

So WHO DOES OWN ENGLAND?

MIKE HANNIS reviews a new book that asks an awkward question.

Who Owns England? How we lost our green and pleasant land, and how to take it back.
By Guy Shrubsole (William Collins, 376pp)

Andy Wightman's exemplary research in Scotland is the acknowledged inspiration for this eagerly awaited book turning the spotlight on England, where the iniquity all began. Building on the work of Kevin Cahill and Marion Shoard, Shrubsole updates the picture for a new generation. Wales and Ireland await their own champions.

Shrubsole deploys investigative techniques unimaginable before the internet era, as well as making judicious use of Freedom of Information legislation, which was not an option for earlier researchers. He also takes advantage of the slow opening up of the Land Registry, which has finally begun releasing occasional trickles of land ownership data. These releases have been due in no small part to pressure from Shrubsole himself, alongside fellow campaigners and data magicians such as Anna Powell Smith and Christian Eriksson.

The book traces the bizarre history of land ownership in England, from the ur-landgrab of the Norman conquest right down to the present day. Separate chapters offer potted histories of major players, then marshal the best available information to estimate their current holdings.

The One Percent

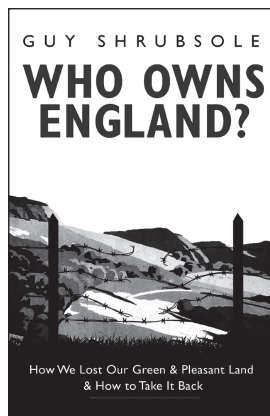
Strictly speaking the Crown still owns all English land, though in practice it directly controls 'only' around 1.4 percent of it. The Church of England owns 0.5 percent, but is oddly vague about the much larger areas it sold off.

The headline revelation is that less than one percent of the population literally owns half the country. A tiny number of old aristocratic families still privately own around a third of it, while those who have joined the super-rich more recently own another seventeen percent. Fifteen million proud owner-occupiers of ordinary houses and flats, whose homes are supposedly their castles, together own only five percent of England. This it seems is probably a comparable area to that held by the micro-élite who actually do own castles. Renters, of course, own none.

Companies own a further 18 percent. A list of the top 100 reveals that the biggest landholdings are those of privatised water companies and grouse moor estate management companies. (As regular readers will know, Shrubsole has a loudly buzzing bee in his bonnet about grouse moors.) Conservation charities including the National Trust own around two percent.

Public bodies including the Forestry Commission, the Ministry of Defence and all local authorities combined own 8.5 percent – only half the size of the 17 percent which remains 'unregistered land'. Shrubsole's educated guess is that most of this is also owned by the aristocracy.

Though there's more precision here than ever before, the outline of the story is familiar. But in each section, the foreground is



filled in with well-chosen examples of finer-grained detail. The narrative is surprisingly fast moving, a personal journey of discovery interspersing historical and analytical passages with first-person tales of adventure, such as a descent into secret tunnels under central London.

An Old Story Retold

It's no spoiler to reveal that the book does not literally provide a list of who owns every parcel of land in England. Undertaking that mammoth – but entirely feasible – task should after all be the job of the Land Registry. As might be expected, the Registry's continued refusal to see this as its role is a recurring theme. With characteristic optimism, Shrubsole suggests speeding up progress by including "a modern Domesday Survey of all land ownership" in the 2021 census.

Some may be disappointed to find no revolutionary proposals for the compulsory redistribution of land. Although the book does end with a rousing call to 'action', in practice most of the actions called for come down to agitation in favour of reform.

Most of the policy recommendations will seem both sensible and familiar to *Land* readers. Shrubsole argues for introducing a Community Right to Buy, as exists in Scotland, and for extending compulsory purchase powers, "giving councils the right to buy land cheaply again so they can build more affordable housing". He offers cautious support for land value taxation, and proposes measures aimed at improving public access and nature conservation (including upland rewilding) on privately owned land.

My one query was who exactly the author means by "we" in the subtitle and throughout the book. Presumably it's campaigner's shorthand for the 99 percent of the population who don't own very much of England at all, and have little chance of ever doing so. But putting it this way suggests some halcyon bygone days in which "we" did own the land, which is an unhelpful fiction.

What the Normans and subsequent enclosers imposed was not only a grossly unfair pattern of land ownership. It was the very idea that land itself can or should ever be privately owned by anyone. To really "take it back" requires challenging this idea. Reclaiming land from the rich is essential, but is not the end of the story.

The answer to the even trickier question "who *should* own England" cannot be a simplistic "us", to which one gains entry by being born in a certain place, and which by definition requires an excluded "them". I'm not for a moment suggesting that this is what Shrubsole has in mind. But in these days of rampant nativism, it is important to be clear about such things.

Minor quibbles aside, this book is both an essential reference work and an entertaining read – not an easy combination to achieve. Despite the many calamitous injustices recounted, it retains a heroic positivity, refusing ever to sink into cynicism or digress too far into speculative conspiracy theories. The bald facts are after all quite wild enough, as the extract opposite illustrates.