scythes on the internet provides this description:

The universal reed scythe is comprised of any number of links cast of high grade scythe-steel movably connected by screws as well as two eyes for connecting pull ropes, chains or bars. Two or more weight balls ensure an even depth of the cut.

Two mowers take the assembled device by the two ends, let it drop to the waterbed and make sure the blade is positioned in front of the weed against the direction of the water current. The two mowers keep sufficient distance to each other and yank the scythe back and forth, taking turns. The one who is pulling makes sure the scythe moves up the stream against the current, while the other one lets out enough rope to make sure the device is not lifted off the ground. A clean cut is easily achieved.

The scythe is to be kept sharp and in good condition. This is done the same way as with normal scythes for crops or hay by hammering and sharpening.

<http://www.agk-kronawitter.de/shop/en/Aquacultur-Pond/Water-protection-and-care/Reed-Scythe/Universal-reed-scythe.html>



# Meadows

Simon Fairlie reviews the best book yet on meadows

A few years ago a fellow called George came round to my store to buy a scythe. He had taken over the management of some meadows in Herefordshire and he wanted to see what the tool could do. He seemed to know more than most people about the ecology of meadows, but it was only when I wrote out the invoice for his purchase that I discovered that this was none other than George Peterken — who along with Oliver Rackham is one of the UK's most distinguished woodland ecologists.

Mr Peterken was clearly so captivated by his grassland that he has now published a lavishly illustrated 400 page book entitled simply *Meadows*. He seems to be somewhat less captivated by his scythe (more of that later) but that is of secondary importance, because, as one would anticipate, he has produced much the best book on the subject available in this country. The scope is broad, covering the history, ecology, ergonomics and artistic interpretation of meadows in the UK, in Europe and in the colonies; yet there is such a wealth of fascinating, well-researched detail in the book that I found myself impatiently hurrying to get through my daily workload so that I could read more pages.

For example, in the chapter “Making Hay the Traditional Way”, Peterken has sifted through quite a few, if not all, of the County Agricultural Surveys produced under the direction of Arthur Young at the turn of the 18th/19th century, and has come up with some vivid and highly detailed reports of how haymaking was carried out that have probably never seen the light of day for two hundred years. I am lucky enough to have a copy of William Marshall's summary of these surveys, published between 1808 and 1817. It runs to a mere 3000 pages, and is equipped with an ingenious classified index that directs you, for example, to everything to do with grassland management. But Peterken must have spent many hours in one of our more venerable libraries searching



Machair on South Uist. The four photos here are all from *Meadows*.

through ten or twenty times the volume of material, with nothing much in the way of index — this is not the sort of material you will find on “Google Books”.

At the same time Peterken's botanical expertise is as good as anyone's. His book — like the wildflower meadows that many of us aspire to create — is peppered with species of flowers and grasses that I have never knowingly encountered, such as hare-tailed cotton grass, spignel, dusky crane's bill and melancholy thistle. Yet nothing diminishes his enthusiasm for buttercups. Like Rackham, Peterken is both ecologist and social historian, and it is that which gives so much depth to this book.

## Missing Link

The one disappointment, for readers of the *Windrow*, is that Peterken hasn't yet latched onto the fact that there is, or even could be, a scythe revival. He has bought a scythe, but there is no evidence in the book that he has found it useful. He describes a visit to the West Country Scythe Fair, which he clearly enjoyed, but seemed to view largely as a historical re-enactment that gave the crowd “a taste of traditional haymaking” but “probably did little to publicize meadows”.

For the most part what reference he makes to contemporary scythe use in the UK, and to the hand powered haymaking methods associated with it are vaguely disparaging:



Viscri, Transylvania, 2007





Capacious hayracks in Perthshire early 20th century

“In Britain hay seems to be mown by ordinary tractors and side mounted mowers or not at all. Whereas hay was last cut by the scythe in the Wye Valley in the early 1950s, scythes are still used in Switzerland and in parts of Eastern Europe . . .”

“[In 2011, in the Dolomites] I saw an elderly woman fluff up freshly mown grass with a pitch fork, then rake the dried hay into rows with a wooden rake. Such scenes are more than a trace of the traditions, but they are more than one can witness in Britain . . .”

“There is now no tradition of — or labour for — storing partly dried hay in cocks. In our own fields, Bill Creswick mows hay in June if the weather is right, but has been forced to delay as late as September in wet summers.”

None of this is strictly correct. Places such as Tinkers Bubble, Monkton Wyld and the Dyfed Permaculture Trust have been scything and making hay in this way for years, and other places are following suit. There is plenty of labour — voluntary labour — available for tedding, cocking and carrying in hay (though, inevitably, booking it in advance is problematic). Admittedly, the number of holdings in the UK where hay is mown by scythes and made by hand on a commercial basis is tiny. But Peterken seems to be unaware of the large number of conservation bodies — including the National Trust, Natural England, RSPB and at least a dozen county wildlife trusts — who find that using volunteer labour with scythes is an effective way of harnessing voluntary labour. He does supply one photo of scythesmen “caring for God’s acre” in a churchyard in the West Midlands. But he fails to mention the hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who find that a scythe is the only tool they need to convert the nether end of their often substantial gardens into “wildflower meadows”.

