

# 1 Snapshot Britain

## *A sense of place*

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to give it its formal title, is a highly centralised and unitary state, and its main component, England, has been so for almost a thousand years, longer than any other European country. As a political entity, however, Britain (as the United Kingdom is loosely called) is less than 300 years old, being the state which emerged from the union of the ancient kingdoms of Scotland and England in 1707.

It is widely assumed that the British are a relatively homogeneous society with a strong sense of identity, but it is an assumption that requires considerable qualification. Even after 300 years the terms 'British' and 'Britain' which are used for official purposes, can also seem very artificial. In his famous *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926, Fowler wrote:

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"It must be remembered that no Englishman, or perhaps no Scotsman, calls himself a Briton without a sneaking sense of the ludicrous, or hears himself referred to as a BRITISHER without squirming. How should an Englishman utter the words *Great Britain* with the glow of emotion that for him goes with *England*? His Sovereign may be Her Britannic Majesty to outsiders, but to him is Queen of *England*."

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For centuries it has been the idea of England (or Scotland), rather than of Britain, which has been charged with patriotic emotion. The idea of England is invoked at times of national crisis, for example at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, when Admiral Lord Nelson's famous order to the British fleet read, "England expects that every man will do his duty." In 1939 during Parliament's emergency debate on the eve of war, one Member of Parliament (MP) called across the chamber to another who was rising to speak: "Come on, Arthur, speak for England."

One should not be surprised, either, that Fowler wrote these words under 'England'. If you look up 'Britain', 'British' and 'Briton' you will find 'See *England*.' Most people call Britain 'England', and the British 'English', as if Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland were merely outer parts of England. Nothing, it should be said, infuriates a Scot more than ignorantly to be called English, or for all Britain to be referred to as England. Many Welsh and Northern Irish feel similarly about their identity.

While Britain is instinctively thought of by many as 'England', so also the idea of England evokes images of the Queen, Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London and the soft landscape of the southern counties of England. This is not so surprising since almost one quarter of the British people live within 25 miles of London's Trafalgar Square. But it also reveals that England as well as Britain is dominated by the south, and particularly the south east.

Yet these symbols can be misleading. The United Kingdom is a land of great diversity, partly in its landscape, but more importantly in the human sphere. There are four territorial divisions, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland (or Ulster). They all carry a special sense of identity which is strongly affected by the tension between their own distinctive history and tradition and centralised government from London. Yet even England has local identities, which tend to be stronger the further one travels from the south east. In Cornwall, in the far south west, there is still a sense of Celtic identity, and a romantic affinity with their cousins, the Celtic people of Brittany in north-west France, persists. In the north of England, in the words of one MP, people are "warm, friendly, quick-tempered and insular". Communities such as those in the mining villages of Durham are tightly knit, with a strong sense of loyalty. The people of Yorkshire and Lancashire, too, have a strong sense of community identity that can hardly be found in the south. As one



moves closer to London, community loyalties are weaker and society is both more homogeneous and yet also more individualistic, the characteristics of a highly integrated modern society.

Each shire or 'county', the administrative division of England created over a thousand years ago, still commands its own local loyalties, still expressed in that most English of games, cricket. Even in the most homogeneous part of Britain, the 'Home Counties' (Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent, Surrey) around London, people can still feel strongly about their county identity. The sense of local difference may be partly a matter of history, but it is also to do with the subtle changes in landscape, architecture or even the way English is spoken, from one county to another.

England, unlike the largely mountainous countries of Wales and Scotland, is mainly lowland, except for six major hilly regions: the Pennines, called the 'backbone of England' dividing the north-west



The Yorkshire Dales.

part of England from the north-east; the scenic Lake District in the north west; the Yorkshire Dales, running to the east coast of Yorkshire; the moorlands of Cornwall and Devon; and the border areas with Scotland and Wales respectively. Elsewhere the ranges of hills are relatively low, while the East Midlands and East Anglia are notably flat and featureless. In Scotland and Wales the greater part of the population is concentrated in the more lowland areas, particularly the area between Glasgow and Edinburgh, and in the east and south-east parts of Wales.

