

# The Windrow

Newsletter of The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland

No 4 May 2012

## You are invited to the Scythe Association's SABI Mowers' Day

on Saturday 16 June  
which is the day before the

## Green Scythe Fair

on Sunday 17 June  
at Thorney Lakes, Muchelney,  
Langport, Somerset.



### Programme for Mowers' Day

**Saturday Morning: Scythe Course** for beginners and improvers with Christiane Lechner from Austria, Phil Batten and Simon Fairlie.

**Saturday Afternoon: Workshops** on peening, haymaking, grassland management, mowing wheat, English scythes etc. **Also "Gas about Grass"** an informal get-together about all aspects of scythe use, led by Chris Riley.

**Saturday evening: Scythe Association AGM** followed by **live music** (jammers welcome, please bring your instrument).

**Café/Restaurant and Bar** on site.

**Individual scythe tuition** from Christiane Lechner available (see last item p. 3).

### Programme for Sunday

**Mowing Championship Heats** 11am - 2.15 pm

**Team Mowing, Scythe v Strimmer, Haymaking Competition** 12-2.30

**Mowing Championship** 3.30pm

**Prizegiving** 6pm

**Also:** music, speakers, theatre, craft area, kids area, healing area, over 70 stalls, local organic food, beer and cider.

**Thursday 14 and Friday 15  
Teacher's Training Course**  
see next page

To book or more information: ring 01297 561359,  
or email [chapter7@tlio.org.uk](mailto:chapter7@tlio.org.uk)

### Tickets

- Two day ticket: £15, plus £10 membership fee if you aren't already a member. This includes everything except the course on Saturday morning.
  - Two day ticket including beginner's or improver's course on Saturday morning: £50.
  - Entry for Sunday only: £5. Accompanied children free.
- Free parking on site.  
Camping: £10 per pitch.  
Tickets available on the day, but please book beforehand for the course.

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If you need to instruct other mowers or want to perfect your scythe skills, we suggest you come on the

# Teachers' and Group Leaders' Training Course

Thursday 14 to Saturday 16 June at Muchelney, Somerset  
culminating in the West Country Scythe Fair on Sunday 17 June

The Teacher's Training Course held in the days running up to the West Country Scythe Festival is without doubt the best course to attend if you want to master the use of the scythe and demonstrate its use to other people, whether in a professional context or informally. It also provides an unusual holiday on a pleasant site in the Somerset Levels.

We bring scythe and yoga expert Christiane Lechner over from Austria, while peening is taught by Phil Batten, probably the person most accomplished at this skill in this country, and winner of last year's "Quality Cup". Simon Fairlie and Steve Tomlin (tbc) also assist with tuition, and on Saturday there are workshops headed by other scythe teachers and experts from around Britain.

The course is designed for people who wish to become scythe teachers, or people who are working as group leaders of teams of volunteers or employees. However the course will be useful for anyone who wants to achieve mastery of using and maintaining a scythe. Anyone can attend the course provided they have already completed a beginners course and/or acquired basic scything skills.

## Programme

On Thursday and Friday we will run you through the entire process of using and maintaining a scythe — setting up snath and blade angles, mowing stance and movement, sharpening, peening, repairing, health and safety etc — but at each point we also examine the best way of conveying this information to beginners. We also cover how to run a course and organize a group of novices or volunteers in the field.

On Saturday morning you will have the opportunity to practice teaching novices, under the supervision of the tutors. In the afternoon there are a series of workshops on peening, haymaking, grassland management, mowing wheat, the traditional English scythe etc.



Christiane Lechner teaching a young lad



Phil Batten explaining peening at the Teachers' Training Course 2010

On Sunday you have free entry to the West Country Scythe Fair, a busy event comprising the mowing championship, other scythe and haymaking events, music, speakers, kids area, craft area, over 70 stalls, local food and beer and cider.

## Certification

This course is approved by the Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland, which is the only body of its kind in the UK. You will receive a certificate of attendance, which may be of value in the event of health and safety or insurance issues arising.

## Site and Facilities

The course includes lunch on Thursday, Friday and Saturday and free entry for the Scythe Fair on Sunday. In order to keep costs down, self-catering facilities with a supply of basic food stuffs are provided for breakfast and the evening meal — or you can go out to eat in a local pub or restaurant.

