

A Eulogy For The Remembered Village

Exploring Cookham's landscape:
Britain's sacred past, idyllic present,
and future post-Brexit.



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Will, my friends, and family

Introduction

This dissertation will explore the British landscape through three areas: as a sacred space, as a rural idyll, and as a part of the British national identity. These three aspects correspond with the past, present and future of Britain. I will focus on Cookham as a case study to base my research on but I will treat this village as a microcosm for Britain as a whole.

Firstly, I will give a brief overview of Cookham's history and my own experience of living there. Citing research by Cookham Parish Council and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM), I will explore the lasting impact that past resident and acclaimed twentieth century artist Stanley Spencer has had on the village, and how his legacy affects the landscape and residents today.

As an artist and resident of Cookham, I have found it illuminating to compare the methodologies of Spencer and I. In walking around Cookham and gathering photographs, interviews, and other sources, I was reminded of photographs of Spencer, wheeling his pram full of paints, stopping to speak to neighbours or admire a view. We record what we see, or what we would like to see (Lippard, 1997, p.18). Being an artist is being curious about one's surroundings, stopping to gather inspiration, and the first place one

usually does this is one's home. Lucy Lippard's book *The Lure of the Local* weaves her own experiences into her research, because she sees no distinction between academic and personal writing. In fact, they inform each other, and she explains that her 'notions of place are inextricable from all the places I've lived and been' (Lippard, 1990, p.5). Just as Spencer's work always draws upon his roots of place, faith, and home, my own experiences of Cookham inform my artistic and academic practice.

Links between spirituality and landscape are explored in Spencer's work. In *Sermons by Artists*, Spencer explains his fascination with Cookham and religion, and reflects on the relationship between these two spaces (Spencer, 1934). Fiona MacCarthy's book *Stanley Spencer: An English Vision* offers insight into his artwork and his personal life through analysis of his paintings, archival notes, letters and sketches (MacCarthy, 1997).

The landscape acts as a memento mori, providing a reminder of temporality and futility. I will also explore feelings of rapture in response to landscapes, and consider footpaths as a form of drawing, or as a metaphorical or psychogeographical path to enlightenment.

Using rural idealisation as a lens to study Cookham through, I will draw upon writings by Jeremy Burchardt, and his leading rural studies texts *Paradise Lost*, *The Rural Idyll: A Critique*, and *Historicizing Counterurbanization*. I will widen my geographical focus to explore the enduring myth of the rural idyll, and consider why we continue to subscribe to it, whilst understanding its shortcomings. I will analyse the limitations of the picturesque movement of painting.

I will explore the 1940s watercolour series *Recording Britain*, and consider the context in which it was commissioned. Alexandra Harris explains the resurgence of village appeal in her book *Romantic Moderns*, an exploration of the British landscape in the 1930s and 40s through the lens of several writers, painters, and poets (Harris, 2010). Her text is cited often in Shirley and Elson's *Creating The Countryside*, a collection of essays that accompanied an exhibition at the Compton Verney (Shirley and Elson, 2017).

Finally, British national identity has become a much-debated topic in light of the European Union (EU) referendum in 2016. This dissertation will reflect on how landscape and identity are linked and politically charged. I will speculate on patterns of landscape idealisation, and how these link to periods of turbulent national identity.

Photographer Wolfgang Tillman's poster *Anti-Brexit* series uses a line of John Donne's poem *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* and imagery of the British shoreline to state his opinion on the EU referendum. I will compare this to other depictions of poetry and the sea, and study how this can be used as propaganda. David Lowenthal's 1991 article *British National Identity and the English Landscape* identifies the differences between heritage and history, and English and British, offering comment on how these words are used in society to infer value. Despite being written some twenty years previously, Lowenthal's arguments have become increasingly relevant to British experience of identity today.



Cookham

Cookham is a small village on the River Thames in Berkshire (see appendices A and B). Known for its beautiful landscapes, Cookham has a chocolate box high street, an eleventh century church, and astronomical house prices. In 2011, it was awarded the title of Britain's second richest village (McGhie, 2011).

Stanley Spencer was born, lived and worked in Cookham, painting the church, paths, fields and people. Many remember him, or tell stories of their relatives being painted by him. Some families have lived in the village for generations, and can trace their lineage back to early settlers that chose Cookham for its riverside crossing vantage point.

The archive *Cookham Voices* explains the authenticity and reliability of its expansive collection of interviews, 'it does not purport to be an accurate history. It reflects what people remember it to have been' (Danks and Rosenthal, 2002, p.7). For Cookham, this method of interviewing residents over a cup of tea and an old story may not reveal an precise history of the village, but it gives an insight into the village that is more true to the spirit of the place.

At the top of the high street, there is a small gallery frequented by day-trippers from London.

Described as a 'shrine' to Spencer by The *Sunday Telegraph* (Brown, 1989), it is a small and dedicated gallery that thrives on National Lottery funding, donations and volunteers, and houses a large archive. Visitors fill its tiny hall, complain that the collection is too small, and have a quick ramble across the flood plain. Then they visit a gastro pub for chunky chips served in a metal bucket on a piece of slate, and go home on the Marlow Donkey, the rickety local train nicknamed for its braying whistle.

Equipped for weekend visits, Cookham has plenty of pubs, B&Bs, pleasure boat moorings, quaint little boutiques and pleasant walks. It has a Londis re-branded as '*Countrystores*', little leisure or entertainment facilities save a private members club, expensive gastro pubs, and poor provision for public transport, especially in snowy weather (Danks and Rosenthal, 2002, p.7).

The population of 5,779 is 96% white, 70.2% Christian, and has an average age of 43.1 (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Represented in parliament by Theresa May, MP since 1997, and Prime Minister since 2016, the area is a safe Conservative seat. One particularly damning social profile by the Department of Work and Pensions suggested that Cookham was 'somewhat spoiled by the gin and jag brigade', to

the distress of residents (Wainwright, 2002).

Made up of three distinct areas, the Cookhams are as follows; the Village, the oldest and most stereotypically attractive area that contains the High Street, an eleventh century church, and the riverside; Cookham Dean on Winter Hill, a somewhat isolated but very expensive and sought after location with a smaller church and a few gastro pubs; and Cookham Rise, a newer development that grew around the railway line that offers a parade of shops, cafes, a doctor's surgery, dentists, a supermarket, and a small library (Danks and Rosenthal, 2002, p.7).

I moved to Cookham Rise in July 2001, at the age of four. The road I live in is shaped like a long oval, with 96 houses that encircle a green. It functions as a space for walking, and for community events such as fetes and Bonfire Night celebrations. Residents of Westwood Green often comment that there is in fact four parts of Cookham: the Rise, the Dean, the Village, and the Green.

In May 2013, The Cookham Parish Council published the *Cookham Village Design Statement*, which is a planning document detailing Cookham's design vision. It is intended to provide residents and business owners with

guidance for developing their property, and to 'ensure that change is in keeping and protects what [Cookham] most values' (Cookham Parish Council, 2013). It gives advice on everything from roof tiling to colour scheme, described as a weathered red, beige, white and brown (see appendices C). This colour scheme is prevalent in Spencer's paintings, and was perhaps inspired by them. Additionally, the Village Design Statement functions as a historical record of Cookham in 2013. Many residents, business owners, council members and land owners were consulted and their own words and photographs are used throughout.

The design statement asserts that Cookham 'is not, and must not be, immune to change, but the best of what Cookham has to offer should be protected and where possible enhanced' (Cookham Parish Council, 2013). In terms of Spencer's paintings of Cookham, 'the spirit of the place is captured. It is this spirit which designation as a conservation area serves to protect' (RBWM, 2016).

A main topic of debate in the document and for Cookham's council is Poundfield, a small meadow that is constantly under threat from developers. It was depicted in several of Spencer's paintings, and therefore many feel that it should be protected as a monument to his work and to the views that he painted (Barker, 1989).

