

This Other Eden - Assessing a myth?

John Mabbitt, June 2024

This paper draws on my professional practice in the historic environment, and my past academic research into the mythic nature of the English historic environment. It is a personal view, but one that offers a cautionary tale in how the mythic interacts with policy and impact assessment, how this mythic retelling of the past can reinforce a dominant narrative of the historic environment or heritage that affects our ability to understand and protect the past.

Cultural meaning can be ascribed through interaction of people with the past environment. These are as often mundane, everyday interactions that shape culture on almost unconscious level as much as they are deliberate grand gestures. Actions as simple as the inclusion of a place in an artwork such as a painting or a film can shape how we understand and experience that location or imagine its place in the past. Centuries of tradition, reminiscence, mythmaking, and remembrance provide multiple layers of meaning and connections that selectively emphasise and elide cultural change, providing a sense of belonging and connection while obscuring the depth of cultural change. The English landscape is a case in point; it is at once an entirely anthropogenic creation, shaped by human action over millennia that has defined cultural actions to the point that English identities are fundamentally tied to landscape.

While the link to place is cast as a deep connection, forged over generations, these narratives are often recent and mythical. Sycamore Gap is a dramatic opening in the whin crags at Walltown on Hadrian's Wall. It was occupied by a solitary sycamore tree, which was felled in an apparent act of deliberate vandalism in September 2023, to enormous public outrageⁱ. The tree was a landmark and a commonplace of films and artworks, most famously the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. The tree was the focal point in a meeting of narratives of empire, frontier, remoteness, and connections that have shaped popular understandings of Empire as well as the role and importance of the Wall, but which have arguably never been fully explored. Similarly, the Lake District World Heritage Site bid, which was approved by UNESCO in 2017, was critiqued by the environmental journalist George Monbiot. It was, Monbiot argued, based on a myth that concealed the ecological degradation and social exclusion that resulted from intensive sheep farming and the tourism industry in the Lake District, instead, the bid's narrative should better reflect the diverse and contested histories and ecologies of the Lake District, to address current and future environmental issues and opportunitiesⁱⁱ.

In the context of a Just Transformation that seeks to protect the rights and interests of communities, and which acknowledges that the causes and effects of the climate crisis are rooted in historical and structural inequalities and injustices, this presents something of a dilemma. Cultural meaning derives from and rests on narratives of power and resistance and these mythic narratives are problematic in they are so fundamental to cultural identity; should we privilege a narrative that is untrue and potentially damaging? How can we assess and protect something that does not exist? In addressing any sense of loss that may be experienced by change to this historic landscape, impact assessors also need to understand the mythic dimension of these meanings and navigate the difficulties they present for impact assessment. This is particularly important in a spatial planning system that is predicated on placing development in the 'right place.'

While most heritage specialists would see the time-depth of the historic landscape in terms of layers, or palimpsest, where the process of erasure of past landscape is only partial, leaving visible elements

of the past landscape to a viewer with sufficient understanding to 'read' that past. It is a commonplace of cultural heritage impact assessment in England that local landscape has power as a constant; as a somehow unchanging world in which past and present co-exist, and in which change can only be negative. Examples taken from recent consultations from different parts of England and spanning national and local technical consultees and third-party objectors include statements such as,

'...the landscape is of special character... where the views over wide and open landscapes are of historic and cultural importance and *have not changed for hundreds of years...*' (arable farmland with significant loss of hedgerow and woodland associated with mechanisation of farming recorded since the mid C19th)ⁱⁱⁱ

'...this area, which is known for its quiet, tranquil, *timeless and unspoiled settings.*' (late parliamentary enclosure, 500m from mainline railway and dual carriageway trunk road, within 600m of mid-20st century 'New Town')^{iv}

'...It is very special... to be able to enjoy this space *as it was laid out and enjoyed 400 years ago...*' (Elite formal garden, remodelled repeatedly from the turn of the 17th century onwards)^v

'The landscape under threat has an entirely unspoiled rural character *which has remained unchanged for generations.*' (intensive arable cultivation in drained fenland)^{vi}

This conception closely matches narratives of stability taken both from a deeply conservative view of the landscape as somewhere quintessentially English; the 'green and pleasant land' of Blake's Jerusalem and from more radical imaginations, of the ancient rights usurped by landowners at enclosure. In either case, any new development is necessarily a harmful modern intrusion, rather than an interaction with a lengthy process of change. In rare cases where this illusory nature was recognised, it could be justified by a statement that the apparent absence of modern built development would leave a viewer feeling that the setting was appropriate to a historic site. The lack of challenge to a mythical conception of the historic environment became a key element in the effective removal of a key element of the just transformation away from carbon-based electricity generation.

An illusory stability is compounded by a tendency in assessment to assume that in the absence of development, that the baseline will remain stable. Heritage assets tend not to breed, or migrate or recolonise new areas, but there are external pressures on the historic landscape. Arguably, all heritage assets are on a trajectory to destruction, and pressures of intensive cultivation or climate change is the biggest threat to the historic landscape. Changes to patterns and types of agricultural use through climatic change coupled with sea level change and coastal erosion, or increased colluviation or erosion from flood events mean that the very fabric of the English historic landscape is irreversibly changing; yet the unchanging nature of that historic landscape is used as an argument to prevent or disrupt the delivery of infrastructure development that offers the only chance of its survival in a recognisable form.

