

The billhook in English Dialect

Between 1948 and 1961 the historic Survey of English Dialect (SED)* was carried out. At this time regional dialects were still common, and largely un-influenced by radio and television. From 1950 to 1961 over 400,000 items were collected by fieldworkers in over 300 locations across the length and breadth of England.

In 1994 a Dictionary and Grammar of over 17,000 words was compiled by Clive Upton, J.D.A Widdowson and David Parry and published by Routledge. The re-issue of this scholarly work in paperback form in 2014 has given the general public access to a tome that was seldom found outside university libraries. From this reprint I have been able to abstract a wealth of information on the regional and dialect words used for billhooks and other tools.

During this post-war period the billhook was still a common item in many households, and was still being used on many farms and in woodlands. In a time of austerity, before the era of consumerism, tools of this type were rarely thrown away or discarded, even when no longer used. In many homes they had become relegated to the role of kindling wood chopper, very few houses having central heating, and most having an open fireplace burning coal or logs.

In the 19th century the term bill was more commonly used than billhook – by adding an adjective the two main types were thus described:

Hand bill – a short handled bill, i.e. a billhook

Hedging bill – a long handled bill, i.e. a slasher

SED researchers asked two questions, mainly of hedge-layers (so the responses are skewed towards hedge-laying, rather than coppice work, thatching etc):

What do you call the short handled implement used in plashing a hedge???

What do you call the long handled implement used in plashing a hedge???

As hedge-laying is not common in some English counties (e.g. in Cornwall, Devon, and Yorkshire where dry-stone walls are more commonly used as field boundaries), they must have asked supplementary questions (not recorded in the SED Dictionary, but possibly to be found in the original field notes)

The terms for the two main tools in this family, the short billhook and the longer handled slasher (listed in SED as a hedging-bill), appear to be used synonymously, with an overlap of terminology between the two, as well as other edge tools of similar shape and usage, e.g. the bean hook, the reaping hook and the grass sickle. If the original researchers were not familiar with the different styles and shapes of tools found and used this could add to the confusion. Thus in the following, where a name is used to describe both variants, the county is included under both headings.

The pronunciation of the word, billhook, varied widely from region to region, county to county or even village to village, with over 19 variations recorded in SED - this is not covered in this abstract.

Billhook:

Badging-hook	Ch, <i>also an implement larger than a billhook used for cutting corn see: fag(v)</i>
Bagging-hook	Wo, Ess, K (<i>author's note: see above: Badging-hook</i>)
Bank-hook	He, (<i>author's note: c.f. Bank-knife, as used in the USA</i>)
Bill	Bk, Bd, C, Ess, Ha, Hrt, Hu, K, Mon, Nth, O, R, Wo
Billhook	Bk, Brk, Ch, Co, Cu, D, Db, Do, Gl, Ha, Hrt, Hu, Ess, K, L, La, Lei, Man, Mon, MxL, Nb, Nf, Nth, O, R, Sa, Sf, So, Sr St, W, Wa, We, Wo, Y
Billing-hook	Y
Bill-knife	Du, Nb, Y
Broad-hook	Sa
Broom-hook	Sa, St
Browse-hook	Co, D, So
Brushel	K, (<i>may be a contracted form of Brush-bill, but Brush-bill was not recorded</i>)
Brushing-bill	Db, Nt, Y
Brushing-hook	Ch, Db, K, Sa, St, Wa, Wo
Chopper	Brk, K (<i>author's note: also W – term used during his childhood 1950-1960</i>)
Clitheroe-bill	La (<i>author's note: the Clitheroe billhook is a regional pattern or shape of blade</i>)
Fag-hook	Ha, Sr, Sx, W
Fagging Hook	Brk, So, Wo (<i>also a sickle for cutting corn – to fag (v) to cut corn with a sickle O, also to fag-up (v) to use a billhook Wa</i>)
Faggoty-bill	Gl
Flasher	Nf, Sf
Frith-hook	D
Fur-blil	Nt, L
Furze-hook	Co (<i>author's note: also pronounced fuzz-hook De, furze is a term used for gorse in many English counties</i>)
Gorse-hook	Db, Lei, Nth, St, Wa
Grass-hook	L, W
Grass-rip	Ess (<i>with a longer, curved blade, c.f. a bean hook</i>)
Hacker	Mon, Sa, Wo
Haftern- hook	D???? (<i>queried in the Basic Material – as collected by the researchers</i>)
Hand-bill	K, Nt, Sr, Sx, Y
Hand-hook	D, He, Nf, Sa, Sf, So

