

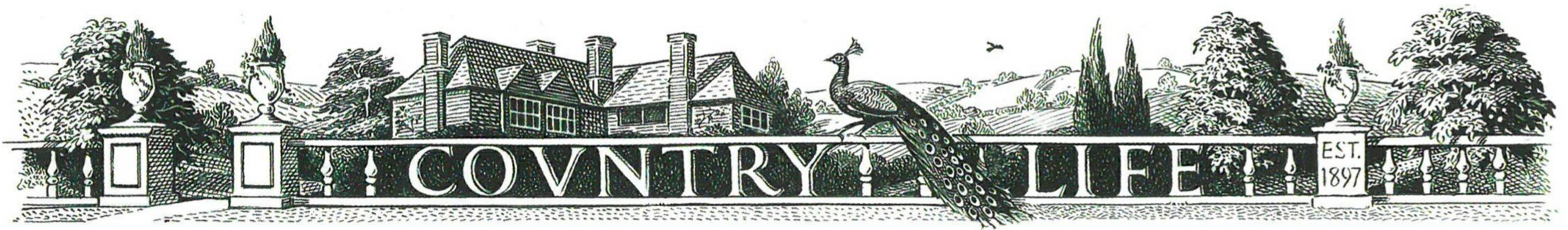


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# Why we must save the countryside's soul

In his regular birthday message to the countryside,  
His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales stresses the need for balance between  
man and Nature and why it's wise to leave rural Britain to solve its own problems



**O**UR countryside and rural society form an extraordinarily diverse web of living interactions between people, environment, landscape and economy that has developed over thousands of years. Rather like some ancient oak woodland or wildflower meadow, it is a system whose innate resilience and capacity to adapt to natural shocks can only be maintained if the management regime respects the constant need for balance and is not over-influenced by the latest fashionable approach.

This year I have, once again, been fortunate enough to visit many parts of rural Britain, meeting farmers and associated rural businesses and have seen and heard a great deal about their hopes and fears for the future. There is clearly a lot to be concerned about. Farm gate prices have remained low, leading to further declines in many already stretched rural incomes; floods have devastated large areas of beautiful and productive countryside, damaging food production, tourism and other rural livelihoods; and the erosion of the rural services that sustain local communities has continued in many areas. Yet somehow, seemingly against all the odds, our countryside, together with the resilience of the people who make it a living, productive, beautiful and hugely valuable part of our nation, have made it through another year.

My concern, based on half a century of active involvement with our countryside and its people, is to try and understand how long this can continue and what, if anything, can be done to help. Will we eventually reach a point at which resilience turns brittle and we start to lose much that is both highly valued and irreplaceable?

Everywhere I have been I have seen inspiring examples of communities, families and individuals working together to produce outcomes that are of value to us all. Apart from anything else, they increasingly produce the best and most nutritious kind of food that has never seen the inside of a ship or an aircraft. They nurture and maintain unique landscapes that raise our spirits and remain timelessly familiar, unchanging and a vital link between generations in a confusingly changing world. And they maintain a way of life that, while it has some urgent needs, including fast broadband, good business planning and training in new skills, differs in important respects from our otherwise largely urban existence. In this sense, we need to get

better at appreciating and valuing the contribution to our wider society of those who live and earn their livelihoods physically close to the land and have a deep understanding of how to manage it well.

I do, of course, understand that there are different ways of looking at the world. But when it comes to the contribution made to the life of the nation by rural Britain, it often appears to me that we focus too much on the narrow, short-term costs and too little on its wider, long-term value.

