

Agents, beneficiaries and victims: picturing people on the land

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Agents, Beneficiaries and Victims: Picturing People on the Land

Jonathan Bignell and Jeremy Burchardt

English agrarian culture in relation to modernity, technology, work, leisure and heritage is an established topic in art history, sociology, cultural geography and literary studies. We might think of studies of the relationship between visual representations of the land and questions of ownership, explored for example by John Berger (1972) or John Barrell (1980). In fiction film, rural landscapes have been particularly important in literary adaptations like *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967, 2015) or *Tamara Drewe* (2010).¹ But in studies of British documentary film, the rural appears marginal in contrast to substantial work on 20th-century representations of urban culture and industry like *Housing Problems* (1935), *Coal Face* (1935) or *Morning in the Streets* (1959) (Nichols 1991, Winston 1995, Corner 1996, Renov 2004). The dominant tradition of British documentary film-making was established by John Grierson and his colleagues between the First and Second World Wars in what became known as the British Documentary Movement. It was premised on the use of film as a medium of public information, a notion that was underpinned conceptually by terms such as ‘nation’ and ‘community’ and the idea of communication by means of what Grierson (1932) called “the creative interpretation of actuality”. These documentaries, shown initially by regional film societies, art cinemas and then, importantly, on television, were intended to raise public consciousness about social problems and encourage support by and for a broad constituency of professionals, governmental and institutional leaders and opinion formers, so that they would do something to address those problems. British documentary had a liberal, interventionist and progressive character but was dominated by a focus on urban subjects and urban audiences.

Documentaries for promotion and information for rural audiences, of which there were a huge number from the 1930s to the 1980s, have scarcely been studied. The audiences targeted were people who lived and worked in the countryside, and who were the agents of change, and its beneficiaries and victims. The films were made by the suppliers of these workers’ machines, equipment and materials, and by government agencies responsible for their professional education and their inculcation into changing agricultural priorities. The

¹ Dates and directors of commercially released films are given in the References. Such information is not generally available for the non-commercial films for farmers collected at the Museum of English Rural Life. *Far From the Madding Crowd* is the adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s 1874 novel of the same title. *Tamara Drewe* was adapted from Posy Simmonds’s 2007 graphic novel, which had first been published as a weekly comic strip serial in *The Guardian* (2005-2007) and is itself inspired by Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

films were generally short, and designed to be shown as part of a programme of screenings embedded in other activities. They would be screened at meetings of local farmers' groups, or in agricultural colleges, usually in venues that were not designed as cinemas but instead were village halls, meeting rooms above pubs, or local community centres that were also used for meetings of the Women's Institute for instance. The films were available to order and were delivered by mail, usually for use on one day and return the next day, either for nothing or for a minimal charge. This little-known form of film culture, specific to rural farming communities, can open up new histories of the land in post-War Britain.

This chapter examines how changes to English landscapes and environments were represented and addressed to specific rural audiences by means of short factual films, and how a film archive of landscape history can be interpreted. Our arguments are based on research into a selection of the around 900 short factual films and several thousand photographs in the collections at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL),² housed at the University of Reading in Berkshire. Founded in 1951 as the first specialist museum of farming and rural life in England, MERL was able to take a lead in the acquisition of large collections recording the history of English farming and the countryside over the last 200 years, and has collections that include large and small artefacts, from tractors, carts and tools to clothing, furniture and home-made toys. It has books, paper archives, photographs, film and sound recordings, and is 'designated' as of national importance. MERL pioneered the acquisition of records of countryside organisations and government agencies, and film and photographic archives from companies and farming magazines. The Museum holds a large and fascinating collection of archive film, made for commercial, governmental and interest group sponsors. The films were intended for local distribution to farmers' organisations, for product promotion and dissemination of best practice. But the complexities of copyright and ownership, and the need to preserve the more than 800 reels of film currently held at MERL, mean that the material is not now available for public screening or commercial distribution. Like other regional film archives and specialist collections in the UK, MERL has prioritised digitisation projects that have enhanced access and preservation, but viewing of the films is restricted to the museum's reading room.³

These images of the agrarian countryside both consciously and unconsciously mediate very major changes occurring in England in the 20th century. As Raymond Williams (1977: 121-127) points out, by definition all representations are infused with traces of the ideologies

² <<http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/>>.

