Marion Shoard
Writer | Broadcaster | Lecturer
www.marionshoard.co.uk

Why Landscapes are Harder to Protect than Buildings

By Marion Shoard

published in Our Past before us: why do we save it?

ed. David Lowenthal & Marcus Binney, London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1981

The countryside plays an immense role in English national life. There is reason to suppose people care far more about the rural landscape than care about the treasures of the built environment. Three industries -- agriculture, forestry and tourism -- depend on the countryside. Not that any of these industries employs many people: farmers, farmworkers and those engaged in forestry together make up little more than one per cent of our population; those employed in tourism make up another one per cent. It is the non-industrial activity that thrives in the countryside that plays by far the biggest role in our national life. Visiting the countryside is the second most popular outdoor recreation pursuit among British people, beaten only by gardening and ahead of watching and participating in outdoor sports or visiting the seaside, according to a Countryside Commission survey in 1978. There are 300,000 paid-up members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, including 30,000 children and teenagers. Some 20,000 young people make expeditions into wild moor and mountain country in Britain every year in order to qualify for their Duke of Edinburgh's awards. Archaeology and local history, much of it based in the countryside, have in recent years become extremely popular subjects for study in adult education classes, attracting numbers comparable with and sometimes greater than those studying traditional subjects like music, English and politics.

This active involvement in the countryside on the part of so many people is accompanied by real interest in and affection for the countrvside on the part of many other people who don't actually visit it themselves. For the English countryside is inextricably bound up with our national identitv. The quality of the English countryside has helped shape the English character just as that same countryside has shaped much of England's art. Try and imagine Chaucer, Constable, Shakespeare, Turner or Elgar brought up in a foreign country.

In spite of the deeply-felt concern for landscape, and the relatively narrow base of enthusiasm for buildings, it is buildings which have won the protection of the law while landscape has been left defenceless. Yet it is the countryside that is under threat, not our towns and cities. The landscape is at the mercy of the small group (under one per cent of the population) who own it and farm it for profit. These people are currently intent on making major changes in their methods which threaten to destroy the countryside as it is enjoyed by others. And they are armed with the power to make virtually whatever changes they wish without reference to anybody else - a situation quite unmatched in the built environment.

Britain's town and country planning system is the envy of much of the world. But in spite of its name, it relates effectively only to towns: Britain's countryside is not really subject to government in the public interest at all. All that is controlled in the countryside is urban-type development - in effect, buildings, whether they be houses, electricity pylons, factories, hypermarkets or new towns. Farming and forestry are almost completely exempt from the effects of planning controls. When Attlee's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act nationalized development rights in land, it excluded from its definition of the 'development' for which planning permission would be required before a particular change could go ahead, all farming and forestry activities.

In 1947, the exemption for agriculture from planning control did not appear to carry with it a threat to the landscape. The impact of farming operations on the countryside was much less far-reaching in the years leading up to 1947 than it has been since the early 1960s. Indeed, conservationists of the 1930s and 40s saw farming as a buttress against landscape change: the main threats to the countryside were seen as ribbon housing development, factory building, mineral excavation and unsightly advertisement hoardings.

Now, however, a new agricultural revolution is under way whose impact on the landscape dwarfs that of all other changes to the countryside in the last two hundred years. Advances in agricultural technology and rising subsidies to agriculture have combined to encourage farmers to remove landscape features on uncultivated land in order to grow as much food as possible. Guaranteed minimum prices even for products which are in surplus make it profitable to plough up almost any square inch of ground, and the machinery to make this possible is now available.

Seventy per cent of England's land surface is countryside and few corners of it remain unaffected by this agricultural revolution. No sudden transformation has occurred, but bit by bit England's traditional patchwork quilt of fields downs and woods, separated by tree-studded hedgerows, sunken lanes and sparkling streams has been disappearing. Over large areas, the countryside has taken on a bleak and empty character. Already a quarter of our hedgerows, 24 million hedgerow trees (more than twice the number killed by Dutch elm disease), thousands of acres of heath, down and moor, a third of our small woods, and hundreds upon hundreds of ponds, streams, marshes and flower-rich meadows have been eliminated as the English countryside is gradually turned into a featureless expanse of prairie, its surface given over either to cereal growing or to a grass monoculture fuelling intensive stock-rearing.