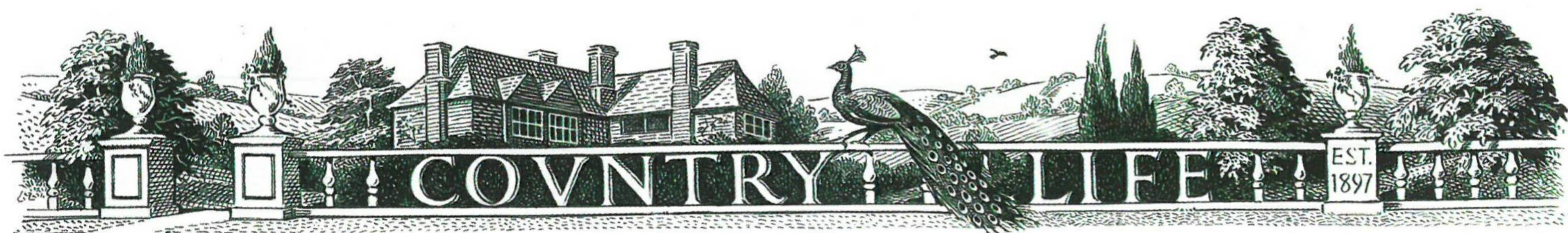
In this regard, it is perhaps worth emphasizing the concept of 'Natural Capital' which seeks to identify and value the assets, in terms of soil, air, water and living things, that together provide the 'ecosystem services' on which we all rely for our existence. The important point is that those services are almost all located and delivered in the countryside, to the benefit of us all, including our burgeoning urban populations. And the people responsible for doing most of the associated work are our farmers.

This is why I have never been able to accept the notion that farming is 'just another industry' and must be treated accordingly. This is particularly the case for the smaller, family farms. I suspect my views on their importance are by now fairly well known, not least to readers of COUNTRY LIFE, but there is a wide range of opinions on this subject and therefore it was evident that some research was called for. So my Countryside Fund asked Professor Michael Winter and his colleagues at the University of Exeter to look at the role of the United Kingdom's small family farms and whether there is a future for them. Their report has now been published and it makes for fascinating reading.

Based on detailed survey work in the South West of England, the report concludes that, for a variety of reasons, there is not necessarily a future for all small family farms, but also points out that the best family farms—whatever their size—could be as efficient as many larger farms. Other valuable insights include that because small family farms 'have to do things differently' they have a strong motivation to innovate, and that small farms are well placed to contribute to their communities. The authors also record their concern that a significant number of operators of small farms will naturally retire in the near future and ask whether their ranks 'can be replenished by active and economically vibrant new small farms or whether, >



