The Windrow

Newsletter of The Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland No 2 May 2011

SUMMER IN FULL SWING

The next issue of the newsletter will appear towards the end of the summer. We welcome contributions, news items, photos and advertisments of any kind related to scythes and haymaking. Please send material to the editor at chapter7@tlio.org.

In This Issue

Festivals and Events

West Country Scythe Festival
and Green Fair

Muchelney, Langport, Somerset

9 June to 11 June

Scythe Teachers' Training Course

Tutors: Christiane Lechner, Phil Batten and Simon Fairlie. £135. Comprehensive training in teaching and organizing courses. Only a few places left.

Saturday 11 June

Scythe Course for Beginners and Improvers.

Scythe tuition in the morning, and then a choice of workshops in the afternoon, including peening, grass management, haymaking with the scythe, English scythe use, and blade repair. £60, including entry to fair on Sunday.

Friday 10 June, evening
Meeting of SABI, the Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland (all welcome)

Sunday 12 June.
Scythe Competition and Green Fair.

Heats from 11am till about 2.30 pm. Championship at 3.15. Other events include team-mowing, scythe v strimmer, peening competition and hay-tossing. Plus all the fun of the fair.

Booking and general info:Simon at: chapter7@tlio.org.uk 01297 561359
For green fair programme: http://www.greenfair.org.uk/
For directions and camping: http://www.thorneylakes.co.uk/

Scotland : Gairloch Gathering

For the fourth year running the Gairloch Gathering will be holding a scythe competition, the only one in Scotland. .

Contact Peter Cunningham: info@wrft.org.uk and formore info about the gathering see http://highland-gathering.com/

Hit the Hay: Scythe Festival in Yorkshire

Saturday 30 July 10am - 5pm.

Haymaking weekend Experienced scythers will teach you all you need to know and set you off in team formation across the field. Competitions to beat the strimmer. For those who can stay into the evening we will be firing up our pizza oven.

Cost: £40 includes lunch and evening pizza.

BOOK NOW - send us a confirmation email and then a cheque in the post to 'Edibles' and send to The Barn, Paddock Farm, Parkgate Road, West Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5XA. Instructions and directions will be sent on receipt.
websit: http://edibles.org.uk/scything%20festival

Mowing Cereals in Oxfordshire

John Letts writes :

I'll be mowing cereals from 11-24th July. Thatching straw growers usually start cutting at the start of the 2nd week of July. Our mowing mini-festival and gathering will be on the 16th or the 23rd depending on how the weather behaves over the next 6 weeks. Volunteers welcome... and for anyone who wants to help scythe cereals in a more determined way please contact me (I may be able to put you up and perhaps recompense you for your efforts !).

Contact John at info@oxfordbreadgroup.co.uk

Liverpool

Urban Scything festival, July.

http://scytherspace.wordpress.com/.

Eastern Counties at Wimpole

Saturday 25 June - Scything Beginners Course
11am-4pm £45 per person including a light lunch.
Booking Essential 01223 206000
Learn the art of scything from the beginning:

- How to fit a scythe to each individual
- Choice of blades
- Setting the blade
- Safe use of a scythe for yourself and others
- Learn to mow
- See how to peen the blade
- Maintenance and fabrication of equipment

Sunday 26 June - 3rd Eastern Counties Scything Competition 3pm
Bring your own scythe, sign up and enter on the day.
Competition: Scythe a 5m x 5m, timed and quality of cut marked out ten. Categories: Overall Champion, Novice, Women and Veteran.
Team Mowing: teams of 4 mowers mowing 10m x 10m
Scythe v Strimmer: 5m x 5m pure speed, who can win?
For further details about the competition please contact Simon Damant 01223 206000
simon.damant@nationaltrust.org.uk

Wimpole Estate
Arrington, Royston, Cambridgeshire, SG8 0BW
Telephone 01223 206000 Fax 01223 207838 Email wimpolehall@nationaltrust.org.uk
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole
www.wimpole.org

Transylvania

Week long scythe and haymaking festival in Transylvania, August 20-28 2011

www.savortransylvania.com/index.php/visit/events/83-haymaking-festival,

Cumbria Scythe Events

Scythe festival at Langdale Valley 2-3 July.

Contact: littoral@btopenworld.com

There is also an event at Sprint Mill near Kendal.

For info about the North West of England see http://scytherspace.wordpress.com/

The Next Meeting of SABI
(Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland)

will be held at the South West Scythe Festival, on Friday 10 May, in the evening, before the sun goes over the yard-arm. All welcome.

SABI NEWS

Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland

Draft Rules

Mark Allery has produced a draft copy of the Rules of the Association, from decisions made at the inaugural meeting in January. The rules are loosely based on those of the Association of Polelathe Turners.

There will be an opportunity to comment on these rules at the meeting of SABI at the South West Scythe Fair on Friday 10th in the evening. The aims of the association are laid out below. Anybody who wants to see a complete copy of the draft rules can get one by emailing Simon at chapter7@tlio.org.uk

The Aims of the Scythe Association of Britain and Ireland;

1. To promote the knowledge and study of scythes and associated crafts, the techniques of their use, their history and their future potential.

2. To take all reasonable steps to support the continuance of the use of scythes and associated crafts.

3. Maintain standards of manufacture and supply of scythes and related equipment

4. To communicate (via a website and/or newsletters) to the general public and between all those interested in scythes and associated crafts.

5. To promote demonstrations, courses, exhibitions, discussions and lectures relating to scythes and associated crafts.

Survey of Scythe Use by Land Managers

SABI is undertaking a survey of scythe use by organizations involved in wildlife conservation and land management. It will be aimed at voluntary organizations, commercial contractors and local authorities.