## Core and periphery

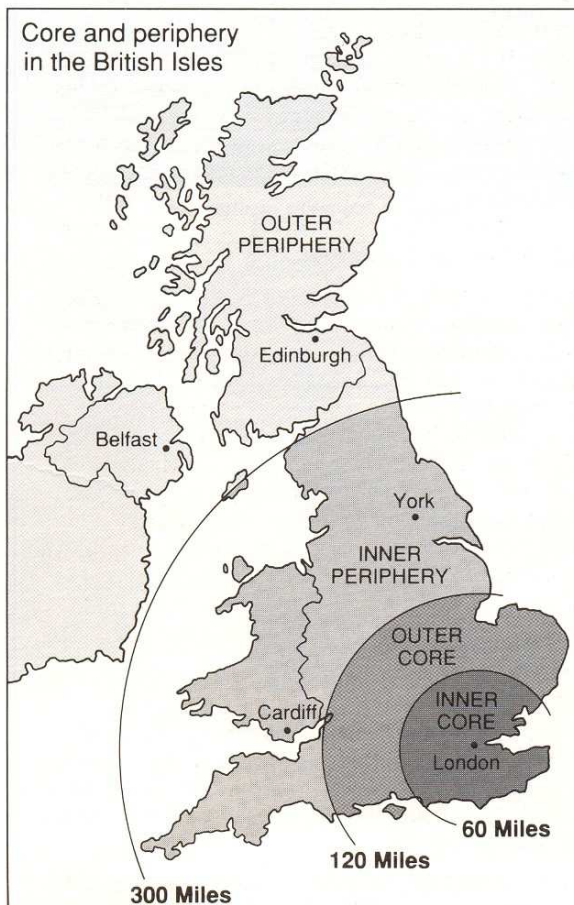
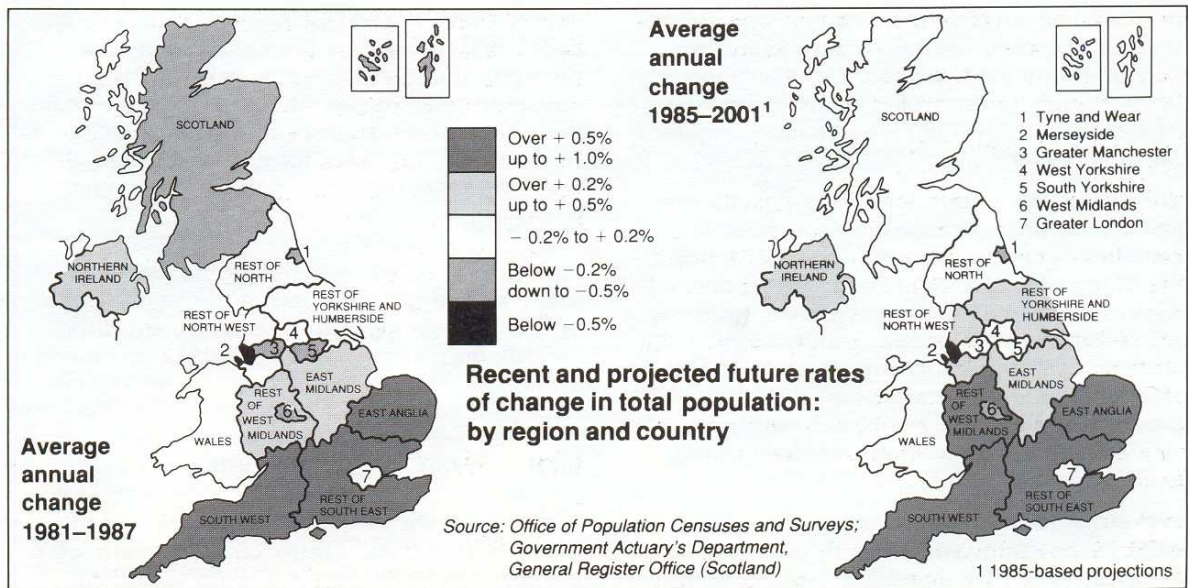
There is another way of looking at the country. Throughout almost all of Britain's history, the centre of economic and political power, and therefore the largest population concentration, has been in the south of the country. The only partial exception was in the two centuries following Britain's industrial revolution, approximately 1775–1975, when the availability of water and coal led to the growth of large industrial towns and cities in the north and the north and West Midlands. But as Britain now leaves its industrial age behind, it is possible to recognise the older dominance of the south – a result of climate, agricultural wealth, and today the ease of communication with the wider world.

It is possible to draw a series of arcs outwards from London, marking an inner and outer 'core' to the country, and an inner and outer 'periphery' (opposite). The pattern may seem crude, but it roughly describes the measure of authority and prosperity radiating from London since the days of Roman Britain. The periphery, particularly Scotland, Wales, and the north of England, has always resented the power of the south and periodically has challenged it. Today, in political terms, these are the areas of Labour Party strength, a rejection of the Conservative political culture of the south.

Looking at Britain, region by region, one can see the continuing evidence of this core/periphery theory. Overall population density reveals the enduring concentration in the south east where over one third of Britain's population lives, and also in the Midlands and north as a result of the industrial age.

