

Rural Protest in England

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The tranquil countryside has long been pitted against the bustle of the city in the English cultural mindset. It is an image which sits alongside clichés of political agitation being confined to urban spaces while rural space is seen as a timeless haven of tradition and social stability. Such clichés die hard but are increasingly outdated, particularly since the Countryside Marches of 1997–2002 put rural protest firmly onto the national political stage.¹ For a long time in the English post-war period, the realities of rural society were hidden from the public gaze and for many people the English countryside was in a time warp. It was an apolitical space of tranquillity where the conflict of urban areas was inexistent. This, of course, is part of the myth of the ‘rural idyll’, a peaceful haven which is peaceful precisely because it is left alone both by the forces of social change and by interfering governments. This is also a recipe for the status quo, something which English rural elites have been remarkably successful in maintaining. To a large degree, rural society only really became visible at the turn of the twenty-first century when the Countryside Alliance mobilised almost three-quarters of a million people to ‘invade’ the urban capital of London with three different demonstrations between 1997 and 2002. The reality of rural spaces and the

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numerous forms of protest within them is, however, one that has a long tradition in English history.

This chapter will analyse the question of rural protest in England on two levels. Firstly, by studying the struggles since the nineteenth century to gain access to rural spaces and, secondly, by attempting to explain why rural protest burst onto the English political stage at the turn of the twenty-first century.

PUBLIC COMMONS, PRIVATE ENCLOSURES

The first major protest of rural spaces in England was the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. In a spontaneous refusal to pay yet another royal tax, in this case to continue the 100 Years War against the French, a local protest in an Essex village spread rapidly, culminating in a march of over 100,000 serfs to London to demand the tax be abolished. It eventually was abolished but not before the young King Richard II decapitated the uprising, both literally and metaphorically. However, this revolt is a good starting point for two reasons. Firstly, by the end of the fourteenth century in England, feudalism was already moving towards agrarian capitalism, that is an agricultural economy in which monetary exchange was replacing feudal obligation. The landowners were beginning to realise that contractual agreements were more efficient in exploiting their lands than the 'servile tenure' of traditional Norman feudalism which obliged the serf to work when the lord demanded. Increasingly, forced labour from recalcitrant serfs was replaced by a 'new lease-hold money system'² whereby landowners rented out strips of land to tenant farmers and used this rent to hire agricultural labourers to farm his estate. To a certain, limited extent this produced a 'win-win' situation for landowners and the landless whereby the former had more reliable workers and the latter had a certain, very small, amount of freedom which they could use to better their positions.³ Unsurprisingly, in the long run, the lords won a lot more than the peasants as this new relationship also set in train a process of divorce between peasants and the land to which they were previously tied. It also weakened the social paternalism of the lord who had previously been seen to have a form of responsibility for the local community: 'the relationship between land ownership and the interests of the community that had begun to take root in the fourteenth century gradually became obscured as land became to be treated as a form of capital.'⁴

Secondly, there still existed at this time a system of common land and commoners' rights which dated back to the pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon society. These rights included grazing rights on common land, the right to collect wood and the rights of passage (i.e., footpaths) over private land. They represented a form of safety net for the destitute who often squatted and survived on common land resources. But it was not only those most in need who benefited, as a commoner was anyone 'from the richest tenants and the largest yeomen in a parish down to its poorest inhabitants'.⁵ So this system allowed all social classes to take advantage of the vast areas considered to be 'common land'. This safety net of collective land, however, would not last long.

GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION⁶

The movement towards the capitalisation of land in England soon came up against the obstacle represented by common land and common rights. The solution the landowners adopted was to fence off these areas, enabling themselves to increase their private property, rationalise production and increase farm yields. This was the *enclosure* movement, as it became known, which in reality was a dual process of inclusion and exclusion: *inclusion* of formerly common land into the private estates of the landowners and *exclusion* of the people, many of whose livelihoods depended on access to this common land. This movement began sporadically in the thirteenth century, but the first real wave was in the fourteenth century with the rise of the Flemish wool trade. The demand for wool was such that English farmers needed far more space for sheep grazing and, most importantly, to fence this space off so the sheep could roam freely without escaping. Economics was not, however, the only justification for enclosures; there were also cultural ones, which became apparent during the sixteenth century as nobility enclosed lands to transform them into elaborate gardens for their estates. Subsequently, industrialisation created huge needs for both food and manpower, both of which could be provided with agricultural modernisation and the masses of unemployed agricultural labourers who drifted into the insalubrious towns. These landless labourers and tenant farmers were the real victims of a raft of legislation that, in large part, was pushed through Parliament by the MP landowners themselves. During the period 1750–1850, 500 Enclosure Acts were passed.⁷

OPPOSITION

During the seventeenth century, rural political protest increased in England with the spread of dissenting, radical ideas. The Diggers, in particular, were a group advocating land reform and castigating, as they saw it, the theft of the English countryside in the form of enclosure. Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley, put it bluntly:

The power of enclosing land and owning property was brought into creation by your ancestors by the sword; which first did murder their fellow creatures, men, and after plunder or steal away their land, and left this land successively to you, their children. And, therefore, though you did not kill or thieve, yet you hold that cursed thing in your hand by the power of the sword.⁸

