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Title of extract: **Thinking About Places**

Name of Author: **Trubshaw, R.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Sacred Places. Trubshaw, R.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Albion**

Pages scanned: **1 - 23**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Sacred Geography AHAN7006**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

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Date authorised: 04.05.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

1: Thinking about places

We are never conscious of things in their true nature, only of the excerpts we make of them.

Jaynes 1976

The landscape is not seen for itself, but as a commentary upon the human condition, as a speculation upon the tension between order and disorder.'
J.M.W. Turner

A richness of meanings

Words such as 'nature', 'landscape', 'country', 'countryside', 'rural', 'urban', 'place', 'space', 'vista', 'route' and 'map' are used in everyday speech without much thought as to their exact meanings, the distinctions between them, and still less to their origins. Yet each of these words relates to complex interwoven ideas rarely recognised in their everyday usage. Academics might be tempted to say that these words are 'problematical', but that has an undesirable negativity. Instead let us put a positive spin on them and think about their 'richness of meanings'.

What is the difference between a 'space' and a 'place', for instance? Whereas space is an abstract analytical concept, place is somewhere specific and tangible. We relate to physical places in a way that we cannot to abstract notions of space. Whereas 'space' is more about what is conceived and thought about, 'place' is what is perceived and lived in. The modern mind might think of space as being a broader concept into which places are situated. However a little thought reveals that humans have had a sense of place long before the more abstract concept of space. An understanding of place must precede the idea of space. Whereas we can conceptualise an empty space, the idea of an empty place suggests only where no people are present, but is otherwise physically present.

Places are not simply physical. They have meaning and significance, which are conveyed in myths and legends, and possibly in ritual activities. Certain places gain importance from promises made during rituals there, so that in future they are increasingly appropriate for ritual activities – whether celebrating New Year at Trafalgar Square, or for 'rites of passage' at a church or prehistoric stone circle.

Places mean different things to different people, and perhaps even different things at different times. Places are the venues where we live out our lives, and as such places range from entirely secular to entirely sacred, with plenty of variation in between. We live out our lives in such places as houses, shops, pubs, parks, fields, woods,

prehistoric sites and churches. Specific examples of each of these types of places may have more significance than others, and each type of place – and each specific place – can change in significance over time.

Modern sense of place has been greatly diluted by people spending so much time in dehumanised places – what might be termed 'architectural spaces' – such as supermarkets, shopping malls, office blocks, hotels, railway and tube stations, airports, and motorways. While they are places they do not have the depth of meanings that are typically associated with traditional notions of place and have only rather negatively-valued meanings (Douglas Adams wittily noted 'It is no coincidence that in no known language does the phrase "As pretty as an airport" appear.'). Even our own homes are becoming less like specific places as we spend more time watching TV or in front of a computer – physically 'at home' but mentally elsewhere.

Meaning and memory

Places have significance to us because they have 'meaning'. That meaning needs to be, in some way, retained and remembered. Simon Schama's study of place and memory (Schama 1995) looked in breadth and depth at the complexities of how cultures create and remember meanings for significant places.

However such 'remembering' also takes place at quite mundane and everyday levels too. For example, the 'meaning' of a place is often summarised in the name we give to the place. The study of place names is far more than unravelling the complex changes to spelling and derivation of the original terminology. It is also more than relating places to the topography, even though a great number of British place names incorporate subtle descriptions of the terrain.

No place name is arbitrary. No matter how little of the original meaning has been remembered, all names link into a society's associations, people and stories. Within a few miles of where I sit writing this the place-names encapsulate the otherwise lost ideas of Anglo-Saxon people living about 1,200 years ago. There is Walton (which translates as 'native British settlement'), Dalby ('the settlement in the dale'), Willoughby ('the settlement in the willow trees'), Hoton ('the settlement on the heel-shaped hill'), Wymeswold ('Wygmond's wold' i.e. woodland with fields), Prestwold ('the priest's wold') and Burton ('the fortified garrison' – created later to defend against Viking attacks). Eighteenth century antiquarians identified the site of a Roman town known as Vernemetum, which means 'Especially Sacred Grove' and presumably refers to a late Iron Age ritual site which has left no visible evidence and has never been excavated by archaeologists.

Sometimes places are given additional significance by being linked with legends or myths. In northern Europe stories giving significance to sacred places rarely emphasise a transcendental presence, a 'spirit of place' or *genius loci*, although these are common in Classical Mediterranean cultures. Even if these legends are *post hoc* explanations (as, for example, when prehistoric or Anglo-Saxon ditches become called the 'Devil's Dyke') they add to the associations of a specific place. By adding a vivid narrative, place-related memories materialise as myths.

Our sense of places exists in the interplay between physical topography and 'mindscapes' conveyed in legends and myths. The meaning of a place needs to be passed on in the form of story or narrative, even if this has become 'fossilised' or shrunk to merely the name of the place whose original significance is lost or largely unknown. Places, like all other aspects of culture, only have significance by providing them with 'narratives of meaning'. Much of the rest of this book explores different aspects of such narratives, whether they be traditional folklore, academics' belief systems about the past, or modern pagan beliefs.

The meanings we give to a place may help to create the sense of belonging for a society and, intentionally or otherwise, exclude others from 'belonging' there. The meaning we attribute to places readily becomes political. Conversely, people who do not 'belong' – such as Gypsies and other travellers – have for centuries been despised by people who feel they belong somewhere. In many non-Western societies women leave the place of their birth and upbringing to live with their husbands. As some feminist writers have recognised, such women are far more 'placeless' than men.

In summary then, the significance of a place has less to do with the physical landscape than with the meanings we give to the location. More specifically, these meanings are remembered and sustained in the narratives we create about these places.

Places and routes

If we have 'places', what about all that lies between them? Do the places meet up? Are there intentional 'spaces' in between? Are places linked together, either conceptually or by routes? And if so, are 'routes' just another type of rather long and thin place, or are they something rather different from 'places', or indeed the 'space' they traverse?

And who travels these routes? Are they humdrum routes we use for commuting to work or popping to the shops? Are they deeply rooted in our history, whether made by eighteenth century Enclosure Awards, or by the Romans, or even by prehistoric feet? Were they once – or perhaps still are – traversed by pilgrims? Or have medieval pilgrims given way to modern day tourists? Or are the routes invisible in the material world but known through myths, such as Irish 'fairy paths', Australian 'Dreamtime tracks', or various shamanistic 'spirit lines'?