The object will be to determine: in what capacities the scythe is proving an effective tool, how it compares with alternatives such as brushcutters, what kind of vegetation it is used for, what difficulties are encountered, and what is required in terms of training both for professional workers and for volunteers.

The aim will be to circulate the results to other organizations and local authorities so they can better assess whether the use of scythes would be appropriate for their circumstances.

SABI will be mailing out the survey to people on our address list who we can identify as representing professional or voluntary organizations, but if you wish to ensure that you receive a copy please email chapter7@tlio.org.uk, or phone 01297 561359. SABI will be grateful to all who take the time to fill in the survey as it will help to spread the message that a scythe can be an effective tool for professionals in some circumstances.

A HEALTH AND SAFETY WARNING

Harvest Field

One deceptive evening, among the sheaves,
with some of the corn uncut, you came by,
and I put my scythe then in hiding,
for fear that the edge of the blade would cut you.

Our world was rounded like the harvest field,
though a part was ripe and a part green;
the day to work and the night to dream,
and the moon rose in the midst of content.

I left a little to cut on the morrow,
and we walked together between the swathes:
you fell on a scythe that another had left,
and your skin was cut, and refused healing

By Derick Thomson (Ruaraidh Mac Thomais)
Tr. from Gaelic by the author

INDIVIDUAL TRAINING
and ON-FARM OPPORTUNITIES

Scything and Haymaking by Hand

Simon Fairlie writes: From June until August I am likely to be making hay whenever the rain looks like holding off on my dairy smallholding at Monkton Wyld Court, Dorset.

I have vacancies for "mini-apprenticeships" of a week to 10 days, from 15 June onwards. Work includes: haymaking with racks (continuously except in bad weather) weed clearance, lawnmowing, cow care, cheese-making, pig fancying etc. You are fed, "watered", and lodged and 7 days work earns a scythe. To apply please send an email or letter describing the reason for your interest, and your previous experience with manual tools etc.

Otherwise, if the weather looks as though it will be dry for a few days, and you are at a loose end, you are welcome to contact me and find out if we are haymaking. Phone 01297 561359 or email: chapter7@tlio.org.uk;

1-to-1 Tuition with Christiane Lechner

One to one tuition at the West Country the Festival . For people who have already completed a beginners course, this is an opportunity to get more advanced individual advice and training. During the 45mins your mowing style and grass situation will be analysed to optimise the scythe setup. You will then be shown how to align your body, resulting in less strain and a more efficient & effortless mowing style. Christiane has been a yoga teacher in Austria for 11 years and studied mowing with Peter Vido over the last 8 years. Sessions will run Saturday 11 June , three sessions from 17:00-20:00 & Sunday 12 June, three sessions from 07:00-10:00. Only six places. Please book with Simon, but also contact Christiane directly to arrange a time for the one-to-one session: c.lechner@stn.at

Scythe Courses

Thanks to last year's teachers' training programme, there is an unprecedented number of courses taking place around the country. At this rate, within a few year's we could have as many competent mowers in the country as we have competent gardeners.

Courses at the West Country Scythe Fair

9-11 June, with Christiane Lechner, Phil Batten and Simon Fairlie. See festival programmes on page 2

Course at the Eastern Counties Festival

Simon Damant has a beginners course at the Eastern Counties Scythe Festival on 25 June. See page 2.

Dorset/Devon

Simon Fairlie gives courses at Monkton Wyld near Axminster.

Two day courses, including hay making and grassland management: 8-10 July and 9-11 September. One day courses from August, date to be arranged

Simon also takes on people for "mini-apprenticeships" see page 3.

For more information see: www.thescytheshop.co.uk/courses.html chapter7@ tlio.org.uk

Devon

Courses with Alastair Inglis

Sat 28 May: Refresher Scythe Day with Exeter Community Agriculture at Shillingford St. George, Nr. Exeter. For scythesfolk with some initial experience, but who need to solidify their style, remember what to do, practice peening, etc... Perhaps a Pre-Festival Warm Up?

Sun 19 June: Haymaking Demonstration at the Underwood Discovery Centre, Beeson Farm, Beeson, South Hams, Devon. Contact Alastair for further details.

Sat 25 June: Beginners Scything Course with Orchard Link at Ham Farm, Loddiswell, South Hams, Devon. Contact Alastair for further details.

Sat 20 August: Beginners Scything Course at Wayfield Nurseries, East Prawle, South Hams, Devon. Contact Alastair for further details.

Sun 21 August: Wheat Scything Demonstration as part of the "Natural Materials Day" at the Underwood Discovery Centre, Beeson Farm, Beeson, South Hams. Contact Alastair for further details.For details and further information contact Alastair on 07796-805453, or email al.inglis@yahoo.co.uk

Nottinghamshire

Ray Lister has been giving courses in Nottinghamshire for the last 5 years

Phone number: 01777 248610

Teacher Training

The photos above show Christiane Lechner instructing a lad at an Austrian Scythe Festival in 2004. He cottoned on quick. Christiane is acknowledged to be a very gifted teacher of mowing (and yoga) will be leading the teacher's training course at the West Country Festival on 9-10 June, and helping with the beginner's and improver's courses on 11 June. (See page 2 for details) She will also be offering an hour's one-to-one tuition to a limited number of students on 11 and 12 June. (see page 3).

Herefordshire

Introduction to Scything, Saturday 9th July 10am-1pm, Little Dewchurch Church, Herefordshire. Free to participants. More workshops will be happening this summer.

