

The countryside

There is more to the countryside than fox-hunting. It has sometimes seemed that this is what the marches of the Countryside Alliance have been all about — at least, this is what seemed to be the major issue in 2000, when the Alliance first came to public attention; and ‘Liberty’ was referring to fox-hunting when the Alliance adopted the ‘Liberty and Livelihood’ slogan for its march in September 2002.

There was no march in 2001, because of the disastrous epidemic of foot and mouth disease. Before that there had been bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or ‘mad cow’ disease. Without a doubt, the countryside has been battered in recent years — or certain groups and individuals in the countryside feel that it has.

There is more to the countryside than farming, too, of course. The population of the countryside is changing; the rural economy is changing; and the government’s attitude towards the countryside has changed. This last change is symbolised by the replacement of the former Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). There is an awareness that food (alive or dead) has been hauled about the country from suppliers, to warehouses, to retail outlets more than is necessary or desirable, and that it is time for a more rational, local sourcing of produce, or ‘farmers’ markets’.

Resources

Rm1 is the larger part of an article by David Storey, published in the January 2003 issue of *Geography Review*. ‘Changing approaches to rural development’, as the title suggests, sets the scene in general terms. Storey ends his article by referring to different rural points of view. Rm2, an edited version of an article by Nick Gee entitled ‘Second homes in England and Wales’ highlights one potent source of difference. This article was published in *Geography Review* in May 2002.

Key concepts

There are certain ineluctable *facts* to be considered — and both articles supply plenty of these; but of more interest, in the long run, are the *values* that are held by different groups. Does it make sense to speak of ‘urban values’ as opposed to ‘rural values’? We can, presumably, make some sense of the difference between the values of ‘conservationists’ and ‘developers’, and between native rural dwellers and second-home owners. The important thing is that we understand that different groups may be ‘coming from’ different places, and have different *perspectives*.

Development

- 1 It is worth finding out what students know/think about the Countryside Alliance and its objectives. Much may depend upon where your students ‘come from’ — whether they are urban or rural, or suburban or agents of ‘counter-urbanisation’.
- 2 Rural development, says Storey, has been ‘top down’ in the past; now it is ‘bottom up’:

↓ Top-down development	↑ Bottom-up development
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 It might be as well to sort out what we mean by these expressions.
- 3 Read Rm1. This source might be best exploited in groups, or individually, in writing. It does not lend itself to a lot of discussion.
- 4 Rm2 lends itself to discussion and also to problem solving. It is set out as a balancing of two positions, debate-style. A problem-solving exercise is set on Qs2, and one possible approach is outlined on the answer sheet.



Changing approaches to rural development

David Storey

Over the past 10 to 15 years there have been significant changes in the way in which rural development is conceived and practised in the UK. There are three key elements underlying these changes. First, it is now widely recognised that 'rural' does not necessarily mean 'agricultural'. Second, it is commonly accepted that local individuals and groups should be more actively involved in the development process. Third, there has been increasing 'Europeanisation' of the rural development agenda. This article looks at each of these elements in more detail.

The changing nature of rural areas

Three interrelated aspects of change can be identified:

- the declining importance of agriculture
- the increasing diversity of economic activities in rural areas
- the changing socioeconomic characteristics of the rural population

Throughout the so-called 'developed' world a variety of processes have led to increased agricultural efficiency. This means that the numbers employed in agriculture have gone down, as has its contribution to economic output. In the UK in the early 1950s agriculture employed over 1 million people; this has now declined to just over 400,000. Factors such as increased mechanisation have played a part in this decline but amalgamation of holdings into larger farm units has seen the number of holdings decline from over 520,000 in 1939 to a current level of 234,000.

The growth of other economic activities in the countryside, including rural industrialisation and the expansion of the service sector, has also helped to change the pattern of employment. A variety of factors have contributed to this growth. The increasing role of the service sector globally is one significant element. Improved transport links have made some rural areas much more accessible from the major cities. The rapid rise of the internet and associated communication and information technologies also means that some industries are free to locate almost anywhere.