In contrast, Tom Copas, a member of the Copas

family that resided in the village for generations and still owns a large proportion of Cookham's land, argued in 1989 that 'the village is no longer as Spencer knew it... I remember him when he was alive, and a lot of people had no time for him then. It is nonsense to say that the village will be ruined' (quoted by Brown, 1989). Paul Barker's article on the dilapidation of Cookham agrees, explaining that despite the developments, 'Stanley Spencer's Cookham is as demure and comfy as ever' (Barker, 1997). In the 1990s, modernisation of roads, transport and housing had begun in earnest. Barker suggests that this gradual transformation of Cookham is not necessarily negative; it merely reflects the changing nature of Britain as a whole, as a society that is growing and changing to meet current needs. Since Copas and Barker's respective articles, Cookham has continued to develop, and for the first time a Costa has opened by the railway station, several takeaway restaurants have sprung up, and many controversial plans for luxury housing have been unveiled, all in close proximity to Poundfield.

According to the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, the local governing body for Cookham, there are four ways in which value can be attributed to a place (RBWM, 2016). They are as follows; evidential value, in which past human activity is evidenced and preserved; historical value, as connection with a historical figure or event; aesthetic value, which deals with either designed or chance sensory pleasure; and finally communal value, which gives past, present or

future residents and visitors a sense of belonging, through shared values and activities.

Brady's text on *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* discusses aesthetic qualities in more depth, particularly imaginative, character, symbolic, and historical (Brady, 2003, p.17). These qualities give insight into the ways that we interact with a place on a visual level, and how this then affects other senses and perceptions.

Cookham's value is evidenced in all four of the RBWM's criteria, but especially in the communal category. The RBWM suggests that 'many aspects of [Cookham] have communal value that is greater than their historical or aesthetic value' (RBWM, 2016). It can be inferred that Spencer's paintings are valuable not just for their aesthetic qualities, but also because they deal first and foremost with community, and the activities that a community like Cookham values; religion, neighbourliness, and connection through spirituality and love. So, a painting of a group of people in a village may possess some aesthetically pleasing qualities, but when it is interpreted by an audience that is familiar with feelings of community, it is considered more valuable.



Sacred

‘Art seemed the only thing which revealed Heaven.’ (Spencer, 1934, p.51)

The Bridle Path at Cookham (fig. 1) depicts the view from the top of Long Lane in Cookham Dean.

For residents, the value of the view and the painting are linked. It has changed very little in eighty years, but in 2015 the path was resurfaced with limestone scalplings, a divisive move that was condemned by horse rider Fiona Beaumont as visually ‘absolutely crazy’ (quoted by Matthews, 2015). In response to the resurfacing one resident wrote to the local paper *The Maidenhead Advertiser* with concerns that ‘we are in real danger of losing forever that which our forefathers strove for... generations to come [should experience] the delight of standing where Sir Stanley Spencer painted’ (Draper, 2015).

In clear weather, Windsor Castle can be seen glinting golden in the sun. Copas farmland is punctuated by copses of trees, hedges or a tumbledown wooden fence. In winter, natural springs bubble up along the top of the ridge, and freeze where they form, creating stunning frozen waterfalls. Down the single lane track are regular passing spaces. These small nooks allow two cars to comfortably pass each other, but

Cookham’s penchant for 4x4s creates frequent road rage. The verges are seasonally lined with poppies, noisy pheasants, crickets, fly tipping, and a year round supply of road kill.

The painting depicts a path that meanders down the hill towards Maidenhead and Windsor, over soft brown and green fields. The foreground is populated with swaying grasses, leaves, and poppies. A lone grey concrete fence post stands on the far left of the foreground. A dark green centre point to the painting draws the eye in, rewarding the viewer with a picturesque little group of trees and shrubs. Further back, the trees give way to misty hills and a faint horizon, topped with a typical overcast sky. In the distance, the iconic shape of Windsor Castle looms. The colours are autumnal; warm ochres, russet reds, and a sharp depth of evergreen. The path is carefully picked out in a light yellow tone, bright against the darker fields.

Path

The path hints at a slower, smaller way of life. Before the motorcar, most people made short journeys, and would live and work in a small radius around their home. This continued well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially for working class and rural people. (Taplin, 1979)

They have no need to be maintained. Their upkeep and existence is directly related to use. The path begins as a mental line that is placed onto a landscape, slowly transformed into a physical line by the footsteps of many travellers over time. Geoffrey Grigson observed that paths are ‘some of man’s oldest inscriptions upon the landscape’ (1954, quoted in Taplin, 1979, p.2). Mothersole’s photograph of Cock Marsh is used on the National Trust’s website to advertise walks around the area. The photo shows pathways that meander along the side of the incline, curving and splitting in two, meeting again beyond a tussock of grass (fig. 2). When read as a drawing, it shows two mark makers, walking side by side, avoiding the little patch of grass, and meeting again on the other side as they tread the worn path up the hill. Paths are drawings that occupy three-dimensional space, and retracing that same line strengthens their presence. They follow topographical features like rivers or hills, and then join to larger roads or settlements, providing quick access for the traveller on foot. They represent a harmonious understanding between man and nature (see appendices D). Until recently, there has been scant interest in the history of footpaths, perhaps, as Taplin suggests, because paths were ‘too slight, too humble, too local’ (Taplin, 1979, p.3), just as the people who used them were deemed to be.



Fig. 1

Stanley Spencer (1938)
The Bridle Path, Cookham
[oil on canvas]
Private collection

Details left to right

Windsor Castle
Poppies
Trees on Copas farmland

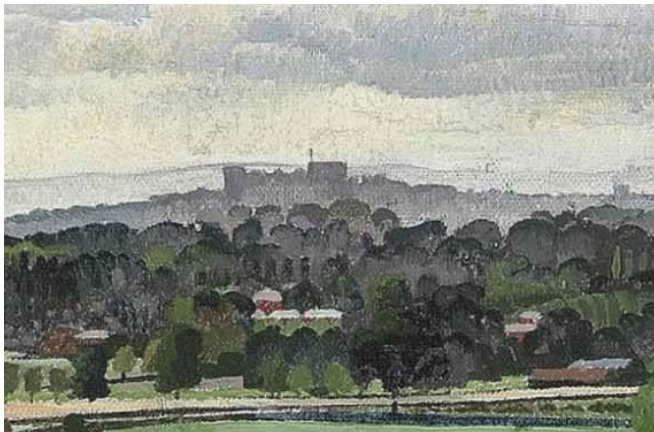




fig. 2

Hugh Mothersole (n.d.)
Bronze-age Burial Mound, Cock Marsh
[online photograph]
The National Trust

For Spencer, paths were not just a form of way finding, but represented a path to enlightenment. He described Cookham as 'a kind of earthly paradise' (c1912, quoted in Rothenstein, 1965, p.133), and often had visitations of angelic voices and visions in his daily life (MacCarthy, 1997, p.1). His paintings depict biblical scenes, posed in familiar environments to him, turning 'Cookham into a pulsing, vital, sacred land' (Harris, 2010, p.179). Worshippers bow between graves at Holy Trinity church, onlookers watch Christ preaching at Cookham Regatta, and a baptism takes place at Odney. After the First World War, he returned to Cookham and found new religious reverence in his home, describing his feelings in a sermon as akin to 'the instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush' (Spencer, 1934).

Rapture

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (The Chinese Room, 2015) is an exploratory video game that places the player in a deserted Shropshire village in 1984. There are clues that hint at a religious event, an apocalypse, an outbreak of a virus, aliens, or some other act of God. By piecing together snippets of radio, recorded phone messages and conversations, it functions like a sci-fi radio show, similar to *War of the Worlds*, with added visual elements like scraps of paper, newspapers, and maps. The player navigates the village by following bright ribbons of golden light that show the previous inhabitants' paths (fig. 3). The player learns that through following

supernatural paths, they are rewarded with knowledge and enlightenment, like Spencer's *The Bridle Path at Cookham*. It is implied that the missing residents became overcome with rapture, enabling them to access a higher plane of existence, one that allowed them to draw visible paths through boundaries of time.

Spencer was frequently overwhelmed with feelings of rapture; a friend of his observed as he 'flung himself into a meadow, writhing with pleasure, burying his face ecstatically in the grass' (MacCarthy, 1997, p.3). Similarly, his painting *A Village in Heaven* (fig. 4) shows Cookham's war memorial, surrounded by flint walls that lead towards the moor. The subjects of the painting are villagers engaged in a scene of pure rapture, a kind of sexual, spiritual ecstasy that causes them to fall to the floor or clutch each other, 'drawn together in a great orgasmic communion' (Harris, 2010, p.179). This painting was renamed *The Village Fete* by Spencer's art dealer (Harris, 2010, p.179) perhaps in the hope it would better sell; Spencer's landscapes and village paintings were in high demand, whilst his more personal, religious work was inaccessible and unpopular for the casual viewer (MacCarthy, 1997, p.45). Art historians, however, have mostly ignored the landscapes in favour of the religious work. It is 'only [recently that] more attention been paid to the stylistic development and critical reception' of landscapes (Bell, 2011, p.19).

