

The Theft Of The Countryside

by Marion Shoard

(Maurice Temple Smith, 1980)

Introduction

Paradise Threatened

England's countryside is not only one of the great treasures of the earth; it is also a vital part of our national identity. All of us - even those who rarely step outside our towns - cherish somewhere in our souls the same vision of our real homeland: a rural vision, nowadays conjured up as faithfully by margarine commercials as it was once by Shakespeare's plays. Virtually all of us know and value the world's most celebrated landscape and cherish rural England's patchwork quilt of fields, downs and woods, separated by thick hedgerows, mossy banks, sunken lanes and sparkling streams. For hundreds of years, our English countryside has given us such ideas as we have had of what paradise might be like. Peopled by badgers, skylarks and nightingales, scattered with bluebells, poppies and cornflowers and studded with oak, elm and hawthorn, our countryside has knitted itself into our idea of ourselves as a nation as thoroughly as it has delighted and amazed strangers who have travelled from the far corners of the earth with no other purpose than to feast their eyes on it. Our empire may have passed away; our industrial strength may be tottering; but the matchless charm of our countryside - that was ours before imperial power or economic hegemony, and it survived them. Until now.

Although few people realise it, the English landscape is under sentence of death. Indeed, the sentence is already being carried out. The executioner is not the industrialist or the property speculator, whose activities have touched only the fringes of our countryside. Instead it is the figure traditionally viewed as the custodian of the rural scene - the farmer.

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 ponds, 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. Its surface is given over either to cereal growing or to a grass monoculture fuelling intensive stock-rearing. This new English landscape can offer little delight to the human eye or ear. It cannot sustain our traditional wild flowers, birds and animals. But each year it takes over hundreds more square miles of England.

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Already, much of the east of the country looks disappointingly familiar to tourists from the American Mid-West. And unless something is done to curb agricultural intensification, virtually the whole of the countryside will be no more than a food factory by the early part of the next century.

If we do allow our children to be cheated of their birthright in this way, they may find it hard to forgive us. As opportunities for work diminish in post-industrial Britain, the need for leisure outlets will grow steadily more insistent. And quite apart from its other claims on us, the countryside is a vast treasury of so far largely untapped recreation opportunities. We can ill afford to stand by and see it destroyed now - and destroyed quite unnecessarily.

We do not have to eliminate the character of our landscape to produce food efficiently. If we take certain steps, we can safeguard our rural heritage and enable farmers to profit from new methods. At present there is no machinery whatever to require farmers to reconcile their plans with the needs of all the rest of us who value the English scene. That is why agricultural change is proceeding in such a destructive way. It need not be so. The deep regard for the countryside that lies entrenched in so many English breasts has yet to make itself felt. But it still can. The theft of England's countryside is under way, but not yet completed. We can save our countryside, if we choose to.

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