Hatchet	<i>(mentioned in SED but not recorded in any county – possibly as an alternative tool when used for splitting kindling wood)</i>
Hedge-hook	D, Gl, Hrt, La, Nf, Y
Hedge-rip	Ess
Hedging-bill	Db, Y <i>(also has its own entry see: slasher)</i>
Hedging-hook	Bd, Db, Do, Ess, Gl, Ha, La, MxL, So, Wo
Hedging-knife	L, Nth
Hedging-mallet	C
Hook	Bk, Cu, Ess (curved blade), L, La, Mo, MxL, O, So, Wo
Laying-Hook	La, Nb
Lea	Sf
Long-hook	D, Nf
Paring-hook	D <i>(light, for finishing)</i>
Patch-hook	Co
Rave-hook	Nf
Reaf-hook	Nf <i>(author's note: possible pronunciation of reap-hook or rip-hook)</i>
Reap-hook	Brk ????(query in BM), Do, Gl, Mon, Hf, So <i>(see reaping-hook, below)</i>
Reaping-hook	Nf <i>(author's note: more properly used as a tool for harvesting corn)</i>
Rip	Ess (curved blade), Sf
Rip-hook	Brk, W
Scrog-hook	Ess (curved blade)
Shearing-hook	Do <i>(author's note: possible confusion with a thatcher's shearing-hook)</i>
Short handle slasher	Nf
Short-hook	He, Wo
Sickle	Sa, Man, Y <i>(author's note: more properly used as a tool for cutting grass)</i>
Slasher	W <i>(as a billhook – see separate entry, below, c.f hedging bill)</i>
Slash-hook	Nf, Lei, St, Wa
Small-axe	<i>(see: hatchet, above)</i>
Small-billhook	<i>(see: billhook, above)</i>
Spear-hook	Co <i>(author's note: possible pronunciation of spar-hook (not mentioned) a small billhook used for cutting thatching spars, common in D, De, So)</i>
Steeping-hook	D <i>(steep (v) is used as a term for plash (v) in hedge-laying D)</i>

Straight-rip	Ess (straight blade) (<i>possible pronunciation of reap, see reap hook, above</i>)
Swapple	Sx???? (<i>queried in BM, possible synonym for swap-hook</i>)
Swatcher	Cu
Wood-hook	Ha, So, W

As mentioned above, the differences in the various edge-tools used in hedge-laying and the subsequent maintenance of hedges may not have been apparent to the researchers: consequently, the heavy slasher used to lay a hedge, and the lighter brushing hook (also listed in catalogues as a staff-hook), used to cut back re-growth and thus maintain a hedge, may not have been regarded as different tools.

Hedging Bill:

Back-slasher	O
Barging-hook	W
Bill	Bk, Bd, C, Ess, Hu, Hrt, K, L, Mon, Nth, O, R, Wo, Y,
Billhook	(<i>see above</i>)
Billing-hook	Y
Bodging-hook	Brk
Briar-hook	Y
Browse-hook	Co, So
Brushel	K
Brush-hook	K
Brushing-bill	Db, Nth, Y
Brushing-hook	Ch, Db, K, Sa, St, Wa, Wo
Chopper	Brk, K
Dike-slasher	We
Drash-hook	Mo
Drashing-bill	He
Drashing-hook	Mo
Dressing-hook	Ch
Flasher	Nf, Sf
Hedge-bill	Gl, He, Sa, Sx
Hedge-cropper	O
Hedge-hook	Gl, Hrt, La, Nf, Y
Hedge-knife	L, Nb, Nt, Nth