The answers to such questions about places and routes reveal much more about how we *think* about the landscape than its physical manifestation. Even the word 'landscape' reveals a richness of meanings. As Raymond Williams noted, 'A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation' (Williams 1973 (1985: 120)). We separate 'practical' and 'aesthetic' ways of thinking about the land. This is a highly culturally-specific distinction. Immigrants to Britain such as Asians and Afro-Caribbeans, even second and third generation descendants, are rarely interested in visiting the countryside for the pleasures of, say, rambling, picnicing or visiting historic buildings. While there are undoubtedly a number of reasons for this, a key one must be that Asian, African and Caribbean attitudes to the land see it as a practical place where people work in the

fields cultivating crops, not as somewhere to be 'enjoyed'. The aesthetic appreciation of landscape is not inherent in non-western mindscapes.

Nature, landscapes and mindscapes

What could be more 'natural' than a 'nature'? Yet 'nature' is a concept of human thought, an idealistic concept – a vague collective of hills, streams, plants and animals but excluding humans. The exclusion of people from the 'natural world' is a profound contradiction, but this is not the only paradox in the way we think about nature. For, on the one hand, nature represents an idealised paradigm of interdependence and co-operation while, on the other, nature is regarded as red in tooth and claw.

Likewise landscapes are more mental than physical. Western mentality thinks of landscape primarily in terms of who owns what. As a result boundaries become one of the most significant aspects of landscapes. Not everything in a landscape is necessarily created by people, but the idea – or, rather, ideas – of landscape are most certainly entirely invented by people. Clearly we construct landscapes by planting trees and hedges, clearing and managing woodland, digging ditches, ploughing and planting crops, erecting buildings, and – increasingly with the advent of mechanisation – have transformed landscapes with canals, railways, roads, cities, suburbs, motorways, airports, industrial estates, derelict areas, and all the rest. But the way we *think about* landscapes is more important still. While we may only be constructing ideas and concepts, these are fundamental to our notions of 'reality'. We need not make any physical changes to the land as a result of these transformations in our thinking, although more usually some changes to the 'real world' result from changes to our concepts about reality. Above all, changes are *thought* about before they are put into effect. Once they are put into existence, the changes to the real world affect the way we think and act – so, a boundary fence or a new bridge blocks or enables physical access, while planting or clearing trees creates concealment or enables visual 'access'.

Some of the most artificial ways of thinking about the landscape hide behind the ubiquitous phrase 'countryside'. In Britain, and especially England, over the last hundred-or-so years some deeply-ingrained 'invented traditions' have come to dominate thinking about rural areas. Beyond rural England extends an even more archetypal landscape, the 'wildernesses' of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. So significant are they in defining the character of their country, large areas are deemed 'national' parks. Into this wilderness venture intrepid 'ramblers' who distinguish themselves by an Otherworldly dress code that signifies their separation from urban life.

The sacred places explored in this book might be thought of as existing within both 'real' and 'perceived' landscapes. However, such a distinction is unreal as the term 'landscape' essentially refers to the way we perceive physical reality. The *topography* may be real but the way we think about it as *landscape* results from the ways we consciously and otherwise construct our perceptions of 'reality'. This book seeks to step outside this 'consensus reality', at least temporarily.

As will become clearer as this chapter progresses, words such as 'landscape', 'countryside' and 'nature' are much more to do with 'mindscapes' than physical reality. But this is not a modern phenomenon. People in all times and all places have engaged with the world in ways that depend on their specific social and historical circumstances. Such involvement is never static. Ideas are continually created, contested and adapted. For this reason 'nature', 'landscape', 'countryside' and similar words are less nouns than verbs in that they describe something that is an ongoing process of both physical change and, more especially, changing significance.

Thinking outside the monoculture

Western culture traps us inside a web of implicit assumptions and values. To step outside these implicit ideas is always difficult, increasingly so as Western cultural values relentlessly promote themselves as 'common sense'. Our 'common sense' derives from a secularised Protestant outlook combined with a dumbed-down, 'Disneyfied' attitude that reduces the most subtle or complex of concepts to simplistic dualistic distinctions.

Where the Western cultural system differs from previous ones is the extent to which it presents itself as the 'natural' option. Western culture succeeds not because it is forced on anyone but because subtle interactions between education, media, commerce and government all beguile the people into thinking there is no alternative. The technical term is 'hegemony'.

The main characteristic of Western hegemony is the assumption that there is only one way to see the world. More exactly, it assumes that, even if there are any other approaches to reality then they are 'superstitious' and otherwise inferior. Its trump card is to swiftly absorb subversive attitudes into nostalgia. This could be seen as one aspect of the invented tradition of the British countryside, explored later in this chapter. A more readily recognised example is the way in which the Sex Pistols' anarchical hits of the mid 1970s were rapidly absorbed into the entirely unthreatening and generally nostalgic *Best of the 70s* compilation CDs. (The pop music industry has proven to be expert at emasculating subversive subcultures, for instance by elevating white boy Elvis Presley as the king of the black R'n'B genre; promoting Jamaican reggae in the toned-down versions of UB40 and Eric Clapton's *I Shot the Sheriff*; making rap safe by promptly putting it into the mouths of pretty white boys such as Duran Duran or Vanilla Ice; using drum and bass as the soundtrack of TV adverts for executive cars; and more recently with Ali G's trite and unthreatening parodies of black street culture. The New Age ethos is also a prime example of radical ideas that have been commodified and trivialised.)

Because of the ease of travel and communication, together with the Western-orientated aspirations of many Third World inhabitants, the Western hegemony is causing all 'traditional cultures' to adapt and mutate at a pace never seen before. At the same time Western tastes for 'exoticism' mean that selected aspects of traditional cultures are absorbed into the 'mainstream'. We are fast approaching a worldwide monoculture.

This book is about 'thinking outside the monoculture'. This in no way means a romantically-inspired return to the past, or even turning one's back on modernity and 'heading for the hills'. The aim is to restore some subtleties to our experiences of places, especially those we chose to perceive as in some way sacred.

This Western monoculture makes it difficult to step outside the matrix and conceive of places in other ways. Too often 'other ways' are just deemed 'alternative' ways to the ones we are accustomed to, 'other' to the monoculture's 'normality'. Only people brought up as children in what the mainstream might call 'alternative communities' are spared the inevitable perspective of seeing everything non-mainstream dismissed as 'alternative'. However every 'alternative' comes with its own cultural baggage, its own ideologies and myths, its own fallacies and flaws. No one has any claim on the 'One True Way' of thinking about our surroundings and, as will be explored in much of the rest of this book, no one has the One True Way of understanding past cultures, especially those made more mysterious by the mists that enshroud all prehistoric societies.

Rather than slip and slide on these superficial distinctions, let's delve down to where some of the most pervasive concepts about our surroundings have their origins. Four words act as shorthand for some very complex 'invented traditions' that are pervasive in modern day Britain. They are 'landscape', 'nature', 'countryside' and 'heritage'.