The course takes place at Thorney Lakes Caravan Site, a pleasant rural location on the Somerset Levels. There is camping and caravan space on site at a cost of £10 per pitch, (so you can bring your family with you). See Thorney Lakes website: <http://www.thorneylakes.co.uk/> Alternatively we can direct you to bed and breakfast nearby.

## How to Register for the Course

The price for attendance is £135 for individuals or £160 for representatives of organizations. To register for the course, or for more information, please contact Simon Fairlie, 01297 561359 [chapter7@tkio.org.uk](mailto:chapter7@tkio.org.uk)

# UK Scythe Course Directory 2012

Courses for beginners and improvers throughout the country. If you want a course specifically on peening, see Steve Tomlin (North of England) , or Phil Batten (S Wales)

## HOME COUNTIES

**Clive Leeke**, Reading, Berkshire;  
clive@traditionalhedgelaying.co.uk

Clive offers scythe courses for all ages and abilities, in the Chilterns, the beautiful North Wessex AONB, and in Central London. Visit:

Introduction to Scything; Earth Trust, Little Wittenham, Oxon; 21st July, 9th September 2012 - £50

Chalk Grassland Haymaking; Avebury, Wilts; dates & price to be announced"

clive@traditionalhedgelaying.co.uk www.traditionalhedgelaying.co.uk

**Beth Tilston** Brighton,

Learn to scythe in the South East of England. Courses all over the region - updated continually. Visit [www.learnscything.com](http://www.learnscything.com) for more info.

Beginners scythe course - Hatfield Forest, 4th August, £45

Beginners scythe course - Braziers Park, 26th June, £45

bethtilston@googlemail.com

**Mark Allery** Beginners/improvers course, for Transition Guildford with Mark Allery as trainer. Saturday 9 June and the Tuesday 4 September. Held on the Downs accessed from the trackway leading off Longdown Road just east of Guildford. Booking through John Bannister 01483 570468

## WEST COUNTRY

### West Country Scythe Festival

Saturday 16 June: Scythe Course for Beginners and Improvers. Scythe tuition in the morning, and then a choice of workshops in the afternoon. Tutors: Christiane Lechner, Phil Batten and Simon Fairlie.

For more information contact Simon Fairlie on 01297 561359, chapter7@tlio.org.uk

**Jez Hastings**, Monkton Wyld, Dorset

'Short cuts for Gardeners' 7 July 2012 £50 includes a delicious lunch. This course is specifically aimed at gardeners and allotmenters. Jez runs the gardens and grounds at Monkton Wyld Court.

Jeremyhastings@me.com

**Simon Fairlie** Monkton Wyld Court, near Axminster.

18 May - one day course with Mark Allery at the Weald and Downland Museum, Singleton, W Sussex. Please contact Lucy Hockley 01243 811021 [www.wealddown.co.uk](http://www.wealddown.co.uk)

9 June - Urban lawn-mowing and scythe use, London Green Fair at Regents Park.

14-15 July Scythe Use and Haymaking from £145 see Monkton Wyld's website <http://www.monktonwyldcourt.co.uk/>

[www.thescytheshop.co.uk](http://www.thescytheshop.co.uk) ; chapter7@tlio.org.uk; 01297 561359.

**Alastair Inglis** Exeter

Beginners Scythe courses:

Thurs 24 May, 09.30 - 4.30-ish, Underwood Discovery Centre, Beeson, S. Hams.

Sat 09 June, 09.30 - 4.30-ish, at Sharp-ham, nr. Totnes.

Sat 30 June, 09.30 - 4.30-ish, at Helford, Cornwall.

Sat 07 July, 09.30 - 4.30-ish, at Exeter Community Agriculture field, nr. Shillingford St. George, Exeter.

Mid-July, Date TBC, Beginners Scythe Course, 09.30 - 4.30-ish, at Growers Organics, Yealmpton, nr. Plymouth.

al.inglis@yahoo.co.uk, or Mobile: 07796-805453.

**Chris Riley**, Wiltshire,

Available for scythe teaching in Wiltshire and neighbouring counties, and nationally from August 2012.

chris@riley2009.plus.com

## EAST ANGLIA

### Eastern Counties Scything Weekend

Saturday 23 June: Scythe Course for Beginners and Improvers. Tutors: Simon Damant, Richard Brown and others tbc.