Winstanley proposed that his ‘diggers’ dig up commons land around the country in order to grow their own food, in defiance of the enclosures taking place. They went down in history when one group of Diggers set up camp on St George’s Hill commons, near Walton-on-Thames, in Surrey, and began to dig up the land and plant vegetables. They were soon chased away but Winstanley’s influence spread around the country with the numerous pamphlets he wrote, in which he targeted private property as the origin of society’s ills. He put forward a utopian vision ‘without class distinctions, property or money, in which land was exploited communally’⁹ and, moreover, he practiced what he preached. In retrospect, the Diggers can be seen as the first in a line of land reformers whose point of departure was the enclosures, viewed as a confiscation of the land by the landowning classes who, in so doing, created a new class of the dispossessed, long before the arrival of the working class:

The enclosures created a new organisation of classes. The peasant with rights and a status, with a share in the fortunes and government of his village, standing in rags, but, standing on his feet, makes way for the labourer with no corporate rights to defend, no corporate power to invoke, no property to cherish, no ambition to pursue, bent beneath the fear of his masters, and the weight of a future without hope. No class in the world has so beaten and crouching a history.¹⁰

The struggle to win back public access to that privatised land goes on to this day.

Subsequently, local protests against enclosures were a constant feature of English society but they didn't pose a political threat to the landowning elite and were relatively easy to put down. The last major rural riots in England took place in 1830. The so-called Swing Riots were centred on the threat of mechanical harvesters to the employment of agricultural labourers, but the background of resentment to enclosure was evident in many of the midland and southern counties involved:

At Benson or Bensington, in Oxfordshire, the labourers, after destroying some threshing machines, made a demonstration against a proposal for enclosure. Mr. Newton, a large proprietor, had just made one of many unsuccessful attempts to obtain an Enclosure Act for the parish. Some thousand persons assembled in the churchyard expecting that Mr. Newton would try to fix the notice on the church door, but as he did not venture to appear, they proceeded to his house, and made him promise never again to attempt to obtain an Enclosure Act. (*Oxford University and City Herald*, November 20 and 27, 1830)¹¹

ACCESS TO THE LAND

At the height of the Industrial Revolution, access to the countryside in England became the object of much conflict. The reasons for this access and the actors involved in the conflict differed considerably however; from the struggle of the workers to be able to walk freely in rural spaces outside the stifling industrial towns to the struggle of the rural elites to prevent this same social group from entering their rural havens, the question of social class loomed large. This conflict is best illustrated in the two famous examples of the Peak District and the Lake District, both areas situated in the north of England.

The origins of the modern environmental movement are often seen in the creation of the Commons Preservation Society (CPS) in 1865 and, in many ways, in its fight to preserve green spaces inside the industrial towns, it was attempting to bring the countryside into the squalid urban spaces of nineteenth-century England. It was also fighting a similar battle to that of the landless of rural society in its drive to protect public spaces being swept away by private economic development. What is perhaps less well known is that the struggle for rights of way in the English countryside, which was part of the overall opposition to enclosures, had already been picked up at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the rise of footpath and rambling groups all over England (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Early footpath and rambling organisations

1824	York Association for the Protection of Footpaths
1826	Manchester Association for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths
1856	The Keswick and District Footpaths Association
1856	Burnley Footpath Committee
1866	Preston Footpath Association
1866	Carr Hill Road Defense Committee (Nelson, Lancashire)
1866	Bank Top Footpath Association (Blackburn)
1876	Hayfield and Kinder Scout Ancient Footpaths Association
1890s	Liverpool Hobnailers
1894	Blackburn and District Ancient Footpaths Association
1894	The Peak District and Northern counties Footpaths Preservation Society
1894	Midland Institute of Ramblers
1897	Co-operative Holidays Association
1900	Sheffield Clarion Ramblers

Source T.C. Smout, *Nature Contested. Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600*, Edinburgh: EUP, 2000, pp. 108–109.

The spatialisation of these groups had geographical and socio-political dimensions. Geographically, they were principally located in the north of England, reflecting the industrial setting of the majority of these rambling clubs. They were also strong in areas close to big towns where there were hills to walk on, and later, to cycle on. Socially, they represented the desire and the need for the urban workers to get out of the insalubrious cities at the weekends. Up to the 1860s, the only day available to do this was Sunday, and taking part in leisure activities on the day of the Lord was looked down on by most Christian organisations. This didn't stop many secular and/or left-wing rambling groups from organising walks on Sunday, as illustrated in the well-known folk song, *The Manchester Rambler*.

The lyrics of this song give clues as to the motivations of the ramblers.¹² Firstly, in the refrain, the need for factory 'slaves' to get some fresh air and feel the freedom of the mountains on Sundays after a long working week is clear. Secondly, equally clear is the political dimension represented by the raw class conflict between the upper class landowners' blood sport leisure activity (grouse shooting on the Peak District moors) and the lower class' need for some open space and fresh air. While the landowner claims the land, the Rambler feels that 'No man has the right to own mountains/Any more than the deep ocean bed.' The third clue is in the nature-loving tradition, so strong in England that it gives the

rambler his sense of belonging, 'Where the grey rock rise rugged and steep/.../ And the curlew flies high over head'.

