

# *Presenting rurality: the Land Settlement Association in interwar England*

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# Presenting rurality: The Land Settlement Association in interwar England

## Abstract

This paper explores how past notions of idyllic rural dwelling were mobilised and enacted during the implementation of the UK Land Settlement Association (LSA) scheme established in 1934. The LSA was a UK Government programme set up to resettle unemployed workers from depressed industrial urban areas to the countryside. Between 1934 and 1939, 1,100 smallholdings were established within 20 settlements across the country. These smallholdings were run as cooperatives, but many failed when relocated families complained of long hours, low pay and isolation. Recruitment to the scheme ceased at the outbreak of World War II, with the settlements being fully dissolved and privatised in 1983. By drawing on a unique archive housed in the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), analysis centres on how the LSA represented and promoted rural living to settlers and the wider public. The paper illuminates three overlapping but distinct elements to this project: the production of physical space as a setting that has been designed to bring about particular forms of behaviour and community cohesion; notions of labour, independence of spirit and reconnecting with the land; and building the physiques of men through hard work, fresh air and good food, thus improving the national stock. The findings demonstrate the power of the rural idyll in producing particular forms of sociality, belonging and masculinity, with many of the ideas that undergirded the LSA continuing to resonate today.

## 1. Introduction

On 11 October 1937, David Gammans, Director of the UK Land Settlement Association (LSA), spoke at the Empire Migration and Development Conference at the Guildhall in the City of London. Standing in front of the hundreds of delegates that had assembled there, he described the challenge that the newly established LSA faced in its mission to settle thousands of unemployed families from economically depressed urban areas in the north of England to small, specially created settlements in the countryside. Gammans said:

“In short, it is to transform a townsman into a countryman; an industrialist into an agriculturalist; a wage-earner into a capitalist, and last but not least, a man with his physique and morale undermined to a greater or lesser degree by prolonged unemployment into a fit and happy member of society again, with all the courage and ambition which success in any walk of life demands” (Gammans, 1937).

This paper examines this endeavour, using archival materials to show how the LSA made its settlements and promoted them to the families that were enrolled into the scheme and to the wider public. It explores the idyllic imagining of the English countryside in the 1930s that underlaid this effort and how the interventions of LSA planners produced distinct and envisaged forms of sociality, belonging and masculinity. It particularly focusses on what the LSA understood a rural settlement to be, the pre-existing visions of rurality that it mobilised and enacted as a result, and its attempts to shape 'townsmen and their wives' to such ideals.

Established in 1934 as an agricultural cooperative, the LSA took various forms before it was finally broken up in 1983, its role and structure evolving considerably over this time. This paper concentrates on the LSA in the 1930s, during the Great Depression and before the outbreak of World War II, when the Association developed hundreds of new smallholdings organised into rural estates in the midlands and southeast of England. It draws on a unique archive housed in the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) consisting of numerous materials depicting life on these newly formed estates, including reports, pamphlets, newspaper articles, short films, maps, drawings and photographs. The research was motivated by a desire to engage with, and raise awareness of, the archive of a scheme that formed a significant part of the development of the English landscape, thereby contributing to scholarship on the endurance of the rural as an imagined arena of social experimentation and how this arena contrasts with experiences on the ground.

The archival materials represent the views of LSA managers, politicians, academics, journalists and other social commentators at the time. The archive therefore provides the 'establishment' account of the LSA scheme, although the voices contained within it are by no means homogenous and a variety of perspectives on the programme's ideas and effects are evident. Taken together, the materials reveal three overlapping but distinct elements to the Association's project: the production of physical space as a setting that has been designed to facilitate preferred modes of community cohesion and sociality; the idea of the dignity of manual labour on the land and how this builds independence of character; and the idealisation of the bodies of working-class men and what these enable, men's physiques being linked by elites at the time to the degradation of the English 'race' and the quality of potential soldiers. The archival materials also show how the LSA's efforts to create new, idealised forms of cooperative living contrasted with the realities of organising and running rural settlements in ways that were financially viable.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section explores the notion of the rural idyll and its long association with small-scale and communitarian forms of living. It looks at the supposed restorative effects of countryside, land and nature, and the particular forms of identity and masculinity that they produce. Section 3 further sets the scene by outlining the history, structure and functions of the LSA. Section 4 presents the empirical data, using the archival materials to explore how the LSA's planners created and presented their settlements. Section 5 examines the main ways in which the realities of settlement life diverged from what the LSA envisaged. The paper concludes in section 6 by reflecting upon the power of the rural idyll in producing particular forms of sociality, belongingness and masculinity, but also where the limits to these constructs lie. While acknowledging that rurality is an ongoing project, it argues that many of the social, radical and romantic ideas that undergirded the LSA continue to resonate today.

## 2. Making idyllic rural communities

In recent decades, much has been written about what the rural idyll is, the ways in which it has been constructed over time, and the effects that it has had on different groups of people. According to Rofo (2013), the rural idyll signifies "community cohesion, harmony with nature, and physical and moral vigour borne of honest labour" (p.263). It is often contrasted to the problems associated with urban living, a harking back by the middle class to times gone by when people lived simpler, traditional lives, and life was relatively uncomplicated (Treble, 2018). Indeed, Havinden (2018), writing on this theme, states:

"The desire to retreat to a self-sufficient, co-operative rural settlement is very ancient. No doubt it embodies a faint folk memory of ancient village communities, as well as a reaction against the pressures and tensions of city life (which were reinforced in the nineteenth century by the dirt, disease, noise, and squalor of so many new industrial towns)" (pp.26-27).

The positioning of rural communities vis-à-vis new forms of urban living in this manner was encapsulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the work of Ferdinand Tönnies who distinguished between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or community and society (Tönnies, 2001). According to Tönnies, simpler systems of living based on status, kinship and joint property were being irresistibly replaced by the economic forces of modernisation, and accompanying moves towards industrialisation, monetization and production (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). While some commentators at the time, such as Karl Marx, welcomed new forms of urban living and the decline of the "idiocy of rural life", others lamented the loss of pastoral, peasant-based ways of living.

