

Why our Rural Landscapes Matter

Today's landscape is the product of human choices and actions. But is this cultural dimension adequately recognised in government policy?

Landscapes of the hand and mind

Stephen Trow

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In October 2006 the government launched Natural England, a new agency with responsibility for nature and landscape conservation in England. A month later it ratified the European Landscape Convention and its Heritage White Paper, setting out a new framework for managing the historic environment, is imminent (*Conservation Bulletin* 52, and Oliver in this issue, pp 6–8). The coincidence of these important developments in heritage and landscape policy provides an unparalleled opportunity for the heritage sector to reflect on how effectively its interests are integrated within current arrangements for managing and planning the landscape and to consider what role it might play in delivering a new vision for the future of England's countryside.

Landscapes are cultural phenomena, both in terms of the way they are created and the way

they are perceived: they are the result of the human hand and mind. At face value, this is fully recognised by those who make decisions on land use and landscape policy. Nevertheless, the historic dimension of landscape is often neglected in the formulation of policy and guidance. At best, policymakers seem to regard the historic environment as a series of features *within* the landscape, rather than recognising it as the *quintessence* of landscape. Why should this be?

Part of the problem may be that the real-life complexity of the cultural landscape – with its kaleidoscopic mixture of built and planted, manipulated and designed, semi-natural and natural – simply defies the neat departmental geometry of Whitehall, where DCLG are responsible for spatial planning, Defra for landscape and land-use processes, including agriculture and forestry, and the DCMS for the historic environment. But where does this leave ultimate responsibility for the cultural aspects of the rural landscape? Does Defra's inevitable preoccupation with natural resources, the scientific-evidence base and the challenge of climate change sit comfortably alongside championship of the aesthetic values of the countryside? Do inter-departmental arrangements exist which adequately promote the seamless management of an asset quite so fundamental to our quality of life and our sense of personal and national identity?

Are domestic obstacles to a holistic approach to landscape further compounded at the European level? The European Union sees the natural environment as a trans-national issue on which it has competence to deliver substantive legislation and has set in place a raft of European-level designations and powerful directives for nature conservation. In contrast, cultural heritage is seen as central to individual nation states' sense of national identity and as an area in which the Council of Europe, rather than the Union naturally takes the lead. While this reasoning may be impeccable, is its unintended result a distortion of domestic policy which

Dispersed settlement on the border of Devon and Cornwall. Can planning, agricultural and rural development policy sustain an historic settlement pattern which defines the distinctive character of much of the rural South-West?

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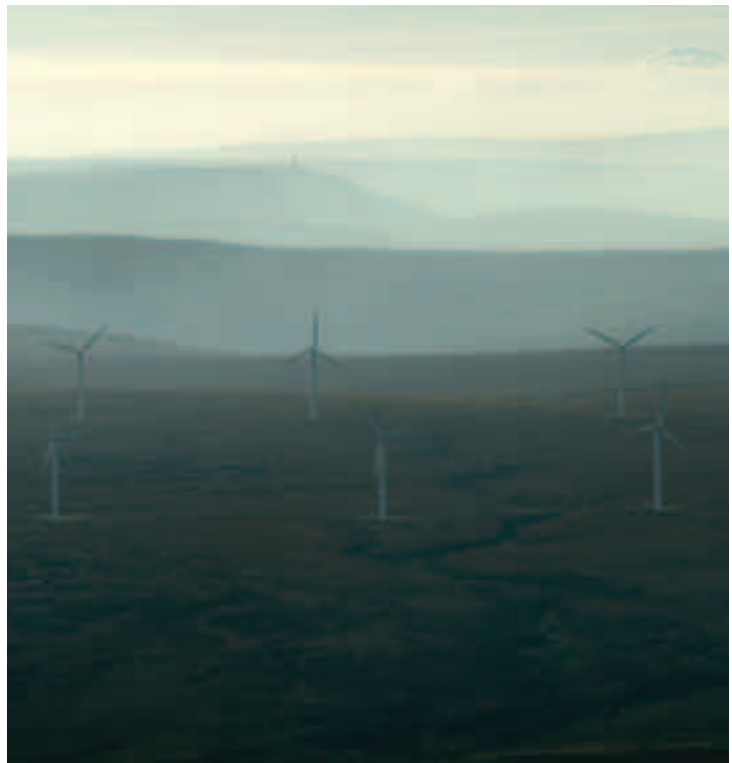


reinforces, rather than reduces, the impediments to effective integration of the cultural and natural aspects of landscape? If so, can the European Landscape Convention (see Fairclough in this issue, pp 8–9) help to break down these barriers?

