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Policy Persistence and Cultural Resistance: The (Re-) Development of Horticulture In the Vale of Evesham

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Abstract

Rural geographers have frequently discussed the development of rural areas in terms of paradigms. Focusing on the Vale of Evesham in the south Midlands of England, UK, this paper instead uses the three cross-cutting themes of historicity, conflict and neo-industrialisation to illuminate the development trajectory of this locality based upon its strong horticultural tradition. The emergence, growth and decline of a culturally, socially and economically unique horticultural sector in the Vale is described against a backdrop of policy persistence favouring other farming enterprises. The way in which historicities of small-scale market gardening are being created, appropriated and reified for local and tourist consumption, is discussed through analysis of four recent horticultural-related inventions. These serve to deny the ‘real’ change occurring in the Vale’s horticultural sector driven by neo-industrialisation, although a lack of conflict is found to be associated with such change. The paper concludes by outlining the prospects for future tensions over the (re)development of horticulture in the Vale.

Keywords: Horticulture; asparagus; historicity; conflict; neo-industrialisation

1.0 Rural Development: Paradigms and Themes

Rural areas always seem to be in need of ‘development’. In Europe, this has been largely precipitated by the limits of modernisation becoming manifest as weak and/or declining regional agricultural economies. Different ideas have emerged on how to transgress such boundaries and introduce into play new strategies and initiatives (Moseley, 2003; Clark et al., 2007; Woods, 2011). Rural development paradigms thus describe the way in which the state and society attempt to chart prosperous ways forward, not just in economic terms, for the countryside. Following the Second World War, the common approach was an *exogenous* one, where the state intervened to provide top-down investment in rural economic activities and infrastructure, based on a belief in technological fixes and multipliers. However, over the last 20 years in the European Union (EU), there has been a well-documented shift in the focus of rural development policy to *endogenous* approaches. Often described as ‘bottom-up’, these rely upon community-led initiatives using internal areal resources (Long & van der Ploeg, 1994; Ray, 1998). A major stimulus to this approach occurred in 1995 when the then EU Agriculture Minister, Franz Fischler, began to argue for a ‘common rural policy’ to replace the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); later published as the 1996 Cork Declaration. A significant feature was an attempt to move away from supporting sectors of economic activity (mainly agriculture) towards integrated development over territories (Goodwin, 1998; Shortall & Shucksmith, 1998).

One challenge to describing rural development in such a dualistic way came from Murdoch (2000, p. 408) who asked the simple question ‘why do we have to choose?’ He argued that, in practice, combinations of exogenous and endogenous approaches would be the ‘norm’, making for partnership approaches that involve state-local interactions based on networks. Such sentiments of collective action are captured in the re-presentation of rural development as ‘neo-endogenous’ (Ray, 2001, 2006; Shucksmith, 2010). It recognises more explicitly the necessity of external links in the process as ‘extralocal actors’ become recruited into localities to facilitate their regeneration strategies (Ray, 2000). One context in which this ‘third way’ has become highly visible is where the state assists in establishing networks of local quality food producers linked by virtue of their artisanal and ‘natural’ methods (Murdoch & Miele, 1999). Also emerging as a fourth idea has been that of agricultural multifunctionality to promote sustainable rural development (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008). Farms serve many economic, environmental, social and cultural roles which can be harnessed and promoted, especially by the state, at a variety of spatial scales, to justify ongoing investment in the future of rural areas. The sensitive use of ‘natural’ resources is moved centre-stage in the production of food and other valued activities associated with the outputs from, and consumption of, agriculture. Unfortunately, though, this is not the only meaning of ‘multifunctional agriculture’ so that the term has now become clouded in its own multiplicity (for an introduction to the problems, see Woods, 2011; also Marsden & Sonnino, 2008).

Of course, each rural development paradigm has its advantages and disadvantages in seeking an understanding of how and why, as Murdoch (2000, p. 407) puts it, ‘rural areas continue to follow their own stubborn logics of change and stasis’. Predictably, analysis of work by rural geographers reveals that no one paradigm has all the answers. Not only this, paradigms imply cohesion, strategy and purpose, yet rural development initiatives themselves often seem highly selective (both spatially and thematically), contingent and ephemeral. In this paper, I want to suggest that fruitful lines of inquiry can emerge from engagement with three themes that cut across paradigmatic boundaries; elements of them can be found in many rural development initiatives and tools.

First, the concept of *historicity* is relevant because future rural development is frequently founded in specific interpretations of past historical events, conceivably made by individuals and then moderated by groups (such as tourism officers of local government organisations). The moments in which such initiatives are made are themselves historical, thus chiming with the selectivity, contingency and temporality already noted (see also Massey, 1999, on sequence and progression in history). Further essences of Heidegger’s (1962) historicity are also approximated through authenticities where opportunities from the past are realised to shape the future. Indeed, work by Urry (1990) and Short (1991) has emphasised the value of understanding historical authenticities which have become the mainstay of local place promotion based upon the commodification of rural space for consumption by visitors (for a more recent example, see Storey, 2010). In sum, even though Murdoch (2000) noted it over a decade ago when advancing networks as a concept to understand diversity in rural development, there is still a need to historicize analysis due to the way interpretations of its reality can be used to explain the unevenness of the terrain upon which current developments are mapped.

Second, rural development initiatives have a propensity to precipitate *conflict*, regardless of their origin within any one paradigm. Tensions can originate from

the dissatisfaction with new innovation in farming practice (Owen et al., 2000; Rogge et al., 2011; Evans, 2013), government sponsored projects such as reservoir building or wind farm development (Woods, 2003; Cowell, 2010) and changing demographic structure leading to objections to established rural cultural norms (see Bingham, 2012, for an example relating to the UK ban on foxhunting). This can be further exacerbated by perceived weakness in the regulatory mechanisms to mitigate against the impact of new developments (Owen et al., 2000; Abdalla et al., 2002; Evans, 2013; Kerselaers et al., 2013). Moreover, conflict illustrates that there is no one rural community to initiate development, but many communities fractured along lines of class, aspiration and social regulation, as is indeed evident in arguments over foxhunting (Woods, 1998). With the countryside becoming an increasingly complex productive and consumptive space, a growth in the number and intensity of rural disputes seems inevitable (Rogge et al., 2011; Evans, 2013).

