

## Seeing the Sycamore Gap – a Conversation about Landscape and Faith

The Sill, National Landscape Discovery Centre,  
13 March 2018

This conversation was the first ‘contextual practice workshop’ organised by the Rural Strand of the Diocesan Strategy. Our aim is to explore contemporary themes that impact on the future of the rural church in our diocese and beyond, in the hope that through our conversations we may learn how that church might work more effectively and strategically.

The workshop was convened and hosted by Benjamin Carter, the Vicar of the parishes of Haydon Bridge and Beltingham with Henshaw.



The scene for the day was set by Tim Cole, Professor of Social History and Director of the Brigstow Institute of the University of Bristol, an international authority on environmental histories.

He offered a series of binaries to orientate ourselves as we prepared to walk the mile or so to Sycamore Gap. These are ways of seeing and responding to the landscape as:

Natural or man-made  
Wild or domestic  
Fixed or fluid  
Secular or sacred  
Work or leisure  
Industrial or natural  
Past or future



He reminded us of the significance of the speed by which we encounter landscape and the different modes of travel associated with this. For example, J.B. Priestly held that the best way to experience the USA was to fly over it, but he argued that Britain is better explored on foot in order to take



notice of the far greater differentiation of the landscape.

In the 1920s and '30s there was thus an emerging moral geography of speed. This even manifested itself in class concerns: the upper middle class put their boots on and set off on foot with the wind and rain on their faces, while the working class piled into charabancs leaving a trail of left litter in their wake.

What, then, does it mean to walk in the landscape today as ‘embodied presences’ in the landscape? What do we see when we walk? How do we relate to the landscape as a natural and as a cultural space and relate to the stories we and others tell about it?

One dominant story is that of the romantics, especially the romantic poets, a story re-told at The Sill. They talked of the landscape, and especially of the privilege of walking there, in terms of the terrifying delight of being within the wild; but in the 1970s a backlash to this attitude saw a move to open up access to the countryside and provoked walkers to oppose road building schemes.

Mindful of all this, what then are the lenses we now wear to look at the landscape? And what are the stories that *aren't* told? Who, indeed, gets to tell the stories? How can stories help us to see differently?

Tim invited us to think about our feet as we walked – and though them to be aware that we were indeed participating in an embodied experience.

**Robert Mayhew, Landscape and Forestry Officer and Head of Conservation for Northumberland National Park then spoke about the opportunities and challenges in and of the National Park.**

Landscape according to the European Landscape Convention is defined as an area perceived by people the character of which is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.

Landscapes are thus constantly evolving and Natural Parks are very diverse. They are Britain’s ‘breathing spaces’ – places where people re-create, places to be inspired.

Shapes in the landscape influence imagination – even as places of the gods and sacred spaces. Can we experience Simonside, for example, as the Uluru of Northumberland?



Northumberland National Park (NNP) itself has diverse landscapes and land uses. 20% of the land is held by the military, forestry covers 23% (woodland covers 10% of the UK as a whole) but is hardly ‘natural’ and upland farming is the predominant agricultural activity in the north of the Park.

There are three main sub-regions of NNP: the cuesta ridges of the south (Hadrian’s Wall country) the weathered sandstone landscape of the Simonside Hills and the wilder landscape of the Cheviots.

Visitors to Hadrian’s Wall may be disappointed that it fails to meet their expectations as an equivalent of the Great Wall of China, but their disappointment is quickly mitigated by the unexpected quality of the landscape through which the Wall runs. It is clear that the story of this (and other) landscapes has not been told and people respond by wishing to re-engage with all the landscape. This is one major reason for the establishment of The Sill.

Human and animal interaction with the landscape has created the upland pastures and the grouse moors, but the future of both is unclear. Brexit and the withdrawal of European grant money calls the future upland farming into question. It remains unclear too whether the extent to which Brexit is a challenge or an opportunity. 97% of land in NNP receives public subsidies, which prompts a clear need to define what constitutes the public good.