Or do the principal challenges lie within the heritage sector? The need to manage change is a central message in the Convention, which concerns itself with the creation of new landscapes as well as the conservation of existing valued places. While archaeological evidence demonstrates unequivocally that all landscapes are dynamic rather than static, with change driven both by human and natural forces, how effective has the heritage sector been in translating this message into its conservation practices in the past and how adept will it be in the future?

Does the heritage sector have the right tools at its disposal to help it engage effectively with managing change in the countryside? In the past, the sector has tended to focus on the Town and Country Planning system as the principal means of managing change in the landscape. While spatial planning will continue to be an important part of the tool-kit, most agriculture and forestry operations lie outside the detailed controls of the Town and Country Planning system. It may be these drivers which will have the greatest impact on the character of the UK's landscapes over the next few decades, particularly as the land-based industries respond to global economic pressures and the challenges of climate change (this issue, Butterworth, pp 31–3 and Riddle, pp 10–12). This being the case, how fit-for-purpose are the heritage sector's links with the land-based industries? How close are we, for example, to developing robust mechanisms for integrating our interest in landscape with those of other environmental partners? And can our objectives be reconciled with the economic realities and pressures for change faced by the land-based industries (this issue, Fursdon, pp 5–6 and Lake, pp 12–14)?

Just how radically do we need to re-think our approach if we are to play an effective role in the management of the landscape of the future? Historically, the sector has tended to focus on the minutiae of change to individual buildings and sites, rather than engaging with change at the macro-scale. New work on landscape characterisation (see *Conservation Bulletin* 47 and Went and Horne in this issue, pp 22–3) has provided us with a potentially powerful tool for delivering area-based management initiatives, but its deployment in the development of new strategies for landscapes management is still in its infancy. Will implementation of the



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A wind farm at Ovenden Moor, West Yorkshire. Climate change will inevitably impact on today's countryside.

Heritage White Paper facilitate further progress in this direction?

Above all, the heritage sector should reflect on how clearly it communicates its priorities to the key partners who can help it deliver them (see Butterworth, pp 31–3, Hunns, pp 35–7, Knight, pp 29–31 and Taylor, pp 33–5, this issue). Our nature conservation colleagues have made great progress in this area, with Biodiversity Action Plans that can be readily grasped and, most importantly, acted upon by a wide range of partners. The task for cultural heritage managers is arguably more complex, but no less compelling if we wish our interests to be fully represented in the dialogue on landscape futures.

Our sector is now presented with a series of opportunities to secure a place in the discourse which will shape the landscape of the 21st century and beyond. Natural England provides us with a powerful new partner who can champion the cause of truly integrated land management; the European Landscape Convention offers a mechanism for enhancing the co-ordination of different departmental interests in landscape; and the Heritage White Paper will direct us toward a modernised management of the cultural heritage, potentially better suited to delivery at the landscape scale. Responsibility for success rests squarely with us.

The view from the CLA

David Fursdon

President, Country Land and Business Association

Each year millions of tourists – both foreign and domestic – are drawn to England’s historic landscape, scattered with quaint villages, market towns, gardens, and ancient monuments. According to Visit Britain, their visits generate £16 billion a year, a quarter of the benefit delivered by tourism to the UK economy as a whole, but rural landscape and heritage not only contribute on a material or economic level, they also foster national and local identity and a feeling of continuity, through local food as well as building styles, and rambling across Devon countryside or Lake District hills provides millions of people with physical and visual access and enjoyment.

