

This Other Eden – Assessing a myth?



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England's Green and Pleasant Land

- This paper considers the historic landscape in its widest sense
- A necessarily personal view and one rooted in a specific context
- Seeks to look at heritage protection policy, how that reflects cultural assumptions and its implications
- Provides a cautionary case study of the 'unintended' consequence of assessment practice
- Looks to ways of better contextualising heritage impact assessment.



The power of myth

- Heritage denotes what communities value
- Our relationship of the past is a core element of cultural identity
- The material world is a collection and a record of past actions; a material story, or series of stories
- Like all good stories, these stories include elements that may have gained or lost in the telling, or may be entirely made up.
- These influence interaction with the past and how it is valued.



A 'monument to overgrazing and ecological destruction'

- These values are often illusory
- Strong conservative discourse around heritage and particularly historic landscape
- Discourse over reinterpretation of elite spaces and the Culture Wars
- Timelessness and landscape change
- The relationship of natural and anthropogenic action
- The illusion of future stability



'A sense of loss'

- '...the landscape is of special character containing many listed buildings including scheduled monuments, Grade I and II listed buildings where the views over wide and open landscapes are of historic and cultural importance *and have not changed for hundreds of years...*'
- '...this area, which is known for its quiet, tranquil, *timeless and unspoiled* settings.'
- '...It is very special... to be able to enjoy this space *as it was laid out and enjoyed 400 years ago...*'
- Predicates any change as harmful
- The Sycamore Gap incident
- But what is the real threat to these historic landscapes?



A false start?

- Example from the first phase of renewable energy development in England, between about 2005 and 2015.
- Focus on onshore wind development with multiple sites coming forward requiring a body of assessment practice to deal with the historic landscape.
- Conception of ‘setting’ or the perceptual context in which heritage assets are experienced.
- Assessment method sought to be nuanced, but more often boiled down to whether wind turbines would be visible.
- Significance-based assessment often privileges mythic narratives of continuity and stability.
- Weighting of harm in decision-making was skewed towards a status quo.



Harm and its weighting

- Removal of onshore wind from the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project planning regime and the ‘ministerial statement’, reinforced by changes to national planning policy.
- ...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... the desirability of preserving Listed Buildings, and their settings, must be given considerable importance and weight in the overall planning balance.
- ...I attach *considerable weight overall* to the fact that the proposed development would fail to preserve the settings of five Listed Buildings... I also attach a small amount of additional weight to the adverse effect upon the character of three Conservation Areas...
- Mythic understandings of the past were been a key element removing a key aspect of the just transformation from the mix.

Towards a Just Transformation

- These conclusions are drawn from a specific context and not a universal solution
- Understand the power of the past in the present
- Acknowledge, understand and contextualise mythical readings of the past
- Opportunity for engagement
- Develop awareness of the past
- Understand the future baseline just as we seek to understand the past