Land owning is diverse. 40% of NNP is in public ownership; three large private estates in the north of the Park mean that most farmed land there is tenanted; meanwhile smaller privately-owned units in the south are quite vulnerable. When times are tight these small farms are barometers of the economic well-being of the county.

Much of the forested land is conifer. The industry is experiencing increased demand for its timber to feed wood-processing plants like Egger (in Hexham) and a wider

range of timber producers such as for housing. The Forestry Commission was set up in 1919, but when NNP was established in 1956 Kielder Forest Park was deliberately set outside its boundary because it was not deemed to meet the necessary criterion of natural beauty. Nevertheless, applications for single species forests are still presented to the NNP authority. Is monoculture not beautiful? Challenges to mixed woodland, meanwhile, include Chalara and Ash Dieback.

NNP sees its job as one of managing change and minimalizing detrimental change. It is clear that championing the landscape is not about trying to bottle or freeze it. NNP sought, for example, to limit the recent southward extension of Wark Forest. NNP works within the National Planning Policy Framework but tries to encourage early engagement with those seeking planning permissions – including the military.

There are just two thousand inhabitants of NPP many of whom are not connected to the electric grid. OFGEM wishes to place lines underground and minimise vertical infrastructure. But this is costly. Light pollution also remains an issue in NNP and is at odds with its dark skies initiative.

The primary purpose of Otterburn Ranges is military training, but NNP seeks to work with the Army to protect and provide access to key historical and archaeological sites such as Chew Green.

Overall NNP seeks to develop management policies for the open environment and local development frameworks for the built environment. Defra has produced a 25-year development plan in which Natural Capital is seen as significant. Landscape can thus be measured in terms of economic value and benefit to health.



Tourism in NNP is discovering new potential, for example, through the dark skies initiative which is extending the tourist season into the winter months. Different ways of recreation have come to the fore – with different speeds of experiencing the landscape, some of them more obviously adventurous. Against this, visitor numbers overall have probably declined over the last twenty years. It can be argued that more facilities attract more people and that there is thus a collective benefit when more is offered. Environmental education has a



new profile. The Sill is part of this, but it took twenty years to imagine before it could be built and it is not liked by everyone: there have been objections to its location and built form and some have opposed the need for it.



**Conversation continued at Sycamore Gap**, where **Robin Dower** recounted his parent's key involvement in the establishment of National Parks, the Dower Report of 1945: John, Robin's father as secretary of the Standing Committee on National Parks, established that a National Park should be:

*an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation's benefit and by appropriate national decision and action, (a) the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved, (b) access and facilities for public open-air enjoyment are amply provided, (c) wild-life and buildings and places of architectural and historical interest are suitably protected, while (d) established farming use is effectively maintained.*



Robert emphasised that the National Parks had two purposes, to preserve and enhance and to promote special places for the nation's benefit but one duty, which was the well-being, of the residents of local communities. including the economic needs, within the new parks.

Robin's mother Pauline as a member of the new National Parks Commission was the principal advocate of united the three distinct landscapes now encompassed by NNP.

Back at The Sill, the participants divided into four groups for a period of reflection and to consider four questions. The responses to these, summarised below, are necessary various – a true conversation involving twenty people almost inevitably results in a rich palimpsest of thoughts. We hope that this will stimulate further conversation.



### **Can we see God doing anything here?**

- If God is to be apprehended in the open air, we have to recognise a lot of people are scared of both.
- Paths have a history and both traditions and pathways can be good and bad.
- The history of a landscape has a dark side of land enclosures and appropriation and flooding of valleys. The romanticism of open space can mask harsher realities.
- The sublimity of landscape can be at odds with a gospel found in the poor and the marginalised.
- Can the landscape give people a language to make sense of their experience of God?
- God seems to work slowly and collaboratively – organically – and goes with the grain.
- Decay as well as flourishing is a stark reminder of the reality of life.
- If 'here' equals Sycamore Gap and the landscape in which it is set, how like a cathedral it seems! It takes ages to build and is used in ways strikingly like a cathedral. It makes us see the bigger picture – a bigger picture through which God tried to communicate.

