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## How England's peasantry was betrayed by the middle classes

An entire way of life, with its peculiar and venerable traditions, has been erased from the national story

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Every nation feeds off a fantastical past, yet each fantasises in its own way. The English ways include the fantasy that the heart of England beats not in the town but in the country – and, moreover, that this rural world takes the form of a landscape, which is to say: a view from afar. For the most part, the English, particularly the middle classes, would prefer that

not too many people get in the way of that view. Latterly, the English landscape has even begun to merge into “nature”, preferably of a wild sort and so without people altogether.

If people are sometimes found in the landscape, they're of a pretty peculiar sort, far removed from the realities of English rural life. Take figures such as “Hodge”, the 19th-century stereotype of the agricultural labourer. Hodge is ignorant, deferential, vacuous, an exemplar of what Friedrich Engels called “the idiocy of rural life”. In the 20th century, Hodge morphed into the more noble figure of “Folk Man”, the backbone of Old England, and the carrier of a folk tradition that transcended and superseded the ephemeral culture of the towns.

Hodge could be found in Punch magazine, while Folk Man strode forth from the 1890s in the productions of the English folk revival, not least as it inspired the music of Hubert Parry and his student Ralph Vaughan Williams. Both figures were silent, Hodge through oafishness and stupidity, and Folk Man because of his elemental timelessness and latent strength. Both figures had almost exactly the same counterparts in countries across Europe.

The single finest example of an exception to the rule of unpeopled landscapes is Ronald Blythe's sad and beautiful book *Akenfield*, published in 1969; but then, Blythe was the son of a Suffolk agricultural worker, and left school at 14. Blythe recorded the days of a rural England that was, even by then, almost completely gone. This is from the book: “The old people think deeply. They are great observers... The old men can describe exactly how the ploughing turns over in a particular field. They recognise a beauty and it is this which they really worship. Not with words – with their eyes.”

Thirty-seven years later, Craig Taylor wrote *Return to Akenfield*. He found the last horsemen and ploughmen replaced by the internet entrepreneur selling “locally sourced” produce at high prices to the better-off people who'd come in from outside in search of the good life – people seeking to reinvent the dying local pub as a “community venture”. (There were also some Polish immigrant workers, people more likely to have been peasants than anyone else in the place.)



Folk tale: Peter Hall's 1975 film *Akenfield* was based on Ronald Blythe's book

The Archers had begun broadcasting on the Home Service 18 years before even *Akenfield* was published. Today, after a further half-century, it's the longest-running radio soap opera in the world: there is no corner of an English field that is not forever Ambridge. England in this guise is cosy, hierarchical, apolitical and, above all, a "community".

For the English middle classes – the moneyed sort, at least – rural dreams take a similarly exaggerated form in the shape of the second home in rural France or Italy. The newly acquired peasant house gives them unmediated access to what in Britain has come to be known as "the good life", one lived like the peasants of yore: one can be both comfortably chic and a peasant at once. In 2002, the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, brought up in a peasant village, directed his scorn at the "reserves" where the last peasants would "dance and sing their bourrées and gavottes" for the satisfaction of the urban tourists – "so long as their existence is economically and symbolically profitable".

Folklore was his target, but also the real "reserves" of the folk museum where folklore is enacted, especially in its "living-history" open-air forms, where "authentic" peasant crafts and customs are on display. There is now a vast number of these institutions strewn across Europe, France included. A rightly bitter Bourdieu knew that these middle-class fantasies came at a huge price, namely the extinction of the awareness that peasant culture was created in the face of exploitation and want. The real forms of peasant culture were being usurped.





A team of students kitted out to spray an orchard against the ingress of disease, 1934 | CREDIT: Fox Photos/Getty Images

Here, then, for a change, are some glimpses of the mental universe of the landless labourer-cum-peasants of old England, rural Lincolnshire in this case, as late as the mid-20th century. For example, the Devil, the “Owd Lad” or “Old ’Un”, was alive and well: he aroused a mixture of fear and awe, yet there was also a familiarity towards him. He was a person more than a principle: you might meet and talk with him on the roads or in the fields, and he could dispense wisdom as well as evil. He might well have appeared as a gentleman in a black coat – hardly a good reflection on the black-coated Anglican clergymen who ministered to these poor people.

Just like their Polish contemporaries at the time, when the head of a household died, English workers would inform the animals for which they cared. Spirits, ghosts, witches, wise men, oracles, omens, dreams – as across Europe, all were there. And when it came to the annual ritual cycle of the seasons and its attendant customs, beliefs and observances, this mirrored the European pattern, too. There was a limited belief in Christian ideas of the Resurrection, and not a great deal of knowledge of or interest in the Christian afterlife.

In writing my new book, *Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*, I chose the term “peasants” knowing that it isn’t usually applied in England. The fact that England thinks of the countryside as its symbolic heart is more because of, rather than despite, the fact that it was, from early on, one of the most urbanised countries on Earth, not to mention the most industrialised. Capitalism in England extended early to agriculture, giving rise to a tripartite division between large landowners, farmers and landless labourers.



English rural life: Tractor and crew on the Isle of Jersey, circa 1982 | CREDIT: Kim Sayer

The last are usually not called “peasants” in England, for the good reason they had no or very little access to land, though such people were called peasants in Europe. And the small farmers of England, historically more important than is sometimes thought, were peasants in the classic Continental mode. “Peasant” was also not used because of the obloquy that attached to the word – though a contempt for “inferiors” was readily apparent in Europe, too.

In fact, we might call them “ghost peasants”. They were real people, but so great is the silence around them that you would hardly know they were there, except in the distorted forms of Cecil Sharp, who collected folk songs and led the 20th-century English folk revival, and the 20th-century composers such as Vaughan Williams who made up the English Pastoral School. (On the publication of *Return to Akenfield*, the octogenarian Blythe said of this way of life: “Some of it will be missed – the part that cannot be put into words.”)

“Peasant” or not, the culture of the English labouring poor has always been like that of peasant Europe, meaning that whenever they think themselves most near to an essential England, the English are being quintessentially European. Moreover, though the English idealise the rural past, they only do it up to a point. In fact, in practice, they seem uninterested in scrutinising it. The Welsh and the Scots, for instance, have extensive “national” museums of rural life, in Cardiff and East Kilbride respectively. Yet the Museum of English Rural Life is tucked away down the side of Reading University. Not a lot of people know that it exists, never mind where it is. Ghostland.

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*Remembering Peasants is published by Allen Lane on Feb 15*

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