

The Scythe Association



ABOVE LEFT Champion scyther Simon Damant completes his section in the quarter-acre mowing competition at the annual Scything Festival at the National Trust's Wimpole Estate. Participants win points for speed and mowing quality; they also compete with trimmers and ride-on mowers – and always win!

LEFT Scythe Association members Richard Brown and Jim McVittie demonstrate scything in the walled garden of the National Trust's Oxburgh Hall.

ABOVE Phil Wakefield, another Scythe Association member, strikes a pose that reminds us that the cultural references and symbolism of the scythe still run surprisingly deep.

The Scythe Association (of Britain and Ireland) was formed in 2011, some 2,000 years after the arrival of the scythe in Britain. Sickles (like those found at Bronze Age Must Farm – see CA 312 and 316) remained the main tool for harvesting grain in Europe well into the Middle Ages, while scythes were principally used to mow grass for hay to provide essential winter feed for livestock – as they are to this day in the mountainous areas of Eastern Europe. They first appear on the Continent in the late Iron Age, while in Britain scythes formed part of Roman ironsmiths' hoards from Great Chesterford and Silchester, and a late-Roman scythe was found at Farmoor, Oxfordshire, in the 1970s.

George Lambrick (former Director of the Council for British Archaeology) found that scythe while directing his first dig. He described it as 'a fearsome implement – anyone who has used a normal scythe would wonder how these massive things could be wielded!' In fact, Scythe Association members will tell you that scything with a razor-sharp blade and a good technique makes mowing a field of hay an almost effortless task, a task that has its own distinctive sounds – in 'Damon the Mower', poet Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) refers to the 'whistling Sythe' [*sic*] – and its own terminology. Members who give demonstrations

at county shows or who compete for trophies aim to create a perfect 'windrow' with their 'asides' – that is to say, to lay the crop in neat rows that the breeze can aerate.

The invention of horse-drawn harvesters saw scythes disappear from the English rural scene; their recent revival may be related to the fashion for wildflower meadows and for traditional methods of orchard and hay meadow management, which crucially depends on removing grass in the form of hay rather than strimming it and leaving it to rot.

Scythe Association members devote much of their time to training would-be scythers and helping them improve their technique – full details of the courses on offer can be found on the Association's website. The testimonials from satisfied customers suggest that, once mastered, scything can become an addictive form of exercise: useful, meditative, at one with nature, and in touch with history – so long as you banish from your mind all thoughts of the Grim Reaper, that scythe-carrying black-cloaked figure from European folk art. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.scytheassociation.org

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Write to theeditor@archaeology.co.uk

ALL IMAGES: Richard Brown