Andrea Gilpin at Caring for God's Acre 01568 611154, info@cfga.fsnet.co.uk, www.caring-forgodsacre.org.uk

Brighton

There will be a two day course for beginners with Simon Fairlie at Brighton Permaculture Group's place at Stanmer on 30 /31 July 2011.

See http://www.brightonpermaculture.org.uk

Carmarthenshire

Phil Batten and Michelle Laine hold courses and workshops in Carmarthenshire. Their programme is as follows:

Sharpening and Peening Workshop: Saturday 9th July

Beginners Scythe Courses: Saturday 28th May, Saturday 25th June, and Saturday 13th August

Two Day Scythe Course, for the more experienced scyther or adventurous beginner: 16th/17th July

Bespoke Courses can be run for groups, on request, on any aspect of scything and hand hay making.

Contact Philip or Michelle at scythecymru@yahoo.co.uk or 07813 464990. Dyfed Permaculture Farm Trust, Penboyr, Drefach Felindre, SA44 5HG Or visit their new website at www.scythecymru.wordpress.com:

Lincolnshire

Deano Martin gives scythe courses on his 4 acre smallholding, which has been managed with a scythe for the last four years. athttp://grinningreaper.wordpress.com/ Or ring 01507 588543.

Shropshire

Acton Scott Historic Farm: Scything Course 9 July and Peening 10 July, with Alastair Inglis.

www.actonscott.com/courses.php 01694 781307

Karuna: Scything course, led by Andrea Gilpin on 12 June (Sunday), 10 am - 5 pm at Karuna Permaculture Project, Shropshire Fee : £50 including lunch and refreshments

Booking : www.karuna.org.uk, merav66@hotmail.com 01694 751374

Stiperstones, led by Steve Tomlin, 7 August.

steve-tomlin@hotmail.co.uk

Cumbria

Steve Tomlin and Paul Kingsnorth provide tuition in Cumbria.

Learn to Mow with Paul Kingsnorth: 5 June, 24 July

paul@paulkingsnorth.net

Learn to Mow with Steve Tomlin: 29 May, 2 July

Improve your Peening with Steve Tomlin: 30 Sept

There is also the possibility of a snath-making course in the autumn this year, contact Steve to express your interest.

steve-tomlin@hotmail.co.uk

See http://scytherspace.wordpress.com/

Scotland

Steve Tomlin is giving a course on the Black Isle, 30-31 July.

steve-tomlin@hotmail.co.uk

Pauk Kingsnorth is doing two courses, back to back, on 6/7 August, at Scotia Seeds in Angus. To book, people need to contact Fiona Guest:

t: 01356 626425 f:01356 629183. fionaguest@scotiaseeds.co.uk

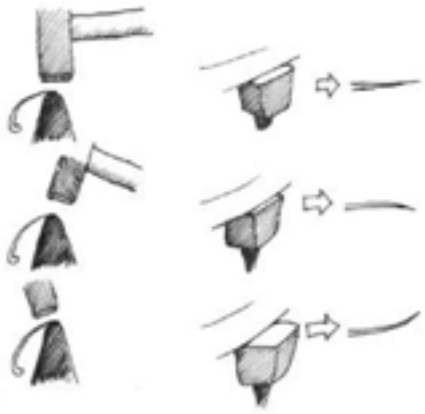
Notes and Queries

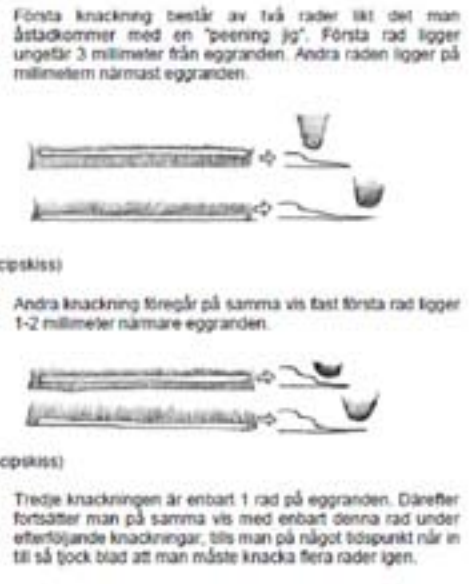
Readers are invited to send in questions about scythe use that other readers might be able to answer.If you have a response please email it to the the editor (chapter7@tlio.org.uk) so that we can forward it to the enquirer and print it in the next issue.

Does Anyone Speak Swedish?

Rune Jakobsen and colleagues have written what looks as though it might be a useful book on scythe use, with some good illustrations (see right). The only trouble is it is in Swedish. They are wondering about getting it translated for publication in the UK, USA and elsewhere. Is there anyone out there who speaks Swedish sufficiently well to look through the book and see if it conatins sufficinet new material to be worth translating.

Rune's address is rune.s.jakobsen@gmail.





Sharpening and Strickles

As every mower soon learns keeping ones blade sharp is one of the key elements to success with a scythe. After four years of practice I can make a reasonable job of sharpening, but I am not yet satisfied that I have found the best combination of peening and whetting. The feeling that I could do a better and more efficient job of honing which has lead me to revisit techniques and equipment including buying one each of the stones Simon Fairlie sells to experiment with. As a sidel issue I wonder how mowers in the past managed to keep their blade sharp with a 'strickle' made from wood?

