

David Matless, in writing about the railway preservation movement of the 1950s, describes the condition of any local area within a wider network, thus;

“Branch-line salvage, branch-line history, can find virtue in not connecting to a wider network, operating locally, back and forth and not beyond, rescuing and revering something passed by, bypassed by, the modern world.”

(Matless, 1998: 276)

This suggests an aspect of human psychology which can derive pleasure from retreating in to a state of rural isolation. The possibility of the existence of this mindset is relevant to my research, in acknowledging that it may be the very promise of increased connectivity, arguably the government’s key selling point for HS2, which is in fact a significant factor in causing resistance to the line by people living in rural localities. Indeed, it is not clear that a typical farmer or agricultural worker would have anything at all to gain from such connection to the wider network across the cities of Europe, and the trains and line itself will absolutely manifest ‘the modern’ in farmed landscapes, the essential functions of which have changed very little since the early Victorian tithe maps.

My final point about the rural condition is the question of land ownership. According to a feature in *Country Life Magazine*, the UK government does not know who owns all of rural England, because (as at 2011) more than 25% of the land in the UK is not registered with the Land Registry. This is because such land has not changed hands since the end of the nineteenth century, when it became compulsory to register it on change of ownership (*Country Life Magazine*, November 2010). There is an unofficial and incomplete map of English land ownership available at map.whoownsengland.org, but this is not reliably updated and does not show the privately-owned Tatton Estate land in Ashley, or, for example, the large areas of urban land owned by Peel Holdings in nearby Trafford. Its data sets come from sources such as water companies, government, the National Trust, Royal Society for Protection of Birds, the Forestry Commission, the Ministry of Defence and so on. It is a public attempt to communicate what information is available, and to propose that this data should not be secret. Data about private ownership can be sought from the land registry, but at a cost of £9,000 for a single download, this is not accessible to the typical PhD researcher, or lay person. Details of land ownership along the HS2 route is available in the *Book of Reference* accompanying the High Speed Rail Bill, but again a (much smaller) fee is payable. *Country Life* claims that;

“More than a third of land is still in the hands of aristocrats and traditional landed gentry. Indeed, the 36,000 members of the CLA [Country Landowners Association] own about 50% of the rural land in England and Wales”

(Country Life Magazine, November 2010)

This estimate is supported by the CLA’s own claims (Country Landowners Association, 2017). The issue of ownership is an important one when it comes to finding out how inhabitants can have real influence over the future of their landscapes, because only the legislative powers of the state can preserve inhabitants’ rights in the face of private interests. This thread within my research has become more significant as work in Ashley has progressed, and land ownership issues have increasingly been raised by residents. This dimension is explored more fully in Chapter Five.

Defining the rural has been one of the unexpectedly difficult aspects of this research. I have repeatedly met with academics in landscape-related fields who disagree with my views. However, in line with my methodology and findings, I am content to conclude that if the materiality of the landscape at a 1:1 scale manifests with what are generally agreed to be significantly rural characteristics, and if the majority of the inhabitants of a place say that it is rural, then so it is.