A third element is the changing social composition of the countryside. Obviously this is linked to the previous two factors as agriculturally-based occupations

are replaced by manufacturing and services. There has been in-migration into many rural areas from urban centres, a phenomenon generally referred to as **counter-urbanisation**. In England, the population of rural areas increased by over 16% between 1971 and 1991. This has had a variety of effects. For example, issues sometimes arise which generate conflict between 'natives' and 'newcomers' and communities may appear to separate along this fault line. The increasing popularity of rural living may raise local land prices, leading to a shortage of housing for local people.

'Top-down' to 'bottom-up' and partnership

The second element of change affecting rural policy is the growth in popularity of 'bottom-up' approaches to development. Traditionally, development and planning were seen in 'top-down' terms. Planners and development specialists – a professional elite – were believed to be in the best position to decide what should be done. This approach has been heavily criticised for failing to take account of local people's views on issues of direct concern to them. As a result, alternative models of development have been advocated.

The arguments in favour of a more bottom-up approach are that it is desirable to include the concerns of local people and to encourage those people to participate actively in devising strategies for their own areas. It is also believed that local people are empowered by being actively involved in implementing change. In other words, the idea rests upon a democratisation of the development process.

Other reasons have also been suggested for the rise in popularity of such approaches over the past decade:

- there is a recognition of the failure of top-down mechanisms
- the bottom-up approach is cheaper
- planners and politicians can rid themselves of responsibility by placing it on the shoulders of local development groups
- although the rhetoric implies local control, the initiatives are still coming from above

These developments can be viewed in a broader context. In the UK, two related elements are important. The first



is the present government's concern to promote the idea of a 'stakeholder' society. One dimension of this is the idea of widespread consultation. The 2000 Rural White Paper for England, *Our Countryside: The Future*, outlines a vision of a 'living countryside', a 'working countryside', a 'protected countryside' and a 'vibrant countryside'. Within this, the desirability of devolving power to a local level and encouraging partnership approaches is emphasised. Of course, it needs to be borne in mind that consultation is not the same as empowerment — people may be consulted but not necessarily listened to!

The second element is the government's promotion of the idea of 'joined-up government', implying closer integration of government policy across a range of areas.

Europeanisation of the development agenda

Since 1973, when the UK joined what was then the EEC, rural policies have been increasingly influenced or controlled by the European Union (EU).

First, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU not only provides support for the prices of agricultural products but also influences the structure of agriculture through various mechanisms such as retirement schemes and inducements to grow (or not to grow) particular crops.

Second, various measures under the EU Structural Funds result in financial benefits for particular regions.

Third, the increasing emphasis on the promotion of a bottom-up and integrated ethos within rural development has been promoted by the EU. The approach was outlined originally in the European Commission's 1988

document entitled *The Future of Rural Society*. More recently, the Cork Declaration of 1996 made explicit this commitment.

Funding can be used to encourage local animation and capacity-building, thereby emphasising the community development aspect. For example, groups in the Marches area in Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire helped support a wide range of projects. These included bracken composting, setting up a museum tea room, marketing organic milk and evaluating shopping patterns in a small market town.

There is no single 'community' view in rural places. Rural residents may well have views which conflict. Factors such as class, gender and ethnicity can lead to groups having different aspirations. For example, the desires and aims of wealthier rural residents may not be the same as those of the less well off. Organisations such as the Countryside Alliance try to present a 'rural voice', but the nature of rural areas is such that there are many competing and conflicting voices.

Even where local consensus can be reached and where these 'political' tensions can be overcome, there may well be 'technical' problems associated with trying to involve a wide cross-section of local people. Much voluntary and community-based activity in rural places is carried out by a small number of dynamic individuals. Many rural residents do not have the time, resources or energy to participate in these sorts of activities. There is, then, a risk that those who claim to represent the community may be drawn from a particular section of rural society and that some voices may be excluded.