In the past a four-sided wooden strickle was commonly used to hone blades in the field. It was made of green oak or sometimes lime wood. Swine fat, soap or resin was smeared onto the strickle which was then coated with sand. Two opposite sides were sanded at a time so that there were two newly-sanded coarse sides to start on and two finer used ones to finish with. The strickle was fixed to the top end of the snath when not in use. Being quite heavy and the snath longer to accommodate its fixing I think it must have also functioned as a counter balance to the typical heavy forged blade of the time – something I will try out sometime with my English 'fensman' scythe. The mower in the field would carry a supply of fat and sand in a sandhorn slung by a string over his shoulder. Sand could be poured from an opening in the narrow end and the fat was held in the wide end.

Not content to just read about it I have now made myself an oak strickle using one of a pair of antique strickles (ebay!) as a pattern. I have got a good supply of local 'egg timer' fine sand, but I am unsure from the descriptions I have read how the grease/sand coating works. Does it work like a soft grinding paste, or is hard fat/tallow likely to be better? I will have to experiment, but if anyone has any theories or historical sources I would be interested to hear them.

Richard Brown May 2011

Clearing Firebreaks for Bracken

J McKinn of Landmarc Suppport Services writes:

Does anyone have any experience on using scythes for heathland management, including cutting firebreaks in heather. Many of our sites are SSSI's, SPA's and SAC's, heathland sites on slopes but there is also military debris hidden in the undergrowth, which may prove problematic. Many of the heathland sites have mature heather as well, so I would be looking at cutting above the height of the heather (approx 10-18" in places).

John Letts responds:

I have learned a little about scything heather recently. My view is that you can't scythe mature heather. It just doesn't work. The blade just springs back and dents. It's ok for cutting short (< 6") stuff that no more than 5 years old max, but beyond this it's just too woody and damages the blade... if you don't destroy the blade by hitting a stone first. I'm cutting 3,500 bundles of 10-14 year old heather at the moment with a brushcutter. I've tried my brush blade and it just doesn't work. Traditionally, heather was 'pulled' for use as thatch. I'm sure you could use a brushcutter to cut heather 18" above ground level, but the best way is probably to use a mower + tractor I'd assume.

Does anyone else have any views on this?

Grass Cycling

Dave Oxford reckons a combination of push mower and scythe is best if you want to maintain a lawn wthout resorting to fertilizers

It's my opinion that Richard Brown was not nearly rude enough about petrol mowers in the first issue of *Windrow* ("Scythe vs Lawnmower").

He rightly condemns them for their gas-guzzling and polluting qualities, but what about the noise, and the danger? Information about mower-related accidents in the UK is hard to come by, but plenty of data is available from the US. Injuries are mainly caused by projectiles thrown out by rotating blades, and foot injuries arising from accidental contact. It is sobering to consider that, in the US, increasing numbers of powered mower accidents occurred during the nine years leading up to 2006*. Between 1989 and 2004, over 9000 children were being injured in mower accidents each year. Two fatalities have been reported, too, from burns sustained while re-fueling.

But if we get rid of them, what can we do about maintaining lawns? We could side-step the problem by agreeing with Bill Mollison, co-founder the Permaculture movement, that lawns are a 'green cancer', and think of a better use for the land. During WW2, many lawns were given over to vegetable production as a result of the 'Dig for Britain' campaign, but they have bounced back. There are an estimated 2,300 square kilometres of domestic lawns in the UK – over six times the area of the Isle of Wight. Nobody could deny their popularity.

The discussion between God and St. Francis (Windrow 1 – One day, God asked St. Francis ..) emphasises the lunacy of some current lawn-care practices. A lawn is sown, nitrogenous fertilisers and weed-killers are applied, it is irrigated with potable water, then harvested and disposed of as if it were a waste product. It was this last step – the disposal of lawn-clippings - that concerned Dorset County Council in 2007. They wanted to reduce the volume of clippings that were being brought to their re-cycling centre. Could they persuade local home-owners to take up grass-cycling – the practice of leaving grass-clippings on the lawn to decompose and return some nitrogen to the lawn? It turned out that they could, but in order to work properly, grass-cycling requires the clippings to be spread evenly across the lawn surface. So, I enlisted a number of volunteers to mow their lawns over a season with manual lawnmowers, and recorded the results as part of my MSc thesis. Readers of Windrow might suggest that all they needed to do was get out their scythes. But although scythes are able to cut vegetation of any length, including lawns, but they do not scatter the grass as effectively as a push-mower

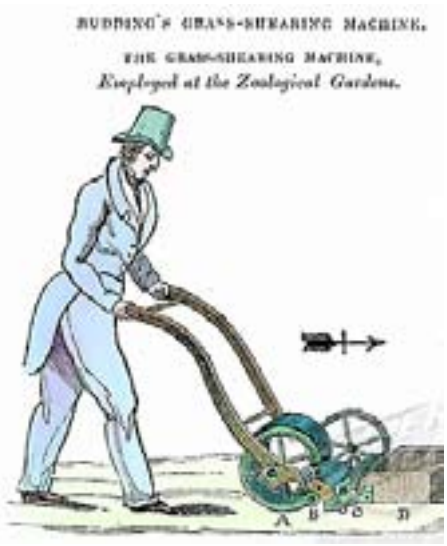
Grass Cycling

Grass is 85-90% water, and this evaporates quite quickly, so even 'clumps' shrink quite a lot. The people in our study said that the clippings disappeared more quickly than they were expecting them to, and so you will probably be surprised if you try it.

