

Edgelands

by Marion Shoard

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Britain's towns and cities do not usually sit cheek by jowl with its countryside, as we often casually assume. Between urban and rural stands a kind of landscape quite different from either. Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland. All these heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. This peculiar landscape is only the latest version of an interfacial rim that has always separated settlements from the countryside to a greater or lesser extent. In our own age, however, this zone has expanded vastly in area, complexity and singularity. Huge numbers of people now spend much of their time living, working or moving within or through it. Yet for most of us, most of the time, this mysterious no man's land passes unnoticed: in our imaginations, as opposed to our actual lives, it barely exists.

When we think of the land of Britain we think of town and village, countryside and coast. Our image of Kent is still one of towns, wealden or coastal, neatly demarcated from downs, orchards and fields. When we think of Scotland we think of Edinburgh Castle and heather-clad hills. We are, of course, also well aware of the great conurbations. But not of the edgelands.

The apparently unplanned, certainly uncelebrated and largely incomprehensible territory where town and country meet rarely forms the setting for films, books or television shows. As we flash past its seemingly meaningless contours in train, car or bus we somehow fail to register it on our retinas. When we deliberately visit it, this is often for mundane activities like taking the car to be serviced or household waste to the disposal plant, which we choose to discount as part of our lives. If we actually live or work there, we usually wish we did not. Public authorities tend to have a similarly negative attitude towards these interfacial areas.

Sometimes these areas are so little acknowledged that they have not even been given distinctive names. Over the past twenty years on land north of Bristol an employment and shopping centre has grown up over what was agricultural land.¹ This development has become so large that it now rivals in size the central business district of Bristol itself.

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The close proximity of three motorway junctions has attracted a science park, the procurement headquarters of the Ministry of Defence (one of the biggest office developments in Europe, with a workforce of 6,500), British Aerospace, Rolls-Royce, the European headquarters of Orange and the European headquarters of Hewlett Packard, together with a shopping mall offering as much retail space as the main shopping centre in the heart of Bristol. The University of the West of England is also to be found here. Yet the whole area, which provides employment for 34,000 people and has an employment capacity of 66,500, is known only as the 'North Fringe'.

In other places, de facto settlements are known by names that fail to reflect their current character. Until the mid-1980s, 'Westwood' in the Isle of Thanet, east Kent, was the name for the crossroads between the main roads serving the area's three long-established coastal resorts — Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate. Today, it denotes a vast developed sprawl in the centre of Thanet, featuring massive retail and business parks, a motorcycle training centre, a riding establishment and a branch of the University of Kent, all of these rubbing shoulders with cabbage fields, old, isolated farmhouses and farm-workers' cottages, and a closed mental hospital; the road names bespeak the juxtaposition of old and new — 'Poorhole Lane' beside 'Enterprise Road'. Yet Westwood has no centre and, in an area long denuded of tree cover, none of the character that the place name suggests.

Once the suburbs were also a netherworld whose existence went unacknowledged. These sudden accretions to ancient settlements, often unwelcome to opinion-formers, also somehow failed to signify, long after they had become far bigger than the towns that spawned them. Eventually, however, the suburbs won recognition. They acquired first noisy detractors, who at least paid them the compliment of noticing their existence, and then their own enthusiasts and advocates. Some came to be admired while others were deplored. They infiltrated jokes, literature and folk wisdom, and entered the consciousness of us all. They are still not universally loved, but they enjoy a place in our world view and their function is respected. Victorian north Oxford is not yet thought of as quite such a vital part of the nation's fabric as the city's medieval high street, but it has devotees hardly less enthusiastic. It is possible to imagine future generations coming to view the Victorian and Edwardian suburbs of some of our towns and cities as more noble than their often far more ravaged original centres. Apparently monotonous suburbs, like the 1930s additions onto North London, are also seen to be a valid part of our total environment.

Yet so far no similar process of recognition has even begun to be extended to the urban-rural interface. How could it? These jungles of marshalling yards and gasometers, gravel pits, water-works and car scrapyards seem no more than repositories for functions we prefer not to think about. Their most obvious components are things we have been brought up to think of as blots on the landscape. The apparently random pattern in which they are assembled seems to defy the concepts of orderly planning by humans and of harmony in nature. And yet, there are reasons why the interface could and should follow the suburbs from the dark pit of universal disdain into the sunlit uplands of appreciation, if not acclaim.

It, too, has its story, and one that is at least as interesting as that of the suburbs. Perhaps, if we can strip ourselves of our negative preconceptions, we may find it as appealing as well.

There is another reason why the edgelands demand our attention. We may not notice it, but it is here that much of our current environmental change, and in particular the development of large-scale retail, business and industrial premises, is taking place. In the United States there is growing awareness of the development of what has been termed 'edge city' and the effect this is having on the geography and economic and social profile of entire regions.² Here in Britain planning still focuses on the problems of towns and the challenge of the countryside. But if we fail to attend to the activity in the interface we forfeit the chance not only to shape that change but also to influence the effects of it on other parts of the environment, such as town centres.

Tasting a landscape

How can we set about the task of evaluating an ignored landscape? In 1965,, two scholars at University College London, David Lowenthal and Hugh Prince (one from the United States, the other British), tried to discover the common features of landscapes most admired by those who lead landscape taste in England. They carried out their survey by identifying views expressed in literature, speeches, newspaper articles, letters and at public hearings. Although nobody since Lowenthal and Prince has attempted to cover the same ground, there is no reason to suppose that their conclusions do not remain valid.