Much of the rural idyll's power stems from its naturalisation and essentialisation. This is particularly so with regard to small-scale, communitarian ways of living, various forms of which have been associated with rurality for centuries. For example, Williams (2014), looking across the disciplines of geography, sociology and planning, identifies two fundamental, normative ideals concerning 'proper' community-based ways to live: bios and demos. Bios, as advocated by Thayer (2003), suggests that sustainable modes of living can be achieved by communities re-finding their places in the world through reconnection with authentic, natural regions. In contrast, demos concerns a communitarian commitment to strengthening local solidarities through shared histories, traditions and identities (Entrikin, 1999). Despite their differing emphases, bios and demos are often positioned relative to the supposed corrosive effects of modernity and globalisation. Both have also been strongly critiqued for being inward-looking and exclusionary (Harvey, 1996).

In recent years, scholars have sought to destabilise the notion of the rural idyll, demonstrating its politicised dimensions and illustrating its role in serving particular interests or objectives (Browne, 2011). In this way, the rural idyll has been understood as an imposition by the middle class on rural residents, as well as a vision actively pursued by people living in the countryside themselves (Shucksmith, 2018). It can act to marginalise particular groups based on categorisations of gender, race, class and sexuality that do not fit easily into dominant understandings and images of rural dwelling. As stated by Bell (2006), the rural idyll separates "who and what belongs in the country and what and who is out of place there" (p.158). These alternative understandings reflect the 'dark side' of the rural idyll, natural environments and open spaces once viewed as idyllic becoming "loci for fear and anxiety" (Somerville et al., 2015, p.221).

Despite these critiques, the perceived superiority of the rural is often associated with efforts to create new, communitarian forms of living in the countryside (Shucksmith, 2018). The origins of these attempts have been traced by Mingay (2018) back to the Victorian model village, created as a result of the paternalistic landlord, followed by the development of early estate villages, which were linked to efforts to improve rural living standards. According to Burchardt (2011), however, it was not until the early twentieth century that 'community' became the lexicon of rural planning, most obviously via the establishment of rural community councils in the 1920s. According to these organisations, a rural community "was a face-to-face society in which everyone could know everyone else and in which individuals stood in a clearly defined relationship to each other, as opposed to the amorphous, shifting and uncertain relationships assumed to characterize urban

social interaction” (Burchardt, 2011, p.78). In these communities, the process of planning and building a central village hall was essential in the creation of a local sense of identity, belonging and rural spirit (Burchardt, 2012).

These early attempts at village design reflect the wider, more extensive urban studies literature, which emphasises that the physical characteristics of people’s living places can lead to particular forms of sociality. Historically, urban design has focused on the key structures that have shaped human settlement over time (Moughtin, 2003). However, in 1960, Kevin Lynch took the step of showing how city form is an essential element in shaping human perceptions and behaviour (Lynch, 1960). This was followed by Whyte (1989) who, through exploration of the liveliness of urban settings, examined how urban development impacts a setting’s social environment. Through the creation of recognisable forms, such as plazas and parks, urban designers aimed to enhance human connectivity and social interaction (Williams, 2014). Conversely, urban developments that were perceived as undesirable, such as urban sprawl, were seen as leading to negative human behaviours, such as crime (Whyte, 1968).

In designing rural settlements, emphasis is commonly placed on land and nature in achieving a sense of local ‘insideness’ (Relph, 1976), whereby inhabitants develop a sense of belonging, accompanied by feelings of safety, security and inclusion. Thus, far away from urban settings and close to regenerative nature, “‘authentic’...rural life is embedded in the land, articulated through the material of the house, and the craft and toil of those who work, build, and dwell there” (Clope & Jones, 2001, p.652). In this way, the countryside was understood as providing opportunities for mending the spirits and bodies of men following World War I and, later on, as giving “special possibilities for the creation, experience and enjoyment of beauty and culture” during the rural community councils movement (Burchardt, 2012, p.87). These experiences, in turn, were believed to lead to the development of new moral virtues in men, including independence of character. This was understood to occur via the high degree of self-organisation and self-regulation that is commonly associated with rural living, compared to the control and surveillance often encountered in urban environments (Somerville et al., 2015).

In addition to these romanticised elements, there is a radical dimension to land that stems from its roots in British labour movements that “fed from hostility towards the landed gentry, and especially those aristocrats who had inherited large estates” (Field, 2013, p.13). From these origins in the early Victorian era to the present day, the ‘back to the land’ movement has presented a counter-cultural

ideal for those seeking to fix society's ills. For example, in the 1840s, agrarian socialism emerged with the aim of establishing small colonies of landholders with freehold rights of tenure (Hardy, 2000). Although this movement was relatively short-lived, it was succeeded by many others in the following decades and centuries. These included the rise of rural settlement schemes after World War I to address the effects of conflict and unemployment on returning soldiers (Lockwood, 1998) and efforts by social reformers to promote women's advancement in farming (Opitz, 2014). More recently, the rise of homesteading emerged in the UK and the US in the 1960s and 70s as a countermovement to industrialisation, and initiatives along these lines continue to the present day (Halfacree, 2007).

As well as sociality and belongingness, the rural imaginary creates distinct types of masculinity. Gahman (2018) states that masculinity is not a static archetype, but rather a series of social constructs that are "iteratively produced by the actors seeking to embody them, as well as by the discourses, spaces, and flows of power within which they operate" (p.246). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is the set of normative ideals operating across differing cultures that defines the most socially acceptable ways of being a 'man' (R.W Connell, 1995). Masculinity is contextual, its ideal type varying from place to place, and between different economic and social classes. Nonetheless, within Western farming environments, Pini (2008, p.34) identifies a stabilised masculine ideal, "which has mobilized around physical strength, control of nature, tenacity, hardship, toughness, independence and individualism", as well as an aptitude for technology. In these contexts, methods of preserving hegemonic masculinity might include marginalizing or excluding women (Martin, 2001) or policing other men (R.W Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, certain industries have interests in promoting particular kinds of masculinities, especially when they help to realise commercial goals (S. E. Bell et al., 2015).