At the Country Land and Business Association (CLA; www.cla.org.uk/heritage) we represent 38,000 members who manage or own more than half of rural England and Wales, and significantly more than half of rural heritage. We see seven key challenges that rural heritage faces today:

- While access to much rural heritage is free, maintaining it is hugely, and increasingly, expensive. Government willingness to fund it through grants is much reduced: allowing for rising construction industry costs, the value of English Heritage’s already small grant budget has been reduced by nearly a third in five years. Heritage must – wherever possible – earn its keep if it is not to decay. This requires a heritage consent system that allows change.
- The evidence suggests that the heritage consent system is not working as well as it could. A significant problem is conservation provision in local authorities (which decide 95 per cent of listed-building applications). The surveys carried out by English Heritage and the Institute for Historic Building Conservation in 2003 (*Local Authority Conservation Provision*) and

in 2006 by the CLA (*Who Pays for Heritage?*, see www.cla.org.uk/heritage) show that many local authorities have no conservation staff, or have staff who are demoralised by low pay and lack of status, have little or no experience or training, or are overworked. Pre-application advice is therefore often not available and applications can become adversarial rather than collaborative. English Heritage initiatives like HELM (www.helm.org.uk) have helped, but across hundreds of local authorities a much-cut English Heritage faces a challenge if it is to make a real difference.

‘Our farm buildings are expensive to maintain, of no economic benefit, and the planners are very reluctant to consider any sort of alternative use.’
A CLA member

- A fundamental and linked problem is conservation philosophy. There are many good conservation officers who proactively seek solutions that, while safeguarding what is significant about a building, also ensure that it has an economically viable future. But the CLA believes that, in practice, too many of those involved in regulation feel that their job is to protect the historic environment against change, so that redundant buildings decay because they cannot be reused. Some seem to lack an understanding of relative significance, so that controls that would be appropriate for a Grade I building – the top 3 per cent of listed buildings – are applied without discrimination to a Grade II building in the bottom 3 per cent; or they do not fully understand the economic background, demanding that redundant agricultural buildings remain in agricultural use when they no longer have any agricultural purpose, or loading extra costs into an economically marginal conversion so that it has to be abandoned.
- The solution is not a weakening of heritage protection; instead it is to make the system as efficient, certain and proportionate as possible. The Heritage Protection Review (HPR) needs to focus on consents as well as designation if it is to tackle these key problems. Fortunately, English Heritage already has the potential solution – the ‘Constructive Conservation’ philosophy, which is the main item in its 2005–10 Strategic Plan. This is a ‘new philosophy of conservation to ensure sensible, consistent decisions’ which seeks to get everyone working together to manage change of the historic environment in a pragmatic way. It has great potential to do good, but it needs to be fleshed out in



Redundant historic farm buildings may be an asset to the landscape, but their repair can be a significant drain on the resources of their owners.

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The adaptive re-use of traditional farm buildings provides important economic and regeneration benefits and high-quality conversions conserve the historic character of the landscape. This renovation of a group of redundant Grade II farm buildings in Taunton, Somerset, provides six office/business suites as an economically viable farm diversification. The scheme was short-listed for the Building Conservation category of the RICS awards in 2005.

clear and concise English, linked to the current statutory guidance in *Planning Policy Guidance 15/16*. English Heritage's *Conservation Principles*, still forthcoming as I write, is supposed to do this, and much will depend on how well it achieves this.

- While legal protection of heritage is necessary, it is also part of the problem, because it can demotivate owners. Generations of farmers and landowners have made sacrifices to look after historic buildings and ancient trees because of pride of ownership; that has certainly been the case on my small family estate in Devon. Love is a stronger motivator than fear, and being told you must do something takes some of the incentive away, especially if it carries attendant baggage of application forms, demands for management plans, method statements, full archaeological surveys and accredited consultants, often even for minor work. With little grant funding, the listing of buildings has become largely negative for owners. Heritage Partnership Agreements – a concept proposed in the HPR – may be a sensible way of trying to address this issue.