English people like to see diverse but calm landscapes in which various elements are arranged in an orderly manner considered picturesque, they reflected. 'What is considered "essentially English" is a calm and peaceful deer park, with slow-moving streams and wide expanses of meadowland dotted with fine trees. The scene should include free-ranging domestic animals . . . When it is arable land, hedgerows and small fields are usually obligatory.'³ They discovered that the English do not like geometrical, obviously pre-planned landscapes, but they do applaud tidiness and neatness. As part of a nostalgic desire to put the clock back, English people like to see evidence of age in their landscapes — old buildings, old trees (native deciduous rather than alien conifer) — and they flock to landscapes rich in historical association. At the same time, they dislike evidence of the present-day and in particular anything obviously functional.

What is immediately apparent about interfacial landscape is that it embodies the antithesis of the characteristics likely to appeal to the appetites identified by Lowenthal and Prince. 'The countryside beloved by the great majority is tamed and inhabited, warm, comfortable, humanized,' they wrote. The edge-lands, in contrast, are raw and rough, and rather than seeming people-friendly are often sombre and menacing, flaunting their participation in activities we do not wholly understand. They certainly do not conform to people's idea of the picturesque by presenting a chocolate-box image, suitably composed and textural. On the contrary, they seem desolate, forsaken and unconnected even to their own elements let alone to our preferred version of human life. Tidiness is absent: here no neat manicured lawns with sharply demarcated edges are found. If there is grassland, it is likely to be coarse and shaggy. It may be grazed by perhaps a few sheep enclosed by derelict fencing leading to tumbledown farm buildings.

If ungrazed, it will be swamped by a riot of wild, invasive plants that seem to over-run everything in their path: fragments of tarmac, wrecks of cars and derelict buildings. Lowenthal and Prince tell us that the English applaud the absence of litter in a landscape: the interface sucks in the detritus of modern life. Not only is litter and household waste casually dumped there because it is closer at hand than the hedgerow and less effectively policed than the high street, but formal waste—processing operations, such as car crushing, sewage treatment or waste transfer, are often located deliberately here, lest they despoil preferred environments. Edgeland rubbish tips may eventually be grassed over, but the cosmetic treatment of unsavoury artefacts is considered less necessary in the interface than in either town or country. Our gardens, whether in city or village, are expected to be extravagantly manicured. Allotments, the interface's bastard half—child of agriculture and horticulture, put on no such show. Laboured over at least as diligently as gardens, they nonetheless flaunt 'unsightly' infrastructure that would be unthinkable in a garden: old piping used as plant supports, soggy carpets keeping down weeds and tool sheds built imaginatively but untidily out of packing materials.

Local councils commonly require far lower standards of design for new buildings in the interface than they do elsewhere: effectively edgelands have become the lowest grade of landscape in UK landscape conservation terms. The facades applied to urban and rural landscapes to help them satisfy the tastes identified by Lowenthal and Prince are considered unnecessary in a landscape that nobody is actually trying to pretend is other than it is. We do not expect the supermarkets or the giant factory sheds of the edgelands to blend in with the local vernacular architecture, and where any tree planting is stipulated by councils as landscaping it is usually only the barest minimum. As if this were not enough, the interface also challenges another key characteristic of favoured English landscapes: dislike of the functional. For it embodies naked function more than any other type of environment. Its great warehouses, car scrapyards, rubbish tips, electricity sub—stations, motorway interchanges, welding and car-breaking units pursue their purposes without even a nod to aesthetic conventions.

A useful space

The characteristic appearance of the interfacial landscape is matched by the characteristic forms of land use it reflects. These uses gravitate to the interface for a combination of reasons. Sometimes the cause is obvious: motorcycle training centres, for example, are noisy yet require easy access to centres of population. Drive—to retail units would be inside towns if retailers could find there the floorspace, the parking area and the consequent relaxed planning regime they require. As these retail parks emerge outside towns the road network adjusts to provide access to them, and a chicken-and-egg situation arises whereby interface sites become more attractive to car users and therefore to retail developers. As shopping is coming to be seen more and more as a leisure activity than a chore, superstores are coming to be surrounded by other types of leisure development, such as restaurants and nightclubs. Business parks, distribution depots and housing estates also spring up in the interface, often around the bypasses and motorway interchanges that it provides.

Here they sit cheek-by-jowl with the uses we have expelled to the interface because we consider them unsuited to more polite environments — gypsy encampments, rubbish tips, recycling centres, mental hospitals, sewage works and telecommunications masts.

The characteristic activities of the edgelands are also arranged in a distinctive way. Unlike a garden city, say, or a Victorian suburb, interfacial areas are not designed from scratch. They assemble themselves in response to whatever needs are thrust upon them, and in whatever way they can. Motorway interchanges, scrapyards and electricity pylons were not thought of when most settlements were conceived: they were tacked on to the edge of settlements because that was as close as they could be brought, mingling with any gravel excavations, mills and factories that were already there. So in the interface we see history as in the stratified layers of an archaeological site. This characteristic makes the interface intrinsically casual. And unofficial. Even stores appear dumped individually, often surrounded by their own extensive car parks, rather than linked together as in a high street.

Did the settlements of the past spawn a similar penumbra of land servicing the urban area with less glamorous functions? Often they seem to have done, though little research has been carried out on this subject or on other areas that might give us clues. For instance, we know little of the way in which past societies dealt with rubbish, or even of the nature of the waste that remained unrecycled. York in Roman times is one place that has been studied. There, archaeologists have found evidence of four uses just outside the boundary of the Roman fortress and of the *colonia*, the deliberately planted civilian town across the River Ouse. These were pottery and tile manufacture in kilns (which would have been hot, smelly and noisy), military training at so-called practice camps (which required considerable amounts of space), rubbish deposition (collections of broken pottery and animal bones in fairly large amounts suggesting organised rubbish deposition) and, particularly interesting and special to the period, burial.⁴ Since the advent of Christianity to Britain, burial has taken place mainly within settlements, but it was the practice of the Romans to bury their dead outside their settlements.⁵ This was probably partly for reasons of public health, and partly because they considered that the dead should have a separate world to inhabit. Elsewhere around Roman York the interface would almost certainly have been devoted to the production of food to supply the garrison and the civilian population.

