



THE NATIONAL TRUST

Speech by Fiona Reynolds to the Centre for English Local History Conference – ‘W G Hoskins and the making of the English Landscape’

HOSKINS – a personal reflection

I'm deeply honoured to be invited to speak at this conference. Hoskins' 'Making of the English Landscape' is, quite honestly, a book that changed my life. Speaking here tonight is an opportunity publicly to recognise its significance to me both personally and professionally; and to say just a little about how the National Trust is exploring the contribution we can make to the study and implementation of an approach based on an understanding of landscape history.

I'm first and foremost a geographer, but when I arrived as an undergraduate in Cambridge in 1976 I was delighted to discover – a fact I hadn't known – that you could actually study something called historical geography – a legacy of HC Darby, who'd only recently retired. Finding Hoskins issued on my reading list as 'the' definite text of the late 70s was like finding what I'd always been looking for. I was already addicted to maps, and the discovery that people had connected geomorphology and history to create a discipline Hoskins had named landscape history was a revelation. I was also lucky enough to have as my supervisor Lucy Adrian, an historical geographer herself and an inspiring teacher and mentor.

I switched from geography to land economy during my undergraduate years, largely as a result of my passion for land use, and so that I could study more deeply the relationship between people, places and their management.

And throughout my professional career – at the Council for National Parks, CPRE and now the National Trust – I have been lucky enough always to work for organisations whose passion for places matched mine; and whose curiosity to explore the relationship between people and place has been a major driver in their work. Finally, Hoskins' book was my desert island discs choice!

I lived for more than twenty years in inner London and my perennial game was to try to imagine – using maps and old records – what my bike route from Walthamstow (and later Highbury) to Eaton Square would have been like fifty, a hundred, or two hundred years before. I never grew tired of tracing old drovers' routes to markets, seeking out back streets and exploring the street patterns of London.

Now I live in the countryside and, like Hoskins in his original closing words, I am privileged to be able to view from my Victorian Glebe House in the south Cotswolds a perfect Hoskins landscape: the source of the Thames less than half a mile away and (probably associated with it) an iron age hill fort and Roman Camp close by; a deserted medieval village and thirteenth century church; the remnants of medieval field patterns and droveways; a late

eighteenth century designed landscape including wonderful Trafalgar-planted woods and a canal – the Thames and Severn – that was a feat of engineering but never worked (being on limestone and the Thames watershed); and a nineteenth century railway line that took its business. And of course a twentieth century farmed landscape and settlement pattern. I walk in it constantly and am always discovering something new. I know I'm lucky – but if you want to look, you can always find traces of the past.

Hoskins' work encapsulated a critical development of both geographical and historical thinking. The relationship between geomorphology and man's impact on land use at an intensely local level had never been captured before. It's perhaps a particularly British phenomenon – we don't have the huge, uniform landscapes of many other countries with monotonous land uses. For us, intimacy is all – look at a soil map or indeed any Ordnance Survey map (my desert island discs luxury!). Among the minutiae of contours, rivers, hills and vales you can trace the development of settlements, the pattern of farming and co-existence in field patterns and commons, recreational and other uses – woods etc – the appearance of great houses and their estates, and the formal, designed elements of the landscape. Read a map closely and the history reveals itself. Dig deeper and you are hooked. It's the most fascinating way to spend an afternoon.

And yet, even the great plains of America have their secrets ready to be revealed, often through literature. Read Willa Cather's 'My Antonia' and then trace the creeks and patterns of pioneer settlers

– just still visible if you really look. Read Annie Proux’s latest novel ‘That Old Ace in the Hole’ about the Texan Panhandle and you can see a community struggling with landscape change driven by economic pressure.

And in truth we don’t have that much to be proud of. Our generation has, through the pace and scale of physical development and through the industrialisation and mechanisation of farming and forestry caused more damage in the last forty years than all the generations before us put together.

When Hoskins wrote his book far more of the past was visible – I have nearly a full set of the Hodder and Stoughton county guides that his book stimulated (will somebody please find me Wiltshire?) and while they are fascinating they also make painful reading. The traces of the past sit ever more lightly on the present, and you have to search harder than ever to find them.

So for all our apparent sophistication, we are the villains. Our landscape and townscapes are infinitely less diverse, interesting and revealing than when Hoskins was writing. And we have let this happen under our noses, while professing to be the generation that cares about history and the environment.

