

Another Texan in England: Personal reflections on English land use

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Introduction:

I am dead certain that the love of the English for the 'fair Earth' and for the growing and flying and running and crawling and standing things on it is enormously responsible for their fixed and unwavering character.

J Frank Dobie: A Texan in England p 185

Growing up in Austin Texas I had heard of J. Frank Dobie: there was a middle school and a mall named after him. Decades later, living in London, my uncle sent me his memoir, *A Texan in England*. I put it on a bookshelf and gave it no further thought until a bout of covid-induced boredom caused me to open it, and I discovered that Dobie had written it in Cambridge during the second world war. Specifically he was at Emmanuel College, and lecturing in American history as part of a transatlantic exchange designed to enhance the cultural affinity between the two nations.

Dobie was born in Texas in 1888, the year the Texas State Capitol in Austin was completed. He died in 1964 having been a professor at the University of Texas at Austin for 30 years and the secretary editor of the Texas Folklore Society for 21 years. He was a champion of the folklore and myths of Texas, and for going out and engaging with the places where the myths were born – the land from which they grew – rather than just library-based scholarship. His book *A Texan in England* contrasted the measured pace of English life with the 'rushing' of youthful America. A fair observation. True to his values, he had spent the year not just holed up in the library, or the Anchor pub, but travelling around England, seeking to understand that land and the people that created so many of his beloved works of literature. His conclusion was that you cannot separate the art of a people from its land. True in Texas, and true in England.

Great Literature transcends its native land, but none that I know of ignores its soil. - J Frank Dobie – Coronado's Children.

I have spent slightly more than a year in England: nearly twenty-five in fact. Most of that time has been spent working at the intersection of the built environment and policy making. I am also a fifth generation Texan on my father's side – which means that I'm given to expounding my ideas at the slightest provocation. While my whole professional life has been spent in London, I would say that I continue to bring an outsider's perspective in my efforts to reconcile the huge spaces of my native soil with the terraced houses and tiny gardens of my chosen country. Like Dobie I am also interested in the relationship between land and story, specifically, how we can apply qualitative information on top of our increasingly complex and sophisticated quantitative understanding of land as part of planning.

From September 2020 to February 2025, I led the Defra team responsible for the Land Use Framework as well as bringing in Biodiversity Net Gain, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and our work on environmental planning more generally. As a card-carrying Urbanist, this brought me to the 'country' side of the Town and Country Planning Act. Through a truly excellent Policy Fellowship run by the *Cambridge Centre for Science, Policy and Analysis*, I have also been in and out of Cambridge over the past few of years talking to academics and trying to get my head

around the relationship between land value and public values. My conclusion is that the stories we tell ourselves about land are more deeply rooted than the evidence base our technocratic age gives allowances for.

Key takeaway:

Once you build on land – it is incredibly difficult to unbuild on it.

It's important to consider what (and who) land is for in its fullest sense before building on it. The planning system takes us part of the way there – but what is required is a genuine mindset shift from the 'control' and regulation of land to the 'emergence' of the kind of land uses that will lead to a more thriving future for people and planet.

As a planning fraternity we can make an industry of anything and everything; but can we think before (and even while) we 'build baby build'? Might that be the space called 'planning'?

Where is the *space and time* to think before we build? To consider what the wider impacts – not a siloed impacts assessment with a million unreadable pages – but at a deep and personal level to stand in a place and seek to understand it and its people (which I believe should also encompass the non-human inhabitants of a place). Importantly, if we are to develop that land, what can we bring from the stories we tell about places to the future of those places?

What is Land For?

As I write, newspaper columns are clattering with the clashes of opinions – and the interests – over the proposal of an electric supply company to build a \$16,000,000 power plant near the ancient city of Durham – which people in England associate more with its castle and cathedral than the red cattle and roll-your-own tobacco that to many Americans afford the name's only connection.