At the outset of the 1990s Britain's total population was just over 57 million, but although it is





barely increasing, the demographic pattern is changing. A continuing movement of population away from the periphery, towards the core, is evident when looking at the balance of population during the years 1981-2001 (above). There is a steady stream of young people, mainly aged between 18 and 35, who move southwards in order to improve their economic prospects. Between 1981 and 1987, Scotland, the north and north west all lost 1.3 per cent of their populations. What the map does not show is that there is a drift also from Cornwall in the far south west and from western Wales towards the core of Britain.

### The north-south divide

Another way of assessing this core/periphery theory is to look at living standards and expectations in recent years. This shows very clearly that the south east, south, south west, East Anglia and the East Midlands do very much better than the peripheral areas. Over a century ago, the English novelist Mrs Gaskell wrote a book entitled *North and South*, about a heroine from a soft southern village forced to move to the fictitious county of Darkshire, who confessed "a detestation for all she had ever heard of the north of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country". Mutual prejudice between a complacent population in the south and a proud but aggrieved one in the north persists. Precisely where the dividing line between north and south



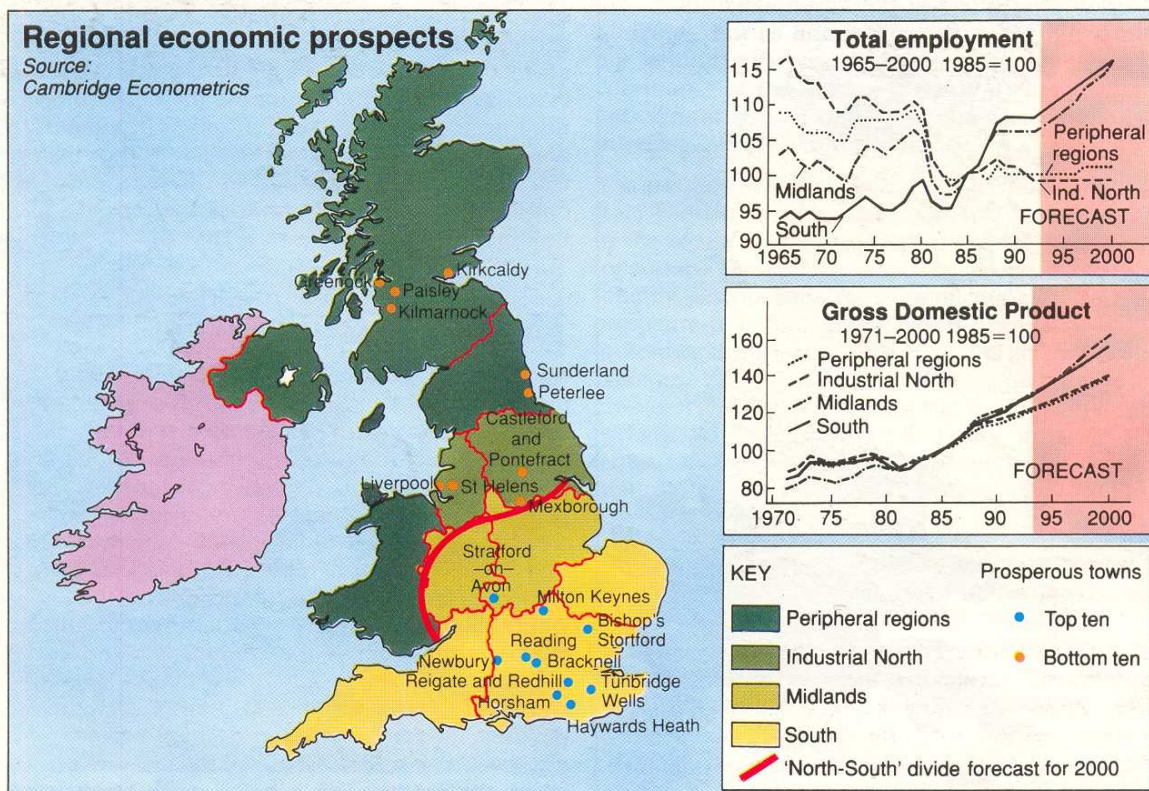
runs is a matter of opinion. In the early 1980s the line was conventionally drawn from the Severn estuary (on the south Wales/England border) across to the Wash (on the north-west side of East Anglia). By 1990 the line more popularly ran from the Severn to the Humber (below).

The divide goes well beyond mere prejudice. A sharp contrast undeniably exists between the conditions of life in the north and in the south, which is likely to continue well beyond the end of the century. A survey of comparative prosperity in the 280 towns of Britain, published in 1990, shows the divide very clearly (see below). The top town, Horsham, had an unemployment rate of 2 per cent. Greenock, at the bottom, suffered 17 per cent unemployment, with the prospect that it would probably get worse in the 1990s.