Of course, there is grass and there is grass. There was one chap in the study who had obviously been throwing a lot of N around and his sward was very thick

Milos Stankovic has provided this excellent pair of photographs showing how he "sorted out" an unkempt lawn belonging to a friend in Plymouth. Many lawnmowers would not have coped with this growth.

indeed. The productivity of such a lawn can be fifty times higher than just unimproved grass (i.e. what the majority of lawns are, but cut short) according to one estimate of the productivity of a pampered 1st division football pitch. If you tried to grass-cycle that, you might run into problems unless you did it very frequently so that the clippings were very short and the volume was corresponding-ly small, too. However, part of the point of grass-cycling is to return some N to the sward, and the re-search shows that cycling reduces N inputs required to maintain golf courses at the same quality by between 30 and 70%.



How short does grass have to be in order to grass-cycle without causing an inhibitive mulch? As-suming the cut lawn is between an inch and two inches tall (i.e. the bit still attached to the roots that you want to keep) then it is 'clump-ing' of the clippings that can lead to yellowing and inhibition of growth. They need to be spread evenly over the lawn surface to avoid clumping, and the manual mowers do this. If you cut a four inch growth to two inches, say, you then have two inch lengths of grass on the surface. I would say that is about the limit for leaving stuff on the surface. However, if you are pre-pared to go over the same patch with the mower on the same height setting, you will find that the mower picks up and dices the two inch portions. Obviously, eventu-ally the point is reached where the volume of clippings is too deep to allow light through. I reckon that if your grass is more than five inches tall, then it's time to get the scythe out, and dispose of the clippings. Up to five inches, you should get the mower through it (though it is obviously much easier if it is, say, three inches tall), and if you do a couple of passes, you will find that the stuff is short enough to disappear.

If you are going to try it, my suggestions would be as follows. If it is more than 5 inches, or more than 4 inches and 'improved' (very thick growth), get your scythe out. If less, then try cutting with the height set around 2 inches, then watch to see how quickly the stuff disappears. If it is too slow for you, don't allow it to get that long again before cutting. If the grass is, say, three inches, and you cut to one and a half inches, you will probably be quite pleased with the results.

There are so many variables that you will probably only find out for certain by experimenting on the grass you have to see how it goes. I would be interested to hear from anyone who does try it.

Push Mowers

It is worth noting that manual push mowers have evolved a lot since Budding patented the first model in 1830, which required two people to operate it because it was so heavy. Modern versions, which share exactly the same mechanism, can be lifted easily with one hand, and because the helical blades do not make contact with the stationary blade, they are much easier to push. Dorset home-owners who took up grass-cycling with manual mowers had few complaints. They found it quicker, quieter, and cheaper, and their lawns looked better, too. And there were no clippings to collect or pass on to the County Council as if they were a waste product.

However, there were oc-casions when their grass had grown too much to allow them to use the manual mower. The two main reasons were that persistent rain had deterred them from cutting, or that they had been away on holiday. They said they had no choice but to revert to use of their powered mowers. How else could they possibly deal with the long grass?

Readers of Windrow will respond immediately that all they needed to do was get out their scythes, and I agree. Scythes are able to cut vegetation of any length, including lawns, but they are of little use for grass-cycling. So, I contend that if you want to maintain a conventional lawn, the quickest, easiest method is to grass-cycle with a manual push mower. Your scythe will deal with all other lengths and types of vegetation, as you already know, including the lawn grass on those oc-casions when it has outgrown your push mower. I urge you to consider Scythe plus Lawnmower as the 'compleat kit' for all of your mowing needs.

Buying a Push Mower

The first thing is to avoid getting one of the cheap models. These are about £30-50 in places like B+Q and they give manual mowers a bad reputation. You need to be paying £70 or more.

In our trials we used the German Brill Razorcut 33. This had very good reviews in the gardening websites, so I got one and tried it before the trial. Apart from the ridiculous orange wheel trims, which always fall off and can be discarded as they are purely cosmetic, this is a pretty good machine. They are recommended for lawns up to 200 square metres, and the larger (i.e. wider cut) Brill 38 is recommended for lawns up to 250 square metres. These cost around £100 for the smaller one, and £110 for the larger one. However, they have large, proper bearings and should last for ages. The makers reckon 10 years.

The Husquvarna Novocut 64 was recommended by Which?, who did a survey of manual mowers (just after we had committed ourselves to buying 20 of the Brills for the trial). They are a tad cheaper, and Which reckon they are a bit easier to push. Since then, Fiskars have come out with a weird looking and very expensive offer-ing (http://www2.fiskars.com/Products/Yard-and-Gar-den/Reel-Mowers/Momentum-Reel-Mower) which is avail-able from Amazon for around £200. They make strong claims for it, particularly that it can cut very long grass. I think those front wheel stalks look a bit vulnerable.

Notes on the History of Scythe Manufacture

Much of the world's farming land can be divided into two zones: the machete zone and the scythe zone.

The machete is a formidable implement — a skilled user can peel an orange, halve a wasp in mid flight or open up a coconut with one swing. It is even used to mow lawns; but the machete is most comfortably swung at hand height, and hence is particularly associated with vegetation which is tall, such as tropical forest or sugar cane, and with regions such as South America and Indonesia, where that kind of vegetation predominates. The European equivalents of the machete are the billhook, and the faghook, or sickle

The scythe is a tool specially adapted for cutting vegetation at ground level. There is no other reason for its existence: it is useless at hand height and (unlike the machete) very unwieldy as a weapon. Initially it was probably designed for grass; but as pasture became harder to find, and livestock were increasingly fed on different kinds of straw, the importance of cutting oats, barley and other grains close to the ground became more important and the scythe began to replace the sickle as a way of harvesting crops.