This is doubly odd because Peterken advocates precisely the kind of management regime that is adapted to the use of the scythe:

“Attention has turned to devising management regimes that mitigate the damaging impacts on the fauna, while keeping the diversity of plants. The principal strategy is rotational neglect or patchy mowing over a whole season, which generates diverse structures in space and time.”

“Rotational neglect” is Peterken’s term for what scythe users in Britain more commonly (and less pejoratively) call “progressive mowing”. A policy of staggering cuts of hay over a period stretching from the end of May to the end of September is the almost

inevitable corollary of relying on scythes and pitchforks (given that there are no longer gangs of Irish labourers coming over to complete the haysel in one fell swoop). In the wet summers, when Peterken was forced to delay the mowing of his meadows till September, had he put an invitation for mowers out on the SABI email list and knocked up a few hay-racks, he would probably have been able to mow parts of his land in June, July or August.

But this one lacuna, while it may be an important one to members of SABI, in no way undermines the quality of *Meadows* which in all other respects is as comprehensive and as inspiring as one could hope for in 400 pages. It is the one book, above all others, that anyone managing semi-natural meadows ought to have on their shelves. One can only hope that George Peterken picks up his scythe and begins to appreciate how useful this tool could prove in the future management of the landscapes which it created in the not long distant past.

***Meadows* is published by British Wildlife Publishing at £29.95, but if you are coming to the SABI winter gathering and want a copy at wholesale price (£19.50) contact The Windrow asap.**



Peterken watches team mowing at the Scythe Fair.



# The English Scythe Revisited

Richard Brown summarizes the current status of the English scythe.

In recent years hundreds of us have enthusiastically welcomed the Austrian scythe on to our small holdings, gardens and nature reserves. We have discovered how this scythe really is a most efficient and practical tool, and is a joy to use. This scythe revival in Britain has re-equipped people to be able to tackle those small to modest mowing tasks in meadows and grasslands which were formerly a bit of a problem.

But scythes are not new to Britain. We already have a century's long tradition of mowing grass and corn with the scythe, and our own distinct and familiar "English Scythe."

So it is that questions arise as to why many have found the English scythe difficult to use, and why it has largely become a bygone curiosity relegated to being an ornament on pub walls. Is it the knowledge of its use we have lost, or does the tool itself now fail us in some way? Why if the Austrian scythe is so much easier to use has it not been imported and widely established in use in Britain before, if only alongside traditional tools?

It is not as if the English scythe was a rather simple and basic tool. The English scythe was like its Austrian cousin the product of centuries of development and use. The English scythe tradition includes more than familiar S-curved snath with stamped riveted blade. There were a variety of forms and variations in both snath and blade as illustrated by this Tyzack catalogue excerpt.

English Scythes were exported worldwide and were the main form adopted in the USA (before Austrian scythes found their way there in recent times).

Logically one has to presume that the English scythe was fit for purpose to have been used so extensively and unchallenged by the alternative European scythe tradition for so long. And surely there must have been a basis for this other than just tradition and prejudice?

A number of SABI scythers are now re-visiting the English scythe to explore what it is really capable of. Mark Allery for example has reverted to using the English Scythe as it is more in keeping for the talks and courses he gives at the Weald and Downland Museum. A number of us got together during this year's Scything weekend at Wimpole Hall to compare notes. We were pleased to be joined by Chris Earle veteran of the English scythe tradition, who was able to give us a few useful pointers. We also used the 5 x 5 m mowing competition to compare English scythe vs Austrian performance. The results of this meeting can be seen in the following video.



In spite of all this investigation, the answers to the key questions seem to remain largely a matter of conjecture. My current personal theory is that the two divergent styles evolved for different circumstances. The heavier English scythe is harder work. The extra weight gives extra momentum which many believe may help to keep the blade moving through the thick lush grass we have in our damp Atlantic climate. However in my experience this does require extra horsepower from the mower.

This could fit with the English tradition of larger farms on which mowing would be organised to make use of the strongest (high Kw) males available (often hired travelling mowing gangs). The other men women and children in the local community would do the rest of the hay making and carting done (which requires at least 5 workers for every mower). By contrast in Continental Europe mowing was not as segregated. Individuals and communities were more likely to have to mow their own grass. In this circumstance a more refined scythe design which could be used efficiently by individuals, both men and women, of varying strength (Kw) would be preferred. If true this could explain why the Austrian scythe is a better match for current situation in the UK where travelling gangs of super-fit mowers are not available and many of us spend more time on computers than in physical work so do not have the power output needed for an English scythe. Against this however we have yet to find anyone who can mow as well with an English scythe as an Austrian one (not even UK champion, Simon Damant).

Two other factors often discussed. Firstly that the English scythes may have been developed simply because they were easier and cheaper to produce in factories, and for a less demanding UK market largely turning over to mechanised farming. Secondly, many like me failed trying to use our grandfather's scythe just because they were made for previous generations who were shorter on average.