³ <https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/collections/Archives_A_to_Z/merl-film.aspx>.

that were residual, dominant or emergent at the time they were made, and often specific representations will negotiate between simultaneous divergent or conflicting ideological currents. Clearly it is the job of the analyst to identify, disentangle and evaluate how that mediation works, and to consider how different possible audiences might engage with representation at different times and places. We want to argue here that because of the specific circumstances surrounding the production, distribution and reception of the short rural films we discuss in this chapter, the cultural and political significance of this body of largely unknown work is especially interesting.

Farming after 1945

In the period of reconstruction after the Second World War, change in British agriculture was more rapid and drastic than in any previous period of comparable length. Rates of output and productivity growth far outstripped those that led to the retrospective use of the term ‘Agricultural Revolution’ about the 18th century and the first half of the 19th (Holderness 1985). In the late 1940s and 1950s, farming was widely regarded as a form of public service. Farmers’ contribution to providing the nation’s food was noted by the Mass Observation diarists for example (Howkins 1988), and there was general gratitude for their efforts to deliver food during wartime. Probably the British population now knew much more about food production than before the war, thanks to campaigns like “Dig for Victory”, the visibility of the Women’s Land Army and the awareness of seasonality and regionality in food production that was enforced by the experience of rationing. There was probably also a conviction that farmers, like miners and some other groups of workers, had suffered unfairly during the 1930s. Food security remained important but agriculture’s potential for import substitution and maximising output was emphasised.

Yet by the 1970s as commodity prices soared, and especially after entry into the Common Agricultural Policy shifted the basis of agricultural support from deficiency payments to tariffs and intervention, farmers were criticised for being wealthy, undeserving recipients of subsidies. European Economic Community food surpluses (of butter and milk, for example) and rising environmental movements prompted emphasis by farmers’ leaders, notably the National Farmers’ Union (NFU), on farmers as ‘stewards’ of the countryside rather than as food producers, a strategy still in evidence today. From the 1980s onwards increasing numbers of farmers began to show an interest in managing land for the benefit of wildlife, landscape and the environment. Meanwhile the sector as a whole continued to diversify, especially into tourism-related businesses associated with holiday accommodation

and outdoor pursuits like horse-riding or fishing. The NFU was formed in 1908, developing out of the Lincolnshire Farmers Union founded by Colin Campbell (Smith 2008). Its predecessors, such as the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (founded in 1872) and the Farmers' Alliance (founded in 1879), had failed to achieve large-scale membership or financial viability but the NFU had attracted 20,000 members after its first five years, increasing to 120,000 members by 1935. The membership mainly comprised tenant farmers (rather than landless labourers or landowners) and focused its activities on protecting the rights of tenants. As pressures on farmers to modernise and increase productivity took hold in the 1950s, NFU membership grew to 210,000, and the union campaigned for greater security of tenancy and against the nationalisation of the industry.⁴

The 'fit' between the public representation of farmers and their self-representation became increasingly problematic in the third quarter of the 20th century. Farmers were becoming a more and more closed social group in these years (Walker 1978). They became more isolated as a result of rising rates of marriage within and between farming families in the same local area (endogenous marriage), and more restricted friendship networks. The numbers of farmers certainly fell during the century, and Graham Holderness (1985: 123), for example, estimates that there were about 260,000 in the 1920s versus about 180,000 in the 1980s, with a significant decrease occurring in the later 1960s.⁵ According to a Countryside Agency report (2004: 177), there were only about 107,000 full-time farmers in 2000. In relation to the strata of social class in the rural population, there was a rapid numerical decline of what had previously been the three other main agricultural groups – landowners, farm labourers and rural craftworkers or tradesmen – and the corresponding political collapse of the 'landed interest' left farmers more isolated. This political isolation was made worse by the fact that agricultural subsidy payments were outside of an individual farmer's control, and made him or her more dependent on state institutions in Britain and Europe than ever before.

There are numerous overlapping histories here. One tells of a strengthened commitment to the self-image of the farmer as a hard-working individualist, and an associated antipathy to all things urban. This, of course, sat awkwardly with the discourse of 'farming in the public interest' that gained currency in the 1940s and 1950s. Potentially the revised construction of the farmer as steward of the countryside better matched criteria long established in the farming community such as keeping the land 'in good heart'. But it has also been argued that

⁴ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/collections/Archives_A_to_Z/merl-SR_NFU.aspx>.