Third, there is an undercurrent of *neo-industrialisation* which is either ignored or denied. Rural development initiatives based upon historicity have become so formulaic and all-pervasive as to appear to be the 'only thing' happening in rural areas. They have become an opaque layer under which little attention is paid to the on-going industrialisation of the countryside, especially that still based on core productive values (Evans et al., 2002; Burton & Paragahawewa, 2011). An appearance of industrialisation by stealth can be attributed to the less obvious emphasis by state on economic modernisation in rural areas. The new hybridity of relationships that has developed between global and local actors in rural places can be regarded as driving pressures for industrialisation in recent years, yet, as Woods (2007) contests, they have been neglected. There has been a sudden explosion in the worries about global food security, in the UK at least, in the face of resource scares linked to climate change, land loss, water availability, population growth and decline of social capital (Ambler-Edwards et al., 2009; Evans, 2009; Foresight, 2011; Maye & Kirwan, 2013). This new horizon looks set to move industrialisation once more centre-stage, albeit this time from a position informed by environmental sustainability as part of a postulated neo-productivist agricultural regime (Evans et al., 2002; Ilbery & Maye, 2010; Burton & Wilson, 2012; Evans, 2013).

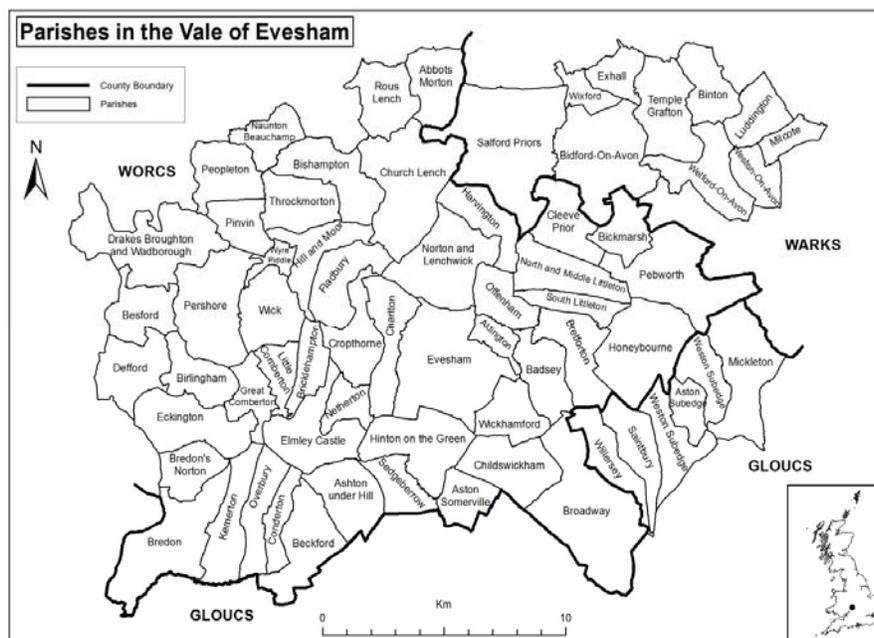
Using these three themes, this paper intends to illuminate rural development in one particular locality; namely, the Vale of Evesham in the south Midlands of England. If ever an example was needed, this locality illustrates why engaging in only one rural development paradigm would fail to capture the full extent of change. Two illustrations can be provided. First, exogenous development is often linked to stimulating sectors of the economy whereas endogenous development emphasises territoriality (Ray, 1998). The Vale of Evesham has long been considered a distinctive territory, but its identity is defined on the basis on one economic sector: horticulture (Buchanan, 1948). Second, it is evident that many initiatives to stimulate the Vale economy are situated at the 'district council' level (Wychavon, in this case). This administrative unit lies towards the local end of the state's regulatory hierarchy and could be called either way as driving exogenous or endogenous development forces. Effectively, it can be considered to be a neo-endogenous actor, albeit just one, in a network between those situated locally and those with global reach. Hence, rather than prioritising one set of forces, factors or actors to make sense of what happens in this rural space, and what will happen in the future, the approach of this paper is to use the themes identified to 'dive in' to the cultural, economic, political, social and environmental relations that make up the essence of life in the Vale. The analysis presented here draws upon extended longitudinal fieldwork in the Vale since the 1990s. The most recent round of face-to-face interviews having taken place

during spring 2011. These are complemented by critical readings of promotional material about the Vale that has emerged within the last five years.

2.0 Horticulture as Tradition in the Vale of Evesham

The Vale of Evesham is the most distinctive agricultural area in the English Midlands. It is renowned for its production of a full range of horticultural produce, including vegetables, top fruit (orchard crops), small fruit, nursery stock and cut flowers. The Vale is a low-lying, south-west oriented valley of the River Avon, although interpretations of its extent vary because the percentage of land devoted to horticulture has in itself been used as a defining variable (Robinson, 1981; Ilbery 1985). Figure 1 offers a fixed definition following Lodge (1974). The Vale has some areas of high quality soil (Worcestershire Farmers Union, 1963), but these are more limited in extent than might be expected. This immediately reaffirms that physical factors alone cannot account for the patterns of agricultural land use found in this area. Instead, emphasis is needed on the complex interaction of economic, social and cultural factors that define the essence of the Vale.

Figure 1: Parishes in the Vale of Evesham (after Lodge, 1974).



The growth of the Vale of Evesham as a major centre of horticultural production did not take off until the 1850s. New markets (other than Evesham and the county of Worcestershire itself) became available with the construction of rail links to London, Birmingham, Oxford, Bristol and Cardiff. The 'Great Agricultural Depression' of the 1870s provided another external stimulus because many cereal farmers, the dominant type of farmer in the area, were forced to abandon their businesses. What replaced it rapidly became a highly specialised and structurally unique area of horticulture in the UK driven by five internal factors.

- i) A culture of 'growing' horticultural produce. This quickly became established, valued and then inherited by offspring and relatives, leading to particular families acquiring a long tradition of growing horticultural produce on a small scale. They became known as 'growers' rather than

'farmers' and their activity labelled with the moniker of 'market gardening'. Labour was the major resource of the growers, with most work done by hand or with machinery specially adapted for use on small plots of land. For example, from the 1930s, hand-held 'walking tractors', such as the British Anzani Iron Horse, could be bought or rented by growers to cultivate land and replace digging by hand. The latter was usually done with an implement especially designed to cope with the clay soils of the area – the two-tined fork (British Anzani, 2007; Sparrow, 2011).