The invention of landscape

'Landscape' derives from an Old German word, *landschaft*, used by the Anglo-Saxons to mean a small piece of cultivated land. The word died out in English during the eleventh century but reappears in Dutch during the late sixteenth century as *landschap*, a technical term used by painters to describe the new fashion for 'landscape' painting. Previously depictions of rural scenes provided only a background to human subjects in the foreground. For reasons unknown, the specialists in such 'background painting' created a fashion for works without any foreground figures.

The interest in 'backgrounds' is probably part-and-parcel of the Renaissance's rediscovery of Ptolemy, a Greek polymath of the second century CE, who invented the concept of 'geography' (as an objective view of the world) and what he termed 'chorography', a more subjective sense of place.

However knowledge of Ptolemy, geography and chorography all died out. Not until 1336 do we have a record of someone climbing a mountain simply to admire the view. This person was the Italian poet Francesco Petrararch (1304–74) who helped to rediscover the Classical tradition. He describes how in 1336 he felt 'intoxicated' by the view from the summit of Mount Ventoux and came down thinking he had transgressed a fundamental law by seeing the land spread out around him, as if he were God, or at the very least Moses when he received the word of the law from Jehovah on Mount Sinai (Lachman 2003: 217–20).

Ptolemy's abstract way of thinking about geography and map-making were rediscovered in the fifteenth century. Two centuries later his sense of chorography

manifested in such works as Johannes Vermeer's *View of Delft* (c.1661) and the landscapes of Claude Poussin (1593–1665) and Claude Lorrain (1600–82).

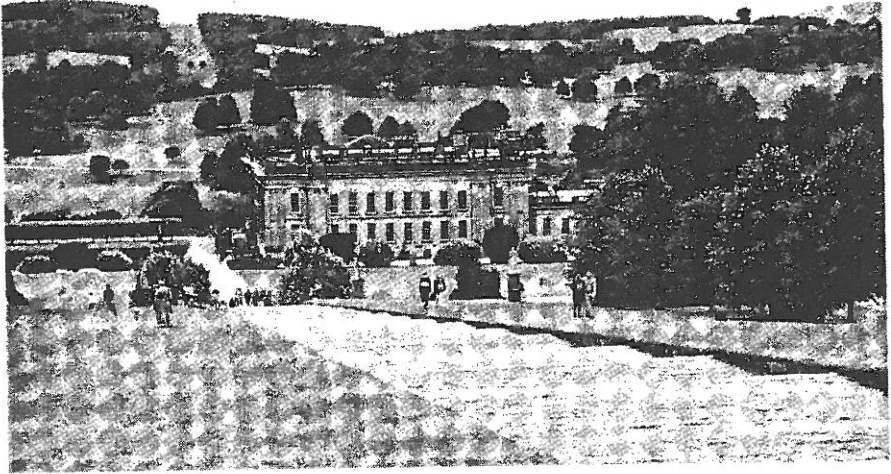
An approximate contemporary of Ptolemy, a doctor called Pausanias, represents a different aspect of chorography. He travelled around Greece in the second century CE describing the sites of Classical antiquity at a time when their remains survived. His aim was to provide a guide to travellers so they might see for themselves the achievements of Classical Greece, at a time when Greece was subject to Roman rule. The sacred sites he describes encompass man-made temples and natural sites such as springs, caves, mountains and groves. Pausanias was especially interested in surviving statues. Indeed his descriptions fail to distinguish between man-made temples and entirely natural sites, although it is probable that in many cases natural sites had been augmented in antiquity with statues and perhaps also temples. (See Alcock and Osborne 1994; Bradley 2000: 20–8)

Pausanias was more than an antiquarian or art historian, as he combined the history of religion with what we would now think of as the attributes of both a field archaeologist and a guide book author. As a 'chorographer' he recovered an all-but-lost sacred landscape to serve nationalistic idealism, thereby anticipating the invention of notions of idealised landscapes that have predominated in Britain during the last hundred-or-so years, to be discussed in the next section.

Art historians conventionally attribute the origins of landscape painting to the Bavarian painter and printmaker Albrecht Altdorfer (c.1480–1538). However these are less studies of nature than settings for human subjects where the background takes greater precedence than in the work of his older contemporaries.

While popular notions of art history attribute the depiction of more realistic landscapes to Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) (indeed his earliest surviving work is a sketch of the Tuscan countryside). However his lesser-known contemporaries Giovanni Bellini (c.1430–1516) and Piero di Cosimo (1462–c.1521) seem to have been the true pioneers.

In contrast to these 'background' painters, the aesthetic appreciation of landscape from a vantage point arises from novel Renaissance theories of visual representation, especially those put forward by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) in his *Ten Books on Architecture* (published posthumously about 1498). Key to this was the use of linear perspective, almost certainly augmented by tracing from images created using a *camera obscura*. Claude Poussin (1593–1665) became the most famous exponent of such landscape art, although Vermeer's *View of Delft* (c.1661) and a large number of topographical prints also fit into this new mode of seeing. Gone was the 'collage of close-ups' that characterised the landscapes of, say, Hieronymus Bosch (1460–1516) or Peter Breughel the Elder (c.1525/30–1569). Perspective is an essentially humanistic development – it aims to represent how the human eye (or, rather, how the human 'I') – views the world. It is not, for example, the omnipresent 'God's eye view' as used in some previous representational schemas. The illusion of perspective is also an ideological illusion.



'Capability' Brown's 1760s landscaping at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire.

Not everybody approved of 'Capability' Brown's transformations. One critic is supposed to have said to him: "Mr Brown, I very sincerely desire that I may die before you." "Why so?" enquired Brown. "Because I should like to see Heaven before you had improved it." (MacDermott 2003: 42)

Landscape as a way of viewing

There is more to landscape painting than the adoption of perspective and a more fully-formed notion of landscape emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a way of viewing. The first recorded use of the word 'landscape' in English is in 1632 and the term came to denote a broad view of a natural or imaginary scene. By the nineteenth century the term 'landscape' shifted from denoting a genre of painting and became adopted as a way of referring to those parts of the real world considered equivalent to the subject matter of such paintings.

The conflation of subject and object continued. Just as landscape paintings depicted their subject from a specific viewpoint, so nature and the estates of the nobility began to be seen from specific 'vantage points', perhaps even imposed by creating prospect mounds or gazebos for the purpose. Estates were 'landscaped' by the likes of William Kent (1685–1748), 'Capability' Brown (1715–83) or Humphrey Repton (1752–1818) to comply with such idealised ways of seeing. The world was seen as a sequence of *vistas*, whether in the original sense of 'a long narrow view' (as between rows of trees) or in the more panoramic sense that the word is now often used.

With the advent of photography in the second half of the nineteenth century 'nature' was further promoted from the fixed 'ideal viewpoint' of the camera and became the dominant western way of seeing.



Prospect mound at Kirby Bellars near Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire.