Characteristically interfacial landscape does not occur today around every settlement. There is plenty of altogether rural land rubbing shoulders with settlements, often quite large ones. It is equally true that land with the distinguishing features I have identified as typically interfacial is not found exclusively on the present-day border between town and country. Although yesterday's interfacial zones are often swallowed up by subsequent building, sometimes they survive as edgeland within built-up areas. Nonetheless, the present rural—urban interface is the expanding landscape of our own age. Disregard of the edgelands means that data about it is largely absent.

But here is one statistic: in the green belt around York, a quarter of the supposedly protected green belt within one mile of the edge of the built-up area was developed between 1966 and 1996, according to calculations by Michael Hopkinson of the University College of Ripon and York St John.⁶ Every single development reflected in this statistic would have involved the overturning of the local councils' green belt presumption against development. Imagine how much faster development must have been taking place (though figures are not available) in fringe areas where no such presumption existed.

Wild at heart

Though usually either unloved or ignored, edgeland does fulfil vital functions. One of the less obvious is the role it is coming to play as a refuge for wildlife. The 13.8 hectares of Molesey Heath are the highest point in an interfacial finger of land on the edge of southwest London extending from Hersham in the south to East and West Molesey in the north. This area takes in raised reservoirs, an industrial estate, an abandoned sewage works, an equestrian centre, a council housing estate, piecemeal private housing (some of it on plotlands), and a camping and caravan site. The Heath is a recent landscape feature: the result of gravel extraction followed by infilling of rubbish. Stepped paths climb the 60 feet to the top, and a surfaced track runs round its circumference, but little else serves the visitor and there are no elaborate interpretation boards. A handful of horses belonging to local travellers prevent encroaching fennel, blackberries and hawthorn from replacing the purple, pink, white and yellow jungle of common mallow and goat's-beard, tufted vetch and yellow vetchling, musk thistle and wall rocket — 311 species of flowering plants and ferns in all. This diversity of plant life is partly the result of the juxtaposition of many different sorts of soil, for instance through deposition of builders' rubble, in a way which would be highly unlikely in Nature. The fact that the travellers' horses frequently turn up bits of broken glass does not affect the nature conservation value of the site one iota, nor does it worry the grasshoppers and crickets that make use of the little open areas, whence they provide an almost deafening aural background in high summer. Indeed, rubbish infilling has raised the land here to such an extent that Molesey Heath offers fine views — as far as Canary Wharf to the north-east and the North Downs to the south. Were this topography the result of some natural process, Molesey Heath would no doubt be celebrated as a viewpoint. And were the lake that lies below it nestling into a sandy cliffside a natural phenomenon rather than the result of groundwater accumulation after gravel extraction, it would not now be in the process of being more than half filled in with rubbish. So disregarded is this lake that it bears no name, yet here, before infilling and thus the partial destruction of the lake started in 2001, the water was of an extraordinary clarity and afforded views of a wealth of submerged green vegetation. Great-crested grebes, kingfishers, coots, moorhens, sedge warblers, frogs, toads, newts and twelve species of dragonfly bred here, while two types of bat would flitter overhead at dusk.

Molesey Heath is not unusual in the rich diversity of its plant and animal communities. Other interfacial wildlife hotspots include the land around Beddington Sewage Works near Croydon, which is one of the top birdwatching sites in southeast England, while all five species of grebe occurring in Britain from the familiar great-crested to the rarely seen red-necked have been recorded at Stonar Lake on the edge of the small town of Sandwich in Kent. This extensive, neglected water, the result of quarrying a hundred years ago, overlooked by a row of rough pines on one side, is not so much as glimpsed by the hundreds of thousands of tourists attracted to this historic town each year. The massive hulks of a pharmaceutical works and a derelict industrial estate strewn with corroding car bodies and litter loom over the other sides; warnings of guard dogs on patrol, which punctuate a crumbling fence, deter the less adventurous from picking their way through the jungle of bushes on the water's edge, which in early spring conceal drifts of silky, yellow coltsfoot.

Clifton Backfields on the northern fringe of York typifies the wildlife value of edgeland space, and represents a rare example of this value actually being appreciated. The Backfields is an unprepossessing stretch of 12 hectares of rough vegetation and scrub close to housing estates, some of them notorious, and partly overlooked by corrugated asbestos hangars and massive, new shed-warehouses. The wanderer here finds him or herself in a varied and beautiful world. There are little patches of woodland with oak, ash, blackthorn, hawthorn, wild rose and apple trees. Deep within these thickets lie occasional stretches of concrete track, their sides covered by carpets of bright-yellow creeping cinquefoil and biting stonecrop. These tracks are a legacy of the last intensive use of the site — by the Army and Air Force during and after the Second World War for, among other things, the Berlin airlift. Most of the Backfields (or the Backies, as it is known locally) consists of fields lightly grazed by rough horses — grassy ridge-and-furrow fields, which bespeak cultivation in medieval times though hardly at all since, and old hay meadows. Here betony, great burnet, red fescue, pepper saxifrage, knapweed, and many other plants characteristic of such habitats flourish. Fifty years ago most farms in this area would have included such flower-rich pasture and hay meadows; now in the countryside they have been almost totally displaced by intensive arable land or stock-rearing monoculture. But in the Backies, away from both plough and agrochemical, the wild flowers and grasses of yesterday's Yorkshire countryside live on.