- ii) *A high number of smallholdings.* As large cereal farms became increasingly unviable and even abandoned under the conditions of depression at the end of the 19th century, they were split up. The 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act gave county councils the power to undertake compulsory purchase of land for the creation of smallholdings. Houses were also constructed, accompanied by a two acre (0.8ha) plot of land for cultivation. A surge in demand for land in the immediate aftermath of the First World War was undoubtedly fuelled by high war-time profits for horticultural produce (including medicinal herbs; see Sparrow, 2011). However, besides economics, there was 'social demand'. The effects of what we now know as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' should not be discounted, as returning soldiers sought solace in the land; being at once alone on their plot to come to terms with the events they had witnessed, yet within shouting distance of many fellow souls in the community of growers. By 1940, there were approximately 2000 holdings under six hectares in the Vale. For example, in the parish of Bretforton, there were 88 tenants on 771ha of land. As Grower W. reminisces:

When the Ashwin's owned the manor, the land was divided into two acre plots for rent to the locals. There was something for everyone then.

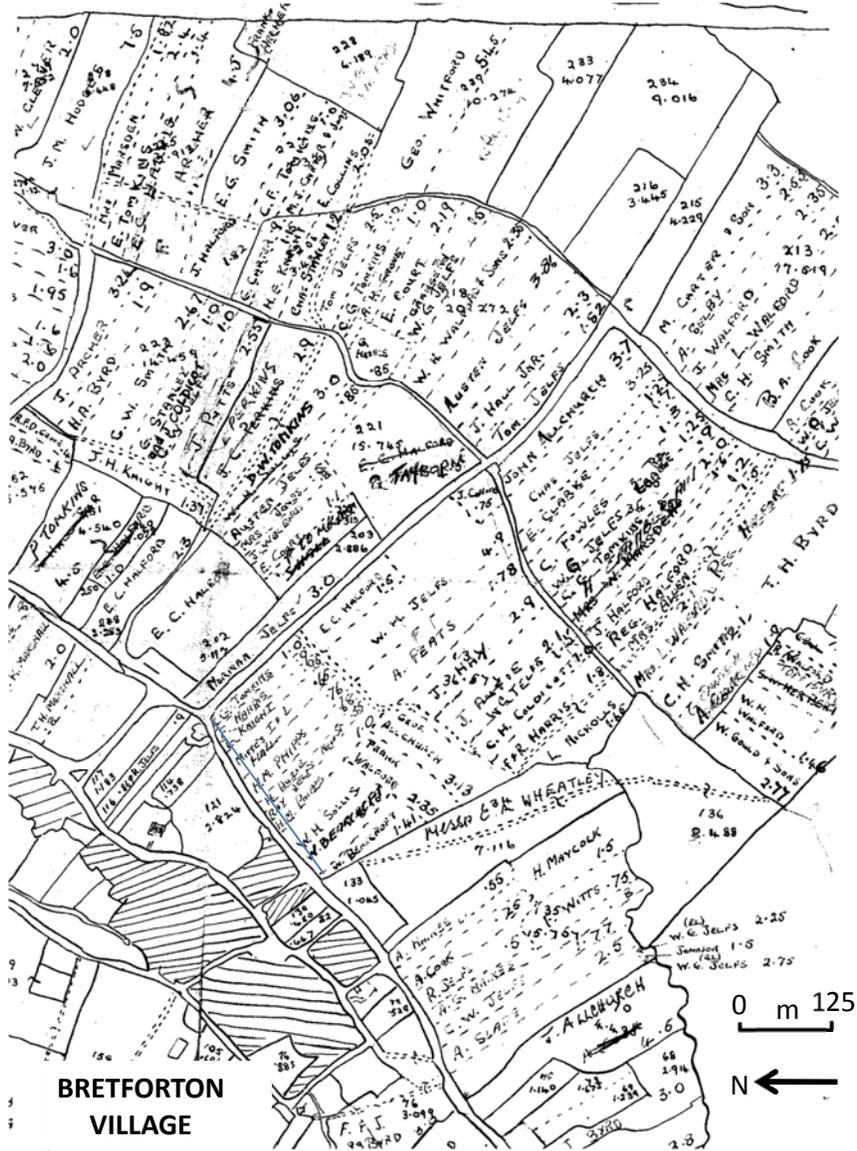
Figure 2 shows an extract from the 1940s cartographic recording of Ron Sidwell, the War Agricultural Executive Committee's (WarAg) District Horticultural Officer. It illustrates the small size of the plots (to fractions of acres) and the intense competition that existed for them.

- iii) *A highly fragmented pattern of landownership.* This was due to piecemeal acquisition of plots, fields and farms under conditions of intense land competition by successful growers over time, also evident on Figure 2 by the replication of names across the map. It stemmed from the creation of smallholdings and the fact that much of the land was rented (Ilbery, 1984). Work by Lodge (1972), using WarAg survey records centred on the parish of Badsey, shows that nine growers had an average of four plots of non-contiguous land distributed throughout the area investigated (Figure 3; see also Buchanan, 1948). These were often close to one another (within walking distance), but the chances of plots adjacent to ones already rented becoming vacant were relatively remote, especially in areas of better soil or in close proximity to settlements.

iv) *The emergence of small grower marketing cooperatives.* Two highly influential producer cooperatives, the Littleton and Badsey Growers (LBG) and Pershore Growers Ltd., were formed in 1908 and 1909 respectively. This was a response to the emergence of so many small holdings. Cooperation served two purposes (Binyon, 1958). First, it allowed growers to combine their produce into larger consignments and benefit from lower railway carriage costs. Value could also be added to produce through professional packing (Robinson, 1981). Second, the

purchase of inputs in small quantities, such as tools, seeds and manure, was expensive, so a cooperative could buy in bulk and pass discounts on to its members.