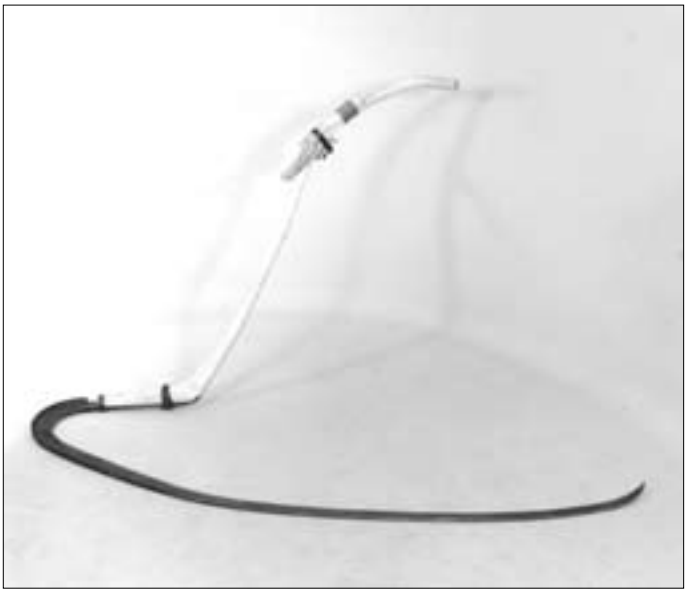
The scythe is therefore found in most areas of the world where grass and grains such as wheat, barley, oats or rye are the predominate agricultural crop. The scythe belt emanates from Europe and the Middle East, but extends from the Mid West of Canada and the US A, through the whole of Europe, much of Russia, the Middle East, Egypt and some other north African countries, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Kirghizstan and other colonies of the former USSR, a few parts of China and of the Indian subcontinent to Australia.

Types of Scythe

There are several varieties of scythe. There is some extraordinary early film footage (c 1915) of folk in the north of Finland mowing with two-edged scythes which they wield in an airborne figure of eight motion, all members of the team (whom we have previously witnessed breakfasting on vodka) moving in perfect synchrony so that their flailing blades don't clash.

Scandinavian scythes are still somewhat different from those found throughout the rest of the world, and some are still handmade by individuals. Otherwise, 95 per cent of scythes in the world nowadays belong to one of two categories: the Anglo-American scythe, made and used up until recently in England and the US; and the much lighter, hand-forged, "continental scythe", sometimes known as the Austrian scythe, because Austria has excelled in its manufacture. The Anglo-American scythe is now hardly made, and the continental model is becoming universal.

It is fairly easy to see why the Anglo-American model has been largely superseded in recent years; the



Replica of Roman era scythe by J W Anstee.

continental model is considerably lighter and easier to use. Traditional English blades were either stamped or rough forged and then shaped by heavy grinding. Austrian blades hardly visit the grinding wheel except for finishing, and are hand-forged, wafer thin, to an elegant curve in all three dimensions so that the finished blade is under tension and therefore stronger in relation to its weight. Because the blade is lighter, the snath, and hence the whole kit, can be lighter as well. A brand new 75 centimetre Anglo-American rig, still available in a few farm stores, weighs 3 kilos; an Austrian blade of the same length with an adjustable ashwood snath weighs 1800 grams, 60 per cent of its rival.

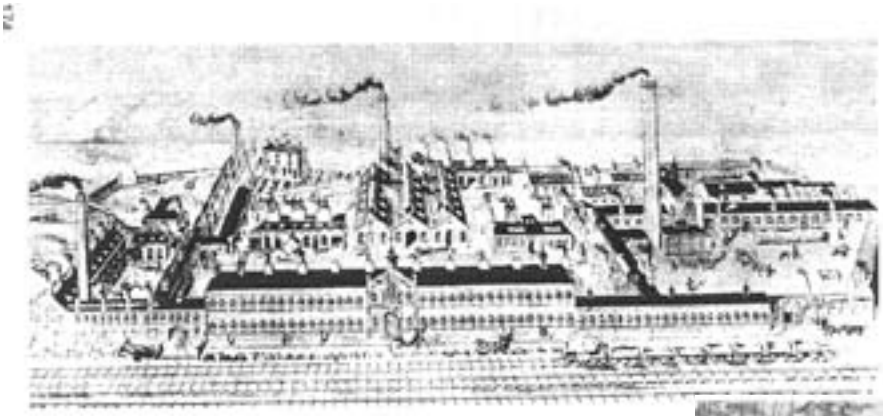
There are those who maintain that the heavy English scythe is more suited to heavy English grasses, and there may be some truth in this, but the fact remains that it is now nearly extinct. Why have Anglo-American blades nearly died out while the continental model is still sold in its millions. And why haven't continental blades caught on in Britain up till now?

Early History

The scythe appears to have developed during Roman times, though it probably wasn't developed by the Romans. Pliny, in his Natural History noted that there were two kinds of scythe: the heavy Gallic kind, and the shorter Italian model. Several examples of what is presumably the Gallic type have been discovered, and they are impressive, up to five feet long. In the 1960s, John Anstee had a replica made and found that skilled scythesmen had no problem mowing with them.

These Gallic scythes were made of soft steel with a strip of higher carbon steel sandwiched inside to provide the cutting edge. This is precisely the method used by English scythemakers to produce what were known as Crown blades — the main kind of blade manufactured in the UK until "Patent" blades were invented in the 19th century. This single fact suggests that the Gallic blades

Look on My Works Ye Mighty and Despair



Left: The Little London Works at Sheffield where (as far as I have been able to ascertain) William Tyzack sons and Turner made the last English scythes around 1987. The factory was built in 1876; the firm was taken over by one of the other Tyzack companies in 1987 and went into receivership in 1991. The factory was demolished in 1988.