Geography Review, January 2003.



Second homes in England and Wales

Nick Gee

After the Second World War farming was modernised to reduce the dependence upon food imports which had been disrupted during the war. Modernisation included the introduction of machinery (tractors and combine harvesters) and the amalgamation of fields and whole farms to improve efficiency. These changes led to a decrease in the work-force needed in farming, so many farm labourers moved out of villages and into urban areas to seek work. Cottages and farm-houses were left empty and soon fell into disrepair.

At the same time, as businesses prospered in post-war Britain, rising incomes, paid holidays and increased personal expectations all contributed to a leisure boom. The purchasing of a second home was one part of this boom. More families than ever before could afford to buy a retreat in the country, and vacant farm cottages provided the ideal properties. Increasing car ownership and road improvements have continued to expand the areas favoured as locations for second homes.

Main locations

In Britain as a whole, second homes account for less than 1% of all properties, but this disguises the fact that they are highly concentrated in certain regions. Not surprisingly these tend to be popular holiday regions with attractive coastal or upland landscapes.

Within these areas, there is a concentration of second homes in certain villages which have particular appeal. For example, in Rhoscolyn on Anglesey 23% of properties are used as second homes; in Blakeney, North Norfolk, 37% of properties are second homes; whilst at High Nibthwaite in the Lake District the figure is 85%. High proportions of second homes in villages tend to increase conflict between the second-home owners and local residents.

Causes of conflict

The arguments against

Resentment over second-home ownership arises in a number of ways:

- It is sometimes seen as unfair that people are buying properties as holiday homes, to use for only a few weeks a year, while other families are unable to afford

any sort of home. (There are 224,000 second homes in Britain, and officially, there are 250,000 homeless people.)

- It is argued that second-home owners force up property prices, preventing young local people from getting onto the housing ladder. In Blakeney, after the 1953 floods, cottages could be bought for £50–£100. Nowadays the high demand for cottages, especially for use as second homes, means that a one-bedroom terraced cottage in Blakeney costs well over £100,000, nearly double the price of an equivalent inland property.
- As most second-home owners only use their holiday home for an average of 51–100 days a year, the property is left empty for the majority of the time. Where there are many such homes together, this can create ‘ghost’ villages which appear largely deserted for part of the year.
- The reduction in the number of permanent residents means there is less demand for services. Post offices, pubs and primary schools may close down, while public transport facilities may be reduced or removed. This can create particular problems for locals who are elderly, disabled or on low incomes.
- Second-home owners often buy their food at supermarkets rather than relying on the village shop. Even those who support the local shop will only provide seasonal trade. Village shops either have to raise prices or close down.

The arguments for

Second-home owners, on the other hand, argue that they can bring advantages.

- In buying abandoned and derelict houses and modernising them, second-home owners can improve the appearance of villages.
- By installing modern sanitation, damp-proofing, wiring etc. they improve the quality of the housing stock and provide employment for local tradespeople.
- Second-home owners may also employ local people as cleaners, gardeners and decorators to maintain their properties. In north Wales, where arson attacks are feared, local residents are hired for security purposes, to keep an eye on empty properties.



- Second-home owners, as tourists, help provide seasonal employment in cafés, pubs and tourist attractions. Indeed, second homes are sometimes rented out by their owners during holiday periods, providing an important source of tourist accommodation for non-owners.

The government plans to abolish the 50% council tax discount that is given to second homes, a measure that should raise £100 million nationally. It is proposed that local councils use the revenue generated to fund affordable homes for local people. Local authorities in Devon and Somerset are hoping to force people to seek planning permission before they turn properties into second homes. In communities where over 10% of houses are already second homes, permission will be refused.

In some communities mobile shops have been established to serve clusters of hamlets, whilst multi-purpose schemes with the 'pub as the hub' are also seen as an important strategy in rural regeneration. This idea involves combining the shop and post office into the

village pub, thereby reducing overheads and providing multiple income sources for the proprietor, who is then able to survive with a small threshold population.