- Traditional farm buildings are particularly at risk because agricultural changes are making so many redundant. In many cases, if consent can be obtained without excessive cost or delay, viable and sympathetic new uses can be found; recent new English Heritage policy and guidance on this will help. But some need an injection of capital to make this possible, and other features – especially stone walls – make an equally vital contribution to rural landscape but have only marginal financial benefit. The good news is that agri-environment schemes and rural development funding have in recent years rescued many of these (see Hunns pp 35–7); the bad news is that the funding for these schemes is under threat. It is vital that built heritage remains a priority for these schemes: maximising the number of plant species is good, but loses much of its point if walls and barns are collapsing all around the plants.

- Rural heritage cannot be maintained in isolation: the strength of the rural economy is crucial, and government must work in close

partnership with landowners and other rural businesses to enable rural communities and businesses to evolve. Regional Development Agencies still focus on urban rather than rural regeneration, and it is important that Natural England champions rural heritage.

Over the coming months and years, rural landscape and heritage face significant challenges. Listed buildings have to be economically viable, and we need realism, proportionality and shared endeavour if they are to last; I was fortunate to have the opportunity to highlight this in a meeting with the Prime Minister late last year. The imminent Heritage White Paper will be just a beginning: much more is needed.

CPRE calls for deeds not words

Tom Oliver

Head of Rural Policy, Campaign to Protect Rural England

By the end of a weekend on the Shropshire/Worcestershire border recently, I had slept in the same bedroom as Prince Rupert once did, hovered on the doorstep of the house where Stanley Baldwin was born, walked over the world's first iron bridge, travelled along lanes which were so low sunk with many hundreds of years' use that there was often no view and walked through an elaborately carved 900-year-old church doorway into a field where I could clearly see where houses had once been that were last occupied 650 years ago. The pub down the road has been standing since before my most distant traceable ancestors and the line of sweet-chestnut trees that sheltered the place where I stayed was planted after the Battle of Waterloo in commemoration of that great and bloody event.

If I had entertained the thought that I was going to get away from it all, I would have been wildly misguided. The upheavals of plague, civil war, the industrial revolution and international conflict, the development of the role of Prime Minister, the ancient significance of religion and the transcendent influence of farmers,

builders, architects and engineers over countless years, all these were inescapable from dawn until night for 48 hours.

But of course that was exactly what I did want out of my weekend. The evidence of what my species, what my fellow citizens, what their organisations and activities have been up to these last thousand years is about as captivating, moving, puzzling and amusing as you can imagine. My quality of life was seriously boosted for two days by observing and thinking about all the ways the landscapes around me had been influenced by people who had been there before me, whose own quality of life had clearly varied from the palatial to the desperate. These were people who had lived lives of every possible kind, some of whom had died old and happy, others stricken by incurable disease after a life of miserable poverty.

It is patently clear that historic rural landscapes are intensely human. They are certainly not the mute and meaningless leftovers of irrelevant dead people. Few would argue that we are better off without the evidence of how we have got to where we are now, especially on the brink of another, this time carbon neutral, industrial revolution and an escalation of world cultural influences. But the places, features and buildings that make up our historic environment are interspersed by other places and features, where the presence of the past, as it was elegantly described by Penelope Lively, has been eroded or obliterated. The attrition of the years is inescapable and of course if nothing ever changed, the layers of history would not be there to admire and protect. But two processes

are constantly at work to weaken or destroy the relevance and interest of our historic surroundings unnecessarily: ignorant neglect and deliberate destruction.

Meanwhile, the extent to which historic features have survived and continue to be understood and appreciated is down to two other processes: the dedication of individuals and communities and the power of government, local or national, to prevent destruction and dereliction and encourage good care. It is not through luck, by and large, that we have the wealth and complexity of historic landscapes that remain, and it has often been through deliberate action that much of historic value has been lost.