In the face of all this, the town and country planning system has been powerless. For what has been happening does not constitute 'development' as defined in the Act. No serious attempt has yet been made by the Government to come to grips with the threat by extending the Act, or by other means. The problem calls for action to rationalize the unequal struggle between competing uses of rural land. What's happened instead is simply that the established rural interest groups have been left to entrench their position. As a result the English people look like being stripped of their rural birthright.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Yet it was to head off a comparable threat to our urban environment that the town planning system was created. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 was an attempt to stop the process of urban despoliation which in the 1930s threatened to do to our towns and cities what it did in fact do to many of their American counterparts. The system has the effect of limiting the power of landowners to override other interests by requiring them to seek the consent of the community before they change the environment. A man who wishes to turn his hotel into a factory, his sweet shop into a supermarket or his house into two flats must first apply to his local planning authority to ensure that his plans would not unduly disadvantage other members of the community. If he fails to convince, he must drop his plans. In the countryside, the man who owns the land may uproot hundreds of miles of hedgerows if he wishes, fell trees, drain marshlands, streams and ponds no matter how great their natural history interest. He may plough up hundreds of acres of open moor, heath and down even though other people and their forefathers may have enjoyed access to it for recreation for generations, without any requirement to notify or consult, let alone seek consent from the rest of the community. Even where buildings are concerned, farmers enjoy special privileges. A man needs planning permission before he can put up the smallest house in town or country, or extend an existing house. But a farmer can erect industrial buildings on his land equivalent in area to eight tennis courts and up to forty feet in height without the need for any planning permission at all.

Technically, all land in England belongs to the Crown and the people we speak of as landowners have simply acquired certain rights over it, the most extensive of which are termed freehold. This approach offers an excellent basis for determining land use in a way which will ensure the maximum benefit for most people. But this is not how rights over rural land have come to be viewed in practice. We speak of landowners and we attribute to individuals the same rights of ownership of rural land as those we attach, say, to a transistor radio set but not, say, to children or pets, whose owners are not allowed to treat their chattels as they wish. England's countryside may technically have been nationalized by medieval kings, but at the moment it is still in practice in the hands of barons who are not required to take any notice at all of the needs of other members of the community who have an interest in the countryside. In fact some of them have chosen to forego profit in the interest of conservation. But the transformation of the English countryside over the last twenty years demonstrates that many more are understandably reluctant to make this sacrifice voluntarily. The attitude of many of them can be summed up in the line attributed to a Suffolk farmer by the East Anglian Daily Times of 7 January 1981: 'There is no more place for a hedge in a wheat field than there is for a hedgehog on the factory floor of Ford's Dagenham'.

It is revealing to compare the protection afforded to historic buildings with that afforded to historic landscapes. Two hundred and seventy-five thousand buildings in England have been 'listed' on a central register compiled by the Department of' the Environment. All surviving buildings from before 1700 are automatically listed; others are selected on account of their special architectural or historical importance. It is this listing which has ensured that so many British towns and cities still contain many old buildings.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

If the owner of a listed building wishes to demolish or alter that building in a way that could affect its special historical or architectural value - for instance, through altering a staircase or a wall - he has to apply to his local planning authority for special permission known as listed building consent, in addition to any planning permission that may be necessary. If either kind of permission is refused, the owner receives no compensation. In addition to tough enforcement powers to conserve listed buildings, local authorities have the right to designate whole districts as Conservation Areas within which special permission is needed for the demolition of all buildings, listed or not.

If half of Britain's historic buildings were now actively being destroyed, there would be a national outcry. But this is what is happening to the relics from the past that lie in the countryside. Causewayed camps and Celtic fields, cliff castles and chambered long barrows, cromlechs and cursi, standing stones and saucer barrows still litter England's countryside and provide the only clues to the nature of life in Britain for the 50,000 years of human existence in these islands before written records were kept. Hedgerows, shaws, country parklands, medieval fishponds, ancient coppices, the remains of ridge and furrow reveal much of what the records fail to tell about life during recorded historical time. Most ancient features in our countryside have: never been excavated, but thousands of the archaeological sites that provide the raw data for history are destroyed ever year, mainly by agriculture. Most at risk are relics that lie under marginal land like chalk downland, heather moorland and woodland. Much of this land has lain uncultivated for centuries, entombing evidence for man's activities at times when the land was cultivated or used as a meeting place, a settlement, a site for religious celebration or whatever.

Wiltshire is a county that has seen its landscape transformed since the war, as rough chalk downland turf formerly used for sheep grazing has been turned into a huge barley prairie. Forty per cent of the county's most important archaeological sites were destroyed in the process in just ten vears between 1954 and 1964. It is now not merely particular sites that are in danger: whole categories of historic landscape feature are being wiped out. Only 10 per cent of' south Dorset's recorded total of 871 Bronze Age burial mounds had survived undamaged by 1963 and ten years later only 5 per cent were left. Ninety-four per cent of the settlements known as 'rounds', established in Cornwall in the Iron Age and Roman-British times two thousand years ago, were being sliced through with ploughshares in 1979; in the same year 54 per cent of the Neolithic long barrows of the Cotswolds - great stone mausoleums providing virtually the only evidence of the way of life of the Neolithic peoples who came to settle there in 4000 BC - were being destroyed.