Contact [Simon.Damant@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:Simon.Damant@nationaltrust.org.uk)

**Richard Brown\***, Kings Lynn, Norfolk.

Botanist, ecologist and seedsman offers practical instruction on wildflower meadow and grassland management using a scythe. Visit Emorsgate Seeds website for more details.

Scything & grassland management course, Greengrow, Ilkeshall St Andrew, Suffolk. 26 May - £45

Scythe clinic, talks & demonstrations, Oxborough Hall (NT), Norfolk. 21st July - free (with NT entry fee).

richardjbrown556@gmail.com

## NORTHERN ENGLAND

**Paul Kingsnorth** Cumbria.

Scything for Beginners, Hay Bridge Nature Reserve, Bouth, South Cumbria. A day-long course in a beautiful nature reserve. Maximum six people. Choose from four available dates: Saturday 12 May, Sunday 10 June, Saturday 7 July Sunday 2 September. 6 places left

Scything for Beginners, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire 23 June. A day course on a local smallholding.

Scything for Beginners, Brantwood House, Cumbria 14 & 15 July A two-day mowing course with me and fellow tutor Steve Tomlin, at John Ruskin's old house on the shores of Coniston. Food and accommodation provided, with plenty of mowing time and an evening talk.

<http://paulkingsnorth.net/scything/courses>  
email: paul@paulkingsnorth.net

**Steve Tomlin** Kendal, Cumbria

Courses for beginners and improvers in beautiful meadows on the edge of the Lake District.

Learn to Mow with an Austrian Scythe 26 May, 30 June, 9 Sept 2012 - £60  
Scythe Improvers 11 Aug - £70  
Improve your Peening 12 Aug - £60 - Both improvers' courses together £115

steve-tomlin@hotmail.co.uk; <http://scythespace.wordpress.com/courses> for more info.

## LINCOLNSHIRE

Deano Martin is available for scythe tuition in this area.

deanom@madasafish.com

## SOUTH WALES

**Phil Batten**

Beginners courses and peening courses. At Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust, S Wales: Beginners Scythe Course - 20th May; 29th July; 11th August; 19th September  
Scythe Workshop / Improvers Course - 28th July  
Peening and Sharpening Workshop - 14th July

scythecymru@yahoo.co.uk <http://scythecymru.wordpress.com>

## WELSH BORDERS

**Andrea Gilpin\***, Presteigne, Powys,

Learn how to mow with ease and flow! Ditch the mower and strimmer - with every stroke of the scythe embrace an ecologically beneficial way of managing the precious gift of grass. Visit [www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk) for more info.

info@cfga.fsnet.co.uk

## CHANNEL ISLANDS

**Phil Batten**

Beginners Scythe Course at Wild-Guernsey, Guernsey, on 8th September.

See [www.scytheguernsey.wordpress.com](http://www.scytheguernsey.wordpress.com) for details or email [scytheguernsey@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:scytheguernsey@yahoo.co.uk)

## SCOTLAND

**Paul Kingsnorth**

Beginners and Improvers Weekend, Scotia Seeds, Angus, Scotland. Beginners Day - Sat 25 August; Improvers Day - Sun 26 Aug.

How to book: email Fiona Guest [fionaguest@scotiaseeds.co.uk](mailto:fionaguest@scotiaseeds.co.uk)

## IRELAND

Chris Hayes will be giving two beginners courses in Tipperary and Cork later in the summer, provisionally for late July.

chris@badgershillforestry.ie

## INDIVIDUAL TUITION

Christiane Lechner will be giving individual tuition at the West Country Scythe Festival. Places very limited. To book contact Christiane at [c.lechner@stn.at](mailto:c.lechner@stn.at)

# Eastern Counties Scything and Smallholding Weekend Wimpole Estate, Cambs

(see photo right)

23-24 June 2012

Scythe competition, haymaking, and  
smallholders' fair.

Demonstrations of scything, hay making and other rural  
skills.

**Sprint mowing competition 3pm**

Blacksmith, Pole lathes, Cleaving, Wattle & gate hurdle  
making; Heavy horse hay making demonstrations; Spoon  
making competition; Home made cider competition; Team  
mowing and scythe vs. strimmer; Hay stack race; Peening  
competition; Smallholder stalls and rural crafts Local beer  
festival.

**Long Distance Mowing Competition Saturday**

Simon Damant, the organizer, says: "Sprinting is fine but  
the real champion is the person who consistently mows  
well over a period of time I am therefore offering a £30  
prize for the winner of the quarter acre cut I will not do it  
this year and if more than two ladies do the eighth of an  
acre I will give a prize of £30 for the winner of that.

