

***A selection of reviews of  
The Theft of the Countryside  
by Marion Shoard  
(Maurice Temple Smith, 1980)***

***Landscape Villains by Caroline Moorehead,  
The Times, October 29 1980***

"If the people of England knew what was happening in their countryside," says Marion Shoard, author of *The Theft of the Countryside*, published this week, "they would not stand for it". It is her intention that they should find out, and be as appalled as she was when she discovered that the landscape she had long cherished for its unique and extraordinary variety was rapidly being transformed into a "vast, featureless prairie".

It is a good story, for it contains the right ingredients of villainy, statistics and nostalgia. The facts are plain. England was once a country renowned for the pastoral beauty of its countryside, for its cornfields splashed with red poppies, its slow moving streams hung over with willows, its mossy banks, sunken Dales, cornflowers and badgers. That England is now largely dead.

In recent years, hedgerows have been cut at the rate of 4,500 miles a year; a third of England's woods have vanished, and with them hundreds of marshes, meadows, ponds and streams. Deciduous trees are gradually being replaced by conifers, which grow faster. The coritcrake seems to have become extinct; frogs, stone curlews, woodlarks are fast disappearing. There are few poppies. The Wiltshire downs have been turned into barley plains. With the fashion favouring the perennial rye grass which converts to milk more quickly, Devon, Cornwall and Somerset will fast follow suit, as water meadow, moor, lowland heath and hay meadow are ploughed up to grow it, bringing in place of "varied intimacy of a traditional patchwork... a new uniformity" and condemning some 95 per cent of England's butterfly species to extinction.

What makes *The Theft of the Countryside* important, however, is that its author has identified a culprit in this chain of depredation: not industry, not property speculation, but agriculture. If the face of England has changed, if parts of it begin to resemble the American mid-west, it is quite simply because a new agricultural revolution is under way, and that nothing at all is happening to check it.

This revolution was born in an immediate post-war reaction to the U-boat campaign, a terror that England, once threatened with isolation, could effectively be cut off and starved. From this stemmed a series of measures and laws designed to protect and cosset the one occupation not seen as potentially destructive, that of producing food.

So while the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was ferocious when it came to permission to build houses, set up caravan sites or change sheds into garages, it exempted from its control both farming and commercial forestry.

The farmer can in fact convert his fields from corn to rye, clear away hedgerows, put streams underground, dig up copses and spray heavily with pesticides, without even notifying, let alone seeking the views of the rest of the community. The Nature Conservancy Council, the Government agency charged with safeguarding the interests of science in land use has no more powers over agriculture than do the local authorities: farmers do not even have to tell the Council of their plans for sites it considers of Specific Scientific Interest. "Wherever you look", says Marion Shoard, "the presumption remains that the needs of agriculture must have priority over all other claims."

The priority goes far. It takes in not just price support (an essential part of Attlee's 1947 Agriculture Act) but capital grants, tax concessions and exemptions from rates, all of which, she argues, has turned the English farm into a "sponge", able to soak up limitless amounts of money, the English countryside into "a vast tax haven", and the farmer, subsidized by the taxpayer at the rate of £8,500 a year, into a fool if he does not make the most of every concession, and keep churning up his land for agriculture.

And yet, as Marion Shoard makes clear, the system is insane. By treating food as an emotive issue, by continuing to consider farmers the sole custodians of a wholesome, better England, when in fact they have turned into businessmen more concerned with cash flow calculations and highly sophisticated machinery that the beauties of nature, good economic sense has been destroyed.

England could be self-sufficient in food immediately, if it needed to be, and not by turning over more land to agriculture, but simply by devoting more of it to feeding people (now a mere eight per cent) and less to producing food for animals.

Marion Shoard is a mild, even tentative woman with that surprising edge of passion that comes from a sense of shock. She read science at Oxford, worked on pest control for the Agricultural Research Council, then took a further degree in planning at Kingston Polytechnic before joining the Council for the Preservation of Rural England.

Marion Shoard does not think that the immensely powerful farmers' union can be fought directly with economic curbs. But she is a believer in the power of "surgical" measures. These would include not just six new national parks, but an extension of the powers of the Town and Country Planning Act, so that farmers would have to get permission for every major change they wished to make on their land, and the setting up of nine regional countryside planning authorities in England and Wales, who would draw up plans for the agriculture, conservation and recreation of their area. It is not, she says, that the aims of farmers are irreconcilable with those of the rest of the population; just that they must be made to tally.