What is being lost embraces an enormous range of things. The importance of archaeological and historical features does not end with their documentary value. These features are fundamental to the interest, variety, regional identity and air of magic that distinguishes England's countryside. The special sense of place evoked by Dartmoor, West Cornwall, the Dorset Downs and the Weald, for example, relies heavily on the upstanding relics that freckle the land. For many people, the presence of relics of ancient man enhances a sense of remoteness from contemporary life. The sense of the past that visitors to these landscapes breathe in is reflected in the literature, poetry and painting that has sprung from them.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

By allowing these feature, be cleared away, we allow areas of countryside to be robbed of their special character; they become just like any other bit of England of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Some protection even against agriculture and forestry is afforded to a small fraction of archaeological sites in England's countryside: the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act of' 1979, expected to come into force during 1981, requires any person who wishes to alter or destroy any of the 8,000 archaeological sites in Britain's countryside that are scheduled ancient monuments to seek consent from the Secretary of State for the Environment. Applicants refused consent for any building development or mineral excavation get no compensation, but farmers are entitled to compensation for profit foregone if consent is refused for an agricultural operation that would damage or destroy a site. Unfortunately, compensating farmers for refraining from activities like ploughing down and moor, grubbing up woods and hedgerows or draining wet meadows is very expensive. As only half a million pounds has been set aside to cover compensation in the first year of operation of the new controls, it is clear that consent for ploughing is not going to be held back very often. To make matters worse, scheduling affects only an estimated one per cent of archaeological sites in Britain's countryside; and historical features like hedgerows (many of which are up to two thousand years old), trackways, old deer parks and the gardens of country houses are explicitly excluded from scheduling.

Thus we protect only a fraction of the historical record that the landscape embodies. What man has built with bricks and mortar and is of some historical and architectural value is usually secure. But the evidence of his past and the beauty and interest of the countryside embodied in ancient hedgerows, shaws, parks, trackways, countless archaeological features and the shape of the landscape itself stands defenceless in the face of an accelerating process of' destruction.

Why do we devote much money and energy to protecting buildings but more or less ignore the countryside in which they lie? The answer to this question is manifold. In particular, certain fundamental characteristics of landscape make it much more difficult to administer in the public interest: than buildings; some of the most destructive changes in our landscape are difficult to detect, certainly at first glance; and our cultural tradition upholds the right of those who make money from the countryside to determine its destiny. Let's look at these three reasons one by one.

The elusive character of landscape first, the characteristics of landscape itself. We understand buildings: our fellow men shaped them for purposes we can understand. But landscapes are different. They are the product of interaction between man's works and the geography, geology and biology of our planet. A trained naturalist, archaeologist, farmer, forester or sportsman can interpret landscape to a limited degree. But no-one is expert enough in all the disciplines necessary to grasp all that is involved in one piece of countryside. To most of us, who neither work in the countryside nor specialize in the study of an aspect of it, any landscape is essentially a jumble of objects whose origin, function and relationship to each other are mysteries.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

A second characteristic of landscape which poses problems for conservationists is the difficulty of defining the limits to any particular stretch of it in space and time.

The built environment is organized in easily defined units: villages, towns, historic town centres, stretches of 1930s suburbia and so on. The countryside is different. Most landscapes appear like seamless webs that merge into one another quite imperceptibly. A few enclosed tracts of landscape are fairly easy to define in the mind's eye: gardens or country parklands, almost always enclosed by a wall; unenclosed commons in built-up areas or in intensely farmed countryside. But most landscapes appear indeterminate. Even the components that make up a landscape are less clear-cut than those that form the building-blocks of built-up areas. Hedgerows erupt into spinneys and woods; a patchwork of bracken and heather merges into a patchwork of ryegrass and barley; a field becomes progressively wetter as it leads into a marsh or stream. This feature of landscape brings any idea of regulation up against the difficulty of definition of the area and type of area to be covered. But it carries with it another problem too. Because landscape is indeterminate, it appears to many people inexhaustible as well. It seems that even if one tract of landscape has been robbed of its character and interest, then there will surely be another unspoilt tract over the next hill or round the next bend.

In a town we can distinguish at a glance and hence feel concern about individual houses, factories, roads, town halls and so on. We can also instantly tell the age of a building. Old buildings are selected for listing and therefore conservation on account of their architectural and historical importance. If- a Norman church or a Georgian theatre were being demolished, many people would notice and protest, but how many could feel sure enough that the hedgebank or ancient woodland they saw being cleared was of historic interest, to rouse the alarm?

So ignorant are most of us of the age of most of the landscape around us that a complete misconception has taken root. It is now widely but erroneously believed that the traditional English countryside is only about 200 or 500 years old. Letters in The Times during the debate about conflicts of interest between modern agriculture and conservation in the autumn of 1980 illustrated well this error. 'The neat patchwork of -fields and hedgerows which has come to be accepted as the quintessential English countryside has existed only since the end of the eighteenth centurv', wrote one correspondent. Another wrote: 'Five hundred years ago, England was covered in forest'. The belief that our landscape is of recent origin serves as a major obstacle to its conservation. It enables those who intend to destroy it to pose as no more than agents of a tide of change that reshapes the landscape, for better or for worse, every now and then. If this were true, it would still be possible to argue that some changes were more desirable than others. But it is not true at all.