Essentially all scythes are designed to perform the same task. The design may change but the underlying geometry to ergonomically fit the user is the same. I believe there is some potential for further scythe evolution: lightweight snaths in the English style incorporating some of the features of the Austrian pattern to make it compatible with today's requirements. Something I have begun experimenting with ...and to be continued next season.

This article is posted on the SABI website. at <http://scytheassociation.org/2013/11/09/the-english-scythe-revisited/>



# Cultural Exchange

## . Benjamin Bouchard on the early import of English and continental scythes to the US.

The “patent” style of blade [stamped steel riveted to a mild steel frame] was much easier to manufacture on an industrial scale, and they were exported to America as economy blades. However, those blades were judged in period publications as being of very poor quality due to their overly thin and flexible unsupported build. One source I’ve read stated that they were unsuitable for anything more than the lightest of lawn work. The fully forged variety of English pattern blade, though still of more simple form than most American ones, were still fairly complex to forge and the better examples I’ve seen (though rare as hen’s teeth here in the US) have actually had fairly decently thin webs for their sort of construction.

Regarding ease of manufacture of American blades in specific, the blades presently carried by Seymour are made for them under contract by Shroeckenfux and are of considerably simplified form compared to historical examples to the point where they are scarcely recognizable as the same tool. In spite of this I have it on authority from Peter Vido himself that those “American” blades are actually more difficult for Fux to produce than their usual continental blades!

Some of the finest examples were forged by the North Wayne Tool Co. and Emerson & Stevens, both of my own native state of Maine. Other makers included David Wadsworth & Son, Rixford, and Isaiah Blood.

The continental scythe was far from unheard of in the United States during the “golden age” of the tool, and can be found in most large hardware and general goods catalogues of the period. The StaTite Snath Company even made a single-gripped snath designed specifically for continental blades. However, a much smaller selection is always displayed compared to the American sort, and economics tells me this is likely because they did not sell as well. I believe firmly that the American pattern is most appropriate to the fairly rough growth and variegated terrain we experience here and this seems to provide some evidence of such. This is not to say that the continental style is in any way less excellent a tool, but rather it’s a style developed for an altogether different environment and circumstances of use. As with different screwdrivers that both still turn screws, the Anglo-American and continental styles accomplish the same tasks, but do so differently and are best applied under different circumstances.

In terms of sharpening I personally feel that the Anglo-American pattern is an easier tool to maintain. Grinding of the blade need only be performed once in a very great while, and it is not uncommon for your edge



Above: three US made blades. Below: one of 1000 blades imitating the US form, made by Scröckenfux for Compass for sale in the UK, in about 2002, after the stock of patent Tyzack rivetted blades ran out. It is reduced from £30 to £18 and described as a “rivetted” blader, which, of course, it isn’t.



to last all day so long as you do not cut into any hillocks, strike stones, etc and all that is necessary to refresh the edge is the use of a stone, steel, or ruffle. No need for a field anvil should you be working a long mowing session — just keep up the use of the stone!

At any rate, a good scythe is a good scythe, regardless of specific pattern, and we need more folks getting into the hobby.

Benjamin has produced a 14 page guide to use of the traditional Anglo American scythe. If anybody wants a copy, please contact the editor at [chapter7@tlio.org.uk](mailto:chapter7@tlio.org.uk)

### Cultural Differences

The continental scythe, and peening, were often viewed with contempt by Americans and Britons. In the 1860s, paddling down the Danube in his canoe John Macgregor made this observation:

“The haymakers are at work; and half their work is hammering the soft edges of their miserable scythes, and then they dip them in the water.”

And here is a cautionary anecdote from an 1890 US trade report.

“Any American who has seen a German . . . peasant swinging his short broad heeled scythe which he sharpens with a hammer attached to a straight snath with its long awkward projecting handles would naturally suppose that the light bent ash snath with its long slender grass scythe would only have to be shown in this country to be immediately and permanently adopted.

But the fact proved otherwise. An American merchant here who has been for fifteen years an extensive importer of machinery and implements has told me his experience with scythes and snaths. He imported a quantity of the best American make placed them with the hardware dealers whom he was supplying with hay and manure forks etc and awaited results The mowing implements did not sell They were so different in appearance from the ones already in use here as to be distinctly revolutionary.

Finally at Mayence one day in early summer he caused half a dozen to be brought to the market place where they were distributed gratis among the most intelligent farmers who had come in with their dairy produce. They examined the new scythes and shook their heads dubiously. Still since the experiment would cost nothing they promised to try. The following week brought another market day and the confident American was at the trysting place to hear the report. Back came the six peasants each bringing his gratuitous scythe and snath. Not one had been able to use them and they each declined to accept one even as a gift.”

“A Thousand Miles in the Rob Roy Canoe on Rivers and Lakes of Europe”. John MacGregor 1866.

Monthly Consular and Trade Reports, Volume 32, Issues 112-115