When considering how farming masculinities are created and maintained, the body plays a central role. According to Gahman (2018), this is not because bodies are the origin of masculinity and femininity, but rather because they are sites upon which masculinity and femininity are signified and implied to exist. These meanings translate into the kinds of bodies that are considered to be appropriate in particular places and, in this way, bodily movement becomes an enactment of social position, which acts to reproduce social difference (Cresswell, 2002). Accordingly, people make instrumental investments in certain body types, such as muscular, in order to compensate for a lack of other resources, for example social connections and educational credentials (Bourdieu, 1986). This occurs in relation to the reproductive work that we undertake to keep ourselves going, the



activities that we engage in to make ourselves culturally acceptable, or the forms of work that we embark on (Wolkowicz, 2011). Moreover, at work, “employers read the surface signals of bodily demeanour, dress and language as indicators of the underlying qualities that they are seeking, or more typically as characteristics they are careful to avoid” (McDowell, 2004, p.51).

In the 1930s, concerns around the bodies of English working-class men were wrapped up in wider anxieties regarding ‘national decline’ across many areas of government policy (Searle, 1990). In particular, concern existed among the rural elite that the rapid urbanisation of the Victorian era had withered men’s physiques. In this period, it had become increasingly clear that the workhouses, which housed the sick and infirm, were insufficient to manage the ongoing movements of people from the English countryside to the cities. Moreover, recent conflicts involving Britain, particularly the Boer Wars, had raised anxiety that the English ‘race’ was becoming weaker. As stated by Field (2013), “in the early years of the [twentieth] century...the sport-playing middle and upper classes of Britain gazed with concern on the puny bodies of industrial Britain, fearful that these unhealthy slum-dwellers might hinder what they called ‘national efficiency’” (p.5). These worries converged with concerns about the decline of the British Empire and a growing threat from a National Socialist Germany, which was seen as physically fit. Together, they “stimulated Social Darwinist rhetoric and the popularity of a physical culture movement across the political spectrum” in the UK (Dietz, 2008, p.809).

As a result, by the 1920s, an ideal workman’s body was starting to take shape, one that was brawny, muscular and upright, traits associated with resourcefulness, moral vigour and independence. This ideal was accompanied by a proliferation of institutions before World War I, most notably the workcamp, that were explicitly designed to work on the physiques of British working-class men (Field, 2013). In these places, engagement in agriculture, it was believed, had a particularly bracing effect on body and character. For example, Dietz (2008) explains how the Conservative MP Pierse Loftus, in his 1926 book ‘The Creed of a Tory’ argued for a hierarchical and organic society whose economy would be based primarily on agriculture “to re-vitalise our exhausted city-bred people, so that the nation would not increasingly breed from the unfit and the alien and the lowest types” (p.809). The concern here was that urbanization was the physical manifestation of a deeper, more troublesome shift from industrialisation to socialism, which the encouragement of agriculture in the English countryside could counteract. Although many schemes along these lines were proposed and implemented in the 1930s, the LSA was probably the most sustained and systematic example of these. This is the focus of the next section.

### 3. The Land Settlement Association

In the 1930s, the Great Depression had produced widespread unemployment in the UK, with approximately 3.5 million registered as out of work. As a result, the government identified a number of Special Areas, regions deemed to be hit particularly hard by the global downturn, including South Wales, Tyneside, Cumberland and southern Scotland. The LSA in England recruited former miners and engineers from the latter three regions. The Association was founded by the Society of Friends, the National Council of Social Service, the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and the British Legion, all of whom were involved in assisting unemployed men at the time. Land for LSA estates was purchased or leased from local authorities, which had been given purchasing powers under the Small Holdings Act of 1926. The scheme was funded through voluntary contributions, with the Government matching these with payments made via the Commission for Special Areas. In this way, a total of 20 estates were developed across the midlands and southeast between 1934 and 1939, comprising a total of 1,100 smallholdings and covering nearly 11,000 hectares.

On these estates, the LSA had control over the whole settlement process, including the selection and training of families. Recruitment normally took place through the Ministry of Labour's Unemployment Assistance Board (UAB). In order to ensure that only the families most suitable for rural life were selected, a triple test was enacted by the LSA, consisting of an initial screening of applicants followed by a panel interview and home visit. In general, married, middle-aged men were targeted for enrolment as it was felt that their prospects of being economically productive again were worse than younger generations. The average age at which a man was admitted into the LSA was 39 and the average period for which he was unemployed was five years. Men with large families were preferred, recognising the advantages of settlers being able to call on "a certain amount of casual labour from the family" (The Architect and Buildings News, 1941, p.168). Settlers were allowed to choose between three forms of enterprise, horticulture, poultry or pigs, or some combination of the three, referred to in the scheme as the 'three-legged stool' (Clarke, 1985). Training took place in two stages: an initial three-month phase to get the men into better 'physical and psychological shape' followed by a period of twelve months on their own smallholdings under the supervision of a technical instructor. During both these periods, families were able to claim their usual unemployment support. This came to an end, however, after the second phase of training when settlers were considered sufficiently skilled to make an independent living.

