

EQUALITY

IN A ZERO CARBON COUNTRYSIDE

Demand for renewable energy and carbon storage to achieve a net zero carbon economy by 2050 could bring wealth to rural Britain — but who will benefit?

The British countryside is prosperous, but it is through urban wealth imported by people who earn their living in town. People who work the land are progressively squeezed out by worsening terms of trade between the country and the town. This was the main theme of *The Land's Rural Manifesto*, first published in 2016, and it remains true today (see box below).

However there are changes on the horizon that could see rural land — or “natural capital” as it is now sometimes called — generating wealth for the rural economy on a hitherto unprecedented scale.¹ In response to the threat of global warming, the Government has belatedly set a target of achieving “net zero” carbon emissions by 2050. Any steps that are made to achieve this will alter the balance of power between town and country. Land is an essential component of the drive to achieve zero carbon, in two main respects: it is a source of renewable energy and resources, and a repository for carbon that is drawn down from the atmosphere.

Ever since Newcastle started exporting coal to London around the 14th century, cities have prospered and swelled thanks to deliveries of highly concentrated fossil fuel energy. The main substitute for these now disgraced fuels will be the renewable energy sources that we tapped in the past: wind, biomass, and water, plus solar, which are dispersed in less concentrated form across the land mass and the surrounding sea. These are now all cheaper, safer, quicker and easier to install than



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the alternative, nuclear power; though whether they can be provided as cheaply and abundantly as fossil fuels remains to be seen. They will be needed not only to furnish existing electricity supplies, but also through electrolysis to produce vast amounts of hydrogen, which is now touted by some as the number one replacement for fossil fuels in a wide range of uses, such as the steel industry, transport, heating buildings, space shuttles and fertiliser manufacture (see “Is There Life After Fert?” p.38).

What renewables will do is restore wealth to the countryside where they are found. All that energy is at least as valuable to industry as the oil, coal and gas it replaces, and provided rural interests play their cards right, industry will fork out for it. Unless the focus is entirely upon nuclear energy and off-shore

Illusory Opulence: An Extract from *The Land's* 2016 Rural Manifesto

The British countryside is basking in prosperity. Newly-thatched cottages, gleaming Range Rovers, 300 horse power tractors, and rolling seas of wheat and barley testify that the countryside harbours a great deal of wealth. However this opulence is not shared by everyone who lives there; it masks an obstinate persistence of age-old inequalities.

People living in the deep countryside in lowland England on average earn about £90 per week more than people living in urban areas. On the other hand people working in all rural areas earn on average about £90 per week less than people working in urban areas.¹⁰ The reason for this apparent paradox is that large numbers of wealthy people who live in the country earn their living in the city. The countryside does not currently generate wealth, it imports it, and it imports the people who

earn it. As long ago as 1999 a Cabinet Office report entitled *Rural Economies* noted that “large parts of rural England risk becoming the exclusive preserve of the more affluent sections of the population.”

The influx of wealthy incomers to the countryside is sometimes applauded on the grounds that they spread money around the local economy: they buy local foods, and employ local builders and services. However their wealth has also allowed them to buy up huge swathes of rural infrastructure, with the result that the price of houses, agricultural buildings and small parcels of land has rocketed out of the reach of many people who both live and work in the countryside, whose wages, despite the largesse of the incomers, remain below the national average. Young people born in the countryside often find they have no choice but to move to the city

to earn enough money to pay for their accommodation.¹¹

Behind this disparity lies a history of declining terms of trade. Adam Smith in 1776 noted how protectionist measures taken by urban guilds and corporations, and access to cheap foreign commodities enabled the town to sell manufactured goods dearly and buy raw materials cheaply in its dealing with the country.¹²

Little has changed: the rural economy today remains vulnerable to competition from global markets and to aggressive price bargaining from cartels of processors and distributors (supermarkets) — whereas large sections of the urban service economy and so-called “creative” industries are immune from these forces. This explains why less than nine percent of earnings from the UK food industry go to UK farmers and fishermen.¹³

wind, a sizeable chunk of the £68 billion or so currently paid out every year by the UK to oil-producing countries and corporations² could find its way into the rural economy — rather more than the miserable £3 billion currently paid out in farm subsidies.