The divide is noticeable in other ways, too, for example in health. In the words of one official report in 1987: "Striking disparities in health can still be observed. Death rates were highest in Scotland, followed by the north and north-west regions of England, and were lowest in the south

east of England and East Anglia." It may be added that on average people die younger in the north and the population generally is more subject to heart disease and cancer. People in the north tend to smoke and drink more heavily than in the south. The Scots, for example, spend about one third more on smoking than the national average.

Such things are symptomatic of the greater stress and harder social conditions of life in the north. This is most clearly seen in employment rates. Overall, during the period 1979–1987, there was a small, 1.5 per cent, fall in the employed labour force. The national figure, however, masks the regional variations. Employment expansion in the south east was 4.3 per cent, in the south west 7.3 per cent and in East Anglia 18.2 per cent. Everywhere else there was contraction, of which the worst were Scotland – 8 per cent, the north – 9.6 per cent, the north west – 12.1 per cent, and Wales – 12.6 per cent. As a result, during this period over 90 per cent of the job losses had been north of the Severn–Wash divide.







*Sheffield, like many northern cities, has had to adjust to the loss of its manufacturing base.*



*Seeking employment at a Job Centre.*

Inevitably, the existence of greater employment opportunities encouraged many in the north to follow the advice of one government minister in the early 1980s to "get on your bike" and seek work in the south. On the whole those most successful in their search were also the most

employable, the best qualified. Although this may relieve short-term unemployment, it also drains depressed areas of their most talented people. Take for example Stranraer, a small town on the south-west tip of Scotland. It has no higher education facility in the locality. Those who go on to any form of further education after secondary school are unlikely to return to the Stranraer area. In other words, the whole district is annually stripped of its brightest young people. Without their talent it is difficult to see how the depressed periphery can be revived.

Single people have much greater ease in moving away in search of work than married people. This is because of the sharp difference in the price of housing. In 1990, for example, houses in the south cost on average twice as much as their equivalent in the north. This means that many married people living in the north cannot afford to move south even if they are offered a job. In any case a higher proportion of people in the north and in Scotland live in council (publicly owned) housing than elsewhere. If they move they



become homeless, joining a long waiting list for council accommodation in the south. It should be noted that as the first large generation of home owners begins to die, people living in the south east are three times as likely to inherit a home as those in any other region. Thus, even in this respect, capital resources are stacked in favour of the south east.



*Expensive housing in the south east.*

There are plenty of exceptions to the view of prosperity in the south and of depression in the north, where there are many firms making a great success in unpromising circumstances. The largest shopping centre in Europe in 1990 was the Metrocentre in Gateshead, Newcastle, the achievement of a proud Northerner, John Hall. It is a symbol of the regional regeneration and rebirth of provincial pride that he and many other northern businessmen believe in. A world leader in the manufacture of glass, Pilkington's, resisted strong pressure in the 1980s to move south from its traditional home in St Helens, outside Liverpool. It is not only Northerners who believe in the north. Leading Japanese firms have chosen periphery areas for major investment, for example Toyota in Wales, and Nissan in Sunderland. There are also plenty of prosperous localities within an overall depressed region. Leeds, for example, boasted the fastest growing economy in England in 1989, with 50 major projects generating 12,000 jobs. The showpiece of Leeds' revival is its old shopping arcades, now revamped and renamed the Victoria Quarter.

However, there are not enough successes to reverse the overall trend. The impression of a more impoverished north persists. In the mid 1980s, for example, the north east of England

remained in the bottom twelve of the European Community's 131 regions in terms of wealth. The north west in 1983 had the highest death rate in England, the highest proportion of divorced men and the lowest proportion of 16-year-olds remaining in school, reflecting profound social and economic problems. Indeed, it is estimated that by the end of the century the north west will have lost 222,000 jobs, representing a fall in its share of national employment from 10.1 per cent to 8.8 per cent. Unemployment in the north generally is likely to remain three times higher than in the south until the end of the century. People will continue to 'vote with their feet' by moving to more prosperous areas. The government itself has estimated that during the years 1986–2001, the number of households in the south, south east, south west, East Anglia and East Midlands will increase by 15 per cent, and by only 6 per cent in the remaining areas.

The theory that businesses will relocate in the north because of cheaper labour and site costs is not borne out by experience. In practice businesses fear they will have difficulties in recruiting qualified people, a reasonable expectation if



*A Japanese factory in Wales.*



almost half of all 16-year-olds in the north leave school without seeking further training. There is great reluctance among most employees working in the south to move to the north. If their business relocates they are more likely to resign than move. A survey in 1988 indicated that among over 100 chief executives of companies in the south, over 90 per cent said their senior staff would resign rather than move north. Businesses prefer to seek a cheap site somewhere else in the south. Because Britain's financial sector is concentrated in London, businesses in the north find it difficult to obtain capital. Many northern businessmen would argue there is an urgent need for decentralisation, to encourage local financial centres to encourage local business. In the meantime, of those companies in the north which chose to relocate, over half have tended to move to the south.