Liminal space

In 1854, the establishment of a railway station 'quickly transformed what had been a quiet Thames-side village' (Bell, 2011, p.20) into a desirable commuter base.⁴

Spencer used this railway service to attend the Slade School of Art between 1908 and 1912, earning the cruelly intended nickname 'Cookham' for returning home every day, and for his somewhat eccentric and aloof demeanour (MacCarthy, 1997, p.11). When he returned to Cookham in 1912, he described his return as entering a 'kind of earthly paradise' (quoted in MacCarthy, 1997, p.13), a heaven on earth, a space between humanity and spirituality. This liminality also describes Cookham's function as a commuting village. Thirty miles from London, Cookham occupies a comfortable distance between urban and rural spaces, and for Spencer, between heaven and earth.



4 Additionally, nearby Heathrow Airport was developed in the mid twentieth century, and Cookham and Maidenhead benefit from the transport links and proximity. Windsor, however, lies directly under the flight path, and the noise can be unpleasant for residents and visitors.



fig. 3

The Chinese Room (2015)
Still from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*
[video game]



fig. 3

Stanley Spencer (1937)

A Village in Heaven

[oil on canvas]

Manchester Art Gallery/Bridgeman Images/ Creating the Countryside

Rural Idyll

'The myth of a happier past has always been more attractive than the realities of the present' (Wild, 2014, p.18)

I am interested in discovering why we continue to subscribe to the idealisation of rural spaces, and what effect this has on the places it concerns. Cultural depictions of the countryside often differ from the experiences of people that actually live there. Furthermore, as Jeremy Burchardt points out in *Rural Idyll: A Critique*, academic discourse seems largely set on either celebrating or debunking the rural idyll, without questioning whether such polarised views are useful to furthering our understanding of the concept (Burchardt, 2017, p.70).

The children's book *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Graeme was written and based in Cookham, and Enid Blyton lived in the neighbouring village, Bourne End. From a young age, children's first encounters with the British landscape teach them that it is an unspoilt, enchanted land (Berberich, 2006, p.214). The myth of the rural idyll is perpetuated from childhood onwards, especially in leisure media like paintings and books.

Rosemary Shirley argues in *Smells Like Rural Idyll* that idealised images of the countryside

have become increasingly widespread in Britain's society (Shirley, 2017, p.112). She mentions Richard Louv's fantasy illness 'Nature Deficit Disorder', a term that describes modern society's disconnect with nature, as a result of increased city living and indoor activities, particularly screen based (cited in Shirley, 2017, p.112). Although there is speculation for the disorder's medical existence, it functions as an appealing sales point for companies wishing to capitalise on hypochondriac anxieties and rural nostalgia.

Easton's BBC news article on the illusion of a concrete Britain clarifies that only 0.1% of Britain's land is densely populated, while the average estimate was 47% (Easton, 2018). Easton suggests that the assumption that 'Britain's treasured green landscapes being gobbled up by greedy industrialists and developers is part of national folklore' (Easton, 2018). The theme of Britain's fear for the destruction of our landscape is prevalent in popular culture. It is explored extensively in paintings, novels, and even children's books like *Watership Down*, and 'acts as a metaphor for the threat we feel to our identity from progress' (Easton, 2018).

As we learn more about our environmental impact on the countryside, our impression of destruction seems larger and harder to reverse. To counteract

our fears, we play into idealisations, as a form of comfort in the face of a changing landscape, locally and worldwide.

Even though we know that images of the rural landscape are idealised, we continue to enjoy them, and seek them out over more natural depictions. We go for long walks on National Trust land, buy Tesco produce with names of fictional farms on the packaging (Shirley, 2017, p.113, see appendices E), and watch Countryfile.

Lowenthal likens Britain it to an idealised version of itself; explaining that the landscape is 'less and less England, more and more 'Englandland', Europe's all engulfing offshore theme park'. (Lowenthal, 1991). In light of the EU referendum and Banksy's bemusement park, Dismaland⁴, this analogy seems all the more stark.

Shirley summarises the boom in popularity of designed depictions of the countryside as

⁴ Open for just five weeks in late summer of 2015, Dismaland provided a dystopian look at a traditional aspect of the British cultural landscape: the seaside funfair. Set in Weston Supermare, a derelict seaside resort, programmer for Dismaland's short film screening Christopher Jobson described it as featuring 'artistic themes of apocalypse, anti-consumerism, and pointed social critiques on celebrity culture, immigration, and law enforcement.' (Jobson, 2015).

‘situating the rural firmly within the realm of consumerism’ (Shirley, 2017, p.113), meaning that the countryside has become a commodity. In turn, this allows for the producer and consumer to decide what is most profitable, and which aspects of the countryside should be shown – or indeed, hidden.

Picturesque

WJT Mitchell: ‘Landscape is both a frame and what the frame contains’
(quoted in Shirley and Elson, 2017)

The term ‘landscape’ came to Britain via the the Dutch ‘landskip’ in the early sixteenth century (Lippard, 1997, p.8). It described a natural space reworked into a composed scene. ‘Scene’ implies performance, viewer, and audience, and therefore judgement of criticism or appreciation. ‘Landscape’ changes nature into a spectacle.

The term ‘picturesque’ came into common use during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, introduced by William Gilpin, a writer and painter. His definition encouraged the appreciation of landscapes according to the aesthetics of painting.

In 1786, Gilpin set out guidelines in *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* of the ideal number of cows in an image: ‘a few are sufficient. Two will hardly do. Three make a good group – either united – or when one is a little removed

from the other two’ (quoted in Groom, 2017, p.57). The same principle applied for any compositional subject, be it mountains, trees, or livestock. It was important to consider their placing in relation to the composition as a whole, whilst retaining a uneven, rough arrangement that made the view look natural. The Tate defines the picturesque as a concept between the sublime movement and the classically beautiful, encompassing ‘views seen as being artistic but containing elements of wildness or irregularity’ (Tate, 2004).

Gilpin’s criteria on the picturesque have become adapted to fit many landscapes, and sometimes places that he originally considered to be unsuitable for the term. For example, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’s landscape designs were deemed ‘flat and insipid... exhibiting false taste’ by Gilpin (quoted in Elborough, 2016 p.43), despite their popularity at the time and today. Gilpin preferred landscapes that had a painterly quality, and less of the designed aesthetic that Brown’s parks presented. For Gilpin, depictions of landscapes were more aesthetically pleasing than the actual landscapes themselves.

The pastoral genre of painting encouraged depictions of the rural as a place of beauty and innocence. Cherubic milkmaids and shepherds napping in the sun were painted onto a backdrop of woodland and charmingly dilapidated buildings (Shirley and Elson, 2017, p.16). These paintings were commissioned by wealthy aristocrats wishing to admire fantasy depictions of their land

(Shirley and Elson, 2017, p. 16). Landscape paintings showed ‘a vision that catered to the tastes of aristocratic patrons and wealthy industrialists, fuelling demands for [landscape] genre works’ (Shirley and Elson, 2017 p.19).

Wild’s book *Village England* gives a broad history of the countryside, with links to political and social events that affected it. Wild explains that stability, traditional values, and ‘romantic perceptions of the English village and countryside tend to be the most compelling at times of rapid economic and social change’ as a direct result and antidote to development beyond ones control (Wild, 2014, p.18).

Social hierarchies were changing, and perhaps it was comforting to see separation between the classes. By way of viewing the rural population as decoration to be objectified in a piece of artwork, the aristocrats could remain in control. Wild describes the history of Britain’s landscape not as an idyll, but as a ‘huge social disparity between the powerful and the powerless’ (Wild, 2014, p.176). A clearly desired stable relationship between landowner and labourer could be created and contained within a painting, freezing time for the viewer.