It’s not all bad news. I spend my twenties and thirties campaigning for better policies to protect National Parks and the wider countryside – and we do now pay farmers for looking after hedgerows rather than ripping them out, as we did when I started work. And while much of the countryside has been devoured by

concrete many places – where I live being among them, because it's an AONB – now have better planning policies than in the 30s, 40s and 50s and we are, still, just about managing to protect the Green Belt and designated countryside.

But what we don't do is fine tune policies enough, enabling them to be sensitive not just to 'the environment' or 'history' but to 'that environment' and 'that history'.

Though it might sound ungrateful to say it, there's almost a risk that everywhere will have hedgerows because you can get money to have a hedgerow, rather than that we will have sustained the locally specific, age-old techniques of the boundaries *of the place* – whether that's stone walls, banks or even a specific type of hedgerow.

One of the most exciting things to happen in my early career was the establishment of *Common Ground* – a tiny charity run by two extraordinary women, Sue Clifford and Angela King. They championed the local, the ordinary, the commonplace – and celebrated its specialness. In doing so, they taught us all to look with new eyes at what is all around us. They are responsible for Apple Day, for the revival of parish maps and milestones, for our dawning awakening that it is what is locally distinctive and authentic that makes a place worth living in. They are the Hoskins of our generation, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Although the Trust does not always use such evocative language, I believe that in many ways we are trying to do the same thing. We live in fear that the National Trust brand will subsume all local personality, and we have to be on constant watch that it does not. We write what we call Statements of Significance for each of our properties – an entirely unique description of why it is important and distinctive, what people care about and why it matters. And we try to ensure that each Property Management Plan is focused on retaining and enhancing those characteristics.

In some areas we have written or commissioned Hoskins-inspired analyses of the significance of the places we are responsible for. Perhaps best known is Susan Denyer's work on the landscape and vernacular buildings of the Lake District, which broke new ground in capturing the symbiosis between the 'natural' and the man-made in tracing minute but significant differences in field wall construction, barn door designs and roof tiles from valley to valley. The Trust has learned a great deal from this kind of painstaking research, enabling us to respond appropriately when we come to manage landscapes, make repairs, or put up new buildings.

This learning process has become part of a bigger trend towards landscape characterisation. This has developed since the 1990s, first by the Countryside Commission with its Countryside Character Programme, and more recently refined by the work of some very exciting partnerships including with local authorities, EN and EH.

The principle has extended to design guides, aimed at ensuring that additions to existing buildings or new ones are designed with greater respect for what has gone before.

As a result, increasingly we have data about what characteristics in the landscape are significant in which areas, and need to be protected and managed – and a baseline against which the support of public policy and private action can be judged, whether by planners, land and property owners or conservation agencies.

The Trust is, of course, responsible for the management of a huge estate – over 600,000 acres of land, much in the uplands and therefore less altered by intensive agriculture; over 700 miles of coastline and an extraordinary array of buildings – more than 300 great houses and gardens, often surrounded by parkland and their wider agricultural estates, 25 castles, archaeological and nature conservation sites, more than 20,000 vernacular buildings; and what must be the greatest collections of artefacts, great works of art, furniture, textiles, china – I could go on and on – in the world.

As a result, we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to retain the spirit of place through continuity of management and the application of skill – whether those skills are curatorial, land management, horticultural or any of a multitude of other specialist skills we sustain.

Like any landowner, we have made mistakes: one of my first memories as a member of a Trust Regional Committee in the mid 1980s was of being horrified that an important lowland agricultural estate had lost most of its character and landscape features through being farmed intensively by tenants during the height of the post war agricultural revolution. There have been others too.

But on the whole the Trust has been a powerful force for good in the nation's landscape – by a process of chance and serendipity as well as by more strategic acquisitions and management decisions; and by our commitment to research, often in partnership with other organisations. We now own the country's largest area of SSSIs in single ownership, some extraordinarily important archaeological sites, great tracts of open country and coastline, as well of course as an amazing collection of buildings and their contents, not to mention the great estates around them.

We have broadened the definition of heritage and our approach to management so that we increasingly tell the story of the whole – whole landscapes, whole estates, and of course the story of an every widening group of people. I hope you've heard of the Workhouse in Southwell, Mr Straw's House in Worksop; the Chartists Cottage and the Back to Backs in Birmingham as well as the two former Beatles' homes in Liverpool.

