

## Defining Rural - Barry Osborne 2010.

*The content of this article refers to the United Kingdom only. In many parts of the world rural areas are areas of general deprivation which is not true for the UK and some other countries. If you are living or working in rural areas other than the UK the information contained here might not be relevant.*

Since the industrial revolution resulted in migration into towns and cities what is rural has become defined as anything that is not urban. By that definition we could state that approximately 90% of the UK land mass is rural and at least 17% of the UK population (approximately one person in six) live there<sup>1</sup>. However, that does not provide enough information.

Some rural areas are great tracts of land with hardly any inhabitants. By contrast some rural communities are almost suburban satellites to towns and cities. For our terms of reference we would not consider any settlement with a population greater than 5,000 still to be classified as rural; government statistics (sometimes used by some Christian mission organisations) include settlements with a population up to 10,000. It is therefore important to be sure of terms of reference when abstracting information.

Returning to the concept of rural being what is left after urban areas are taken out of the equation we find that there are a wide variety of housing developments and a range of potential social definitions.

10.4% of Britain's population live in settlements of 1,000 or less. Many of these are either in small hamlets or in scattered housing. 1.4% of Britain's population live in villages of between 1,000 and 2,000. Approximately 5% of Britain's population live in larger villages and country towns with populations up to 5,000.

After the great migrations brought about by industrialisation there was little significant population movement until the mid 1950s. People who lived in the countryside could trace their families back in the same area over several generations. By the 1960s migration from urban areas into the countryside became more obvious. Terms such as incomer or offcomer were bandied about. There was a "them and us" cultural divide in many villages. The inflow of non-indigenous rural residents that began then has accelerated to a level in which, in many villages, "they" now outnumber the "us". In fact those terms have largely become irrelevant.

As late as 1970 it was still possible to identify certain characteristics common within rural personalities. These had been honed by generations of life lived in a gold-fish bowl, small, discrete community. Rural people were often cautious, taking care what they did and said because they knew that their words and actions would be judged by their neighbours. As a result there was a conservative tendency and a resistance to change. Insularity gave rise to suspicion regarding anyone or anything that was "foreign". Diffidence and deference were other traits. In some rural communities today something of these traits can still be identified but even indigenous rural people no longer live parochial lives.

In addition to change brought about by population movement there have been other influences such as the scattering of families, changes in patterns of education, the opportunity to travel cheaply to other parts of the country and abroad, and the ubiquitous television that brings insight into other cultures into our homes.

The incoming population has led to the housing stock in rural areas increasing substantially. But incomers have also been keen to purchase older rural dwellings - quite often as second homes. In the process property prices have been driven up and many whose previous generations lived in the village now have found themselves forced to move into towns to find somewhere to live. Even many farmhouses have been sold, and it is not

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<sup>1</sup> Source: UK Office for National Statistics.

uncommon to find farmers who commute from towns to work on the farm in some parts of Britain.

Among those who have moved into the countryside there are some distinct people groups. Some are people who have retired or are about to retire. One set of studies in East Anglia noted that after a few years many moved back into towns, sometimes because of the higher cost of living in the countryside, sometimes because of transport difficulties, sometimes because of the remoteness from essential services, and sometimes because they failed to realise that they were moving into an agricultural industrial environment with associated dirt and smells.

Another group of immigrants were those looking for the “good life”. They bought up run down country cottages, grew their own vegetables, and kept chicken and occasionally a goat.

Yet another group were the movers and shakers in society who could afford to purchase larger grander property in a nicer location. Here they escaped from their demanding working environments to the peace of the countryside. For many it was also seen as a better place to bring up your children.

The larger rural mansions were purchased by celebrities, hiding behind electronic gates and security systems.

But hard on the heels of these groups came others, disenamoured with urban life and drawn by the myth of the rural idyll.

In the earlier days those who moved into the countryside often sought ways to integrate into the traditional rural social structures. In the twenty first century there is more often a tendency for people to import their life-styles with themselves. Many have no idea who lives next door.

With the population change has also come a higher level of personal mobility. Often there are three or more cars per household. But 14% of people in rural areas have no personal motorised transport, and the general abundance of cars has led to a reduction in public transport, leaving some isolated. Commuting into towns to shop has also fuelled the growth of supermarkets, leading to the decline of village shops. In fact many of the traditional and historic amenities of village life have disappeared.

Many villages have become suburbanised with populations that commute to work, to shop, for social activities, and often (if so inclined) for church.

Villages vary enormously. Some are clustered housing; others are ribbon development along a main road. Some, with a school, medical practice and general store and post office, function as service centres for other neighbouring villages. While many villages grew up around agriculture and forestry, others developed around fishing, and still others around industries such as mining. Many have developed around tourism. Every village has its own distinct “feel”.

Into this context are set churches. In the main they have been there for many centuries. Most villages have a local Parish Church, often with several parishes clustered with one clergyperson serving them all and various pattern of services - possibly not every week. Methodist churches are the next most prolific but they have closed in thousands, as have many rural United Reformed Church buildings that were previously Congregational. Baptist and continuing Congregational Churches still have a significant though small presence<sup>2</sup>

They continue to be a major contributor to quality rural life even though weakened by decline.

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately 63% of churches in rural England are Anglican, 26% are Methodist, and 5% are Baptist. The remainder are Congregational, United reformed Church, Roman Catholic and independents.