

**A tsunami of shimmering plastic is coming to a field near you. Guild member Marion Shoard believes the British countryside is facing a threat greater than fracking. She tells OF editor Stephen Neale why polytunnels are a creeping menace that must be stopped.**

MARION Shoard is a watcher. She notices things other people don't see; like Miss Jane Marple without an ego.

She lives in Strood, in Medway, Kent, near Chattenden Barracks. The barracks is a redundant MoD site, near the River Medway, where thistles run wild, nightingales sing louder than pigs at feeding time, and planners want to build lots of houses.

Marion moved to Kent from Dorking, in Surrey, in 2012. Partly because it was where she grew up; partly because she wanted a change. It's within 35 minutes of St Pancras, in London, by train – and has access to woods, estuaries and marshlands between the old churches, housing estates and caravan parks.

She doesn't drive, so gets into the countryside on buses, trains or her bicycle. It's an old fashioned bike, with a basket on the front, in which she carries binoculars, a jewellers eye-glass and maybe a bottle of water.

"I'm not a big-booted hiking type," she says. "I amble along, endlessly dazzled by the beauty of the outdoors, endlessly stopping to examine a flower, insect, rock or building. The North Kent marshes are wonderful for bird watching. A couple of days ago I saw an exquisite curlew sandpiper on the Oare marshes, west of Faversham.

"I enjoy chatting to passers-by using buses and trains. If I had more time I'd try to run minibus trips into the country for older people who can't easily get and about, as I used to through my church in Dorking.

"I go out in normal gear. No Nordic walking sticks. I'm not into all that. As well as the creeks, shores and saltings of the Medway and Thames estuaries, there are woods and stretches of downland turf around here, but also a lot of post-industrial landscapes, which I like. Lots of disused chalk quarries."

She writes sometimes about the places she calls 'edgelands': 'a contrast between the ordered, pretty countryside of Surrey with the much more chaotic and wild landscape around Medway'.

If she sees beauty in post industrial 'chaos', her latest subject is much less attractive. In fact it makes her 'angry and distressed'.

Polytunnels. Sheets of white and transparent plastic strung over 30 ft wide metal arches. UK farmers want to extend their growing seasons into winter. Their Spanish peers have already covered more than 100 square miles of Almeria, in Spain, in the last two decades. Now the flood of plastic is spreading here.



The Friends of the Dymock Poets (a voluntary group) is challenging a farmer's planning application to cover his land in Gloucestershire to extend the asparagus-growing season. He plans to build two reservoirs because covering the fields prevents natural drainage.

"I think this kind of challenge is more important than the fracking proposals that attract so much more publicity," says Marion, who is a member of the Friends' committee. "One or two polytunnels is OK, but what we're seeing is the spread of whole stretches of them."

"If this development goes ahead, an area equivalent to 28 football pitches will go under mainly polytunnels but also two reservoirs, and black sheeting on the outside watercourses to prevent the growth of wild plants. There will be no fields as we know them – a large area will cease to be countryside at all. Birds and other wild creatures will be completely cut off from the earth."

An online check of the polytunnel industry and it's clear something is happening. UK

manufacturers describe their polythene hoods as 'sectional buildings' they are supplying to government organisations, prisons, major landowners, farmers, NHS Trusts, schools and even 'celebs'.

The benefits are increased crop yields, longer seasons, protection from bad weather and guaranteed harvest days.

Growers have been successful in lobbying the UK government into relaxing tax laws to ease the introduction of more plastic. Changes made last year mean they can qualify for capital allowances if the structures are 'moved around' to help crops grow in 'different areas at different times'.

Planners are tending to look favourably on applications too, with pressure from the influential and powerful National Farmers' Union. No planning permission is needed for domestic use if plastic is below 3 metres and takes up less than 50% of the garden.

A report in 2006 by English Nature concluded that National Parks must 'accept that the polytunnel issue is a locally significant one which is likely to grow as farming economics undergo further re-adjustment'.

"This is a step further in the industrialisation of agriculture than raining huge quantities of pesticides and fertilizer down on our fields," warns Marion. "It involves covering pretty well all the land involved with plastic.

"Fracking diverts attention and agitation from more fundamental and pervasive threats, such as the spread of polytunnels."

She is no doomsayer, and has been warning for decades how new farming techniques can damage the environment, as well as erode people's free movement in the outdoors.

Marion has written extensively of the anomalies regarding the UK and how the

**Moorland is not a 'natural' landscape – but it plays host to its own wildlife: hen harriers, insects and plants**

**RIGHT** Simonside in the Northumberland National Park, by David Taylor



# Tunnel Vision

so-called guardians of our countryside – farmers and landowners – manage things too often for self-interest over public interest.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) in 2000 was supposed to improve things; access at least. But while many have celebrated its introduction, Marion dismisses it as a failure. “I never thought CROW would work,” she says.

“There were always going to be so many problems. You have to mark all the areas over which people are allowed to roam freely. You have to import all this extra data and information into the structure of maps. Then you should ideally signpost the land involved. And then there’s the division of responsibility in managing the system. In a time of austerity and cut backs its chances of success are not so good.

“In contrast in Scotland the Land Reform Act of 2003 means there is a presumption that you can be on land or water anywhere. You have to be responsible in the way you behave, but so too do land owners and land managers.

“Before Scotland changed its access laws, landowning interests said the general right of access would be disastrous. It’s quite extraordinary how well things have worked there.

“Down here in England and Wales, CROW is too complicated.

