

THE SCOTT REPORT

by L.F. Easterbrook

Following is the talk after tonight's
9 o'clock B.B.C. News:-

I wonder how many of you realise that about 85 per cent of the land surface of this country is devoted to agriculture? Eighty-five per cent! By far the greater part.

A Committee was appointed last October, under Lord Justice Scott, to enquire into how we were using this land, and to make some suggestions about the sort of ways we might use it, and manage it, after the war so as to make the most of this inheritance.

It touches us more closely than many of us think. For not only does the land feed us, and not only does it engage the full time activities of 1,000,000 people: it is there for our recreation, for walking and cycling, for motoring in happier days, for our holidays and week ends.

It is there for our health, offering a safety valve for many who are condemned to live in towns and who feel they must get out into the country, if only for a few hours.

But do you realise that the countryside that we enjoy - and it is one of the fairest in the world -- is only what it is because it is farmed?

Without farming, there would not be the villages that give such warmth and friendliness to the scene; there wouldn't be the lanes and fields, the open commons, the trimmed hedges and ordered views. There wouldn't even be many of the actual works of man's hand - the tithe barns, churches, market places and corn exchanges.

A very large part of Britain would go back to bramble and thicket and bog, and for all practical purposes would be impenetrable.

So the Scott Committee took the very sensible view, not only that the first job to do with agricultural land was to farm it, but also that it was in the interest of everyone that the land should be farmed, and in fact that this was the cheapest way to keep our countryside, even if we didn't have to grow food on it.

They went further than this, however. They pointed out the enormous amount of harm that has been done by letting towns and housing estates just splay out over the countryside. Without control, this was inevitable, and it led to the best agricultural land being taken.

So the Scott Committee has recommended that a central Planning Authority should be set up to control the use of land, and anyone wanting to divert land from its agricultural use should have to prove to the Authority that it was in the national interest to do so. Now that's something quite new.

But, you may very well ask, how is this going to affect the idea, which many people find an attractive one, of moving some of our industries out into country districts after the war?

Lord Scott's Committee considered this very carefully.

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They came to the conclusion that some of our new war factories built in the country might very well become the centres for new towns, and they see possibilities for moving some industries, especially of the lighter and more mobile type, to the smaller market towns.

But, having weighed the evidence, they are not in favour of anything like a general exodus of industry to country districts. Many of them are tied, of course, to their raw material, such as coal supplies, to which they want to be as near as possible.

But there are even more formidable considerations.

An enterprise employing even only 400 people means about 2,000 with their dependents. They require houses, shops, cinemas, transport and other services, and they would soon become a small town in themselves. Certainly they would swamp a village, of which the average population is only 1,000 to 1,500.

Then supposing the enterprise had to be closed down or go on short time with no other employment available in the neighbourhood. It would be a national disaster.

But one form of industry the Committee does recommend should be encouraged in every village --- that is, the village craftsman, such as the blacksmith and the wheelwright. They are part of the life of the farming countryside, and with modern equipment, such as electric power or oxyacetylene welding plants, they will still play an essential part in servicing the new machines that have come to stay on the farms.

And then they are craftsmen. They have mechanical initiative. They can turn out a distinctive or an improvised article that mechanical processes cannot reproduce, and as we become saturated with mass-produced goods, there is every indication that there is an increasing demand for these products of individual design and fit. The Committee recommend the revival or creation of guilds of craftsmen and a review of the whole question of apprenticeship to such crafts.

Now many of you must have seen, and perhaps know only too well, the frightful mess some of the "extractive" industries, such as mining and quarrying, make of the land, spoiling it from the point of view both of use and beauty. Where they have dug out iron-ore, for example, in parts of Northamptonshire, it looks like the Somme battlefield on a monster scale.

The industries can't help making the mess, but they can be made to put it straight again, so that the land can be used for farming or forestry.

So the Committee recommends that those who gain any benefit from the working of land or minerals should be under the obligation of restoring it for use again within a reasonably short period.

As regards afforestation, the Report recommends that the Forestry Commission should have power to enforce proper management of all woodland, public or private. That, I think, is good.

For trees, after all, are a crop, just as corn is, only they take rather longer to ripen, and in the future they look like being a very important crop to us who have to look abroad for about 85 or 90 per cent. of our timber supplies.

We can't afford bad forestry any more than we can afford bad farming.

I wish, in fact, that the Scott Committee had been a little firmer and more detailed on this question of forestry. They defend the Forestry Commission's planting of softwoods in dull square blocks, and perhaps this is a commercial necessity. But I always feel that those square blocks could be softened and enriched by breaking up the outline with skilful planting of hardwoods.

I don't think we ought to be so frightened of creating beauty. We are not in our own homes, where we decorate the walls with pictures. Just look how much we owe today to those landowners who planted the clumps and belts of trees that still give us so much pleasure and shelter today.