Figure 2: Market gardening tenants, together with plot size indicated in acres, in the parish of Bretforton, circa 1942.



v) A unique system of land tenure ('Evesham Custom'). A consensus has emerged amongst commentators (Buchanan, 1948; Lodge, 1972; Sparrow, 2011) that a land tenure system known as Evesham Custom was the most important factor in sustaining horticultural growth throughout the Vale. It shows the power of contingent events to proliferate and establish themselves. From the late 19th century, landlords had been furnished with numerous tenancies on newly created smallholdings, each renewed annually at Michaelmas (Sparrow, 2006). Faced with a large number of short tenancy agreements, micro-management would have been needed to renew them all and so, in

practice, landlords began to take a back seat as tenants sorted out arrangements amongst themselves in the form of ‘gentleman’s agreements’. Crucially, improvements made by a tenant remained his/her property. This led to continuity of tenancy and encouraged investment by tenants to improve their landlord’s property, such as erecting greenhouses or planting ‘long-term’ crops such as asparagus, all without reference to their landlord (though, of course, to the landowner’s benefit). If a tenant ceased growing on a plot, they could keep the value of their improvements as an ‘ingoing’ payment by the new tenant whom they also had the right to choose (Lodge, 1972). This custom did not begin to be codified in law until 1895 and was only resolved properly in 1913 (Sparrow, 2006).

The main periods of expansion are associated with the war-times of the First and Second World Wars and so last reached a peak in the late 1940s. These times generated a demand, and thus high prices, for home-grown produce in the face of import restrictions. Almost immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War, the Vale entered into a long decline. For example, records of the LBG co-operative uncovered by Sparrow (2011, p. 80) state:

1948: Very low prices during the last months of the year.

1949: Ill-regulated imports leading to problems.

1952: A disastrous plum season.

1953: Very low prices during last half of the year.

The relative specialization of the Vale in horticulture has since been continually eroded (Ilbery, 1985). In this respect, industrialised horticultural production based on the logic of capitalism has failed considerably to replace a growing system founded in a strong mix of social and cultural factors. Two major reasons for this can be identified. First, there has been a policy persistence favouring virtually all other sectors of agriculture, via the EU’s CAP, in preference to horticulture, which was unsupported. Added to this, CAP’s mechanisms of assistance for the farm sector were congruent with large-scale production systems that service the high volume food demands of processors and retailers (supermarkets). Grower B. remarks:

They have buying power and need convenience. The supermarket representatives are unwilling to take small amounts of produce from each grower, even those that are all within the same parish.

This reconfiguration of power within the food chain lay at odds with the established landowning structure in the Vale. Without the backing of numerous small producer members, the cooperative system collapsed in the 1980s. Even its legacy has succumbed to capitalist logic, as illustrated by the restructuring of LBG into a limited company supplying horticultural inputs and its takeover of other supply businesses in southern parts of the UK. Second, the ‘death’ of traditional market gardening has been made a slow one because of the cultural resistance of growers clinging to traditional structures and methods. Their extinction has been gradual, dying out as those who could potentially succeed them are heavily discouraged in the face limited markets, meagre returns and a physically demanding way of life. As Grower G. puts it:

It was all done by hand and it’s a shame that it’s going [disappearing], but no-one wants to work for nothing.

And one of the few remaining growers says:

I continue growing ‘cos it is all I know. (Grower T.)

However, for the wider public, the historic good economic times during both World Wars and the visual rich productiveness of the land have led them to construct the Vale with a reputation for prosperity that has far outlived the reality of a long, drawn out horticultural decline.

3.0 Re-imagining Horticulture: From the Vale of Evesham to Worcestershire's Heritage Garden

The question therefore arises as to what rural development initiatives have addressed the decline in horticulture and the virtual disappearance of traditional small-scale market gardening. Exogenous national initiatives to help ameliorate the effects of the loss of horticulture from the locality are conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, it can be argued that the Vale lies in a hole at the centre of a development policy 'doughnut', with all surrounding areas having received some direct central government assistance. So, in juxtaposition to the Vale, there is support for the following localities:

1. North—Birmingham and the Black Country: the UK's second city together with an area to its west had an economic base heavily reliant upon manufacturing industry, but has been hit hard by global restructuring since the 1980s. Much of the effort of the now defunct regional development agency Advantage West Midlands (AWM) from its founding in 1999 was concentrated on assisting businesses in the city, to the virtual exclusion of surrounding rural areas.
2. East—Stratford-upon-Avon: is an international tourism honeypot famed as the birthplace of William Shakespeare and has received substantial government grants and funds of various types (tourism, heritage, arts) to promote itself.
3. South East—the Cotswold Hills: has been designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) since 1966. The area grew as a prosperous agricultural region in the Middle Ages as a result of the wool trade. Its landscape and period stone-built houses have attracted wealthy commuters and second home owners, especially from London since the Second World War. The 2000 Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act afforded the same protection to AONBs as Britain's National Parks, with a corresponding increase in budget allocation to fund more proactive landscape conservation management. The Cotswold Hills was also defined as an Environmentally Sensitive Area in 1994, mainly to encourage farmers to convert arable land back to flora-rich limestone grassland.
4. South west—the Forest of Dean: this is a former royal hunting forest with high recreational value. It has received aid to attract hi-tech companies as a replacement for the shutdown of its mining industry after the Second World War.
5. West—the Malvern Hills: the area is a former Victorian spa resort and another AONB, recognised as such from 1959 due to the high landscape value of its distinctive line of hills. Protection of 1200 hectares of common land in the Malverns is further ensured by a body known as the Malvern Hills Conservators, formed by an Act of Parliament in 1884 and largely funded by local ratepayers.
6. North west—Central Technology Belt: also known as the A38 corridor, was a spatial planning tool devised by the former regional development agency (AWM) to replicate the 'Silicon Valley' effect of California in

