

The Windrow

Newsletter of The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland

No 8 April 2014



Reed Cutting in Norfolk and Devon — see page 5

By the end of April last year grass had hardly begun to grow. This year growth is so luxuriant that we will soon be scanning the weather forecast for a hay-making window.

But if blades of grass are more abundant this year, so are blades of steel. This issue of the *Windrow* lists an unprecedented range of scythe events and courses taking place in Britain and beyond and there are probably more we haven't clocked.

Time then to dig out your blades rub off the rust and make your way out to the field. Happy mowing folks.

This Newsletter is produced by SABI
The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland
<http://scytheassociation.org/>

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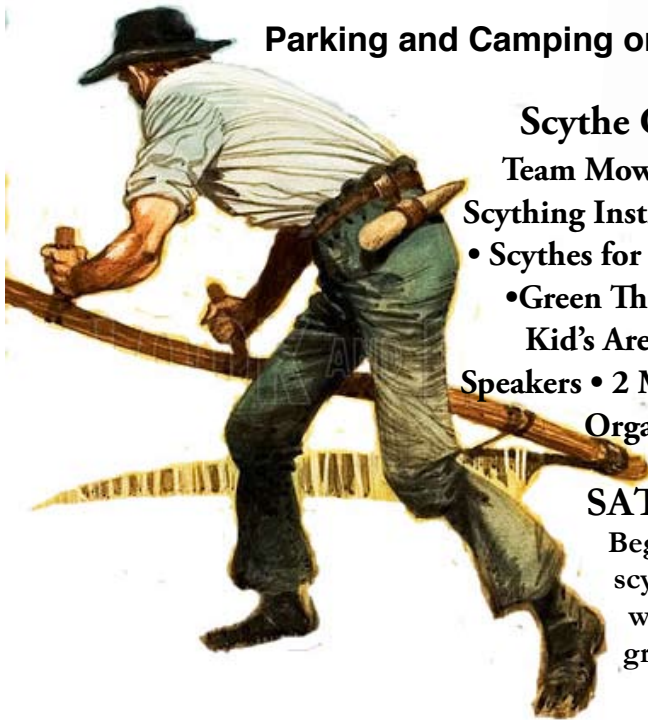
The Tenth West Country Scythe Festival *and* Green Fair

SUNDAY 15 JUNE 2014

Thorney Lakes, Muchelney,
Langport, Somerset, TA10 0DW

£5 ENTRY — KIDS FREE

Parking and Camping on Site



Scythe Championship
Team Mowing • Haymaking •
Scything Instruction • Crafts Stalls
• Scythes for Sale • Tools and Tat •
• Green Things • Campaigns •
Kid's Area — Hay for Play
Speakers • 2 Music Stages • Ceilidh
Organic food • 2 Bars

SATURDAY 14 JUNE

Beginners' and improvers'
scything instruction, plus
workshops on peening,
grassland management,
haymaking etc.

More information: 01297 561359 chapter7@tlio.org.uk
www.thescytheshop.co.uk/festival.html ; <http://www.greenfair.org.uk>

April 2014

INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

Sixth Annual Transylvanian Haymaking Festival

3-10th August A wonderful week long opportunity for a scything and haymaking holiday in a country that hasn't yet been completely screwed up by industrial agriculture.

For more information contact Barbara Knowles
barbara.knowles@yahoo.co.uk

Trim Haymaking Festival Co Meath Ireland

15 June 2014. Now in its 46th year this festival includes a mowing competition, and other events, including a "roll in the hay" competition where couples compete tied together with hay rope.

<http://www.trimhaymakingfestival.com>

Russian Scythe Competition

UK mowers have received an invitation from Aleksandr Shatokhin of the Arti Scythe Factory who writes:

"Our fourth Scythe Tournament will be held on **12 July 2014**. We conduct these competitions in the Ural Mountains (Sverdlovsk region) in the village of Arti. Mowers from all over Russia and some European countries participate.

Maybe some brave mowers from UK would risk to take part in our adventure?"