And that's not all: renewable energy is only half the net zero story. The Government also wants to remove carbon from the atmosphere and store it indefinitely, in order to offset intractable carbon emissions from high impact industries that they are unwilling to abandon, notably air travel, and concrete manufacture. Landowners are already being paid to store carbon in trees, and there is a vocal lobby advocating payments for soil carbon capture as well.

On top of that there are the “ecosystem services”, biodiversity offsets and other public goods which rural land managers are now urged and increasingly paid to provide.³ We will also require natural fibres such as timber, hemp and wool to replace fossil-fuel-sourced plastics, and high energy products such as steel and concrete. And we will still need to produce food; and biomass fuel. In short, in a biological economy there will be increasing demand for rural land from all these competing uses. The value of agricultural land, which has quadrupled in price since 2000, will continue to rise and the rural economy stands to become a great deal richer.

Who Benefits?

Who within the rural economy is likely to benefit from this influx of wealth? As things stand now, the answer is simple: landowners, notably the 28,000 members of the Country Land and Business Association who are alleged to own half of England, and landowning members of the National Farmers Union who possess much of the rest.

Some of this wealth will trickle down to their employees, but there are now not so many of these left. In any case most schemes for exploiting the energy and carbon storage potential of land require little in the way of actual work from landowners. Grazing sheep round ranks of solar panels, reducing the size of your cattle herd, turning your arable over to extensive grazing, planting and maintaining native woodland — none of these activities are labour intensive.

Going the whole hog by rewilding your country estate will typically involve firing workers, in which case their cottages can be rented out to urban incomers, while the barns are converted to upmarket offices — as has happened at Knepp Estate in Sussex, where property released for rental brings in upwards of £500,000 a year.⁴ And the Government is happy to throw more money into the aristocratic rewilding pot. Answering the charge that the Landscape Recovery Scheme,



Solar Farm Bonanza

Brace yourself for a new wave of solar energy parks. There may be one coming near you soon, especially if you live near a disused coal-fired power station with its grid connection going begging. Don't expect it to look like the leafy artist's impression pictured above. That's promotional material for Next Energy Solar Fund, a Guernsey-based investment company. Their real life installations at Great Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire, and Staughton, Bedfordshire host ranks of panels stretching to the horizon across bare, flat, arable land.

But Next Energy's solar “farms” of 38 and 50 megawatts (MW) respectively

are puny compared to what is in the pipeline. The Finnish-backed company Evolution Power has plans for a 165MW project on 400 acres at Aldington in Kent. Mallard Pass solar farm, a joint venture between the Chinese firm Canadian Solar and Swansea-based Windel Energy, aims to generate 350MW from 2175 acres on the Lincs/Rutland border.

Any advance on 350? The Exeter-based firm Low Carbon has confirmed plans to build a 500MW farm on a site of about two square miles connected to the substation at Cottam power station in Lincs. And the same grid connection

is the target of a 600MW proposal from transnational Island Green, in tandem with another 480MW park connected to the grid at nearby West Burton. Island Green also have a joint venture involving 700MW of projects with Foresight Group, the London-based firm who have been buying up farms in Wales for tree-planting.

All of these proposals are over 50 MW which means that instead of applying to the local authority for planning permission, developers apply directly to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy — not a government department noted for its concern for local communities.

Some of the profit from these projects will go to investors in the development companies. But landowners are told to expect rents of £1100 over acre, plus a bonus when returns exceed expectations. This is nearly 12 times as much as a farmer could derive from subsidies through the Basic Payment scheme. Small wonder then if landowners are eager to join consortiums that host solar farms: 100 acres will bring in over £100,000 a year for doing sod all except grazing sheep on the land from time to time. If you thought EU subsidies were a scam for landowners, you ain't seen nothing yet.

S Rai-Roche, *UK Experiencing Solar Boom with Raft of 100MW+ PV Projects in Planning Phase*, PVTech, 9 Nov 2021, www.pv-tech.org.

