

## UNDERSTANDING PAST LANDSCAPES FOR FUTURE CONSERVATION

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In Norway, at the 18th session of the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape in 1998, I gave a keynote address on what I saw as one role of the historical geographer today (Hooke 1999). Arguing that it is imperative for planners and practitioners to acquire knowledge of how landscape has evolved before making decisions about the future, I encouraged historical geographers to become involved in landscape management at all levels.

Sadly, the role of historical geography has diminished in many modern-day UK university geography departments although, in a few, the discipline has, rightly, expanded its approach to look at the meaning of landscape and how different landscapes have been perceived in the past by different groups of people. It would be sad if the ‘old-fashioned’ approach of examining how landscape has evolved were to be lost, but this role, at least in the United Kingdom, has to some extent been ‘re-discovered’ in departments of archaeology and history. Needless to say, it is extremely important that any knowledge acquired or developed by historical geographers in the past should be thoroughly absorbed into these disciplines. I’m afraid this is clearly not always the case, but historical geographers also need to keep abreast of new techniques and ideas that are circulating in these disciplines; in other words, a truly *interdisciplinary* approach remains essential.

As an example, there can be no doubt that Geographical Information Systems, or GIS, has been an efficient technique for both researching and presenting data in all disciplines. Currently, English Heritage is using these techniques to map the data contained in Domesday Book, the 11th-century record of landholders and land holdings in most of England. Individual counties have their own priorities: in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire historical maps are being put on to a common scale as part of a web-based programme. In the former county, the Worcestershire Tithe and Enclosure Map Project not only shows the information contained on 19th-century tithe maps on a 1:5000 base but relates these digital maps to create ‘virtual fly throughs’ of the 18th- and 19th-century landscapes in 3D (Bryant & Noke 2007), helping to bring the past back to life. Slowly, early medieval charter boundaries, with their strings of boundary landmarks, are being added to the database. Other countries have similar projects: The National Archives of Sweden have their ‘National Edition of the Oldest Geometrical Maps’, reported upon recently in *Landscape History*, and it can be shown how these have helped to identify late medieval desertion. They often indicate uninhabited units in the 17th century, in various ways, that can be related to the cadastral registers (Karsvall 2007).

Another technique being used by archaeologists is Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) which has recently been developed to allow survey over wooded landscapes. This effectively allows archaeologists to see beneath the tree cover, revealing previously hidden archaeological surface features. While pollen analysis, where available, is necessary to determine *periods* of tree removal or regeneration, this technique is producing some dramatic new data about, especially, the degree of prehistoric and medieval development in certain regions.

## **Heritage landscapes**

### *Marginal landscapes*

To return to the theme of different landscapes meaning different things to different groups of people: this affects how many landscapes are valued, preserved and presented today. Let us consider, for a moment, marginal landscapes. Were these regions of poverty and hardship, areas of wild nature or, perhaps, areas for exclusive sports such as aristocratic hunting? The first approach may be exemplified by the treatment of some Irish landscapes: native traditional-type dwellings were ruthlessly cleared away in recent times to make room for more modern housing, and such glorious landscapes as, say, The Burren, a bare limestone area which must have been impossibly hard to farm (Pl. I), but which is now recognised as of enormous ecological value, was initially seen as a place of deep sadness, in places portraying the awful consequences of the potato blight that destroyed so many poor households. Today, this is seen as one of Ireland's classic 'heritage landscapes'.



*Plate I:*

*View across The Burren*

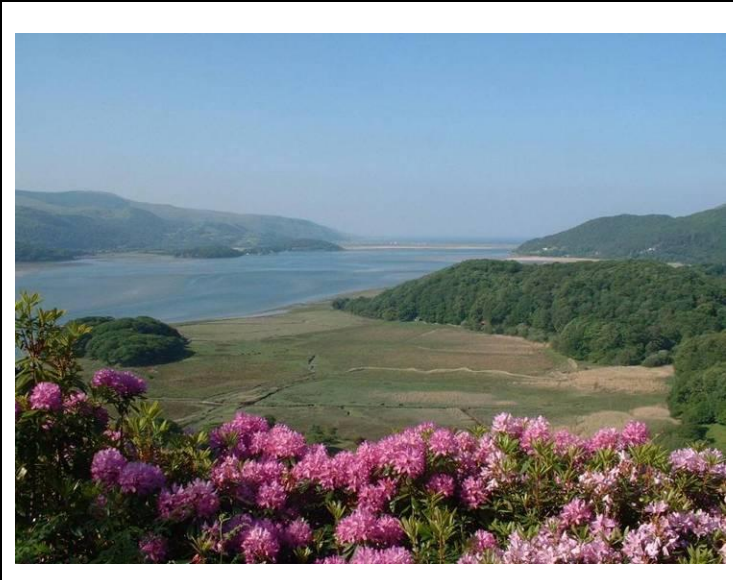
In England, the prospect of 're-wilding' a region does not arise, although such ideas have been advanced from time to time, especially for Scotland or the Snowdonia National Park. Our

