

Report annual meeting EAEH, 2005

Crossing Landscapes.

When People, Practices or Problems are relocated.

Report of the annual meeting of British Environmental Historians/ European Association for Environmental History (UK Branch) Milton Keynes, 24 May 2005

(based on http://eseh.org/conference/eaeh/meeting2005/document_view)

The annual conference of British environmental historians was, as usual, held at the Open University, Milton Keynes. This meeting is normally small, with about 20 people in attendance, but the papers and discussions are high in quality. An additional advantage of this kind of small meetings is the fact that informal discussions with some of the key players in British environmental history, such as John Sheail and Peter Brimblecombe amongst others are possible.

This year's theme was inspired by the 50th anniversary of the publication of Hoskins' groundbreaking work *The Making of the English Landscape*. In line with this theme the meeting aimed to look at the way in which landscapes have been interconnected, through the interchange of people, practices and ideas, and problems that cross boundaries. However, since the field of environmental history is so wide ranging there were three out of five papers that connected in some way to the central theme.

The first paper by David Demeritt of King's College London looked at river management and use in New England for the purpose of log floating during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The paper examined the use of rivers as "public highways" for log floating and the question of whether a river could be deemed as 'owned' and how this affect the rights of those that used them. Naturally, conflicts inevitably arose from individual industrial use such as log floating, generation of hydro-electricity, shipping and fisheries. The paper concluded that uses of the river and log floating in particular changed the physical shape of the river and mechanised its flow in order to function as a "cog" in the timber industry. Nature became thus an extension of the emerging industry in the United States.

Raymond Smith talked about the changes in agriculture between the 1940s and early 1960s with regard to hydrology and irrigation in particular. This paper linked with Hoskins' work observing the rapid changes taking place in agriculture at the time, and in particular created in East Anglia and Lincolnshire, the almost 'prairie field' landscape that was an entirely new feature of the British landscape. During that period active irrigation was introduced in Britain and much research was devoted to transpiration, weather conditions and other aspects that affect the water balance in agricultural fields. An important issued addressed was why irrigation was introduced in such a naturally wet country as Britain. The answer partly lies in the colonial experience where irrigation was needed for producing crops. It was thought that by introducing it in Britain agricultural production would increase and become more reliable since it was no longer at the mercy of dry summers. The paper concluded that irrigation altered the hydrology in many parts of Britain.

Nick Goddard of Anglia Polytechnic University discussed the development of sewage irrigation and purification in Croydon in the 19th century. This town was one of the first in England with a sewage treatment system. The paper explored the environmental and health effects of sewage irrigation as well as the legal aspects and location of treatment areas, complete with contemporary accounts of public reaction to the obvious stench that such a facility often generated.

Atmospheric chemist Peter Brimblecombe of the University of East Anglia presented a fascinating paper about the location of power stations in cities and related air pollution problems, focusing on the famous Battersea power station in London. The paper argued how initial worries about air pollution were ignored since the decision of the construction of the station could not be overturned. This led to massive protest by the people living near the site of Battersea. To smother the protests, the renowned architect, Giles Gilbert Scott, was hired to design and construct a remarkable art deco 'temple' of electricity generation that became an iconic part of the London townscape. The economic argument was also progressed that centralised power generation in one big plant was a cleaner form of energy. Both of these actions dampened public disquiet, to such an extent that when the power plant closed in the 1970s, there was protest against demolition plans, as the building was seen as an integral feature of London's industrial heritage. The building was declared a world heritage site in the 1980s, but there remains a quandary as to its future use. One proposal suggests a theme park development, with smoke to come from the chimneys to symbolise a 'living community'. Ironically this plan inverts the protest of the 1920s against the plant.

Newcastle's Fred Milton presented the final paper, which discussed the role of the Dicky Bird Society (DBS) in bird conservation. Fred briefly recounted the history of the DBS and illustrated how this remarkable movement promulgated its conservationist agenda to its members and the wider public through the use of a provincial paper. The various campaigns of the DBS were highlighted, from the simple encouragement to children to put out bird food in winter to the tougher and more controversial agendas against the feather millinery trade. It also highlighted the importance of the role of moral nature education aimed at children in furthering the cause of bird protection and conservation values, whilst questioning whether this was a continuation of middle class social control accusations that have been levelled at other nineteenth century animal welfare movements. One remarkable conclusion of this paper seems to be that the movement was entirely composed of children and that for a large part based in the working classes of mining towns throughout the Northeast.

All papers were concluded with questions from the floor that led to stimulating debate. The day concluded with informal discussions over sandwiches that were kindly provided by the Open University. We are already looking forward to the next edition of this annual meeting.

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