We are the architects of the survival of our own historic surroundings just as much as those who fashioned and managed and built them in the first place. If we give up on the obligations, as individuals, as communities or as supporters of government actions and structures in the common interest, what we have now will steadily be lost with little possibility of recall. The sooner those who chafe at rules and policies which protect historic landscapes get this clear in their heads, the better. There is precious little excuse in this country to plead ignorance of the virtues and advantages that accrue from conserving the outward signs of our history. The remarkable and inspiring project to map the historic landscape character of England by English Heritage (see *Conservation Bulletin* 47 and Went and Horne in this issue, pp 22–3) provides anyone who cares to look with all the evidence they need that our history surrounds us in the landscape.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) is profoundly concerned that initiatives derived from the Heritage Protection Review need far greater and more realistic funding if they are to help stem the attrition and encourage good practice. In overall terms, the sums needed to ensure that English Heritage and local authorities can integrate heritage controls and guidance successfully are very small. Yet without this money, we face a damaging and depressing retreat from the quality of governance and decision-making needed to safeguard our rich inheritance. Why is it that the government has so far failed to see the merit in the DCMS Select Committee report that although protecting the historic environment is very good value, we do need to actually pay for it? The Historic Environment Record, for example, is an essential source of accurate information that is needed to guide wise development decisions. But if the resources to collect, tabulate and maintain this information are

When Abraham Darby constructed his revolutionary iron bridge in 1771–81 the Industrial Revolution had only just begun to transform the traditional countryside of post-medieval Shropshire. On the eve of a new carbon-neutral revolution, it is a potent reminder of the centuries of human endeavour locked within our historic rural landscapes.

Mike Heaketh-Roberts © Crown copyright/NMR



not available, the facts will not be available either. Pre-application consultation on planning applications is a wise and democratic idea, but people need to be employed by local authorities to do this work. CPRE works closely with local authority officers expert in the historic environment wherever it can, but often these officers are working under great pressure, with only modest support and in a significant number of local authorities there is no one employed in this role.

There is an overwhelming consensus that the historic environment brings riches to society of every kind: cultural, social, environmental and economic. Our report *Recharging the Power of Place*, published jointly with the National Trust and Heritage Link in 2004, contributed to building that consensus. But, depressingly, it seems far-fetched indeed that government should identify the protection and enhancement of the historic environment as meriting funding as part of a Housing and Planning Delivery Grant. The embedded energy and quality of construction of buildings that have literally stood the test of time appears still to mean little to the Treasury. Far greater encouragement could be given to the farming community to see historic landscapes and monuments as part of their asset base, rather than as a hindrance to freedom of land management. And the taxpayer needs to make a fair contribution to the long-term survival of historic landscapes, in view of their national benefits.

Our rural landscapes, made up as they are of towns, villages, scattered settlements and open countryside, are the closest thing we will ever experience to a time machine. They are the source of much of our culture – art, drama, poetry and language. From earth everyone has come and to earth everyone will return. In the mean time, it makes sense to understand and celebrate that ancient historical fact.

Made in England: landscape, culture and identity

Graham Fairclough

Head of Characterisation, English Heritage

Having written about the European Landscape Convention (the ‘Florence Convention’; www.coe.int/t/e/Cultural_Co-operation/Environment/Landscape/) in several issues of *Conservation Bulletin*, it is gratifying to write about it again as it comes into force in the UK on 1 March 2007. It is already active in 25 other European countries, a speed of progress since publication in 2000 that testifies to how great

its potential is seen to be. How far or quickly this potential will be achieved depends of course on its implementation. Its ideas need to be adopted by all government departments, and to be recognised at the highest level. It could even form part of a national constitution: how citizens see their landscapes defines the nation.

‘Florence’, as befits a new member of the Council of Europe’s family of heritage conventions, offers a revitalised approach to heritage. It is the first convention dedicated to the whole landscape, rather than to components of the environment. Its starting-points are that landscape is everywhere, and that it is natural and cultural heritage entwined. It insists that all areas, whether special or ordinary, beautiful or degraded, need to be treated as landscape. The ‘poor’ landscapes, not the best, might indeed be the ones that most need investment and management to improve people’s quality of life.