THE PEAK DISTRICT

The *Manchester Rambler* was written following a mediatised, mass trespass organised in 1932 by the British Workers Sports Federation (a branch of the Young Communist League) on the Kinder Scout area of what is today the Peak District National Park. In particular, the rambles wanted access to an ancient right of way linking Hayfield Village to the Woodlands Valley.¹³

The problem was that this meant crossing private grouse moors and, eventually, the walkers came face to face with gamekeepers and the police. There were some scuffles and six arrests. In a subsequent report on the trespass by the Sheffield Branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, it was discovered that '[of] the seventeen private owners, seven were aristocrats, two were army officers and eight were industrialists'.¹⁴ This 1932 protest was part of a long-running conflict reaching back to the nineteenth century for access to the most beautiful views in the Peak District. It was a particularly acute conflict given the socio-political geography of the area. Firstly, because the Peak District had been less enclosed than many areas in the Midlands and the South: only 5–10% of the common and waste land and c.25% of its open-field arable land.¹⁵ Secondly, because it was surrounded by important industrial towns, full of workers who were attracted by its proximity:

The working class from the nearby towns looked to the open moorland for its peace and quietness, as a place to walk, climb, and look at the views. The moors became the site of a symbolic contestation over citizenship by those whose labour was the raw fuel of the manufacturing industries, but who were denied a vote in the political life of the nation.¹⁶

The question of access to rights of way in the Peak District, therefore, was a stark political class conflict between the new working classes and the large aristocratic and gentrified landowners. The situation in the Lake District was a different one.

THE LAKE DISTRICT

While the Peak District was in the throes of access to land protests, the Lake District had its own, more gentlemanly form of dissent, which manifested itself in two campaigns. The Lake District (or Lakes, as they are sometimes called) is an area in the north-west of England, close to the Scottish border. It has become famous for its spectacular landscape of mountains, lakes and valleys and is today a popular holiday resort. In the nineteenth century, it was treasured as a place of natural beauty and frequented by an artistic elite made up of poets, writers and painters. The most famous of this elite was undoubtedly the English poet William Wordsworth who was to become one of its most ardent defenders and whose name has become virtually synonymous with the area. Wordsworth, and his sister Dorothy who lived with him for long periods of his life, considered the Lake District a national treasure which needed defending, as 'a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy'.¹⁷ However, the defence of this 'national property' did not seem to possess the same democratic dimension that was at the core of the Peak District campaigns for access.

In latter half of the nineteenth century, the Lake District was opening up to the outside world, which was not to everyone's liking. In 1844 for example, Wordsworth threw his considerable weight behind a protest campaign against the construction of a railway line between Kendal and Windemere; indeed, he was one of its leaders.¹⁸

He was poet laureate at the time and he even wrote a poem expanding on his reasons. He was scandalised by the consequences of this project for two reasons. Firstly, because he believed a railway would bring too many people into the Lake District and this would be damaging for the natural environment, and secondly, because the type of people who would come should not be there in the first place; that is, these would be people who were not capable of appreciating the beauty of the region given that 'a vivid perception of romantic scenery is neither inherent in mankind, nor a necessary consequence of even a comprehensive education'.¹⁹ Wordsworth's objection was seen as an elitist protection of privilege against the right of working-class tourists to have a day out in the country and, just in case his message was unclear, his sister Dorothy was even more direct in her reply to this argument that a railway would allow

workers to come into the countryside: '[A] greenfield with buttercups would answer all the purposes of the Lancashire operatives.'²⁰

The response to the Wordsworths' fears was later given by the Board of Trade (1845):

We must therefore state that an argument which goes to deprive the artisan of the offered means of occasionally changing his narrow abode, his crowded streets, his wearisome task and unwholesome toil, for the fresh air, and the healthful holiday which sends him back to his work refreshed and invigorated—simply that individuals who object on the grounds above stated may retain to themselves the exclusive enjoyment of scenes which should be open alike to all, provided the enjoyment of them shall not involve the infringement of private rights, appears to us to be an argument wholly untenable....²¹

The second threat to the Lake District came in the form of a project to build a reservoir at Thirlmere in 1877 to meet the water needs of Manchester. Here was the first test case in England between an organised protest group and a local authority (Manchester Corporation) battling over a public project seen as detrimental to the environment. It was an environmental protest which mixed localism, nationalism, identity and social class. By the time the Thirlmere Defence Association (TDA) was created in 1877, Wordsworth had been dead for 27 years but his shadow hovered over the whole campaign to reject this new threat to his beloved Lake District. The TDA was initially made up of the c.50 property owners who would be affected, but it soon received support from well beyond local residents, reaching from England to the rest of the Empire.²² Many of the imperial ex-patriots articulated the sense of identity loss they would feel if the project went ahead, which reflected the association of the Lake District with the English rural myth. As for the dimension of social class, this protest campaign was a long way from that of the Peak District ramblers:

Promoted by local notables Robert Somervell, a Lake District publisher; John Harward, a landowner at Grasmere; and the Bishop of Carlisle, the TDA was supported by academics, aristocratic landowners, nationally known public figures such as Ruskin and Carlyle, and the Commons society.²³

The social composition of the TDA protesters and its supporters was clearly more elevated than that of the Peak District ramblers, and

although the social class dimension in each of these protests was clearly present, it played different roles. During the Thirlmere reservoir campaign, the protesters used their (landowners') privilege to try and keep the urban masses away from what they considered to be their rural space.²⁴ During the Peak District protest, the boot was on the other foot with the working-class ramblers scaling the heights of social privilege by forcing access to the privatised land reserved for grouse shooting.

