

FT MASTERCLASS SCYTHING

...with
CLIVE LEEKE

The ancient art of scything is making a comeback. *Jojo Tulloh* takes up her snathe to mow a meadow at Walthamstow Marshes in London. But can she cut it? Illustration by *David Cecil Holmes*

Snathe", "peen", "windrow": the language of scything is esoteric. But take up a scythe handle (or snathe) for yourself and the words soon unlock their meaning: to peen is to flatten and thin the blade's edge for sharpening, so that it is keen enough to cut a windrow, or line of hay.

Once nearing extinction in this country, scything has been undergoing a revival in the past decade, with the technique being used to cut grass in allotments, churchyards, nature reserves and stately homes as well as the more traditional hay meadows. (Its bare-torso associations in the BBC's *Poldark* haven't hurt either.) The scythe is good for wildlife, as animals scatter well ahead of its slow-moving arc, and it is a peaceful and low-impact exercise, in contrast to a noisy strimmer.

On Lammas Day (August 1), the festival of the wheat harvest, scythe expert Clive Leeke came to Walthamstow Marshes in east London to run scything workshops as part of Community Haystacks, a harvest festival and celebration of this ancient piece of common land. (Devised by artists Louis Buckley and Kathrin Böhm, the festival is now in its third year.)

When I arrive on the marshes, I see half a dozen figures already spread out across an expanse of tough-looking meadow grass, each holding a light, wood-handled Austrian scythe topped with a sinister curving blade; these are more nimble than the traditional English scythe, and the beginners in the field are already scything away well. Their blades are held low ►





◀ and parallel to the ground, their weight shifting from side to side in a dance-like movement as the blade describes an arc in the grass. Others have paused with their snathes on the ground, blade up for sharpening, whetstone in gloved hand; the tap and scrape of file on metal is just audible beneath the buzz of a police helicopter overhead.

To begin, we measure the scythes against our bodies to make sure the two adjustable handles are in the right place. In the past, scythes would have been made from ash poles, bent to match each individual's specific reach, and would have been guarded jealously by their owners. We adjust the blade to get it into the right angle: with the blade up (fully open), it will take a wider bite of grass; closed, it will cut a smaller arc. We learn how to carry the scythe safely. The Grim Reaper's preferred over-the-shoulder technique is deemed too dangerous, so we lower our scythes, pointing the blades down at the end of an outstretched arm, and walk out into the long grass.

For some it comes naturally: a sweep across and the cut grass is deposited on the left, a close-cropped sward appearing in front of you. The blade should not be lifted but should instead slide forwards and back – it is not a sweaty macho chopping. As you work, the pile of hay should form a straight line as you move along the cut edge of the grass. This is the windrow. Ideally, the cut grass is heaped up slightly so that air can move through it and start to dry the hay, hence the word “wind-row”.

I struggle, my blade snagging and stuttering. “Oh dear,” says Leeke, “you’re going about this all the wrong way.” It seems the hafting angle needs adjusting. While he does this, Leeke also sharpens the blade. “This is crucial,” he says, “but it’s really very simple.”

The best time of day to scythe is predawn, when the grass stalks hold most moisture. Dry conditions like today’s dull the blade quickly and one must stop every five minutes to hone it. Leeke moves the whetstone down and along the blade’s edge before turning it and filing off the burr.

‘The Grim Reaper’s over-the-shoulder technique is deemed too dangerous, so we lower our scythes, pointing the blades downwards’

From time to time the blade must also be peened – hammered to flatten its edge and maintain its keenness. But this is not a job for beginners (or the field), so for now Leeke just sharpens my blade for me, and when he hands back the scythe I find it’s far less effortful. “Now you’re dancing,” says Leeke happily. He is right. I have found the sweet spot (albeit briefly) and my blade swoops through, leaving a neat pile of cut grass on my left. It’s satisfying but I am working rarely used muscles and my arms tire quickly.

“It’s like riding a bicycle: no one can really teach you,” says Gill Barron, who has dragged herself away from her farm’s own hay harvest to be here today with her husband, scythe importer Simon Fairlie. After struggling with traditional English scythes, Fairlie came across a second-hand Austrian scythe and went to Austria to procure more; since the mid-1990s he has imported 10,000 of them. When I ask him how long he thinks it will be before I get any good at this, he says “about five years”. Surprisingly for a traditionalist, he also suggests that I look at a YouTube video of scything superstar Peter Vido and his daughter Ashley, “to see what can be done”.

Hay-cutting is part of the ancient order of farming, a way of regulating the agricultural year and locking fertility into the soil. Cutting hay on Lammas Day is historically inaccurate, however, since the hay should have been cut between late June and mid-July. Lammas is traditionally the date on which stock would be turned back on to the meadows to graze. As a pagan festival, Lammas also celebrates the cutting of the first crops, with the newly harvested wheat ground and made into bread.

This is where I step into the role of baker. I have made Lammas bread with flour milled locally by the E5 Bakehouse, which trades out of a railway arch on London Fields. Owner Ben Mackinnon recently installed a mill in the next-door arch and now grinds his own flour both for sale and for use in the bakery. Before setting off for Walthamstow, I got up early to bake five sourdough loaves, packed them into a suitably rustic wicker basket and took them down to the marshes. We eat the bread as part of a picnic, the prelude to the weekend’s climax, which involves a scything contest and haystack-making.

From across London, Kent and Essex, scything enthusiasts have descended on the marshes. Some have come with their own scythes; others are using the ones provided. The youngest, Laurence, is only 10. Over the weekend, more than 100 people have learnt to scythe – a mixed bunch of conservationists, architects, artists, local families and at least one eastern European with obvious scything form. They fan out in a line and mow for half an hour, the railway line that bisects the marsh ahead of them creating a curious visual dissonance. The prizes are handed out, for best windrow, closest cut to the ground and best overall performance. Surprisingly, an absolute beginner takes closest cut. “Now,” says Leeke, “it’s all about the raking.” And with pitchforks and rakes in hand, we set to and make our haystack. **FT**

Jojo Tullloh is author of “The Modern Peasant” (Chatto). Buy a scythe at thescytheshop.co.uk; find a course at scytheassociation.org; h-a-y-t-a-c-k-s.net