Marion Shoard is forming Countryside Action Groups - the first will be launched tonight at Sloley, Norfolk - to focus concern on what is happening. Britain is full of people who care passionately for the countryside, she says; they must be made aware how nearly it has gone.

***Death on Graffham Down by Christopher Brasher,  
The Observer, 16 November, 1980***

It was May and I was running gently along the South Downs Way, high above the greedy world, breathing English air, when I stumbled onto a battlefield.

Great trees lay dying on the down, their roots stark against the heavens, like the limbs of fallen soldiers at the Somme. I picked my way through the deep-rutted mud left by the monstrous machines that had obliterated the cool downland grass, and passed on, saying nothing, doing nothing about such vandalism.

Last week I went back there, to Graffham Down, in the company of Marion Shoard, a young woman who has, praise be, done something. She has spent three years of her life, researching and writing a book.

In it she says: "A new agricultural revolution is under way. If allowed to proceed unhindered, it will transform the face of England. Already a quarter of our hedgerows, 24 million hedgerow trees, thousands of acres of down and heathland, a third of our woods and hundred upon hundred of streams, marshes and flower-rich meadows have disappeared. They have been systematically eliminated by farmers seeking to profit from a complex web of economic and technological change. Speedily but almost imperceptibly, the English countryside is being turned into a vast, featureless expanse of prairie."

I and we are paying public money to destroy what Marion calls 'one of the great treasures of the earth.'

Graffham Down, where I stumbled through the Somme, is one of the places that she uses to illustrate her thesis; It was, until last year, a little wilderness, a paradise of birds, butterflies and flowers whose names sound like poetry: self-heal and pink centaury; harebells and lady's bedstraw; viper's bugloss and rock rose. Through the wood and scrub, green swaths of grass led eye and foot along the down. But now it has all gone, obliterated by man.

Once the land was owned by Mrs Nagle, the formidable lady who took on the Jockey Club, that establishment of the Establishment, and with the aid of English law and Lord Denning, forced them to recognise that a woman is as good as a man when it comes to training racehorses.

She trained many winners on Graffham Down, but even this great lady could not halt the march of time, and in the Seventies, when she was in her eighties, she had to sell. Eventually, the land came into the possession of two Dutchmen, the van de Vegte brothers, one of whom stayed in Holland while the other, Frans, managed the land in Sussex. It was Frans van de Vegte who sent the heavy machinery to clear Graffham Down, and he did it aided by our money. He cleared and then ploughed 83 acres, including those lovely swaths of - grass along which Mrs Nagle's horses had galloped and we paid him 20 per cent of the cost, some £3,000-£4,000. And then he planted barley, which is in such surplus that the Intervention Board have had to buy in 400,000 tons at a cost of £39 million!

It breaks Mrs Nagle's heart, and mine too. A woman who speaks her mind, she asked Frans van de Vegte why he ever came to England and he said : 'Because it's so beautiful.' `Well,' she said, `you've ruined the beauty. Why don't you go back to Holland?' One reason is that land in Holland is nearly three times as expensive as in England. We sell our birthright cheaply.

And we have no way of protecting it. Many local people, and societies, protested at what was happening on Graffham Down. Some of them thought that their landscape was protected because these downs are designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Indeed, there is a West Sussex Structure Plan, prepared after much consultation and approved this year by the Secretary of State for the Environment. One sentence of that plan reads: 'There is an exceptionally strong presumption against development and changes of land use and management which would be harmful to the visual quality and essential rural character of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.' The italics are Marion Shoard's.

I am not allowed to change the shape of a window in my house, or put up a new fence without first obtaining planning permission. But I can buy hundreds of acres of land and alter its character completely by grubbing out hedgerows, or by planting serried ranks of conifers over hill, downland and dale.

Graffham Down is only one small piece of land whose beauty has been destroyed. There are thousands of other examples all over our little island, and each single piece of destruction is the destruction of part of us. Hilaire Belloc, a lover of Sussex, showed how the pieces make up the whole when he wrote:

The hundred little lands within one little land that lie

Where Severn seeks the sunset isles or Sussex scales the sky.

At the foot of Graffham Down, in the little village that nestles there, lives Professor Marion Bowley, once professor of political economy at University College. She has known and loved Graffham Down for nearly 60 years. She feels that part of her life has now been `cut away' and that the 'system that allows such things to happen is `total folly:'

Marion Shoard has now exposed this total folly, this theft of the countryside. As Henry Moore, our greatest living sculptor, says in the foreword: 'This book explains what is happening and how it could be stopped. Please read it, for your sakes, for the sake of your children and for the sake of your country.'