It is questionable whether even the south really benefits from the growing regional imbalance, since in return for what may prove economic prosperity the environment is degraded by very high population concentrations, heavy air and road traffic, and urban development. It is doubtful whether this imbalance will change unless

government returns to the policy generally applied up to 1979 of providing incentives to economic growth in the under-developed areas, and discouragements to the continued concentration in the south.

### *City and market town*

Eighty per cent of the British people live in towns or cities of 100,000 inhabitants or more. Yet most of these town dwellers would prefer to live in the countryside if it were possible. This has a lot to do with a national state of mind, discussed in Chapter 8. Nevertheless, people are moving out of larger cities, some going to the countryside (discussed below), and others to smaller towns. In the 1960s London had a population of 8.5 million. By 1981 it had fallen by 20 per cent to only 6.7 million. Liverpool, in the north west, has suffered urban decline compounded by its location. In 1937 its population was 867,000. It was still 745,000 in 1961, but since then has fallen to 469,000, and will have only half its 1937 population by 2001. Several impoverished inner city areas, including Liverpool, experienced major riots during the 1980s.





In fact there has been a flight from the great cities ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, when industrialisation made them such unpleasant places to live and when the invention of the railway made it possible to commute to the city from more pleasant areas. Take London, for example. Until the First World War most of the middle classes and a smaller 'service' class moved to London's new suburbs which reached into the countryside enclosing a large number of villages within a 25-mile radius.

During the middle years of the twentieth century, the 1920s to the 1970s, mainly professional middle-class people started to move out beyond 'suburbia' into the towns and villages of the Home Counties. They could either afford a motor car or the rail fares, and so could live in what were still quiet country towns. Places like Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Reigate and Redhill, Guildford and Dorking all acquired a new population of professional people who commuted daily to work in the City. Much of the countryside between these towns and Greater London was designated a protected 'Green Belt'. Many other cities did the same, in order to protect their hinterland from uncontrolled urban sprawl.

In the late 1970s and 1980s the pressure to move out of London and its suburbs intensified. There were two main reasons for this. The most important was the steep rise in house prices in the London area. The other reason for moving was to escape a marked decline in the quality of life in Britain's larger cities. In London, for example, traffic congestion and pollution made life in the 1980s much less attractive than it had been in the London of the 1960s. Since house prices in the Home Counties had risen to virtually the same level as those in London itself, people began to look further afield. For those prepared to spend up to two hours travelling to work by rail each day, it was possible to buy a larger house perhaps 160 miles or more from London, in areas around Brighton, Salisbury, Bristol, Oxford, Northampton, Cambridge, Peterborough and Norwich. Similar, though less pronounced, effects have become evident around other large cities, particularly the more depressed ones. Finally there was another smaller but growing category of people who, thanks to the new information technology, no longer needed to work in central offices. Two London boroughs, for example, 'outposted' their computer and finance departments in 1990, one to Sheffield, where rents were much lower, and another to Barnstaple, a market town in the

picturesque county of Devon. An increasing number of people were even able to work from home, linked by computer and fax facilities to their employer. Possibly up to half the people working in London will be working from home by the end of the century. If this comes about, it must be expected that more people will leave London.



*Commuters on their way to work in London.*

The danger for Britain's large cities is that they will have impoverished inner areas, in which only the poorest live, while everyone who is able to will try to live on the edge of the city or outside it, shopping by car at the new large shopping centres sited on city ring roads. The growth of such large shopping centres spells danger for the old-fashioned high streets of city suburbs. If people find it more attractive to shop by car, they will find that high street shops will close and local economic decline will set in, just as it has already done in some inner city areas. Thus, unplanned free-market growth may strike at the roots of that local community coherence which still strongly exists in many city suburbs, particularly those based on old villages long since swallowed up by city growth.