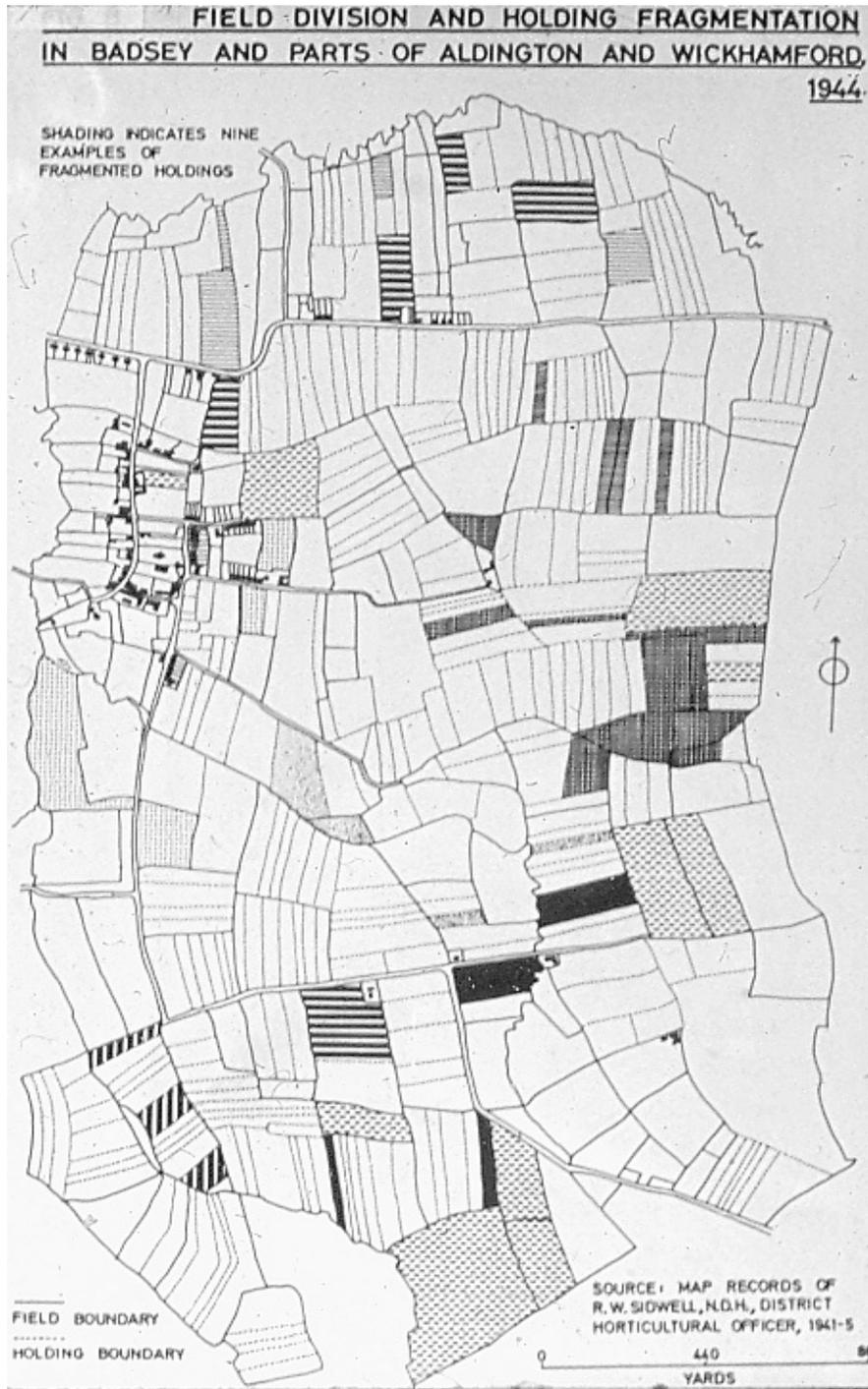
the English Midlands (Birmingham Post, 2011). The idea emerged in the aftermath of the 2005 closure of the MG Rover Longbridge car manufacturing plant in Birmingham and the earlier restructuring of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA), which precipitated the establishment of a Malvern Hills Science Park. Hi-tech businesses were provided with inducements to locate between these two poles.

In contrast to these adjacent areas, the Vale represents a rural space that has escaped attention and received no special measures to help mitigate against the effects of horticultural decline. This is because it has no obvious structural economic problems (as larger-scale agriculture—not horticulture—has regained ground), no spectacular landscapes and is perceived by virtue of its constructed legacy as a prosperous and successful area of countryside. As noted earlier, development initiatives have begun to emerge over the last ten years in which the district council is playing a prominent role. A common feature is that they re-imagine particular horticultural historicities of the Vale, but within a rather standard formula of place promotion for visitor consumption (see Storey, 2010). Attempts are being made to give them a high profile in the local community, a process no doubt facilitated by the low propensity of traditional small-scale horticulture (which has largely gone in any case) to cause conflict. The pockets of large-scale or hi-tech neo-industrialising horticultural practice (see Evans, 2013) are airbrushed from the scene because they fail to reflect such re-imaginings. Four main horticultural ‘inventions’ are now briefly discussed.

3.1 *Worcestershire’s Heritage Garden*

In a somewhat ambitious move (culturally at least), a recent attempt has been launched to rebrand the Vale of Evesham as *Worcestershire’s Heritage Garden*. The use of the word ‘garden’ has deliberate connotations with market gardening. This device draws together events for local people and visitors in a more co-ordinated way than hitherto (an Events Diary publication has been produced annually since 2010), provides historical synopses of Vale towns and offers local businesses advertising space. One specific feature is the promotion of a ‘Vale Trail’, which has its own publication, described as having been “... *designed to give you a horticultural and gastronomic experience—just a taste of what the area has to offer*”. In reality there is no trail, just a map showing the businesses that have decided to advertise in the glossy booklet promoting the idea. Producers selling niche market ‘quality food’ products (Watts et al., 2005) do have some presence in the Vale Trail. Unfortunately, the two farm shops (out of only three advertising) that have some supply from their own land represented on the Vale Trail map hardly do justice to the area’s tradition of informal roadside and farm gate selling of fruit and vegetable produce. Moreover, quality food networks tend to be regionally based (Heart of England Fine Foods, for example) and have arguably served to undermine any supremacy the Vale might once have had as an exclusive source of ‘fine food’. If the Vale Trail does evolve into an attempt to construct a more local food network, research will then be required to investigate how this network challenges the spatially more dispersed regional one. Other businesses included on the Vale Trail map at the centre of the *Worcestershire’s Heritage Garden* publication do not have any seemingly obvious connection with the local horticultural tradition and include a motor coach company (Figure 3), two leisure riverboat companies and a ‘brasserie’ offering Italian cuisine! These serve to shatter the coherence of the constructed theme, reduce the relevance to local residents and lower the offer to the common denominator of attracting any tourist in an opportunistic and tenuous way.