However, the view that ‘the ideal number of rural labourers in a scene, for Gilpin, was no labourers at all’ (Groom, 2017, p.57) suggests that the picturesque movement largely ignored the people that created the landscapes. There is

limited representation of rural traditions such as agricultural fairs, folk celebrations, or working life. Instead, the typical 'picturesque painting drained history, tradition, and folklore... and replaced it with a disengaged sentimentality' (Groom, 2017, p.57). Audiences were able to look back in time and marvel at a past they had never experienced, and perhaps never existed.

Jeremy Burchardt's critique on the rural idyll suggests that idealised representations of the countryside are used to 'divert attention from, or even deny the existence of, the centuries of poverty, inequality and injustice that have disfigured the history of rural England' (Burchardt, 2017, p.65), as a way of the urban dismissing, and ultimately controlling the rural from the top down.. This view is supported by Lowenthal, who suggests that 'the idea that peasant and nature are intrinsically barbaric unless subject to... discipline has been the rationale of the lauded elite for centuries' (Lowenthal, 1991).

Wild points out that the 'plague stricken and rebellion torn Middle-Ages, the intolerant and politically divided seventeenth century... the deep agricultural depression of the nineteenth and twentieth century are largely ignored' (Wild, 2014, p.18). Unsightly or unappealing parts of Britain's rural history were overlooked in favour of more aesthetically or socially pleasing subjects. This biased approach means that we are unable to critically evaluate our past, and our interpretation of the countryside through paintings or other

media. Wild's book seeks to illuminate the unexplored history of the countryside, to provide a rounded history of the land, and of the people who created it.

The painted landscape contained only what the artist and audience wished to see; a flat, attractive landscape populated with lazy shepherds, a few cows, and a charmingly ruined cottage. In other words, the modern, industrialised, forward thinking urban population were able to look upon a depiction of an archaic, backwards, inefficient rural, and feel able to justifiably dismiss it, whilst idealising and fetishising it for purposes of aesthetic pleasure and nostalgia.

This idyllic view, however, fails to recognize the spectrum of opinions held by the people that lived there. Wild's text points out the negatives of subscribing to an idealised countryside, but it largely ignores that for many, the countryside could simply be an environment they happened to live in, neither positive or negative, or perhaps their perception of their surroundings changed over time. It is this subjective approach that enables us to put together a more balanced, critical picture of the landscape, rather than dismissing it as positive or negative. Views of the countryside intersect, differ depending on time, place, and class, and rarely fall into a binary category.

Landscape Tourism

Chesterton 1931: 'The English village was a miraculous relic, like the relic of a great saint' (quoted in Lowenthal, 1991)

The Cookham Walk (fig. 5) is a popular pamphlet sold by the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham. It features three walks that take the reader around Cookham, and points out special views, places, and sites that Spencer painted. The text encourages the walkers to 'follow in the footsteps of [Spencer] who regarded these fields, meadows and pathways as a Holy Suburb of Heaven' (Stanley Spencer Gallery, 2014), leading them to discover paths in a sacred and metaphorical sense.

In the walking guide, archival photographs and small reproductions of Spencer's paintings and drawings help the readers to orientate themselves in Cookham's stage set, and act as players in a scene that ended fifty years previously. The front cover image, *Neighbours*, depicts two women exchanging red flowers over a hedge, their hands touching as if holding hands. The use of this particular image for the cover suggests that Cookham's community quite literally crosses borders, and welcomes the tourists to become neighbours of both the past and present Cookham.

The National Trust's website also encourages

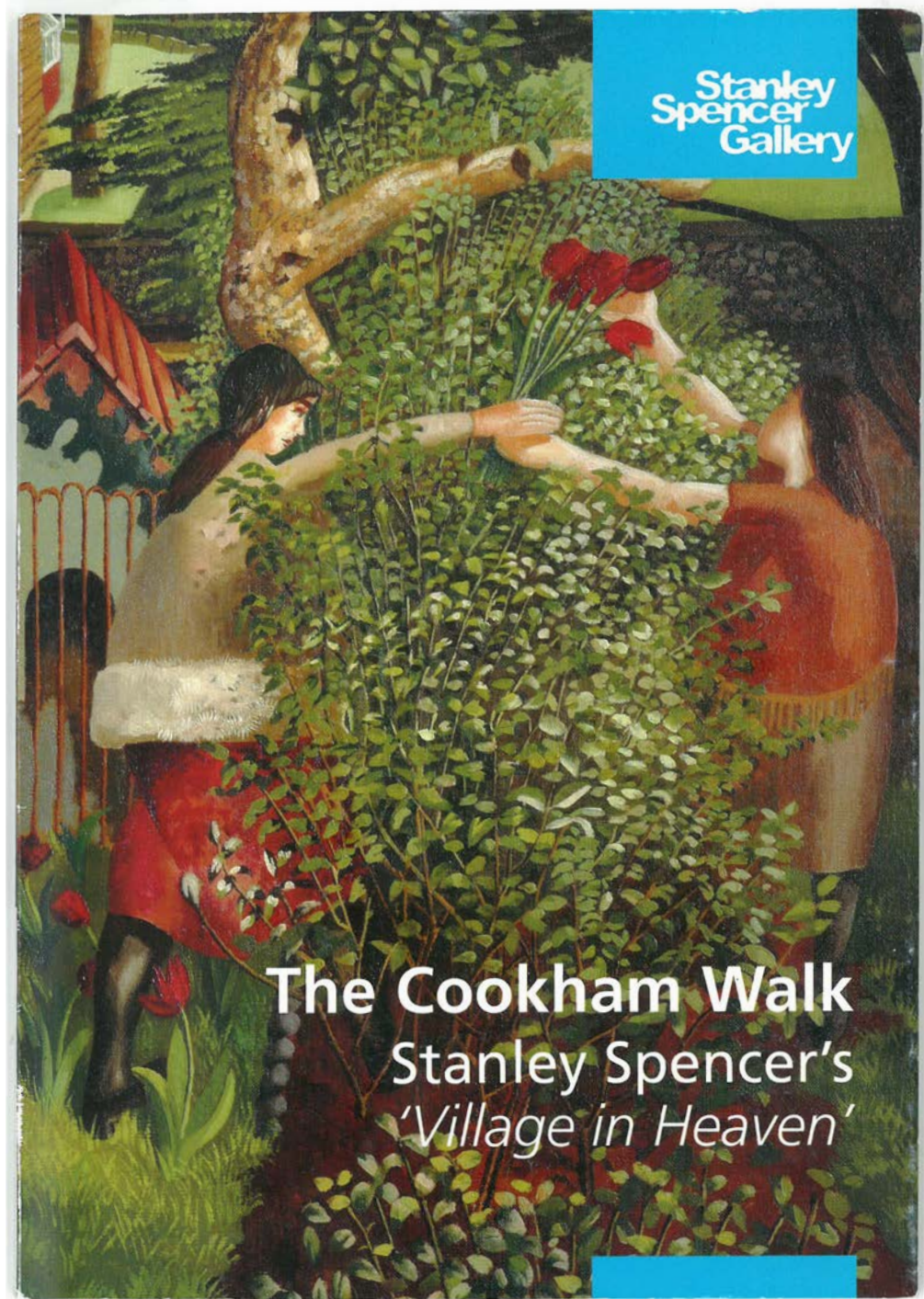


fig. 5

Stanley Spencer Gallery (2014)
The Cookham Walk
[pamphlet]
Stanley Spencer Gallery, Cookham

the act of walking to discover Spencer's work in relation to Cookham's landscape. It suggests that standing on Cookham Moor 'gives a view towards the village that hasn't changed since being captured by Spencer' (National Trust, 2015) and gives a list of key paintings that visitors should look at whilst walking around the village. The website also features Spencer's words, 'I like to take my thoughts for a walk and marry them to someplace in Cookham' (National Trust, 2015), encouraging visitors to use Cookham as a place of contemplation, meditation and worship.