For more details please write to ash2o@mail.ru; Tel: +7 922 224 34 09. The website is at <http://kosari.ru>

Austria 2015

Schroeckenfux, who have been making scythes since 1540, are celebrating their 475th anniversary next year. There are unconfirmed rumours that they may be hosting a scythe festival to celebrate We will keep you informed.

Seventh Eastern Counties Scythe Festival

Wimpole, Herts 28-29 June

A fun weekend at the National Trust property, with a wide range of scything and other rural events. Mowing competitions include 5mx5m, 10mx 10m, eighth of an acre and quarter of an acre. There is also a course for beginners on Saturday. Other events include spoon making, an egg and wooden spoon race, cider competition etc. Plus demos from blacksmiths, sheep shearers, pole lathers, and other rural crafts, not to mention Justin's Bentley.

Camping is available and there are spaces for stallholders (free if you demonstrate, otherwise there is a small fee).

For more information go to <http://sadeik.wordpress.com/walks/scything-festival/> or email Simon.Damant@nationaltrust.org.uk



UK EVENTS

Eastern Region Scything Demonstrations and Scythe Clinic.

Oxburgh Hall (National Trust), Norfolk, 26th July 2014

Talks and demonstrations on scything and meadow management from 11am - 3pm in the walled garden at Oxburgh Hall. Richard Brown and other SABI members will be available to give advice, so come along if you need help with either wild flower management or scythes.

Advice and talks free but normal National Trust entry fees apply.

Eastern Counties Cereal Mowing Day

Wimpole Estate, Cambs Weather and season permitting we will be mowing our wheat and there is also an opportunity to stay over for our regular pole-lathing day on the Sunday.

For more information contact Jim McVittie (dalefield@ntlworld.com) or Simon Damant (simon.damant@gmail.com)

Wimpole Practice Sessions

Wimpole Estate, Cambs SABI members are invited to join our informal mowings during June and July. We usually meet on some weekday evenings.

For more information contact Jim McVittie (dalefield@ntlworld.com).

Get Together in Cornwall

Get together day for all Kernow scythers and anybody else interested at Skyegrove, Herodsfoot, in Cornwall on Sat 7th June 10 - 3. Lunch provided and a bit of scything.

KAustin@EdenProject.com

SABI AGM

The Scythe Association's AGM will take place on the evening of Saturday 14 June at the West Country Scythe Festival.

Social Mow in South Wales

On Sunday 13th July, join SABI member Phil Batten and others for our annual social mow on the wildflower meadows of Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust. Meet fellow scythers, share mowing tips and tricks, and see hand hay making in progress, all followed by a bring and share lunch.

. We will be mowing from 8am, join us when you can. Bring food to share. Overnight camping available. Volunteers welcome for the weekend and following week.

For more information see www.scythecymru.co.uk/courses/events/

Haysel Begins in May at Monkton Wyld

Are you tired of mowing rank, lodged, wiry or gone-to-seed meadows full of grass past its sell-by date? Come and mow the burgeoning, succulent rye-grass and clover coveted by our Jersey cows, and help make it into hay. Grass which cuts like butter makes the best butter.

We will be mowing on the first dry spell in May, and continue making hay into June and July with a second cut in August perhaps.

If you want to get on our email list to be informed (at short notice) when we will be haymaking, please email Simon at chapter7@tlio.org.uk

Kew Gardens at Wakehurst Sussex

Scythe event 19th and 20th July with Beth Tilston at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. Wakehurst Place, Selsfield Road, Ardingly, West Sussex, RH17 6TN

Contact i.parkinson@kew.org 01444 894304

We Need More Teachers

— especially for professionals in land management, writes Richard Brown

Last year's scything and grassland management courses organized by Flora Locale proved so popular that this year they are the headline course for the conservation charity's training programme. The courses are tutored By Clive Leeke and Richard Brown

Flora Locale courses are specifically aimed at professional people involved in land management, either directly (including farmers or landowners, local authorities, Environment agency, wildlife trusts, landscape professionals etc). Increasing interest and adoption of the scythe as a serious tool in these circles has to be a good sign.

