

Thriving railway hedges boost biodiversity and put railways on track for greener future

March 15, 2024



Several traditional 'railway hedges' are thriving in North London, after **Network Rail** teamed up with **The Tree Council** to improve biodiversity on the railways.

Planted in 2018 along one of Britain's busiest lines, a series of trial hedgerows has now grown to well over head height at Hadley Wood station on the border between Greater London and Hertfordshire. Network Rail welcomed the news, adding that it showed how the railway can contribute to the country's biodiversity.

The project was launched in response to the recommendations of the Varley Review, set up to re-evaluate how Network Rail should manage its linesides and protect biodiversity. The Tree Council was called upon to act as Network Rail's 'critical friend', helping it to improve vegetation management along the railways, and working with community groups to return the cleared areas at Hadley Wood to nature.

Network Rail Chair Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill said: "It's wonderful to see how the landscape at Hadley Wood has developed in the last five years. It's a great reflection of the work and care shown by The Tree Council, the many community volunteers and our own colleagues at Network Rail. We've travelled a long way as a railway in understanding how we can use our land to improve biodiversity, and run a safe and reliable railway, and The Tree Council has helped us every step on that journey."

The railway act of 1842 made rail companies legally bound to protect their lines from livestock, either by constructing miles of fencing or planting hedges. Fences provide the necessary barrier but hedges do more, increasing biodiversity, helping tackle flooding and creating snow barriers.

Jon Stokes, Director of Trees, Science & Research at The Tree Council, and Chair of Hedgelink, said: "Animals and plants like edges, because there's light and security – it's why you find the busiest areas of biodiversity in woodland to be along the margins. A hedge is nothing but edge, so it's perfect.

"We know practically we can't put hedges along every mile of railway boundary – that would be over 20,000 miles – but if we could get even some way to that, it would be a huge win for the country's biodiversity."

Following criticism of the clearance at Hadley Wood, the Government ordered John Varley to undertake an independent review of Network Rail's lineside vegetation management.

The Varley Review carried a number of recommendations, which The Tree Council is helping to deliver. These include managing the lineside as an asset, improving communication with nearby communities, and leading cultural change within Network Rail around valuing nature and the environment.

Network Rail's biodiversity strategy manager, Dr Neil Strong, said: "Trees drop leaves and fall on tracks, but managing our trees well is so much better than simply removing them. The State of Nature report 2023 showed a 19 per cent decline in UK species since 1970 and the railway has a huge part to play in helping reverse that by linking areas of wildlife through places that are otherwise short on green space. Hedges provide the perfect cover for small animals and food for pollinators, without who we would be unable to grow food or survive as a species."

Rail Minister, Huw Merriman said: "It's great to see the positive impact hedgerows are having in Hadley Wood, forming a corridor for wildlife to thrive along one of the country's busiest railway lines while reducing noise pollution for local residents. I hope to see more schemes like this up and down the country as Network Rail continues to help make the rail network greener."

[Hadley Wood Association](#) and [Hadley Wood Rail User Group](#) both campaigned on behalf of nearby communities, following the lineside vegetation clearance in 2018.

Robert Wilson, Chairman of Hadley Wood Association said: "Our community is determined to preserve our green environment and support good growth. As managers of the surrounding woods and fields, the HWA are delighted that Network Rail is continuing their partnership with The Tree Council for further stages of the national hedgerow planting trial on the trackside through the heart of Hadley Wood."

A spokesperson for Hadley Wood Rail User Group (HWRUG), said: "HWRUG was founded to campaign for an accessible entrance to platform four, which was opened in May 2017. Since then, we have continued to work with partners to enhance our station and maintain our train services. This is our second collaboration with The Tree Council and Network Rail, and we are delighted to be part of the development and planting of this magnificent new hedgerow, which not only lifts everyone's spirits but also benefits wildlife and will become a model for the future management of the railways."

The hedges at Hadley Wood are a mixture of species such as hawthorn, hazel, guelder rose, blackthorn and dogwood, planted using different techniques by a mixture of contractors and volunteers. Network Rail and The Tree Council's five-year partnership secured the Sustainability and Environmental Excellence Award at the prestigious 2024 Rail Business Awards last month.