***The Theft of the Countryside, by John Hillaby,  
New Scientist, 4 December 1980***

Dedicated as I am to the cause of conservation and uncommon sense, there are times, I must confess, that when I see a new book entitled *The Theft of the Countryside*, I want to crawl under the bed. One can envisage it all: this demi-paradise, this other Eden threatened by the truly colossal disappearance of hedgerows, upland, downland, woodland, copse and spinney with their once abundant wildlife. And now what? The prospect of naught but prairie farms on our rich shires and, at the publication of a book such as this, of the pious reactions of John Maddox, the Forestry Commission and the farming pressure groups with their platitudes of stale reasoning.

But after turning over all that (psycho-grammatically), I started to read the book, and read and read with enthusiasm growing at such a rate that I now commend it unreservedly to our Latter Day Saints and their uncertain followers of action and reaction alike, certain at least that her adversaries will be hard-pressed to refute Marion Shoard's arguments.

After working first for the Agricultural Research Council, then for the Council for the Protection of Rural England, and, at the same time, studying town and country planning, she took time off to marshal facts and launch this swingeing attack against contemporary farming practices, their proponents and the bizarre subsidies of the Common Agricultural Policy which have resulted in Europe's expensive mountains of surplus produce and a dreary countryside.

But, ahem, you will murmur, haven't we read much of, if not all of this before? I think not. Her book is not only a compendious work of reference; it uncovers a major national scandal: the fact that farmers, like the Forestry Commission, are outside laws that control the rest of us from doing more or less what we like to the land.

Farming was exempted from planning in 1947 because it hardly occurred to anybody to include it. At the time, planners and conservationists saw agriculture as something that needed to be protected rather than what it is today, a highly destructive force. Shoard backs this up with authoritative and highly quotable references and tells us clearly what still can and should be done. This is a most important book.

***Past at Present by Peter Fowler,  
Popular Archeology, May 1981***

A good mix this - fourteen publications ranging across much of the spectrum available in print about various aspects of the past at present. They are published at different levels for different audiences - national, local, academic student, landowner, tourist and the ubiquitous 'general reader'. Words such as 'countryside', 'archaeology', 'the past', 'the age' and 'landscape' in the several titles indicate the general field of interest and provide links across what superficially appears to be a miscellaneous collection. And the sting is in the tail.

Two of these books are outstanding. They will be being read in ten years' time. My interest in all these titles, however, is as a collection representing what people are thinking about the past at the moment, how they are trying to put it across, what publishers think is worth publishing and what presumably they and the authors think people will read and perhaps even need to read. This present list is published too against a background of falling book sales, especially in the educational world, and of a developing debate within archaeology itself about the nature of publication for a subject in which the printed word has been for centuries the ultimate objective (and, as many archaeologists have found, the ultimate deterrent).

On the one hand, the working archaeologist is beginning to find it increasingly difficult to find outlets for his reports, particularly the large ones packed with detailed information. On the other hand archaeologists themselves, never mind the public interested enough to subscribe to archaeological societies and therefore to subsidise their publications, are also beginning to wonder whether too much is being published via the printed word. It is not just that printing costs are rocketing: there simply is not time to read anything more than a fraction already being issued so academic salvation tends to be sought in the reasonably thorough reading of a narrower and narrower band of specialism. Then you realise what you are missing.

The point is dramatically made by one of the two outstanding books here. Marion Shoard's *The Theft of the Countryside* is a general book by a 'generalist' - but how hard she has worked to put it together. Hers is not an archaeological book - it is far more important than that - though the author duly takes note of the historic dimension in her countryside and devotes chapter 16 specifically to the plight of ancient monuments there. The essence of her argument, and hence her title, is that the landowner and farmer have traditionally cared for the countryside. Because their interest has coincided with the public interest a unique landscape has been created, rich in natural and cultural history.

This creation has been based on trust, the public trusting the farmer to act in the general interest as well as his own. Now, however, the public and private interests have diverged and, in promoting their own interests alone, the former rural custodians, so Ms. Shoard argues, have betrayed the public trust in them. Furthermore, because of the tradition of trust and a legacy of fear from the 1940s when the threat of food blockade was the more frightening in view of the depressed state of agriculture at the time, the balance in favour of exploitive, insensitive farming is tilted by large subsidies of public money inaugurated when it was assumed that 'the farmer knows best'.