Hedger	Y
Hedge-slasher	Bk, K, Nf, Y
Hedge-splasher	Nth
Hedge-stopper	R
Hedge-topper	L, Nth
Hedge-trimmer	O
Hedging-bill	Db, La, Y
Hedging-hook	Bd, Ess, Gl, Ha, Mxl, So, Wo
Hedging-knife	L, Nth
Hook	Co, Cu, Gl, Hu, L, Sf, W
Knife	L
Lazy-back	D???? (queried in BM)
Long-flasher	Sf
Long-handled bill-hook	Mon
Long-handle(d) hook	Brk, Co, D, Ess, W
Long-hook	D
Long-shafted hook	La
Long-slasher	Sx
Long-staled brushing-hook	Wo
Long-staled hook	Sa, Wo
Quick-hook	C
Rip	Sf
Shredding-hook	Gl
Sickle	Man, Sa
Slanching-hook	Ch (<i>slanch (v) – to trim the sides of hedges, Ch</i>)
Slash	Cu, We
Slasher	common throughout England – used in catalogues in 19 th & 20 th centuries
Slash-hook	Lei, St, Wa
Slashing-hook	Bk, Brk, Ch, Ha, La, St, Wa, Wo, Y
Slashing-knife	Du
Splasher	Lei. O, R, Wa

Splash- hook	(see slash-hook, above)
Splashing-hook	La, Wa
Splosher	O
Staff-hook	Co, D, Do, So (<i>author's note, also W</i>)
Swiver	Nf
Tommy-hook	Db ??? (queried BM)
Trimming-hook	Co, Ha, Hrt, Hu, Sr
Trouncing-hook	Wa

To author, as a layman, but maybe not to an etymologist, there would appear to be some direct connection in derivation between the words 'pleacher' and 'slasher', as used in hedge-laying:

pleacher (n) => pleach(v) => splash (v) => splasher (n) => slasher(n)

Key to Counties:

Bd	Bedfordshire	He	Herefordshire	Nth	Northamptonshire
Bk	Buckinghamshire	Hrt	Hertfordshire	O	Oxfordshire
Brk	Berkshire	Hu	Huntingdonshire	R	Rutland
C	Cambridgeshire	K	Kent	Sa	Shropshire
Ch	Cheshire	L	Lincolnshire	Sf	Suffolk
Co	Cornwall	La	Lancashire	So	Somerset
Cu	Cumberland	Lei	Leicestershire	Sr	Surrey
D	Devon	Man	(Isle of) Man	St	Staffordshire
Db	Derbyshire	Mon	Monmouthshire	Sx	Sussex
Do	Dorset	MxL	Middlesex &	W	Wiltshire
Du	Durham		London	Wa	Warwickshire
Ess	Essex	Nb	Northumberland	We	Westmoreland
Gl	Gloucestershire	Nf	Norfolk	Wo	Worcestershire
Ha	Hampshire	Nt	Nottinghamshire	Y	Yorkshire

In most counties there is a local pattern of billhook; some counties having several, often originating in specific town and villages. The longer handled hedging-bill, or slasher, has far fewer variations – many seem to have originated after the Enclosures Acts of the 18th century, when wealthy landowners consolidated their estates, and planted miles of hedges to delineate them. One such was. Sir Tatton Sykes (1772-1863) the 4th Baronet of Sledmere in the East Riding of Yorkshire, who had an interest in agricultural techniques. His father had relocated the whole village of Sledmere, planted 100 acres of woodland and had bought and enclosed vast areas of farmland. Presumably by Sir Tatton's day, the hedges were in need of re-laying, and he had the slasher that bears his name made specifically for the task.

* Survey of English Dialects, Clive Upton, David Parry and J.D.A Widdowson, Routledge, 2014 ISBN 978 0 415 75506 1