Those interested in the competition please email me with  
their details before the 20 June so I know the approxi-  
mate number of entrants if possible but not to worry if  
you come on the spur of the moment.

Contact: Simon Damant [simon.damant@nationaltrust.org](mailto:simon.damant@nationaltrust.org).

## *London Green Fair Regents Park, 9-10 June 2012*

### *Liberating London's Lawns*

Talk, demonstration and tuition on the subject  
of mowing and managing urban and suburban  
lawns and gardens with a scythe, with Ida  
Fabrizio and Simon Fairlie. Part of the London  
Permaculture Group's stand. Contact Ida at [ifabrizio@hotmail.com](mailto:ifabrizio@hotmail.com); 07930 927 979



## Transylvanian Scythe Holidays

After last years successful haymaking festival in Transylvania  
(see photo left) Romania, this year Barbara Knowles is co-ordi-  
nating two events

**Haymaking course 15 to 21 July**

A new opportunity to learn every aspect of traditional  
haymaking working alongside the Sárig family. July displays  
the outstanding meadow flowers and butterflies at their most  
spectacular.

**International Haymaking Festival 19 to 26 August**

Now in its fourth year, the Gyimes Haymaking Festival is  
a celebration of traditional skills and crafts related to mak-  
ing hay. The programme depends on the weather but should  
include mowing by scythe, making hay, a mowing competition,  
learning how to make traditional rakes and scythes with a local  
craftsman, visiting the cows in the summer pastures, making  
and tasting cheese, horse and cart rides, collecting wild herbs,  
enjoying local food, learning about meadow plants and animals,  
testing your skill in folk dances.

We can organise village accommodation, rail transfer from  
Miercurea Ciuc, airport transfers (from Tirgu Mures, Cluj-Napoca  
or Bucharest), and suggest a guide and an itinerary if you want  
to explore more of the area before or after the events.

Places are limited, so send expressions of interest to [barbara.knowles@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:barbara.knowles@yahoo.co.uk) We can also organise tailor-made hay-  
making and other holidays in this beautiful region.

## World Championships 2012



You would have thought  
that the World Scythe-Mowing  
Championships 2012 would be  
held in London in August; but no,  
they are taking place in Salbitz,  
Saxony, from 17-20 May. These  
are well worth a visit, but in case  
you are thinking of competing,  
take a look at Joseph Mayer,  
the German champion mowing  
10 metres by 10 metres in 1.10  
seconds at Imdorf on youtube.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLKKOKeWIUC&feature=related>

Left: The London Green Fair,  
Regents Park last year.  
Above: Aerial photo of grass  
plots ready for the Salbitz com-  
petition.

For more information see the  
ScytheWorld Championship website (in  
German) at <http://www.sensenwm.de/398.html>



# The SCYTHE ASSOCIATION of BRITAIN and IRELAND

## THE SCYTHE ASSOCIATION OF BRITAIN & IRELAND

was formed in 2011, only 2000 years after the arrival of the scythe in the British Isles . . .

These islands are blessed with one of the best grass-growing climates in the world, so grassland management has always been a necessary activity, whether for feeding livestock through the winter by haymaking, or for keeping on top of lawns, cricket pitches and way-side weeds.

In the past workers were trained in the proper handling of the English scythe, but after WW2 scythes were replaced by noisy and temperamental petrol-powered machinery. In the last decade the Austrian scythe has arrived in the UK. A traditional yet modern and versatile tool, it is light and easy to use, yet giving scope for ever-improving levels of skill and pleasure.

Scythes are once again being used in public parks and gardens, wildlife reserves, stately homes and allotments, on riverbanks and haymeadows throughout the islands. From the Home Counties to the Outer Hebrides, the scything revival is flourishing, not least because of its benefits to health, its environmental benefits, and the sense of satisfaction that comes from real work done well.

As a testament to the scythe's many enjoyable aspects, a lively social network has sprung up with events, festivals and courses around the country and keen participants from all walks and ages of life. It is this natural association which SABI exists to support and foster.