⁵ The numbers need to be treated with care, since not all farms are operated by full-time farmers, and some farmers have several farms, for example. The total British population rose from about 43 million in 1921 to about 58 million in 2001, so the proportion of farmers in the population also fell sharply.

the educated middle class social provenance of late 20th-century environmentalism resonated negatively with farmers who were often engaged in an unequal battle to retain their local predominance against the rising tide of counter-urbanisation. Disputes over footpath access, stubble burning, spraying, marsh drainage and moorland ploughing are cases in point. The films made for rural, farming audiences negotiated these conflicting and constantly shifting representations. Analysis of these films will allow an assessment of how the biochemical, mechanical and organisational innovations that underpinned this growth were presented, explained and marketed to potential purchasers and adopters. The farmer was the central figure here, offering opportunities and challenges to both government agencies and manufacturers, especially in relation to the explication of new knowledge-based technologies and practices to a notoriously under-educated and change-resistant social group. These documentary films adopted strategies in order to circumvent these barriers, by engaging with the farmers' own understandings and self-perceptions, through addressing, for example, concepts of 'good husbandry' and keeping the land 'in good heart'. Scientific authority had to be carefully mediated to a group some elements of which – not least because of mixed experiences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – regarded science with ambivalence.

However, there was also a long tradition of progressive experimentation and promulgating best practice within parts of the farming community, encapsulated in the motto of the Royal Agricultural Society (founded in 1838) – 'Practice with Science'. Part of the difficulty was that farmers were extraordinarily diverse to documentary filmmakers who had to bear multiple audiences in mind. A 'barley baron' like Oliver Walston, with 2,250 acres of prime arable land in Cambridgeshire, second son of Lord Walston and educated at Eton and Cambridge, had little in common with the smallholders, scraping out a bare subsistence from a few acres, photographed by James Ravilious with such meticulous respect (see Hamilton 2007).

Films for Farmers

Government ministries and official bodies representing agricultural interest groups commonly made films to encourage what was seen as best practice in farming, and to alert farmers to potential hazards such as animal disease. The Milk Marketing Board made about 40 films from the 1950s to the 1970s, showing milk production and related industries, such as *Milk is Our Business* and *The Art of English Cheesemaking*. The role of the Boards, established by the NFU in 1933 for England and Wales, and for Scotland and then Northern Ireland in successive years thereafter, was to protect the incomes of smaller milk producers.

By registering with the Boards, farmers benefited from price stability at a time of national economic depression when competition from large dairy companies was driving down the farmers' revenues. Until their abolition in 1994, the Boards marketed milk, butter and cheese, under brand names that included Dairy Crest and Country Life.⁶

Similarly, the National Dairy Council made about 30 films 1960s-1970s promoting dairy products and dairy farming, including *Supper with the Archers* (featuring characters from the BBC's eponymous radio soap opera that began in 1951 and is still broadcast) and *English Cheese and the Caterer*. By far the most prolific film producer was the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which from the 1930s to the 1980s made over 460 mainly educational films for farmers, showing the latest techniques and best agricultural practices. The titles include *Making Grass Silage*, *The Farmstead in the Landscape* and *Beware of the Bull*. The traditionalist political pressure group The Council for the Protection of Rural England and the democratising Land Settlement Association each made a handful of promotional, propagandist films in the 1930s. One of the latter was directed by the celebrated documentary film-maker Paul Rotha who was contracted as a director by the commercial film company engaged to make the film, the Strand Film Company.

Intentions to pass on new techniques to increase production volume and efficiency were showcased in films made by state-funded research institutes. The National Institute of Agricultural Engineering made about 12 films in the 1940s-1950s, about *Potato Cultivation* and *Tractor Ploughing* for example. The National Institute for Research in Dairying made five films in the 1950s-1970s, while the Silsoe Research Institute was prolific, making about 400 films showcasing its work from the 1940s until 2005. The films ranged from test-drives of new tractors to films about a new *Blackcurrant Harvester* and techniques for *Muck Spreading*. Looking at the films the Institute made not only illuminates its history as it negotiated its changing relationships with state institutions and research funding bodies, but also how discourses of scientific agricultural practice changed over the 20th century.

