

Marion (in beret) in 2014 with campaigners protesting the introduction of polytunnels in Gloucestershire countryside



**“It would be useful if older people showed that it’s OK to look how you are. We owe it to the young to show that ageing is part of life”**

*Original thinker and influential environmentalist Marion Shoard talks to Alex Reece about her new cause as an older people’s advocate, and how we need to change our attitude to later life*

“I

f you really care about something, you just get stuck in – or at least I do,” says lifelong campaigner Marion Shoard, who, as an environmentalist and writer, has had a tangible impact on our relationship with the landscape. Her influential books, *This Land is Our Land* and *A Right to Roam*, paved the way to greater access for walkers in the British countryside. And her first published work in 1980, *The Theft of the Countryside*, was an early warning against the impact of industrial farming.

At her home in Strood, Kent, the sitting room is lined with books and papers, and she is fresh from attending a public inquiry the previous day, regarding a patch of open land on the outskirts of her home town. Such ‘edgelands’ – the unsung brownfield\* sites of the urban fringe – were the subject of an award-winning essay she wrote in 2002, and she was among the first to outline their environmental importance. This has been a theme throughout her career; directing the public gaze towards places and people that both society and the Government have overlooked.

Her latest cause, that of older people’s issues, is the subject of a new book, *How to Handle Later Life* – a practical guide to navigating the third age, from money and housing to diet and companionship – which runs to 1,160 pages and took 15 years to write. It’s a field she was thrust into when her mother developed dementia and began losing her eyesight in the late 1990s, and Marion struggled to find her adequate care. Eventually, she found her mother a place in an NHS unit, where she spent the last four years of her life. “I think it provided better care than she would have got in any care home, and it was also free,” she adds. “I thought: ‘I must try and help other people facing this and other serious problems that can arise in later life.’”

## ENLIGHTENMENT OF AGE

Although there is more awareness these days of older people’s issues, many government policies, Marion says, remain fundamentally ageist. An example she gives is how all but the poorest people with dementia, osteoarthritis and Parkinson’s disease – common chronic conditions of old age – have to pay for the long-term practical help they need, as this ‘social care’ is means tested. “Now if, say, you get pregnant – which is a choice – you get all that care free (and I agree, you should),” says Marion. “That’s quite ageist, really.”

Part of the wider problem is our attitude to ageing – which needs looking at in a new way, Marion suggests. “Although we’re all supposed to be very politically correct, if you scratch the surface, a lot of people still rather despise older people. They see them as weak and pathetic – and a burden on society. We need to

show that these people are individuals, with their own contribution to give.”

It’s a situation not helped perhaps by the fact that most of the faces we see in the media look ageless or younger than their years. “You do get some people on telly who look as old as they really are, like Sir David Attenborough and Mary Beard, but they tend to be the exception,” Marion says. “I do worry that it’s a bad example to set for younger people.” Citing a government-funded survey published in 2017, she points out that a quarter of 14-year-old girls were found to have symptoms of depression. “It’s partly exam stress but it’s partly appearance anxiety,” she continues. “If older people showed that it’s OK to look how old you really are, then I think that could be useful. Also – I have a one-year-old grandson – I think we owe it to our grandchildren and the younger generation to show that ageing is part of life. You have to cope with your own mortality at some stage.”

In her work as an older people’s advocate – whether discussing death on *Woman’s Hour* or calling for people in care homes to have a legal right to be taken

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out of doors for an hour a day at her recent book launch – Marion uses the same tactics as for environmental campaigning. She engages with decision makers, writes articles, addresses meetings, launches petitions and attends demonstrations.

Now in her late 60s, Marion has no desire to retire: “I like to feel I’m doing something worthwhile. I hope I’d always want to do that.” Her campaign for a universal right to roam has been ongoing for more than 30 years, since *This Land is Our Land* came out in 1987. “It’s an affront to us all that we don’t have the right to move freely around our land,” says Marion today. A keen walker and cyclist, she recalls living in Luton in her 20s and wanting to go for a walk in the country at weekends. “There was this wonderful estate on the edge of town with large parkland, a lake and woods. I longed to be able to walk on the grass and by the lake, and at the time, you couldn’t – there was virtually no public access. Then I found out there were lots of situations like this.”