The convention is important to English Heritage and the wider historic environment sector for many reasons. Its concept of landscape promises to be central to our work, which is why we have already been participating in the conferences and workshops organised by the Council of Europe to start implementing the convention. It firmly underwrites national policy as set out in *Power of Place* and *Force for our Future*. It allows us to engage people’s interest in heritage on a much larger scale than hitherto, and in terms of future development it enables us to build a bridge from past to future. It is an effective way to integrate our cultural interests with those of other agencies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency.

The word ‘landscape’ may conjure up ideas about Nature and rural scenes, but the convention encourages us to see it as much more important than that, as a democratically shared common heritage. We each take different things from it, depending on who we are, on our gender, ethnicity or religion, on how old we are and what our lives are like, yet at the same time we all share landscape perhaps more than anything else. Landscape is very squarely about people: people who over very long periods of time have created the physical patterns of the land, who today ‘create’ landscape through their perceptions, and for whom landscape is an economic or social resource, people who are part of landscape, not simply external impacts on it. The European Landscape Convention is the first heritage convention that relates to where people live and work, how they accommodate themselves to their surroundings and how they interact psychologically and emotionally with their environment or habitat. It is

concerned not only with places of scenic beauty or ornamental parks, but with landscapes everywhere, with how people perceive all land, urban and peri-urban as well as rural, and indeed water or seascapes. In summary, an 'ordinary' area of landscape is as much part of our heritage as any palace or church.

But the traditional concern of heritage to protect and keep the fabric of the past cannot be applied to landscape. Conventional heritage protection can only keep the very best because we know we cannot keep everything. The convention, on the other hand, invites us to recognise that human history and, more important, people's memories and identity, exists not only in the small proportion of the building stock that is listed but everywhere in the landscape, especially where people actually live and work. Put simply, all landscape is heritage. How do we respond to this challenge?

Landscape is our most complex human artefact, but it is not finished. It will continue to change and evolve whatever actions we take or do not take. We can, however, plan its future evolution, which is why the convention is explicitly forward-looking, and also why it is an enabling instrument rather than a prescriptive one. It advises us to manage landscape in active ways that include change and creation so that it continues to live. It suggests three ways of doing this – protection, management and planning – but it is management (ensuring upkeep, keeping up appropriate processes for a living landscape) and planning (mitigating necessary change, enhancing landscape, creating new landscape) which have the greatest applicability, especially through spatial planning and agricultural policy.

The challenge posed by the convention is not simply to protect our inherited landscapes

but to create 'good' future landscapes for everyone. We need a wide debate about what 'good' landscape might be. For the historic environment sector (and we might not share other sectors' views on this) a 'good' landscape is surely one in which history and culture, identity and memories, can be read and enjoyed, but this is not the same as attempting to keep landscape unchanged, or recreating the past.

This issue of *Conservation Bulletin* shows many examples of how the historic environment sector is already contributing to implementation of the convention: well-established methods for understanding landscape, with a broad range of applications such as English Heritage's programme of historic landscape characterisation and urban characterisation (see, for example, *Conservation Bulletin* 47), regional characterisations that begin to chart the contribution to landscape of our rich legacy of farm buildings (see the HELM website at www.helm.org.uk) and a broad explanation of landscape history at regional scale as seen in the recent English Heritage books (see Rowley, pp 20–1). Implementing the European Landscape Convention will be a cornerstone for practical working relationships with the newly formed Natural England, and we have already helped the Highways Agency to write practical guidance on how to take Historic Landscape character into account in the design of new roads, probably the first official document to use the convention as its starting-point.

All this is only a start, however, given the wide horizons thrown open by the convention. Landscape's role in social and individual well-being, and its major contribution to economic prosperity and quality of life, gives it an importance that cannot be ignored.

"Landscape" means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' (from the European Landscape Convention, Article 1, Definitions). Now awaiting a new post-Cold War future as an immigration centre, the redundant RAF Coltishall was itself superimposed on to a traditional Norfolk farming landscape.

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