This is our country. We are going to live in it. We want to use it sensibly and efficiently, but that's no reason why we shouldn't make it a nice place to live in.

So far as farming is concerned, the Committee don't advocate any drastic changes. Developments, they say, will occur. Some farms will be enlarged, others may be made smaller. Fields and farm boundaries will be straightened out to adapt them to modern methods of cultivation.

But farming has evolved over many generations into about 20 different types, based upon local conditions of climate, soil and markets, and this has given the industry a foundation of stability that is practical, sensible and flexible. Monster specialised farms are very definitely not recommended, and, come to think of it, they are not very suitable in a country where livestock has got to be our anchor.

Now there is one member of the Committee, Professor S.R. Dennison, an economist, who does not agree with a lot of this. He issued a minority report.

He wants to see greater constructional and industrial development in the countryside, without prior rights to agriculture. He does advocate specialised agriculture, with fewer but more highly paid workers. He fears that if we have too much farming after the war, our standard of living will fall because we shall not be able to exchange as many manufactured goods for cheap food from abroad.

This is not the time or the place to enter into a detailed argument on these points. I would only add my personal views again that you can't specialise and keep the land growing the same things without harming it. To all who favour keeping the size of our agriculture severely restricted, I would like to put the question: All right, then. But what are you going to do with the land? For unless it is farmed, it will soon become useless and might as well be sunk under the sea.

The Scott Committee visualise a great constructional programme in the countryside, which should be planned now so as to begin the day after the war finishes.

New country homes, with electricity, piped water, and in some cases even gas are in the forefront. They are essential to stopping the drift to the towns.

They advocate a rather better type of Council cottage than many of those that we have seen hitherto. We have been too fond of the town model - one that is too high in proportion to its floor space, that doesn't fit happily into country surroundings, where land is not so valuable. So urban were our ideas that most council cottagers were even forbidden to keep a few hens before the war!

These new homes, it is recommended, should be grouped round village greens, or a series of greens, and no one allowed to build in open country without showing very good reason for it.

For the village, grouped round its main institutions, is a symbol of the friendliness and co-operation of country life.

Nor should we be frightened of trying new designs and new technique for these houses, provided we pay attention to the surroundings in which they will exist. Those Georgian builders who added many new houses and shops to our market towns and villages introduced originality. It must have looked very striking (even modernistic) at the time, and yet today they blend so happily with the whole scene that we hardly notice them except to admire them individually.

Green belts round the towns, easier access to the country, national parks where walkers and campers are encouraged, but where agriculture still goes on, are further suggestions from this Committee for making the country play a bigger part in our lives.

Holiday camps and holiday villages, more hostels, restaurants, hotels and petrol stations will also be required, and this makes it even more important that there should be one central authority to control it all, so that they are built where they are wanted and are, in construction and design, worthy of landscape.

Special walker's ways, like the Pennine Way, are recommended and the opening again of the old "coast-guards' path", that will enable anyone to walk the whole coast line of our island.

Footpaths would be scheduled and sign-posted, perhaps just with bright bands of colour on trees, stones or gate-posts.

A network of Village Colleges like those in Cambridgeshire and covering the whole country is recommended.

Besides being schools, they would be community centres where life is lived for groups of villages. Their doors would be open to all for recreation and education from childhood to old age.

The question of nationalisation of the land was not in the Committee's terms of reference. But they point out that they do not consider nationalisation necessary to carry out their programme, which can be achieved if the State has adequate control of the land. Control, that is to say, is more important than actual ownership.

Ah yes! I hear some of you say. It's a pretty picture. A wonderful dream, of the Britain we might have. This war's homes for heroes.

But how can the world after the war be anything but hard? I think it's very likely true that it will be a harder world. But does that mean it need be a less happy one?

I think some of us are too inclined to measure happiness in the number of visits we can pay to the cinema, or the number of things we can buy that we don't really want, and forget all that happiness we can create for ourselves -- out of family life, for instance, lived in decent surroundings, from social contacts and giving a friendly hand to one another.

We have thought an awful lot about the standard of living. We might think a lot more about the standard of happiness.

For don't forget that at heart we are a gay people. We know how to enjoy ourselves, given half a chance, but the trouble is that for much of the industrial period we haven't had much of a chance.

And yet you couldn't say there had been a decrease, up to this war, in the material things we could buy. No.

It seems to me that we have got to look inside ourselves to find happiness, and it will come in all sorts of simple ways out of our roots if we allow them to develop.

Here, in this Report, is the means to plant many of those roots, and they will grow into a crop of good life that will make our countryside really serve the whole nation, materially and spiritually.

Don't let us become so frightened of good news that we won't believe it when we hear it.

There is not one of the proposals that I have put before you this evening that could not be realised if we willed it.

St. Paul's Cathedral was once a dream. So were the United States of America. And they only came true because men had faith in their vision.

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