

Changes to britain's landscape



The past few decades have witnessed an explosion of concern about the ways in which the countryside is changing in Britain. This burgeoning of interest seems to revolve around one main set of issues relating to resource use and management and to issues about the conservation of the natural environment and landscape. This can be seen in the House of Lords report (1990: 7) on the future of rural society, recognising that, while 'historically, rural communities have been based on the exploitation of the natural resources of the countryside ..., now priorities have changed'. Therefore, this essay aims to investigate the changes that have occurred in the British landscape since the post-war period, the reasons for these changes, and the likely future trajectory of change and policy implications. This will be done by looking at agriculture, migration and tourism as factors of environmental change in the British countryside.

The many changes in agriculture since 1945 can be aptly described as revolutionary in that farming at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a vastly different proposition than at the beginning of the twentieth century. A transformation covering all farming systems has been effected through the interaction of numerous factors. The overwhelming commitment of government to aid and subsidise agriculture has been vital in helping to stabilise the industry. The growing wealth of the nation as a whole increased demand, especially for 'luxury' foods. There has been a 'green' revolution in which new techniques have supplanted old traditions, with mechanisation becoming commonplace. The decline of the general agricultural labourer has continued - to be replaced by fewer skilled workers operating new machinery or working as a specialist in a particular branch of farming. In terms of

production, the extent of the revolution can be gauged from such statistics as the doubling of the wheat yield between 1915/19 and 1965/9, the doubling of milk and egg production between 1935/9 and 1970/4, the overall two and a half times increase in the national net output between 1937/9 and 1971/3 (Donaldson, 1972), and a four-fold rise in wheat production from the late 1940s to the early 1980s, and a 30 percent increase in the production of beef and pork during the same period (Soper, 1986).

The effects upon the landscape of post-1945 changes in agriculture were described for West Berkshire by Bowers and Cheshire (1983: 29 - 51) who stressed the role played by subsidies paid to farmers. Their study area included both clay vale and chalk downlands which were studied by air photographs and ground survey and can be taken as representative of much larger trends occurring nationwide. Between 1947 and 1976 the area had lost over one-third of its hedges, half its footpaths and tracks and nearly two-thirds of its ponds. There was a small decline in the area under woodland whilst the total amount of farmland had decreased slightly as a result of residential and recreational growth. Within agriculture itself permanent pasture had fallen by nearly 80 percent, being replaced by cereals and a substantial area of oilseed rape. The number of farms in the area fell from 19 in 1947 to 12 in 1981. The great increase in the area under arable meant that chalk downland pasture was completely eliminated. This typifies a general trend throughout most of Britain toward a more open, less enclosed countryside, much different from that of the previous centuries, where many of the major landscape types have been altered, with deterioration occurring

more widely and to a greater degree than at any other time in modern history (Bowers and Cheshire, 1983: 48).

The greatest visual change in the landscape was the loss of pasture and its replacement by cereals being grown in enlarged fields. This enlargement had been at the expense of hedgerows, of which 55km out of 129km in the study area discussed above had been removed between 1941 and 1981. The loss of hedgerows was identified as being part of a vicious circle (Bowers and Cheshire, 1983: 39). Rising rents and land prices promoted intensification, leading to greater use of capital which, in turn, was favoured by subsidies on capital inputs. The subsidies have also promoted the use of chemical inputs and mechanisation, producing further intensification and landscape change (e. g. Cox *et al.*, 1986). The arable monoculture that has been the result of this intensification requires few stock-proof barriers and is operated by means of larger machines which need bigger fields. Hence, there has been little incentive to retain hedges, especially as they require maintenance and so would require additional expense to pay for the extra work required. This degradation of the land stock should be halted and sustainable agricultural practices implemented through the involvement of farmers in decision making as well as policy implementation.

Along with changes in agricultural practices, it is the resurgence of population growth in rural areas that constitutes a key cause of fundamental changes that are now occurring in the countryside. Forty years ago discussion of rural affairs was dominated by the issue of depopulation, however, the rural population turnaround identified in the 1970s has become the dominant pattern of contemporary rural population change. The

underbounding of urban areas and local metropolitan decentralisation represents most clearly this new post-industrial settlement pattern. The statistical evidence marshalled for the UK points to a definite change in population trends affecting extensive rural zones, and this is not just limited to the fringes of larger cities. An analysis has demonstrated the large scale of the turnaround in the most rural parts of Britain, which had a population growth rate of 8.9 percentage points above the national average between the 1971 and 1981 Censuses, compared with one 5.5 points below the average in 1951-61 (Champion, 1989). This population growth has taken the form of conversion of old agricultural buildings, development of unused farmland and the encroachment of housing onto pristine 'greenfield' sites. The surrounding countryside has also been changed due to the high level of infrastructure and services which this new population group requires.

Another type of usage of rural localities causing major conservation issues is tourism. Rural tourism, which goes hand-in-hand with urban-rural population migration, however, is not a discrete activity divorced from other forms of leisure activity. Visitors on holiday in rural areas may spend some of their time visiting towns or resorts. This relationship between tourism in rural areas and other places is important, and holds part of the answer to addressing the problems. The countryside is an important resource for tourism in Britain, attracting a quarter of all domestic holiday nights and a third of all day trips. British people take some 10 million holidays and spend some 45 million nights in the English countryside as well as making over 1,000 million day visits. Up to a half of England's 20 million overseas visitors

also visit the countryside while they are in England and place a high value on its attractiveness (Countryside Commission, 1995).

With the decline in agricultural employment, many rural areas are looking to tourism to make an even greater contribution in the future. However, as well as bringing social and economic benefits to the countryside, tourism can also bring costs, through intrusive development, traffic congestion, erosion and disturbance to wildlife and local people. Such problems are often compounded due to their highly local and seasonal nature.

With the problems above outlined, it is clear that there is a need for a policy of sustainable use of the British countryside, which integrates the problems associated with modern agriculture, tourism and urban-rural migration. The Environment Act (HMSO, 1995) has gone some way to mitigating these issues, but there is still work to be done in the new millennium. The problem of climate change will likely exacerbate an already delicate ecological situation in some localities, with increased temperatures and reduced rainfalls. There is also the question of whether the encroachment of rural development upon natural resources can be halted, either through regulation of planning laws or the development of sustainable consumption, ecotourism and environmentally friendly technology. These initiatives may be stifled under the current regime of agricultural subsidies and ignorance toward greenfield development which plagues the current system. At all levels, use of rural areas must become sustainable if they are to remain as productive as they have been since 1945, while maintaining their ecological integrity for the benefit of future generations.

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