Below: The Schroeckenfux works in the village of Rossleithen, pictured in the 1920s. Many of the buildings are still standing and scythes are still made there in much the same way as they were in the 1920s.

were a forerunner of the traditional English scythe.

Whether the shorter "Italian" blade mentioned by Pliny can be seen as a forerunner of the continental scythe is less clear. In the early 14th century a "lighter more flexible" scythe known as the Hainault scythe, with a shorter handle came into use in Flanders, but it never caught on in England.

Continental Scythe Manufacture

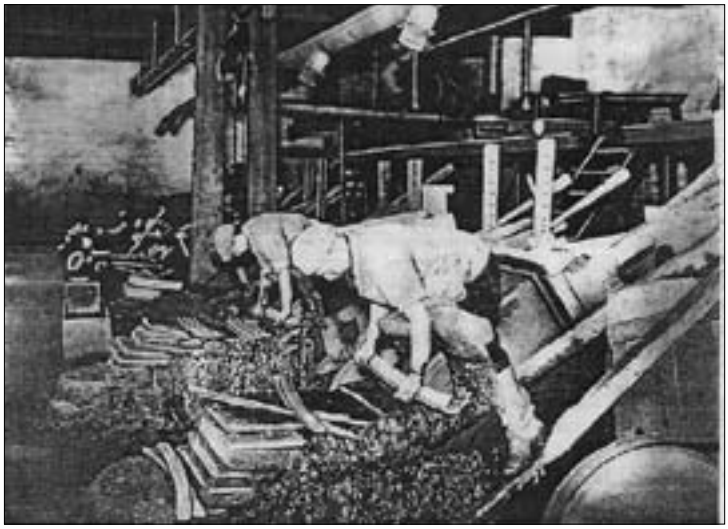
The modern continental scythe industry is often described as having its origins in the occupation of Austria by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. The Ottomans were renowned for the quality of their steel, and the area of Styria, in Austria, supplied everything that was needed for state-of-the art steel manufacture in the 16th century: iron ore, timber for charcoal, and waterpower. I have yet to find any firm evidence in the English language that this was indeed what happened: but it seems to be widely accepted, and in the second half of the 20th century, the Austrian Scythe Union marketed its blades as Turk Scythes (Turkensensen) to evoke these origins.

The continental method of forging scythes spread right across Europe and until recently similar blades were made in Spain, France, Italy, Sweden, Germany, Slovakia, Poland and Slovenia. However the Austrians dominated the industry; around the time of the First World War there were 53 scythe producers, many of them based at watermills in small towns and villages, and some of them dating back to the 1500s. Millions of scythes were exported from Austria every year (allegedly up to 10 million at the end of the 19th century) many of them to Russia. I have read somewhere that when Napoleon declared war on the Austro Hungarian empire, he ran into problems because France was dependent upon Austrian scythe blades for its harvest.

In the second half of the 20th century the industry started declining, because sales were dropping in the industrialized countries, while factories in Turkey and China started producing blades of lower quality, much cheaper. One by one the small factories closed. For a time, a number of factories in Austria and Germany joined forces to form the Sense Union (Scythe Union) which produced the Turk blade. But eventually even many of these closed, and now there are no factories in Germany, and just two in Austria, Schroeckenfux, and Offner.

The manufacturing process at the Schroeckenfux works remains similar to that employed over the last 400 years. The blades are hand-forged under a trip hammer, originally water-powered but now electric. (The Redtenbacher factory in Scharnstein was using some water power up until its closure in the 1980s.) In all there are at least 15 processes, many of them highly skilled. It is a long apprenticeship to learn how to perform the principle forging processes and only a small number of apprentices are considered to have the aptitude to perform the most highly skilled work, which is therefore well-paid.

Since the scythes are hand forged, they can be made to any pattern specified by the customer and there are patents for literally thousands of patterns. I have a Schroeckenfux order form dating from the 1930s, which has a diagram of a scythe with about 20 different measurements and angles which the customer is invited to specify.



Nose to the grindstone. Scythe grinders at Tyzacks

The English Scythe Industry

The English scythe industry evolved in a very different direction from that on the continent. There were two main differences

Firstly, whereas the dominant tradesman on the continent was the smith, in the UK it was the scythe-grinder. The amount of forging involved in the manufacture of the English Crown blades appears to have been relatively low, compared to the Austrian process. A strip of hard steel was sandwiched between two plates of softer steel, and the three were hammer welded together, and then plated out to the required width.

In the 19th century another style of blade, the "Patent blade" was developed, which comprised a flat sheet of rolled steel stamped out and hardened, and then riveted to a rigid back. Patent blades were manufactured by Tyzack in Sheffield up until the late 1980s, and can still be found in hardware stores.

Both kinds of blade required prodigious amounts of grinding which was performed by men suspended above huge water-powered grinding wheels, so as to be able to place all their pressure on the blade. It is easy to see where the expression "nose to the grindstone" came from. In 1879 a workman could grind only two to three dozen crown blades in a day — which gives an indication of the considerable amount of grinding involved.

