

Living Conditions in Rural Settings

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Urban space was far from uniform, despite the image of relentless and monotonous terraced housing. Equally, nor was the rural world characterized by anything approaching uniformity. The rural world remained important to the British people in every respect: this despite the historian's obsession with the urban world. Nor was the rural setting dominated only by the rural poor and the incredibly wealthy aristocracy. Towns and the countryside melded into each other. Urban workers could walk for only a few miles in order to throw a long-line into the sea or else to hunt rabbits. As towns sprawled, before planning and restriction came in to control that growth, it was common enough for farms to become virtually parts of towns and for rural labourers to be found living on the outskirts.

The rural world embraced an even wider range of dwellings than the town also occupied a perhaps even more highly charged space in the nation's psyche. While the urban-dweller might reject the countryside as dreary, rain-soaked, repetitively green (as Lytton Strachey did on a trip to Skye in 1908), others lauded the rural idyll as the true English ideal, a world which was being lost. The lament for the land was not so much aimed at the pauper's hovel or the rickety, leaky cottage, endlessly patched up, which was occupied by the agricultural day-labourer. Then again, nor was it true that all rural dwellings were as poor as this. The truth is that social commentators and travel writers discovered examples of all kinds when they toured the British Isles. Some of the greatest disparities were between the huge estate houses-- the mansions, halls and villas-- in which resided the magnate landowners and the pokey, basic shelter provided for their tenants and labourers.

The land and industry never sat next to each other so clearly as on estates where mining provided for high levels of proletarianisation within spitting distance of the rustic labourers bent at the ploughshare. The south Northumberland estates of Lord Hastings provide a striking example of this. In the space of just a few square miles were found (and indeed can still be found) a number of small towns or pit villages-- Seaton Delaval, New Hartley and Holywell-- the fishing village of Seaton Sluice, the mining and port town of Blyth, broad acres of flat arable land, and the impressive estate of Delaval Hall. In a place such as this, miners, fishermen, estate managers, pit overseers, farmers, farm labourers, milkmaids, wholesalers, and a plethora of others, came into doubtless regular contact on a daily basis. And the complexity of social and spatial relations in the countryside was increasing as time went on. Each of the villages and towns mentioned here were serviced by railways that spurred off the main North-South line through Newcastle to Edinburgh. Hence, railway workers, signalmen, rail maintenance men-- and their families-- could also be found residing in a world which we might mistakenly see as solely inhabited by miners, fishermen and agriculturalists.

Far from merely being sites of ancient tradition, great estates were also places of enterprize. Fine botanical collections, highly treasured art collections and libraries, leisure pursuits such as hunting and fishing-- these were just some of the things which made the aristocrat's mansion more than just a place in which to observe the idling rich. Lord Armstrong, of Tyneside ship-building fame, owned a magnificent estate house, Cragside Hall in Northumberland, which aside from its gardens and finely decorated rooms, was celebrated for its early example of electric lighting. This was more than just a sign of middle-class social climbing allied to aristocratic social tinkering-- it was a sign of the inter-connectedness of urban and rural wealth and a sign that estates were far from unchanging.

Indeed, by the 1880s, 25 per cent or more peers (men almost by definition normally associated with the countryside) held company directorships while more and more of them were embracing the very urban principles of modern business management in the running of their estates. New estates, new forests, deer parks, stocked fishing-waters, scientific breeding, exotic trees and plants sat alongside the maintenance of certain traditional values and the cherished, deferential position which rural society afforded to the country's noblemen. Equally, many of the middle class who aped their superiors fell well short of a wholesale adoption of upper-class mores. The deerstalker and twelve-bore shotgun might be standard fashion accessories, but it was not necessary to buy up 10,000 acres to enjoy the countryside. Many, indeed, bought the big house and a few acres, maintaining a balance of urban business interests and rural lifestyle.

The rural world, despite its poverty, hardship and out-migration, and in spite of its stark contrast of plutocracy and penury, nevertheless provided a model for so many critics of the town. Rural people tended to be healthier and stronger than their urban counterparts; the army wanted them for this reason, and the shock of the poverty of health among those who would join the army to fight the Boer War (1899-1902) right at the end of our period, did nothing to disabuse thinkers of the view that national efficiency might be better sought with a rural model to hand. But it was not merely a matter of physical health. The rural world was supposed to be characterized by good manners as well as good health, and a deference to accepted power structures which the average town-dweller was thought to lack or eschew. Cattle houghing, rick-burning and incidents of rural unrest-- in the early 1830s and 1870s, for example-- might cause us to question this ideal; the significant and continuous violence of Irish rural society would just about sink any notion of the harmony of landed relations. Perhaps, though, Ireland is a special case. Rural society enjoyed a neighbourliness, a sense of community in which all members participated, which commentators feared was missing from the town. The rock of aristocratic privilege, the enjoyment of an age-old and solid social system, was thought to be the foundation of this allegedly superior rural world. The rural world also tended to be studded with smaller towns-- sites of small-scale industry, market towns and the like. The fear of big towns was thus enforced by a seeming appreciation of the smaller town wherein the local elites had the magistracy, education and other bureaucratic and social services in their back pockets. As a kind of icing on the cake, too, villages were more likely to go to church than their urban counterparts-- and they might even find themselves under the same roof as the local squire or other privileged members of their communities.