

In the trenches with a garden warrior

Picture: JIMMY GASTON

The Monday interview



Boris Johnson
meets hedge
campaigner
Michael Jones

THIS is the stuff wars are made of," says Michael Jones, a retired schoolteacher of 70.

The stuff in question is green, smells of turpentine when crushed, and grows at the frightening speed of three feet a year. We are standing in his garden in Selly Oak, in the shade of a hedge composed of *Cupressus leylandii*.

This is no ordinary hedge. This is the hedge that gave English jurisprudence its first definition of a hedge. This hedge launched the phrase "hedge abuse". Out of this hedge was born "hedgeline", the crisis number for those oppressed by giant hedges, and what has the makings of a political movement.

A confidential letter from Jack Straw shows he is in a funk that Labour has not taken the issue seriously enough. An Early Day Motion calling for hedge victims to have redress against the "vindictive impulses" of their neighbours has been signed by 166 MPs. The party conference will be picketed by the hedge campaigners, and Michael Jones is their Führer.

"The accolades have come pouring in," says Jones with owlish pleasure, as his wife Maureen produces tea and a home-made cake. "I get a vast number of letters, and — this is what makes me bigheaded — I have never had a nasty letter. I've had OBEs, MBEs, Lordships. One thought I should be Prime Minister." The Great Hedge War of



Weoley Park Road, Birmingham can be traced back to 1971 and, like every feud between neighbours, there are two sides. The Jones family say the Stantons, who have lived in their adjacent house since 1949, were dismayed when new dwellings were constructed. "They thought they were a cut above us," says Maureen Jones.

Rubbish, says Terry Stanton, son of the elder Stanton, now 90. The Stanton family claim the hedge was for the benefit of the Joneses, to stop them being dazzled by the Stanton greenhouse. The leylandii were allowed to grow to 35ft because Mrs Stanton senior

became convinced that Mr Jones was spying on her. Stuff and nonsense, say the Joneses. The only person to use binoculars was Maureen Jones, to see a rare albino starling. Jones took to trimming the hedge, which was on the Stantons' land, without permission. According to Stanton he would do this in the middle of the night.

According to Jones: "I just get up early." At one stage Jones says Stanton senior attacked him with a pole when he was up the ladder. Stanton says the whole episode is fictitious. Both sides agree that the Stantons then built a large scaffolding tower behind the hedge, Jones

says this was a sinister watchtower. Terry Stanton says it was to record the damage to the trees.

Jones says Stanton senior, a former engineer, constructed an artillery platform to squirt him with a powerful hose. The Stanton family say one of the Joneses shouted: "You and your sons had better not go out at night." This alleged threat caused Mrs Stanton senior to experience a nervous decline. She dropped a full bottle of Ribena on her foot, which is believed to have triggered an embolism, and she died. On the anniversary of her death, or thereabouts, Jones was cutting the hedge when Terry Stan-

ton came round, after which Stanton was convicted of assault causing actual bodily harm. Jones says Stanton struck him. Stanton that Jones fell over a pile of cut logs.

There followed a long court case that Jones won. Under the terms of the covenants of the Bournville Village Trust, the hedge was a party hedge, and could be trimmed by either side. In the course of this action, legal history was made.

"The judge said to me, 'Mr Jones, if I planted 10 trees in the middle of a field, would that be a hedge?' and I said, 'If you allowed them to grow to full potential with unrestricted girth and roots, then

you'd have 10 trees. But if their roots and girth are restricted in reaching their full potential, then that is a hedge.'"

The judge agreed and in April 1996 Jones was able legally to shorten the hedge. But Stanton had an ace up his sleeve: hedge two! Now we seem to sit under it in Jones's sitting room, already, at 18ft, towering over hedge one. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the feud, this is a vindictive hedge, darkening the room. How long must this suffering continue, before Labour has the courage to act?

□ *Neighbours at War, BBC1, tonight at 9.30pm*