J Saunders, *Solar Farms — Benefits for Landlords*, Stephens Scown, 3 Dec 2021, www.stephens-scown.co.uk.

which represents over a third of the overall farm subsidy budget, will swell the bank accounts of estate owners and wealthy companies, Secretary of State for the Environment, George Eustice responded:

“I make the example of Knepp. There will be other estates, other large landowners who would like to follow that journey, and we want to be able to support that choice . . . I think you have to move away from thinking who gets the subsidy.”⁵

Urban and industrial interests seeking carbon offsets or ecosystem services will be at ease with this arrangement since a small number of compliant landowners are easier to deal with than a multiplicity of small proprietors. In fact the commercial sector may claw back some of its expenditure by buying farmland itself for offsetting purposes. Foresight, a multinational investment firm with offices in the Shard, has recently bought four farms in Wales for offsetting carbon through tree-planting, and is one of several companies pursuing this agenda.⁶

This could seriously undermine food production which, unlike ecosystem services and carbon storage, is not regarded as a “public good” and hence not currently considered eligible for subsidies. The recent trade deal with Australia demonstrates how little the Government cares about food quality and security. Urban interests may also try to minimise the tribute paid to the countryside, by producing cheap junk food in vertical farms and microbial laboratories, as advocated by George Monbiot and the Rethinkx crew, instead of buying quality produce from rural farms.⁷ A worst case scenario would be the dense compact metropolis advocated by James Lovelock, where “real food grown in soil” is reserved for “the privileged” while “the poor” are fed on “tissue cultures of meats and vegetables and junk food made from any convenient organism.”⁸

Lovelock’s dystopia is a conceivable destination for zero-carbon humanity, not an inevitable one. But there are indicators that we are currently headed in that direction, not least of which is continued attrition of the rural land-based workforce, as landowners engross land, deploy robots on the productive acres and hand the rest back to nature.

Rural Lives Matter

The task of halting global warming is so urgent and so challenging that the political and social implications of proposed solutions are rarely considered, at least in Britain (these matters do arise in negotiations between rich and poor countries). But as long as these factors are ignored, any policies adopted are almost bound to favour the powerful. It is therefore essential that they are raised by progressive analysts and campaigners. Zero carbon land policy must not be a sinecure for a rural elite. It is never in the interests of a democratic society for land ownership to be concentrated in the hands of a small number of people — and still less so when land is the source of nearly all energy and resources.

“You have to move away from thinking who gets the subsidy.”

George Eustice,
Secretary of State for
Agriculture

Nor should these policies further impede access to land and opportunities for those people (and especially any young people whose aptitudes and energies are best suited to outdoor work and grappling with physical reality). Over the last century so many landless people have been urbanised that they don’t even know what they have lost. Challenging land ownership patterns has slipped off the agenda in England and Wales, though not in Scotland. The toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol and the Black Lives Matters movement represent growing recognition of the poisonous legacy of colonial dispossession. But few indigenous British people from the landless classes are aware of how their ancestors were dispossessed through a process of land concentration that peaked in the 18th and 19th century enclosures, but still continues today.

We are therefore updating our Rural Manifesto with a raft of new recommendations designed to heighten awareness of these matters and stimulate discussion about them. Some, perhaps, may prove to be more appropriate to a brainstorm than a manifesto. But they all have as their objective the building of a rural economy which is not only environmentally remedial, but also equitable and accessible to all who seek what Adam Smith described as

“the pleasures of a country life, the tranquillity of mind that it promises and, wherever the injustice of human laws does not disturb it, the independence that it really affords.”⁹

Many thanks to Clifford Harper who provided all except three of the illustrations for this article and its recommendations. Most of these came from Country Diary Drawings, published by Agraphia Press, 2003. Clifford Harper also provided original illustrations for the 2016 Rural Manifesto.

Thanks also to Nick Hayes for illustrations on pages 19 and 20 which are from his Book of Trespass, Bloomsbury, 2021.

REFERENCES

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11. Although children under 15 make up about 18 per cent of the population in both cities and countryside, the proportion of 16-29 year olds in rural areas is only 13.5 percent, whereas in urban areas it is over 20 percent. DEFRA, *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, 2012. Since 2002, the average age in rural areas is higher and has increased faster than in urban areas. DEFRA *Statistical Digest of Rural England* 2012.
12. Adam Smith, op cit 9, Book I Chapter X Part II, 1776.
13. The UK’s agriculture and fisheries industries combined generate less than nine percent of the total value added by the UK food industry. Nearly seven times as many people are employed in catering and food retail as are employed in agriculture and fisheries. DEFRA, *Food Statistics Pocketbook*, 2020.

EQUALITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Access to Land

Nick Hayes, The Book of Trespass



- England, Wales and Northern Ireland governments should appoint Land Reform Commissions similar to that operating in Scotland, with a brief to examine all aspects of land ownership. These should include: the amount of wealth and power existing patterns of ownership confer on an elite minority; the extent to which lack of access to land may cramp people's aspirations and opportunities; the impacts upon employment and the economy; and ways in which access to land, both rural and urban, should and could be improved.

Agriculture

- The provision of healthy food at affordable prices should be regarded as a public good, and eligible for subsidies when farmgate prices are low, or supplies insufficient. Where farmers are vulnerable to aggressive pricing by processors and supermarkets, the government should regulate prices, for example, through an agency similar to the former Milk Marketing Board.
- To reflect regional comparative advantages, most livestock farmers are found to the west of the country and most arable farmers to the east. The result is an excess of slurry on livestock farms causing pollution, and a deficiency of fertility on arable farms requiring the application of artificial fertilisers, along with herbicides and pesticides to address problems caused by monoculture. The two problems can be made to cancel each other out by returning to traditional mixed farming where clover and grass leys feed cattle and fertilise arable crops.



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- The million or so acres of land devoted to horseyculture should be turned over to something more useful, or else the horses (and their owners) put to work.

Housing



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- Buildings as far as reasonably possible should be constructed primarily out of natural materials, notably wood, since this stores carbon. Local stone or earth should be preferred to concrete, and lime to Portland cement.
- Research and start-up grants should be made available for firms supplying home insulation made from wool, hemp or other UK grown plant fibres.
- Nearly all residential static caravan sites are restricted to people over the age of 50. This is discriminatory: provision must be made for young people and families to benefit from this affordable housing model. Static caravans should be made of wood, not aluminium and plastic, and high standards of landscaping, environmental impact and garden/allotment provision should be observed.

Transport

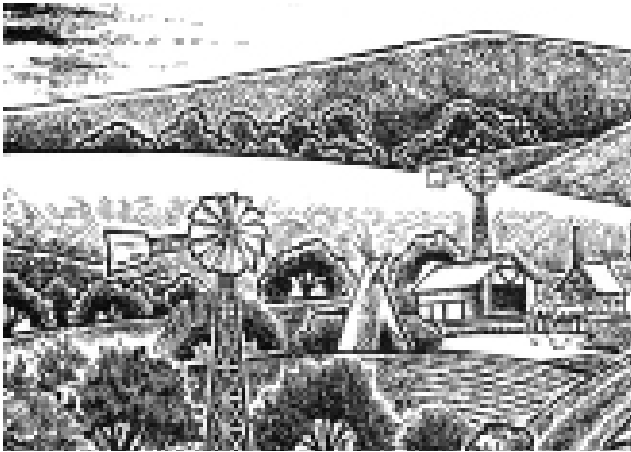
- Calibrate and hypothecate road tax on private electric cars so as to subsidise renewably-powered public transport, including universal school bus provision and car hire services based in villages, and at rail stations.
- Land should be assigned to produce biodiesel or ethanol to keep existing petroleum-powered tractors and commercial vehicles running for their full potential lifespan, notably for people who cannot afford a new electric vehicle.
- Over 80 percent of the world's population has never flown. Passenger air travel is elitist and environmentally destructive: rural land should not be used as a carbon sink to offset its emissions.



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- * Close country lanes once a month to allow livestock to graze the verges and hedgerows.
- Use canals for freight.

Energy



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- Planning obstacles introduced in 2015, against onshore wind, the cheapest source of renewable energy, should be replaced with policies favourable to community-owned ventures.
- Leases for onshore wind farms (currently in the order of £6000 per acre of land rendered unfarmable per year) and for solar parks should not be paid solely to landowners, but at least half to the local community. Planning policies for onshore wind and solar should prioritise community-owned projects that are a co-operative venture between the landowner, the local authority and other local stakeholders.
- Where there is strong local support for a community-owned renewable energy project on a given site of low grade land, but the landowner refuses to allow it, the local authority should be empowered to apply a compulsory purchase order.