wildest hills are covered with the relics of past settlement of all ages, from prehistoric hut circles to the remains of medieval shielings (Pl. II) or even later unsuccessful farms (Hooke 2003).



*Plate II:*  
*Deserted settlement in western Arduwy (Merioneth), Wales*

No part of Britain is unaffected by man, apart from the summits of a few mountains. Even the coast below high water mark is constantly changing as harbour and sea defences are constructed or strengthened, and estuaries dredged, affecting the long-shore movement of sand and shingle, the extent of salt-marsh, etc (Pl. III). The vegetation of these islands is a response to thousands of years of human activity – something I shall return to later.



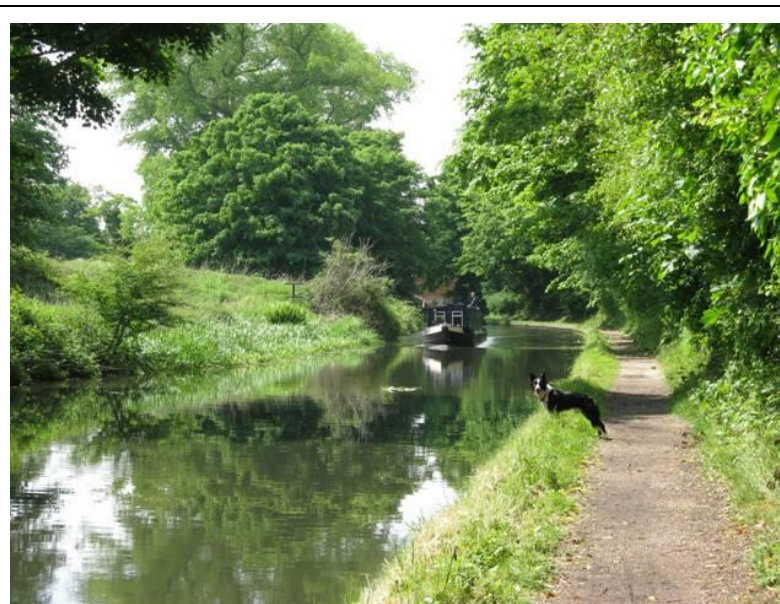
*Plate III.*  
*Marshland beside the Mawddach estuary, west Wales.*

The woodlands of England were also regions of seasonal grazing before medieval times, playing an invaluable role in early territorial groupings, but they acquired a new importance with the growing preoccupation of late Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings with hunting (Hooke 1998, 139-69). Hunting, for the aristocracy, nurtured the skills of knightly battle necessary for the

defence of the realm but the woodlands were increasingly seen as their own preserve for their own sport, a legacy passed on to the large landowners of later periods. This was bitterly opposed by the common folk and conflict over the right to take game continued down the centuries – even in the 19th century in some regions nearly every cottager had his ‘long dog’ to help in this illegal pursuit. Even today, large parts of some wooded regions remain under strict single ownership and the modern movement towards the encouragement of public access has had little, if any, effect. Although a ‘right to roam’ has ensured access in many marginal areas, the grouse moors of the Pennines and Scotland remain outside such jurisdiction, for obvious reasons, in the shooting season.

### ***Industrial and urban landscapes***

In the 1950s and '60s the ‘heritage industry’ had yet to gather force. Canals, for instance, were regarded as a vestige of an old transport network that had long been superseded by railways and roads. Some had never even been finished as the railways took over their trade, and in the mid years of the 20th century many others were filled in. Today they are much loved features that are being restored by British Waterways or private trusts, with a huge following (Pl. IV) that is far removed from the days when the Black Country barges were carrying their loads of coal from the pits to the towns, drawn by great Shire horses and often presided over by a long-skirted grandmother sitting on one of the barges, sometimes accompanied by coal-dirty children!