The word 'landscape' owes much more to art history than to geography. Above all it is a way of looking at the world that is specific to Renaissance and modern Western thinking. It is not an *a priori* way of apprehending the world. Writers who refer to 'prehistoric landscapes' or the ways in which non-Western societies see 'their landscape' are either using the word 'landscape' as a convenient shorthand for the different ways people of other times or places conceptualised their surroundings, or have failed to recognise that 'landscape' is a concept specific to our own culture.

There are two deeply-rooted aspects which make the modern Western concept of landscape distinct from non-Western ones. The first is that it is entirely visual, whereas non-Western cultures often give equal or greater prominence to auditory interaction with the surroundings. Secondly, the deeply-embedded notion of seeing landscapes from specific viewpoints removes our sense of travelling through space. Indeed when the scene is frozen in a painting or photograph the image becomes literally timeless. Because this static notion of landscape is so ingrained in western thinking, we tend to see rural topography as implicitly timeless. Yet almost all our interaction with our surroundings is as much about time as space. In the next chapter we will explore further these two specific problems with our concept of landscape.

The invention of nature

If our ideas about landscape are derived from Renaissance paintings, 'nature' comes from a more literary vein, albeit deeply rooted in a sequence of social and political strata.

There have been broadly four ways of thinking about nature in Europe during the last few hundred years:

1. In medieval times 'nature' equated to the whole of God's creation, with the human world being rather fluidly differentiated from the rest of the natural world. People were not usually conscious of the distinction between the concepts of the 'human world' and the 'natural world'.
2. By the end of the Renaissance a more secular and rational abstraction had been conceived – the idea of 'humanity', which was defined by distinction from 'nature'. The adoption of perspective by Renaissance artists undoubtedly helped foster this 'alienation' from nature, in that a landscape painting is viewed as an object, by a viewer who is entirely 'outside' the topography depicted.
3. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries humans increasingly intervened in 'nature', whether by agricultural improvement, science, and the various technical and social changes of the industrial revolution, so that all aspects of nature became regarded as something akin to objects. This was the Age of the Enlightenment, where 'Reason' was diametrically opposed to 'Nature'.
4. Within the last three decades this way of thinking about nature as quite distinct from humanity has been moderated in various ways by the concerns of ecologists, James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', and pagans who regard the Earth as a goddess.

These changes underlie more specific shifts in perceptions of nature. Most people are aware that such 'beauty spots' as the Lake District were regarded as threatening wildernesses until the nineteenth century, notably until the poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) turned to the natural world of his native Cumbria for inspiration. As late as 1874 Gustave Flaubert wrote that 'The Alps are out of all proportion to human existence. They are too big to be useful. This is the third time that they have provoked a disagreeable reaction in me and I hope it is the last.' (Cited in Beaumont 1985: 87)

In the eighteenth century landscape painting developed as part of the activities on the 'Grand Tour'. The pioneer English watercolour painter Paul Sandby (1731–1809) came back from Italy and, for the first time, depicted the landscapes of Scotland and Wales in a similar manner. The Wye Valley, South Wales, the Scottish Highlands, North Wales, and the New Forest followed in the 1780s under the direct influence of William Gilpin (1724–1804). The influence of other watercolourists in the 1760s made the Lake District fashionable.

About a hundred years later a further change in the visual awareness of nature arose in the 1880s when a group of artists, among them Guy Dawber (1861–1938), began to spend their summers at Broadway. This visual awareness was paralleled in literature with the creation of 'Wessex' by Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). Together a

fashionable cult of the Cotswolds (hitherto a little-regarded area) was triggered in 1895 with the arrival of a famous actress and various members of the nobility, who were visited by a great many guests, included the leading writers and artists of the day. The publication of four guide books in 1904 completed 'the transformation of Broadway from a sleepy straggling village into one of the showpieces of rural England'. (Marsh 1982: 30)

The founding of the National Trust in 1895 quickly led to the preservation of both historic buildings and 'picturesque' open spaces (see Marsh 1982: 55–9). The priorities of the National Trust fitted in closely with the widespread influence of John Ruskin (1819–1900) and William Morris (1834–96). Starting in 1901 the National Trust became responsible for the preservation of large parts of Ruskin's beloved Lake District.

Long before Wordsworth painters and writers in the sixteenth century had played a major part in creating the modern concepts of nature. In 1546 Pietro Arentino (1492–1556) writes of 'discovering' the beauty of Venetian sunsets after seeing them depicted in Titian's vibrant paintings. Similarly, the 'discovery' of Alpine scenery follows the spread of prints and paintings with mountain panoramas in the sixteenth century. One of the first literary appreciations of an Alpine region bears a striking resemblance to Peter Breughel the Elder's *Landscape with St Mary Magdalene* (c.1555). The similarity can hardly be accidental.

As Flaubert's instincts still confirm, 'nature' was once to be feared. Until we felt securely in control we could not begin to look positively at mountains, wild animals, and other previously unsubdued aspects of nature. Only with the Romantic movement's response to urbanisation does nature become regarded as beautiful. The mystical love of nature is a by-product of the change from a largely rural Britain to a largely urban one during the nineteenth century. The active protection of animals, birds and plants in the wild is an even more recent change in attitudes.

Modern western benign attitudes to nature should not be projected onto earlier times and other societies. Indeed, one of the fundamental concepts of many different cultures is the contrast between 'ordered' society and 'chaotic' nature. As we will explore in Chapter 7, creating such distinctions may be one of the defining features of Neolithic peoples in Europe.

The English rural landscape is far from natural. Since at least the ninth century landowners have invested heavily in farming and estate management to maximise both profit and opportunities for recreations such as hunting. Enclosure Acts in the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth century not only created the pattern of small fields regarded as typical of lowland Britain but also to all intents and purposes eliminated 'subsistence farming' in their quest for maximising profits. The wealthiest aristocrats created landscaped parks around their houses at vast expense as extravagant examples of conspicuous consumption. The English landscape is not merely a product of human enterprise, it is a profoundly political statement of ownership and hegemonic domination. The main players are the tenant farmers who made the aristocracy wealthy, and yeoman farmers who transformed the landscape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to fulfil their own economic motives. Upon this political stage our notions of nature evolved (see Thomas 1983).

The invention of the rural idyll

A widespread human myth is of the 'good old days', a never-quite-specified time approximately contemporary with one's grandparents when everything was better than it is today. Rural England has long been the venue for such myths.