“It’s true there are places, for instance, on Bodmin Moor and in the South Downs and Forest of Bowland which have been opened up that were previously inaccessible. But here in England and Wales we have nothing like the general right of access that people enjoy in Scotland.

“The categories of land that can be covered by CROW amount to only about ten per cent of the land of England and Wales.

## **Fracking diverts attention and agitation from more fundamental and pervasive threats, such as the spread of polytunnels.**

“If you had a general right of access the erosion of access along rights of way through lack of proper maintenance that we’re seeing as a result of the austerity cutbacks wouldn’t matter so much, because people would enjoy access in principle everywhere.

“The big issues are the polytunnels and the loss of access as public paths are not being maintained. There’s little point in stopping fracking if the countryside is being lost anyway.”

Too few journalists report on these matters with any passion or detail. George Monbiot is an exception. The Guardian

columnist wrote the foreword to the second edition of Marion’s book *This Land is Our Land* in 1997. But even he falls foul of her critical eye over the practical detail of his latest book, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*. Monbiot suggests extensive rewilding of upland farmland would be beneficial for tax payers and the environment.

Marion is sceptical.

“Yes, of course I agree with George that heather moorland is not a ‘natural’ landscape and yes, I agree that far too much cash is spent on subsidizing sheep farming in our uplands.

“I also agree that there’s plenty of scope for allowing natural vegetation to grow in many upland areas where this is prevented at present because sheep or deer decapitate the young shoots. But what I think George Monbiot fails to grasp is the cultural value of moorland. Many people like open moorland. They associate it with writers such as Emily Bronte. Heather moorland can be dazzling and entrancing in the summer, when the heather is in bloom. Moorland plays host to its own unique wildlife – hen harriers, insects and plants that would be driven out if the moors gave way to a great forested jungle. You can see the shape of the land in a way that you can’t if it’s covered in forest. British people feel comfortable about roaming across open moorland in a way that they don’t through dense forest. All this goes





# Tunnel Vision

**Marion Shoard**

to support a vibrant tourism industry. Grouse shooting too employs people and it remains profitable. How does George Monbiot plan to take that land to turn it over to forest? So let's have some open moorland, but also many other habitats, too – certainly not just vast swathes of uninterrupted, wild forest.”

The theme of man-made landscapes is one Marion returns to throughout her writing and work. Whether it is with the fields and woods frequented by the Dymock Poets, or about the edgelands and brownfield sites of her home in Kent, or man-made country parklands and heathlands. But as much as she despises the polytunnels, the influence of human hand in so many other parts of the natural world is celebrated. It must be refreshing. Not being a parrot of fashion or consensus, but looking, listening and then placing something into a perspective that was missed by the rest of us hacks and writers rushing to the next job, chasing a deadline or running up another Marilyn.

“I'm interested in the different ways in which people respond to different landscapes,” she explains. “When I started work at CPRE [Campaign to Protect Rural England] national office in the mid-70s, I couldn't understand the special attraction the then leaders of the countryside movement felt for moorland. I didn't like it much, especially in winter, yet they wanted to give moorland (and mountain) priority in countryside policy-making and were successful doing so in that moor and mountain dominated the landscape types embraced by national parks in England and Wales. The first piece of research I conducted when I left CPRE in 1977 was to carry out at-length interviews

with five of those people to try to tease out what it was about moorland that attracted them and why they didn't seem to warm to the lowland landscapes that I preferred and which seemed to me more quintessentially English. That research resulted in an essay called 'The Lure of the Moors', which is on my website.

“The Dymock Poets responded to the apparently ordinary countryside of a small part of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire in a particular way. I think landscapes do inspire. It's about people and the way they relate to what's around them; and that's not necessarily about whether the landscape is wild. Some people say moorland is wild. They see no evidence of human hand. They don't see it as a collision between man and nature. The first thing they see is nature. But I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing.

“The way people relate to their landscapes is intriguing. I don't think Monbiot finds that as fascinating as I do.”

The Friends of the Dymock Poets have won the first round of their fight against the farmer and his polytunnels. They managed to persuade the Forest of Dean District Council to reject this application. They're now fighting an appeal to the government against the refusal of planning permission. It could go either way. Marion isn't downbeat. Just realistic.

“I'm very distressed by what land owners and farmers can do. But I can't lie and say this is destroying me. Because I'm an optimist. I could not say the CROW Act is much of an advance in England and Wales. But you win some, lose some.

“It's human nature to cling on to these things. To hope for the best. Sometimes good things do happen. We could never have imagined back in the 1980s with all the access battles that were being fought then in Scotland that a Scottish Parliament would arrive and enact as one of its very first pieces of legislation a general right of access to the land and water of Scotland.

“I've been interested in changes that seem to have been imperceptible at the time they were taking place. I wrote *Theft of the Countryside* in 1980 about changes made by the modern farmer. I just felt that modern agriculture had made a bigger impact on the countryside than people realised. Later, I explored the emergence of the new environment that had been exploding between town and country during the 90s which people hadn't noticed – the edgelands – and later still, the decline in informal exploration of the outdoors, perhaps as a result of a change in the nature of childhood.

“Polytunnels take everything up another notch. They will take all these areas out of being countryside. The pressure from the farming community to make these polytunnels happen is growing fast. This is a serious threat in many areas, not least Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Kent. People are talking a lot about fracking proposals. But polytunnels are in my opinion a greater threat. This is really something we need to be more concerned about.”

**BELOW** Polytunnels at Lintridge Farm outside Redmarley D'Abitot in north-west Gloucestershire. Both pics: Catherine Shoard