And today's property managers are highly sensitive to the need to protect and nurture *every* phase of significance so that we, and future generations, can both read and enjoy the history of a place

and how it's changed over time; as well as retaining evidence for those yet to come to draw on.

But while I am hugely proud of what the Trust is able to do, my greatest fear is that future generations will live in a sea of mediocrity, and that the Trust will be spotted a mile off by its perfect stone wall, beautiful wrought iron gate leading into a perfect garden and restored mansion. No, our success will be not only that we have looked after places well and sympathetically ourselves; but also that we have encouraged others to do likewise. This is not a mantra for no change, but change that respects the past: our countryside and heritage is the whole thing, as Hoskins knew so well – not just 'islands' isolated from the wider landscape.

But each generation has its challenges, and here are just three examples of those which we are facing at the moment

Uplands

On the whole, the uplands are places where the stories of the past can often be traced most vividly – and where public interests, whether in the form of beautiful landscapes, wildlife, historic features or public access, are or can be very visibly met.

Around 60% of the Trust's 600,000 acre estate is in the uplands and the vast bulk is farmed – either on full farm tenancies or

grazing licences. As a result, we are hugely dependent on the viability of hill farming; and on the various elements that support it – subsidies of various types, as well as the market for hill farm products.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the worst is over as far as the farmed landscape is concerned. After decades of fighting, the Common Agricultural Policy – responsible for wiping out much landscape and wildlife diversity in from the 50s to the 90s – has finally begun the process of reform, and farmers are to be paid for looking after the countryside rather than how much they can grow or produce from the land. The Trust supports this move and has spent a lot of time working with DEFRA to ensure that in return for payments, farmers will look after local landscape, historical and cultural features and provide for wildlife and access.

However, in the uplands, the precise form CAP reform is taking is resulting in a threatened collapse of farm incomes. DEFRA's decision to divide the country for payment purposes into three bands – lowland, upland and severely disadvantaged upland – has resulted in much less money being available to support hill farming, especially in remote areas – than other sorts of farming.

It's not exaggerating to say that many hill farms face ruin unless either new markets can be found, or other methods of support introduced. Our biggest fear is that people will no longer wish to farm the land, seeing no viable future.

Farming plays a crucial role in maintaining the landscape of some of England's most important upland areas. The Government needs to recognise fully the public value of upland farming which supports wildlife, maintains a rich and varied landscape, provides access to millions of people and underpins a vibrant tourism industry. Further measures are urgently needed to put upland farming on a more sustainable footing and avoid chaotic change in some of our most cherished landscapes.

We are working with many others to help find alternative forms of income for farmers – a recent project, for example, supports the development of markets for the fleece of the distinctive Lake District Herdwick sheep. I'm proud to say that we've just fitted a Herdwick carpet in our new central office in Swindon. But with sheep rearing making losses and new markets elusive for many farmers, the future looks bleak and we are taking the plight of hill farmers up at the highest level.

Sustainable Communities Plan

The second big threat is from massive development – what in the 70s and 80s was called urban sprawl; now, somewhat euphemistically, is called the Sustainable Communities Plan.

Over 600,000 houses are going to be built in England over the next few years – mostly new housing in the south east; and it cannot have escaped you there is a battle going on in the north about the extent to which the existing housing stock will be demolished or renewed.

There is an avowed intention not to make the mistakes of the past; and to incorporate elements that will make this development more sustainable. But there is a widespread fear that the new housing development, despite the intention of sustainability, will simply obliterate all traces of the past with no regard for location, tradition, or the need for facilities like schools, shops, community and other facilities which will actually make these places communities.

Losing all sense of the connection between the way places have evolved and the people who have lived in them undermines our civic culture and our sense of who we are.

Some things are different about this scheme, and here I must declare an interest, as the Trust has accepted money from the ODPM to make a contribution towards environmental quality in the housing development plans for the south east.

We have offered one of our most important nature reserves – Wicken Fen – as a greenspace for the people of Cambridgeshire. Wicken was one of the country's first nature reserves and is not only hugely important scientifically but is also culturally significant – Darwin did a lot of his research there and it is one of few

remaining fenland areas giving us some impression of the landscape pre-drainage.

But it is tiny, and vulnerable. I call it our 'nature reserve in a plastic bag' because we have had to artificially contain water levels while the surrounding, cultivated land, has dried out. But with ODPM's support we have an innovative plan for restoring wetland and biodiversity so that it will act as a 'green lung' for these expanding communities. Our ambition includes a hundred year plan to expand Wicken Fen by 1000%, by buying up surrounding farmland and returning it to fen. Already we own 1330 acres and it becomes more secure every day.

