

Hedgerow Loss in Wembury in the 20th Century

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Hedgerows are extremely important ecologically, and Devon is fortunate to have more than any other county – 53,000 km or 36,000 miles. One survey of Devon, however, has shown that there was extensive hedgerow loss during the 20th century in most parts of the county, with unavoidable impacts on flora, fauna and landscape.

Because a whole century is a long period, it cannot be assumed that loss was steady over such a long time span. Our analysis has therefore undertaken a comparison between losses experienced between 1915 and 1946 and those occurring between 1946 and 2009.

Data sources were the OS 6" map of 1915, aerial photographs flown by the RAF in December 1946 and Google Earth images from 2009.

Pre-WWII losses are shown in red.

Removals after 1946 are in blue.

The contrast between the scale of change before and after World War II is striking. A few hedgerows were lost in the pre-war period, but their removal was overwhelmingly a post-war phenomenon.

This partly reflected post-war suburbanisation of the Wembury countryside: the cluster of losses south of West Wembury made way for housing in the late 1960s and 1970s. And housing was also the driving force on the coast in the extreme west around Heybrook Bay.

In the large majority of cases, however, farmers removed hedges to enlarge their fields and take better advantage of mechanisation. Away from the coast, especially, this was a common practice across the parish.

On average, the original size of fields affected by hedge removal was around 5 acres. Half were significantly smaller, and even the largest was less than 10 acres.

After hedge removal, the average size of the new fields – around 12.5 acres – was more than double the original figure. Even the smallest of the new fields was 7.5 acres and the largest almost 25. Environmental loss was, therefore, the price paid for this economic / operational economic gain.

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Total Loss for the period 1915 to 2009 = 23,697 metres

- 1915-1946 = 5,616 metres (23.9%)
- 1946-2009 = 17,854 metres (76.1%)

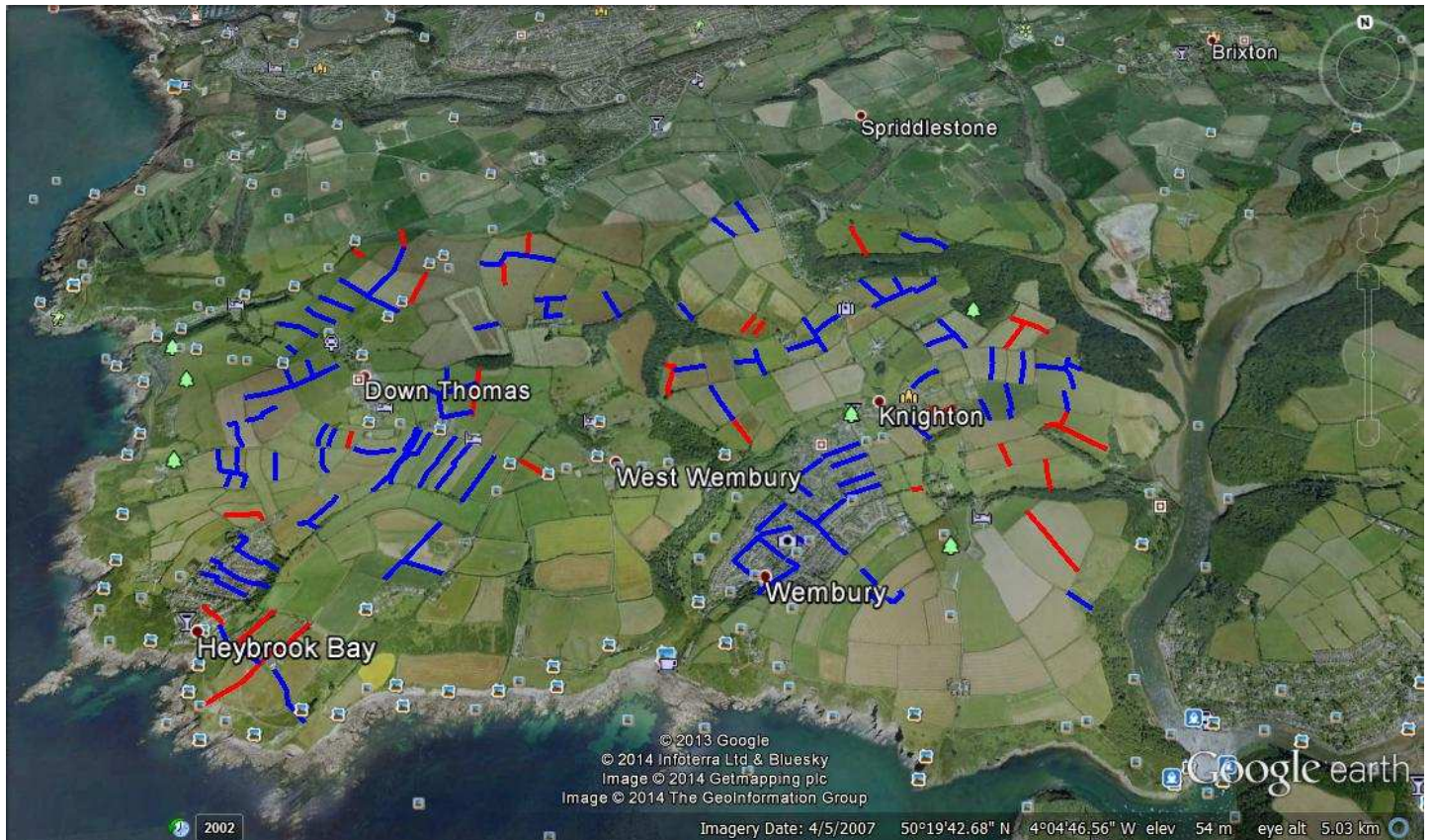


Figure 1 Hedgerow loss in Wembury, 1915-46 (red) and 1947-2009 (blue)