## The Aims of The Scythe Association:

- To promote the use of scythes in Britain
- To improve mowing skills through training and the broadcast of information
- To promote the advantages of the scythe to government, local authorities and national organizations
- To enhance communication amongst mowers and between mowers and landowners and other sectors
- To promote the study of the history of the scythe and allied technologies
- To maintain standards of manufacture and supply of scythes and ancillary equipment



## Membership benefits include:

- Free or reduced entry fees to competitions
- Personal invitation to regional events
- Local and national networking and training opportunities
- Downloadable leaflets
- Googlegroup news and blog access.
- A membership card and handsome die-cast badge.

Membership is open to all, and runs annually from the 1st February. Irish members may pay by cheque or cash, in euros.

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## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

Name:

Address:

Town

County / Postcode

email address

How would you prefer to keep in touch with the Association? (tick as many as you wish to)

- website news postings
- Windrow newsletter (sent as pdf by email)
- facebook / twitter
- gmail group
- by post

Do you belong to any organisations or companies relevant to your use of scythes?

Signature:

Date

I enclose a cheque or postal order made out to the Scythe Association for £10 for annual subscription to next 31st January (Irish members - 10 euro)

Please return to Membership Sec, Monkton Wyld Court, Charmouth, Bridport DT6 6DQ.

# SURVEY OF PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR SCYTHE USERS

This survey was carried out in the months of January-March 2012. The purpose was to determine how scythes were being used by professional and voluntary sector organizations and individuals, to assess whether they were seen to be effective, and to identify problems.

## Method of Survey

110 survey forms were mailed directly to addresses supplied by the Scythe Shop; these elicited 49 responses. A further 14 responses came back through advertising the survey in the Windrow, the newsletter of the Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland. Two of these responses were discarded because they came from people who were only mowing in domestic gardens, leaving 61 valid responses.

There were 17 questions — all open ended questions, rather than limited response questions (eg tick (a) (b) or (c)). (We chose this approach on the grounds that many scythe users are likely to be the sort of people who think outside the box.)

Of the 61 respondents, only two had stopped using scythes, while all the others still used them. We draw no statistical conclusion from this as recipients of the survey who had stopped using scythes might be less inclined to fill in the survey. Nonetheless, since there was a 45 per cent return rate on the targeted survey forms — which is fairly high — it seems very likely that a majority of professional users who have bought scythes in the past ten years are finding them useful.

## Main conclusions

- **Scythe use is experiencing a revival.** The overwhelming majority of organizations buying scythes (89 per cent) have been using them for less than ten years, and 73 per cent have been using them for less than five years. (Q 4).

- **Scythes are being used in a wide variety of professional contexts, and on a wide variety of vegetation.** On some sites scythes are the main or only tool used for cutting light vegetation, in other cases they are a subsidiary tool. (Questions 2, 9 and 10)

- **Scythes have several advantages over machine tools.** The main advantages cited for using scythes are that they are good for volunteers, they make no noise, they use no fossil fuel, they are light, pleasant to use, good for wildlife, cheap, environmentally friendly and better at depositing vegetation in rows where it can be gathered up. (Q 11, 12,)

- **Scythes have two principal disadvantages.** They require some skill, and they are slower than machines in some situations. (Q 13)

- **Scythes are especially useful for volunteers.** There are few health and safety issues and no requirement for professional certified training. Nonetheless a certain level of skill is necessary and bringing volunteers up to this level can sometimes be problematic. (Q 12)

- **Most people enjoy working with scythes.** A large majority (80 per cent) reported that their workforce enjoyed using scythes and some responses were very enthusiastic. Only one response stated categorically that their workforce did not enjoy using scythes — it was tried by the warden as an experiment and rejected. However in some cases there is a problem with staff acceptance, particularly with employees used to working with machines. (Q 8, 17)

- **Scythes improve relations with the public.** 82 per cent of respondents reported that scythes altered their rapport with the public; and all except two of the remainder had no engagement with the public. The most common observation was that the absence of noise and PPE made workers more approachable. (Q14)

- **The majority of users have had some training, but many still find sharpening and peening challenging.** (Q7 and 15). Peening, which involves thinning the edge of a blade with a hammer and anvil, is the most difficult aspect of scythe maintenance for many people.