William Keith, in a pioneering study of the rural idyll in English literature, put this sharply in focus when he noted 'Rural values, like all others, are continually in a state of flux; every generation encounters new changes and challenges.' (Keith 1975: 14)

Keith places Isaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, written in 1653, at the root of the English rural idyll:

The Compleat Angler begins – and therefore, to all intents and purposes, the English rural tradition begins – with three men, Piscator, Venator and Auceps, meeting on a road leading out of London this 'fine, fresh May morning'. The setting is at one and the same time familiar and original. Inevitably we recall the congregation of pilgrims at the Tabard Inn at the opening of *The Canterbury Tales*, but, whereas Chaucer presents us with a journey from the secular city to the sacred cathedral of God, Walton shows us three men leaving London for the enjoyment of the countryside. True, the river Lea may at first sight appear a trivial goal compared with the shrine at Canterbury, yet the overall tone of Walton's book is more sober and, despite the Parson's concluding and comprehensive sermon (interestingly paralleled by Piscator's speech in the final chapter), more pious than that of Chaucer's poem. While at Canterbury pilgrims turn a holy duty into a diverting recreation, Piscator converts a secular hobby into a contemplation and celebration of God's gifts to man on earth. Implicit here, I suggest, is the idea later to be expressed with memorable conciseness by William Cowper that "God made the country, and man made the town".

(Keith 1975: 26, quoting from Isaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* p19 and William Cowper's *The Task* 1, p749)

Man not only made the town but it was these townspeople who predominately made the myth of the rural idyll. As Keith states, 'It is worth noting that Piscator, Walton's mouthpiece, is also a townsman.' (Keith 1975: 27).

Walton was followed by Gilbert White and numerous other literary rural idealisers. Alongside these the work of the political Radical William Cobbett (1763–1835) also created a widespread belief that rural life had been ideal when each man had a cottage, a pig and use of the common – a scenario that was largely being superseded by the effects of Enclosure. Cobbett's idealism was disseminated in popular broadsheet ballads, which gave the underlying ideals such widespread currency that by the 1830s they have become truisms. This rural idyll was prevalent in nineteenth century literature and not directly opposed at the time. (Hutton 1999: 433 fn19, contra Mandler 1997b).

Rural writers such as Isaak Walton and Gilbert White only became popular in the Victorian era with the advent of an urban readership. Reading about the countryside

was, and still is, not merely a substitute for visiting the countryside but often preferable to the reality. The rural idyll may be a widespread and deeply-rooted myth, but there is a complex conflict between the myth and both the reality of rural life and the practicalities of travel, weather, refreshments, accommodation and such like.

As already noted, the transformation of nature into something desirable takes place at the same time as Victorian England was becoming increasingly urban. Early urban development soon developed into squalid living conditions where basic sanitation was lacking and epidemics of diseases such as cholera could not be controlled. One of the Victorian obsessions was attributing illnesses to 'bad air'. Quaint as these notions are now that we understand bacteria and viruses, they are fundamental to the positive perceptions of the rural environment, where the air was considered to be generally 'good'. Indeed modern tourism, with its fetish for the seaside, has its origins in Georgian England and the supposed ozone of the coast air (although we now know that 'stimulating sea breezes' smell not of ozone but of rotting seaweed).

The notion of 'bad air' is now regarded as totally fallacious. Nevertheless, it was a primary cause in the creation of an imagined tradition that has become increasingly important in Britain – what we think of as 'the countryside'.

The invention of the countryside

Before we explore the invention of 'the countryside' we need to understand another quirk of nineteenth century values. At a time when Britain dominated the world and was setting the pace for industrialised nations, the preferred architectural style for public buildings was an accurate recreation of the 'Gothic' of about 1300. Why, while every other aspect of British life reflected the overwhelming forces of modernism, were churches and town halls, indeed even the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament, done in a manner that suggested a loss of confidence in modernity?

This apparent chink in the self-confidence of the dominant nation can be traced to changes in ecclesiastical fashions in the 1830s. These turned against the eighteenth century Church of England liturgy that was dominated by sermons. Instead the reformers substituted the celebration of 'communion' (the Protestant successor to the Catholic Mass) along with hymn singing – more-or-less what was a typical CofE service for much of the twentieth century. This new ecclesiastical fashion required changes to the interiors of the churches. As many of the rural churches were dilapidated and long overdue restoration this led to a major programme of church renewals during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The leading architects, such as Charles Barry, A.W.N. Pugin and Gilbert Scott all favoured the 'Gothic' style with its emphasis on 'heavenward-pointing' columns and arches as, by the early part of the nineteenth century, the Gothic had become associated with profound religious thinking.

If the Gothic was good enough for the country's cathedrals and churches then, by gosh, it was good enough for town halls and railway terminals too. The fashion for Neo-Gothic brought with it respect and admiration for original medieval architecture. Alarmed at the destructive 'restorations' of medieval buildings typical of Victorian architects, William Morris founded The Society for the Protection of

Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877. Morris achieved some of his objectives with the passing of the Ancient Monuments Protection Act 1882.

Morris's SPAB emulated the first of the 'heritage pressure groups', the Commons Preservation Society which had been born in 1865. The same spirit of concern for what we now think of as 'heritage' widened from the preservation of Gothic architecture to the 'countryside' with the creation of the National Trust in 1895. The formation of the National Trust was part of a wider group of radical and Liberal protests which sought to provide land access benefits for the working classes but, by the 1920s, these organisations had moved to the political right and were more concerned with protecting property than enabling access.

For example, a leading figure in the Commons Preservation Society at the time, Sir Lawrence Chubb, thought the Kinder Scout mass trespass on 24 April 1932 was funded by 'Russian money'. In the 1930s the National Trust turned its attention away from preserving and providing access to places of natural beauty and instead became preoccupied with country houses, hitherto an incidental aspect of their interests. At this time the Conservative party under Stanley Baldwin began to associate itself explicitly with an idealized myth of the countryside.

Baldwin assiduously cultivated an image of himself as a kind of rural Everyman (despite the fact that his money came from the iron industry) and the illusion he created was so successful that it not only remains more or less intact to this day (think John Major and his evocation of 'village cricket and warm beer' as what was best about Britain) but it also began to undermine the efficacy of the claims on the countryside that were made by the radicals and the Romantics.
(Worthington 2004: 101-2)

The National Trust is a quintessentially British compromise which holds land and properties in private ownership for the benefit of the nation and the public. The radicalism that led to its founding has long been replaced by a populist rhetoric which thinly disguises deeply unequal class interests and the need to be a major player in the 'big business' of the country's tourism and heritage industry.

Little could the founders of the National Trust realise how profound the changes to rural Britain would be in the next fifty years, and to what extent the Trust would both serve to create and maintain an illusion of a 'lost' (but ultimately illusory) countryside. In all fairness the National Trust did not create this illusion, although it has most effectively nurtured it.

So where does the invented tradition of the British countryside arise, and how does it shift so quickly along the political spectrum? Intriguingly, these ideas and changes are largely attributable to the success and longevity of what might be thought of as one of the 'institutions' of British publishing – *Country Life*.