Mark Schofield of Lincs Wildlife Trust attended one of the courses run by Richard Brown and responded with this feedback:

"Following the scything course, I am strongly encouraged to feel that scything education could make possible many community meadow schemes that would otherwise fail. In my experience it is the expense, lack of availability and lack of skill with power tools and large-scale equipment that often precludes meadow creation and/or management on the small scale at the village green and churchyard level".

Mark has since been working at persuading colleagues within his wildlife trust to consider adopting the scythe I have been discussing with Mark of ways to support this.

What I have observed both personally and in conversation with others is that demand for training, for participation in events like the Coronation meadows is stretching capacity of the current dedicated band of disciples (To my mind the clear answer to this is to encourage more individuals and groups to get involved.

The Somerset course to develop skills of scythe instructors and leaders which runs each year before the scythe festival is the lynch pin of this process. I would urge anyone who has been on a scythe course before and who has since developed a reasonable competency with a scythe to consider the course for themselves, particularly if they have the potential to foster scythe use within a local community group. The self analysis of technique that comes with learning how to teach others is also one of the best ways to develop one's own scythe skills. Attending the teaching course in itself may not be enough to make you a confident scythe instructor but will set you up to become one. You will certainly learn the skills needed to organise and lead mowing groups safely.

Details about the "Masterclass" at Muchelney, Somerset on 12-14 June are given on the next page.

TRAINING COURSES

Masterclass at the West Country Scythe Festival

12-14 June, at Muchelney, Langport Somerset

The definitive course for

- mowers with some experience who want to perfect their skills;
- team leaders managing volunteers or staff;
- people who want to teach scythe use to others.

The teachers are Christiane Lechner, scythe and yoga teacher from Austria; Phil Batten master peener from Scythe Cymru, <http://scythecymru.co.uk/> and Steve Tomlin from Scythospace <http://steve-tomlincrafts.wordpress.com/scythes/>

The venue is at Thorney Lakes. Muchelney, near Langport <http://www.thorney-lakes.co.uk/>

The cost is £165 for individuals, £190 for organizations. Food is provided –Camping on site is available

For a programme and other information please see <http://www.thescytheshop.co.uk/festival.html> To book, email Simon at chapter7@tlio.org.uk tel 01297 561359

Beginners' and Improvers' Course at the West Country Scythe Festival

14 June, Muchelney, Langport Somerset

Supervised by Simon Fairlie, Christiane Lechner, Steve Tomlin and Phil Batten.

Scythe use, set up, sharpening and maintenance in the morning.

A choice of workshops, including peening, grassland management, haymaking and English scythe use in the afternoon.

Trainees are divided into two groups, beginners and improvers,

Entry to Scythe Fair on Sunday is included in the price of £55.

To book, email Simon at chapter7@tlio.org.uk tel 01297 5613

Training at the Eastern Counties Scythe Festival

Beginners course at the Eastern Counties Scythe Festival 28 June. For more information see festival announcement at the bottom of page 2

Steve Tomlin - Cumbria

Learn to Mow with an Austrian Scythe: 25 May, 20 June, 6 Sept 2014 - £80.

Courses also offered further afield.

steve-tomlin@hotmail.co.uk SteveTomlinCrafts.wordpress.com

Andrea Gilpin - Powys

Courses for beginners and improvers.

Saturday 12 April, Saturday 2 August at Wild Meadow, Presteigne, Powys, www.wildmeadow.co.uk/scything-classes/ £50

Sunday 6 July at Karuna, Shropshire, www.karuna.org.uk, 01694 751374 £55

Courses also offered further afield.

Philip Batten - S Wales

Introductory Scythe Courses - Saturday 24th May, Wednesday 9th July, Saturday 30th August, additional dates to be confirmed - £50

Get Ready to Mow - Peening Workshop - Sunday 6th April - £40

Peening and Sharpening Workshop - Wednesday 23rd July - £40

Hand Hay Making Workshop - Wednesday 16th July - £50

Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust, Carmarthenshire; scythecymru@yahoo.co.uk www.scythecymru.co.uk

Simon Fairlie - Dorset

Courses on scythe use, grassland management and haymaking at Monkton Wyld Court, on the Dorset/Devon border, .

