

The Ageing Countryside

Lydia Speakman and Professor Philip Lowe

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The late and great JK Galbraith first warned us about accepting “the conventional wisdom” in his book “The Affluent Society”. I have been on my guard ever since and never more than with two of the current conventional assumptions. The first is that an ageing society is a bad thing, and the second is that rural England is in deep crisis. Some environmental academics have brought the two together with a collection of essays entitled “The Ageing Countryside” edited by Professor Philip Lowe and Lydia Speakman. They have produced an impressive analysis of the changing demographics of rural Britain.

Britain, like all large Western European countries, is getting older as people are living longer and produce fewer babies. There are two main contributory factors – the remarkable progress of medical technology and younger women’s preference for work over breeding. In rural England these trends are even more pronounced by the substantial migration of older urban dwellers to the countryside and a growing exodus of younger people from the countryside to the towns.

The conventional wisdom is that an ageing society becomes less productive and therefore less prosperous. The cost of maintaining these prolific pensioners is, the argument goes, a huge burden on those in work. Furthermore, we are led to believe, rural society is already in a crisis, and all these extra old people will lead to catastrophe.

One difficulty, when analysing rural issues is in defining what we mean by rural. In England any conurbation of 10,000 or less is seen to be rural. The author uses this definition and concludes that there is a rural population of 18m, or 36% of the population, which surely overstates the figure. In Scotland the figure is a more realistic 4,000. In France there are two categories – “urban/rural” which embraces anyone living within about 100 kilometres of a major urban conurbation, and “rural/rural” for those living outside this radius. The French would argue that the serious rural problems lie in the remote areas, rather than in the Sussex and Hertfordshire countryside.

The rural lobby brilliantly exploited the short-term crisis created by the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001, to suggest that the countryside was in a meltdown and in urgent need of regeneration. But the evidence in this book suggests otherwise. Using the English definition the rural population is growing for the first time since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1845, as inward migration exceeds outward. Rural England is healthier and more educated than it ever was, and in addition more prosperous than the towns. There is rural poverty but it is much less severe than urban deprivation. The problems are ones of success

not failure – too many house purchasers forcing prices beyond the reach of potential first time buyers, too few workers to carry out the hard physical work in farming. Indeed, were it not for the extraordinary inflow of workers from Eastern Europe most of the daffodils in Cornwall, fruit in Evesham and Kent, and vegetables in Lincolnshire would not be harvested. The IT revolution has enabled rural business to engage in markets which in the past would have been inaccessible.

The ageing population, in town and country, is by no means an economic burden. Most old people replace a big house with a smaller one when moving from high cost London to low cost Devon and Cornwall, and with additional benefits of pensions and savings, are relatively affluent. As consumers they stimulate local economies. More and more grandparents become productive child carers, to enable their children to return to work. Huge numbers of old people, like myself in my seventieth year, are still at work, albeit part time. In rural England, the old people have a much stronger commitment to communities, an essential element in a vibrant countryside. Old people have exploited the IT revolution with alacrity.

Of course as the book points out, there are too many vulnerable young and old people in the countryside. Whilst 86% of people have access to a car, those who do not, mainly young and old, can feel remote at a time when the majority enjoy unprecedented access to the “delights” of modern urban life, supermarkets, leisure and high quality hospital care. More houses need to be built in rural towns and villages which are affordable to young people. But the rural population resists such proposals because they may undermine the quality of rural life.

A curious feature of English rural society is that, although it is politically conservative, it paradoxically adopts a culture of dependence on the state, (just as, despite its anti-European stance it fiercely protects the benefits it receives from the CAP). But demands for more government rural initiative should generally be resisted, except where, as in the case of affordable housing, planning reforms could tackle a problem common to both town and country.

Rural England stands to benefit from the increase in prosperous elderly immigrants, as long as the rising inward flow of younger people from Eastern Europe ensures that the rural economy continues to thrive.

Lord Haskins

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