CONTEMPORARY PROTEST

When commentators talk of 'rural protest' nowadays they will probably be referring to the three large 'Countryside Marches' between 1997 and 2002.²⁵ When New Labour won the general election in 1997, many countryside leaders were worried by the promises the new prime minister, Tony Blair, had made during the electoral campaign, two of which stood out: the potential ban on hunting with dogs and the 'right to roam'. The concern over the intentions of the new government was sufficient for rural leaders to begin organising a preventive riposte. In 1995, the Countryside Movement (CM) was founded with former Liberal Party leader David Steel at its head. Two years later, its membership had reached c.100,000, and it joined forces with two other rural organisations—the British Fields Sport Society and the Countryside Business Group—to form the Countryside Alliance (CA). In July of the same year, it organised its first national demonstration, drawing over 100,000 into the streets of London.²⁶ This event, coming 2 months after the election of New Labour and the threat of a Bill to legislate hunting, was clearly targeted on the upcoming Private Member's Bill of Labour MP Michael Forster to ban hunting with dogs. The following year, the CA brought twice as many demonstrators onto the streets (250,000).²⁷ This march was still targeting the hunting bill but was trying to move the focus onto wider 'rural concerns' such as farmers' incomes and the right to roam. In 2000, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) was enacted,²⁸ widely extending the areas open to walkers around the country and increasing the fears of rural landowners that their land would be damaged.

In 2001, a serious outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease occurred: 'In total, almost 6.5m animals were slaughtered, making this the largest slaughter of its kind in history. According to the National Audit Office, the crisis cost an estimated £8 billion.'²⁹ This outbreak caused the 'shutting down' of the countryside for several months, which affected the

wider rural economy (e.g., the tourist industry) and caused much criticism of the farming sector, seen as responsible for the crisis. The upshot of these different events since 1997 was that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, different parts of rural England felt somewhat misunderstood, under siege even, by ‘urban England’, especially following the foot-and-mouth episode. The CA march of 2002 managed to channel this rural anxiety into a massive demonstration (between 300,000 and 400,000 people)³⁰ on a platform of even wider-ranging concerns affecting rural society (e.g., hunting, unemployment, public service closures):

The notion of a ‘rural-urban divide’ has assisted the growth of the Countryside Alliance and mobilized participation in the Countryside Rally, Countryside March and the Liberty and Livelihood March.³¹

These large demonstrations and, more generally, the mediatisation of rural matters came as a surprise to most urban people in England.³² But why was it such a surprise and who were these demonstrators?

THE AGRICULTURAL SETTLEMENT

The background to these protests helps us to understand the size of them. It begins in the immediate post-war period with two pieces of 1947 legislation: the Agriculture Act and the Town and Country Planning Act, both of which were passed in an atmosphere of fear and hope—fear of food shortages and hope for a better society. The Agriculture Act, for example, was intended to create:

a stable and efficient agricultural industry capable of producing such part of the nation’s food and other agricultural produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom, and of producing it at minimum prices consistently with proper remuneration and living conditions for farmers and workers in agriculture and an adequate return on capital invested in the industry.³³

The Town and Country Planning Act, as its name suggests, was a wide-ranging piece of legislation, regulating urban and rural spaces. It was especially important for the question of rural spaces because of the freedom it gave to the agricultural sector in terms of landscape management. This was because it exempted farmers from many of the planning controls which this Act brought in: ‘the Town and Country Planning

Act 1947 largely excluded farming from planning controls and farms were also exempt from paying rates.³⁴ These two pieces of legislation incarnated the English version of what Adam Sheingate later termed the 'Agricultural Welfare State', that is a system of guaranteed State subsidies acting as a 'safety net designed to protect farmers' incomes'.³⁵

The first consequence of this legislation was the strengthening of a rural policy community that had already been in place since the 1920s and which was limited to three principal actors: the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAAF) officials, the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the landowners union Country Landowners Association (CLA). This closely knit policy community was left a free hand to organise rural spaces in the interests of the large farmers and the landowners.

... by the third decade of the twentieth century a division of labour had emerged in British rural politics that was to endure for the next seventy years – between a process of *external representation*, that was the domain of farm unions, business associations and pressure groups operating within exclusive policy communities, and a process of *internal governance*, dominated by land-owning and agricultural elites and their allies.³⁶

According to M. Woods, in the developed world as a whole, this dual structure produced a form of rural governance which was both fragmented and stable. It was fragmented because:

'Rural interests' could be dealt with on a sector-by-sector basis. There was no need to develop an integrated rural policy, and no one government department, minister or agency was entrusted with an overarching responsibility for rural areas.³⁷

It was also stable in that this agricultural model had the backing of the state through guaranteed subsidies and functioned successfully for most of the post-war period, from an economic point of view at least. Rural space became defined as, and restricted to resource industries; namely the production of food resources (agriculture) and the management and extraction of natural resources (fishing, forestry, mining), and the principal aim of these resource industries was *productionism*, that is maximising production via intensive agriculture. However, in Britain, this agricultural model began to reach its limits in the 1980s for a range of social, political, economic and environmental reasons.