The English countryside as we now see it has actually developed over a period of 6,000 years. To be sure, England was once covered in forest, but this was a post-glacial forest which existed not 500 but 6,000 years ago. Since that time, when Neolithic man began making clearings in the ancient forest to grow crops and to graze livestock, the English countryside has continually adjusted to new demands.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

The landscape we see today - paths, roads and villages, ancient earthworks, hedgerows and walls, land tilled and land left rough - is the product of thousands of years of social and economic change. This steady process of development has thrice been interrupted, however, by advances in farming methods which have imposed far-reaching and dramatic change on the landscape. The first such revolution was the discovery, shortly before the Roman conquest, that one piece of land could be cultivated again and again, particularly if it were allowed to lie fallow, thus making possible the end of shifting cultivation. Those who think that the countryside was created two hundred years ago mistake the considerable impact of the second agricultural revolution on the landscape for the creation of that landscape. This second revolution, the enclosure of the common land and open fields by landowners, which reached a peak between 1750 and 1850, certainly left its mark on the face of central England: landowners, eager to produce more food for the growing industrial population, imposed a geometrical pattern of hedgerows and stone walls on the old open-field landscape of the Midlands. Outside this area, however, the effect of the second agricultural revolution was much more limited. Most of the hedgerows that survive today outside the Midlands were already in existence when the enclosure movement began. Many date from the times when the first settlers enclosed fields from the primeval forest; others have formed parish boundaries since Saxon times. And even in Midland counties many hedgerows and whole landscapes are much older than two hundred years. Half of Oxfordshire's hedgerows pre-date the Georgian and Victorian periods, and 15 per cent of Oxfordshire's hedge-miles mark out fields carved straight out of ancient forest, according to surveys by landscape historian Frank Emery.

It is not only the age of landscape which is mysterious. Their very form is elusive. Landscapes are always changing. One scene never looks quite the same on another occasion. The pattern of line, form, colour, contrast, scale and focal points that makes up any landscape is at the mercy of light and weather to a much greater extent than is the impression left by a building. And the sense of change in landscape is compounded by the rotation of the seasons with the accompanying activities of man, like the trimming of hedgerows or the harvesting of crops.

This feeling of constant change helps mask the effects of deeper, permanent alterations to a landscape. If buildings, like hedgerows, were decapitated every year, we might find it easier to accept their complete demolition; certainly the removal of hedgerows is not seen automatically as an attack on our heritage. Acts of God, like Dutch elm disease, further accustom us to change in the countryside - even damaging change.

The feeling that the landscape is a shifting creature, as well as of uncertain age, means that an enormous degree of change can be thrust upon it before anybody notices, let alone complains. At the moment we are living in the midst of an agricultural revolution whose impact on the landscape far outweighs the two earlier revolutions. But farmers try to soften the impact of what they are doing on the public mind by emphasizing that the countryside has always been changing and that the existing landscape was itself created by change. This is perfectly true.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

But it remains as possible to destroy a country's landscape heritage as it is to destroy its historic buildings. And there are all the signs that our landscape heritage is now being destroyed, even though the alarm bells are so muffled.

For the rural conservationist, however, it is the third characteristic of landscape that poses the most insidious problem - apparent ability to regenerate itself. The main constituents of landscapes - plants - clearly do have the power to replicate themselves as obviously as buildings lack this quality. This phenomenon imparts the dangerous illusion that landscapes, once savaged, can be relied upon to heal their own wounds. In fact, far from being able to regenerate themselves, landscapes are often impossible to replace, however much devotion is applied to the task. Buildings can be reassembled stone by stone, even though they do not perform this feat themselves. But we cannot reconstruct even one individual tree -let alone the kaleidoscope of lines, forms and colours that makes up a single landscape.

The insidious course of landscape change

The elusiveness of landscape character is matched by the intractability of landscape change. When a Firestone factory is demolished at least it is obvious that this has happened. And it is clear that demolition is necessarily a painful experience for a building. Yet the changes most threatening to the countryside are often imperceptible to the casual observer and may sound, when casually recounted, harmless or even beneficial.

The intensification of rough grass pasture is a case in point. Ploughing is one of the oldest activities in the countryside: out of context the verb itself conjures up something slow, steady and reassuring. And ploughing plays as vital a role in most kinds of landscape as the sunshine or the rain: the special beauty of' the English countryside depends on a combination of uncultivated land and ploughland. Against this background the news that a tract of ancient downland turf is being ploughed up will not arouse the same popular outrage as might the news that it was being buried in concrete or eroded by visitors' feet or cars. Yet building and erosion from recreation affect only a tiny amount of downland compared with the amount being eliminated by ploughing. Since the war, thousands of acres not only of chalk downland turf, but also of all our other main types of rough, flower-spangled, grazing grassland have been sliced up by the plough, sprayed with huge quantities of pesticide and then sown either with barley or with perennial ryegrass, which happens to be convertible to milk more quickly than the old rough grasses on which cows used to feed directly. The process is drawing a blanket of uniformity over a countryside which used to be differentiated partly by the variety of its grazing pasture.