Tests on agricultural machinery at the Silsoe Institute offered a ready supply of material for short films aimed at farming audiences. New models of tractor featured regularly, following the first World Agricultural Tractor Trials of 1930. The Institute had been founded in 1924 as the Institute of Agricultural Engineering, based at Oxford University, with a remit to test farm machines designed for work such as improving the drainage of land below plough

⁶ <<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/c7072399-761f-48b5-9c9a-c17d8ff1d287>>.

depth by using a tractor-mounted subsoiler, or cutting and drying hay mechanically.⁷ The need to maximise output for food production during the Second World War saw the Institute taken under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1942, and renamed the National Institute of Agricultural Engineering. Research into best practice and the testing of new mechanical products fed into the training courses run by the Institute at this time, taken by a cadre of machinery instructors who were employed by the ministry to visit farmers and advise them. The wartime government had established War Agricultural Executive Committees, tasked with increasing the efficiency of British farming so that domestic food production could offset the unavailability of imported food. As food rationing wound down in the late 1940s, and state intervention in farming changed from its wartime role to a peacetime one, a renewed emphasis on long-term, strategic research programmes was marked by the Institute's transfer from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Agricultural Research Council. The reference to engineering was dropped from the Institute's name in 1991 when it became the Silsoe Research Institute, and its status as an academic body was confirmed in 1994 when it was formally adopted as one of eight institutes supported by a recurrent grant from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. There was an increasing emphasis on mathematical modelling and biological science as well as conventional engineering being applied to solve farming problems. However, with the withdrawal of research council support in 2004, the Institute was closed down. The films made by the Institute over its relatively long life chart the different ways that farming problems were addressed, with greater or lesser state intervention, changing relationships between research and its practical implementation by means of new products, and the increasing significance of specialised scientific research to the design of engineering solutions.

Many large commercial companies made films to advertise their products, usually presenting them as aspects of modern, profit-driven agriculture that the ambitious farmer should want to participate in. For instance, Hardy and Collins made films in the 1950s showing how their aviation services could be used in agriculture. *Cleaner Fields – Greater Yields* was made in the 1950s about crop spraying in the Lincolnshire Fens, and used aerial photography that drew on romantic pictorial compositions of landscape in combination with the aestheticisation of aircraft familiar from wartime narratives in factual and fictional cinema. The giant agrochemical company ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) made about 30 films in the 1960s and 1970s showing farming and technology in Britain and internationally,

⁷ <https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/collections/Archives_A_to_Z/merl-SR_SRI.aspx>

focusing especially on fertilisers and anti-pest sprays. British Oil and Cake Mills Ltd, makers of processed animal feeds, made at least 40 films showing pig rearing, dairying and general livestock farming in the 1960s, with titles like *Profitable Sow Management* and *Pig Feeding Today*. The Chilean Nitrate Corporation also made about 40 films in the 1950s and 1960s showing the company's operations in Chile and the use of the fertilisers manufactured there. As well as product-advertising films titled, for example *Nitrate: The Story of a Great Discovery* and *More Fruit from British Orchards*, there was also some exotic travelogue appeal in their film *Views Around Santiago*.

Much more representative were films showing high-value machinery in use, with an informational and promotional purpose. Some of the earliest were by John Fowler and Company, based in Leeds in Yorkshire, who in the 1920s made eight films showing their machinery in use. Ford New Holland made about 60 films in the 1950s and 1970s announcing new models of Fordson tractors. For example, *Fordson Tractors: Showing the Way* and *The Living Soil*, produced by the Ford Film Unit in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively show how developments in farm machines enabled new kinds of working practices and increased production. These changes were justified in the films by representing the agrarian landscape as a material resource and national asset in an uneasy dialogue with discourses of natural beauty, seasonal and diurnal cycles of nature, and discourses of common sense and rural traditions.

The International Harvester Company made more than 60 films in the 1950s and 1960s showing off their machinery products. The titles included *The New Breed*, *Roots of Power* and *They Work Harder You Don't*. *Haytime – Your Annual Race with the Sun* is a film about a new hay-baler, and shows the technologisation of the harvest in the 1960s. It refuses the conventions of representation associated with horse-power and the communitarian labour of families and communities working on the land, in a manner reminiscent of Soviet film documentary rather than the romantic versions of harvest labour occasionally seen in earlier British Documentary Movement films. The International Harvester Company was American-owned, and until 1939 the British arm had no manufacturing facilities, instead importing and assembling products from the USA and Canada. Their first assembly plant in the UK was set up at Liverpool in 1923, but a large manufacturing facility was built at Doncaster in 1938. It was requisitioned by the UK government during the Second World War, and returned to producing wheeled tractors, crawler tractors and farm implements for International Harvester in 1946. In 1954 the company purchased the Jowett Motor Car works at Bradford, which was

converted to production of diesel tractors. By 1970 International Harvester had more than 10 per cent of the UK market for tractors and combine harvesters.