While she’s pleased that her activism and subsequent book, *A Right to Roam*, contributed to the partial access we now enjoy in England and Wales »



## AN ACTIVE LIFE

The Marion Shoard CV

- 1949** Born in Cornwall. Marion grows up in Kent, and goes on to read zoology at Oxford University.
- 1970s** Works for the Council for the Protection of Rural England.
- 1980** Publishes her first book, *The Theft of the Countryside*, shortly after the birth of her daughter, Catherine.
- 1987** Marion's book on land ownership in the countryside, *This Land is Our Land*, comes out. She also presents a documentary on the theme, *Power in the Land*, on Channel 4.
- 1999** *A Right to Roam* is published. A year later, the Government passes the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.
- 2004** Following a struggle to secure good care for her mother in her final years, Marion publishes her first handbook for older people and their relatives: *A Survival Guide to Later Life*.
- 2006** Is named one of The Guardian's top 100 green campaigners of all time.
- 2009** Is the first woman to win the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild's Golden Eagle Award for lifetime achievement in the outdoors field.
- 2017** *How to Handle Later Life* (Amaranth Books) is published. In a speech at an 800th anniversary celebration of the Charter of the Forest, she calls for greater access to woodland.



With grandson Daniel (above). Opposite: a mass trespass in 1932 in the Peak District protesting lack of access for walkers; it would be another 68 years before our Right to Roam became part of legislation

granted by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act in 2000 – and the general right to roam in Scotland – she maintains that more could be done. “What we did get was a right only to certain mapped lands that had to fall into certain categories: mountain, moor, heath, down or registered common land. Land around the coast has been added since then. And I just think we should have a universal right.” Marion wants to see an extension of this partial access to take in woodland, too: “A walk in the woods is part of the British landscape experience that we should all be entitled to.”

The way we enjoy the outdoors nowadays has become too much of an artificial experience, Marion fears, with visitors being shepherded along designated paths rather than roaming freely; or else we simply run or cycle past the landscape rather than engaging with it. “If you think back to people like Laurie Lee and Dylan Thomas, they were all about just exploring the countryside and it not just being a backdrop for other activities,” she says. When Marion received her Golden Eagle lifetime achievement award from the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild in 2009, she used her acceptance speech to mourn the “incarceration of our children”, who are no longer

given the freedom to develop an instinctive relationship with the outside world, as they once did.

## CAMPAIGNING ON THE EDGE

An assiduous observer of changes in the British landscape, Marion coined the term ‘edgelands’ in an essay published in 2002, which inspired much discussion about the semi-industrial periphery of our towns and cities and further recent books on the subject (such as Rob Cowen’s *Common Ground* and Paul Evans’ *Field Notes from the Edge*). She’s keen for the environmental and historical value of these brownfield sites to be taken seriously. “There’s a general assumption that anything brownfield should be developed,” she says, “and it’s often in these overlooked edgeland areas that wildlife develops in its own way. They’re more wild somehow than, say, the fells of the Lake District, which are managed for sheep grazing. But they often look threatening and chaotic, and partly for that reason people tend to ignore them.”

Such is her knowledge and experience of rural issues that she was recently invited to talk to civil servants at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs about her ideas for countryside policy





post-Brexit. “At the moment, it’s not possible to predict what’s going to happen,” Marion says, “except that if our farmers are going to have to face tariff-free competition from other parts of the world, it’s going to be quite tough for them and they’re going to need some kind of support, as well as subsidies the Government says it’s going to give them for conservation. There might be a lot of abandonment of farmland, of course, and re-wilding.” Depending on the outcome of current negotiations, Marion wonders if the impact of Brexit on the countryside could be the most visible of all.

With so many calls on her time, there is little left over for Marion’s extra-curricular passions – such as her interest in the way landscapes inspire artists and writers. She is a long-time member of The Friends of the Dymock Poets, an organisation that celebrates the work of Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke and Robert Frost, among others. “They gathered in a very little-known area where Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire meet, just before the outbreak of World War I. They walked the fields and did what they called ‘walks-talking,’” says Marion, who is giving a talk and a tour of the area this month. “Their poetry is in simple language and speaks to the heart,” she adds. “When you’re walking around that pocket of country, it’s easy to see how the landscape affected them.”

There is much still that drives her to keep campaigning and writing – not least a desperately

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needed improvement in the world of care homes. Our understanding of the third stage of life – now much longer than ever before – and what its purpose might be, is still very much in its infancy. Marion draws a comparison with childhood, which, as we know it now, was only really ‘invented’ in the last century. “Until late Victorian times or the early 20th century, a lot of children were just classed as miniature adults,” she says. “The idea that ordinary children would be treated as they are today, with their individuality fostered and being encouraged to be creative – and that a whole multimillion pound industry would have grown up based on fulfilling their needs or demands – you wouldn’t have imagined it.

“In future,” she continues, “I’d hope that we’d all debate just what later life is for, while according our most vulnerable older people real respect.” And, as with the invention of childhood, this might just enrich the lives of everyone. **S**

Read Marion’s articles and find out more about her campaigning at [marionshoard.co.uk](http://marionshoard.co.uk).