After the war, ownership of Clifton Backfields reverted to its previous freeholder, who grazed it. When he abandoned farming, the area fell into the category of 'white land' — or space that might be allocated for future housing. Many considered such a step not only uncontroversial but probably helpful to the overall environment, particularly since it would relieve pressure on villages and farmland in the Vale of York. However, Ryedale District Council refused planning consent on the grounds not only that the Backies was an important open area but also because they considered it a significant nature conservation resource.

The developers appealed to the Secretary of State for the Environment to reverse the refusal of planning consent. Although they could not build on the Backies without consent, they nonetheless started to clear away scrub and trees with bulldozers.

Local residents were so enraged that several dozen of them physically blocked the path of the bulldozers or installed themselves within them. To defuse the situation the local authority stepped in and issued emergency tree preservation orders; eventually planning consent was given for housing over part of the site, linked to a scheme to tame the landscape near the new houses, but most of the site was left intact. Today the Backies is still much favoured as an informal recreation area. Amid dog roses, ash trees and flowery fields, blackcaps, chiffchaffs, willow warblers and whitethroats pour forth their springtime song, children build houses in the trees and dens in the abandoned ammunition bunkers, teenagers ride mountain bikes and grown-ups stroll with their dogs, while water voles, now scarce in the countryside, busy themselves in the beck.

Landscape ecologists Tony Kendle and Stephen Forbes have explained why stretches of neglected rough space in towns can be rich in wildlife, particularly if the deposited waste has contributed to the underlying rock and soil. They explain:

Of course most sites are benign even if they are made up of materials such as waste, but unusual conditions can be found and often lead to the most interesting areas. The pH may range from 2 to 12 the nutrient content may range from excess to almost non-existent ... Every textural class and soil classification can be encountered, including some which have never been properly described.

The interface provides similar and often greater wildlife benefits than urban wildscape, and on a much more extensive scale. For plants and animals being driven out of the countryside by modern agricultural methods, interfacial areas provide an obvious first refuge, benefiting not only from their own ecological resources but also from their proximity to that other increasingly important wildlife refuge, gardens. Wildlife habitats often survive in the interface because farming is pursued less intensively, either because the land is fragmented or because the owners are no longer altogether serious about agriculture. Land uses that replace farming in the edgelands, like grazing for horses or the excavation of minerals, scruffy though they may appear, can actually in themselves be better for wildlife than modern industrial agriculture. Horses in the edgelands are reared for casual exercise, not meat production, so those who keep them do not turn their pasture into a ryegrass monoculture as stock farmers usually do; in any case horses, not being cloven-hoofed, would crush reseeded ryegrass. Lakes, like those at Stonar and Molesey Heath, which are allowed to develop after mineral extraction, can be rich in wildlife. Rainwater and groundwater provide the source of their clear water, unpolluted by run-off from agricultural land or rivers into which effluent has been discharged. Having no inflow or outflow such bodies of water contain none of the large bottom-dwelling fish like bream that stir up the mud and silt of most lake bottoms, occluding the water and thus stunting the development of many underwater plants. Young amphibians that would be eaten by such fish flourish in this predator-free environment.

Interfacial sites often enjoy biological diversity partly because they are ignored. Being ignored, they go unmanaged. The clutter of the interface, which would be tidied out of sight by those concerned with creating an acceptable landscape there, often enhances wildlife by creating new niches that wild creatures can exploit. Throw an empty milk crate into a lake and while it may look untidy, fish will swim in and out of it and use it as part of their ecological world. Black redstarts nest in the brickwork of derelict buildings. So while town parks are grassed over for ball games and our national parks overgrazed by sheep, these truer wildernesses are allowed to find their own accommodation with Nature, evolving silently and unhindered.

Art, history, play, utility

Wildlife value is relatively quantifiable; some of the other benefits bestowed by the edgelands are less so. The subversiveness of interfacial land perhaps explains why children often value it more than other groups, seeming to find the edgelands a wonderful place to play. Why? This landscape offers an obviously varied environment, which is often wild, and which has plenty of places to hide and things to play with. Its dereliction stimulates the imagination. This seems to apply not only to children but also to some kinds of creative artist. The aura of excitement that goes with the apparent lawlessness of the edgelands has been exploited in such films of the 1990s as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Seven*, *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*, *Fargo* and *The Straight Story*. The interface is the obvious place for people to hand over money in brown envelopes or to hide kidnap victims. Here the final shoot-out can take place against an ominously incomprehensible industrial backdrop. Strange pieces of debris of twentieth-century capitalism seem to have some of the capacity to inspire awe in the same way as the leftover artefacts of other ages, such as Stonehenge. Like such ancient relics, the relics of our own age now stand outside the humdrum landscape of everyday life. These things have not been designed by some functionary eager to satisfy the bland tastes authority attributes to the public. They do not greet you like a country or town park, a high street or any other environment tailored to the supposed needs of the lowest common denominator. This is a vaguely menacing frontier land hinting that here the normal rules governing human behaviour cannot be altogether relied upon.

Yet this living museum of our recent past is also the powerhouse of the society of the present. Visit a high street today and the chances are you will not learn all that much about what makes the town that contains it tick economically. You would probably get a much better idea by taking a trip to its interface. Here you will find the branch offices, industrial works and superstores that probably account for far more turnover than the businesses and shops surviving in the traditional centre. You will also find much of the essential apparatus without which the whole settlement could not function: rubbish tips, electricity substations, sewage works, gas-holders, motorway interchanges and so on.

Neglect and abuse

None of these considerations — wildlife importance, value as an adventure playground for children and imagined landscape for artists, museum of our recent past and cauldron of our economic present — seem to be sufficient to earn the edgelands the respect of those who control our lives. Not only is less care taken over the appearance of new buildings here, but councils also neglect to provide the most basic public facilities they would automatically provide in a town.