*An out of town supermarket that threatens the traditional high street.*

The attraction of the new 'boom' towns, usually with populations under 150,000, is the higher quality of life, good transport links and diversified economy. Most of them are in the southern half of England, for example Banbury, Bury St Edmunds, Cambridge, Colchester, Huntingdon, Milton Keynes, Reading, Swindon, Warwick and Worcester. Exeter represents the most western of these boom towns. One or two are significantly further north, for example Warrington and Harrogate, and Wrexham in north Wales. Wrexham's fortunes changed when two large Japanese electronics companies, Sharp and Brother, both established factories there, attracted by low labour costs and improved road access to Manchester. It is hard to exaggerate the psychological effect of Japanese investment on local prosperity, for their confidence draws in British investors who would otherwise have had little confidence in a small market town in a low income area. Warrington suffered heavily in the early 1980s with the loss of jobs in steel and aluminium production giving it a high unemployment rate. By 1990 unemployment was below the

national average thanks mainly to diversification into non-manual or 'white-collar' jobs, and a shrinkage in the proportion of manual, or 'blue-collar' jobs, and most important of all, new confidence resulting from local successes.

Yet, it is still within the south east that the greatest small town growth is taking place. The population of Milton Keynes grew by 41 per cent between 1981 and 1988. In terms of economic growth Horsham, in West Sussex, overtook nearby Crawley in 1990 as one of the fastest growing towns in the country. Access to London by road and rail is easy, and Gatwick airport is nearby. Traditionally a quiet market town, Horsham has become a busy and prosperous shopping centre for the area, with a large commuter population but also with a high level of business in the town itself. Its largest employer is a large insurance company. As happens in most growing towns, the emphasis is on service industry rather than manufacturing and the job vacancies are for those with skills and educational qualifications. Few unskilled workers are wanted in these boom towns.



## *'Sunset' and 'sunrise' areas*

The pattern of prosperity, or lack of it, is evident in the areas of development and stagnation in the country. The sunset areas are broadly those where traditional industries have collapsed during the past twenty-five years, for example cotton goods in Lancashire, car production in the West Midlands, coal and steel production in south Wales, Tyne and Wear, Durham and parts of Yorkshire, and shipbuilding in Tyne and Wear, Clydeside and Belfast. Yet the north has its sunrise areas, those areas where significant new economic activity is occurring, for example between Manchester and Leeds, but unlike the large areas in the south, prosperous parts are far more patchy in the north.

The most sensational sunrise areas are in the outer core (and the outer edge of the inner core areas) of Britain. Of these, the most notable is the 'M4 Corridor', the band of once lovely countryside stretching westwards from London to Swindon and beyond. Easy access to London's Heathrow airport, and to the M25 (London orbital), M3 and M4 motorways has made the towns west of London highly attractive to the new high technology

industries which grew rapidly during the 1980s. As a result, development and employment growth has been intensive. The town of Bracknell is a good example. It was a small town of barely 40,000 inhabitants when it was designated a new town in the early 1960s. By 1971 its population had grown to 65,000, by 1990 to 96,000, and it is expected to reach 110,000 in the mid 1990s. Bracknell is not alone. Reading, Newbury, Hungerford, Basingstoke and Swindon all grew rapidly during the 1980s. However, as each becomes densely populated, with high house prices, some companies and employees move further afield to avoid the overdevelopment to which they have contributed.

Another major area of development is across Cambridge and East Anglia. Access to London, to the excellent scientific and technical resources of Cambridge, and to low-cost industrial areas and housing has made this area particularly attractive to high technology and service industries. As a result East Anglia, the most sparsely populated part of England, but with excellent seafreight facilities for Europe, had remarkable population growth during the 1980s, at a rate of 1 per cent per annum.