Each family admitted into the LSA was provided with a smallholding of up to four hectares. Homesteads were designed to be self-sufficient, consisting of a house, its outbuildings and its land all within in the same plot. Settlements were run by an estate manager, referred to as the 'warden', with a Centralised Services providing facilities such as plant propagation, stores, a machinery pool, a packing station and marketing. Settlers were contractually bound to use these services. Each warden was supported by a number of Technical Assistants, who brought agricultural expertise and supervised settlers on a day-to-day basis. The LSA provided incomers with credit for stock, although some of the equipment, such as agricultural tools, were given as gifts. The LSA favoured the cooperative system because it was seen as more productive than independent smallholdings, more likely to produce a sense of community among its settlers, and more suited to men from industrial areas that were used to "working in large aggregations, and to organising as a working class to improve...working conditions" (Royal Institute of British Architects, 1937, p.80). Families were generally left on tenancy agreements rather than being given the option to purchase land. This is because the LSA believed that it should retain the right to terminate occupancy if settlers proved 'unsuitable' for rural life.

As outlined above, the LSA was one of a number of schemes at the time designed to create self-sustaining rural communities. However, the LSA, as a national programme, stood out as larger than many other similar programmes developed in 1930s England. It was also the first formal government scheme to take on men and women with no previous agricultural experience (Martins, 2006). This was acknowledged by the LSA in 1936 when it stated that, "It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the task upon which the association is engaged is unlike any other previously attempted in Great Britain" (LSA, 1936, p.8). The scheme succeeded in capturing the imaginations of politicians, the media and the public at the time, with Gammans (1937) referring to it as the "greatest experiment in land settlement in the Empire". The scheme was also productive, with the Times newspaper noting in May 1939 that the LSA was the largest producer of foodstuffs in the UK (McCready, 1974). The scheme continued to target the unemployed until the outbreak of World War II when the programme shifted its focus towards the recruitment of more experienced farmers.

#### 4. Settlement and the 'shaping of townsmen and their wives'

This section explores how the LSA's vision of rural community life was imagined and enacted. As outlined above, this took place in three main ways: in terms of the physical layout of LSA settlements and the social cohesion that this was supposed to bring about; in relation to notions of labour, independence of spirit and reconnecting with the land; and in terms of building the physiques of

men through hard work, fresh air and good food. In the text that follows, each of these ways is considered in turn.

#### 4.1. Setting the stage: promoting social cohesion

An important LSA goal was to create a coherent community of settlers, encouraging the development of a “close co-operative and friendly spirit...both between the tenants themselves and between the tenants and the staff” (Carnegie Trust, 1948, p.48). The LSA attempted to achieve this, in part, via the design and layout of its buildings. It was common in the 1930s for smallholders’ houses to be of low quality, generally being made of wood and asbestos (Swenarton, 2003). LSA houses, in contrast, were considered to be superior, being built to meet the 1935 Housing Act regulations. The construction of high quality homes was important to the LSA’s managers because they wanted settlers to feel comfortable in their new dwellings, believing that this would aid the development of friendly relations between neighbours (LSA, 1935). LSA houses were fashioned in a ‘cottage style’, the walls being “generally of cavity brickwork, the roofs of plain tiles, and the gable ends boarded” (Royal Institute of British Architects, 1937, p.80) (Figure 1). Inside, houses consisted of a living room, three bedrooms, a scullery, larder and combined bathroom and WC (Swenarton, 2003). Houses were considered well equipped for the time, being “fitted with modern sanitation, separate bathroom, wood block and tile floors, electric light, and hot water from the living room range” (Royal Institute of British Architects, 1939, p.721).



**Figure 1: A row of typical LSA ‘cottage style’ houses.**

Credit: The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading; ref. no. CR 3LSA PH1/A/10.

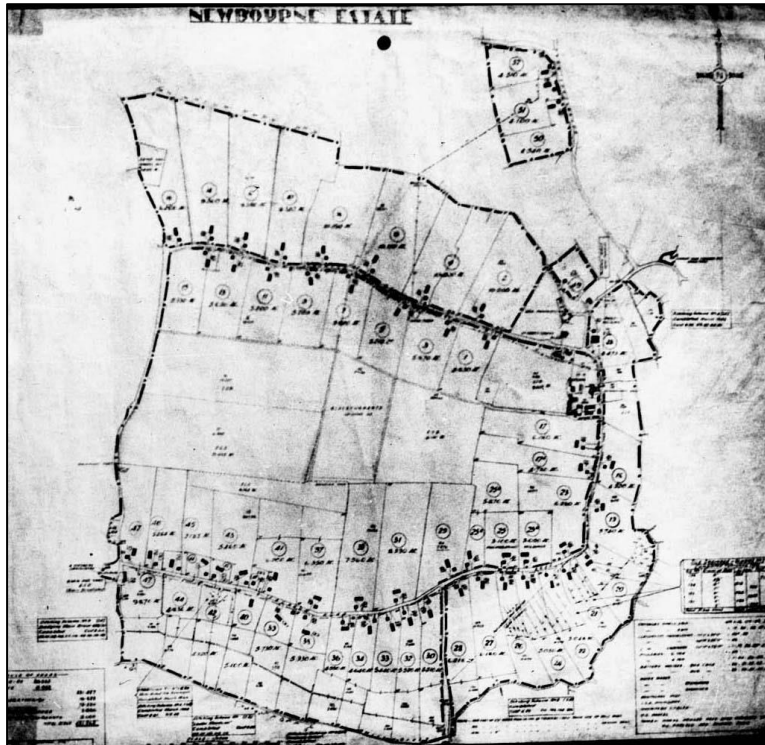
As only two architects' firms were used for the whole scheme, LSA houses were relatively uniform in size, shape and style across different settlements. Uniformity was viewed as advantageous, partly because settlements were cheaper to construct in this way, but also because repetition of units was thought of as another means of obtaining social cohesion (Hardy, 2000). Nevertheless, local variations in housing detail did emerge. This was, to a degree, due to local preferences and the use of local materials (Clarke, 1985). However, the LSA was also willing to consider the needs of its tenants and to adjust its house designs as a result. A number of these alterations were reported at the time by the Royal Institute of British Architects (1937). For example, at first it was thought by LSA planners that only one external door to homes would be required, "as some housewives said that they never use the front door", but it soon transpired that "the main demand now however is for two doors". Initially, the bathroom was placed in the scullery on the ground floor "so men can wash coming in off the land", but a separate, top floor bathroom was later requested by tenants. Moreover, it was noted that "a large oven is necessary for families from the North Country as they are accustomed to bake their own bread". As pointed out by the Royal Institute, "many of these details may appear unimportant, but they are in fact important to the tenants and therefore to the success of the scheme" (p.80).