Out-of-town shopping is a key component of Westwood on the Isle of Thanet, which is home to huge stores like Sainsbury's Homebase, Tesco Extra, Carpet Right, Halford's and B&Q — more than 37,000 square metres in total — and which now exceeds that found in Margate town centre. Close by, two business parks are springing up. Thanet District Council has chosen not to provide the sort of public facilities that a town centre would offer. Instead, it is relying on the retail operators themselves to provide these: once a further massive shopping development has been built, they will probably include a paved square with benches. Do people who work in the interface in retail complexes and business parks like this not need a park for a stroll at lunchtime? Where, for that matter, are they to eat their lunch? Kick a football with their friends? Or watch their children play? There is, of course, a fear that provision of public facilities in the interface would further hasten the depletion of town centres which is already so pronounced. Yet the absence of basic facilities either encourages people to travel, usually by car, if they have the time, or it leaves them stranded in conditions we would not tolerate elsewhere. Furthermore, the absence of any community space deprives people of the right to live fully. The right of freedom of association and the right to stage public demonstrations can hardly be exercised in edgeland settlements like this where such apparently public space as exists, like super-store car parks, is actually private.

Such neglect by local authorities does not appear to bother central government. In 2000 the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) published a white paper entitled *Our Towns and Cities: Delivering an Urban Renaissance* and another on the future of the countryside of England called *Our Countryside: The Future*. Both were substantial documents, running to a total of nearly 400 A4 pages between them. The urban white paper makes no mention of the interface, apart from the word 'fringe' appearing in a diagram, yet it is hard to see how urban decline can be stemmed without attention being paid to the role of interfacial areas, which so often suck economic activity out of the centres of towns and cities. The sister document refers to the urban fringe briefly in the context only of the difficulties of farming there.⁸

The main instructions from the DETR to local councils in England on planning on the edge of built-up areas come in the shape of their publication *The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development: Planning Policy Guidance Note 7*, issued in 2001. This document sees interfacial land as essentially problem land with no intrinsically valuable features: its use is to offer space for functions like waste disposal and informal recreation in order to allow more valuable land to remain untouched.

So the interface remains a dumping ground for activities considered unprepossessing and a frontier land in which private sector development rages unchecked by noticeable standards of design. One of the most striking of such activities may soon be wind farming, which is set to boom as power generators are forced to turn to renewables to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels. In the face of complaints that windmills ruin remote moorland landscapes, officials are coming to see interfacial areas as their obvious home, even though they will of course be vastly more intrusive in the intricate environment of the interface. Equally threatening for this landscape, which relishes what other landscapes vomit up and which laughs at current notions of taste, are attempts, also under way, to castrate it by turning it into the sort of landscape considered more desirable. It goes without saying that all three approaches reflect the assumption that the interface has nothing to offer as a landscape in its own right.

Afforestation has emerged as the fashionable mechanism for transforming as much as possible of the interface into something more acceptable to polite society, and hiding as much as possible of the rest of it from view. Vast interfacial areas bordering towns from Bristol, Swindon and London Colney to Bolton, Warrington and Hartlepool, together with much of the edge-lands of Romford, Rainham, Nottingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Sunderland, are to be transformed by courtesy of substantial grants into so-called 'community forests'. In England alone (and there are also similar forests in Wales and Scotland) the community forest programme covers an area of more than 1,700 square miles (4,400 kilometres), or over twelve times that of the Isle of Wight. Not all of the land involved is interfacial, but the vast majority is. 'We're transforming the living and working environment of the North East,' proclaims a document which sets out how 101,000 acres (40,900 hectares) will be planted with 20 million trees to make the area more attractive for business and housing and to 'improve the landscape and the image of the North East'.¹⁰ The same document presents pictures of an old industrial landscape which has been bulldozed clear of any upstanding features or natural vegetation alongside the replacement landscape aspired to: a line of trim, brick houses surrounded by a liberal sprinkling of trees and new, screwdriver assembly factories.

This, it is imagined, is the kind of scene that will lure industrialists and prospective homeowners alike, to fill the grim world of the edgelands with happy workers and laughing families. All over Britain, disused quarries, old industrial land and other varieties of unkempt wasteland are to be turned into something more respectable and legitimate — woodland. The intention for the community forests is not continuous forest: about 30 per cent of the land is to be tree covered, with the remainder 'a rich mosaic of wooded landscapes and land uses including farmland, villages and leisure enterprises, nature areas and public open space'.¹¹ But the essential idea is that an undesirable landscape is to be turned into something else — green, but ordered rather than wild.

Behind this onslaught on the integrity of the interfacial landscape lies something more than the sort of attitudes to landscape distilled by Lowenthal and Prince. The planning theorists have their own theology of hostility towards it.

Not that the edgelands were even noticed by planners until the 1960s, when Alice Coleman, a geographer based at King's College London who was taking part in a land utilisation survey, uncovered the existence of a large amount of fringe land that did not fall neatly into the land—use pattern of either farmscape or townscape.¹² She called this land-type 'the rurban fringe', maintaining that new development had sprawled into the countryside in a way that obscured the distinction between town and country. She noticed that, as a result, farmland had become fragmented and in some cases, abandoned. She considered this state of affairs essentially undesirable, and recommended that the rurban fringe should be reduced or eliminated either by being turned into proper townscape, with neatly rounded-off development or, better still, into productive farmland.

The legacy of Professor Coleman's insights can be found in contemporary attempts to sanitise or otherwise neuter the edgelands up and down the country. Travel on the railway line from Swansea to Carmarthen and you will be struck by two quite distinct landscape forms close to Llanelli, the former steel—working centre. On its western edge is a stretch of wild edge-land: pylons march over a rough sweep of country in which old corrugated iron sheds and gaping factories seem to be sinking in tangled skeins of vetches and meadowsweet, while herons suddenly rise up from what look like forgotten dykes. Sadly, this beguiling kingdom falls within the area of the Llanelli Millennium Coastal Park which, together with another community forest project, is rapidly transforming it into a 'grassed-over area of flat land and low ridges, the latter sporting ranks of sapling trees in plastic sheaths. The aims of the scheme sound laudable enough (to enhance landscape and wildlife), but although it will generate some new wildlife habitat, mainly through the creation of new wetlands, it will at the same time destroy a unique environment.