Another tourist location known for its painted landscape is Constable Country, or Dedham Vale in Suffolk, which was home to John Constable and his many paintings of the countryside created in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Commenting on the hamlet of Flatford, the setting of Constable's *The Hay Wain* (see appendices F), Visit Suffolk remarks that 'like so much of Constable Country, it remains unchanged to this day' (Visit Suffolk, 2016). Walks and tour guides are available to be booked year round, as in the photograph *Flogging a Dead Horse* by Paul Reas (fig. 6). It shows a group of tourists being directed by a tour guide to appreciate a view. The guide holds a reproduction of a Constable landscape painting, and points out of the frame towards the site of the original painting where the view can be revealed. The layers of narrative are shown through different frames; first, Constable's

painting; then, as a tourist's experience; and finally, through the lens of Reas, who offers a wry commentary on the whole spectacle, using the tongue in cheek title *Flogging a Dead Horse* (Shirley and Elson, 2017, p.16).

Thomas Gainsborough, a portrait painter in the eighteenth century, would make models to paint his landscapes from, arranging scraps of 'coal, cork, with mirrors for water, and florets of broccoli for trees' in accordance with popular picturesque aesthetics at the time (Pavord, 2016, p.24). Unlike Constable, his work was unpopular and demand for his landscape paintings was scarce. People were unable to relate to his constructed landscapes, preferring views that they already knew and loved. Similarly, Spencer's landscape paintings continue to be popular over fifty years after his death, because the places depicted can still be visited. This explains Cookham's continuing desire to preserve Spencer's subject, because it gives authenticity and therefore popularity to his paintings.

Landscape tourism, then, is most profitable when the place depicted is as similar to the painting as possible. It is in the tourism industry's interest to preserve and protect an artists' landscape muse, as it brings money to an otherwise defunct place. Cookham and Suffolk share an agrarian past, a past that is now obsolete. But through a performance of walking and visiting the sites of the paintings, we are able to connect with our shared agricultural heritage, albeit through

the romanticised and idealised lens of the picturesque.

As in Reas' photograph, we realise that we are always viewing our surroundings through some sort of filter, a lens that affects our judgement of a place, for purposes of tourism, commodity, or nostalgia. We idealise the idealisations of the landscape, through old paintings, walks, and viewpoints. We have never idealised the real countryside, only aspects of it, shown to us through a lens of politics, wealth, and power. And yet, we rarely consider the opinions of those that actually experience it themselves.

Memento Mori

'The sense of place can outlast a place itself'
(Lippard, 1997, p.50)

One of the largest landowners in Britain bar the National Trust, the Ministry of Defence uses its land for training purposes, airfields and other structures (Ministry of Defence, 2017). The link between landscape and war has been a relationship spanning conflicts, and often used as a weapon for propaganda, especially during the First and Second World Wars by appointment of official government war artists, including Stanley Spencer.⁵

⁵ Stanley Spencer and his Slade School of Art contemporary, Paul Nash, are the only two official British war artists that worked during both world wars. (MacCarthy, 1997, p.47)



fig. 6

Paul Reas (1993)
*Flogging a Dead Horse: Constable Country,
Flatford Mill, Suffolk*
[lightjet print]
Hyman Collection, London

During and following the Second World War, many felt a sense of premature nostalgia, perhaps because people's mortality was brought into the forefront of their daily lives. After losing a vast percentage of Britain's population twenty years previously, many expected a similar death toll (Harris, 2010, p.175). Watching their homes and environments being bombed created a new appreciation for the British landscape.

Village life was something that had been cultivated over generations, and for this reason, the tradition of community was important to uphold. Harris explains, 'the longing for community is the most powerful motivating force for the rediscovery of the village' (Harris, 2010, p.179). This is supported by the RBWM's conservation appraisal, as it outlines the church, village halls, schools, and war memorial as places of special interest that must be preserved (RBWM, 2016). On their own, these buildings bear little historic or aesthetic significance, but their potential for bringing the village together is of utmost importance for the longevity of Cookham's community. Wild argues for the preservation of buildings deemed unimportant aesthetically such as these, because each 'is a significant piece of the historic building fabric [of a village], even if it does not have any pretensions to beauty and charm' (Wild, 2014, p.177).

In the 1930s and 40s, a period of social and economic change and Spencer's most productive years as a painter, new efforts to preserve the

landscape came about in projects such as the *Recording Britain* watercolour paintings, in popular literature, and in government rhetoric. (Harris, 2010, p.174).

Over one thousand watercolour paintings were made for the *Recording Britain* project during the Second World War. The drawings depict Britain's high streets, roads, fields, and other local scenes. The artists' efforts were focused on the south of Britain, as that was believed to be most immediately at risk of bombing. Additionally, areas that were vulnerable to industrial and residential development were recorded.

Wilfred Fairclough's *Maidenhead Bridge* (fig. 7) is a muted, serene look across the Thames towards the bridge, picked out in pen and ink. Just down the river from Cookham, Maidenhead's landscape has changed considerably since Fairclough's 1942 painting. The historic and notorious Skindles hotel, tranquil boat yards, and low lying housing seen in the background has been replaced with luxury flats, as Maidenhead's regeneration continues. Fairclough's painting acts as a time capsule, preserving elements of the landscape and culture that were vulnerable to bombs, but ultimately succumbed to gentrification.

Looking at the collection of images available in the Victoria and Albert Museum's archives one is struck by how soft, muted, and gentle the brown and pale yellow colour scheme is. The aged paper's sepia tone has some effect on the

colour, but Harris suggests that the use of these pigments 'presented a umbery-ochre nation that might not for very longer be painted in this mellow palette.' (Harris, 2010, p.207)

The paintings were exhibited in 1941, to an audience that were reminded what they were fighting for. Herbert Read remarked 'a landscape whose features have been moulded in liberty, every winding lane is an expression of our national character' (quoted in Harris, 2010, p.207). Like Taplin's text on the path, Read recognised that small yet significant pieces of Britain's culture and topography would be overlooked if not recorded and conserved. Britain had been preserved in paint for future generations, but the landscapes themselves were already changing, in ways that the painters had not anticipated. Harris summarises, 'if the dream of the 1930s was to recapture a sense of belonging to particular stretches of country, the nightmare was to find these places irrevocably changed' (Harris, 2010, p.174).

Industry

In Glasgow, Spencer was also recording wartime efforts, drawing the *Shipbuilders on the Clyde* (fig. 8). After the depression in the 1930s, Glasgow's shipbuilding industry received a welcome revival of production for ships for transporting raw materials and supplies.

The paintings show cheerful workers busying



fig. 7

Wilfred Fairclough (1942)
Maidenhead Bridge
[pen and ink wash on paper]
V&A, London

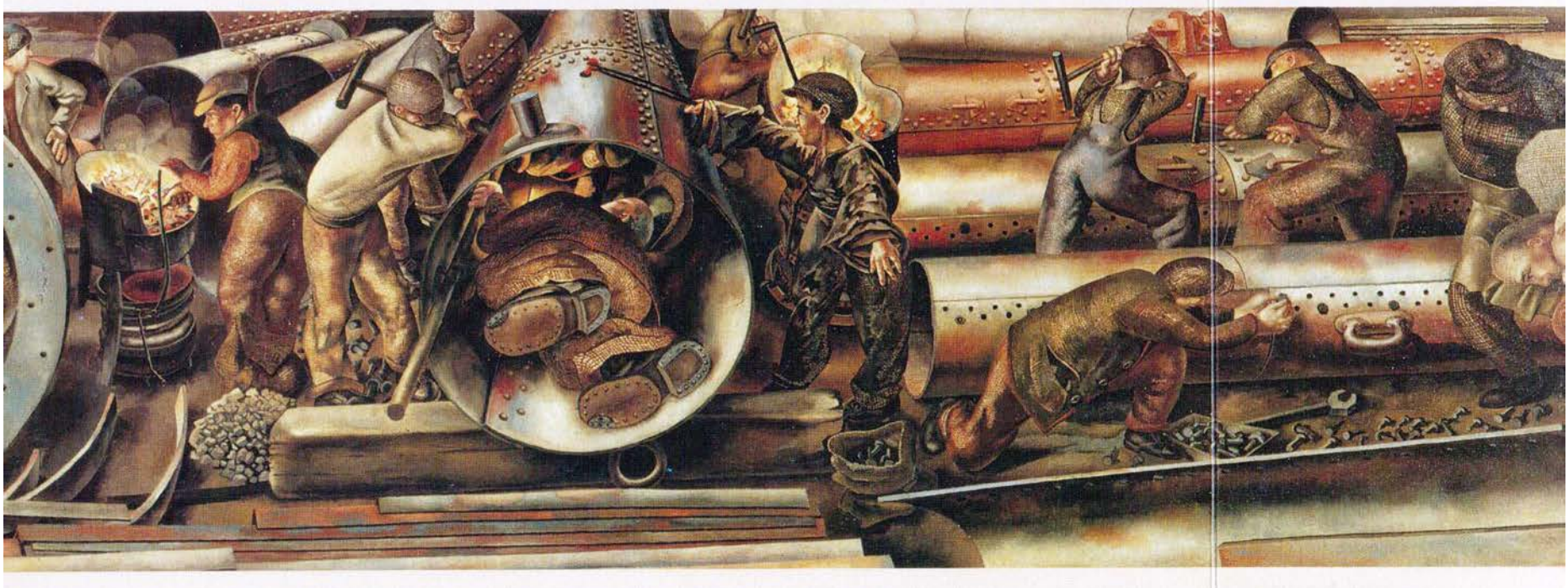


fig. 8

Stanley Spencer (1941)
Detail of *Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Riveters*
[oil on canvas]
Imperial War Museum, London