Two day courses, both days recommended, but you can choose to attend day 1 only (complete beginners), or only day 2 only (improvers):

9-11 May 2014

18-20 July 2014

5-7 September 2014

For info www.thescytheshop.co.uk or chapter7@tlio.org.uk; To book: www.monktonwyldcourt.co.uk/, or tel 01297 560342

Alastair Inglis - Devon

Sunday 18 May: Introduction to Scything - Hawkwood College, Stroud, Bookings via their website <http://www.hawkwoodcollege.co.uk>

Scything Taster Sessions - Green Earth Awakening Camp, Blackdown Hills 16-20 July, Bookings via Buddhafield.

May - June: Introduction to Scything - Exeter Growers Co-operative field near Exeter, Dates to be confirmed.

Saturday 31 May (to be confirmed): Peening Workshop - Exeter Growers Co-operative field near Exeter.

Contact Alastair on 07796-805453 or al.inglis@yahoo.co.uk

Kevin Austin - Cornwall

Beginners course on 6th July 10.00 - 4.00 at Skygrove Herodsfoot Cornwall.

Contact Kevin 07943653825 or kevin@skygroveorganics.co.uk

Richard Brown - Norfolk

Botanist, ecologist and seedsman offers scythe courses and tuition by arrangement.

Practical scything & grassland management. 2nd July 2014. Emorsgate Seeds, Kings Lynn, Norfolk. £100 / £75 concessions - to book contact flora locale (all proceeds go to this charity).

richardjbrown556@gmail.com

Herts/Cambs

Beginners course at the Eastern Counties Scythe Festival 28 June. For more information see festival announcement at the bottom of page 2

Clive Leeke - Berks

Introduction to the Austrian Scythe:

4 July 2014, Earth Trust, Wittenham, South Oxon, OX14 4QZ

9 August 2014, National Trust, Maidenhead Commons, Pinkneys Green, Berks; for booking information, contact Lynn Cassells

Tel: 07796 941065 or email <http://www.austrianscythes.co.uk/>

Mark Allery Surrey

Two courses for Beginners and Improvers: Saturday 31 May and Tuesday 2 September. £25 per head. Lovely sward on the North Downs.

Beginner's courses at the Weald & Downland Museum on Saturday 17th May and Friday 11th July (to book call the museum on 01243 811931 or via the website www.wealddown.co.uk)

Beth Tilston - E Sussex

Courses for individuals and for organisations.

Beginners Scything course - Saturday 31st May 2014 Plumpton Green, Sussex, £90

Beginners Scything course - Saturday 26th July 2014 Plumpton Green, Sussex £90

Contact me (via my website) if you're an organisation who would like me to come to you to teach you scything.

www.learnscything.com

Brighton

Two day course with tutors: Simon Fairlie, Stefan Gehrels & Beth Tilston-Cost: £80-£200 (depending on income)

Brighton Permaculture Trust, Stanmer Park, Brighton BN1 9PZ www.brightonpermaculture.org.uk

Mini Apprenticeship

Two weeks scything, haymaking etc at Monkton Wyld Court, Dorset. You are fed, lodged and come away with a scythe. A couple of vacancies left this year.

For more info ring Simon on 01297 561359 or email chapter7@tlio.org.uk

Winter Reed Harvest

This winter saw SABI members harvesting reed on both sides of the country.

In Norfolk Richard Brown, Jim McVittie, Petra and others mowed reed at Heacham on the North Norfolk Coast. Every year part the 11 acre site is mown on a five to seven year rotation

Meanwhile Chris Riley was employed to mow an acre of reed the bank of the river Exe near Topsham Lock, south of Exeter., which he did mainly single handed, with the aid of two labourers who did the binding. It took him a week. Chris writes:

“The intended use of the reed on a thatched roof meant that as much as possible of the material had to be gathered safely once cut with the scythe. The reasons for using a scythe were that the site was too remote to get machinery to it, and also that the scythe makes a nice clean cut of the stem, which is better for thatching.