- **Scythes are fairly robust, and breakage is not a great problem.** There were 11 reports of broken blades or snaths; in 8 of these cases, misuse was cited as a reason for failure. (Q 16)

# Analysis of Some Salient Issues

## 1. Staff Acceptance

The scythe is a popular tool: 49 responses (80%) stated that their workforce enjoyed using them, nine (13%) reported a mixed reaction and only one response stated that workers categorically disliked the tool. (Even in this case, a site of 5000 acres, the respondent mentioned that he had used it in his own orchard “*and did really enjoy it so it is a personal preference*”). 36 out of 42 organizations using volunteers (85%) reported that their workforce enjoyed using scythes. For example, a voluntary group working for a district council reported that they found scythes:

“*very satisfying. We have a band of volunteers who will pick up a scythe along with other tools — seems to come as second nature.*”

Others made comments such as “*very popular*” (County Wildlife Trust) and “*very positive and well-received*” (BTCV group).

However, 12 responses to Question 17 (Have you experienced any other problems or difficulties when introducing scythes into the work schedule?) mentioned resistance from users when scythes were first introduced, and the matter was also raised in responses to Question 13 (Disadvantages of the scythe). In some cases this resistance disappeared over time, in others some staff were enthusiastic about scythes while others remained unconvinced. Since these responses were very varied it is worth quoting several of them.

“*Initial credibility issues.*” (County Council)

“*Most volunteers show no interest at all in learning the skill of scything, but a few are very enthusiastic.*” (District Council)

“*Perception biggest problem! People quite wedded to their brush cutters.*” (Wildlife Trust)

“*The problem is convincing people used to machines that a hand tool is capable of doing the job.*” (Metropolitan Council)

“*Biggest problem is staff acceptance.*” (Zoo)

“*Some staff were doubtful but they came round.*” (Voluntary group)

“*Most people can't see the advantage, but many others enjoy.*” (National Trust property).

“*Resistance of members of staff who love their machines!*” (National Trust property)

“*Staff and volunteers can be suspicious of scythes perceiving them to be inefficient. Often there is initial interest and then people default to machinery. Many people find the technique of using them difficult.*” (National Trust property).

“*It is a problem getting buy-in from paid employees who view it as making their life more difficult. Need to introduce gradually and let them try it out — in my experience they can become the best advocates.*” (Private Contractor)

Unsurprisingly, resistance to using the scythe was most common amongst workers who already used machines, and hence amongst paid staff rather than volunteers or individual users. Of the nine organizations reporting continuing resistance from at least some of their workers, two thirds used paid employees (whereas only 39 per cent of all respondents employed paid staff).

On the other hand, only six out of the 42 respondents using volunteers reported negative reactions towards the scythe. In at least two cases this was related to the use of machinery:

“*Variable response. Volunteers that use brushcutters always prefer brushcutter over scythes.*” (County Wildlife Trust)

“*A little reluctance from some volunteers who are very used to using brushcutters.*” (County Wildlife Trust)

The manager of an RSPB nature reserve observed “*Our volunteer team are not all machinery qualified and will default to scythes. . . Some can 'get' scythes and appreciate their use — others see them as a necessary evil . . .*” He found the main disadvantage of scythes to be “*working with volunteers who don't 'get' them.*” Yet he also considered “*scythes are a great way to engage volunteers.*”

## 2. Training

Why do some people “get” scythes while others don't? Is it a case of “*horses for courses*” as the RSPB manager put it? Are some people constitutionally or psychologically better suited to the scythe than others? Is it, as one respondent put it, that “*some people like big, smelly, horrible machinery*”? Or is it simply that some people conclude that the advantages of using a scythe are outweighed by its disadvantages.

The answers to question 13 confirm that there are two main disadvantages to the scythe: that it is slower in some circumstances than using machinery, and that it requires a degree of skill — as one respondent put it: “*training for brushcutters is more straightforward*”. To an extent these two disadvantages reinforce each other. Lack of skill makes work with the scythe much slower than it need be — and the worker who repeatedly defaults to machinery because he finds it quicker will never develop the skill. By contrast, volunteers who are not qualified to use machinery must knuckle down and learn to master the tool, and more often than not, that is what they do.

It can take more than a simple training course to avoid this vicious circle. More than half of all respondents stated that at least one person had attended a one day or two-day training course, and less than a quarter had had no training other than publications and videos. There was no correlation in the survey responses between user resistance to the scythe and lack of training. On the contrary, nearly all of the respondents who reported staff resistance provided a measure of formal training, and two of them, both managers of National Trust properties, are highly experienced scythesmen.