After publication of the fact that the company had received a license from the Durham County Council to build, a rash of protests broke out against what is characterised as a defilement of the view of the cathedral and castle, especially from the railroad. ... It seems a case in which everybody is right, including the capitalists, who are to erect the Durham power plant. If the advantageous site – and advantageous because of the lay of the land next to the accessible water – is changed, it will not do as much material good to as many people as it might have done. If the selected site is built on, the cathedral and castle, existing mostly to be looked at, will shrink as pictures. J Frank Dobie: A Texan in England Page 98 - 99

Land is put to a range of uses in England – and the planning system regulates the use of that land to a greater or lesser extent depending on what those uses are. For example, if I owned a building on the high street which was currently in use as a pharmacy, and I wanted to change it to a hot food take-away (assuming it was nowhere near a school) I would need to apply for planning permission. If I was a farmer in possession of a field of lentils and I wanted to turn it into maize for biofuels I would be able to do so as a business decision. This assumes that the land has been under cultivation in the past 15 years, does not involve physical restructuring, and that the land is not designated as semi-natural or environmentally sensitive. Nothing is ever totally simple and straightforward in English planning.

This of course goes back to the origins of our current Town and Country Planning system, where the fathers of planning carved out the majority of agricultural land uses from the development

planning system. Today there are a number of wider regulations – largely environmental and heritage related – which regulate those land use changes. The readers of this paper will know more about the details of these regulations, but in summary we can conclude that since the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act we have been in the grip of a ‘scarcity’ mindset when it comes to land. And with that scarcity has come an increase in the price of land and a correlated reduction in our understanding of the value of land in non-monetary terms.

Who is land for?

Eighty-five percent of the English population live in towns and cities, not counting the little groups of farmhouses called villages. Eighty-five percent of the land is country. There are millions in the cities who would not know a hawk from a house wren, but a remarkable number of the audible part of the population have country-going instincts.

In Texas I feel hemmed up unless I'm ten miles away from a country post office. I do not understand how I can feel so out and free in a twenty-acre woodland of England, a half dozen pied wagtails flitting on the lawn of King's college courtyard affording as much relief from human constriction as a remuda of dun horses galloping across a prickly pear flat in the middle of a hundred thousand acres of unpeopled chaparral and mesquite. I have never observed that the owner of many thousands of acres of land loves its features any more or gets any more virtue out of it than the cultivator of a mere plot. - J Frank Dobie: A Texan in England Page 183

As in the 1940s, the majority of people in England today live in towns or cities and have done so for generations. This is increasingly true across the world, and as societies lose connection with the productive landscape, we lose the ability to read land and landscapes. To know that when we see deep green rolling hills dotted with sheep or cows, that this means that there is likely to be a polluted waterway nearby suffering from nutrient run-off.

Much has been made of the psychological impact of losing touch with nature – forgetting the names of plants, birds, and other species. But not enough has been made of the very real consequences that this has on our ability – as a society – to build a sustainable future for our own species as well as others.

This matters for planning and planners. If we do not understand for whom we are planning and developing – how can we have a hope of delivering good outcomes?

Based on Ipsos polling in 2023¹ people consistently overestimate how much of the land is built up, and this matters, because it affects people's willingness to accept changes in land use. One reason for this may be *because* people are so concentrated in urban areas: it's hard for people to imagine that over 80% of the land in England is in fact used either for agriculture or nature, when what they see around them is a crowded urban environment. How well that land is used for agriculture in nature is a different matter.

In England, unlike in Texas, land is held by relatively few people and institutions², indeed you can get most of them round a table in a large board room. Government (largely Ministry of Defence and Defra) and its Quangos (e.g. Forestry Commission), the Crown Estate, the Church, the