This subtle process of agricultural change has obliterated much of the open land on which people used to walk, picnic, ride and play; it has destroyed archaeological treasures that had lain undisturbed under the soil surface for thousands of years; and it has eliminated a wealth of wild creatures. The loss of recreation areas ranges from vast tracts of chalk downland turf in Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset and Wiltshire that thirty years ago provided land over which the walker could roam at will on a carpet of springy, thyme-scented turf, speckled with upstanding archaeological relics and rich in animal and plant life, to small tracts of marshland, perhaps used for tadpoling for generations, that have been drained, reseeded and fenced off.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

One quarter of Dorset's downland turf, or 11,000 acres, for instance, went under the plough between 1957 and 1972 - downland that harboured nearly 120 different species of flowering plant as well as 20 species of grass. With the flowers go the butterflies. Twenty-four of Britain's butterfly species can live in natural permanent pasture, but not a single British species can live in reseeded ryegrass. The Nature Conservancy Council has estimated that if all farmland in Britain were totally 'improved' we would lose 80 per cent of the birds and 95 per cent of the butterfly species from our farmed lands. But the scale of this threat is far from apparent to the casual observer. After all, the countryside still exists; the grass is still green albeit a different, more vivid shade; and, from the air, our land still looks variegated because different crops continue to be grown on adjacent fields.

Tree planting is another deceptive phenomenon, in one sense more deceptive than roughland ploughing. For tree planting is actually presented as a means of restoring to the landscape some of the character which farmers' operations have destroyed. Plant a few trees behind you and nature will restore everything modern agriculture has taken away, many farmers would have you believe. Several local authorities and official bodies like the Countryside- Commission do seem to believe that tree planting is a sufficient means of covering farmers' tracks. The approach of Essex County Council is typical: it consists of giving farmers grants to plant trees and offering them advice on the management of any landscape features they choose to refrain from destroying. The chairman of Essex County Council's Planning committee made his Council's approach clear in a letter published in The Times on 13 November 1980:

Hundreds, possibly thousands of small spinneys have been planted over the length and breadth of Essex. But this is only one side of landscape conservation: a typical visit by one of my countryside staff will include advice on the age and management of hedgerows, small woodlands and ponds; the improvement of farm buildings by a coat of bitumen; the farmer's rights (as well as the public's) with regard to footpaths and bridleways.

The Essex countryside today, studded as it is with the fruits of the County Council's excellent tree-planting schemes, does not, however, bear comparison with the landscape shown in photographs of pre-war Essex. No amount of tree-planting can re-create a countryside of flower-spangled downs and marshes, fragrant meadows and thick hedgerows, coastal marshes and sparkling streams, primrose woods, and sunken, violet-studded banks. Nor can it compensate for the disappearance of truly irreplaceable features - the secrets of our nation's past enshrined in archaeological features or Britain's ancient woods, those relics of the post-Ice-Age forest cover that were taken into management through coppicing and pollarding in medieval times and whose plant and animal communities, undisturbed by land clearance, have been undergoing a gradual evolution through thousands of years. Yet in the last thirty years, clearance of these ancient woods to replace them either with farm crops or with fast-growing conifers has destroyed nearly a third of the ancient woods that had survived in Britain from time immemorial until 1945.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Nonetheless, palliatives like tree planting can still be presented to innocent audiences as evidence of concern for the landscape, and the confusion is the greater because some tree planting is, and much more could be, a genuine transfusion service for a countryside being steadily drained of life.

The obstructive content of our cultural tradition.

The assumption that the countryside can look after itself is reinforced by our cultural tradition. It is traditional to assume that those who own and work the land -the people who are making most of the changes to our landscapes - know best what should be done. Radio and television series like 'The Archers' and 'Emmerdale Farm' convey the familiar idea that the countryside, and in particular the agricultural environment, breeds more wholesome people than do our towns and cities. Professor Gerald Wibberley explains when this classical tradition became particularly popular:

The uncritical belief that human character fashioned by rural, and particularly by agricultural, experience was somehow vital to the development of a healthy nation, was fostered in the rapidly growing industrial climate of nineteenth-century Britain. So much of the literature of the time bewails the passing of rural Arcadia and its replacement by the dark satanic mills and hateful conditions of the industrial city (Joan Davidson and Gerald Wibberley, Planning and the Rural Environment, London: Pergamon, 1977).

And with our assumptions about the essential goodness of country-dwellers goes a belief that farmers know better than mere city-dwellers not just how to administer the land but what form it should take. The National Farmers' Union argues that because farmers created the landscape, we have only to ensure the future prosperity of farmers to guarantee ourselves a beautiful landscape in the years ahead. The problem is that the agriculture that helped shape the countryside was completely different in its effect on the landscape from the activity that now goes by the same name.