Nonetheless the majority of those reporting user resistance reported difficulties keeping tools sharp. One independent contractor reported: “*beginners do struggle and in many organizations with volunteers the inability to keep scythes sharp is a reason why they don't catch on*”. Two respondents complained that it was a chore having to do all the peening and maintenance for their volunteers. In all, 25 responses (41%) cited problems with sharpening and peening; it is also possible that some of those who did not report a problem are unaware that their blades could be keener and their scything faster and more effective.

**Our recommendation** for anyone planning to introduce scythes to their workforce is to adopt a training strategy that focuses particularly on sharpening and peening — possibly involving attendance at one of the peening courses that several teachers are now providing. There are probably many enthusiastic volunteers who will never master peening — but it might be an advantage to train two or three more adept workers to peen, so that the burden of maintaining blades in condition does not fall on one person.

### 3. Arguments For and Against Certification

One respondent, a contractor working primarily for a conservation charity, made the following comments :

*“Scythes have a great appeal and help to draw volunteers in. They are so much more pleasant to use than a strimmer. [However] Austrian scythes require a more careful approach. This is a difficult skill to master and takes practice and dedication and good training. I think the main barrier to the wider incorporation of scythes in our work is one of training. At the moment it is more straightforward to arrange training and maintenance for brushcutters etc. It can also be difficult to get managers/external organizations to see a scythe course on the same level as an externally certified (eg LANTRA) brushcutter course.”* He suggested that scythe use could be promoted by “*getting LANTRA or another training authority to include a certification for the use and maintenance of Austrian scythes.*”

On the other hand eight respondents to question 12 cited as one of the advantages of scythes that there was no need for formal training. (Of these eight, three were Wildlife Trusts, two National Trust sites, one a Forestry Commission site, one a County Council, and one a contractor.) Typical comments were:

*“No formal/external/expensive training.”* (County Council)

*“Any volunteer can have a go with a scythe, brush-cutter requires a course and certificate”.* (County Wildlife Trust)

*“LANTRA training course not required.”* (National Trust, their emphasis)

This divergence of opinion reflects a debate that is currently exercising the newly formed Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland. Some members would like to initiate a LANTRA or similar certificated course on the grounds that better training is needed, and that it will enhance the credibility of the scythe amongst

professional landworkers. Others argue that one of the principal benefits of the scythe is that it can be used and enjoyed by volunteers, and that if a LANTRA course were established, site managers would be reluctant to let volunteers use scythes unless they were qualified, for fear of litigation should an accident occur.

The dispute highlights the fact that there are two reasons for needing training, which can become confused. Brushcutters require certificated training largely because they are potentially a danger to the user and the public. Scythes (despite their fierce aspect and their association with Grim Reapers) are less dangerous than billhooks and require training primarily because they need some skill to use and maintain. The worry is that by providing certificated scythe training for professionals, amateurs will be barred from using them in a professional context because they no longer meet health and safety requirements embedded in certification. Eight respondents stated that one of the advantages of the scythe was that it had fewer health and safety requirements:

*“An insurance/public liability policy does not have to have extra clauses and therefore extra costs for scythes as they do for strimmers etc.”* (This response was from a local voluntary organization which in 2011 provided insurance cover for a scythe course held by a district council, because the council's rules prevented it from insuring the course!)

There is one possible way out of this dilemma. If a LANTRA or similar certificated course were established, not for individual scythe use on its own, but for training and managing teams of volunteer scythesmen and women, then both quality of scythemanship and the status of the scythe would be enhanced; at the same time, any conservation organization could engage uncertified scythe users, either staff or volunteers, without fear of litigation, provided that they were under the management of someone who was a trained and certified team leader.

### Conclusion

Scything is an art, but managing a gang of scythesmen is a greater art, and that is probably the underlying message of this survey. Mowing was a team activity in the days when all of our hay and much of our corn was harvested with the scythe; it remains a team activity today, because that is the only way that the scythe can cover a sizable area of land. There is no difficulty finding volunteers to mow large areas of land because most people enjoy using scythes provided they are well taught. It is the job of the professional to instruct them and organize them.

Joe Wright's film of Anna Karenina, due for release later this year, will include a sequence showing a gang of 40 mowers, shot on Salisbury Plain — the largest team in Britain for many a year. Hopefully it will arouse wider interest and set a standard for co-operative scythemanship throughout the country.

**The detailed results of this survey are available on request from [chapter7@tlio.org.uk](mailto:chapter7@tlio.org.uk)**