Julie Harding

What next for rural Britain?

The fly-tipping epidemic, housing explosion, farming's 'poor relation' status and the dangers of over-regulation were among the subjects put under the microscope at the latest sell-out Future Countryside conference

'Siege mob' of new homes blighting Britain's countryside

PARTS of Britain are being covered in 'identikit identical houses' that appear to have been 'ordered by an algorithm' and enabled by an increasingly centralised planning system and the growing influence of a construction industry that wields extraordinary power, according to Simon Jenkins (*left*). The BBC broadcaster and author told the audience in his keynote address to the Future Countryside conference at Raby Castle, Co Durham, last week that the build obsession in Britain for 'houses, houses, houses' had nothing to do with homelessness, but everything to do with the arbitrary statistic of 1.5 million homes—'which we're not going to reach anyway'—and a building industry intent on making money. Local authorities have become 'mere agencies of central government direction', targets can be imposed on local villages and towns with impunity and 'that imposition is, to me, the biggest single threat we face at the moment'. He cited the example of Moreton-in-Marsh, a once lovely Cotswold town that 'is now an absolute disgrace', having been 'destroyed by a surrounding siege mob of Persimmon and Barratt homes'. 'You drive across the Somerset Levels, you drive across Essex, Kent… the south Midlands, parts of the Welsh borders and there are ugly housing estates. These are not houses for the poor. They are houses built by the private sector for the middling rich.'

Rural spaces, such as Langdale in Cumbria, should be valued, not covered in houses

The millennium was a watershed, when polls showed the British people loved only the Royal Family and the NHS more than the countryside. As long ago as the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, people felt rural areas should be protected and this had continued through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. 'There was a general agreement that the countryside was something worth protecting… There was no great battle running then, except a battle to move slowly forward every year, [but] something... dissolved at the turn of the century.'

This consensus began to unravel during the Blair years as the construction lobby grew in influence and 'wanted the Government to do what they wanted, and they were very, very effective. Most of the money going to the Conservative party [then] was coming from the construction industry, and the result [was that]… by the time of the Cameron government, you had a real sense that the game was up'.

The former chair of the National Trust added that he regards nimbys (an acronym for 'Not in my back yard', people who oppose developments) as 'heroes of our age... At least somebody is trying to defend the countryside'.

To reverse the trend, he argued that although there will always be competing demands, the countryside has 'to work for our advantage, but that working has got to be the result of a conversation in which the quality of the countryside must be dominant'.

Soundbites from the Future Countryside stage

Craig Bennett, chief executive The Wildlife Trusts 'The economy, our lives, our livelihoods, everything we hold dear, depends on Nature. As Sir Partha Dasgupta said in the Dasgupta Review [of 2021]: "An economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the natural world", and yet we treat it as if it's the other way around'

Chris Smith, chancellor, University of Cambridge 'Where politicians have completely failed both to understand and to interpret and inspire is [when] making the connection with voters about their perception of their bit of the environment. If we make that connection, then hearts and minds will follow'

Rupert Soames, businessman 'We are at the tiger-cub stage of AI and the countryside consists of hundreds of thousands of small and medium-sized businesses who struggle with imperfect analysis and advice. AI is bringing that information and analysis to their doorstep'

Minette Batters, farming leader 'To matter, you have to be valued, and successive governments haven't valued farming'

Matt Ridley, author 'There is such a thing as over-regulation. It does happen, and it's not harmless. It does stifle innovation and it has perverse outcomes that are bad for Nature…

'All of the bad things that have happened to the uplands in my lifetime were at the behest of government. Drainage, over-grazing, Sitka spruce trees—an ecological, irreversible catastrophe, in my view—wind farms (which deter golden plovers from breeding and golden eagles won't hunt near them), the ban on heather burning, which is bad for fire risk and bad for golden-plover breeding habitats and good for ticks… Is there a better way? Yes. It's called outcomes-based regulation. You specify the end, not the means [then you afford] a degree of trust to those who are doing the right thing and a degree of suspicion to those who are [not]'

Fly-tipping is easy for criminal gangs when no retribution is forthcoming

Crime of no consequence

IN an effort to get people to dispose of their waste more responsibly, consecutive governments have encouraged people to [dump it] on your land—and it's a very serious problem,' stated television presenter and waste campaigner Kirstie Allsopp (*above*). Speaking as a report from Future Countryside and the National Rural Crime Network (NRCN), *Breaking the Cycle: Tackling Fly-Tipping and Waste Crime—A Roadmap for Reform*, for which Ms Allsopp contributed the foreword, was launched, she noted that 'what's extraordinary is that it's the only crime where the victims have to pay… and it's astonishing that consecutive governments have done nothing'.