“With the tall reed stems (8 feet and more) there is a lot of scope for them getting held up at the top, with stray stems preventing a clean sweep. This is even before you encounter stands with a proportion of broken stems! This was the greatest issue in the whole process of harvesting the reed. The wind direction on the day sometimes exacerbated this.”

Chris used a 65cm ditch bladed, suitably ‘de-peened’ ie filed and honed so that the edge is less acute, and therefore stronger than when mowing grass. He attached a willow bow to the snath, to help gather the mown reeds stems neatly.



Chris Riley mowing on the river Exe.

Mowers Wanted for Next Winter

Chris Riley writes:

Next winter there are plans to extend the project and mow a larger area. I am therefore looking for others interested in doing this kind of work.

It is likely that the work will need to be done in January or February 2015, which is when the reed is suitable for harvesting. The work will also need to be timed to fit in with tides, as the site is in the tidal zone of the River Exe.

Mowers will need to be moderately proficient in the use of the scythe but the reed stems are tough and woody, so you need to be physically fit to mow them all day. Mowers will need to do a full sustained days work (7-8 hours), for a day or two, or perhaps a week or more.

If you are interested in this, I would like an idea of what you would expect to be paid per day, and how many days you would be able to work.

There is potentially some accommodation on site. Costs of this would have to be shared, but it would save on daily travel expenses.

All I want at the moment, on behalf of the landowner, is an expression of interest rather than a commitment, to help in the run up to organising the operation next season.

chris@pratensis.net “Chris Riley, Pratensis Countryside Services 07719 691312 www.pratensis.net



Norfolk: Jim McVittie and Petra Reulecke admiring their rows.

The Gardener and the Scythe

by Phil Batten

We live on a 20 acre smallholding held by the Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust. The scythe is used to link management of the permanent pasture, hayfields, paths and lawns with the management of our large annual vegetable garden and perennial food crops. At this time of year, potatoes are being planted using the following method.

The potato bed is prepared by removing any persistent perennial weeds, such as dock, nettle and creeping buttercups. A layer of home made compost is spread onto the surface. Chitted potatoes are nestled into the compost, then the whole lot is covered with 1 to 2 feet of hay mulch. If a hard late frost is forecast after the shoots have emerged, more hay can be layered over the top to protect them.

By harvest time, the mulch has reduced to a layer a few inches thick, which is peeled back to reveal the potatoes underneath. Harvesting is easy, especially in a wet autumn when there is little suitable time to dig. It is possible to grow a larger volume of potatoes and still have sufficient time to harvest them. There is very little work between planting and harvesting the potatoes. More effort could be put in to increase yields, but we have not found the increase valuable proportional to the extra work that is needed.

In this case, hay is being used as a way to store mulch from a time when we have it in abundance over to a time when it is scarce. The mulch adds a large amount of organic matter to the soil which benefits soil structure and the following crops. It is a way to move fertility from one area of the farm to another, which is more conventionally done by using the manure produced from overwintered livestock.

Weed seeds in the hay could lead to problems in subsequent crops, especially as we make hay after the majority of plants have flowered and seeded to benefit the wild flowers in the Trust meadows. Weed problems are moderated by the use of more mulch e.g. bracken over winter, or by the sowing of follow on crops such as radishes or a green manure. These crops are more vigorous than the weeds, so decrease weed establishment, and are tended / mulched further during their growth. The worst weed problems occur in beds where a hay mulch is left over the winter and no further mulching or cultivation occurs. Of course, this can be dealt with in the Spring – with more mulch!

Small direct sown seeds such as carrot or parsnip, which are not sufficiently vigorous to grow away from weed competition, are the weakest link in our system and need extra care during establishment. Hay is not the only mulch material that we use, and many of the others do not present a major weed seed problem, e.g. bracken, grass clippings from paths and lawns, field



Photo – A potato bed in progress. Foreground - potatoes in compost. Background – the hay mulch. It was a kale bed previously and any plants that still have a usable harvest are left in position.

grass cut early or late in the season. Hay made earlier in the season is relatively free of weed seeds, as is hay cut late in the season when most of the seeds have ripened and fallen.