In designing their settlements, the LSA emphasised the cramped conditions in industrial cities and contrasted these to the supposed space and freedom of the countryside. However, the Association was also concerned that city-based families were more comfortable in terraced homes and therefore would have difficulties adapting to life in detached or semi-detached buildings. For this reason, the LSA tried to cluster houses as close together as its smallholding arrangement would allow. The Association also believed that placing homes in closer proximity to one another would result in a higher frequency of social interactions between neighbours, thus producing a greater sense of community. For example, with regard to the LSA in Wales, the Royal Institute of British Architects (1939) stated:

"And the type of settlement necessarily involved under a smallholding system, a number of individual homesteads on individual farms, spread over a large area, cannot so easily have the social coherence and sense of community that is [normally] possible under a cooperative system. This sense of community would seem particularly desirable for families who are moved from the Special Areas, and who, whatever the squalor amongst which they have been

living, have obtained by the very fact of living close together, gossiping from door to door, a definite sense of group existence” (p.279).

LSA smallholdings, in addition to being positioned close together, were commonly grouped in a rough semi-circular configuration, facing into a central cluster of agricultural and social buildings (Hardy, 2000) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: A map of the LSA's Newbourn estate near Ipswich in Suffolk county.**

Credit: The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading; ref. no. CR 3LSA PH1/A/40.

These central structures typically constituted the original farmhouse and its outbuildings, which had been reconditioned to accommodate the warden and the facilities of the Centralised Services. Of these buildings, the 'social hut' was an important place where settlers could congregate for meetings, dances and other recreational activities (Figure 3). In 1936 the LSA reported that progress had been made in this respect:

"Social activities for men, women and children have been much in evidence on the estates during the past year. Lectures, dances, whist drives and children's parties have been well organized and well attended, and have enabled families, many of whom are drawn from different localities in the north, to make friends with their neighbours and so foster the community spirit which is so necessary" (LSA, 1936, pp.23-24).



**Figure 3: A dance at an LSA social hut.**

Credit: The Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading; ref. no. CR 3LSA PH1/A/31.

In addition to creating socially coherent communities, the LSA saw it as self-evident that its settlements should be “gradually assimilated with the life of their new countryside” (LSA, 1935, p.10). This was explained in 1937 by the Royal Institute of British Architects, which stated:

“It has not been the aim to create new communities, but to absorb settlers into the existing life of the area. Since the settlers often come from distant parts of the country, the creation of a colony of ‘foreigners’ would be almost inevitable were the scheme isolated from the neighbourhood. Clearly this has to be avoided” (Royal Institute of British Architects, 1937, p.78).

Thus, the LSA did “everything in its power to discourage any tendency for estates to become closed communities” (McCready, 1974, p.11). New settlements were placed near to existing villages and the LSA’s architects “went to considerable lengths to develop properties that were fitting with the local rural character” (LSA, 1937, p.7) and that were aesthetically appealing. For example, the LSA stated in 1935 that:



“In designing the cottages a further objective has been to ensure that the old gibe of ‘Queen Anne in front and Mary Ann at the back’ shall have no force. Front, back and sides have decent, comely faces, and any pair of cottages may turn its back to the road to give the best aspect to the living room without fearing that it may thus cause offence to the passer-by” (LSA, 1935, p.17).

On some estates, social huts were built in cooperation with residents of nearby villages to provide joint facilities (McCready, 1974). People neighbouring settlements were also encouraged to become involved in the management of individual estates. For example, during the recruitment phase, one or two local people were invited onto selection committees when deciding who to recruit into the scheme. Moreover, each estate was guided by a Local Advisory Committee, small groups of people made up of prominent individuals from the local district. The role of the committees was to “help the Association in determining policy for development and cultivation, to watch over the social interests of settlers, and to keep the public informed of the aims and activities of the Association” (LSA, 1937, p.22).

#### 4.2 Land, labour and nature: stimulating independence of spirit

In promoting their new settlements, a central LSA concern was that years of “miserable idleness” (The Times, 1935) in the Special Areas had normalised a sense of hopelessness among men and engendered within them a dependence on external help. As a result, many of the arrivals at LSA settlements were “suspicious and anxious. Many are inclined to give up the effort on the most trivial excuse” (LSA, 1937, p.18). Complaints from new settlers were reported as common, many supposedly confusing the small training allowance that they received from the LSA with a weekly wage. Moreover, extended unemployment in the Special Areas was seen as having taken its toll on the townsmen’s wives, most commonly attributed to the ‘stress’ or ‘mental tiredness’ that resulted from running a household under challenging economic conditions. For example, in 1936 the LSA wrote that, “Many of them [townsmen’s wives], when they arrive at the new estates are mentally and physically tired and only realise the measure of their fatigue after anxiety for the future has been removed and they can look forward to better times on their holdings” (LSA, 1936, p.22).

LSA settlements, then, were promoted as a solution to these problems. As the Times wrote in 1936:

“Its [land settlement’s] advantages are obvious. The parents would be given security of home and livelihood in pleasant surroundings and bright family conditions. They would have



removed from their minds the hopelessness of long unemployment and the fear of never again finding work. Their children, taken out of the deadening atmosphere of the Special Areas and finding, some of them for the first time, a real job bringing in a fair wage, would acquire a new character and a fresh, sturdy outlook upon life" (The Times, 1936, p.7839).