Country Life was founded in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and two years after the creation of the National Trust. Unlike almost all other periodicals of its time the emphasis was visual rather than literary. It was well-designed and used newly invented high-quality photographic printing technology.

These images presented a romantic vision of 'unspoilt' villages, rolling landscapes, country houses, and the nation's heritage of cathedrals, castles and historic cities.

By this time most of the population lived in suburban surroundings. These were the people who predominately bought this romantic rural idyll. The influential thinker John Ruskin (1819–1900) had added his weight to the belief that the countryside provided an antidote of order and tranquillity that was lacking in industrial society (although there is no record of him enquiring whether the rural population thought they were living in 'order and tranquillity').

By the Edwardian era the readership of *Country Life* was predominantly female. For many decades the cover featured a débutante from the minor aristocracy, photographed in a conventional flattering style. Every issue featured a country house, photographed with all evidence of its inhabitants eradicated. Not even a copy of *The Times* on a study desk or a handy pair of bedroom slippers cluttered the images, in contrast to far-from-minimalist furnishings typical of late Victorian interiors.

The emphasis was on rural leisure rather than toil. *Country Life* promoted sports suitable for gentlemen, such as the then new fashion for golf (indeed the idea for the magazine was first discussed on a golf course). Hunting and shooting were also promoted as part of this romanticised tradition, an early emphasis that, controversially, remains a mainstay of current editorial attitudes.

Above all *Country Life* made the countryside glamorous, and nurtured the aspirations of successful businessmen to sell up their urban houses and acquire the appearances of a gentleman by taking up rural residence.

More than any other magazine, *Country Life* was to become the manual of gentrification for the late Victorian and Edwardian middle classes. It was created at a crucial period in the formation of the attitudes and ideas which were to dominate British society well into the twentieth century.
(Strong 1996: 30)

The reality of rural Britain was totally at odds with *Country Life's* romantic image. Changes in the rural economy during the eighteenth and nineteenth had been every bit as dramatic as the industrialisation and massive growth of urban areas. Georgian England had been marked by the social consequences of enclosure and the loss of common lands. While improving the efficiency of farming by concentrating land and power into the hands of the gentry, the result was the creation of a large number of landless poor. When these were not required for military service the problems of vagrants and beggars became difficult for the authorities to contain. In parts of England many families eked out their survival in such poverty-stricken trades as framework knitting. Only as the nineteenth century unfolded, and industrialised urban areas grew, did this poverty steadily migrate from rural settlements to the slums of the new cities.

But all was not well at the top end of the social scale either. The power of the landed classes was steadily undermined by politicians. In 1883–4 the Third Reform Act finally separated voting rights from property. More damaging to the financial basis of the gentry were the imports which depressed agricultural prices from the 1880s until

and owning dynasties were further diminished by death duties. These were first introduced in 1894 and increased from 8 percent to 15 percent in 1909. Income tax also rose in 1909 and those with an income over £3,000 per year were subject to a 'super tax'. The Parliament Act of 1910 rendered the House of Lords virtually impotent. The landed classes had all-but lost out to socialism and the First World War completed what the politicians had started. The new county and district councils (with all the associated legislation) took over the power vacuum.

One of the consequences was that the country houses, fetishised in picturesque photography in the editorial pages of *Country Life* and sold or let in its advertisement pages, were increasingly sold off, the contents and fittings auctioned, and – in many cases – allowed to go to ruin. Remarkably, this large-scale 'dissolution' of the country houses during the middle decades of the twentieth century did not render *Country Life* defunct. The reasons provide a remarkable insight into the invention of 'the countryside' in Britain during the last hundred years, as Roy Strong has analysed in his history of the first hundred years of *Country Life* (Strong 1996).

There was a long tradition, going back to Tudor times, of fortunes made in trade and commerce being invested in a country estate. But by the Edwardian era it did not make sense to own a substantial estate. Nevertheless, the new ideal of rural life was modelled on the economically and politically redundant aristocracy.

At the time when the landowning classes lost their political and social power, they were to retain their cultural hegemony over society through the projection of their culture as the model way of living for the middle classes. By the 1880s, over eighty percent of the population was urban-based, and one might have thought that towns and cities were where future aspirations should logically have been focussed.... Instead, they centred around a totally new vision of rural life, part of a phenomenon which we now recognise as an invented tradition.
(Strong 1996: 29)

Conservatism and a suspicion of change began to pervade society, which found a creative expression for these values in a largely fictional view of the countryside, where ancient stoic virtues were seen to flourish... After decades of massive economic and social change, these alternative attributes quickly assumed an aura of spiritual authority and consequently underpinned a new sense of collective identity from which the attributes of industrialised society were excluded.
(Strong 1996: 33)

The aspirations of the professional and urban-based readers of *Country Life* saw the life of a country gentleman as particularly desirable. Each week's issue provided a 'pantheon of images that gradually formed a powerfully enticing illustration of national identity.... The overwhelming impression ... was (and still is) of continuity and tradition.' (Strong 1996: 36)

The illusion crossed ideological boundaries. To the socialist the 'lost idyll' was one where an honest craftsman could practice his skills within the security of an

unchanging village community. Simultaneously '... Tories could envisage an age when the social hierarchy lay undisturbed, guided by the landed classes who dominated local affairs as their natural right.' (Strong 1996: 36-7)

Country Life came to embody the quintessence of English ideals. These ideals continue to perpetrate the cultural influence of the aristocracy who, in almost all other respects, had no significant influence after the 1920s. The major social changes of the 1920s included the advent of the five-day working week and thus the 'invention' of the weekend. Developments in private motoring increased the interest in the countryside that had already been aroused by the railways and bicycles, leading to vastly more 'day trips' at weekends. Country houses, ruined castles, parish churches and picturesque villages were the prime destinations, although prehistoric sites were of interest too.

Country Life was written for the upper classes, even though the majority readership was middle class. Towards the opposite end of the social scale *The Clarion* was aimed at the upper working classes, especially those with middle class aspirations. It had started off with a socialist agenda but by the 1920s was promoting cycling, walking and the enjoyment of rural pleasures. The editor of *The Clarion* was Robert Blatchford who wrote a book called *Merrie England*. As the title suggests, it promotes a romanticised rural idyll. The popularity of this idyll is indicated by the sales of *Merrie England* exceeding a million copies.

Even greater commercial success was attained in the 1930s by the King's England series of guidebooks written by Arthur Mee and the Shell guides. These too promoted the romance of the rural idyll and, to a large extent, shaped the concepts of 'countryside' which we still hold today.

