

'Turnstiles on the trail'

by Marion Shoard

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What, if any, are the limits of the terrain over which market forces should be asked to work their magic? For some, one limit will certainly be breached if we see, as we soon may, the commercialization of the country walk.

Water privatization seems set to bring in its wake the first systematic imposition of pay-as-you-walk schemes. The assets of the new water companies will include hundreds of thousands of acres of land. Much of this they will not be permitted to develop: it will include, for example, 15 per cent of the Peak District National Park and other areas that make up some of Britain's best walking country.

Most of this land is, at present, freely accessible on a permissive basis, but Clause 7(5) of the Water Bill empowers the new companies to charge for recreational facilities.

Walking is one of the nation's leading leisure pursuits and in the past has been little exploited commercially. Vigorously managed, however, this otherwise largely useless asset could contribute significantly to the water companies' turnover.

If the new managements are in any doubt about this prospect, they need look only to the experience of those few landowners who have already demonstrated in microcosm that charging walkers works. At Bolton Abbey, near Skipton, where the Chatsworth Estate charges adults 50p and children 30p for a walk along the River Wharfe, 44,000 people paid up last year. Another 35,000 took the Ingleton Waterfalls Trail in the Yorkshire Dales (adults 75p, children 20p, £2 for a car-load).

The prospect of such practices being extended to the water-gathering uplands of the Peak District, the Lake District, Dartmoor, Snowdonia and the Pennines has already prompted protests from the Ramblers' Association. But if the turnstiles come, they are not likely to stop there.

The Forestry Commission owns much more land than the water authorities, and some of this is being sold off. Even the Nature Conservancy Council is being pressed to privatize sites. New private owners may prove at least as keen as the water companies to raise revenue from recreation.

If new landowners do impose pay-as-you-walk, their example is unlikely to be lost on the many farmers now scratching their heads over what to do with "set-aside" land. What could be easier than creating a nature trail, printing a few leaflets and opening a ticket office?

As the idea catches on, charities such as the National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds may come under pressure from potential donors to exploit the box-office potential of the extensive outdoor holdings to which they at present allow free access. Public bodies such as the local authorities which run country parks may find public funding withheld until they have first maximized visitor revenues.

Quite quickly we could find it has become normal to pay for a walk in the country. If it does, it may not only be landowners who benefit. At present, the future of our countryside hangs in the balance, its landscape and wildlife attractions threatened as never before. While the ravages of modern farming and forestry continue, yet more destructive activities wait in the wings as agriculture begins to retreat.

Existing public policy gives insufficient protection against these threats. The 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act subsidized landowners who refrained from lucrative but environmentally damaging actions. Predictably, this approach is proving as unworkable as it sounds in theory. To safeguard the countryside by this means, unimaginable sums would have to be paid to rich landowners for doing nothing.

Unleashing the power of the private purse, on the other hand, might serve not only to defend the threatened charms of our countryside, but to extend them. If it became as profitable to farm recreation as oilseed rape, landowners would have an incentive both to create new nature reserves and country parks and to foster wildlife and landscape attractions on land which continued to be used primarily for purposes other than recreation but which could provide a secondary income.

Already the purchasing power of the tiny shooting community serves to sustain the extensive grouse moors and deer forests of upland Britain and (on behalf of the pheasant) much of the deciduous woodland of the lowlands. These days, plenty of other country-lovers have money waiting to be spent. The picnicker's pound might bring back cowslips and catkin, butterflies and badgers, newts and nightingales to large areas from which they have disappeared.

This being so, the stand taken by the Ramblers' Association on water privatization is open to question. Walkers in future may have to pay for their pleasure, but in doing so they could safeguard and even enhance its future. In a world where the consumer is king, would not walkers be wise to secure their place in an ever more competed-for countryside by buying their piece of the action?

Somehow, even those who admit the possible benefits seem to think not. This is not just because they do not want to have to pay for what they have hitherto received free. Something more seems to be involved. Those who could well afford to pay for their country walks, as well as those who would be hard pressed, say that payment would ruin their enjoyment. But charges for entry to museums and even cathedrals do not seem to have provoked this response. What's the difference? It seems to lie in the nature of the commodity being sold.

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A building seems to be regarded as completely the property of its owner, even if it is also a house of God. The owner is, therefore, as entitled to charge for entry to his property as the owner of goods or skills is entitled to charge for those. In law, the owner of rural land certainly enjoys the same right, but not always, it seems, in the mind of his fellow citizens.

Like Rousseau, Ruskin and J. S. Mill, many people seem to believe deep down that land cannot be wholly owned by an individual. To some extent they continue to see the countryside as the collective property of all, or perhaps none, with landowners enjoying rights which fall short of the right to extract a toll from their fellow citizens merely for access to it.

This attitude reflects a British tradition of limited land ownership. Landowners have been required to accept commoners' rights, rights of way, development control and, in the late Middle Ages, a general right of access. The de facto access which still exists in much of our countryside is part of this pattern of communal sharing of the land surface.

Today, some people still see their unacknowledged birthright in the lawfully held property of others as a gift of God. Others see it as part of an irreducible residue of egalitarian bedrock which must be grimly defended even in these inauspicious times.

Either way, the passions which such notions inspire can be intense: Only half a century ago pitched battles were fought over access to Derbyshire's moors. Attempts to revoke the right of free access to those same moors today might provoke a surprisingly fierce response.

What place, though, will such unfashionable feelings be accorded in a Britain where fewer things have any meaning unless they can be bought and sold? Will opposition to what most may see as no more than a minor step in the steady commercialization of our lives be shrugged off as the quaint vestige of a dying culture? Or might turnstiles on the trails turn out to be the unlikely last straw which convinces Britain that Thatcherism has gone far enough?

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