This situation reached a peak during the period to 2014, when many new onshore wind farms were proposed in England. New guidance from Historic England effectively meant that anything visible from a heritage asset was a change to setting^{vii}. Despite the use of significance-based assessment approaches, most assessors found that they could not robustly argue that this change would be

anything but adverse. Or in policy terms, 'harmful.' In effect something that a viewer felt 'shouldn't' be there could only be harmful. With a government who were openly hostile to onshore wind energy development, the Barnwell Manor and Bradford test cases allowed the weighting of even minor harms to be such that effects considered to be non-significant could lead to a refusal^{viii}. A sample of such a judgement from the Dorcas Lane Wind Farm appeal decision shows this logic in the words of the Planning Inspector.

'...This would cause a *small amount of harm* to the heritage significance of All Saints Church in Soulbury... a *very small amount of harm* to the heritage significance of St Luke's Church in Stoke Hammond, to Hollingdon Grange, and to the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Old Rectory in Drayton Parslow... I attach *considerable weight overall* to the fact that the proposed development would fail to preserve the settings of five Listed Buildings...' [emphasis added]^{ix}

This rebalancing was part of a hostile series of measures, including removal of onshore wind from the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project planning regime and the 'ministerial statement,' which became footnote 58 to NPPF^x, effectively giving individuals within a community a veto over onshore wind energy. Similarly, recent projects aimed at reconfiguring England's electricity transmission grid to better reflect the changing location and nature of generation, have seen the historic landscape becoming a central focus in consenting.

'East Anglia's landscapes are full of churches, castles and country houses with wonderful gardens which should be treasured... It is outrageous that the Government's latest energy policy consultation seeks to prioritise the delivery of offshore wind and associated onshore infrastructure...' ^{xi}

The challenge is to move forward from this situation and address this sense of loss in Impact Assessment, and balance what is necessarily and 'objective,' 'professional' view with the more visceral community responses.

The critical point is to understand and appreciate the power of the past in the present. The past is not, a 'foreign country;' it lives and resonates into the present. It is a fundamental element of identity, and the materiality of the historic landscape offers tangible connections that are particularly sensitive.

That these connections are frequently mythical or fictitious does nothing to reduce their power and is often the source of that power. These myths have grown up and become reified by their utility, whether in supporting claims to ownership and rights, or in developing a sense of cohesion within a community. It is important to acknowledge, the power of these myths. It is, however, important to understand them for what they are and contextualise how or when they arose, and what purpose they served. These are as much part of the past as any objective past; it is the record of how communities have engaged with their past and identity, and how that engagement has changed over time. There is a parallel with the principle of 'retain and explain', developed by the Conservative government to address the issue of contentious memorials in public spaces, although the circumstances in which that policy principle was developed have led to criticism that its effect is to allow the retention of memorials that selectively reveal elements of the past rather than providing an opportunity to engage with communities. While an understanding of the past is important to advocate for, and achieve a Just Transformation, that understanding must consider what of the past really matters to those communities and how best to address it in the present.

Dealing with the mythical past offers an opportunity to develop awareness of the past. This requires a step change in how we view heritage outreach and engagement; it is not a neutral process of presenting the findings of archaeological work, nor of adding 'interpretation' materials that are rarely accessed. It is, rather, the process of bringing communities to an understanding of how their environment come to be as it is and why we value it. This understanding is a key element in empowering communities to make decisions on how to treat the material remains of the past which continue to provide meaning.

It is also important to understand the future baseline just as we seek to understand the past. It is simply no longer acceptable to cling onto a naïve sense that the historic landscape will not change. It is, rather, essential to understand just how far it might change and use this understanding to contextualise the impacts that we assess, and to shape that change for the better.

ⁱ BBC 2024 'Sycamore Gap: The Story So Far' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-66994729.amp>: viewed June 2024

ⁱⁱ Monbiot, G. 2017 'The Lake District as a world heritage site? What a disaster that would be' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/09/lake-district-world-heritage-site-george-monbiot?ref=inkcap-journal> viewed June 2024

ⁱⁱⁱ Reference available on request

^{iv} Reference available on request

^v Reference available on request

^{vi} Reference available on request

^{vii} English Heritage 2010 *The Setting of Heritage Assets*

^{viii} Barnwell Manor Wind Energy Limited v (1) East Northamptonshire District Council (2) English Heritage (3) National Trust (4) The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government [2014] EWCA Civ 137; James Hall v City of Bradford [2019] EWHC 2899 (Admin)

^{ix} Town And Country Planning Act 1990 – SECTION 78 Appeal by Force 9 Energy LLP and EDF ER at land to the South of Dorcas Lane, South-West of Stoke Hammond and North-West of Soulbury Application Ref: 11/02798/APP dated 21 December 2011

^x Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities, *National Planning Policy Framework* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework> viewed June 2024

^{xi} Reference available on request