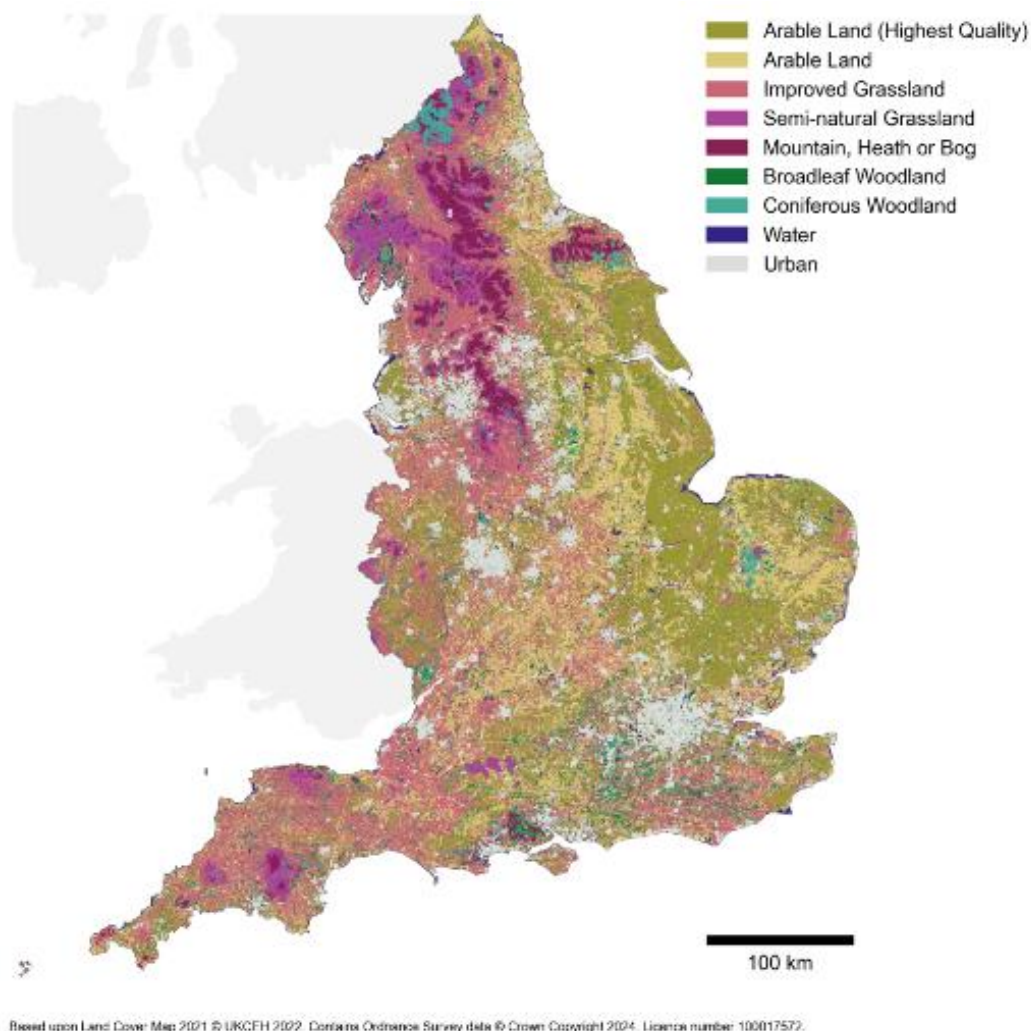
¹ [Six in ten people in England would keep the Green Belt as it is | Ipsos](#)

² [England's major landowners to work together to drive nature recovery. – Environment](#)

National Trust, various of the ‘great estates’, and indeed the Oxford and Cambridge colleges are they key players. And therefore, what they do with their land has a disproportionate impact on access to land, as well as the outcomes from the land. England also has an inconsistently managed rights of way network which means most people do not travel through the countryside in the way that they might do in the remaining wildernesses of the national parks in Europe or North America. These two factors, taken together, may also have something to do with the disconnect between people and the land of England.

On the whole people are happy to see land used for environmental purposes, with 50% saying it was a fairly to very good idea, 28% neutral / don’t know, and 22% saying it was a fairly /very bad idea³.

Like in Dobie’s time we can see that the majority of land in England is ‘country’. England is made up of a mosaic of different land uses, with two thirds of its area (67%) being agricultural while built up areas take up 11% of land.