Of the various characteristics promoted by land settlement, creating a sense of independence among the men was fundamental. Indeed, the LSA archive is replete with the idea that 'self-mastery' was a condition desired by many men, a quality that land settlement was ideally positioned to unleash. For example, the Times, writing in 1939, stated,

"The cherished dream of many farmworkers is to become their own boss, and for most it remains just a dream. But on a 364-hectare [LSA] estate in Carlton, near Snaith, 29 men and their families have found Utopia – their own thriving business, a sense of independence, and a knowledge that the future is something more than a...emptiness" (The Times, 1939).

In promoting these ideals, the LSA often acknowledged the difficulties that it faced in bringing about such a transformation, a task "which only time and ordered patience can accomplish" (LSA, 1935, p.18). As explained in the LSA promotional film, 'Here is the Land' (Hawes, 1937), agricultural work meant preparing "for long hours and an uncertain outcome". Nonetheless, even though life was hard, it was also "a happy one thanks to the virtues of the land" (The Times, 1936). Working the land and, through it, reconnecting with nature allowed men to learn "the dignity of labour" and watch "the beauty of growth". LSA settlements, then, were special places where the "vitality of nature" could be witnessed, where, in the spring, "young plants burst through the earth", expressing "a new life and vigour which is typical of the estates" (Hawes, 1937). In these ways, the bios and demos found on LSA estates provided a foil to the squalor of urban living, allowing children to "grow up in the sight of green fields and trees, instead of slum streets and slag heaps" (Picture Post, 1939, p.46).

These ideas were supported by the commonly held notion that men arriving at LSA estates were "but a generation from the land" (Clarke, 2012, p.4) and that their father's fathers had been "happy on the soil" (Hawes, 1937). Industrialisation, while having disconnected settlers from the virtues of agricultural production, had nevertheless failed to quench a deep-seated instinct among them to

reconnect with nature (British Pathé 1944). This apparent phenomenon, for example, was described in the 1940s promotional pamphlet, *Land for Townsmen*<sup>1</sup>. It said:

“As the importation of food from abroad increased, and as the towns became bigger, more people grew up who knew nothing of the country. But there never has ceased to be a desire among townsmen to grow and tend something. It expressed itself not only in the 600,000 urban allotments that existed before the war, but also in the countless backyards, in window boxes and in the keeping of pigeons in the very heart of the city. No discouragement could kill it, though every discouragement was given” (p.3).

For men, then, it was believed that land settlement would revive dormant agricultural instincts (Clarke, 2012), “land hunger” being an “atavistic human emotion”<sup>2</sup>. For women, however, the situation was somewhat different. While men required direct contact with the soil, the development of women lay in the promotion of social and educational activities. Thus, women on LSA estates were widely encouraged to join nearby Women’s Institutes or to set up new Institutes by themselves, with social huts providing accommodation for meetings. Women were also enrolled into classes on rural domestic economy, which taught subjects likely to be of “special interest” to them, such as fruit and vegetable preserving, poultry keeping, and packing and grading fruit and vegetables (LSA, 1936, p.22). These activities, it was believed, would help connect women to their new rural environments, increasing the chances that, after a few months in their new settings, they would be ready to settle.

### 4.3 Strengthening men’s bodies

While idleness was understood to have weakened the characters of men, special attention was placed on the impacts that it had had on their physiques. The LSA, recognising that “smallholdings require strenuous work and long hours” (The Times, 1936), was concerned that working-class men subject to long-term unemployment had lost their abilities to “do a full day’s work without excessive fatigue” (LSA, 1937, p.18). The Association summed up this difficulty in its First Annual Report: “Land Settlement for any class, in the present state of world agriculture, would be difficult enough; applied in particular to industrial workers, weakened in stamina by prolonged unemployment, it presents particular problems” (LSA, 1935, p.17). An example of this was provided in 1939 by the *Picture Post*,

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<sup>1</sup> Undated booklet (circa 1940s) about Land Settlement with anonymous author, the Museum of English Rural Life.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, J.L (1961) *Two Feet on the Ladder*. Unpublished pamphlet, the Museum of English Rural Life.

which reported on the case of Nathan Turner, a Durham-based miner and LSA recruit who had been unemployed for 14 years:

“Now, at 54, Turner is grey-haired, lined, a little bent. He has the small, strong body of a miner but his arms have lost their strength and skill. He will never work in a mine again; he could not stand the ‘hard graft’. But he aches for work. He wants his wife and children to see him working. He wants to win back his strength” (Picture Post, 1939, p.43).

The solution provided by Land settlement, then, was to move men into the countryside where their weakened, ‘out-of-place’ bodies would be made ‘into place’ via their labour on the land. Thus, continuing the story of Nathan, the Picture Post wrote: “Here [on the LSA’s Caversham estate], Nathan Turner will...find plenty of work for his arms and muscles. He will level, dig and hoe, plant seeds, keep chickens, grow greenstuffs, potatoes, bush fruit and flowers” (p.46).

With these activities in mind, the first three months of preliminary training on settlements were particularly important to the task of strengthening up the men. During this time, up to 20 settlers lived together on the estate’s grounds in central dormitory accommodation. They were immediately put to work following their arrival, clearing land, constructing roads, laying out water supplies, erecting outbuildings, such as poultry houses and pig sties, and, in the case of the Andover estate in Hampshire, constructing their own homes. In carrying out these tasks, men were told to put their “backs into the work and do a man’s job without complaining” (Hawes, 1937). In addition, nutritious food and clean air were essential to “overcome the inertia which had set in during the previous long period of unemployment” (LSA, 1935, p.18), necessities seen as beyond the means of many urban-based, working-class people at the time. As reported by the Times in 1936:

“Strength of body depends largely on food consumed. A great advance in the consumption of protective foods is necessary, yet...they are for the most part out of reach of unemployed families. The cottage homestead would provide for its tenant those very foods of which he stands so much in need” (The Times, 1936, p.7839).