Mechanised tools and farming implements were common subjects for rural films. There were about 10 films made by the Howard Rotavator Company, and about 120 films made from as early as 1935 right up to 1979 by Ransomes, Sims and Jefferies, showing the ploughs, tools and lawn mowers made by the company. Ransomes were, by the late 19th century, Britain's leading agricultural machinery manufacturers and exporters. In 1927 they developed the first tractor-mounted plough, and in the Second World War converted their factories to build aircraft and also farm implements for the "ploughing-up" campaign that sought to bring available land into cultivation to produce food. By the 1950s the company was pioneering combine harvesters, and later made root harvesters and seed drills until Electrolux bought out Ransomes' entire agricultural implement business in 1989.⁸

Picturing the Land

A key aspect of the changes affecting the films is in relation to conflicting conceptions of English and more broadly British national identity. Whilst the farmer is the pivotal figure in the post-Second World War countryside, cultural historians have often argued that, to many urban residents, rural England remained 'a landscape without figures'. Indeed, it is possible to identify an inverse relationship between the economic significance of agriculture and the cultural centrality of the countryside (Weiner 1981). A countryside emptied of people by out-migration in the late 19th and early 20th century was increasingly available to be appropriated as a cultural symbol, as had happened in the industrialisation processes of earlier periods (Fussell 1984). The physical landscape was central to this process, and available for visual representation in the increasingly pervasive media of photography, film and television. Yet the meanings with which the landscape was invested were complex and variable over both space and time. During the 1930s and 1940s a discourse of regionality became established, closely associated with the emergence of planning as a trope and the recognition of the planner as a person with a professional role. The character and appropriate use of agricultural land could be defined as much in relation to regional as to national identity: what was fitting in the South Downs might be unacceptable in the Cotswolds, Yorkshire dales, or the Lake District for example.

Cutting across this were shifting and contested investments of national identity in the

⁸ <http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Ransomes,_Sims_and_Jefferies>.

landscape. English national identity also encompassed the modern and industrial, but hardening town-country cultural contrasts associated modernity and mass production with the urban sphere. Until recently the historiography has been dominated by an emphasis on the conservative social, political and economic implications of the centrality of the rural landscape to English national identity. Yet recent work (see Gilbert, Matless and Short 2003) has complicated this, underlining the nexus between rural preservation and modernist planning, personified by Patrick Abercrombie, founder member of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and doyen of planners (Matless 1998). For example, the modern could be accommodated within a traditional countryside through the rhetoric of 'tidiness'; hence the CPRE's initial approval of some kinds of electricity pylon. Farmers themselves did not, on the whole, object to pylons. They took up minimal space and did not significantly interfere either with grazing or arable, conforming with economic and policy imperatives that strongly favoured large-scale mechanised agriculture after 1945 (Howkins 2003). Initially, therefore, there appeared to be some scope for accommodating agricultural modernisation within the 'traditional' rural landscape after the Second World War, since the discourse of modernisation valued farms and farming as important uses of the land while turning the land into an extremely productive resource. But by the 1970s the emergence of a powerful environmentalist critique of the effects of agricultural modernisation on landscape suggests that there were limits to how far such a compromise between productivity and stewardship could go.

Furthermore, in some respects the Second World War sharpened the divide between traditionalist and modernising visions of the English rural landscape. The 'timeless' pastoral countryside was equated with small-scale mixed farming, the *locus classicus* being the Scott Report of 1942 (Young 1943). The Majority Report strongly endorses the 'chequerboard' pattern of small-scale mixed farming, and anticipates no great change in this in the post-war decades. The Minority Report, signed only by the economist S. R. Dennison, follows the Oxford agricultural economist C. S. Orwin in advocating a radically simplified 'prairie' landscape suitable to rapid mechanisation, specialisation and ruthless economies of scale. Important associations were at stake here, on the one hand with an influential version of the national past celebrating English moderation and political continuity, and on the other, potentially, with a sharp break with the past and acceptance of a 'foreign' landscape as the price of efficiency.