Elsewhere change is not only transforming scarce habitat but also eradicating industrial landscape. The gaping factory to the west of Llanelli is now the only surviving relic of the town's nineteenth-century industrial past. Yet in its heyday it produced more tin than anywhere in the world and was known as 'Tinopolis'. Llanelli would not exist on its present scale were it not for the industry that came and went in a brief 150-year period. On the southern edge of the town, for instance, in the Machynys area, a link road and prestigious golf course today provide no hint that here once stood foundries and steelworks, tin works and railway sheds, two villages including workers' dwellings, shops, chapels, a school and an older farmhouse: all have been completely swept away.

The case for planning

The world of town and country planning in Britain has yet to catch up with the intricate and varied needs of the edgelands. Planning authorities pay much less attention to the detailed planning of these areas than they do to that of either town or country. Instead, they continue to allow the interface to be shaped largely by the planning applications that happen to come in, rather than by proactive planning with the use of instruments such as compulsory purchase and town plans to assert a public realm.

When planners do confront the interface they find themselves confronting massive economic pressures. The price differential between agricultural land with no planning permission and that with development value accorded by the granting of planning permission is colossal — between a few thousand pounds per acre and millions of pounds per acre. Developers like interfacial land because it is usually greenfield, and therefore free of existing buildings or noxious waste, and yet it is close to urban areas. Farmers are usually only too pleased to sell. If they wish to carry on farming, it is usually far more sensible to sell a farm in the interface and use the millions of pounds they raise to buy something somewhere else. The task of the developer is made easier by the fact that councils impose fewer conditions in terms of design of buildings and so on than they do in other environments. As a planner who had worked in development control on the edge of Cambridge explained to me, 'It is important to bear in mind hope value: the idea that farmers are waiting with pieces of land that they hope they can sell for development; land where holdings are probably fragmented by roads and so on, so it might be difficult to farm them. There are fields around Cambridge where farmers are waiting to get permission: they feel, "This is my retirement." They see the council vacillating, denying them the opportunity to make a packet. Every time there is a planning debate, say about the local plan, they put forward their plot of land, pleading for it to be built on. So this is farmland in a minimal state, farmed in a desultory way.

Large-scale development in many of our edgelands took off during the Thatcher years when planning deregulation was fashionable, with central government predisposed towards freemarket thinking. Often, one superstore development would trigger an interfacial growth explosion; in the Bristol North fringe, on the Isle of Thanet and in many other areas, planning consent was turned down by the local authority but allowed on appeal by central government. As further applications came in, local authorities felt they had no choice but to grant them, extracting such benefit as they could — an improved road junction here, the guarantee of a special Tesco bus service there — under planning-gain agreements. But they were unable to do anything significant to alter the distinctive buildscape that was emerging - spread out, discontinuous, fragmented and without a clear focus, comprising self-contained units of development and oriented to car-based travel. The absence of any master plan for interfacial developments in the past does not, however, mean that such plans are emerging now.

Several interfacial areas do benefit from the application of Britain's oldest and most popular planning tool — green belt. Interfacial land around Edinburgh, Bristol, Bath, Glasgow, Cambridge, Bournemouth, Manchester, Sheffield and London, among other places, is covered at least partly by green belt designation. No green belts have been designated in Wales, but local authorities are entitled to create them, subject to approval by the Cardiff Assembly. Yet the purpose of green belt, unlike all our other planning designations, from National Park to Conservation Area, is not to protect the land it enshrines. The tool was devised in the 1930s at a time when many towns were exploding in size, but at a time when local councils had yet to acquire development-control machinery. Green belt was therefore invented to protect the integrity of the built-up areas on one side of it and the countryside on the other.

Today green belts continue to be designated to prevent the coalescence of neighbouring settlements, to contain sprawl or to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns, without any real concern for the green belt land itself.¹³ Their purpose remains the creation of firebreaks between genuinely valued landscapes, not to tease out the essential qualities of the distinctive landscape that develops on urban edges, and to enhance it in its own right.

So neither green belt nor other broad-brush designations used around settlements that lack formally designated green belt recognise the varied character and demands of the interface — an environment at least as varied as townscape, the countryside or the coast. In any case, green belt is easily overridden. Thus around York, the green belt has been rolled out: its boundary has been extended outwards to allow for building around the edge of the built-up area. The total extent of the York green belt is kept more or less the same through the extension of its outer boundary further into surrounding countryside. In other places, from Edinburgh to Bristol, areas within the green belt that local councils were prepared to see developed have been zoned by them as 'land for non-conforming uses or as urban envelopes', and released.

As it happens, the concept of the green belt itself is now in question. The prevention of coalescence seems far less important today than it did in the 1930s, and such prevention flies in the face of arguably the most important planning imperative of the twenty-first century — the need to plan for 'sustainable' development. The existence of green belts has caused development to leapfrog over them to places beyond the green belt. This encourages commuting back to the urban area (while sacrificing countryside that is more untouched than land in the interface) •¹⁴ If we are to have planning for sustainable development, it is probably better to have development in the interface or on routes already well served by public transport than on land beyond green belt zones.

Detailed land-use plans could focus specifically on interfacial areas. These plans ought to face up to the lack of public provision in these areas. Should we have public parks in the interface? Should we have cycleways and routes for pedestrians or continue to give these areas over to car use? Should we encourage the development of cinemas, nightclubs and restaurants in the edgelands? Or should we insist that these stay only in town centres, many of which currently suffer from night-time desolation?

