

NOTES FROM SOMEWHERE NEAR THE RECTORY

From Toby Garfitt

January and February are the traditional months for hedging and ditching, when plant growth has stopped for the winter. Before the mechanisation of agriculture, farmworkers had spare time at this season to get on with these routine maintenance tasks. Hedges needed to be kept not only tidy but stockproof, as any gaps would encourage livestock to stray and run the risk of injury or death.

These days hedges are appreciated more for their amenity value, and also for the cover they provide for wildlife. Most of our hedges are kept well-trimmed on the top and sides, but the base is often thin and bare. While it is no longer vital to keep a hedge stockproof (barbed or electrified wire serves that purpose), the traditional craft of hedge-laying, which ensures good, thick, even growth, is enjoying a revival. In the middle of Great Haseley you can see a fine hedge that was laid only last year. With a friend from the village, I recently spent a day at a hands-on course, in the sleet and snow. We learned how to clear unnecessary material from an old overgrown hedge, cut and bend the live stems at an angle, and hold them together with vertical stakes and horizontal woven binders (both made of pliable hazel rods). Vigorous new shoots will quickly grow from the base and the angled stems.

Whether or not we make New Year's resolutions (I'm afraid I don't), the period after Christmas is a pretty good time to take stock. Think of our life as a hedge. There will certainly be untidy bits that need trimming (physically and psychologically), and there may well be broken, even dead bits that need clearing out. Then how about the ragged gaps that will have appeared? This may be the time to address broken relationships, failed aspirations, and a sense of emptiness.

There will certainly be plenty of vigorous life in our hedge, but it may not all be in the right place. A little judicious cutting, bending, reshaping, may be all it takes to promote new growth in those barren areas. And there will be friends who can act as stakes and binders, helping us to hold together and thrive.

January is in any case a time for new beginnings. The Church celebrates the Sunday after Epiphany (January 9th this year) as Plough Sunday, the traditional start of the agricultural year; and the Collect for the following Sunday says this:

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory.

My daughter in Wiltshire has asked me to come over and lay a 50-metre hedge for her. It will be the first time I have tackled something like that on my own, and I'm sure I shall make mistakes. But new beginnings need courage! So as the French would say, "Bonne année, et bon courage (Happy New Year, and good courage)!"

The Rector, Simon Cronk, is away.