*Plate IV:*

*A Birmingham canal*

The 1960s was, of course, a period of destruction in England on a massive scale, often to make way for the Abercrombie ideal of regular blocks of apartment housing set out in an orderly



American-type style, and with zoned areas within towns where industry and commerce, shopping and housing etc were not permitted to mingle – incidentally making transport a continuous requirement. Row upon row of so-called ‘inferior housing’ was pulled down – some of it rightly so – and it was only in the nick of time that valuable historical townscapes, such as Birmingham’s Victorian developments, were saved for posterity. Other losses to the country’s heritage were many of the great country houses. Times had indeed changed and few of these could find, or support, the vast numbers of servants needed to maintain them after the First and Second World Wars. The country’s hierarchal social organisation of master and servant, which had prevailed up to the time of World War I, was broken for ever and thousands of men had been lost in the trenches. Social ideals surfacing after World War II decried the social inequality such houses portrayed and many families were finally defeated by government imposed death duties. In Shropshire alone, of 90 country houses standing in the 1870s no fewer than 35 had entirely disappeared by 1952 and it is said that in 1955 a country house was being demolished every two and a half days somewhere in Britain (Harris 1998, 5). Today, many of the survivors have gained a new life as ‘luxury apartments’, often for ‘retirement’ (Pl. V).



*Plate V:*  
*Clopton House, near*  
*Stratford-upon-Avon,*  
*Warwickshire: a country*  
*house now in apartments*

Industrial buildings have often been successfully protected and sensitively adapted since the '60s, largely due to an enthusiastic body of amateur industrial archaeologists. New developments have to incorporate any building of note and many have been wonderfully restored, whether as offices, public buildings or apartment blocks, breathing new life into run-down areas. They also help to present a region’s past heritage, as in the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter, a zone of tiny independent workshops that flourished in the 19th century (Pl. VI) (Upton 1993, 174-5).



*Plate VI: Birmingham Jewellery Quarter*



*Plate VII: Hartbury (?)tith barn, Gloucestershire, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century barn of the abbots of Gloucester*

### ***Rural farm buildings***

Another group of buildings that has acquired a new respect are farm buildings, now appreciated for the way in which they represent not just developments in architecture but for the way in which they help to contribute to the individual character of a region. Not only the huge barns (Pl. VII) that were often built to house the produce of medieval ecclesiastical estates, or their associated dovecotes (most of which are now listed buildings) for rearing the young squabs that were a valuable source of food, but the minor field barns that were usually built of local stone and therefore part of regional character (Pl. VIII).





*Plate VIII:  
A Welsh cattle byre of stone and slate construction*

## **Landscape character**

The preservation of regional character has been a somewhat latecomer to the aims of English Heritage and other bodies interested in conserving the past. In England, it really began under the initiative of the Countryside Commission in Warwickshire in the late 1980s (Warwickshire County Council 1993). In Europe, the late 1990s saw the beginnings of the European Landscape Convention which developed a similar approach on a much grander scale. In England, the recognition of the historic and archaeological characteristics of different regions has subsequently been funded by English Heritage, a body that had at first been pre-occupied with archaeological *monuments* and individual historic buildings (Cornwall County Council 1996; English Heritage 1999). The results of these surveys now underpin plans for future development, although the pressure to build new homes or meet ‘eco’ objectives may yet over-ride consideration of the historic environment in the future.

### ***Traditional rural landscapes***

One of the most important advances for the preservation of the rural countryside has been a growing awareness of the need to understand traditional ways of land management. The fauna and flora that characterise particular regions have adapted over hundreds of years to fit in with such traditional land use. Today’s management guidelines have been produced through the participation of archaeologists, geographers and historians with ecologists to find the best ways to maintain cherished landscapes, and lessons have had to be learned. Take heathlands, for instance (Pl. IX): heath can be re-created by removing an enriched topsoil but, in so doing, archaeological evidence can often be destroyed. Tree planting has been vigorously encouraged and grant-aided but has led to some ill-advised planting: in efforts to re-create 18th- or 19th-century designer landscapes, trees have sometimes been planted over historical sites such as deserted medieval villages. Present-day farming can also lead to increased pressure that some environments have been unable to absorb – a common problem in upland areas when grants to farmers were initially based upon the numbers of stock kept on the hills.