Coastline and *Shifting Shores*

My final example – though there could be many more – is our shifting coastline. Always mobile, always changing, new evidence suggests that the impact of climate change on our coasts could be both faster and more dramatic than we or anyone else had realised.

We have a special reason to be concerned about the coast. This year we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of our Neptune Coastline campaign, launched to save the coast from unplanned and damaging – mostly built – development.

As a result of this extraordinarily successful campaign the Trust now owns over 700 miles of coast, including most of the most

beautiful and vulnerable stretches in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

But any celebration of the glories of our coastline must also recognise the enormous challenges it faces. The coast never stands still, and its innate unpredictabilities are greater now than ever before, as we begin to see the pressures of climate change.

We see both the intensely local impacts – for example the coast retreating, sea defences unable to cope; and must take a broader view – we can't just respond to each problem as it arises. I sometimes describe us as the nation's canary: the first to feel the impact of change.

We've just completed our first ever coastal risk assessment, and it has exposed massive pressures from both inundation and erosion across our extensive coastal holdings. With rising sea levels, the intensity of the rate of change is increasing, and there is also likely to be an increased rate of unpredictable events of extreme weather.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of what might be in store for us happened on 16 August 2004, when flash floods caused by a freak storm of unprecedented intensity swept through the small, peaceful north Cornish village of Boscastle, wreaking massive damage in a matter of minutes.

We are one of the major landowners in the area, and most of the structures we own were damaged, as were roads, riverside walls and the harbour itself. The flood affected surrounding farmland and coastal footpaths, and caused huge damage in the Valency Valley. Our estimate is that it has cost us about £1.4 million, including uninsured costs to the Trust of around £500,000. This is the kind of responsibility we have to bear.

Change is, however, inevitable; and has always been with us. The most important message we want to get across is that change is inevitable, but we can influence it; and in doing so we need to work with nature, not against it.

Concluding remarks

Perhaps the most interesting thing that has happened within the Trust in the last fifty years has been to shift from a perception (probably never a reality) that the Trust is there to 'preserve' things; rather that our job is managing change, in ways that reflect our passion for the past but also our responsibilities for the future.

We sum up the Trust's core purpose today as 'looking after special places for ever, for everyone'. This is a dynamic process, respecting all that has gone in the past but also recognising that we have to make choices and that some change is inevitable. I often sum it up as having constantly to combine continuity – respect and indeed passion for all that has gone before – with change.

Hoskins recognised this too. Indeed, his book is full of message about landscape change – its inevitability, its fascination, its necessity. But as Christopher Taylor pointed out in his 1988 commentary, we are a generation that appears to fear and dislike change more than the generations that have come before us. If this is true, it must be because of the power of the destructive forces we can wield – and the sheer pace and scale of the changes we have brought about in our own lifetimes.

No change is not an option: the issue is how we change and how much we change. So, perhaps, fifty years on from that seminal book, our duty is to implement change in ways that do *not* erase the story of the past, but enable future generations – whether they've heard of Hoskins or not – to 'read' and respect the landscape of that past so that future generations can enjoy it as much as we do.

Can we rise to this challenge? Do we care enough to do so? To achieve it, we need to awaken a sense of belonging and ownership in communities urban and rural; to value what is there and authentic; and to demand higher standards and greater respect from all those things that do bring change.

I did not know Hoskins. But I do not believe from what I read that he was a dictatorial man – for him, it seems, the joy was of discovery and interpretation. As Christopher Taylor also reminds us, he was a true polymath, able to open doors of discovery in many different directions.

But as Christopher Taylor also reminds us, we need to remember what this discovery is *for*: it is so that we can use and interpret information intelligently, and make wise decisions about the future.

Hoskins did not tell people what to do; but I am sure he hoped that by opening people's eyes, minds and senses to the history that is all around us that we would respond appropriately. I hope he was right.

As a generation we have made some terrible mistakes but we have also sown the seeds of a better way forward. I hope that in our small way the Trust has already made a difference, and can continue to do so in the future: to help us all to take responsibility for our own actions and to help us all to renew the Hoskins vision, for the benefit not only of ourselves but so that future generations can be inspired as we have been.

FR

July 05