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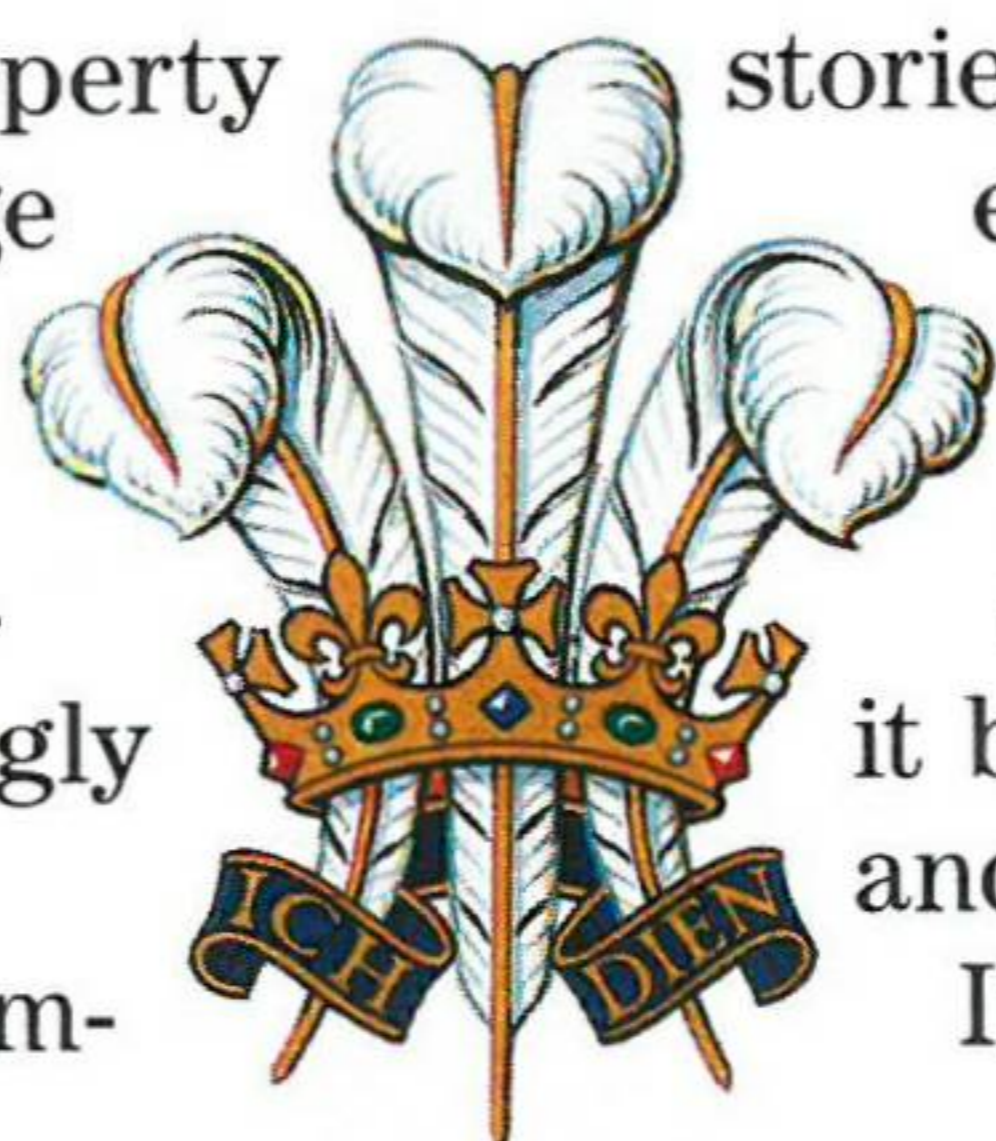


as seems more likely... their land and property is taken-up by a combination of expanding large farms and residential life-style purchasers.' To me, that is a very important question, which many responsible landowners with a real understanding of the countryside are increasingly trying to address.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for farmers and small businesses, for the agriculture sector, and for policy makers—all of which we must fervently hope will receive careful attention. Some of the recommendations are being taken forward immediately by my Countryside Fund through our Farm Resilience Programme. This is the most ambitious project we have undertaken so far, targetted specifically at helping those farm businesses that are not currently engaged with local support networks, and in particular at those who are 'hardest to reach'. We know that there are a variety of reasons why rural businesses may be hard to reach; ranging from lack of confidence, depression and anxiety, isolation, basic skills needs (such as computer and machinery training) and simply lack of time. Yet these businesses are often those whose need for support is greatest, so we are placing a lot of emphasis on overcoming those barriers, reaching as many as possible and encouraging them to benefit from networks where they can learn from each other and from expert speakers and consultants.

Having just re-read Professor Winter's report, I was particularly struck by his reference to 'the stability of family farms as the main institutional units in the countryside,' underlined by the statistic that the average time that families in the survey had been farming either the same farm or in the general vicinity was 105 years. I cannot help thinking about the scale of the local, inherited knowledge and collective wisdom accumulated by those families over those years, and how much we will collectively lose if it is dissipated through the introduction of vast and highly automated systems, or simply disappears as farms are 'consolidated' and rural employment declines.

While I recognize the need for efficiency in food production, not least in terms of greater self-sufficiency and a reduction in food miles, it would be a tragedy if we merely abandoned the profoundly important cultural dimension of farming, with its pervasive influence on the landscape, on rural communities and on the



It would be a tragedy if we merely abandoned the profoundly important cultural dimension of farming ;

stories behind food and, instead, reduced our human experience to the level of a soulless, industrialized factory. Would that truly be progress when one of the great things about the diversity of this country's farming systems is that it brings the added value of agricultural, social and environmental benefits?

