

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Dr Peter Brandon gave us an excellent talk at the AGM, in which he explained that major changes were taking place in the countryside, which must be seriously considered by the CPRE. Change in the countryside is usually detrimental to Wildlife, since it is there because it finds the conditions suitable for its existence. It is also usually opposed by its human inhabitants and the job of the CPRE is seen as resisting all change. So what changes are now taking place? Can we resist them, or can we take action to obtain the best benefits we can from them? Dr Brandon urged CPRE to become involved in policy making rather than reacting to policies as they are announced and said "Innovation can be complimentary to Conservation".

The great changes of the past have been in the use of the land and the present situation is no different. "The Sussex Countryside owes its character and well-being to farmers", but the fact is that in many areas – and particularly the High Weald – farmers are giving up the struggle to produce food in competition with imports from areas where soil, climate and labour costs are all more favourable, and Health & Safety Regulations for plants, animals and humans are all less restrictive and costly.

The last time this happened on a similar scale was the abolition of the Corn Laws in the mid nineteenth century, allowing cheap Canadian Grain to destroy our own arable farming, while Argentine Beef and New Zealand Lamb destroyed our livestock industry. This started the break-up of the great estates, which was hastened by the introduction of Death Duties. I grew up on a farm before the last war, when there was no market for our milk and grain, so we used them to fatten pigs in conditions not allowed today and crammed chickens in an even more barbaric way for the luxury London Market. Neither option is available to the small family farmers today, so they have difficulty finding a profitable use for their land, let alone its stewardship.

The countryside had to find ways of attracting money earned elsewhere to pay for the cost of its care, and in Victorian and Edwardian times this was done by allowing profits from colonial exploitation – cotton, coffee, bananas, slaves, etc. – to be spent on building country mansions for the enjoyment of its amenities – House Parties, Hunting and Shooting – and we particularly admire the houses, parks and gardens they created.

Between the wars this continued on a smaller scale due to wealthy city businessmen being able to commute by car and train, but post war the land was returned to profitable food production, thanks to the CAP, and the large houses were sold off, so there is now no way the countryside can attract the number of wealthy individuals to pay for the environmental care it needs.

I believe that we must urgently find a way. The planning regulations designed after the war to protect land for food production are no longer appropriate, out dated, and need revision. To attract these wealthy people to spend their money on care of the countryside they need to be able to live on their own land and enjoy its amenities, and to do this they must be able to build an appropriate house. This would be a very valuable concession and we should look for a substantial public benefit in return. What I suggest is that planning approval may be given on fulfilment of the following strict criteria:

- 1 That the house is sited and designed to blend in with the surrounding countryside, and compliment it like those of the Victorians, but on a smaller scale.
- 2 That it is tied **in perpetuity** to the surrounding land and its environmental management by a Section 106 Agreement, so as to prevent the house being sold off and the land being developed in a way which would damage its wildlife habitats and landscape value.
- 3 That a substantial amount of Public Access is provided to enable others to enjoy its amenities.

The amount of land to be tied in this way will vary according to circumstances, but I would suggest it should not be more than 50 acres, so that its care is not an unreasonable burden – which might be used as an excuse to apply for the S106 agreement to be set aside.

Houses in the countryside are an acceptable feature and can contribute to the landscape, but we have built precious few since the war which we can be proud to pass on to future generations, while having a resident landowner is the best way of ensuring the land does not fall into neglect. When we are faced with thousands of new houses being built in the Weald, which will contribute nothing to its upkeep, surely a few which will take responsibility for its care and provide enjoyment for all of us is a good bargain.

I have described the 'Challenge of Change' facing us, and suggested my solution. I do not claim this to be the only way, and hope others will propose alternatives, but so far none have been suggested and I believe action is urgent to obtain the best future for our countryside, by welcoming the best new landowners. At present those taking over farmland often have priorities, such as horses, which absorb their funds and time, and which are not always the best environmental managers. We must try to find a better way.