

Dedham Vale Society

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The Dedham Vale Society has always been closely associated with CPRE and, indeed, when the society was formed in 1938 it was proposed that, "a Committee of the Essex Branch of the CPRE be formed" But this was amended to a motion, "that a society known as the Dedham Vale Society affiliated to the Essex branch of CPRE be formed..." The amendment was carried, Sir Alfred Munnings was then elected President and the rest is history!

Thus it is appropriate that Sir Max Hastings' address, as president of CPRE, should be reproduced in this newsletter, (DVS president, Robert Erith is vice-president of CPRE-Essex).

"A vast number of the people who now live in rural areas are what we might call incomers, people who have moved there from cities or suburbs. It is sometimes a sad business, to see how they try to bring with them into villages and hamlets the spirit and values of the pavements, rather than adapt to those of rural England. My father used to remark with relish that the principal business of the countryside is death and sex, which everyone with any knowledge of wildlife knows to be true. Yet today we see legal actions brought by people who object to the racket made by crowing cockerels, the rise of vegetarianism and so-called animal rights, and a recent poll which showed that 29% of respondents would support a ban on sport fishing, because it is considered cruel. A Hampshire farmer calculated recently that each year he removes from his land 36 tons of rubbish deposited by the public, most of them no doubt people who tell opinion pollsters how much they love the countryside.

Most of us here today would agree, I think, that while we want country-dwellers to enjoy as many amenities as possible, we also want to intrude upon the natural order of things as little as possible. It is dismaying to see pavements and kerbs springing up on country roads, railings being erected around village ponds, white lines being painted on roads, and a plague of mostly quite unnecessary, grotesquely prominent signs, often advertising local attractions. I notice that the Norfolk Society, in particular, has done a wonderful job over the years, in highlighting this issue of signs. Most signs are erected in the name of public safety, an increasing preoccupation of our litigious society, the world of the blame culture. Yet each one diminishes in some small degree the wildness and thus the beauty of the countryside. Who needs huge signs proclaiming: welcome to Northamptonshire, Rose of the Shires, even if this were true. Royal Berkshire: 50 years of service to community. It is all intrusive, expensive, meaningless tosh. There should be a presumption against everything of this kind, unless an overwhelming case can be made for its utility. There should be prejudice in favour of nature.

Last month, the CPRE launched its night blight campaign, against the light pollution of Britain. Even in the remotest areas of this island, never mind in and around the cities, an orange glow suffuses our skies at night. Many villages now boast lighting, which is often wildly inappropriate to its character. We have to recognise that the introduction of village lighting often reflects the wishes of local people, though I suspect many of the enthusiasts are not country-born. But it seems as important that future generations should be able to see our stars at night, as that they should enjoy the opportunity to see our birds and wild flowers by day. The CPRE is not campaigning to remove lighting, but to plan it more sensitively to illuminate the ground beneath rather than pollute the sky above. I'd like to pay tribute to the quality of the work done by CPRE.

Since I became President of the CPRE, I have spent a lot of time thinking about what 'protecting the English countryside' means. We can all agree upon a vision of a green landscape which harbours the traditional flora and fauna. But throughout its history, that landscape has always been changing, and so have the people who live in it. Economic forces have been influencing the way that England looks, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill, since the beginning of time.

Yet even by historic standards, rural England is now in the midst of one of the greatest upheavals it has ever known. This is driven by two unrelated forces. First, vast numbers of people want to live in the countryside, numbers so great that if a free-for-all was declared, south-east England in particular would disappear under concrete.

Second, the traditional economic base of the countryside, farming, once the greatest industry in England, is in crisis, because foreign producers can grow almost all the commodities we eat more cheaply than our own domestic ones. In thinking about how best we can serve our cause, it seems essential to see these two issues in tandem. Farmers have often been devoted stewards of their land. Yet today, we have to face the fact that many would welcome any opportunity to develop parts of their holdings for building, because planting concrete is incomparably more profitable than planting crops. I am one of those deeply troubled by the new realities, that owners of rural land, upon whom we depend to maintain the landscape on behalf of us all, are today those with the most powerful economic interest in seeing it developed.

There is plenty of scope for debate about how best to secure the economic future of the countryside, but an economic future of some kind there must be. Some quite large areas of marginal tillage, which would never have been ploughed up in the first place but for subsidy, can and should be taken out of production, and become what we might call tended wildernesses. But we cannot pretend that all of England can become a countryside park. The people who live on the land must somehow be able to make an income from it. The challenge, which the Common Agricultural Policy makes it so difficult to answer, is to ensure that farmers earn a living without merely pouring more public money into grain and butter mountains.

I want to turn now to the second key aspect of the rural debate, and the major business of the CPRE – planning. Most of us wish it were possible simply to halt in its tracks the march of concrete across the green places of this island. Yet we know this is not an option. Our role is to influence the argument about planning, to manage development, in such a way that we control the rush of building, and check the power of those who have no interest in the countryside save to make money out of building over it.

One of the toughest and most urgent tasks is to question the assumptions underlying government airports policy. At present, alarmingly, ministers seem willing to accept the aviation industry's extravagant predictions about the growth of air traffic, to give airports almost untrammelled licence for expansion, in the sacred name of economic growth. The CPRE's argument is first, the southern half of this island will become little more than a vast aircraft-carrier if the airlines have their way. We also challenge their projections not only about traffic growth, but also in measuring the real cost of air travel to society – the pollution and noise and ground transport implications of untaxed fuel and soaring aircraft movements. It is very nice to be able to fly to Paris for £20 or Madrid for £30. Yet we all know that these figures do not represent anything like the true cost of air passenger movements. Rhetoric is not enough here. Evidence and detailed arguments are vital, and these are what the CPRE excels in providing.

As a body, we need to think harder about what kinds of development we do find acceptable, to ensure that our reputation is not that of mere NIMBYs. For instance, as a personal view, I believe we must accept many, though not all, appeals for change-of-use of redundant agricultural buildings. We recognise that it is unrealistic to campaign against all development, because to do so is to invite dismissal as hopeless dreamers. Our demand must be for a presumption against building whether nationally or locally, rather than a presumption in its favour. We must fight relentlessly for higher densities on any given development, and above all for maximising the use of housing in existing urban and suburban areas, on brownfield rather than greenfield sites.

I feel proud of having become part of a body which has contributed so much for so long to the fight – and it is a constant fight – to save Britain's countryside. Yet I must admit to a strong regret that an organisation which stands at the heart of one of the most vital debates in Britain today should possess so relatively small a national membership. Numbers do matter. The CPRE would be able to use its influence far more effectively if we can enlist more declared support for what we are doing. If the RSPB can muster almost a million members, surely the CPRE deserves twice as many. If we have no countryside left, there will be no birds left to protect in it. We have to grow, or slowly perish, and there is nothing in our numbers today to encourage complacency.

The key to success for the CPRE is that we should be perceived as a body not only with specific issues, specific planning decisions, not only fighting against numbered roads and named airport expansions and housing schemes, but with a vision for the future of the English countryside as a whole, which catches the imagination of those who share our hopes as well as our fears. I would love to see people joining CPRE in huge numbers not because they're scared witless by some huge airport extension but because they have a view of where we and the English countryside are going.