With one-fifth of domestic industrial waste now apparently disposed of illegally and with local authorities in England dealing with more than 1.26 million fly-tipping incidents in 2024–25 (up 9% on the previous year—although numerous incidents go unreported), the report paints a bleak picture of waste crime that is now lucrative big business for criminals, who despoil the countryside, yet rarely face prosecution due to 'weak regulation' and 'patchy enforcement'. In 2024–25, only 13 custodial sentences were given for fly-tipping offences across England. There is also evidence that illegal waste disposal prompts further criminal activities, such as hare coursing, which often lead to entire communities living in fear.

The report not only advocates reform to prevent victims bearing clean-up costs, but tougher action against criminal networks, plus the establishment of a national reporting system, better intelligence sharing and stronger regulation of waste carriers and brokers.

Ms Allsopp stated that her husband, Ben Andersen, owned a building in London next door to a vacant property, where, 'in the middle of the night, the entire plot was filled with rubbish as high as the house… The owner was then approached by gang leaders and given a figure to pay for them to take it away. Major gangs are now involved in litter as, bizarrely, fly-tipping is worth more than drugs and illegal cigarettes; it is the easiest thing to do because there is no comeback'.

Ms Allsopp advocated a solution: 'Local authorities have to roll back on the skip taxes and fees,' she said. 'You can't be in a situation where it's more economical for people to fly-tip than it is for them to legally get rid of their rubbish… Quite a lot of [dumping] occurs close to tips. People... have been turned away and told that's not something [the council] accepts. They have then fly-tipped it. Therefore, tips must accept everything.'

On the issue of littering, Ms Allsopp referred to the scourge of cigarette butts—5,000 end up in a single drain every year in Britain, according to research by Keep Britain Tidy. She suggested that the solution lies in education and hard-hitting campaigns, such as the Don't be a Tosser anti-litter initiative. 'We have to be so much more robust in how we approach this,' added Ms Allsopp.

David Skaith, Mayor of York and North Yorkshire, announced that a successful 10-week pilot project in his area, Natural Health Service, is being extended for 18 months—with £550,000 of funding from the mayor's budget—'to show how Nature can... be a part of our wider health service'. During the initial pilot, researchers from York St John University investigated the role that access to the natural world plays in supporting physical and mental wellbeing and discovered significant improvements in the health of the 45 completing participants.

Good week for

Choral farmers

The Hawkstone Farmers Choir, first assembled by Jeremy Clarkson, won *Britain's Got Talent*'s first prize of £250,000 at the end of May with an original song, *This is Home*

Swish sandwiches

As National Picnic Week takes place (June 15–21), Fortnum & Mason is launching a private vintage picnic experience on the Thames just in time for Henley Regatta. Visit www.fortnumandmason.com/fortnums-on-thames

Expert appraisals

KYN is partnering with Lots Road Auctions for an exclusive valuation event in the garden of care home KYN Hurlingham, London SW6, June 18, 3pm–6pm. Guests are invited to bring along treasured possessions for complimentary, no-obligation valuations by Lots Road Auctions' team of experts. Visit https://tinyurl.com/36frpwcv

Military phalerists

On June 17, Noonans Mayfair is auctioning three medals (estimate £6,000–£8,000) awarded to Sgt James William Wightman, the central figure in Richard Caton-Woodville's painting *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1895. Wightman was taken captive following the disastrous engagement

Country Life

The magazine's five-star stand at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show garnered 2.7 million views on Instagram across the globe

Bad week for

Bites and stings

False widow spiders, mosquitoes and jellyfish are thriving earlier than usual due to the recent heatwave—and biting or stinging all of those who lie in their wake