Figure 3: Farm fragmentation in the Badsey area of the Vale of Evesham; where fields are shaded with the same pattern, they are cultivated by one grower.



3.2 *The British Asparagus Festival*

Compared with the device above, the formulation of a British Asparagus Festival has more coherence. Of all horticultural crops that have been grown in the Vale, it is necessary to elaborate why this rather unusual one has been singled out for

attention. One illustration is that Bretforton parish in the east of the Vale produced one-tenth of all asparagus in England and Wales in 1935, although the crop is now a rarity in this locality. Badsey and Evesham parishes were not far behind, sending produce via rail to Covent Garden in London. Worcestershire was the premier county in England and Wales for the production of asparagus, partly because climatic conditions meant that it appeared earlier in the season here than anywhere else in the country, yielding premium returns. The Vale is the only locality in Europe where asparagus is grown on clay soils, a handicap overcome by the physical effort that the growers could dedicate to the crop (Robinson, 1983). Therefore, it developed into something of a cultural phenomenon, with the whole family (women and children in particular) participating in packing the 'gras'. As indicated by this last word, asparagus even had a distinct language associated with it (for example, sprue, bower, fern, stubs all described various parts and uses of the plant).

Even so, Worcestershire had lost its number one asparagus status by 1960 to Suffolk in eastern England where a very small number of farmers decided to specialise in growing the crop on a large scale. MAFF (1967) report that of the 861 acres (348ha) of asparagus grown in Suffolk and its adjacent county of Norfolk in 1962, 613 acres (248ha) were grown by just eight farmers. Worcestershire grew 349 acres (141ha) at this time, spread amongst a dense network of small producers. Celebrations of the crop in the Vale were common, dating from the early part of the twentieth century. A group of growers formed the Badsey Asparagus Growers, widening their net by 1925 to become the Vale of Evesham Asparagus Growers Association and moving their headquarters to Evesham before returning to Badsey in 1960 (Sparrow, 2002). Annual presentations to champion growers by civic dignitaries became an established part of local life. However, by 1970, the crop had all but disappeared. The 45th and last show was held on 26th May 1976. All that remained to mark the former glory of asparagus within communities to the east of Evesham was the renaming of a pub in Badsey to 'The Round of Gras' (a 'round' refers to 120 stalks or 'buds' of asparagus, yet curiously is also known as a 'hundred') from the more ubiquitous 'Royal Oak' in 1967 and an annual asparagus auction of the first round of the season in a Bretforton pub to raise funds for the local silver (brass) band.

Despite the increasing nation-wide emphasis on food quality, re-localisation and traceability, a re-emergence of the traditional and now more 'up-market' crop of asparagus has failed to materialise locally. Rather, its cultivation is spread across growers in Worcestershire and neighbouring counties. The fact that asparagus has made no comeback in the Vale has not prevented the construction of a historicity through the rather grandly named British Asparagus Festival. A series of bizarre events (the festival won fourth prize in the most eccentric event in England competition in 2010) has been invented. Consequently, there is an asparagus run, asparagus games, 'aspara-Art', 'Asparabus' tours, an AsparaFest 'boutique' festival and even 'Gus' the asparagus mascot to help seize publicity for it. Added into this mix is the fact that although headlined as 'British', the Festival commences on St George's Day (England's National Saints Day) and clearly is an attempt to piggyback more recent and popular assertions of English national identity. It comes as little surprise to state that all these asparagus activities bear little relation to any aspects of the past production of the crop itself.

3.3 Blossom Trail

The Blossom Trail has the longest vintage amongst the horticultural based devices constructed for the Vale, having been promoted for 28 years. It is a 45 mile driving route (coach tours are available) from which can be seen various concentrations of the Vale's fruit trees in bloom. A Blossom Bikeaway has been added, as have three walks, and it has its own dedicated website. Ironically, the trail has become a little more difficult to follow by blossom alone over the years as concentrations of fruit trees, particularly plums, have become grubbed up, leaving gaps along the route within the prescribed itinerary. Some mitigation is provided by the industrialisation of many remaining orchards as growers switch from standard height (tall) trees to more efficient dwarf trees of limited commercial varieties that can be mechanically harvested. This represents a fundamental dismantling of the traditional practice of top-fruit growing and its associated cultural rituals, yet this process of change actually makes little difference to the superficial tourist spectacle of 'blossoming'. Parallels can be drawn with the livestock sector where farm animals remain numerous, but individual local breeds have declined to the point of extinction (see Evans & Yarwood, 2000).

3.4 The Pershore Plum Festival

This is a relatively recent re-creation, since 1996, which attempts to emulate the claim of the 1920s that Pershore held 'the largest plum show on earth'. It was a one-day event until 2008 when it became transformed into a month long festival – a rather blatant marketing device to maximise the tourist gain. It includes plum tastings, cookery events, heritage exhibitions, a 'plum fun zone', the 'Land O' Plums' horse race and even the crowning of a Plum Queen! Another irony is that the decline of orchards in the Vale has been selective of certain fruit, especially plums, changing the composition of remaining orchards considerably. Plums, which have a particular tradition in the Vale, are still the most extensive orchard crop but consumer demand for them has collapsed. There were just 433ha of plums in the Vale by 1988 (the last year for which figures are available), approximately one third of the 1970 area and a fraction (17%) of the 2500ha reported in the 1940s by Buchanan (1948). Further, one quarter of the remaining area of plums in the late 1980s was contained in just one parish (Norton and Lenchwick). The 1980s was a period of intense grubbing activity as many ageing orchards were removed in the continuing absence of a consumer market.

In sum, all four recent promotions just discussed represent degrees of partnerships between the local state, businesses and communities. The latter are interesting in that they tend to feature a mix of incomers to parish communities, a few retired growers and people who associate themselves with 'growing families' by virtue of being descended from the large number of market gardeners that formerly populated the Vale, even though they have no experience of growing themselves. The vibrant existence of the Badsey Society is a case in point, drawing its membership from all these groups. Overall, the events that have appeared are attempts to showcase the Vale's horticultural past. They represent the usual selective and sanitised creations and re-creations of highly localised, community events to cater for a mass tourism market (Urry, 1990). They remain local affairs, but promotion is ramping them up into attracting wider audiences. At the moment, they are relatively uncontroversial and so free from conflict.