The existing buildings of the interface also call out for choices to be made. The giant sheds of the edgelands are not designed for the requirements of sustainable development. Many are built to be temporary, for businesses that expect technology, and thus their requirements, to change within ten years. Artificial light is essential in the sheds, since they are designed without windows. Artificial heating is necessary because no solar panels have been installed. And these buildings require a high degree of car use because they tend to exist outside the public transport network. All of these things could be altered. The massive, gently sloping roofs of the sheds would be ideal for solar panels.

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Because they are located alongside ring roads and major highways, bus services to them could be provided with relative ease; at the same time car use could be discouraged through a variety of measures, as has already happened in town centres. But if we are to go down this route, real compulsion will be necessary.

What, though, of the lives of the people who live in the interface? Unlike the edge cities of the United States, our edge—lands are not often desired as a place in which to live. Nonetheless, they often embrace bits of housing, and outer suburban housing is frequently adjacent. Generally speaking, however, these areas of settlement do not form distinct villages — with a clear edge, on a human scale, with mixed-use development, traffic—calming devices and pedestrian and cycle trails. Should we be converting the housing of the edgelands into mini villages, as the New Urbanism movement of the United States is trying to do in the edge cities of that country? Or should we seek to retain the haphazard, sometimes rather forlorn character of much of our interfacial housing? Also, we assume that housing on the outer edge of our towns and cities should be low-density; visit the outer suburbs of Stockholm, however, and you will see tower blocks cheek-by-jowl with farmland.

Bringing the interface more fully within the realm of town and country planning does, of course, involve a basic contradiction. Much of the special character of interfacial areas arises from the fact that they are not planned and not managed. If the essential feature of the edgelands is that they are untamed, and that they express our own age in being so, then to plan them is to some extent to trample on their essential character. If we conserve the land strewn with wild flowers around Llanelli and prop up the hulks of its once-active industrial works then are we not essentially destroying what makes such an area attractive to start with? If the interface is the only theatre in which the real desires of real people can be expressed, and if we wish to celebrate it and not inhibit it precisely because it provides that theatre, then trying to shape the built environment of the interface so that it becomes like an Italian city centre may appear to rob the interface of the freedom on which its character currently depends.

Although one could argue that it is a contradiction to try to intrude the dead hand of the planner into something whose character is to be free, I nonetheless think that we should. If we do not chronicle and assert the special wildlife and historical value of parts of our edgelands, these will disappear anyway, just as they have at Llanelli and in many other places. If we continue to fail to provide public facilities in the edgelands, then we continue to exclude from them the 30 per cent of households who have no car, and we diminish the lives of those who work and shop in them at present. The way in which we intervene will determine whether we conserve or mutilate these strange spaces. In the context of the edgelands, we need to see the planner not as the shaper of an entire environment but as a handmaiden, who helps along a universe he or she does not seek to control. People could be allowed to walk over the flower-strewn wildernesses of the edgelands without the aid of tarmac paths or signboards. And we could simply refuse to permit further developments of the kind that have caused so much visual damage.

One possibly encouraging sign is the publication, in ~ of the Countryside Commission's document *Linking Town and Country*, in which the Commission urges local authorities to prepare greenscape programmes for the land within and around the edge of towns and cities.⁵ The idea is to create a network of green spaces running out from the heart of towns into the wider countryside. The Commission urges that such programmes should be sensitive to the local environment. However, it does not go so far as to identify the special qualities that councils should look out for in the interface, so it is difficult to see how the initiative will make councils much more sensitive to the special character of the interface than they have been up till now

Another positive sign has been a decision of the Countryside Agency (which succeeded the Countryside Commission in 1999) to provide funding jointly with local authorities for the appointment of small teams of people charged with seeking to improve the appearance of the urban fringe and extend provision for walkers, riders and cyclists, largely through talking to landowners. The Agency recognises the potential recreational importance of the interface in that it represents land with a rural feel that is also close to where many people live. Thus Molesey Heath, for example, lies within the Lower Mole Valley Countryside Management Project. However, such initiatives, welcome as they are, are paltry in comparison to the support provided to more favoured parts of the planning landscape, such as national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. And they do little or nothing to protect the areas involved from undesirable change.

Focus of our age

The neglect and disdain with which the authorities regard the interface at least enable it to continue as the ultimate physical expression of the character of our age, unmediated by the passing tastes of elite groups. In the edgelands, no bureaucrats' diktats force new buildings to mimic the style of the past. So here rises the architecture of our own time in all its majesty~ The electricity substations and rubbish tips of the interface perhaps more accurately express the character of our time than Portcullis House or the new Scottish Parliament building. Although so much of the interface induces revulsion rather than affection, this has been the fate of the truly contemporary through the ages. We should not let our sense of shock and mild horror inhibit our appreciation. What goes on inside those giant sheds on the edge of my town? Why was that motorway intersection designed in that way rather than another? How does the local sewage works actually function? Instead of seeing the interface as a kind of hellish landscape to be shunned, we should celebrate it. We should see reservoirs and rubbish tips as sources of fascination not only for the civil engineering and landscaping challenges they present, but for what they can tell us about the way our society is.

Town and country may show us the surface of life with which we feel comfortable, but the interface shows us its broiling depths. If people were encouraged to understand this world more, they might feel less alienated and puzzled by the circumstances of their lives. Many of the activities we have dumped in the interface may be there because we do not esteem them, but perhaps we should esteem them more. We might all be better off if we increased both our understanding of and respect for the apparently mundane yet vital activities that make our society work.