Country Life had an effective monopoly on the advertising of 'superior' country properties and this income kept the magazine alive during the middle decades of the twentieth century, even though the conservatism of the editorial content became increasingly anachronistic. During the 1970s this conservatism led to *Country Life* being the focus for the new 'heritage lobby'. Awareness of 'heritage', and the threats to it, have subsequently gone from strength to strength but, as will be discussed in the next section, exactly what is meant by the term usually remains slippery.

In the mid-1980s rivals to *Country Life* such as *Countryman*, *The Field*, *The Lady* and *This England* began to promote this fantasy traditional lifestyle. And the emerging concept of poorly-defined 'heritage' combined with increased interest in rural living prompted the launch of other periodicals, notably *Country Living*, which appealed to the new middle class interest in the countryside. Indeed, so pervasive was the notion of rural 'escapism' that it could be gently satirised by the television sit-com *The Good Life*.

Although England is essentially urban, for the majority of people their ideals are rural, even though these ideals are based almost entirely on illusions rather than reality.

The invention of heritage

During the last twenty-five years the word 'heritage' has become increasingly used, initially by pressure groups but now as part of 'bureaucrat-speak' where familiar

words are linked together by national and local government officials in sentences that defy all attempts to unravel their meaning.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* provides four meanings for 'heritage', of which 'a nation's historic buildings, monuments, countryside, etc. especially when regarded as worthy of preservation' is the only relevant one. But, as we have just explored, this begs the question as to how we think of 'countryside'. Because of the imperceptible changes to the editorial approach between the 1930s and the 1970s, the invention of 'the countryside' by *Country Life* in the early decades of the twentieth century merges seamlessly with the magazine's central role in the invention of 'heritage' in the 1970s. Justifiable concerns for ecology and the depredations of motorway building were put into the same pot as support for hunting and attacks on EEC/EU 'interventionist' farming policies and broader political issues, creating what I think of as 'heritage soup'.

Numerous pressure groups seek to preserve the 'traditional countryside' invented in the twentieth century. Indeed, one of the most active takes its role in the conservation of this myth further and styles itself the Society for the *Protection of Rural England*. Partly in response to these new pressure groups the British government passed the National Heritage Act in 1983. One of the actions was to create a body known as English Heritage to care for and promote the nation's heritage. English Heritage has responded to this difficult challenge in ways that have rather too often generated controversy and created the impression that it is inward-looking, authoritarian and inflexible (one of the most public of these contretemps arose over 'Sea Henge'; see Chapter 5). Suffice to say that the cynicism with which English Heritage is too often regarded has tainted the word 'heritage' further.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* fails to take account of how the word 'heritage' is now used for much wider cultural legacies, so that phrases such as 'musical heritage', 'literary heritage' and the like are not regarded as spurious. The word 'heritage' is now used so abundantly that it is possible to think in terms of the early twenty-first century being enacted within a 'heritage cult'. The heritage industry too readily reduces the complexities of changes over many centuries to a poorly-differentiated sense of 'oldness'. What they offer is the preservation and promotion of a consoling but largely spurious past, epitomised by neatly mown areas of grass and a nice tea shop. How the past is 'consumed' is far more important to the heritage industry than how ideas about the past are 'produced' (a distinction explored further in Chapter 6; see also Shanks 1992: 71–3; 106–8). This mish-mash approach to the past further blurs the ingredients of 'heritage soup'.

Since the start of the heritage industry in the 1980s, its capitalist and materialistic ideologies have been critiqued by a number of writers (notably Samuel 1984; Wright 1985; Lowenthal 1985; 1996; and Hewison 1987; Brewer 1995; Hunter 1996; Mandler 1997a; Arnold, Davies and Ditchfield 1998). The promotion of heritage has become a ubiquitous aspect of modern culture. Like much else it is neither all bad nor all good and continually evolves.

Heritage can be thought as a way of reconstructing the past as artefacts and commodities which appeal to present-day fads and fancies. Heritage has little (and

often nothing) to do with promoting the sort of ideas and meanings about the past that are developed by specialists or academics. 'Heritage centres' too frequently offer a dumbed-down rendition of the past, with specific myths and ideologies being promoted at the expense of the greater diversity (and complexity) of interpretations which informed research offers.

For most people the past is consumed through different aspects of the heritage industry. Inevitably this consumption of the past is how the meaning of the past is produced, as consumption and production of meanings are two sides of the same process. The ever-evolving mythic past promoted by the heritage industry are reconstructions of the past according to present day considerations.

The romance of ruins

However we should not entirely blame the modern heritage industry for creating romantic myths about the past. There is something inherent in the English personality which has been seduced by the romance of ruined buildings and old documents. This goes all the way back to the author of the first history of England, the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, written by Bede (c.673–735) – who seems to have a fondness for earthworks and ruins. Two centuries later King Alfred (c.848–c.900) was also an enthusiastic historian. Indeed, what we might now think of as antiquarianism was crucial to both religious and social status for the Anglo-Saxons.

In later centuries John Milton (1608–74), William Blake (1757–1827) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) helped to create and sustain a romantic vision of Britain's past. Even William Shakespeare (1564–1616) puts the following words into the mouth of a soldier:

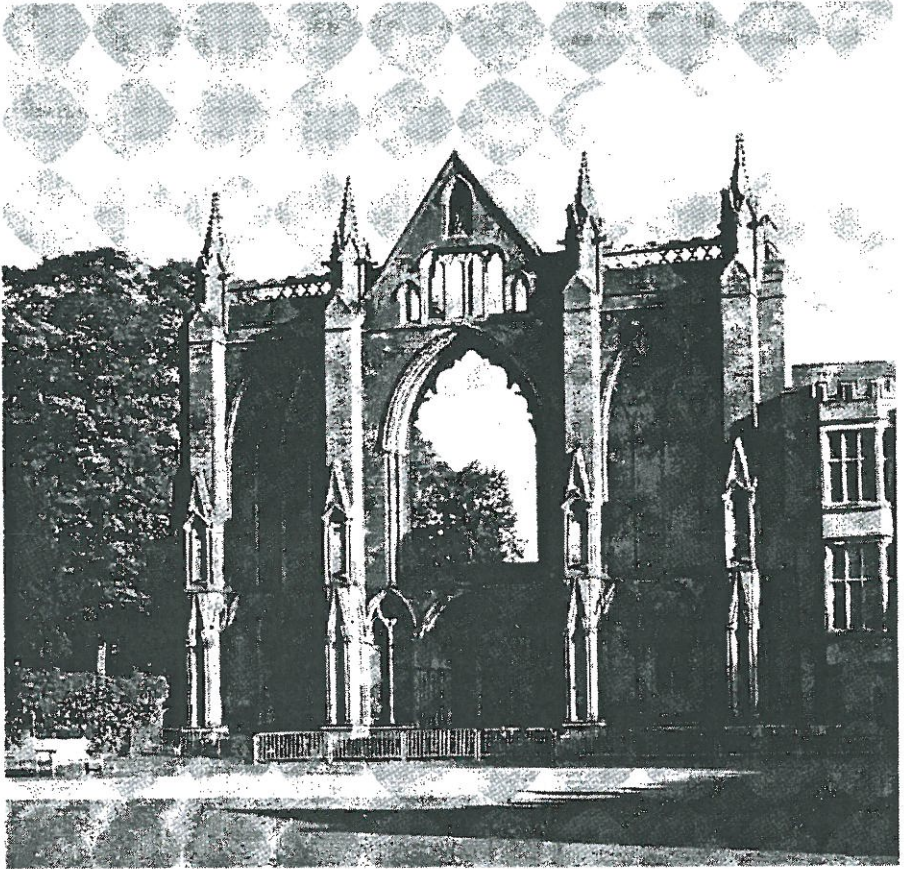
... from our troops I strayed
To gaze upon a ruinous monastery,
And as I earnestly did fix mine eye,
Upon the wasted building...