DECLINE OF THE FARMING LOBBY³⁸

The fact that the 1980s are often cited as the decline of this agricultural model is a reflection of the crisis Britain went through in the preceding decade. The welfare ‘consensus’³⁹ was breaking down in the face of social and economic problems, and M. Thatcher’s free-market Britain was on the drawing board, waiting for the right moment. This moment came in May 1979, and the neoliberal decade which followed fundamentally weakened the corporatist state of the consensus period. M. Thatcher may well have had ‘sympathy for farmers’,⁴⁰ considering them to be the ‘backbone of society’,⁴¹ but the ‘privileged position of the farmers was bound to sit uneasily with the antipathy of these governments both to subsidies and to corporatist relationships with interest groups.’⁴² It seems clear that, compared to the significant deindustrialisation of Britain in the 1980s, the agricultural sector fared relatively well, and has continued to do so as Wyn Grant observed in 2005: ‘farmers continue to be more heavily subsidised and protected than any other group in society.’⁴³ However, what has changed is the relative power of the farming lobby.

One of the main reasons for what J. McCormick terms the ‘decline of the farming lobby’⁴⁴ was the increasingly visible conflict between the CLA and the NFU on the one hand, and the growing environmentalist lobby on the other. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the effects of agricultural practices on landscape and wildlife had become a concern not only to environmentalist groups⁴⁵ but also to governmental bodies such as the Countryside Commission.⁴⁶ This conflict came to a head with the passing in 1981 ‘of the most important piece of countryside legislation for 32 years’,⁴⁷ namely the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The conflict centred on the possibility of regulating ‘the environmental impact of agricultural development’—as per the wishes of the environmentalists—or maintain the traditional ‘voluntary co-operation of the farming community’⁴⁸ in protecting the natural environment, the favoured solution of the CLA and the NFU. To all intents and purposes, the farming lobby won this battle but the long-term consequence was equally significant in that this legislation politicised the formerly apolitical issue of the countryside and revealed the extent and potential power of the burgeoning environmentalist lobby in Britain.

Since this legislation, the environmentalist movement has continued to grow both in numbers and political influence,⁴⁹ and public opinion on the role and effects of intensive agriculture has also evolved. Several food

scares since the 1980s, particularly the epidemics of BSE (1986–c.2000)⁵⁰ and foot-and-mouth disease (2001),⁵¹ increased public suspicion over agricultural practices as did the rising concerns over pollution from farming, especially water pollution. Moreover, consumer organisations and the media have opened up the public gaze onto a sector which up until the 1980s was of little interest to people living outside rural areas.

The traditional power structure within rural society has also been weakened by the profound sociological and economic changes which have taken place since the end of the war. The dependence on agriculture, for example, has declined considerably. Between 1950 and 2000, the rural population dependent on agriculture was halved (Table 2.2), falling to just under 17%. This declining dependence on the traditional employment base was also reflected in corresponding changes in the types of employment (Table 2.3).

Table 2.2 British rural population dependent on agriculture

1950	34.6%
1970	24.3%
1990	19.6%
2000	16.8%

Source Michael Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2005, p. 15 (adapted).

Table 2.3 Employment in non-metropolitan districts^a of England and Wales, 1951 and 1991

<i>Sector</i>	<i>1951 (%)</i>	<i>1991 (%)</i>	<i>Change (%)</i>
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	9	3	–6
Manufacturing	32	19	–13
Services	27	38	+11
Distribution	11	21	+10
Mining and quarrying	7	3	–4
Construction	7	8	+1
Transport	6	6	=
Energy and water	1	2	+1

^aDefined as all of England and Wales, excluding the seven major conurbations and twelve largest free-standing cities

Source Census of Population, 1951 and 1991 in M. Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, op. cit., p. 16.

Table 2.4 Population change in rural and urban districts of England

	1981–1991 (%)	1991–2001 (%)	1981–2001 (%)
Rural districts	+7.1	+4.9	+12.4
Urban districts	+1.4	+0.9	+2.4
England total	+3.0	+2.0	+5.0

Source Countryside Agency, *The State of the Countryside*, 2003 in M. Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, op. cit., p. 16.

Table 2.5 Age differences in rural and urban England (2001)

	Age	Population (%)
Rural	15–44	37.3
	+65	18.1
Urban	15–44	43.2
	+65	15

Source M. Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, op. cit., p. 16 (adapted).

At the same time, rural demographics have changed also in large part due to ‘counterurbanisation’, that is a population shift from the towns to the countryside (Table 2.4).

This population shift has also increased the average age of many rural communities (Table 2.5).

These different factors taken together have changed the stable, ‘productionist paradigm’⁵² of rural Britain in a relatively short space of time. The English countryside is no longer synonymous with agriculture, just as agriculture is no longer synonymous with the ‘rural idyll’ of ‘England’s green and pleasant land’.⁵³ New social groups, increasingly in-migrants from urban areas and working in sectors other than agriculture, have changed the face of many rural communities. Moreover, the in-migrants and the ‘locals’ do not necessarily share the same rural values or the same vision of what rural society should look like, and these new arrivals may also be less deferential than local people in terms of accepting traditional authority structures. They have also been involved in protest when, for example, the level of public services in rural communities started to decline, as it has done in recent years, in relation to those in urban areas⁵⁴ (e.g., post office and school closures, transport cuts, etc.). This decline has regularly produced ad hoc protests and campaigns. Taken together, these sociological, economic, political and environmental changes in the English countryside could go towards explaining the sense of foreboding

for many rural people who identified with the sheltered and perhaps more comfortable ‘Agricultural Welfare State’ which has all but disappeared. They also helped fuel the rural grievances ahead of the CA mobilisations.