South West Water

The company was fined a record £1,853,000 for drinking-water failures following an outbreak of cryptosporidium that affected 16,000 homes and businesses in Brixham, Devon. Hundreds of people reported being ill **WH**

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New Hope for rural transport

The Swiss idea that rail and bus timetables should connect up will soon be given life in Derbyshire

HOPE VALLEY in Derbyshire will soon play host to a fully integrated rural public-transport pilot that will mirror a highly successful Swiss model. 'Mini Switzerland' will implement revised timetables to coordinate better rural bus services with train schedules, ensuring timely connections for 10 villages and five railway stations—Castleton, Hope, Bamford, Hathersage and Eyam—that will connect to the likes of Manchester and Sheffield stations in less than an hour. In April, the Government allocated £6 million of funding to the project, which has been shaped over the past year by the Hope Valley Climate Action charity and a group of volunteers, including Thomas Ableman of Freewheeling, a consultancy firm that specialises in transport and mobility. The pilot could potentially be operational by April 2027. Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander has said that the project will aim to 'make getting to work or a day out in the Peak District by public transport as easy as jumping in the car'.

'In Switzerland, as long as a village has a population exceeding 300 people, it is connected by bus every hour to the local station and the trains and the buses are timed to meet each other perfectly,' Mr Ableman tells COUNTRY LIFE. 'The Swiss believe that theirs is a rich nation because they have a great transport system, not the other way around.'

The country's high-density railway network, plus national hourly timetables introduced in the 1980s, have led to a slick system that ensures about 25% of journeys are made by public transport in Switzerland today. Mr Ableman acknowledges that the British transport system is not only very different, but is 'so broken and so fragmented' that the introduction of Swiss-style transport can sometimes seem 'almost insurmountable'. However, 'we're taking one rural area and will do it really well,' he says, adding that 'all the bus operators and the rail operator in the area are on side. Then, if we can make it work in one place, we can replicate it again and again'.

The Government's consultation on banning trail-hunting in England and Wales closes on June 18. Anyone wishing to respond, including businesses that will be affected, from timber merchants to farriers and livery-yard owners, should visit https://consult.defra.gov.uk/defra/trail-hunting-consultation

England's rural champions are invited to enter CPRE Centenary Awards

The CPRE's Centenary Awards, which celebrate the people and projects helping England's countryside to thrive, are open for nominations. The six categories are Young countryside changemaker award (for outstanding individuals under 25), plus Countryside changemaker, Best access to the countryside project, Best housing solution, Best green space project and Best rooftop solar solution.

The closing date for submissions (at www.cpre.org.uk/cpre-national-centenary-awards) is June 24 and the winners will be announced at the Houses of Parliament on October 29.

Klimt work is among highlights of £200m sale

Amedeo Modigliani's *Nu assis au collier* (estimate excess £45 million) will form a part of Sotheby's London sale 'Masterpieces from the Lewis Collection' on June 24. The auction also includes Lucian Freud's *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet* (*Town & Country, May 27*) and Gustav Klimt's full-length *Portrait of Gertrud Loew* (estimate £20 million–£30 million). A free exhibition of all the works, which are together worth in excess of £200 million, runs at No 34–35, New Bond Street, London W1 from today (June 10) until June 23. For more information and to bid, visit www.sothebys.com.

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Core Bramley campaign comes unstuck

CAMPAIGNERS planning to buy the house where the original 200-year-old Bramley apple tree grows in the garden and turn it into a heritage centre have been thwarted only a week before they were due to receive a 'large investment'. Nottingham Trent University (NTU), owner of the house and its garden at No 25, Church Street, Southwell, Nottingham, have instead sold part of the garden containing the tree to Joshua and Alicia Wheatley, owners of Bramley Tree Cottage next door. The university-owned No 25 is still listed for sale. An NTU spokesperson said: 'There had been interest from another party, which the university was fully prepared to consider, but it didn't materialise. We are delighted that custodianship of the tree has passed to the owners of Bramley Tree Cottage. Historically, the Bramley was in this garden, so it is great to be able to support the return to its original home. The university is now supporting the new custodians with advice on how to care for the Bramley, which has outlived its natural lifespan by quite some time.'

Artist and campaign co-founder Dan Llywelyn Hall told COUNTRY LIFE: 'NTU are supposedly pioneers of the environment and had an opportunity to celebrate this tree for the world to see, but have wiped their hands of it.'