Conclusions

Second homes are a topical and contentious issue. Locals and tourists will always be in conflict with each other because of their different outlooks and different interests in the countryside. However, second-home owners are an easy scapegoat for the decline of village life. It is perhaps better to regard them as one component of counter-urbanisation (the movement of people from urban areas into the countryside). Commuters and retirees, who have migrated into villages in far larger numbers than second-home owners, have also contributed to the socioeconomic changes in villages. The key question is whether these people have actually caused the decline of the traditional village community, or whether they are merely a symptom of it.

Geography Review May 2002.





Changing approaches to rural development

D Questions can be answered in class or group **discussion**.

I Questions call for some **information** to be sought.

W Questions might best be addressed in **writing**.

① Storey refers to the ‘changing socioeconomic characteristics of the rural population’. Make a summary list, in your own words, of what he then goes on to say about precisely what changes have taken place.

D W

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② ‘Issues sometime arise which generate conflict between “natives” and “newcomers”,’ says Storey. Give examples of issues that you think might cause such conflict. **W**

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③ One reason for encouraging bottom-up development is the belief that local people are ‘empowered’ by being actively involved in implementing change. What do you think ‘empowered’ means? **I W**

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④ The 2000 Rural White Paper for England, *Our Countryside: The Future*, laid plans for a ‘working countryside’, and a ‘protected countryside’. Is there any potential for conflict between these two aspects of this ‘vision’ for the countryside? **W**

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⑤ Summarise in your own words what you take to be the thinking behind the EU’s policy for rural areas. What seem to be its overall objectives? **W**

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⑥ In what respect, according to Storey, may the views expressed by the Countryside Alliance give a limited idea, only, of the wishes and aspirations of people living in the countryside? **W**

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Second homes in England and Wales (Rm2)

D Questions can be answered in class or group **discussion**.

I Questions call for some **information** to be sought.

W Questions might best be addressed in **writing**.

① Why should what Gee calls ‘road improvements’ have led to more people buying second homes in the countryside? **D**

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② Why might the 15% of those whose permanent homes are in High Nibthwaite have cause to resent the owners of 85% of the homes, who live elsewhere? **D**

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③ Could we solve the problem of homelessness at a stroke by outlawing second-home ownership and allocating the surplus homes to the homeless? **D**

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④ Why do you suppose that the second-home owners do not patronise the village shop(s) when they visit for a weekend or holiday? **D**

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⑤ Why should there be a fear of arson attacks on second homes in north Wales? **D I**

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⑥ **Problem-solving exercise**

Use this article as the basis for a report to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), in which you:

(a) identify the problem of increasing second-home ownership in rural areas

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(b) identify who the parties are who have an interest in the problem and some responsibility for it

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(c) suggest what might be done to alleviate or resolve the problem (i) in the short term, and (ii) in the long term

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Changing approaches to rural development (Rm1)