³ [Do you think it is a good or bad idea to convert more of the farmland in England to climate and natural environment purposes, including solar farms, tree planting and improving habitats for birds, insects and fish? | Daily Question](#)

This agricultural land is balanced between arable and grassland, with significant regional variations in the type and quality of England's agricultural and rural land. For example, much of the most productive arable farmland can be found in the east of England, where the land is largely flat, and the summers are generally dry. The southwest, with gentle hills and a wetter climate, is home to around 40% of England's dairy herd. Hillier upland areas across the country (including along the Pennines), tend to consist of lower quality farmland and predominantly feature sheep farming.

How do we need to use land in the future?

For hundreds of years Englishmen have been draining the Fens, turning the course of rivers, digging wide ditches, mounding high dikes, pumping out water, at first with Dutch windmills, now with turbine engines, reclaiming acre by acre the fertile alluvial soil. The present war's demand for the last ounce of food and the government's' all-enveloping control of every acre of earth have forced almost the last plot of fen land into cultivation.

Only a spot held by the National Trust as a wildlife refuge remains in original vegetation. Drainage has caused the earth to shrink so that the streams now run yards above the land level. In dry seasons the winds blow the fine topsoil away. I have seen a blinding Dust Bowl cloud over the Fens. It is only a matter of time till a large part of the area will be as low under sea-level as the Netherlands. - J Frank Dobie: A Texan in England Page 149

We need to use land in a way that reflects the very real climate and nature crises, while also supporting the kinds of economic activity that support human flourishing. Climate mitigation and adaptation, improving nature and biodiversity, and providing food for humans (and other creatures) – each of these three things can be achieved in ways that balance against one

Defra developed a spatial model to help consider the implications of simultaneously achieving environmental and climate targets and commitments by 2050 on land in different parts of the country. The model simulates changes in land use to achieve national aims and then examines what this typically means in terms of the amount and type of land use change that results in different landscapes. The simulated reallocation of land use is guided by consideration of the biophysical suitability of a unit of land to support different alternative uses such as food production, as well as any pre-existing constraints on the land use change such as those from environmental and planning protections. A random element is introduced to the reallocation during a simulation, reflecting the uncertainty about where change might occur.

Different scenarios have been run that integrate economic and climatic factors and reprioritise amongst policy choices. The results of this modelling can be compared in terms of their impacts on outcomes such as nutrient pollution and biodiversity. The approach taken means that the model does not optimise or prescribe where land use change should occur. It suggests where change might happen given how the suitability for different types of land use change varies spatially.

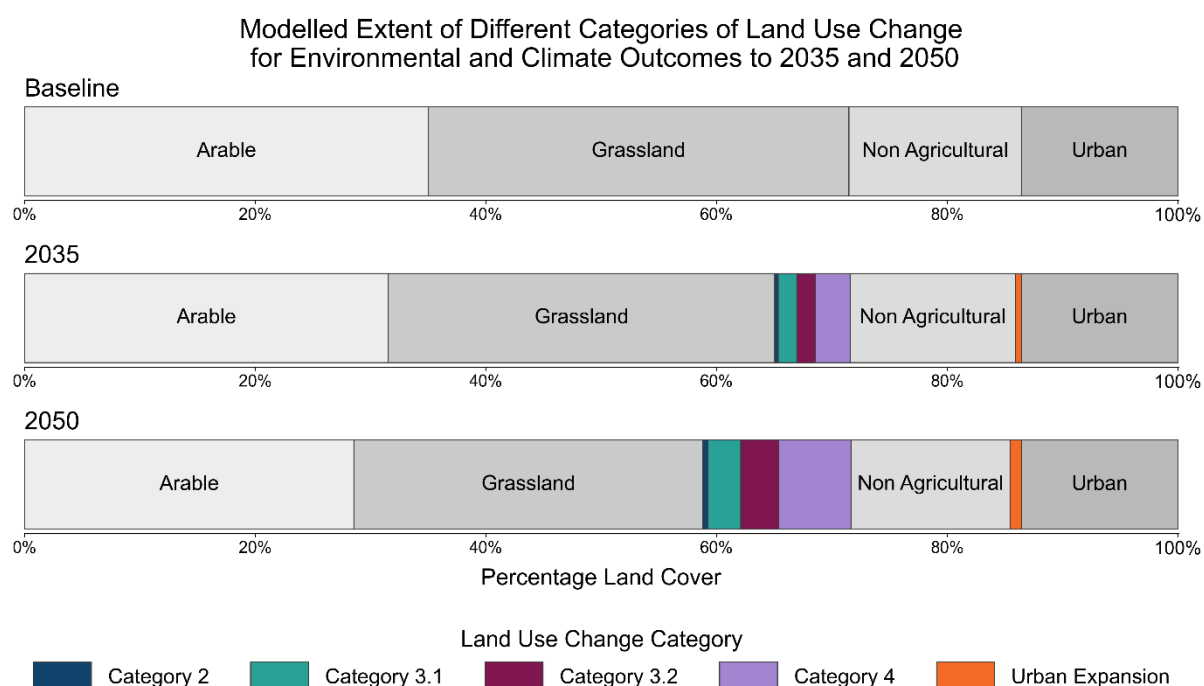
Defra Land Use Consultation, Analytical Annex p20