The approach of the Countryside Commission to countryside conservation and in particular to the conflicts of interest that can arise between modern agriculture and conservation shows how successful the farmers can be at pushing their line. The Commission would not for one moment contemplate the removal of planning controls on industrialists like mineral operators, or those who build houses, factories or offices; but it has always said that there is no need for planning controls over agriculture: instead it advocates a campaign of education and advice to farmers, hoping that this will be sufficient to persuade farmers to go against their own economic interests. The Commission believes that farmers should be free to decide when and where the activities they wish to carry out for economic reasons should be modified or abandoned in the interests of the rest of the community, even though it would not dream of placing the same burden of responsibility on those in charge of other industries. In fact, the Commission's attitude is probably largely governed by the belief that the extension of planning controls to the countryside is impracticable, given the power of the farming lobby in Britain. The only function then remaining for conservationists is to appeal to the better nature of a group whose power is inviolable - an appeal that had best be made in polite terms for fear of enraging those to whom it is made.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Even more distorted than our picture of the men and women who run the countryside is our idea of the nature of their industry. We are constantly bombarded by the media with a completely false picture of the present-day rural scene. We are not shown a countryside ravaged by modern agriculture over large areas in which most animals are kept indoors, farmers and farmworkers are nowhere to be seen and the land itself is a biological desert. Instead, we see a countryside of little cattle-grazed fields, enclosed by neat hedgerows and served by a Dan Archer figure amongst traditional farm buildings, all reassuring us that the present-day rural scene is still as beautiful as it was when we were children. And this reinforces the notion in the minds of many of us that agriculture is not an industrial process at all. From the time when cities first existed, men have returned to the countryside to regain contact with earthy, primitive rural tasks: one of the major tasks of the rural conservationist today is the unappealing but necessary one of pointing out that modern agriculture has wiped out the countryside's nymphs and shepherds.

Agriculture in Britain today is no longer the process that can be summed up in the lines “We plough the fields and scatter / The good seed on the land / But it is fed and watered / By Gods Almighty land”. It is, rather, an industrial process involving the conversion of one set of industrial products into another set that happen to be edible. The amount of nitrogen-based fertilizer applied to UK farmland increased eightfold between 1953 and 1976; over a similar period the number of approved pesticides in use on British farmland increased twelvefold. Today there are more than 500,000 tractors at work on British farms, compared with 10,000 in 1920; while the 300,000 horses still working on our farms in 1950 have now virtually all disappeared.

Yet the image of agriculture that is beamed down by a wide range of media is something quite different from the industrial process that agriculture now is. Harlech Television's weekly programme 'West Country Farming', for example, is introduced by a film of two horses slowly drawing a plough through the soil; a similar picture greets the reader on the cover of the Farm Holiday Guide for 1979.

In contrast with our beliefs about the innate goodness and worthiness of farmers is the stereotyped but also mistaken view of the urban visitor to the countryside. Farmer Leonard Griffiths, writing in The Times on 7 November 1980, deployed this familiar image in his argument that farmers should continue to be given carte blanche to change the countryside for their own ends. He wrote: 'Fewer people walk in the countryside today than formerly and it is not because the footpaths are no longer there or because farmers prevent them from doing so. The fact is that they arrive in the countryside in their motor cars but they then refuse to get out of the wretched vehicle to walk - wheels must take them everywhere.' The stereotypical urban visitor to the countryside is a creature unwilling to venture beyond his roadside picnic area, where he reads the Sunday Mirror and drinks tea from a flask without even venturing outside his car, save perhaps to toss bulky items of domestic refuse into hedges, trample down orchids and leave farm gates open. If this were the true face of rural recreation it clearly would not matter much what farmers or foresters did to the landscape, but it is not.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

The countryside is used by a great many people for a wide range of activities. Professor Colin Buchanan put this point well in a letter to The Times on 18 November 1980:

Surely the point about the countryside is that it is used for so many different purposes. Farming is one; looking at it from cars or trains is another. It is also used for exercise, for rambling, for camping, for riding, for adventure-training, and it provides source material for artists, poet,,), biologists, ornithologists, zoologists, archaeologists, architects, historians and many other people. It also supports other life forms for which, it could be argued, we humans with our unlimited powers of destruction, have special responsibilities beyond the tact that we may find them interesting or beautiful. All these interests, with the possible exception of farming, would seem to be better served by the green field system than by prairies. Is not this the context in which modern agricultural processes need to be judged?

The problem in arguing about conflicting interests in the countryside is that this multiplicity of groups that make use of the countryside can convey no immediate, meaningful image on the public mind. Farmers, in contrast, are seen as a clearly defined group who perform a vital function; few people know a farmer personally, but everybody can immediately recognize the stereotype. Those who seek to question some of the things farmers do can rely on no pre-established image of reassurance, if they can rely on any image at all. When I was interviewed on 'West Country Farming' on 1 February 1981, the description that appeared on the screen of the function I fulfilled was 'environmentalist'. Not the programme's fault, of course, but what image exactly did that designation conjure up?