Industrialization and Revolt

The other feature of the English industry was its early concentration and industrialization. Whilst scythe-making in Austria remained a largely rural industry, based in small towns and villages, in the UK it became an urban industry. Although there were small scythe grinding mills to be found in villages around the country, by the first half of the 19th century the industry was becoming highly concentrated in Sheffield. According to Don Tyzack, "following enclosure . . . the army of little mesters making scythes gave way to bigger workshops making machine knives" for reaping machines, and scythes for a market kept buoyant by demand from the colonies. Much of the scythe manufacturing industry lay under the control of one family, the Tyzacks. By the 20th century, the Tyzacks (who split up into a number of firms) seem to have gained a monopoly over scythe production in the UK. At their Stella works in Sheffield, there were 20 "sturdy grinders" working side by side on 20 large wheels.

Scythe grinding was a vile occupation, and the almost certain risk of silicosis, meant that many scythe-grinders died by the time they reached 40. However the scythe-grinders union was strong, and very active in the Sheffield Outrages of the 1850s. Machinery was destroyed, factory owners were shot at, and the secretary of the Scythe Grinders Union, Michael Thompson, was accused by Joshua Tyzack, of paying men to blow up scythe grinding wheels with gunpowder. The union hustled 14 scythe grinders out of the country to avoid their prosecution.

Men's Work?

Another charge laid against the scythe in England is that it contributed to the marginalization of women in agriculture. Mowing, as well as being highly skilled, was regarded as particularly physically demanding work. According to Richard Baxter "though the labour of a smith be hard" it is in "a dry house, and by short fits; and little in the comparison of threshing and reaping; but as nothing in comparison with mowing, which constantly pulls forth whole man's strength." Scythe work was highly paid, and it was a male monopoly. At haymaking women and boys would do the raking and turning, while men would mow. Since there was a need for twice as many turners as mowers, this was perhaps not altogether surprising.

It was when the scythe took over as a means of harvesting corn that it became particularly injurious to women's interests. Grain harvesting was originally a predominately female activity, and as long as the sickle remained the main means of harvesting grain, women could work as reapers. Alice George, an Oxford woman who claimed to be over 100 years old told John Locke in 1681 that in her youth "she was able to have reaped as much in a day as any man, and had as much wages".

The advantage of a sickle was that it left the second hand free to lay the stalks of corn neatly for the followers who would bind it into stooks. A scythe cut

Men at Work. Great Massingham ~Norfolk

quicker but it left the stalks in disarray, so more time was taken binding. The development of the cradle in the 18th century meant that corn could be mown with a scythe and deposited neatly in rows for the convenience of the binder; and that the straw could be cut lower. As the scythe gradually replaced the sickle in the harvest, women found themselves relegated to lower paid jobs such as raking and tying — and once mechanization was introduced, they found themselves excluded completely.

I doubt whether the male monopoly over the scythe was confined to the UK, but it seems likely that it was particularly entrenched here because of the additional weight of the English scythe — and also because of the highly structured and centralized nature of the English agricultural economy. In the European peasant economy, there was much more "soiling", than in Britain — mowing grass on a daily basis for dairy animals, rabbits etc — and this was more likely to be performed by a woman than gang mowing. I have about six historic pictures of women mowing and only one shows a gang, and that was in France during the First World War. In the 1950s the Austrian firm Vindobona was advertising its scythes with a picture of an cheery Heidi-like lass scything in a headscarf and apron, but to what extent this was an advertising gimmick designed to emphasise the lightness of the kit, and to what extent it reflected actual use, I do not know.

Vindobona advert, Austria c.1950s

The Future for the Scythe Industry

Despite the above shortcomings, the Anglo-American scythe remained a much loved and respected tool, which over the centuries played a major role in feeding entire nations. Many consider it unduly heavy, but there are some who maintain that its weight is necessary to achieve impetus through the thick English grasses: and it is true that the Northern versions of the continental scythes tend to be somewhat heavier than those designed for hotter countries where the grass cover is usually thinner. Overweight or not, the scythe was a popular tool, and scything was a popular and well paid occupation, much preferred to threshing, and so nobody complained.

But, unlike the continental scythe it has not stood

Gang of women haymaking in France during the First World War

the test of time. As far as I can gather the last scythes made in England on any scale were manufactured around 1987, and these were also the last Patent scythes made anywhere. You can still buy a hickory snath from the US, together with something resembling a Crown blade, but these are now made at the Schroeckenfux factory in Austria, where one worker asked me "Why do you English like your scythes so heavy?" This article is, I suppose, my attempt to answer him.

The continental scythe industry, by contrast, shows no signs of collapsing, though the remaining European producers face stiff price competition from Turkey and China. Scythe use is experiencing a revival in some west European countries because of the tool's environmental benefits: and there is still high demand in the Middle East and neighbouring countries. There was a newspaper report recently that US invaders are attempting to gain the confidence of Iraqi farmers by giving them gifts of scythe blades — the sure way to a peasant's heart. One wonders which manufacturer's blades they were giving away, now that they don't make their own.

The collapse of the English scythe industry may have less to do with the form of the tool, than with the structure of the English agricultural industry, which has succeeded in pulling more people off the land than in almost any other country. There is perhaps an argument that the form of the English scythe was compliant to the process of industrialization. Be that as it may, it seems almost certain that, as people come back to the land, it will most likely be the continental style scythe to which they will turn. Perhaps, one day, someone will make them in Britain.

SIMON FAIRLIE

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This article was written in 2006 and published in the *Tools and Trades History* magazine. I have shifted my opinion in respect of some matters, and would be interested in any comments or criticism. Also I made no mention of Isaac Nash, a smaller outfit in Worcestershire, who were taken over by Tyzack and then closed down in the 1950s.