another, but within that balance we also need to deliver economic infrastructure (e.g. housing, transport, energy etc) that are essential for a functioning society.

In 2017 Kate Raworth spoke to this conference about her recently published book *Doughnut Economics*. She talked about the importance of development within ecological limits, but not forgetting the human and social floor, as articulated by the Sustainable Development Goals.

This tension, between feeding ourselves and building economic infrastructure while also enabling the long-term thriving of nature and climate resilience, is at the heart of the land use framework which government consulted on in early 2025⁴. It underpinned the modelling that we built to understand the spatial implications of meeting climate and environment targets, while maintaining food production at current levels.

Through our models we found that the scale of the transition in land use that would be required if we are to meet climate and environment targets, maintain food production, and deliver crucial economic infrastructure is at least 1.6 million hectares of land use change by 2050 – an area three quarters of the size of Wales.



Category 2 – small changes maintaining the same agricultural land use

Category 3.1 – changes in agricultural land use, for both food and environmental / climate benefits

Category 3.2 changes in agricultural land use, mainly for environmental and climate benefits with limited food production.

Category 4- change away from agricultural land, for environmental or climate benefits

⁴ [Land use in England - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/land-use-in-england)

What all of this change means is that it is possible to meet commitments on climate and environment while also meeting the economic infrastructure requirements, as well as the food production required to feed the nation. This will require a change, not only in the land but also in people's mindsets, the latter is inevitably harder. The data and modelling we have developed demonstrates that the risk to 'food security' as narrowly conceived as domestic production, is not at risk as we make a transition to, say, higher levels of solar energy. But bringing data to an argument which is largely about a 'feeling' of security is not always that compelling.

What is striking, surprising even for people working in the built environment, is how very little impact the scale of new building has on land use *change*. In the rest of the world, urbanisation and turning wild landscapes into agriculture are the biggest contributors to climate change. But in England, we've already done all that. The people live in towns and cities, and most of the land has already been turned over for agriculture. What is needed now is a rebalancing: if not a total 'rewilding' then at least an invitation for nature to integrate back into the landscape, including our urban landscapes. But how do we invite nature back into towns and cities, and how do we build new places that integrate nature?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), as set out in the Environment Act 2021, set out a framework for achieving that. They are strategic spatial plans for nature, and nature-based solutions. Drawn at a strategic level, they are part of the broader shift to strategic spatial planning, recognising that while nature doesn't respect council boundaries, funding and governance structures often do. There is a clear link between LNRSs and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), where the metric used to calculate a developments 'BNG' contribution is weighted to incentivise delivering off-site BNG in areas identified for nature recovery in the LNRS.

The multiple benefits of climate resilience and adaptation are supported by a more integrated approach to thinking about flooding and urban overheating. Policy and funding support for Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDs) or Natural Flood Management is increasing, as governments local and national start to see the criticality. Similarly, carbon capture, through the soils and the trees, is seen as a new funding stream for land owners⁵, and perhaps a break with the hegemony of technologically complex solutions to climate challenges.