The roots of the problem here go back to the first half of the 20th century, in many respects a crucially formative period with respect not only to rurality and national identity but

also in fixing a particular understanding of the relationship between agriculture and the countryside. While the growing of crops and tending of livestock has always figured centrally in representations of rurality, dating back to Virgil's pastoral *Eclogues* and agrarian *Georgics* and before, this had not usually been exclusively so. Canonical representations of English rurality in the 18th century and for most of the 19th century typically encompassed rural trades and industries as well as farming. George Dyer's georgic poem *The Fleece* (1757) celebrates weaving and the wool trade as well as lambing, rearing and shearing. Wordsworth's 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' (1798) couples 'pastoral farms' with the 'wreaths of smoke' sent up by itinerant charcoal burners, while Constable's paintings embed rural industries such as boat-building and milling seamlessly within an iconically perfect rural landscape.

However by the early 20th century this inclusive representation of the English countryside was rapidly giving way to something much narrower and more specific, partly as a result of economic pressures that were hollowing out many of the long-established rural industries such as textile outwork, wheelwrighting, blacksmithing and wood-based trades such as chair-making and coopering, and partly because of a growing ambivalence, and indeed often downright hostility, towards industrialism in all its shapes and forms. In the first few decades of the 20th century much of the English countryside was more agricultural, in terms of landscape, employment and economic activity, than it had been since the rise of the woollen cloth industry in the late Middle Ages. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that this coincided with a period of unprecedented literary and popular interest in rural England, fuelled partly, as Paul Fussell (1975) demonstrated, by a reaction to the First World War in all its mechanised and industrial horror. Quite quickly a powerful image of rural England became established in which mechanisation was marginalised or altogether excluded. In 1915 Hardy published 'In Time of the Breaking of Nations', in which he invoked a timeless rurality as a bulwark against the implosion of Western civilisation:

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow, silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch grass
Yet these things shall go onward the same

Though dynasties pass.

This was at a time when the tractors that were to displace horses from agriculture wholesale were already making their appearance in the fields as part of the wartime production drive. Eleven years later, for prime minister Stanley Baldwin in his speech ‘On England’, ‘the plough team coming over the brow of the hill’ was ‘the one eternal sight of rural England’. Historians such as Patrick Wright (1985) and Alun Howkins (2003) have plausibly argued that in these years a vision of ‘Deep England’ was being laid down that was central to national identity and in which the countryside was quite simply equated with agriculture. The difficulty was that, while the CPRE might be able to see a ‘real beauty’ in the spare elegance of giant pylons striding across the landscape, and some might reckon that the modernist purity of buildings such as William Lescaze’s High Cross House at Dartington, Devon (1932) also sat well in the landscape, this modernist planner-preservationist discourse rarely extended to and could not accommodate many of the central aspects of agricultural modernity as portrayed in the rural documentary films in the MERL archive. The CPRE was strikingly uninterested in agriculture – while the claim that preservationists sought a ‘landscape without figures’ is questionable, it might not be unreasonable to suggest that they preferred landscapes without tractors. As the central element of the post-Second World War productionist revolution in agriculture, both in technical and symbolic terms, the tractor has been (and remains) remarkably invisible in artistic representations of rural landscape. Even artists who seek to disrupt the perceived dichotomy between traditional and modern in landscape painting such as David Hockney (2012) characteristically choose not to see the tractor.

This divergence between representations of the countryside and the realities of modern farming mapped onto another divergence, between discourses around agriculture and wider social, political and ethical concerns (mapped in the essays collected by Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson 2006). Despite the resistance of pre-Second World War representations of farming to some aspects of modernity, contemporary understandings of agriculture were very rarely divorced from these wider concerns. In this context the discourse of rural regeneration was central, as manifest in initiatives such as Horace Plunkett’s mutualist Agricultural Organisation Society (1901), Lloyd George’s Development Commission (1909), the Rural Community Councils (from 1920), Montague Fordham’s Rural Reconstruction Association (1926) and Robertson Scott’s *The Countryman* magazine (1927). Almost always in these years, restoring agricultural profitability was seen as a means to the larger end of stemming

rural depopulation, righting the perceived ‘imbalance’ that had developed between town and country and, ultimately, fostering a flourishing, independent community life in the countryside, as in Plunkett’s celebrated slogan ‘Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living’.⁹ While there were rather few rural documentary films before the 1950s, those that exist usually seem to reflect these wider social and ethical issues. A good example is Kay Mander’s 1946 documentary *24 Square Miles*, in which the agriculture of the area around Banbury (Oxfordshire) is constantly related to the social and planning needs of the inhabitants of this area.