MARCHING IN ALLIANCE?

The focus of the three aforementioned countryside marches was initially on the defence of countryside sports (i.e., hunting with dogs) but progressively moved on to the theme of inequality of treatment between rural and urban England. The press gave the impression of a ‘nationwide movement’⁵⁵ with *The Daily Telegraph* suggesting that it was a march which cut across class barriers and, by extension, political parties: ‘Pack instinct cuts across class barriers to preserve way of life’, claimed one of its article headlines.⁵⁶ The reality was somewhat different as subsequent polling surveys revealed.

In 1998, Ipsos Mori released the results of a poll taken during the 1997 Countryside Rally and it was discovered that a majority of the marchers were in the upper social class bracket: ‘47% of marchers were in the AB class group (professional/managerial), and 35% in the C1 (clerical) group. Only 5% came from the DE group.’⁵⁷ In 2002, a similar survey of the Liberty and Livelihood March showed that the percentage of the AB group was even higher (Table 2.6).

Table 2.6 Social class of marchers (2002)

<i>Social class</i>	<i>% at march</i>	<i>% across rural areas</i>
AB	52	25
C1	27	19
C2	16	31
DE	4	25

Source Ipsos MORI, *The Countryside March Survey*, 23 September 2002.

Table 2.7 Where marchers lived (1997/2002)

	<i>1997</i>	<i>2002 (%)</i>
Urban (middle of town, city or in suburb)	20%	25
Edge of the countryside	22%	27
In the middle of the countryside	ND	47

Source Ipsos MORI, op. cit., 2002 and *The Countryside March—Who Was Really There?* March 1998.

Table 2.8 Political party marchers 'most inclined to support' (1997/2002)

	1997 (%)	2002 (%)
Conservative Party	79	82
Liberal Democrats	10	9
Labour Party	7	4

Source Ipsos MORI, op. cit., 2002; Ipsos MORI, op. cit., 1998.

Table 2.9 Newspapers read by surveyed Countryside Alliance members ($n = 1207$)

The Daily Telegraph	50.3%
The Times	16.5%
The Daily Mail	15.6%
Financial Times	3.4%
Daily Express	3.0%
Racing Post	1.9%
The Sun	1.7%
The Guardian	1.0%
The Independent	1.0%
The Mirror	0.9%

Source M Woods, 'Reporting an Unsettled Countryside', op. cit., p. 238.

These surveys also revealed that not all of the marchers lived in the countryside (Table 2.7).

The political sympathies of the marchers were also less widely spread across the political spectrum than some press reports suggested and, once again, the 2002 results were even starker than those of the 1997 march (Table 2.8).

These political results were corroborated by M. Woods in his research on the role of the media in rural protest. When broaching the question of newspapers read by the CA members, he discovered that whereas a sizeable majority read a right-wing newspaper, barely 3% read a liberal-left wing paper (Table 2.9).

Clearly, the profile of the average 'countryside' marcher was far from the image portrayed by certain sections of the media. By 2002, s/he was likely to be an upper class, Conservative Party supporter who read *The Daily Telegraph*.

CONCLUSION

In this article we set out by questioning the myth of the 'rural idyll', which presents the English countryside as 'a timeless haven of tradition and social stability'. We have shown that behind this idealistic cliché,

rural protest has long been a feature of rural society. From the beginning of the enclosure movement to the recent countryside marches, different readings and representations of rural spaces have clashed with varying outcomes. Regarding enclosures, the landed elite quite clearly won out over any protest the commoners could muster. During the Middle Ages, the imbalance of power between rich and poor was such that no other outcome was feasible, although that didn't prevent protests from taking place. Even towards the end of the enclosure movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the local authority of the lord and squire was often enough to see through enclosure plans and if it wasn't, Parliament, largely controlled by the landed elite up to the 1880s,⁵⁸ did the rest.

With regard to more recent rural protests, the countryside rally of 1997 showed that although the landed elite is not what it was in the nineteenth century, it could still manage to bring thousands of people onto the streets of London to defend a traditional, aristocratic blood sport. Moreover, the objective of the Countryside Alliance, in this march in particular, seemed to be to maintain the status quo of rural spaces, and of hunting in particular and, in this respect, can be traced back to their predecessors of the nineteenth century defending grouse shooting in the Peak District. However, as we have also seen, there have been major shifts in the make-up of rural spaces over the last 40 years, the combination of which, following the food scares of the 1990s in particular, could also help to explain the outburst of protests at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Throughout the different periods we have considered, two interrelated features of English society stand out and help to explain the prevalence of rural protest. The first is the power of landed interests bolstered by the liberal tradition. The privatisation of the commons that enclosure represents, aided and abetted firstly by the Crown and subsequently by Parliament, was justified, over time, by the principle of private property, regardless of how that property was acquired. The rambling clubs of the industrial North in practising their leisure activity were, by definition, protesting against the exclusion that stemmed from these acquisitions. The second, corollary feature is the importance of social class, a constant feature of English society since the Industrial Revolution. As we have seen, struggle for access to the countryside was fought in class terms in the Peak District and the Lake District. Interestingly, in both these cases, the attempts to limit access to ramblers and working-class tourists were, ultimately, failures. The creation of the Peak District National Park (April

1951), the first National Park in the UK, opened up the walking paths which were previously out of bounds. Likewise, the opening of the Lake District National Park, 4 months later (August 1951), was the beginning of a major tourist attraction.