- This analogy of a cathedral may be compared to the French concept of 'terroir': a place made by a sum of physical, environmental factors together with human use culture, which together adds up to something that transcends them all in expressing the essence of that place.



- Places in the landscape hold memories. Being rooted in the landscape allows God to work through history, but this may be exclusive/excluding too.
- Walking is healing. Anything healing is of God.
- There is a thread that connects going with the grain, to memories and to the recognition of sacred spaces. The National Trust recognises the significance of the spirit of a place. What makes a place sacred is memories, linked to community.

**Where do we find meaning in what we have seen?**

- What is the 'below stairs' narrative of our churches?
- How does my story connect with the national story? And the church story?
- The meaning we discern depends very much on the history we come from.

- There are those who perceive the national park - and the church, as not for the likes of them. Not everyone wants to be here. Not everyone has the choice.
- We are part of God's creative activity and share in that: God and humanity work together in the landscape. We are on a pilgrimage.
- An understanding of the landscape may be a way of knowing where we are.





- There is also a meaning in the pattern of things, those things which enable us to know where we are.
- Meaning comes in our interaction with story. There is (Tim says) a difference between space and place: place is space with people. Place is inhabited with stories and it makes meaning in interaction.
- If we want to see the churches as sacred spaces, do people need to have fruitful memories within them?

#### **What kind of faith is formed here?**

- The question implies that faith is indeed formed here.
- There may be a fear of change and a wish to keep things as they are. Eternity must not be equated with the status quo.
- Awareness of the landscape opens the possibility that a Creator God may mean more here than a Christ who died for our sins.
- Churches are built of local stone, the resources we are given and build a faith from below. Churches are symbols of God's local presence – the landscape is made visible in church buildings.



- How can we thus hold bottom up and top down in tension in terms of faith?
- The rural church is often a 'centred set' rather than a 'bounded set.'

- How we see matters. Many different kinds of faith are formed here.
- A romantic view of the landscape may ignore/overlook harsh realities and our faith may be used as a mask.
- The church is obsessed about community. Might we need to discover a new connectedness, similar to that of the desert fathers in this landscape?
- There are conflicted tensions in the rurality landscape, for example, afforestation post World War One to combat rural depopulations and lack of employment.

### **What are the possibilities here for transformation?**

- There have actually been huge changes within the church - even as simply as having space at the back, and fewer pews. Perhaps we are more open. Brexit will bring change too.
- House prices will bring transformation. Employment patterns will bring transformation. So a lot of it is beyond our control.
- Perhaps telling the story itself may be transformational.
- A wilderness experience may transform us and open us to things other than ourselves.
- The Church needs to be more of an advocate for people and need to fit into the spaces in people's lives.
- The church needs to engage with other bodies and communities to build a shared vision for flourishing community life and embrace an abundance mentality of what we can offer.
- How do we stand up for what we believe to achieve this against Political and political forces?



### **Concluding reflections from Tim Cole and plenary comments**

- Our discussions have highlighted some tensions, not least one concerning rootedness: On this rock I will build my church. Is our greatest strength our greatest weakness?





- Another tension is around space and the need to rethink our relationship to space. Are we moving into people's space or vice-versa?
  - Life has its seasons and the church has its stability within that. In some circumstances just remaining can be a victory.
  - When Kielder people were moved to new houses they took stones from their old home with them: a symbolic gesture of transformation and continuity.
- Stories never go away, they have a power and place is ultimately about stories. Stories bring a new life to place.
- But what kind of below stairs stories can we tell and do we need to tell new stories?
- Does the media try to impose an urban story on rural stories?

***We invite you to join the conversation ...***