There is often a concern about slugs with mulch based systems, but we do not generally have a problem. An integrated management system, including minimising slug habitat by keeping grass on main paths short and mulching paths between beds to keep them weed free, combined with a flock of free range ducks keeps slug damage to a minimum.

Our no-dig potatoes are one aspect of a land management philosophy which aims to maximise on-site resource cycling, create holistic, integrated systems based on the use of human power and gain a sufficient yield proportional to the work put in.

Lucerne in the Garden

An unused area of your lawn can be turned into a very attractive source of green matter for the compost heap by planting it to alfalfa (lucerne), and treating it like a miniature hayfield. Alfalfa will grow in any sunny well-drained site as long as the soil is not acidic. The most delightful way to mow your backyard alfalfa is with a scythe . . . We mow the alfalfa as needed for the green layers in the heap. The best management practice is to mow the area every time the first blossoms appear. The patch is more productive that way and the regrowth will be even. In good soil an alfalfa planting can be productive for 10 years or more.

From Eliot Coleman *Four Season Harvest: Organic Vegetables from your Home Garden All Year Long*

The Grindstone

Robert Frost was lyrical about scythes, but he had a rather sour opinion of the grinding wheel that North Americans used to profile them.

Having a wheel and four legs of its own
Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone
To get it anywhere that I can see.
These hands have helped it go, and even race;
Not all the motion, though, they ever lent,
Not all the miles it may have thought it went,
Have got it one step from the starting place.
It stands beside the same old apple tree.
The shadow of the apple tree is thin
Upon it now its feet as fast in snow.
All other farm machinery's gone in,
And some of it on no more legs and wheel
Than the grindstone can boast to stand or go.
(I'm thinking chiefly of the wheelbarrow.)
For months it hasn't known the taste of steel
Washed down with rusty water in a tin.
But standing outdoors hungry, in the cold,
Except in towns at night is not a sin.
And anyway, it's standing in the yard
Under a ruinous live apple tree
Has nothing any more to do with me,
Except that I remember how of old
One summer day, all day I drove it hard,
And someone mounted on it rode it hard
And he and I between us ground a blade.
I gave it the preliminary spin
And poured on water (tears it might have been);
And when it almost gaily jumped and flowed,
A Father-Time-like man got on and rode,
Armed with a scythe and spectacles that glowed.
He turned on will-power to increase the load
And slow me down -- and I abruptly slowed,
Like coming to a sudden railroad station.
I changed from hand to hand in desperation.
I wondered what machine of ages gone
This represented an improvement on.
For all I knew it may have sharpened spears
And arrowheads itself. Much use for years
Had gradually worn it an oblate
Spheroid that kicked and struggled in its gait,
Appearing to return me hate for hate;
(But I forgive it now as easily
As any other boyhood enemy
Whose pride has failed to get him anywhere).
I wondered who it was the man thought ground
— The one who held the wheel back or the one
Who gave his life to keep it going round?
I wondered if he really thought it fair
For him to have the say when we were done.
Such were the bitter thoughts to which I turned.
Not for myself was I so much concerned
Oh no --Although, of course, I could have found
A better way to pass the afternoon



Maine, 1910. Photo from *The Scythe Book*,
by David Tresemer

Than grinding discord out of a grindstone,
And beating insects at their gritty tune.
Nor was I for the man so much concerned.
Once when the grindstone almost jumped its bearing
It looked as if he might be badly thrown
And wounded on his blade. So far from caring,
I laughed inside, and only cranked the faster
(It ran as if it wasn't greased but glued);
I'd welcome any moderate disaster
That might be calculated to postpone
What evidently nothing could conclude.
The thing that made me more and more afraid
Was that we'd ground it sharp and hadn't known,
And now were only wasting precious blade.
And when he raised it dripping once and tried
The creepy edge of it with wary touch
And viewed it over his glasses funny-eyed,
Only disinterestedly to decide
It needed a turn more, I could have cried
Wasn't there a danger of a turn too much?
Mightn't we make it worse instead of better?
I was for leaving something to the whettor.
What if it wasn't all it should be? I'd
Be satisfied if he'd be satisfied.