Now, the argument concludes, it is patently obvious that he does not for, exempt from legal constraints applying to other forms of development, he is selfishly wrecking the landscape against the public interest but on the back of the taxpayer.

On the principle that there is no smoke without fire, *The Theft* seems to be at least partly on target to judge from the furious correspondence which graced that great organ of democracy, the correspondence columns of *The Times*, during October and November, 1980. It is not, however, this reviewer's role here either to take sides or to adjudicate in what is a fairly fundamental argument; but what I can say is that Ms Shoard has written a well researched, powerfully-argued and brave book, questioning basic premises on which major national policies are founded. Her matter is of direct relevance to the future of our archaeological heritage for, while plants and wildlife continue to disappear, so too will the cultural landscape, our 'historic environment'.

How badly that is faring in the countryside can be glimpsed in the pages behind another emotive title, *The Past under the Plough*. This is a completely different sort of book, sober where Ms Shoard enthuses, without conviction where she persuades; but it is basically about the archaeological aspect of the general problem she addresses. It consists of the edited papers given at a seminar on plough damage and archaeology held at Salisbury in February, 1977. Appearing 31/2 years after the event, the book has lost much of the impact it should have made. Of course, the situation it describes continues unabated, especially in the intensively arable area of the country such as Wessex, the Yorkshire Wolds, the Sussex Downs, Norfolk, the Upper Thames, the Lincolnshire Fens and the Cotswolds, all of which are discussed here. The fact of the matter is, however, that the existence of upstanding archaeological sites is by and large incompatible with 'the countryside-is-a-factory-floor' approach to farming; and buried or already flattened sites are increasingly at risk as regular cultivation erodes the topsoil and periodic deep disturbance breaks up the subsoil.

Several of the papers here smack of fiddling while Rome burns, procrastinating quasi-scientifically as a substitute for clear thought and decisive action. Yet while it is easy enough to argue the general case, as does Ms Shoard in her book, that the nation has no right, and cannot afford, to obliterate its landscape inheritance, the onus is clearly on archaeologists to produce cast-iron reasons why specific sites should be preserved. Clearly everything from the past cannot be kept inviolate; equally clearly, parts of our patrimony must be kept inviolate. But it is not the obvious monuments like Stonehenge and Avebury which are the problem; it is among the hundreds of thousands of visually less obvious but, for all we know, culturally as significant sites that the making of choices is critical. Even when made, there ensues the problem of how to preserve, for the taking of areas of land out of farming use altogether is not necessarily the best solution. The ideal is to work for an appropriate land management programme which does not harm the archaeology - sheep-grazing on earthworks and silage harvesting on flattened sites might be possible solutions on specific sites. Such arrangements are, however, the province of administrators, politicians and landowners acting on the basis of archaeological assessments and within a framework of the public interest.

What is needed now is the archaeological equivalent of *The Theft of the Countryside*. This *The Past under the Plough* very definitely is not, for, as Colin Renfrew remarks (p.139) 'archaeologists have not yet fully realised or effectively communicated to the public the scale of destruction and the urgency of the situation.' Perhaps it would help if I just state bluntly that most of the archaeological remains in England are already destroyed or damaged and that much of that which survives is, like many natural resources, under serious threat of extinction. I for one fear that by next century not only will there be little left to see but also that much research into improving our understanding of our past will have to be by desk-studies based on records already made rather than by new work on the primary evidence in the field. It will simply not be there. We are all scared stiff about our oil reserves running out by the end of the century, yet oil is by no means the only natural resource of a finite nature. The visible past is on a time-fuse too.

One of the ways of tackling the problem of numbers and assessment in the field is by the use of sampling procedures. They are well-known in other disciplines but relatively new in archaeology, at least in premeditated form (though, as Colin Bowen remarks on p.134 'all excavation is in some sense ...a sampling' because only a small proportion of archaeological remains will even be excavated). Yet, as Clive Orton observes in his opening sentence, 'To most people, the idea of connecting mathematics with archaeology comes as something of a surprise' - not least to archaeologists of an older generation he very kindly does not add. The aim of his *Mathematics in Archaeology* 'is to demonstrate the mathematical ideas that sit at the heart of many archaeological ideas and concepts, and to work them out through practical examples' (p.13). Sensibly he does not try 'to turn the archaeologist into a mathematician or vice versa' but tries to 'make mathematical ideas more accessible by expressing them in ordinary language rather than in the private language of mathematicians' (p.14). And he succeeds, at least with me.