	
<p><i>Plate IX: New Forest heathland. Robin Fletcher/Natural England.</i></p>	<p><i>Plate X: A wood-pasture habitat. Clive Chatters/New Forest National Park.</i></p>

Wood-pasture (Pl. X) is an ancient kind of habitat, for woodlands provided seasonal pasture from at least the late Iron Age, but it is one that had almost disappeared by the end of the 20th century. In lowland regions, transhumance over long distances had ceased by medieval times, although the parallel routes which led into regions like the Weald of south-eastern England are still the backbone of the road network. Herds of pigs, cattle and even sheep had previously been taken into the woods to find pasture, the pigs foraging for acorns or beech-mast in season. Providing numbers of stock are limited, little lasting damage is done to the trees, many of which – like oak and ash – are resistant to such pressure. Although wood-pasture landscapes have been preserved in many private parklands, woods and animals have usually been separated under modern farming management, the woods enclosed for timber or country pursuits such as pheasant shooting. Although wood-pasture habitats are being preserved in the Lakeland Fells, often with the help of the National Trust, probably the best-known example is the New Forest, England’s latest National Park, where just under half of the forest is classified as a wood-pasture habitat, most of the rest being open heath. The forest was established by the Normans soon after the conquest but probably lay close to an earlier ‘old’ forest. Here the habitat has been preserved for over a thousand years by the grazing of New Forest ponies (Pl. XI). Most of the forest belongs to the Crown and is managed by the Forestry Commission but there are still c. 300-500 active commoners turning out livestock. Numbers can be controlled at the autumn round-up. Grazing by cattle and ponies preserves the open areas of lawn (grassland) and heath separated by relatively open woodland, but pigs are also turned out in autumn to forage on the acorns. The



way that pigs root up the soil has been shown to actually help tree regeneration. These are domestic herds, for wild boar have not yet reached the New Forest.



*Plate XI:*

*New Forest ponies. Peter Wakely/Natural England.*

When wild boar – escapees – started to re-colonise the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire there was uproar from both local farmers and tourists because of their destructive habits and a perceived danger. The re-introduction of such native species as the beaver has also aroused adverse comment and the idea of releasing the wolf on an estate in the Scottish Highlands has caused a furore – at present, and until the estate owner manages to buy up more land, this remains a non-starter.

The problem is that the expectations of the general public have changed over the generations and the number of people frequenting the countryside has drastically increased, while those living there often have their source of employment elsewhere in the towns. However, on the plus side, many more are now aware of the richness of traditional habitats that supported the local flora and fauna – managed woods now have open spaces that encourage butterflies; patches of fenland have been maintained or re-instated for wild bird and wild fowl populations. Many, if not most, of England’s water meadows were destroyed to make way for transport networks or housing, but many of those remaining have been re-instated as flower-rich enclaves (Pl. XII), allowed to flood periodically not only to maintain traditional land usage but to absorb run-off and thus help to avoid damaging floods. Ancient grasslands, too, were ploughed up and replaced with mono-species grassland or arable so that some 97% of England’s flower-rich pastures were destroyed between 1930 and the mid-1980s. In marginal uplands, the break-up of and re-seeding of ancient pastures has often eroded landscape character for ever, further aggravated by stone clearance and removal.



*Plate XII:  
Water meadows at Cricklade,  
Wiltshire*

One other example of traditional land use imperative to the preservation of countryside character and the maintenance of an ecologically rich environment has been the maintenance of hedgerows (Pl. XIII). Many hundreds of miles of hedgerows were removed, especially during the 1980s, to provide more land for agriculture and for modern agricultural machinery to manoeuvre. Over-enthusiastic replanting to create wildlife corridors at first threatened to destroy the character of some regions that had been open field until the 18th century – illustrating the need for an historical appraisal to be made in all new management plans – but now ancient hedgerows are protected by law and local traditions of hedge-laying – and also of dry stone walling (Pl. XIV) – are usually taken on board. Again a traditional form of land use has been reinstated, preserving the character of the cultural landscape and benefiting wildlife.



*Plate XIII.  
Ancient hedgerows in western  
Herefordshire*



*Plate XIV:*

*A landscape of stone walls:  
western Arddudwy, west Wales*

‘Cultural landscape’ is a phrase now commonly heard across Europe, although such landscapes are as yet only partly amalgamated into legal systems. It incorporates not only regional character but landscapes of national identity. But any discussion of these MUST take into consideration of how – and why – such landscapes evolved, whether it be the alpine meadows of central Europe, the terraced hillsides and olive groves of Mediterranean lands, or the forest environments of northern Europe.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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