

## **Nigel Pearce – Written Evidence (LUE0006)**

### **'The Road Not Taken'**

"All times are times of transition," wrote Flora Thompson in the late 1930s, recalling her childhood of the 1880s. I have been reading her well-known book, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, for the first time, having previously been mildly put off it by what I remember of a likeable but rather sentimentalised adaptation by the BBC.

The book itself, with its down-to-earth and vivid description of rural poverty, is anything but sentimental. Surely few people would choose to go back in time and live there. But it offers a quiet challenge to the way we live now. This passage, for example:

"Up and down went the white main road between wide grass margins, thick, berried hedgerows and overhanging trees . . . Today, past that same spot, a first-class, tar-sprayed road, thronged with motor traffic, runs between low, closely trimmed hedges . . . Three miles away trains roared over a viaduct, carrying those who would, had they lived a few years before or later, have used the turnpike. People were saying that far too much money was being spent on keeping such roads in repair, for their day was over . . ."

Several observations emerge from this. First, there was a time when, perhaps more by accident than design, the natural world was given space alongside human traffic, and hedgerows were not regularly massacred, ruinously so for nearby wildlife. Second, you had to pay to use a main road; not a bad idea for the age of electric vehicles. And third, the recently unthinkable was being thought – the roads' day was over – and needs to be reconsidered.

Such observations appear not to have troubled the preparation of the relentlessly anthropocentric "Phasing Report" for provision of key infrastructure for a "garden village" due to be built on a greenfield site in southern England. Missing from the key infrastructure "types" are the achievement of nature recovery and biodiversity net gain, a renewable energy network, and zero carbon construction.

Furthermore, the "spine road" that will run through the middle of the new village is clearly intended to redirect some traffic away from the main

road, in order to increase its capacity for even more traffic. Einstein's definition of insanity comes to mind: doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.

We cannot go back beyond the fork in the road that was introduced by the industrial and subsequent technological revolutions. But we can find a different road through the continuing evolution of our way of life.

Such a road will fully recognise our dependence on the non-human inhabitants of the planet, and put the rest of Nature first, ahead of our own short-term needs. In UK planning terms, it will devise a national land use strategy which

- engages the cooperation of landowners and developers, but is not dictated by them, recognising their need to make a living, but not a killing;
- prioritises the use of land for increased biodiversity, and for climate change adaptation, deceleration and even reversal, if eventually possible;
- carefully balances this with food production, energy provision and appreciation of the countryside;
- houses people with dignity in accordance with local needs at prices local people can afford;
- and redirects transport away from our current excessive car, van and lorry dependency and makes much of it unnecessary.

Robert Frost, an almost exact contemporary of Flora Thompson, wrote in 1915:

"Two paths diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference."

What difference will we make in this time of transition, as we make choices to shape our future? We could choose that other road, the one less travelled by, which we have neglected for too long.

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