Chris Black, who runs a tat stall at the West Country Scythe Festival has kindly given the editors a Withy Moor Scythe Works Penny Token. These tokens were minted when between 1807 and 1821 (presumably because of the Napoleonic Wars) no regal copper coins were struck resulting in a shortage of small change. This caused major problems, particularly in the growing industrial cities of the Midlands and north of England. For a period of 4 years, between 1811 and 1815, numerous factories, tradespeople and even workhouses issued tokens.

Scythe Wars

The debate between enthusiasts of the Anglo-American scythe and of the Continental scythe is becoming as intense as that between Eurosceptics and Europhiles. Currently three heavyweights of the scythe world are battling it out on the internet. The skirmish started when Botan Anderson of Mystic Prairie posted an overenthusiastic article on his website extolling the virtues of the Austrian scythes he sells and dismissive of the American counterpart. In October, Benjamin Bouchard (see Windrow 7), came back with a response that was precisely the inverse. Now the original scythe guru himself, Peter Vido, has weighed in with an umpteenth-thousand word article that is equally scathing about both Botan's and Benjamin's approach.

One heartening aspect of this dispute is that the two extremists are now co-operating together, having agreed to exchange scythes for a year to see how each gets along with the others' and report back. Curiously it is the fellow with the most balanced approach, Peter Vido, who is most contemptuous of the others' viewpoints. Vido may be abrasive, but he is by no means coarse — he hones his arguments with a Rozsutec — and I'm inclined to agree with most of what he says.

What the debate confirms is that there is more than one way to skin a meadow. Below we have a contribution from veteran English scythesman Martin Kibblewhite, putting forward yet another view, not uncommonly held, that the English scythe should be sharpened so as to create a burr that cuts more like a saw than a knife. We hope that Martin is prepared for some feedback. SF

Botan Andersen: Dispelling the Myths of the American Scythe: A Response to Botan Andersen's A Tale of Two Scythes <http://ep.yimg.com/ty/cdn/yhst-129988217023674/Tale2ScythesResponse.pdf>; Peter Vido: Two Scythe Tales: American versus austrian Scythe Pitches <http://scytheconnection.com/two-scythe-tales/>



Disputes about scythe use are nothing new. These 19th century Polish scythesmen insisted that the hafting angle of a blade should be 180 degrees.

In Praise of Burr

The discussion about the relative merits of the English and the Continental scythe has become slightly adversarial. I've probably contributed to this myself, so it's time to make a careful comparison.

The main points of difference are: the nature of the edge given by sharpening, the angle of the blade and how it cuts, the cross-section of the blade, the necessity of peening, and weight.

The English scythe works as a very fine-toothed saw. The teeth of the saw are made by the coarse sharpening stone, which is drawn along the blade from the 'heel' towards the tip, away from the edge on both sides to work up a 'burr', making tiny teeth facing forwards. The stone doesn't need to be wetted in use because its coarseness keeps it clear of rubbed-off steel.

The blade is set at approximately 45 degrees to the snath, on a line taken through the bases of the handles.

With this angle of set the blade travels almost tangentially as it swings round the arc, making it slide past the grass stems while the burr saws them off. Each stroke takes little more than the width of the blade.

The Continental blade is given a 'sharp' edge by honing with a fine sharpening stone. This has to be kept wet to prevent the pores from becoming clogged with steel.

The blade is set at approximately 70 degrees to the handle. The angle of attack is more obtuse than with the English scythe, so the blade operates more like a knife - 'slicing', rather than 'sawing' the grass.

'Sawing' and 'slicing' require different energy inputs. Using a saw in woodwork, the effort is to lightly push the blade forward, and to draw it back. The weight of the saw is sufficient to advance the cut. Whittling wood with a knife or cutting it with a chisel seems to call for more effort than to saw it.

Martin Kibblewhite