⁵ [Have your say on a new nature-based carbon standard consultation – Environment](#)

Land Use Principles:

In the Land Use Framework consultation, we consulted on five principles for making decisions about land use:

1. **Co-design:** Support for participation and leadership at the local and regional scale to develop and align spatial strategies and assess the fairness of changes in land use.
2. **Multifunctional land:** Enable multiple benefits on land, targeted according to opportunity, societal needs (such as health benefits of co-locating new homes and nature), and environmental pressures (such as reducing pollution).
3. **Playing to the strengths of the land:** Support and spatially target land use change to locations where benefits are greater, and trade-offs are lower. Give priority to land uses that are more scarce or spatially sensitive (for example grid capacity places restrictions on new renewable energy generation sites or protecting land that is best suited to food production).
4. **Decisions fit for the long-term:** Take a long-term view of changing land suitability, prioritising resilience (including to the impacts of climate change). This could include planning for new homes that are resilient to climate impacts such as flooding and overheating.
5. **Responsive by design:** Land use policy, including spatial prioritisation and targeting, needs to be responsive to new data, opportunities, and pressures.

These principles are based on analysis of what needs to be true spatially, physically, in order to meet climate and environment targets. By applying them to land use decisions (from field scale to policy level) you are invited to consider the wider consequences of decisions. To think about how we create places that enable long term sustainability rather than short term nods to 'best practice'. To create new stories about land and place.

What next?

Better ways of living lie ahead, not behind. By taking thought, by employing science in its widest meaning, man can add more than one cubit unto his stature.

Few Englishmen, rich or poor, expect to go back to normalcy. Normalcy was ugly, like the word. Normal life ahead comprises something beyond what electrical fixtures can supply. The economy of the nation did not just happen. Man brought it about. Man can manage it so as to benefit from it in a more democratic way. Yes management does not imply a Russian break with the long continuity of English tradition. To find hope, English people need not to migrate to a new world. They have the intelligence and the power to renew their own world. In other words, the British, the conservative English, especially, have comprehended the meaning of evolution. - J Frank Dobie: A Texan in England Page 277

At the time of writing, we are one year into a Labour Government – one that is focused on delivering economic growth. To that end the [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#) and the [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) have been introduced and are being debated in Parliament. There are institutional as well as legislative changes afoot: [the National](#)

[Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority \(NISTA\)](#) has been set up as a joint unit between Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. We're seeing signs of simplifying and rationalising the number and scope of statutory consultees. There is also no shortage of strategies and frameworks. From the [Land Use Framework Consultation](#) to the [10 Year Infrastructure Strategy](#), to the [Food Strategy](#) and the [10 Year Health Plan](#).

It's been a busy year.

Other papers at this year's conference explore the role of strategic planning, housebuilding and securing consents for strategic land assets and regeneration projects (hint, flexibility is key to both) in more detail. So instead, I want to invite you to imagine a world in which we understand not just the data that underpin evidence-based planning choices, but the stories that have gotten us to this point. For myself – as for Dobie – I am grateful to have the opportunity to live in the land where so many of my favourite stories were written. To drink in the pubs frequented by CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, and to think about what we can learn from the stories that are being told about places and what new stories we need to tell about the future of places.

Building on land doesn't just shift the soil, it shifts the story. And yet, how many of us truly know the story of the land before we write over it? In England, most people think land is already built on, when in fact it is mostly fields — fields that feed us, hold memory, and shelter more-than-human lives. The planning system offers tools, yes — but what we need is a deeper pause. A space not just to assess impact, but to feel it. To ask: what does this land remember? What might it become if we listened, not just regulated?

Planning, at its best, is not just about control — it is about care and hope. Perhaps the future lies not in building faster, but in building smarter — with stories, with stewardship, and with space to imagine what could be next.

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Rachel Fisher, DEFRA

Some further reading

A Texan in England J Frank Dobie

Doughnut Economics Kate Raworth

Sitopia Carolyn Steele

English Pastoral James Rebanks

Field Work Bella Bathurst

Divide Anna Jones

Lie of the Land Guy Shrubsole

Who owns England? Guy Shrubsole

Land Smart Tom Heap

Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope Bill Sharpe

The Regenerative Structural Engineer Oliver Broadbent

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