The food weapon

Those seeking to resist the conservation of landscape have in their hands a propaganda weapon denied to those seeking change in the built environment. On the whole, property speculators building office blocks, industrialists seeking to install processes which create noise and pollution can expect to have to prove that the change they want is desirable. Farmers, however, do not owe their exemption from the need to justify land use changes they want to carefully prepared evidence demonstrating that what they do is in the national interest. They do not have to. Instead they are able to rely on the emotive appeal of one simple idea -'food'. This slogan is not supported by argument for the very good reason that in today's conditions there is no real argument to support it. This dues not matter. The slogan is magical enough to do its work unsupported.

The arguments on which the National Farmers' Union and the Ministry of Agriculture now rely to justify granting farmers continued exemption from planning controls and to justify their massive state subsidy do not stand up to a moment's scrutiny. For instance, the idea that agriculture should be subsidized by the state in order to produce exports runs counter to the present Government's and the last Labour Government's economic strategy for all other industries: they receive state subsidy not as an open-ended commitment but in order to tide them over difficult periods if there is a good chance that these industries will be profitable at the end of the day.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Even if it were thought wise to subsidize industries to produce exports, there are far more obvious recipients of whatever money might be available for this purpose than agriculture-other industries too that employ far more people than farming. The original idea for supporting agriculture was based on the need for the country to be able to feed itself in time of war, but it is plainly absurd to argue that we need to plough up all our marginal, uncultivated land now in order to be self-sufficient in food, for on our present diet with more than 90 per cent of our farmland producing animal feed rather than crops man can consume directly, we could never be self-sufficient; and in the event of a blockade several experts have shown that we could feed ourselves by switching the mix of crops we grow - a privation we would all presumably be prepared to accept in the circumstances - on an acreage of land smaller than that which is at present under the plough.

The farming lobby seems aware that the case for intensification as a public good (as opposed to a means of enrichment for farmers) does not stand up to close scrutiny. But it is also aware that the mere mention of the food argument can stir deep emotional disquiet. The president of the Notional Farmers' Union has only to rise up at a meeting and utter a sentence including the word 'food'; however weak the argument on which his case is based, the reassuring image he imparts, the magic in which he will try to enshrine the process of food production and above all the underlying scariness of the idea of starvation, provide him with an extremely powerful platform.

This position is very different from that of the maligned property speculator facing the massed ranks of his well-organized foes at an urban public inquiry, even though the development the speculator proposes may often be of far more benefit to the community in terms of income or employment than everything the farmers have done in the countryside since Attlee's Government enthroned them in their position of unchallenged privilege.

The difficulties of justifying landscape preservation.

The protection of old buildings is justified primarily on historical and architectural grounds. Most land-use decision-makers seem at ease with the idea of preserving buildings because they are old, because they represent a particular style of architecture, or because they are of special historical interest. But the reasons for preserving most landscapes are far less easy to describe and to categorise.

The reason usually given for the conservation of landscapes is 'natural beauty'. All ten of our National Parks and all thirty-three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - the two main types of protective landscape classification in England and Wales - owe their selection and protection largely to this concept, on the assumption that individual people may well have different preferences for different sorts of landscape but that there is nonetheless a consensus view on what constitutes an attractive scene. But land-use decision-makers seem to find it hard to accommodate landscape considerations much of the time. And when landuse decision-makers do take landscape considerations into account, they often tend to interpret ‘beauty' to mean what suits them, justifying their actions with the old cliché that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Apart from the essential vagueness of the idea of 'natural beauty' as the basis for the protection of landscapes, it has two other major disadvantages. First, the expression 'natural beauty', which alone is used to justify the selection and protection of our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, reflects only one aspect of their importance. These are not just aesthetically pleasing landscapes: they also play a vital role in our national life. Our most valuable landscapes - like the Wye Valley, the Hampshire Downs and the Northumberland and Cornwall Coasts AONBs - usually embrace the countryside of greatest recreational importance. Hunting, shooting and fishing, canoeing, orienteering and bird-watching, driving, riding and walking are all enjoyed most intensively in the most attractive parts of the countryside. But though these activities are important to all sections of the community, they are not considered grounds in themselves for the protection of the environments m which they take place.

Secondly, no criterion advanced for conserving landscapes - scientific, historical, recreational or aesthetic - can be adequately costed and therefore weighed against economic criteria in the way to which planners are accustomed. But natural beauty is at a particular disadvantage in the planner's world of computers and cost-benefit analysis since there is no way in which the beauty of a landscape or the impact of a proposed change on landscape character can usefully even be quantified. All conservation does of course involve some value judgement: although the importance of a listed building is assessed on more specific criteria like age, architectural importance and technological innovation, the listing decision often involves some value judgement - perhaps concerning its importance in the local scene or its attractiveness. The evaluation of a landscape requires much more subjective judgement: there are no objective criteria like age. All we can do is to describe landscapes and ask observers who are as far as possible representative of the community at large to decide that one landscape is more aesthetically pleasing than another.