NOTES

1. Countryside Rally, July 1997; Countryside March, March 1998; Liberty and Livelihood March, September 2002.
2. G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* [1942], London: Penguin, 1986, p. 72.
3. This was the case in the post Black Death (1348–1350) period when agricultural labour was in great demand and, therefore, well paid. It is estimated that the Black Death killed between a third and a half of the English population (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item103973.html>). Trevelyan (*English Social History*, op. cit., p. 78) considers that, overall, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were favourable periods for peasants in that there was a ‘glut in land’, raising the price of farm labour.
4. Marion Shoard, *This Land is our Land* [1987], London: Gaia Books, 1997, p. 29.
5. Ibid., p. 25.
6. Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity: Geography of Nation and Class in England*, Oxford: Berg, 2000, p. 107.
7. Matthew Cragoe, Briony McDonagh, ‘Parliamentary Enclosure, Vermin and the Cultural Life of English Parishes, 1750–1850’, *Continuity and Change*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2013, pp. 27–50.
8. Gerrard Winstanley (1609–1676) in Marion Shoard, *This Land is our Land*, op. cit., p. 37.
9. E.N. Williams, *Dictionary of English and European History*, London: Penguin, 1980, p. 117.
10. J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832: A Study in the Government of England before the Reform Bill*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920 (http://archive.org/stream/villagelabournew00hammuoft/villagelabournew00hammuoft_djvu.txt, accessed 20/8/15). See also: <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hammond/village.html>.
11. Ibid.
12. *The Manchester Rambler* was written by Ewan McColl, one of the giants of the English folk scene in the 1960s. He was also a left-wing political activist who was heavily involved in the campaign for access to the countryside and particularly the mountains. The lyrics can be found at: <http://www.kinglaoghaire.com/lyrics/586-the-manchester-rambler>.

13. See map in Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity*, op. cit., p. 129.
14. Ibid., p. 137.
15. Ibid., p. 128.
16. Ibid.
17. William Wordsworth, *The Illustrated Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes* (ed. Peter Bicknell), New York: Congdon and Weed, 1984, in Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009 (Edition Kindle).
18. In many ways, Wordsworth's opposition was what is today called 'Nimbyism', that is protest against a collective project on personal grounds. NIMBY ('Not in My Back Yard'): 'Opposition to the locating of something considered undesirable (as a prison or incinerator) in one's neighborhood' (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nimby>, accessed 20/8/15). See map at: <http://www.wordsworthcountry.com/maps.htm>.
19. <http://oldsite.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/unlocked/wordsworth/letters-on-railway.html>, accessed 20/8/15.
20. Harvey Taylor, *A Claim on the Countryside: A History of the British Outdoor Movement*, Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997, in T.C. Smout, *Nature Contested. Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 26.
21. <http://oldsite.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/unlocked/wordsworth/letters-on-railway.html>, accessed 20/8/15.
22. Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green*, op. cit. (Edition Kindle).
23. Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity*, op. cit., p. 152.
24. The promoters of the reservoir, on the other hand, played the 'class card' by pointing out how much the working classes of Manchester needed clean water (Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green*, op. cit.). This could be seen as a somewhat specious argument however as H. Ritvo also indicates that 'provision of internal water in working-class neighbourhoods did not become official policy for four more decades'.
25. This chapter does not include the radical environmentalist protests of rural Britain which we have dealt with elsewhere (see for instance Brendan Prendiville, 'Mouvements sociaux et politique routière dans la Grande-Bretagne des années 1990', in Christoph Bernhardt and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (ed.), *Le Démon moderne*, Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2002).
26. Marion Shoard, *This Land is our Land*, op. cit., p. xviii.
27. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/60845.stm, accessed 23/8/15.
28. This piece of legislation only came into operation in 2005 due to the time it took to map the open spaces around the UK open to walkers (<https://>

- www.google.fr/search?q=ramblers+crowandie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=crandei=dNzZVnZFMPkaNTZmMAJ, accessed 23/8/15).
29. A. Donaldson, R. Lee, N. Ward and K. Wilkinson, *Foot and Mouth—Five years On: The Legacy of the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease Crisis for Farming and the British Countryside*, Newcastle: Centre For Rural Economy, Discussion Paper Series No. 6, 2006 (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/publish/discussionpapers/pdfs/dp6.pdf>, accessed 23/8/15).
 30. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1407980/Thousands-march-for-countryside.html>, accessed 23/8/15.
 31. Michael Woods, *Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside*, Chap. 1: 'The Strange Awakening of Rural Britain', Farnham: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 1–22 (http://www.ashgate.com/pdf/SamplePages/Contesting_Rurality_Ch1.pdf, accessed 23/8/15). The 'rural–urban divide' in Britain is one in which one of the two sectors, normally the rural sector, feels disadvantaged in terms of a variety of principally socio-economic factors such as housing, employment, public services, etc., and considers the urban sector has a better standard of living. M. Wood is Professor of Human Geography at Aberystwyth University. His research specialities are in rural geography and political geography (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/iges/staff/academic-staff/zzp/>).
 32. 'In 2011, 81.5% (45.7 million) of the usually resident population of England and Wales lived in urban areas' (ONS, *2011 Census Analysis—Comparing Rural and Urban Areas of England and Wales*, 22 November 2013: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_337939.pdf, accessed 24/8/15).
 33. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/10-11/48/section/1>, accessed 24/8/15.
 34. Robert Garner, *Environmental Politics*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996, p. 159.
 35. A.D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 3, quoted in Michael Woods, 'Redefining the 'Rural Question': The New 'Politics of the Rural' and Social Policy', *Social Policy and Administration*, vol. 40, no. 6, December 2006, pp. 579–595. Sheingate was talking about the American agricultural lobby, but this term also fits what was happening in Britain.
 36. Michael Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, op. cit. (original emphasis). Since the abolition of the MAAF and the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2001, rural spaces have more institutional recognition of their diversity and specific problems.
 37. Michael Woods, 'Deconstructing rural protest: the emergence of a new social movement', *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, 2003, pp. 309–325 (<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.471.4641&ndrep=rep1&dtype=pdf>, accessed, 24/8/15).

