

The History of the Countryside:
The classic history of Britain's landscape, flora and fauna

Oliver Rackham

Phoenix 2000 [1986]

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2008 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

The History of the Countryside is a magisterial study of British landscapes from prehistory down to the present. In it Oliver Rackham draws on a broad range of sources and material, combining statistical and scientific data with personal experiences and details of specific locations and features, sometimes down to individual trees. The result is engaging and informative.

Rackham begins with the broad regional divisions of Britain, but *The History of the Countryside* has little about Wales, Ireland, or Scotland. The focus is primarily on the English lowland and its division between "ancient" and "planned" countryside.

"On the one hand, as in Essex or Herefordshire, we have the England of hamlets, medieval farms in hollows of the hills, lonely moats and many footpaths, fords, irregularly-shaped groves with thick hedges colourful with maple, dogwood, and spindle — an intricate land of mystery and surprise. On the other hand there is the Cambridgeshire type of landscape, the England of big villages, few, busy roads, thin hawthorn hedges, windswept brick farms, and ivied clumps of trees in corners of fields; a predictable land of wide views, sweeping sameness, and straight lines."

Rackham gives a very brief introduction to historical methods and sources; one of his specialties is the use of Anglo-Saxon charter bounds or perambulations.

He touches briefly on conservation, and his own passion for preserving unique and representative British landscapes and landscape features runs through the volume. And he spends thirty pages on the introductions and extinctions of animals and plants in the British Isles.

The bulk of the book considers different types of landscapes and land uses:

their origins, their extent at different times and their history, and their current status and future prospects. There are long chapters on woodlands and on wood-pasture (wooded commons, parks and wooded Forests) and a very brief chapter on modern plantations.

"North-west Essex is typical in that more of the smaller woods survive. Except in specially-protected Hatfield Forest, only one wood bigger than 100 acres now remains intact of the fourteen in 1805. Woods bigger than 30 acres have been reduced by more than half. Owners of big woods are more likely to grub them out. In small woods, attempts at replanting are less common and are usually cancelled by later neglect. Although 'economic necessity' is pleaded as the excuse for destroying woods, experience shows that they, like other antiquities, survive more often at times and in places where there is too little money than where there is too much."

"A Forest is land on which the king (or some other magnate) has the right to keep deer. This is the original sense of the word: to the medievals a Forest was a place of deer, not a place of trees."

There are chapters on fields, hedges and field-walls, and trees of hedgerow and farmland, along with an entire chapter on elms.

"In midland and northern England there are, even now, great areas of what has long been pasture which shows wave-like undulations, every 11 yards or so. For centuries it has been appreciated that these result from ancient ploughing practices. ... Ridge-and-furrow comes naturally from driving an asymmetrical mouldboard plow, drawn by eight oxen, within the narrow limits of a half-acre strip. ... At every ploughing a plough's depth of soil is shifted one plough's width towards the middle of the selion. Hence a ridge is formed."

"In the time of ignorance we supposed that the trees and shrubs in a hedge were determined, in some vague way, by soil, climate, or management, or by the whims of those who planted the hedge. Dr Hooper noticed that all these were less important than the age of the hedge ... The number of species, counted in a standardized way, is approximately equal to the age of the hedge in centuries."

A chapter on highways includes a bit about [bridges](#). There are chapters on heathland, moorland, and grassland. And Rackham finishes with chapters on ponds, dells and pits and on marshes, fens, rivers and the sea.

"Moorland evidently ranges from wholly natural to artificial in

origin. Much of it is the effect of interactions between human activity and natural processes. Leaching and peat formation would by now anyway have turned large areas of wildwood to moorland; human activities have speeded these processes. In high-rainfall areas, as well as at high altitudes and in the far north, the balance of evidence is that moorland is mainly natural. Wildwood has always been precarious, restricted to favourable localities and times. The accumulating blanket-peat would have made tree growth increasingly difficult as time went on. ... Eastern Britain is less favourable to peat formation and more favourable to trees, and most of the drier, less peaty moorland, like heathland, would still be wildwood but for human intervention."

The History of the Countryside is liberally provided with maps, some showing country-wide distributions and some providing more local information. It also has a good selection of black and white photographs.

Rackham debunks myths, enters into debates, and obviously feels passionately about issues, but he remains balanced and sober. He presents broad claims and generalisations, but backs them up with both detailed case studies and general statistical and analytical arguments, drawing on a familiarity with landscapes and on disciplines from palynology to textual criticism.

The History of the Countryside is recommended to anyone curious about British landscapes and seeking a study with depth but with more breadth than local studies or the specialist scientific literature.

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