*A sunset area: industrial dereliction.*



## *Town and country*

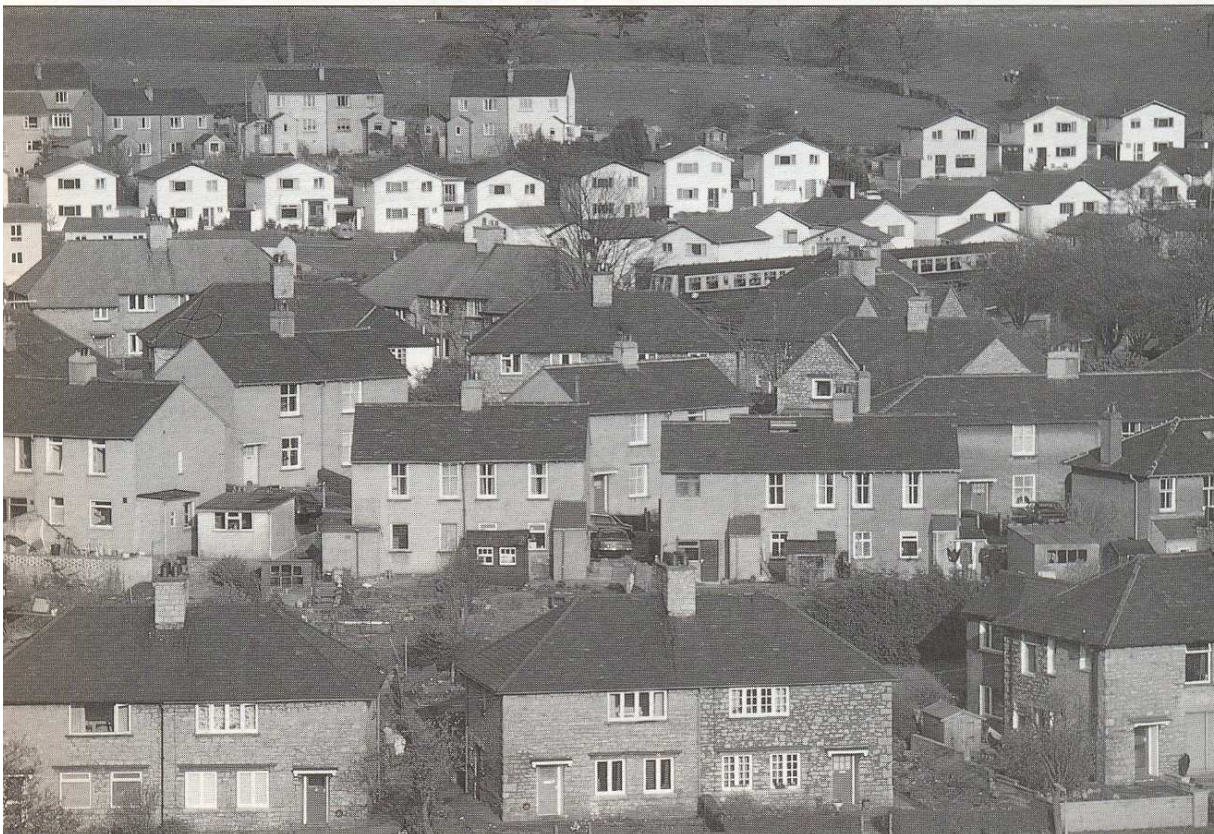
It is obvious that, especially in the south and south east, the pressure created by the growth of towns along the M4 Corridor and other development areas, and by the increasing departure of people from the cities, has been particularly felt in the countryside. In fact, it would be true to say that almost all of rural England has been affected. Large numbers of mainly middle-class families have bought cottages in the country, either to live in or to use as holiday homes.

This migration into the countryside has changed the nature of village life. Many villages today have a substantial proportion of commuters, people whose home is in the village but who earn their living elsewhere. This is in complete contrast with only half a century ago, when villages were much smaller and were populated by those who made their living out of the country, primarily farmers and farm labourers. In Hampshire, for example, there is not a single village left which is not almost entirely commuter-based, its inhabitants travelling to work anywhere from the Solent

to the south, to Avon (Bath-Bristol) to the west, or the M4 Corridor towns or London to the north and north east.

This migration has transformed occupancy. Pretty old cottages have been bought at higher prices than most local people can afford. The local poor have been steadily squeezed out, particularly during the past twenty years, into low-cost or publicly owned rented housing on the edge of the village.

Village geography has also changed. The pressure for housing has led to intensive infilling and expansion onto open land in and around villages. The county of Berkshire, for example, has doubled its housing stock since 1960. Reading, Wokingham and Bracknell have all expanded so that they almost form one single conurbation. Pressure has been particularly acute around London, with successive governments trying to infringe the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act which protects the Green Belt. According to government estimates, 700,000 new homes are needed in the south east during the 1990s, of which 570,000



*Low cost public housing on the outskirts of a village.*



homes will be outside London. The pressure to expand onto 'green-field' sites, in other words the countryside, will be very great. So far the pressures have been largely resisted. Between 1954 and 1981 the built-on area of the south east rose from 11.9 per cent to 15.7 per cent. It may reach 17 per cent by the end of the century. In 1990 there were at least sixty new towns and villages proposed in different parts of rural England.

The pressure on rural housing is an area of tension between long-established country people and middle-class newcomers. Local people often resent the way they have been displaced into cheap housing on the edge of the village. It is the newly arrived commuting middle classes who are generally more anxious to protect their picturesque village from further housing development. Most villages threatened with nearby new housing developments quickly organise campaigns to oppose their implementation. However, truly local people sometimes regard commuters as hypocritical, since they do not have to earn a livelihood locally.

The pressure of people is also felt through tourism, in areas which receive heavy use during the summer. Two notable areas in danger are the Lake District, first made famous in the nineteenth century by the great romantic poet William Wordsworth, and the Peak District in the Pennine Hills, running between Lancashire and Yorkshire. National parks in Britain are already significantly different from those in most of Europe, because they are already man-modified landscapes. Many of the landscapes now run the risk of development as leisure facilities. By 1990 there were a dozen major leisure complexes in the Lake District. The more people use or interfere with these national parks the more they will be degraded. Britain faces a major crisis in tourist damage both in its cities and countryside. The sheer numbers of people wishing to visit Westminster Abbey or to walk the Pennine Way are literally wearing these facilities away.