themselves among colossal pieces of steel, pipes, machinery and equipment. For modern audiences, the series functions as a memorial not just for the Glasgow shipbuilding industry, but for Britain's national industrial past, and as a reminder that this industry only survived a little longer because of its potential for aiding war efforts.

In the collection of essays *Landscape and Englishness* Christine Berberich describes the effect the industrial revolution had on the landscape. With hindsight, it can be concluded that industrial demand removed many agricultural labourers from the countryside, bringing them into cities they had little connection with. Martin J. Wiener notes that British society 'became ill at ease with [the industrial industry] enough to deny its legitimacy by adopting a conception of Englishness that virtually excluded it' (quoted in Berberich, 2006, p.209). It seemed that no matter whether the working class labourers were engaged with archaic agricultural industries, or in modern industrial labour, they were to be dismissed.

So began another resurgence of countryside idealisation. Berberich explains, 'the celebration of the countryside ideal [is a] reflection of a nation's present discontent' (Berberich, 2006, p.209).

The Shipbuilding at the Clyde series serves as a reminder and memorial of Britain's industrial past, of what remains timeless, and what had already

been lost.

Britain's identity could be prized for its rural or industrial features, but never celebrated for containing both. An identity based on idealisations rather than reality enabled the dismissal of the working class to continue, regardless of their feelings towards their environment, or their countryside or city setting.



Constructing National Identity

‘National Trust members now outnumber dairy farmers 7 to 1.’ (Groom, 2017).

Driven by the 2016 vote to leave the EU, rapidly developing technologies, and changes in the economic, cultural and political landscapes, Britain’s identity is in flux.

National identity is a summary of selves, including our classes, families, occupations, and demography. It is constructed by our shared past, stories, myths, and artifacts, and consequently contains tropes and stereotypes like the parts it is made up of (Burden, 2006, p.17). Therefore, it can be critically read and analysed, in order to draw out underlying themes.

Politics

‘The smell of wood smoke coming up in the autumn evening... that wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air when they were coming home from a day’s forage.’
(Baldwin, 1926)

Stanley Baldwin, Conservative prime minister in the 1920s and Party leader for much of the 1930s, used evocative rhetoric to describe the countryside, and more importantly, the

countryside’s past. Encouraging this cultural shift towards country nostalgia gave Baldwin’s speeches legitimacy, and emotive persuasion (Harris, 2010, p.174). Critical of Baldwin’s motives, Burchardt suggests that Baldwin’s ‘self-identification with rurality may have been sincere, although it was undoubtedly self serving’ (Burchardt, 2002, p.105). Using rural idealisations to further a political agenda could be used as a distraction from urban, industrial, and economic problems. Also, the rural imagery that Baldwin’s speeches evoked was distinctly sanitised; like the picturesque paintings of the eighteenth century, there was no mention of the agricultural industry, nor of the people that worked in it. Additionally, Burchardt notes that in 1921, the true feelings of the Conservative party towards the agricultural industry had been revealed in the crisis of the ‘Great Betrayal’, a withdrawal of guaranteed prices for farming produce. So, government idealisation of the countryside facilitated and justified neglect of the rural landscape, the residents and workers, whilst enabling a Conservative political landscape and national identity in the interwar years.

As proven by the fraught EU referendum in 2016, this insular, territorial island society still strives for an authentic identity, one that is separate from mainland Europe. Although insularity ‘encourages

loyalty and protection, it also cuts [one] off from the rest of the world’ (Lowenthal, 1991). Debates on both sides focused on the strength of Britain, either as a single entity or as part of a union.

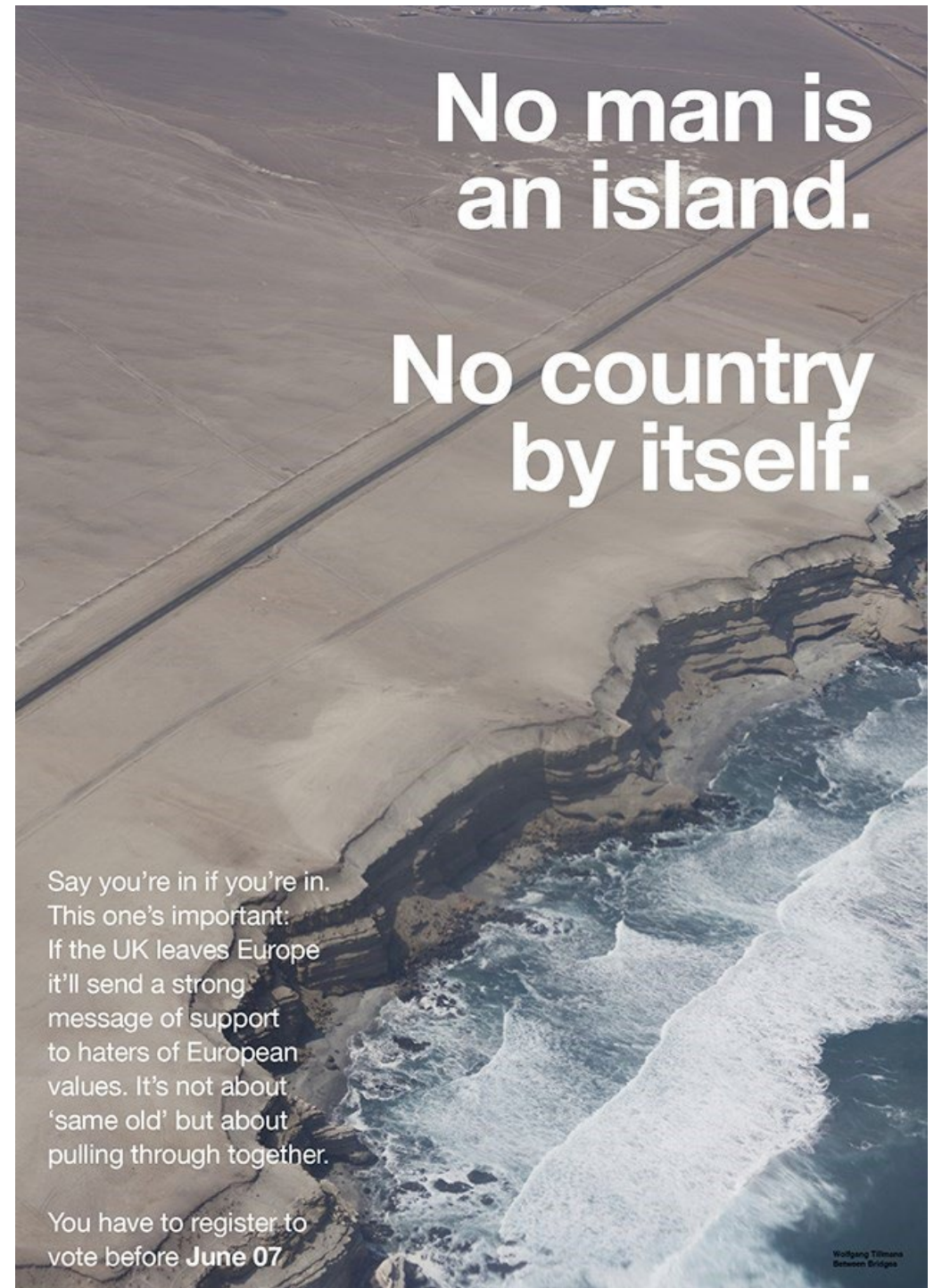
Wolfgang Tillmans’ collection of *Anti-Brexit* posters (Tillmans, 2016) used the British landscape as a motif, and one included the quote ‘No man is an island’ from John Donne’s 1624 poem *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Donne, 1624) to encourage community and shared identity (fig. 9). The series used persuasive slogans, bold typography and bright colours to advocate for experiences of refugees, second-generation migrants, and students. Online, Tillman offered the series as a free download and encouraged the public to print and distribute them. The shoreline in the *No Man is an Island* poster shows a physical border between land and sea, a liminal space that acts as a transition between one space and another. The 2016 vote initiated a similarly transitional phase, and one that at the time of writing is ongoing without a clear resolution.