Indeed, what looks like 'progress' to one generation can easily be seen as short-sighted, blinkered or even irresponsible by the next. That is one reason why, for the last 30 years, I have been so passionate about helping to ensure the survival of rare breeds of livestock and traditional varieties of vegetables and fruit at a time when they have been under severe threat. They may not be as productive or 'efficient' in simple terms as more modern types, but they have been carefully selected to succeed over many generations, providing different qualities, such as disease resistance, excellent taste and the ability to survive in

difficult conditions. Maintaining a wide genetic pool for a species has real value when problems arise, as we have seen recently with the use of genetically diverse trees in the fight against ash dieback. Once lost, these vital genes are gone forever.

I would further question whether 'efficiency' can ever be a sufficient goal for an activity and way of life that is so intertwined with natural processes. In living systems, too narrow a focus leads to a loss of diversity, which can all too easily lead inadvertently to a reduction in resilience and to unintended consequences that cannot be easily or quickly reversed. There are plenty of cautionary tales from which we can learn, including crop failures due to over-reliance on a single variety, disasters resulting from the unexpected impacts of introduced non-native species, environmental and landscape damage from monocultural forestry plantations and losses of bees and other natural pollinators due, at least in part, to pesticide use.

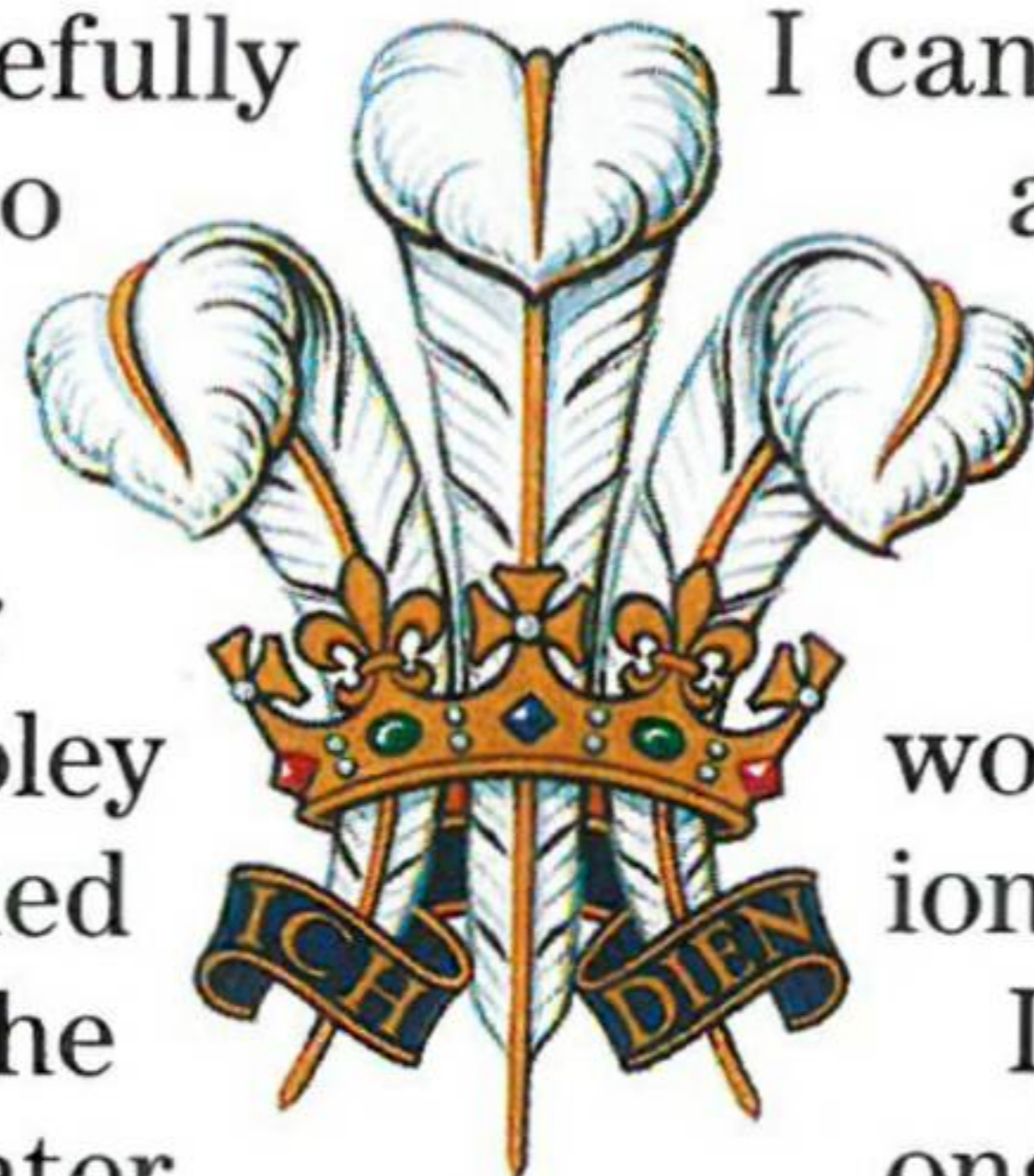
As I mentioned earlier, this year I have once again been fortunate enough to visit many rural areas of the country and have seen and heard for myself a great deal about the challenges being faced by local people and their fortitude in response. Nowhere was this more evident than in Cumbria in March, following the devastating floods. At that time, nine out of ten tourist businesses had suffered from a reduction in tourist numbers and not all of the key infrastructure was fully