38. In the English context, the 'Farming Lobby' is represented by the activities and influence of the NFU which, according to Robert Garner (*Environmental Politics*, op. cit., p. 158), has had a 'privileged position' in the formulation of agricultural policy since the Second World War (see above).
39. David Dutton, *British Politics since 1945: The Rise and Fall of Consensus*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1997 (2nd ed.).
40. David Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* Oxford: OUP, 1990, p. 267.
41. Wyn Grant, 'Agricultural Policy', in P. Dorey (ed.), *Developments in British Public Policy*, London: Sage, 2005, p. 16 (http://www.corwin.com/upm-data/9608_019990chap01.pdf, accessed, 24/8/15).
42. Robert Garner, *Environmental Politics*, op. cit., p. 161.
43. Wyn Grant, 'Agricultural Policy', op. cit., p. 23.
44. John McCormick, *British Politics and the Environment*, London: Earthscan, 1991, p. 78. The term 'farming lobby' is used here to include the NFU and the CLA. See also Graham Cox and Philip Lowe, 'Countryside Politics: Goodbye to Goodwill?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 54, 1983, pp. 268–282.
45. This concern was heightened with the English publication (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, criticising the effects of pesticides on landscape and wildlife. This was an American study but it 'prompted the question as to how far Britain, prior to *Silent Spring*, had achieved the higher productivity that came through the use of agricultural chemicals without risk to human health and the wider environment' (John Sheail, *An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Publishers, 2002, p. 236).
46. Countryside Commission, *New Agricultural Landscapes*, London: HMSO, in John Sheail, *An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain*, op. cit., p. 154.
47. Parliamentary debate over the Bill lasted 11 months with 2300 amendments (Graham Cox and Philip Lowe, 'Countryside Politics: Goodbye to Goodwill?', op. cit.).
48. Ibid.
49. See Brendan Prendiville, 'British Environmentalism: a party in movement?', in David Haigron (ed.), *The UK's Political Landscape in the 21st Century: Players, Strategies, Achievements*, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, XII-n 8, 2014 (<https://lisa.revues.org/7119?lang=fr>, accessed July 2016).
50. 'In Britain, the epicentre of the outbreak, there were 184,500 confirmed cases of BSE between 1993 and 2010. The numbers have been

- dropping, from 1443 in 2000, to 225 in 2005, and 11 cases in 2010' (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/quick-facts-about-mad-cow-disease-1.1134991>, accessed 28/8/15).
51. This outbreak lasted 8 months. Over 6m animals were slaughtered, and the cost of the outbreak was estimated at over £8m by the National Audit Office (public sector: + £3b/ private sector: + £5b; <http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2002/06/0102939.pdf>, accessed 28/8/15).
 52. Wyn Grant, 'Agricultural Policy', op. cit., p. 7. In the same chapter, W. Grant describes the "productionist" policy paradigm [as one] which emphasized the maximization of domestic production in the interests of food security, a goal that it was thought required and justified the payment of considerable subsidies to farmers'.
 53. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-new-jerusalem/>, accessed 29/8/15.
 54. There have been many local campaigns in rural areas against the social inequalities between rural and urban spaces. On this inequality, see <http://www.acre.org.uk/cms/resources/afairdealforruralcommunities-mainreport3-1.pdf> (2012), accessed 20/8/15. See also Michael Woods, 'Redefining the "Rural Question": The New "Politics of the Rural" and Social Policy', op. cit.
 55. Michael Woods, 'Reporting an Unsettled Countryside: The News Media and Rural Protests in Britain', *Culture Unbound*, vol. 2, 2010, pp. 215–239 (<http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se>).
 56. *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 1997, quoted in ibid., p. 225.
 57. <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2014/The-Countryside-March-Who-Was-Really-There.aspx>, accessed 30/8/15.
 58. 'In 1874, 209 MPs were landowners and rentiers compared to 157 from commerce and industry. By 1880, the balance had shifted decisively with 259 industrialists to 125 landowners and rentiers' (Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy: England 1868–1914*, London: Longman, 1994, quoted in Philip W. Sutton, *Explaining Environmentalism: In Search of a New Social Movement*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, p. 94).

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The English Countryside
Representations, Identities, Mutations
Haigron, D. (Ed.)
2017, X, 273 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-53272-1