Lowenthal explains the sea’s functions, as it ‘limits size, marks boundaries, and insulates against continental contaminants’ (Lowenthal, 1991). This protective, exclusionary view of the sea was supported and emphasised by the Leave



fig. 9

Wolfgang Tillmans (2016)
No Man is an Island from *Anti-Brexit* series
www.tillmans.co.uk/campaign-eu



campaign, which sought to celebrate this natural border.

Nigel Farage, former leader of UKIP and active member of the Leave EU campaign, stated that President Donald Trump's proposal to build a wall between the USA and Mexico was 'entirely sensible... We don't need to do it. We have got the English Channel' (quoted by Wheeler and Tominey, 2016). The sea simultaneously acts as an illustration that encourages or condemns insularity, depending on the political context. Tillman's poster, when paired with Donne's quote, encourages the viewer to view the sea as something that connects Britain to the EU, and therefore Britain as part of a larger body. Farage and Lowenthal's view is of a hostile, protective barrier that separates Britain from Europe.

After the referendum, some early commentators on why Britain voted to leave the EU blamed the working class, attributing an anger and desire for control in voters' decisions (Bhambra, 2017). Certainly, politicians like Farage (and Trump in the USA) used anti-democracy, underdog tactics to appeal to those uninterested in politics. But, this view fails to take into account that most 'ethnic minorities did not vote Leave... despite the fact that they themselves constitute a large proportion of the working-class' (Bhambra, 2017). Still, the responsibility falls to the working class, despite having little evidence that they had an impact on the result. Since the referendum, many have put forward accusations as to why Britain voted the

way it did; but few offer any suggestion of what the next steps are.

Heritage versus History

The difference between heritage and history as a term to describe a place's past is to do with value. History can be a disconnected, distant and abstract concept, whereas heritage continues to live through the people that reinforce it.

Heritage implies ownership, for example, 'my', or 'our' heritage. We prize a national, collective heritage above a personal one; we feel deeply connected to the National Trust or the English Heritage sites despite having no personal connection to them (Lowenthal, 1991). Lowenthal remarks that few know about their own family history, but are unconcerned because they have 'a secure *national* identity' (Lowenthal, 1991, italics original).

Using 'heritage' to describe the past feels more personal, subjective, and altogether more positive, as it is frequently used to describe tourist attractions. One headline on the English Heritage website homepage encourages viewers to 'make the past your present' (English Heritage, 2015), subtly changing a determinative pronoun to a possessive. Where history draws parallels between events, people, and places, heritage seeks to celebrate differences, by turning them into tourist commodities (Lowenthal, 1991), as seen in the chapter on rural idealisation.

National Anthem

James Thomson's 1730 poem *The Seasons* links landscape to British national identity (Groom, 2017, p.53). Written in a turbulent period of British history, Thomson saw changing borders and an eventual union between England, Wales and his native Scotland in the early eighteenth century.

Similarly to the picturesque painting movement later that century, Thomson's poem makes no reference to typical rural customs such as calendar events, folk celebrations, or agriculture. A version of his most well known poem, *Rule Britannia*, is still sung as a celebration of Britain and the landscape;

'...Blest isle! with matchless beauty crowned,
And manly hearts to guard the fair.
"Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves."
(Thomson, 1763) ⁴

Burden's response to the repeated refrain of *Rule Britannia* in British culture is to remark 'there is no greater myth of national unity... than the Last Night at the Proms' (Burden, 2006, p.15).

⁴ The well-known modern adaptation is often sung with subtle differences, including adding an 's' to 'rule the waves' to read '*rules* the waves'. This change from imperative to third person singular implies that Britannia still rules the waves, and will continue to do so.

According to Durkheim, “in worshipping the symbols of their identities, societies actually worship themselves” (cited in Lowenthal, 1991). We celebrate only history that we feel belongs to us, as an exercise in admiration for the past self. And in order to do so, we claim current ownership over aspects of our identity that involve past ownership, such as land, sea, language, and colonies.

But perhaps we forget that our collective identity is made up of many cultures, including Middle Eastern farmers, hunter-gatherers from Eastern Europe, Huguenots, Celts, and Vikings. Lowenthal describes the effect as Anglo-Saxon Amnesia, a term that humorously describes the assumptions that we have made over the years that we are a pure breed (Lowenthal, 1991).

The way that we define and express our national identity differs to other nations. Shippey suggests that where most identify themselves with a national dress, flag, anthem, or perhaps a myth of origin, (cited by Lowenthal, 1991) Britain remains stoically undefined. The Union Jack flag pieces together the English and Scottish flag, uniting them uneasily on top of each other. For Britain, the landscape is our national signifier, a visual anthem that refrains year after year with the seasons. Like our flag, our muddled DNA, our changeable weather, and our landscape, a patchwork identity is what unites us.



Conclusion

In summary, Britain's identity is constantly, and has always been, in flux. In creating paintings, taking photographs, writing poems, or documenting topography, we strive to pin down a snapshot of what Britain *is* in one given moment in time. But in doing so we merely preserve one interpretation of what Britain *was*. This interpretation is decided by the urban population and culture, never by the rural.

Furthermore, this past version of Britain is inaccurate; we celebrate what we thought it was. When we think we are celebrating present, we are actually celebrating an idealisation of the past. This mythical past is impossible to pin on a specific date, as it changes to suit the agenda of the idealisation.

As proven by Spencer's artwork and Lowenthal's article, where this idealisation becomes worship, we overlook or dismiss anything that does not fit into our vision, especially empirical approaches that acknowledge positive and negative opinions co-existing at different times, places, and especially within the same individual's experience.

Wild's *English Village* offers some alternative histories to the ones we prefer to uphold, which has been important in my research when considering the authenticity of picturesque

movement paintings. Alongside idealisations of the countryside comes an automatic dismissal of those who live in it, chiefly the working class. Additionally, essays in Shirley and Elson's *Creating the Countryside* book have been instrumental in presenting a wider range of viewpoints, and this helped me to critique primary sources with a range of theories, articles, and historical contexts.

The most helpful techniques in my research led me to question why sources had been made, especially in the case of the *Cookham Village Design Statement*. It was only because Cookham's visual identity was under threat from modernisation and development that it was deemed important enough to explore in depth and produce a substantial document of how and why it should be preserved. Similarly, the collection of watercolour paintings from the *Recording Britain* series were only created because they could provide a relic of Britain if it were to be destroyed in war.

Where the *Recording Britain* series seeks to pre-emptively eulogise Britain, Spencer's work seeks to resurrect it, starting with his birthplace, Cookham.

In light of the EU referendum, research on

the British identity and its links to landscape have become more relevant. It can be seen how idealisation of the British countryside has affected politics, identity, and culture in the past, particularly in the interwar years, or during the unification of Britain in the eighteenth century. In summary, idealisation of the landscape has been used as political tool to romanticise aspects of Britain that conform to right wing ideologies, and dismiss all aspects and peoples that fall outside the desired image of Britain they wish to project.

Looking ahead, this turbulent period will offer more opportunities to discover the future of the British landscape, and later, how we will no doubt idealise this time through artwork and literature.