Despite the problems set out above, the LSA reported grounds for optimism in its recruitment and training of men and women. For example, in 1935 it stated that the physical “standard of men and their wives presenting themselves to the Selection Committees is surprisingly high in view of the often-distressing conditions under which they have lived for many years” (LSA, 1935, p.7). Moreover,

the Association's training programme was producing results, with the "improvement in the men's appetite and appearance in this period" being "very marked" (LSA, 1936, p.10). To illustrate, the LSA reported in 1936 that:

"The condition of the men does not allow of very strenuous labour during the first few weeks, but it has been found that good food and open air quickly build up their strength, and that by the end of about three months most of them are able to do a fair day's work without undue fatigue... It scarcely needs adding that without such preliminary rehabilitation instruction in agriculture would be of little value" (LSA, 1935, p.10).

In addition to producing men that were physically capable of agricultural work, the LSA's training programme was seen as creating wider societal benefits. Children brought out of polluted urban centres and into the countryside meant that "growing up in healthy surroundings, they have infinitely better chances of finding work when they leave school" (Picture Post, 1939, p.13). Resettlement provided a service to the public, adding to "the stability of the country by increasing its food supplies and raising the standard of its manhood" (The Times, 1936, p.7839). The LSA admitted that a "fair proportion" of the men and their families dropped out of its scheme before becoming "effective smallholders" (LSA, 1937, p.10). Nonetheless, they "went back to the conditions they left improved in health and physique by a spell of regular work in the open air". Moreover, a percentage of them were "so improved that they find work in the locality of the estate and do not return to the Special Areas". In these ways, the LSA's policy of physical reconditioning was presented as a 'win-win' approach.

## 5. Divergence from the idyll

The LSA recognised that transforming people whom it described as "physically and psychologically impaired by years of unemployment, to full time occupation of the land" (LSA, 1935, p.9) was highly ambitious. It is not surprising then that processes of contestation were evident throughout the scheme, with divergence by settlers from the rural ideals espoused by the LSA potentially leading to the expulsion of families from settlements (Linehan & Gruffudd, 2004). Indeed, the dropout rate from LSA estates during the 1930s was relatively high. To illustrate, the Association reported that, during its first few years of operation, a total of 772 of the 1,709 settlers (45 percent) had given up or been sent back to the Special Areas as 'unsuitable' for rural life (McCready, 1974). As a result, by the time World War II had broken out in 1939, a total of 178 LSA smallholdings (17 percent) were standing vacant.

The reasons for settler dissatisfaction with the scheme were varied and complex. One problem was that the level of social cohesion desired by the LSA was mostly unobtainable. As the Association acknowledged, "It was not easy to assimilate a population of 150-200 newcomers with different habits and accents into the general life of quiet country districts, nor were the newcomers a ready-made community, since they were nearly all strangers to one another" (McCready, 1974, p.7). At first, the LSA settled families from the same urban areas into the same estates, believing that this would facilitate social interaction. However, it was impossible to maintain this approach once the turnover of men had become more considerable (Clarke, 1985). Whereas the LSA desired social and cultural similarity within its settlements, instead it found "as great a variety among those who earn their living as smallholders on the estates of the Association as is to be found in any large group of men" (Richmond, 1960, p.16).

LSA settlers also experienced problems fitting into their new rural surrounds, with many families feeling isolated and cut off from their original homes. Issues arose in particular with respect to the LSA houses, which, as described above, were generally of higher quality than local agricultural holdings. This led to frictions with local farmers. For example, at the LSA's estate in Foxash, Essex, the Local Advisory Committee argued that the standard of accommodation in LSA homes was far above that provided for long-established agricultural labourers. As a result, at the Committee's insistence, basic earth closets were provided in LSA houses rather than more advanced water closets. The idea of northern, working-class men and women mingling with rural populations in the southeast of England was also questioned. For example, the East Anglian Magazine reported that on the Newbourne estate,

"For months on end the unemployed 'Geordies' from Durham coalfields eyed the 'silly Suffolers' with curiosity and suspicion. The brusque and outspoken men from the North had but little in common with the quiet and reserved farm workers of Newbourne. In both speech and outlook they were miles apart...Even organised meetings and lectures had but little effect. They continued to stare at one another from opposite sides of the newly erected Community Hut" (Tye, 1961, p.257).

To many in the 1930s, the countryside was seen as a place of leisure, cleansing and recuperation for the upper and middle classes but inherently unsuitable for the working-class man and woman. The idea of assimilating former miners and engineers into the countryside was thus ridiculed by some,

who portrayed the rural not as a place of fulfilment but one of terror. This idea was taken up, for example, in a 1940s Times article entitled 'Back from the Land':

"The Land Settlement Association, in their praiseworthy efforts to turn the unemployed into pig-and-poultry farmers, have come up against an unexpected difficulty – a panic fear of the countryside on the part of the town-bred men whom they are trying to help...The hearts of all city dwellers, whatever their age, sex or class, will go out at once to the poor, panic-stricken Cockney, cowering beneath a sky intolerably vast and indecently clear, and surrounded, not by friendly twinkling human eyes, but by the cunning, impudent leer of pigs and the beady, witless stare of poultry...Small wonder, then, that the Londoner, who threads his way undaunted through the thickest traffic and who is well known for his courage in time of war, should quail before the perils of rusticity. He has an instinctive conviction that the only place for a civilised human being to live is in a town" (The Times, 1940).

In addition to these challenges, problems arose between tenants and the LSA management, especially the wardens. Wardens were expected to oversee settlers' activities but also provide smallholders with sufficient room to operate under their own initiatives. Indeed, as the LSA stated in 1935, "Overstrictness might cramp the growing spirit of independence in the men, and make of them mere labourers; while laxity in management can destroy order and the growth of community spirit" (LSA, 1935, p.18). Unfortunately, getting the balance right between control and leniency was difficult for wardens to achieve in practice, and settler-led protests and strikes took place on some estates in response to their authoritarian nature (Clarke, 1985). Particular areas of contention arose in relation to the management of settlers' finances, decisions on which crops to plant, and the illicit sale of agricultural produce outside of the Centralised Services. In all these examples, the LSA aimed to maintain ultimate control over smallholders' operations via the tenancy agreements that it held with them, with the possibility of contract termination an ever-present threat. This arrangement, despite representing a major obstacle to smallholder independence, was defended by the LSA management as necessary to the enforcement of cooperative buying and marketing and the acceptance of the warden's advice (Belcham, 2014).