(*Titus Andronicus* Act 5)

And Shakespeare's younger contemporary, John Webster (c.1580–1634), betrays similar concerns in his dark tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, which is obsessed with death and decay:

I do love these ancient ruins;
We do never tread upon them, but we set
Our foot upon some reverend history

Webster would have read William Camden's *Britannia* (first published in 1586) which has been described as 'an earnest attempt to convey the political wisdom of the recent past.' (Richardson 2004: 113). Camden, who lived from 1551 to 1623, is the *de facto* father of English antiquarianism as, although John Leland was an generation earlier (1506–62), his *Itinerary* was only published posthumously in 1710 (see Chapter 5 for a further discussion of Leland). However Camden makes few observations about prehistoric sites and is predominately interested in the Roman period; even the much-expanded posthumous editions of *Britannia* did little to redress the balance.



The yawning arch betokening slow decay at Newstead, Nottinghamshire. Modern day visitors need to provide their own wine and monk's skull to have the complete Byron experience.

By the time of Lord Byron (1788–1824) the love affair with ruins went so far as to live in a house adjoining the ruins of Newstead Abbey, whose 'yawning arch betokens slow decay', and drink wine there out of a monk's skull. Even such disparate characters as Percy Shelley (1792–1822) and Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) were inspired to write by visits to ruins – *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was conceived during a visit to the remains of the Capitol in Rome.

By the late eighteenth century no garden makeover was complete without the creation of a picturesque ruin. So well-known was the English predilection for ruins that J.W. von Goethe (1749–1882) was able to include the following mocking remark:

Are Britons here? They go abroad, feel calls
To trace old battle-fields and crumbling walls...
(Mephistopheles in *Faust*)



Old John, the well-known folly in Bradgate Park, Leicestershire, built in 1784. Old John was probably designed by John Hope, who had designed a similar folly for Mow Cop (on the Cheshire/Staffordshire border) in 1754.

Old John provides shelter to view the surrounding landscape in comfort, especially the hunting and horse trials which took place in close proximity to the tower. The archway was originally part of a longer wall which, although constructed as a mock ruin, was originally part of now-demolished stables.

Local folklore tells that this monument was erected in its present tankard shape to commemorate either a faithful retainer or a miller killed on the hill top. However the putative 'Old John' commemorated in this way seems to be a post hoc invention, as the hill was known as 'John Hill' at least forty years earlier than these supposed deaths (Ramsey 2002).

Napoleon may have famously accused Britain of being a nation of shopkeepers but a more accurate observation would have been to regard us as a nation of nostalgics, sustaining myths of romantic rural idylls.

Nothing but nostalgia

Such tendencies to nostalgia have multiplied many-fold in recent decades. The pace of technological and social change means that artefacts and attitudes of our grandparents' era rarely have any utilitarian value today. We can only value them nostalgically, as part of our 'heritage' and such like.

Laurie Lee's evocative although somewhat imaginative biography *Cider with Rosie*, published in 1959, became widely known (not least because for many years it was a set text for some GCE and GCSE English examinations). He describes life in a poor

but self-sufficient Cotswold village in the 1920s and records the tough conditions of this now-vanished rural way of life, although the overall tone is very much one of nostalgia. The same is true of Flora Thompson's study of life in late nineteenth century Oxfordshire, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, published in 1945. Lee and Thompson write in a manner which is easy to read and both delight in recounting the traditional practices of their villages. This generates a sense of 'lost idyll' which more than counterbalances the poverty, hard work, disease and sheer stoicism which these writers also recount.

When Edith Holden's natural history diary for 1906 was rediscovered after 70 years and published in 1977 as *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* this fuelled a huge wave of nostalgia and led to numerous me-too books and a whole industry of kitsch artefacts decorated with motifs from the book. Sixty to thirty years on from their publication, these three books remain as the key inspirations for the currently pervasive English nostalgia.

In Britain anyone under the age of about 40 has been brought up within a culture largely fabricated from notions of nostalgia, mostly woven by commercial concerns and the whims of mass media, into which tourism and heritage are thoroughly intertwined. Such nostalgia is pervasive but far from homogenous. Indeed, the same place or object can evoke a wide variety of reconstructions of the past, mostly dependent on prior knowledge and belief systems.

Complex constructions of nostalgia are deeply embedded into present day culture. Places and artefacts of historic interest which no longer have any practical importance are utilised to create mythic references to aspects of the past – usually carefully selected aspects that sanitise away the poverty, social inequality and poor health of the people who sustained stately homes and generated the wealth which enabled such conspicuous consumption.

A place or object – restored or conserved to its present day existence – is used to signify specific cultural reconstructions of the past (perhaps better thought of as 'simulations'). The heritage industry has long been creating such nostalgic simulations of the past. This is as true of prehistoric sites as it is for stately homes or decommissioned Cold War nuclear bunkers. The urge to simulate the past takes many forms, from military re-enactment groups at medieval castles to Druids at Stonehenge on midsummer morning.

In recent years the 'visitor centre' syndrome has increasingly infected prehistoric sites too, with Newgrange in Ireland and Carnac in Brittany providing some of the more dramatic examples, while quite subtly-nuanced presentations (such as the Keiller Museum at Avebury in Wiltshire) make their own statements about how the past can be reconstructed, or 'simulated', including in these 'statements' the possibility of multiple interpretations.

Summary

While only some of these elaborate notions of the past are closely related to how we think about landscape or the countryside, how we think about sacred places is derived from four interwoven strands. Starting with the most recent, these are:

- pervasive and complex nostalgia;
- muddled ideas of heritage;
- the invented tradition of the countryside;
- the earlier invention of nature and landscape.

Needless to say this interweaving readily results in some rather complex (and at times rather confused) thinking about sacred places. This complexity is explored in the rest of this book.

Sources

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