Down-to-Earth Films

The post-war rural documentary films collected at MERL are strikingly parochial and limited in their ambitions compared to the representations discussed above. Predominantly the films are remarkably free of overt propagandistic content – they are practical, instructional, concerned with giving farmers and others involved in agricultural production information about new products and how to use them. Of course, as with any cultural discourse, the films are in fact saturated with latent ideology but this is an ideology that typically presents itself as nothing more than ‘down-to-earth’ common sense. It is bound up with the way the films represent and encode ‘science’ as an ostensibly neutral (in moral, social and political terms) and intrinsically benign frame of reference. In contrast to the powerfully social interwar discourse of rural regeneration, the representation of agriculture to farmers and by farmers’ representatives narrowed in the 1950s and 1960s. While ‘farming in the public interest’ was an accepted trope, the way farmers were expected to contribute to this public interest was simply by producing more and more at lower and lower costs. Alternative visions of farming as a way of life, embodying distinctive values and dispositions, potentially making a vital contribution to rural society and even perhaps mediating the relationship between humanity and the natural world, are rarely present in the documentary films, nor in other literature and media produced by or for farmers.

The difficulty here is that what the documentary films are encouraging farmers and others engaged in agricultural production in ancillary roles to adopt are in fact highly controversial and often ethically problematic practices. Mechanisation did more to contribute to what historian Alun Howkins (1986) terms ‘the death of rural England’ (referring

⁹ Sir Horace Plunkett (1854-1932) is one of the pioneers of the co-operative movement in Ireland and England. The Plunkett Foundation, which he co-founded in 1919, promotes and develops agricultural co-operatives and rural community enterprise, with the slogan “Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living” (<http://www.icos.ie/history/sir-horace-plunkett/>).

principally to agricultural depopulation) than any other single cause. It was also associated with the grubbing up of hedgerows, compaction of soil, the creation of prairie-style arable monoculture and the decline of small farmers, who had been historically resistant to mechanisation because they were rarely in a position to afford it, and it yielded fewer economies of scale for them. Fertilizers caused eutrophication (saturation by nutrients) while pesticides such as DDT and paraquat are associated with a range of environmental problems including the collapse of food chains in some ecologies and serious human health issues. Battery poultry production and other forms of factory farming have proved intensely problematic and controversial from an animal-welfare perspective. Yet the rural documentary films are largely silent on these critical issues, many of them intrinsically related to the products and practices that are the subjects of the films.

To a certain extent all producer groups, not only the farming community, were also agents, beneficiaries and victims enmeshed in similar productionist discourses. Celebrated industrial documentaries such as Hillary Harris's 1961 *Seawards the Great Ships* also extoll mechanisation, output and a narrowly economic sense of achievement while taking little or no cognisance of the environmental and human costs, such as, in the case of Clyde shipbuilding, the asbestos poisoning that blighted the lives of shipyard workers for decades after the yards closed. But the disjunction was more severe for farmers for a number of reasons. In the first place, agriculture was uniquely exposed to the first wave of public environmental consciousness in the 1970s and 1980s, since this focused principally on the impact of human activity on wildlife and rural landscapes, in contrast to more recent environmental concerns with globalised problems such as climate change, in which agriculture is not so directly and extensively implicated. Secondly, there was no equivalent divergence between the public perception of industry and the realities of industrial change after WW2. Certainly since the works of mid-19th-century critics of industry such as Charles Dickens and John Ruskin, the public perception of industry had to a very large extent been that it was dirty, polluting and a blot on the landscape (Wiener 1981). The opposite was the case with agriculture. Thirdly, the increasing social isolation of farmers meant that the technologised discourses around agricultural science and mechanisation were subject to little challenge from within the agricultural community, or from the close (not to say incestuous) policy nexus between the National Farmers' Union and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). By contrast, industries such as mining had powerful workers' trade unions that ensured social and political concerns were never very far away. From the 1970s the rise of counter-urbanisation did begin to break down the demographic isolation of farmers but,

initially at least, this tended to create ‘encapsulated’ agricultural communities-within-communities and served only to expose the scale of the contradiction between public perceptions and expectations of farming on the one hand, and the science- and profit-driven practices and priorities of modern agribusiness on the other (Newby 1979).

These contradictions came to a head in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a series of major confrontations between the agricultural lobby and conservationists, notably disputes over the ploughing of parts of Exmoor, the drainage of Halvergate Marshes (East Anglia) and, in a more general sense, the destruction of hedgerows. Marion Shoard’s *The Theft of the Countryside* (1981) brought together many of these concerns, both expressing and fanning the flames of growing public indignation.