The countryside probably also faces more systematic exploitation than in any other country in Western Europe. The English countryside has



Hikers on the Pennine Way.



changed more in the past 40 years than in the previous 400 years. The main threat comes from farming. The pressure to improve yields, a feature of government policy since the food shortages of the Second World War, has had a damaging effect on the countryside and the structure of farming. This pressure has led to increased capitalisation and mechanisation, and this in turn has led to the disappearance of smaller, less profitable farms in favour of much larger enterprises. The concentration of farmland in a few wealthy hands is a particularly British phenomenon. The average farm in Britain is much larger than in any other West European country.

Intensive large-scale farming has changed the traditional landscape in many parts of England. In order to make maximum use of mechanisation many farmers have torn up thousands of the hedgerows that characterised the English landscape. Well over 100,000 miles of hedges – enough to encircle the world four times – have been removed since 1947. Some East Anglian fields are now 500 acres in size. Half the country's ancient lowland woods have been cleared for farmland since 1945. In addition the intensive use of chemical fertilisers has led to substantial pollution of rivers, and the destruction of fish and other wildlife. In the late 1980s there was growing concern at the degradation of the countryside. A vigorous nature conservation lobby, rivalled possibly only by that in Holland, may be able to halt the progressive degradation of the rural environment.

Modern agricultural methods have also led to a sharp decline in the farming population. In 1946 there were 739,000 full-time agricultural workers. Over 600,000 of these have disappeared since then. One Cambridgeshire farmer, for example, today employs only six people where his father employed eighty-five people, yet manages to produce twice as much. In the mid 1980s over-production became a problem, and farmers are now encouraged to produce less food per acre. However, it is unlikely that farmers will return to previous methods, either by restoring hedgerows or by reducing the use of chemical fertilisers.

## *Rich and poor*

What happened to over half a million farm labourers? Many sought other unskilled or semi-skilled work, some in nearby towns. Because of their very low income many found it almost impossible to move to town. Others have found it impossible to find work. The countryside remains an area of high unemployment, and one quarter of all rural households live in comparative poverty. The desire of the rural poor for better economic prospects, even at the cost of new housing estates in the village, contrasts sharply with the views of newly arrived middle-class people who do not want picturesque villages spoilt.

However, rural poverty is often forgotten because it is overshadowed by the far larger problem of



*A homeless person sleeping rough in a London park.*



urban poverty. Although there is a higher proportion of both rural and urban poor on the periphery, particularly in the depressed areas of the north, the most casual tourist in London can easily find signs of desperate poverty among the homeless who sleep rough in the centre of the city. Most of Britain's poor live in the run-down areas which exist in almost every large town or city. The most notorious of these are in London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol, but only because it was in these cities that the anger of poverty exploded in riots during the 1980s.

During the 1980s the gap between the richest and poorest in Britain grew significantly after over thirty years of relative stability. This was a direct result of economic policy and of changes to the tax system which intentionally rewarded the richest most, on the assumption that the highest income earners were the most productive members of society. In 1989 it was estimated that the richest 200 people in Britain owned assets equivalent to 8 per cent of the gross national product, including 7 per cent of the land.

In contrast, during the period from 1979 to 1987 the number of people living on less than half the national average income doubled, from roughly one tenth to one fifth of the whole population. In fact poverty seems to have increased during the 1980s more rapidly than elsewhere in the European Community. However, while the number of poor people undoubtedly increased during the 1980s, it is also true that the remaining 80 per cent of the population were probably somewhat better off than they had been in 1979. The real difficulty was that the gap between rich and poor grew. The richer a family was, the more they tended to benefit during the 1980s, and the poorer they were, the less they benefited. This trend seemed set to continue into the 1990s.

Britain's diversity is, therefore, a good deal more complex than merely the variety of its landscape, or quaint cultures like Scottish bagpipes, Welsh harps and northern brass bands. During the closing years of the twentieth century the physical landscape is changing rapidly as a result of economic and social change. Although these have been discussed in contrasting terms, north and south, town and country, rich and poor and so forth, it will be clear that these themes interact. It is not possible to look at the comparative prosperity of the south without considering its implications for the countryside, or for the decaying cores of its cities. Nor is it possible to consider, for example, the unfortunate impact of modern

farming without seeing it in the context of a highly integrated modern society. In many respects the British people find themselves caught between their idealised view of Britain and its institutions and the less comfortable realities at the approach of the twenty-first century.