- ① ● technology means that fewer people are employed in agriculture
 - there has been a concentration of farms in fewer hands
 - new-style industries and businesses have located in the countryside
 - the better off, and the retired, have taken up residence in rural areas
- ② ● ‘Newcomers’ selling expensive urban property are prepared to pay prices for houses that ‘natives’ could not pay. The latter are therefore priced out of the market.
 - Newcomers have work done on their houses that may cause noise and disturbance, and that may be out of character with other houses in a village.
 - They might use cars more to drive to facilities rather than use those in the rural locality.
 - They bring suburban values and ways of life into the countryside: on-street parking, security lights, patios and barbecues.
- ③ It means that they are enabled to play their full part in democratic decision making and political/environmental activity. They are treated as ‘active citizens’ rather than as ‘subjects’ of an authoritarian, top-down state (see Topic 7).
- ④ Each aspect expresses a different *value*, in a sense: a ‘working countryside’ is one in which there will be a lot of traffic, and therefore noise. There will be delivery vans and commuters’ four-wheel drives. There will be new building, and lanes will be upgraded to highways.
A ‘protected countryside’ is one in which there will be respect for rural peace and quiet, and where villages are not compromised by modern, functional building and all the development associated with motor traffic.
- ⑤ The EU seems to want to *rationalise* agricultural activity so that not too much of one item is produced, or too little of another, and so that resources are exploited most efficiently; and it seems to want to *equalise* development across different regions, so that there is not an imbalance of economic activity and prosperity in different parts of the EU.
- ⑥ The Countryside Alliance likes to think that it is *the* voice of country people — that country people are united in their support for foxhunting, for example, and their opposition to change foisted upon them by urban planners. In reality, the Alliance may only represent a minority of vocal traditionalists, and it may be that country people are no more homogenous, no more united in their wishes and aspirations, than urbanites. In other words, country people cannot be spoken of as if they were one sort of people, in *stereotype* fashion.

Second homes in England and Wales (Rm2)

- ① By ‘road improvements’ Gee means new roads being built, and existing roads being made straighter and wider, perhaps made into dual carriageways. Thus, people living in towns can reach rural areas quickly and easily, reducing commuting time, and making a weekend retreat more feasible.
- ② Permanent homeowners might regret that their sons and daughters cannot afford to buy property in the village; and they might dislike the fact that so much of the village is shut up, particularly in the winter. On the other hand, there is presumably rather little employment about, so the houses might well be unoccupied and neglected if they were not second homes — and the second-home owners might well retire to the village in time.



- ③ The idea would not be feasible because to outlaw second-home ownership would be impossible in a free society; the state would not be able to afford to buy the surplus homes at their market price, and then to give them away; the homeless could not be ordered to live where the empty homes happened to be; there would not be jobs for them in the areas to which they were sent. The plan smacks of the darkest days of Stalinist communism.
- ④ The village shop probably offers rather little choice and can't sell produce in bulk, so its prices are relatively high. It is easy for second-home owners to buy what they need at their local supermarket and to load the car with it, before retreating to the countryside.
- ⑤ There is less need for fear than there was — but Welsh nationalists have targeted properties owned by absentee English owners in the past, particularly in Gwynedd which is Welsh speaking. They wanted to protect Welsh property and traditions from the English, from English culture, and from the English language.
- ⑥ **Problem-solving exercise**
- (a) The problem is that as houses become vacant in rural areas they are often snapped up at inflated prices with the result that locals cannot afford them. Village amenities, and the very identity of villages, are put under threat. They become commuter villages — suburban villages — and much of their former rural character is lost.
- (b) Those parties who have an interest in the problem and some responsibility for it are as follows:
- The *second-home owners* themselves; they may put rather little into the village in exchange for their enjoyment of its ambience.
 - *Permanent residents* in that they may never really come to know their neighbours; their village 'dies' in the off-season, and during the week, and village facilities may close down.
 - *Shop proprietors*, pub landlords and others who may no longer be able to make a living from merely seasonal trade.
 - The *local council* which loses revenue from council tax paid by permanent residents, and voter-numbers drop.
 - *Estate agents* who do rather well out of the sale of properties at high prices and may be 'responsible' for promoting the increase in second-home ownership.
- (c) (i) Short-term strategies:
- Council tax could be levied on all owners at 100% and the money be invested in affordable homes for locals.
 - Planning permission might be required for second-home use of property, and permission refused when a certain proportion of the housing stock in use as second homes has been reached.
- (ii) Long-term strategies:
- Local services — shops, post office, pub — might be concentrated in one building, under one proprietor, to reduce overheads.
 - Local people might be given priority in the purchase of affordable housing, sold not through estate agents but through the local council or housing association.
 - Encouragement might be given to local businesses so that local people — and second-home owners — have an incentive to live in the village rather than merely to stay in it from time to time.