Farmers were at the epicentre of this indignation – and in this respect the NFU’s shift towards an ideology of stewardship not only came too late, but arguably struck the wrong note. Certainly since the First World War agriculture had, to a very large extent, in any case been equated with the countryside in the public mind – the arguments made by the majority Scott Report in 1942 that the beauty of the English countryside was a product of agriculture, and dependent on its continuing prosperity, were neither new nor controversial. There had been a widespread, perhaps rather unreflecting, assumption that the countryside was safe in farmers’ hands, so the exposure of the damaging environmental and animal welfare implications was shocking to many. How far the public came to regard farmers as ultimately responsible for this damage is uncertain – survey evidence suggests that well into the 1980s farmers remained surprisingly popular and that blame for ‘the theft of the countryside’ was largely placed at the door of UK and European agricultural policy with its heedlessly one-sided commitment to productionism and the often severe squeeze on farm output prices.

However, rightly or otherwise there is no doubt that farmers felt that they had been cast as the villains of the piece and that they were the unwitting victims of urban prejudice and misunderstanding. This has left a long-lasting legacy of bitterness and resentment in the farming community, a resentment that was powerfully on display at the height of the countryside movement of the late 1990s and first decade of this century, when farmers and their allies marched through London on several occasions in defence of fox-hunting, ‘livelihood’ and ‘liberty’. These marches were rich in anti-urban symbolism, a particularly popular placard featuring an ‘urban jackboot’ crushing the ‘rural way of life’.

While there is no doubt that some large farmers grew rich through exploiting the technologies and opportunities of the post-Second World War agricultural revolution, on the whole farmers have a strong case in arguing that they were principally victims rather than

beneficiaries of the modernising techniques enjoined on them by so many of the rural documentary films in the MERL collection. More than in most industries, farming in the second half of the 20th century depended on advice, guidance and instruction in new methods and technologies from government advisors (NAAS/ADAS, the advisory and research branch of MAFF, played a particularly important role) and commercial salesmen. Furthermore this advice was underpinned by an array of productionist government grants (for example to drain land, modernise farm buildings and install electricity) and commercial incentives, while farmers who failed to move with the times ran a very real risk, given the steady decline in aggregate net farm income, of being unable to cover their overheads and ultimately being forced out of the industry. The rural informational films produced by MAFF and its subsidiaries, Ransomes, Ford New Holland, International Harvester, ICI, the Chilean Nitrate Corporation and their ilk played a significant role in mediating this advice and leading farmers along a path that was later to incur public opprobrium.

Viewed from this distance in time, what is most remarkable about these films is perhaps their silences – the unspoken voices of farmworkers made redundant by machinery; crafts and skills, in some cases centuries old, no longer needed; young people unable to find work in the modern countryside; even farm animals swollen and distorted by selective breeding and growth stimulants. Yet, in the main, this was no conspiracy. The government advisors and commercial salesmen, and the filmmakers whose work helped convey their messages to farmers, were simply doing their job. Unfortunately, perhaps, they were allowed to do so for three decades or more without much in the way of external scrutiny or criticism. The narrow, economic approach of government, collusion between MAFF and the NFU, the ruthlessly commercial concerns of the agricultural supply industry, the social isolation of farmers, the weakness of agricultural trade unionism and the profound lack of interest of preservationists in agriculture, work and rural society all contributed to this lack of scrutiny. The problem with the rural informational films held by MERL, then, is not so much the content or even implications of the films themselves, but more the lack of alternative voices and perspectives that might have questioned, challenged and complicated some of the perhaps unduly complacent scientism that permeates the films. A profound ideological faith in commerce, chemistry and machines underpins them but remains unacknowledged.

Films for farmers are a little-known body of work that makes an interesting contribution to representations of British agrarian labour, changing landscapes and rural economies. There are also strands of research that could be taken further, about links between the cultures of documentary film and rural life in post-war England. There is further investigation to be done

of the comparisons and correspondences between post-war newsreel and documentary filmmaking, and the nature and function of institutional and organisational sponsorship of films for a specific rural community. The complex, shifting interplay between conceptions of farming, landscape, and regional and national identities needs to be related to representations and self-representations of key actors, including farmers, agriculture-related businesses and conservationists. This material offers a significant contribution to the project of archiving, understanding and representing the history of the rural world.

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