In appreciating the present we might enhance our ability to change the future. By embracing the interface we might learn to be more imaginative about new building everywhere and more respectful of unconventional scenes and forgotten industrial landscapes.

We might also come to want to involve ourselves to a far greater extent in some of those essential functions that are enshrined in the edgelands. If schoolchildren were given guided tours of waste disposal facilities they might develop not only respect for the civil engineering, chemical and landscaping challenges that have been overcome in building them, but also a greater concern about the use of packaging and a real interest in participating in debates about how waste is to be processed, by whom and where. They might boycott plastic bags that give rise to disposal problems. Car scrapyards are not only interesting but can evoke new perceptions on contemporary life. Most of us encounter cars most of the time in a positive light: advertisements make them objects of desire by showing them in pristine form. When we see how they break, how they crumple and go rusty, we may find it easier to break free of their stranglehold over our lives and our environment. The appearance of cars in a scrapyard reflects their real character: cars are made of metal not paint, and under their glossy exterior they are jagged, corrodable objects.

Few people flashing past a railway marshalling yard pause to think about why rolling stock is stationed there or to consider how the network of which it forms part actually operates. They tend instead to gaze over it at the scenery beyond or to cocoon themselves in a book. We take our unfamiliarity with such stuff for granted. We have placed understanding and therefore control of such matters in the hands of others. In the past, when things seemed simpler, people probably knew much more about how their world worked. This must have helped make them feel more in control of their destiny than our alienated citizenry. Reinvolving people in the mechanics of life might, for example, help them make more mature judgements over issues such as safety.

Today, we prefer to celebrate the romantic aura that surrounds traditional activities from the past rather than to grapple with those of the present. We yearn to live in a medieval cottage, perhaps a converted forge or farmhouse. Yet when such a cottage actually functioned as forge or farmhouse it was probably thought of much in the way we think of a sewage works or a car-breaking yard: noisy, smelly, hot and mundane. Just as perhaps people in the fifteenth century should have taken more interest in the forge when it was not old, when it was part of the lives they were living, so perhaps today we should square up to the hidden facets of our contemporary lives, especially the functions in which we do not engage directly ourselves.

Kindling an interest

How could we kindle more interest in the edgelands? Black-and-white photography, television, film, sculpture, painting and poetry could contribute much. Some artists have painted features of the interface as well as scruffy landscapes occurring elsewhere, such as shacks and broken-down fencing, but it would be good to see the development of an interest in the interface per se by individual artists or groups of them.

It would be even more interesting to see artistic expression of the dynamism that the interface enshrines, rather than simply the decay and redundancy with which artists usually identify it. Such interest could be encouraged through the promotion of exhibitions or competitions by local authorities with a stake in interfacial territory. We could also do with a bit more basic information about the extent and make-up of the interface, of the kind we take for granted where other kinds of landscape are involved. No quantitative information exists about, say, the wildlife populations of the interface. Yet this could be obtained with relative ease. Britain is already divided into kilometre squares whose wildlife is laboriously documented by eager enthusiasts. It would take no great effort to determine which squares contained so per cent or more land that could be considered interfacial, and then to extract the wildlife data relevant to these squares. Once we knew what they contained we would be able to speak meaningfully of the wildlife population of the interface.

Other studies could build up a picture of human demography, industrial use, archaeological features and so on. Local civic societies, naturalists' groups, historical societies, town and country planning organisations and educational institutions, including schools, might all be encouraged to participate. Elderly citizens could be invited to describe the changes they have witnessed to their local edgelands during their lifetimes.

Guidebooks and guided walks should open up this new world, just as they do more familiar ones. Each September the Civic Trust takes the lead in setting up a weekend of guided walks to open people's eyes to their own localities. Until now such walks have rarely touched the interface, focusing on town and village centres and the workings of, say, Victorian water mills. Why should such walks not also embrace new business parks or the complex of gas-holders, old factories, allotments, recycling centres, telecommunications masts and industrial sheds, together with the hidden stretches of river and expanses of wild vegetation that often lurk in the interface? Here we can see history in the making, as one use is replaced by another, at least as well as we can in any other part of our environment.

It may seem an uphill task to transform perceptions of a landscape as reviled as that of the edgelands, but history teaches that this may not be as big a challenge as it seems. Those who find it inconceivable that the public's tastes could change so dramatically or that the priorities of town and country planners could be so radically transformed should take heart from changes in taste and policy that have already taken place. As in so many other areas of life, people respond readily when given a lead. Perceptions of landscape are changing all the time. Hitherto reviled landscape types have constantly re-emerged as desirable and fascinating, as the tides of fashion ebb and flow I have already referred to the suburbs, but there have been plenty of other swings in landscape fashion. In the eighteenth century the idea that stretches of grassland dotted with trees should be viewed as the new top landscape — parkland — must have been quite revolutionary. Moors and mountains were once considered hideous places. Daniel Defoe reflected the accepted tastes of his day when he described Westmorland, with its Lake District mountains, lakes and fells, as 'a country eminent for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales itself'.

Yet in the twentieth century the protection of mountain and moorland became an overriding component of policy and when, in the 1950s, the National Parks Commission came to single out stretches of countryside on which to bestow the highest level of landscape designation — the newly created status of national park — it was to moorland and mountain that they most frequently turned. This reversal of public taste was spearheaded by writers like William Wordsworth and Emily Brontë. When they were living in a remote part of the Lake District and the Yorkshire moors respectively, mountain and moorland were still thought of as places it would be a misfortune to have to visit, let alone inhabit, but their lead helped turn Britain's moors and mountains into magical landscapes of myth. ¹⁷

It is time for the edgelands to get the recognition that Emily Brontë and William Wordsworth brought to the moors and mountains and John Betjeman to the suburbs. They too have their story. It is the more cogent and urgent for being the story of our age.

§ - Ends -- §

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