4.0 From Imagined to Real Horticulture

As Storey (2010) notes, heritage-based place promotion, of which the above are celebratory examples, is highly selective and does not approach ‘authenticity’, even if the latter could be defined. Beneath the heritage gloss, there are aspects of the Vale’s horticulture that do remain but which are not promoted; the horticultural realities. This is mainly because they are associated with an ongoing industrialisation and restructuring of the horticultural sector from its culturally distinct roots into commercialised and differentiated commodity chains. Indeed, it could be argued that it is to the advantage of modern practitioners associated with the horticultural sector to allow such activities to deflect attention. Further, taking this perspective, there is a logic to encouraging the few remaining small, traditional growers to offer local food. At present, the long-established informal arrangement of farm gate sales dominates the marketing of outputs from small-scale growing, as it always has done. It certainly does not constitute any sort of network that expresses ‘agricultural multifunctionality’.

In effect, then, the most significant horticultural development is occurring by stealth, under the conditions noted earlier of a persistent absence of specific ‘rural development’ initiatives and wider government support commonly associated with land-based production. It is in this context that the three cross-cutting themes identified can be employed to deliver a better understanding of the current and future lived experience of people in the Vale. These can be matched with the three main restructuring components of contemporary horticulture in the Vale now subsequently outlined. Needless to say, the latter fail to feature in any promotional literature about the Vale, or the ‘Heritage Garden’. Yet, all possess historicities which will make them highly influential over the way in which the Vale will develop in the future; more so than the ones enrolled in place promotion.

4.1 Packing and Chilled Distribution

As growing itself has declined, other parts of the food chain have become more significant to the Vale. The main one is the transport of produce, driven by supermarkets who command about 80% of the UK fresh produce market (Wychavon District Council, 2004). Chilled distribution stems from some growers setting up their own road haulage companies. This was necessary following drastic cuts to the rail network in the 1960s, although some had been initiated from the 1920s as a reaction against high carriage prices, especially for small quantities of produce (G. Robinson, personal communication, July 14, 2011). Likewise, over time some growers have moved into packing produce, at first for themselves and then for others. This was a function also formerly carried out by grower co-operatives such as LBG or Pershore Growers Ltd (see Binyon, 1958), but which ceased with the decline in the number of growers.

The need for both packing and chilled distribution operations have grown further with imports, driven by supermarket demand for high quality, standardised produce with an extended shelf-life in a form ready to sell to the consumer (Evans, 2013). Although roads are locally poor or ‘inappropriate’ (WDC, 2004), the national centrality of the Vale’s location, together with the packing facilities, has meant it has become a hub for hauliers. That chilled distribution and packing are a vital part of the Vale’s economy is widely recognised. In Wychavon District Council’s (WDC, 2004, p. 52) survey, they found only one parish council in objection with the jingoistic tirade: “the industry provides no value to the area at all and that villages only receive nuisance through employees, immigrants, asylum seekers and cheap labour.” Immediately the report’s authors state “we are happy to report that this does not seem to be a widely shared view”.

WDC pointed to the recognition that these sectors have wide benefits beyond those to the remaining growers in the area. There are some minor grumbles about vehicular movements, but even the environmental campaign group The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has no strong stance on the matter, similarly acknowledging the need to balance economics and environment. In anticipation of potential problems, WDC has created an out-of-town business park (Vale Park) and has quietly allocated land there to which packing and distribution companies can move. However, there is recognition that few companies would be able to afford to move there, so a more pragmatic policy of preferring hauliers and packers to base themselves on sites adjacent to 'the principal road network' has been adopted (WDC, 2004). Overall, it seems that local people have a tolerance of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) moving through their communities, with a general lack of conflict. Similarly, the state, in the form of the Worcestershire County Council-led local strategic partnership, is drawing a blind eye to these activities as evidenced by the fact that their county-wide 'climate change action plan' makes no mention of them: such is their economic importance (see Worcestershire Partnership, 2009).

4.2 Glasshouse-Based Nursery Production

Decline has long been the hallmark of horticulture in the Vale, and the area under glass is no exception. However, this has been a spatially uneven process as glasshouse cultivation becomes restructured away from being dispersed amongst small traditional growers with one or two wooden greenhouses to becoming highly concentrated in the hands of specialised nursery companies with hi-tech modern structures. The parish of Offenham to the east of Evesham town contained one quarter (25ha) of all glass in the entire county of Worcestershire in 1988, the last year for which data are available. Observation confirms that the area has continued to expand over the subsequent 20 years. Glasshouse cultivation is built on the tradition of growing where many market gardeners raised plants in a greenhouse on their smallholding and devoted some rows within plots to crops under cloches. Larger-scale production was initiated by Dutch immigrants to the Vale during the Second World War who had technological expertise in this type of cultivation. The latest development involves industrialized nursery stock production by companies for the wholesale market, usually under contract with large retail chains ('Do-It-Yourself' stores in particular). Although more like factories than farms, and with visible expansion in specific places, local people appear to voice no concerns about such structures.

4.3 Neo-industrialisation: Strawberries and Plasticulture

Small fruit was never as extensive in the Vale as orchards, with only strawberries of significance. With large spaces between standard orchard trees, growers made the most of their land by undercropping tree fruits with strawberries, a local practice known specifically as 'Evesham System'. It is now seldom seen because orchards have been grubbed up or modernised with dwarf, closely spaced trees. Small fruit has therefore declined, a trend offset until 1980 by the popularity amongst the public of pick-your-own (PYO) enterprises. As a consequence, growers held on to this enterprise after grubbing up orchards. Unfortunately, too many PYO ventures were initiated, the novelty of PYO as a recreational activity soon wore off, and consumers found it cheaper and more convenient to purchase strawberries in supermarkets. Decline thus resumed as growers rationalized their PYO activities in the 1980s under such negative pressures of fashion and competition.