Finally, while a key LSA objective was to develop the physiques of men, many settlers objected to what they viewed as the tough physical conditions and long working hours that existed on estates. Indeed, the LSA noted that settlers were taking "more slowly to working the soil than to other forms of husbandry" (LSA, 1938, p.8). This was because "comparatively few settlers have appreciated

during the early years the necessity for the steady work of digging, hoeing and weeding". Instead of this outdoor labour, the LSA observed, settlers preferred the lighter work associated with glasshouses, or keeping pigs and poultry. Moreover, physical ill-health or inability to undertake farm-based work were recorded by the LSA as one of the main reasons for settlers dropping out of the scheme. In all these ways, from social cohesion, to fitting in, to achieving independence and building physical strength, the realities of day-to-day life in LSA settlements diverged from the rural ideals promoted by the Association.

## 6. Conclusion

As Ingold (2000) writes, there is an important distinction to be made between worldbuilding, the modernist idea of worlds being made before they are lived in, and dwelling, in which worlds arise through processes of habitation. By drawing on idealised notions of the 1930s English countryside, the LSA tried to build a particular kind of world, one that was first designed by settlement managers and then inhabited by urban-based northerners who were transported to the midlands and southeast of England in their thousands. These 'townsmen and their wives', the LSA hoped, would be malleable to the objectives of village planners, objectives concerning the attainment of social cohesion through settlement design, the reconnection of working-class men with the land, thus reinvigorating their characters and spirits, and the fashioning of men's bodies through honest labour, thus improving the national stock. In these ways, incomers into LSA estates would gradually fit into their new pastoral surrounds, developing a cooperative spirit between themselves and the wider rural community as they did so. Such outcomes were promoted not just to the settlers themselves but also to the politicians who oversaw the scheme and to the wider public. They were popularised through slogans concerning the appeal of nature and the dignity of labour, and publicised through reports, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines and films.

In exploring these ideals and goals, this paper demonstrates the power of the rural idyll as a basis for social organisation and experimentation. Established in line with pre-conceived visions of country living, there was little room in LSA settlements for divergence towards alternative ways of being. According to Browne (2011), "rural spaces are ripe for the exploration not only of the negativities of exclusion through the concept of the rural idyll, but also of the creation of empowering, alternative and resistant space" (p.21). But this was rarely the case on LSA estates, where farmer resistance was little tolerated and those who failed or refused to conform to the rules were ejected from the scheme. The rigidity of the LSA's policies in this regard is reflected by the high turnover rates of families on Association estates. Moreover, while acknowledging that rurality is an unfinished and

incomplete project (Neal & Walters, 2007), many of the social, radical and romantic ideas that undergirded the LSA continue to resonate today. Farming is still widely viewed as a frontier industry, and romanticised (Cole & Stewart, 2017) and masculinised (S. E. Bell et al., 2015) accordingly. These processes reflect the wider literature on how different frontier industries shape and sustain particular ways to be a 'man' (Leonard, 2016). In the UK, the proposed Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, which forms part of the country's post-Brexit reform strategy, is laced with narratives linked to rural beauty (DEFRA, 2020). And recent initiatives to tackle social challenges, including long-term unemployment, and to address environmental degradation continue to draw on the rural as an imagined arena of social experimentation. For example, the supposed role of social entrepreneurs in reinvigorating 'hard-to-reach' rural areas has recently been critically examined by Steinerowski et al. (2008) and Gaddefors and Anderson (2019).

Of course, in exploring the ideas set out above, it is not the intention of this paper to portray the LSA as simply naïve or extreme. The LSA's motives in the 1930s were complex and multifaceted, exhibiting a range of sometimes conflicting charitable, economic, political and agricultural aims in an era of considerable economic and political upheaval. Much of what the Association tried to do was well-meaning, reflecting a genuine desire in some quarters of the British political establishment to improve the lives of the long-term unemployed. Moreover, the LSA was able to adapt its aims and operations during World War II and onwards into the post-war period, referring to its smallholders first as 'settlers', then as 'tenants' and finally as 'growers'. Nor it is the intention of this paper to claim that LSA discourses and images concerning the virtues of the rural were entirely dominant. As shown above, although the ideas promoted by the LSA, in contrasting rural living with the destructive effects of urban mass unemployment, served particular political and normative goals, they were not shared by all. For example, section 5 illustrates how some social commentators at the time remained unable to reconcile themselves to the idea of transforming the urban working class into independent agriculturalists. There were also conflicts evident within the LSA management itself over how settlers and settlements should be managed, especially when smallholders stepped out of line.

For the various reasons reported above, the LSA's primary aim to transform townsmen and their families into contented rural occupants was largely unrealistic. To further explore these outcomes, future research could examine in greater depth how particular groups were affected by the newly established settlements. For example, there is scope to extend examination of the strongly gendered assumptions underpinning the LSA scheme and to investigate the implications of these for the



women who lived and worked on its smallholdings. Moreover, although the MERL archive largely consists of establishment accounts of the LSA, there could be potential to uncover a wider range of perspectives on the relocation programme through, for example, parish council meetings at the time or interviews with people who grew up on the estates. These alternative sources would likely further demonstrate how the arrival and integration of settlers in those early years of the scheme represented not an endpoint – a culmination of a utopian dream – in the development of the English rural landscape, but rather a continuation of it, with new physical, ideal and bodily forms being created along the way.

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