functioning again, but what struck me forcefully was the way everyone had pulled together to ensure that they really were 'open for business'. As just one example, notwithstanding the fact that the 18th century structure after which it is named had been swept away, Pooley Bridge was a hive of activity, with what seemed like the entire community gathered at the Sun Inn to talk positively about the future. Later in the day, I visited Grasmere and its renowned Gingerbread Shop, which dates back to 1854. Like so many local businesses, its owners had suffered badly from the loss of trade following the floods, and expected few customers at Easter, but were still remarkably optimistic.

That visit to Cumbria was one of a number of opportunities to discuss flood mitigation and the role of local communities in developing grass roots and farmer-led approaches. It reminded me once again of the importance of the local dimension in managing the environment sensibly. The kind of place-specific schemes that have been developed at Pickering in North Yorkshire and at Belford in Northumberland show just what can be achieved through slowing, storing and filtering flood water on agricultural land. In each case the involvement of local people in developing inclusive land management practices has been crucial in protecting urban communities downstream.

After many years of visits, discussions and practical involvement, I cannot help thinking that the countryside is remarkably good at sorting out its own problems, drawing on a combination of indigenous knowledge and expert help in deciding what needs to be done, and then getting on and doing it, in its own way.



‘There is clearly a lot to be concerned about,’

I cannot help feeling that when and where assistance is needed, we should look to help in achieving outcomes of real and lasting value to our society, including increasing resilience and looking after the long-term assets whose worth cannot readily be assessed by conventional metrics.

I am convinced that the thoughtful and detailed ongoing work to develop the concept of 'Natural Capital' is going to be of real significance for the future of environmental decision-making in the countryside. Perhaps one day we will have a body of rigorous work on rural social and cultural capital to set alongside it. But, until then, it is perhaps worth noting that despite a great deal of so-

called 'efficiency' and agricultural intensification in the developed world, we have managed to waste forty per cent of our food, destroy the fertility of our soils and create an epidemic of plant, crop, tree and animal diseases. So let us keep the essential balance in our precious countryside that has stood the test of time so well; a balance between the hand of man and Nature, between efficiency and the cultural character of places, people and communities. Without it, we will have lost our souls—and so will our countryside.

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