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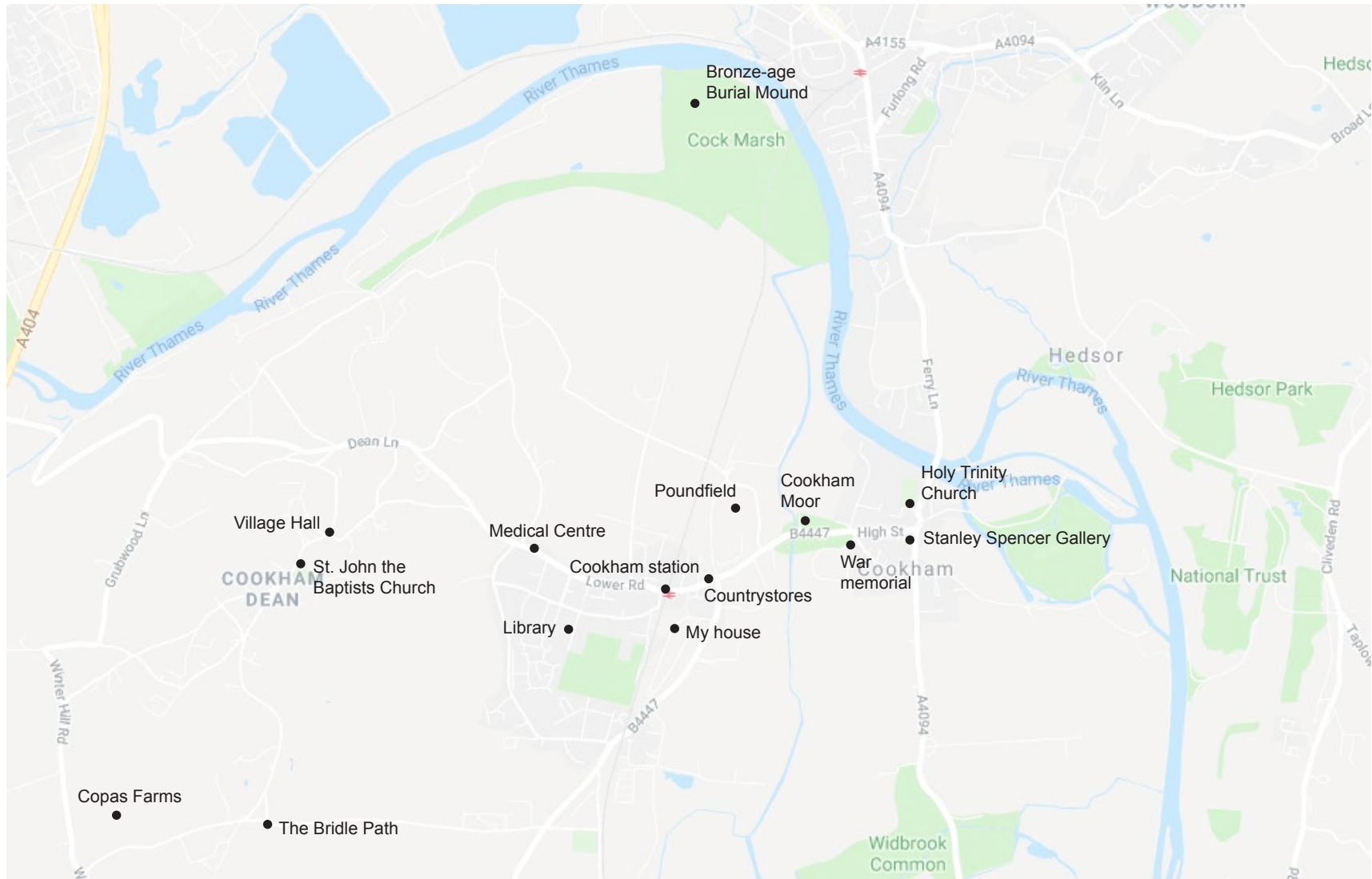


Appendices



A.

Google Earth (2017)
Map of Cookham and surrounding area
[online]



B.

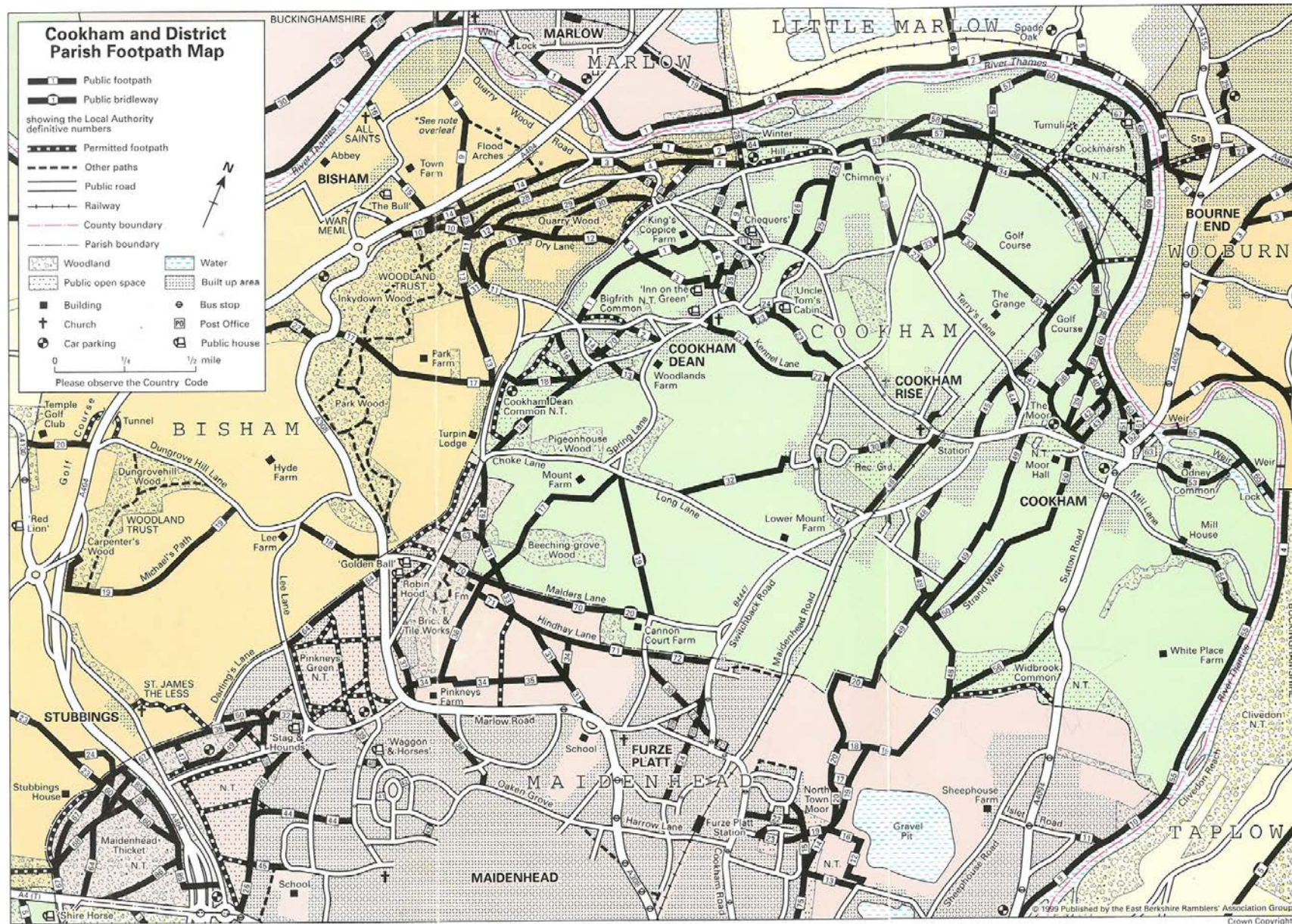
Google Maps (2017)
Map of Cookham, my annotations
[online]



***Varying styles and building lines in Cookham High Street.
An understanding of Cookham's unifying built colour palette of weathered red, beige, white, grey, brown and black (Section 6.8) can aid decisions regarding external décor colours.***

C.

Cookham Parish Council (2013)
Village Design Statement



D.

The Ramblers' Association (1999)
Rambling for Pleasure: Cookham & District Footpath Map
 [pamphlet]



E.

Tesco (2016)
Redmere Farms
[packaging branding]
Tesco online



F.

John Constable (1832)
The Hay Wain
[oil on canvas]
The National Gallery, London