Since 2000, a farmer in the neighbouring county of Herefordshire began fabrication of the 'Spanish polytunnel' for fruit growing (Evans, 2013). Unlike the small polytunnels that have been used by the nursery horticulture sector in the Vale for many years as a cheap alternative to glass (one-span arches, known as 'French' polytunnels), these cover whole fields as the plastic does not reach the ground between crop rows. At this time, 95% of British strawberries were grown outside. Most of this crop matured within a two-week period in the last half of June, known as the 'Wimbledon Fortnight' (Carter et al., 1993). Further, the quality of the crop was very much affected by prevailing weather conditions. If it was wet, as is usual at this time of year, then the fungal disease botrytis either rotted the crop in situ or dramatically reduced its shelf life, so that a Class 1 grading was achievable on a maximum of only 50% of the crop (British Summer Fruits, 2013). Polytunnels suddenly meant that British producers could grow fruit for six months of the year (Calleja et al., 2012), gave them greater control over inputs used (chemicals, water, labour, pollination and pest control), and raised the amount of Class 1 fruit that could be produced to 90%. This allowed British fruit farmers to access the market created by power and preferences of large food retailers. In the UK, the retail governance of supermarkets has emerged as a main driver of horticultural land utilisation and especially Spanish polytunnel strawberry production. They demand large quantities of high quality, standardised produce:

They'll [supermarkets] turn away a whole lorry-load if they find one mouldy [straw]berry. (Grower A.)

Added to this, UK supermarkets are engaged in a battle for retail supremacy. Regardless of whether or not they drive down their margins in the process (Laffin, 2009), they fail to offer the producer a generous price:

We specialise in strawberries because the demand is always there [from supermarkets]. [Using polytunnels] We get more yield and can be more efficient because the supermarkets don't give their prices away. (Grower J.)

Consequently, growers have to engage not only with production economies of scale but with specific marketing strategies to secure any sort of return from the severely restricted profit margin available:

We can't persuade the supermarkets to pay more. With prices being forced down, we counterpoint this by using a co-operative for our marketing. (Grower N.)

Further, supermarkets use health promotions, such as the World Health Organisation's 'five-a-day' campaign, to increase volume sales and growers have spotted this opportunity:

We moved to fruit 12 years ago and started to grow raspberries and strawberries. We saw the market for healthy eating. (Grower A.)

To maintain sales, and hence profit, continuity of supply is vital. All the main UK supermarkets operate a produce acquisition system known as 'programming', sourcing strawberries from producers in any geographical location (including Spain, Morocco, Israel and California) who can deliver into specified time slots. Supermarkets could therefore 'factor out' British producers, although they have currency to be made from using British suppliers to counter criticisms made of excess 'food miles'. Nevertheless, to compete, British producers have to guarantee to deliver, which can only be assured by using

polytunnels. Effectively, it means that UK strawberry production is industrialised and globalised. One grower had developed his response further to safeguard his share in the programmed strawberry supply chain.

We can't do it without polytunnels and even then can only supply from April to November, so we have a 'growing partner' in Spain from which we import strawberries. (Grower C.)

With traditional growers disappearing and arable farming re-establishing itself, some Vale producers began to respond armed with the new technological innovation of polytunnels. They were actively acquiring land and planting strawberries.

I used to run a labour agency business but I've left it to my brother now. I'm moving the strawberries from a hobby to building up a main business. (Grower V.)

It is interesting to note that the sudden appearance of polytunnels in the rural landscape has been highly controversial in other counties, be they distant (as in Sussex, south-east England) or neighbouring (Herefordshire). Again, there seems no objection to such operations in the Vale:

We have no interest from the community. (Grower V.)

Its distinctive horticultural legacy seems to play a part in dampening resistance and conflict.

5.0 Conclusions

An attempt has been made in this paper to use the themes of historicity, conflict and neo-industrialisation to interrogate the rural development trajectory of the Vale of Evesham region of the south Midlands of England. It is now possible to reflect upon the way in which these concepts interact. Horticulture is the essence of the Vale, being highly visible in its economic and cultural landscapes. Its historicity means that Vale communities are immersed in a tradition of horticulture that is now more abstract as small-scale production has itself virtually disappeared, but one being actively reified at a local level. People living there are embedded within horticulture and those moving in will rapidly become aware of its strong cultural presence. Though more research is necessary, it seems apparent that all are buying into a tolerance of horticulture and related activities, contributing to a minimisation of conflict. Even one of the most controversial developments associated with neo-industrialisation – Spanish polytunnels – seems to have passed largely unnoticed. This appears to be the case because it is based upon the strength of the Vale's historicity, manifest as both horticultural legacy and the vigour with which new appropriations are shaping future constructions of it.

However, neo-industrialisation is stealthily changing the nature of production. This raises the possibility that the tolerance of local people will one day be exceeded as real horticulture becomes more distant from re-imagined horticulture. For example, a 'transition movement' group has been established, called Transition Evesham Vale (TEV), taking its lead from the 'transition towns' movement, as championed in the UK by Hopkins (2008). It encourages people to adopt a low carbon approach to living. TEV is one of the few British transition groups to be 'rural' rather than town focused. It is relatively new and so far has been silent on chilled distribution and packing activities. Nevertheless, during an interview with a TEV group leader, his reaction to being informed that polytunnels had appeared in the Vale was:

The last thing we want is polytunnels.

Traditional small-scale growing, even though it is all but lost, may be lauded by such groups for its perceived sustainable credentials (locally-based, fresh and seasonal, high in cultural capital, to mention a few). This represents yet another reinvention, one which selectively removes the intensive application of chemical treatments that small growers routinely applied to their fruit and vegetable crops. So, although illustrative of potential dissidence, it is unlikely that objection to polytunnels by groups such as TEV will in itself challenge the development trajectory of the Vale: in this specific case because arguments about oil consumption in the manufacture of plastic can be countered by the reduction in food miles resulting from producing locally. More fundamentally, perhaps, it appears that horticulture itself continues to hold power in the Vale. In Foucauldian terms, horticulture could be regarded as a 'dispositif' (Foucault, 1980), its assemblage of forms being used as the apparatus of perpetuating the 'normality' of the Vale. Certainly, there is evidence presented within this paper of formal and informal mechanisms relating to institutions, laws, policy guidance, rural development initiatives and discourses, both in presence and absence, acting to 'control' the lives of the citizens of the Vale of Evesham.

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