Forestry

- Woodlands are multifunctional and should be planted with a number of objectives in mind, including to provide livelihoods, fuelwood and accessible spaces for local people.
- Woodland planting should normally be carried out at high densities so that (a) there is maximum carbon sequestration in the first few years; (b) there are thinning crops suitable for construction or firewood; and (c) the mature timber is of good timber quality.
- Avoid building with high energy materials such as concrete and fired bricks, and use more wood and other biomass, since this is a way of storing carbon. Plant and manage more woodlands to provide building timber, particularly of quality softwoods such as Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar.
- Grants for tree-planting should preferably be given for land that is unsuitable for other uses. Grants should not be given for planting trees on high quality permanent grassland, nor on potentially arable land unless there is a dearth of trees and a surplus of arable land in the locality.



Nick Hayes

Public Goods and Rewilding

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- Reward workers, not landowners, for managing land ecologically. Environmental payments should not be made to landowners for doing little or nothing to their land, but to people actively working on land in a manner that is both productive *and* environmentally benign.
- To maintain food production, rewilding should not normally be carried out on arable land or high quality agricultural land (grade 3 and above, and some grade 4) except perhaps in the case of fenland peat soils.

• On the “land to the tiller” principle, it is not acceptable for large landowners to pull entire farms or estates out of production, for rewilding or other purposes, while there are other farmers or new entrants in the locality in need of land. County Councils with a waiting list of prospective farm tenants should be empowered to compulsorily purchase, at agricultural prices, a proportion of the better land on any farm or estate that is taken out of production.

• Subsidies for estates and large farms that are rewilded should be contingent upon the landowner donating at least half the land rewilded to a local public body such as the parish council, the local authority or a locally managed conservation trust.

• In the less favoured areas (hill farms) subsidies currently supporting an excess of extensive sheep farming should be redirected to a wider range of activities that support a more benign ecology and a vibrant local economy: sensitive afforestation for timber and fuelwood, renewable energy, land improvement, hill crops, local-scale horticulture and dairying, sheep for wool and manure as well as meat, land management for wildlife and water conservation, and ecotourism.

Carbon Sinks

• When land is taken out of food production for tree-planting or rewilding, any carbon captured and stored there is replacing historic losses of carbon, removed when the land was first cleared for agriculture. It therefore cannot and should not be used to offset contemporary carbon emissions from air travel, cement production etc. Corporations with high emissions should be taxed or fined on the Polluter Pays principle without being able to claim that their activities are “zero carbon”.

• The potential benefits of soil carbon capture are disputed, and the more optimistic claims rejected by scientists. Measuring and monitoring soil carbon sequestration is fraught with problems, and storage is not permanently guaranteed; soils can lose carbon as readily as they gain it, as do forests when they are felled, succumb to disease or burn down. Direct subsidies for carbon capture are therefore unwise.

• Carbon capture and storage should be viewed as one benefit out of many provided by multifunctional forestry and agro-ecological farming practices. Farmers should not be paid for simply sequestering carbon but for producing food, timber and other goods in ways that are likely to combine carbon sequestration with other benefits such as increased biodiversity, soil health and employment opportunities. Examples include multi-functional forestry, mixed farming using clover/grass leys and cover crops, composting and conservation grazing.

• If carbon sequestration involves taking land out of production, the benefits should be weighed against the loss of food, the loss of livelihoods, and the possibility of compensatory agricultural production elsewhere causing carbon emissions.



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• If landowners are paid money specifically to capture and store carbon, their contract should state that they are obliged to pay the money back if the carbon is released back into the atmosphere, for example through logging, a forest fire or ploughing up pasture.

• Methane emissions should be calculated through the GWP* methodology (pronounced “GWP-star”), not through the out-dated GWP100 metric which is inaccurate. Methane calculations from documents employing GWP100 should not be cited in support of policies.

The original Rural Manifesto was published in *The Land* 19, with original illustrations by Clifford Harper.

It can be found under Issue 19 on the Back Issues page of *The Land* website www.thelandmagazine.org.uk

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**EQUALITY
IN THE COUNTRYSIDE**
A RURAL MANIFESTO



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Original Illustrations by Clifford Harper