Wilderness landscapes provide perhaps the most intractable problems of definition. In Britain it is heather and grass moorland that is considered by leading countryside conservationists to fulfil most completely the role of wilderness environment - a place in which people, usually singly or in small groups, can roam at will and feel completely cut off from twentieth-century urban life. But although the protection of large areas as wilderness has even come to dominate some aspects of countryside policy-making, in particular the selection of national parks, the criteria for wilderness preservation have never been translated into a set of guidelines in the way that a mass of analytical advice has been prepared by central government on the selection and preservation of historic buildings. In fact, this lack of explicit criteria has not held back the conservation of wilderness too seriously, as even if criteria have not been articulated, some idea of the qualities of a wilderness as wild, open, assymetrical, homogeneous, high up, open to free wandering and devoid of twentieth-century man's activities can be hypothesized fairly easily. Clearly the enclosure of rnoorland country for intensive farming or afforestation by conifers clashes with unspoken requirements. It is the more subtle idea of the indubitably man-made lowland farmed landscape which throws up the greatest problems in justifying landscape conservation. Unfortunatelv it is this landscape which modern agricultural methods most threaten to wipe out.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

There is, however, one feature of landscape protection that matches exactly a common problem in the conservation of buildings. The protection of landscapes that are scientifically, historically or in some other way unique or at least scarce is much easier to achieve than that of landscapes that are simply important for people in their day-to-day lives. Building conservationists will recognize the problem. Dotted all over England's countryside are thousands of odd pieces of uncultivated, marginal land supporting hedgerows, spinneys, woods, rough meadows, marshes and streams which may not be of any special wildlife or archaeological note but which play an important role in people's lives. People in towns and villages all over our country may use such land for an early morning stroll or jog or to exercise their dogs. Their children go there after school to climb trees, to catch tadpoles and play chase. These tracts of marginal land stand to be 'reclaimed' at any time by farmers and in fact such pieces of land are now disappearing at an alarming rate.

Landscape features, particularly those which lie near our homes, form part of our collective identity. We are, in part, the places that have shaped our lives. If England's landscape is impoverished, so are our personalities. In their chapter, Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach argue for the protection of buildings which are important in people's lives whether or not the buildings in question happen to be of special historic or architectural note. 'The principal reason why we seek to preserve our heritage is to preserve our own identity, to give us a point of reference from which we can measure ourselves', said Patrick A. Faulkner, the Superintending Architect of the Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings Division of the Department of the Environment (Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, Vol. 126 (1978), p. 458). This should be as true of landscapes as it is of buildings.

In conclusion, it will always be more difficult to protect landscapes than to protect buildings. But we can no longer use this difficulty as an excuse for leaving the task unattempted. The time has come when we must find out how what has been achieved in the conservation of historic buildings can be achieved in the more intractable realm of landscape. For it now seems that our landscape needs protection more than our historic buildings have ever done.

Further Reading

Berry, Wendell. TA, Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture. San Francisco: Sierra Club; New York: Avon Books, 1977. Examines the impact of-modern agriculture on the American landscape and calls for the replacement of large farming units with small-scale, mixed family farms.

Millman, Roger, and Brandon, Peter F. (eds). Historic Landscapes: Identification, Recording and Management (1978);Recording Historic Landscapes (1980); The Threat to tbe Historic Rural Landscape (1981). Department of Geography, Polytechnic of North London, Occasional Papers. Three conference reports summing up the state of historic landscape conservation in Britain.

Newby, Howard. Green and Pleasant Land? Social Change in Rural England. London: Hutchinson, 1979; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980. Examines the impact of the post-war agricultural revolution on the social fabric the English countryside.

© Copyright: Marion Shoard

Sheail, John. Rural Conservation in Inter-war Britain. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. Describes the conditions and thinking that gave rise to Britain's town and country planning system.

Shoard, Marion. The Theft of the Countryside. London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1980. Examines the nature of the current agricultural revolution, its impact on the English countryside, the adequacy of' landscape defence machinery to meet this threat, and economic justifications for agricultural change. To conserve the countryside against agricultural change, I recommend the extension of planning control to the farmed countryside, the establishment of new regional countryside authorities, the designation of six new national parks in lowland England, and the improvement of access to the countryside, particularly for city dwellers.

Turner. Keith. The Impact of Modern Farming Systems on the Social and Physical Environment. The Mill House, Olney, Bucks: Nuffield Farm Scholarships Trust, 1980. Compares the impact of agricultural change on the countryside in Britain with that in France, Romania, Denmark and West Germany.

§ - Ends -- §

© Copyright: Marion Shoard