The tree, which has no preservation order, originated from pips planted by a child, Mary Ann Brailsford, in 1809. This 'mother' tree went on to produce fruit sold by Henry Merryweather when Matthew Bramley owned the cottage. Merryweather also took cuttings that were registered as Bramley Seedling. Planted extensively, they would lead to the Bramley becoming Britain's most popular cooking apple (*page 94*).

The 200-year-old Bramley apple tree at the centre of a fight for possession

Mr Llywelyn Hall said he visited the site two years ago to find 'the poor tree surrounded by honey-fungus proliferation in a lonely, unloved garden. It was a sad sight for a tree of such huge significance... It was always an inconvenience, and, simply put, NTU never saw the value'. NTU says it has 'undertaken steps for the transfer of the garden to contain specific obligations to ensure the continued maintenance, preservation and care of the Bramley, as well as public access for events'.

Mr Llywelyn Hall added that if the idea of setting up a heritage centre had been successful, Celia Steven, great-granddaughter of Merryweather, had 'a great deal of items that would have told the remarkable story to the world'.

Potential lifeline for soaring countryside emergencies launched by charity

RABI the farmer's charity has launched FarmersAid, a critical-care app that offers step-by-step guidance for the first critical minutes following a serious accident. Free to use and put together with advice from trauma consultants, the app comes in the wake of a surge of deaths in the agricultural sector. Four farmers died this April, with 33 fatalities between April 1, 2025 and April 1, 2026. 'This app doesn't replace the emergency services, but it may keep somebody alive during the "platinum 10 minutes",' says RABI's chief executive Alicia Chivers, who attributes the one in five work accidents that occur in the sector to farmers frequently working alone in 'highly pressured' and 'overwhelming' situations. 'You don't have to be a farmer, however, to use FarmersAid,' adds Ms Chivers. 'Anyone living, working or visiting the countryside can use it—and it might just save a life.'

Country Mouse

The best of England

BOWLER hats and roses, pretty dresses and raincoats, eager children and picnics worthy of Enid Blyton: the Shropshire Hound Show was the best of England. On the lawn of a quintessential country house, hunts gathered to show doghounds in the morning and bitches after lunch in time-honoured fashion. Each hound represented hundreds of years of breeding, recorded in stud books that go back further than those for the Thoroughbred horse. After consideration of conformation (vital for stamina), biddability (a huntsman controls 25-odd hounds at once with ease) and eagerness (all hounds want to work), judges awarded Albrighton & Woodland Rallywood the doghound championship and Wheatland Magnet the bitchhound.

In between was the reason I was there: the hunt picnic competition. These celebrations of home-reared ham and homemade cakes, home-smoked salmon and home-raised pies are a tribute to hard work, fellowship and community. One chap revealed that he bakes bread in the small hours to relieve the stress of farming; one lady had assembled a croquembouche worthy of *Bake Off*. After much judicious tasting (it's a hard job), we awarded first prize to the United, with the Wheatland and Ludlow close behind. Sated, I looked across the happy scene and swallowed a lump in my throat at the thought that all this could be lost. **OP**

Town Mouse

Counting down the days

TRAVELLING this week has been made memorable by the weather, with brilliant sunshine alternating with short periods of torrential rain and an occasional clap of thunder. Among its highlights was a short visit to Belfast and with it the opportunity to attend a meeting of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society in the stable yard of Clandeboye, Co Down. The estate is completely encircled by the suburbs of Belfast and Bangor, but, once inside, you would never know. Pass through the main entrance, which opens improbably off a busy dual carriageway, and the visitor seems to enter a rural idyll. Between downpours, there was an opportunity to enjoy a spectacular walk around the grounds and lake, the latter reputedly planned in the form of a shamrock, and to admire the bee house, a set of hives delightfully united in a tiny thatched cottage.

By the time this column appears in print, there will be only two A-level papers left for our household to worry about. We have been counting them down one by one and striking out the subjects as they pass—the Wars of the Roses, the philosophy of religion, drama… No sooner than they finish, we will no doubt be worrying about the results, but at present that seems —relatively speaking—an attractive prospect. **JG**