

# THE PERI-URBAN FRINGE

The grey area that lies between the brown and the green of town and countryside is a semi-forgotten land-bank with great potential. In this section we look at a number of ideas, old and new, that may help to open it up for a variety of uses. Badlands? Brownfield? Time to look again?



## EDGE LANDS



**MARION SHOARD discusses the unique nature of the undervalued and overlooked fringe between city and country, and suggests we should appreciate this landscape for its own sake, and for the freedom it allows for natural processes and human uses to evolve without undue interference.**

Britain's towns and cities do not usually sit cheek by jowl with its countryside, as we often casually assume. Between urban and rural stands a kind of landscape quite different from either. Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland. All these heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. This peculiar landscape is only the latest version of an interfacial rim that has always separated settlements from the countryside. In our own age, however, this zone has expanded vastly in area, complexity and singularity. Huge numbers of people now spend much of their time living, working or moving within or through it. Yet for most of us, most of the time, this mysterious no man's land passes unnoticed: in our imaginations, as opposed to our actual lives, it barely exists. When we deliberately visit it, this is often for mundane activities like taking the car to be serviced or household waste to the disposal plant, which we choose to discount as part of our lives. If we actually live or work there, we usually wish we did not.

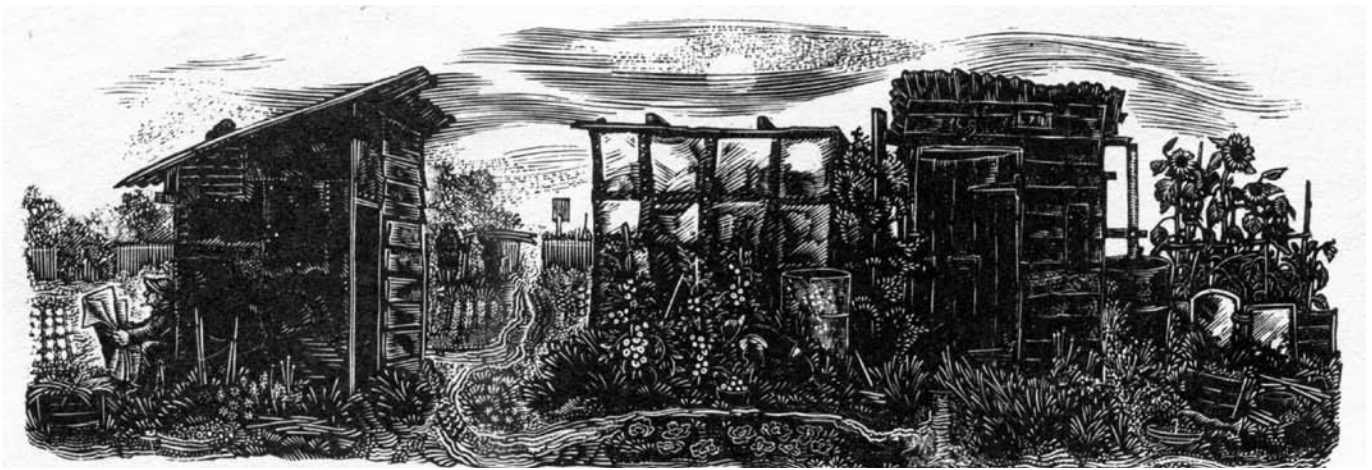
Often these areas are so little acknowledged that they have no name, or have names that fail to reflect their current character. For instance, until the mid 1980s, 'Westwood' in the Isle of Thanet, east Kent, was the name of the crossroads serving

the area's three coastal resorts — Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate. Today, it denotes a vast, developed sprawl in the centre of Thanet, featuring massive retail and business parks and a branch of the University of Kent, all rubbing shoulders with cabbage fields, old, isolated farmhouses and farm-workers' cottages, and a closed mental hospital; the road names bespeak the juxtaposition of old and new — 'Poorhole Lane' beside 'Enterprise Road'. Westwood, in an area long denuded of tree cover, offers no hint of the character that the place name suggests.

Once the suburbs were also a netherworld whose existence went unacknowledged. These sudden accretions to ancient settlements also failed to signify, long after they had become far bigger than the towns that spawned them. Eventually, however, the suburbs won recognition.. They are still not universally loved, but they enjoy a place in our world view and their function is respected.

Yet no similar recognition has been extended to the urban-rural interface. How could it? These jungles of marshalling yards and gravel pits, water-works and car scrapyards seem no more than repositories for functions we prefer not to think about: blots on the landscape. The apparently random pattern in which they are assembled seems to defy the concepts of orderly planning by humans and of harmony in nature. Should these edgelands follow the suburbs from the dark pit of universal disdain into the sunlit uplands of appreciation? Their story is at least as interesting as that of the suburbs.





Our gardens, whether in city or village, are expected to be extravagantly manicured. Allotments, the interface's bastard half-child of agriculture and horticulture, put on no such show. Laboured over at least as diligently as gardens, they nonetheless flaunt 'unsightly' infrastructure that would be unthinkable in a garden: old piping used as plant supports, soggy carpets keeping down weeds and tool sheds built imaginatively but untidily out of old packing materials.

### Tasting a Landscape

In 1965, two scholars set out to discover what common features of landscapes are most admired in England.<sup>1</sup> They concluded that 'What is considered "essentially English" is a calm and peaceful deer park, with slow-moving streams and wide expanses of meadowland dotted with fine trees. The scene should include free-ranging domestic animals . . . When it is arable land, hedgerows and small fields are usually obligatory.'<sup>3</sup> The English do not like geometrical, obviously pre-planned landscapes, nor evidence of the present-day, and particularly dislike anything obviously functional. But they do applaud tidiness and neatness, and evidence of age — old buildings and trees. The countryside beloved by the great majority is tamed and inhabited, warm, comfortable, humanized.

Interfacial landscapes are the very antithesis of all this. The edgelands are raw and rough, and rather than seeming people-friendly are often sombre and menacing, flaunting their participation in activities we do not wholly understand. They certainly do not conform to people's chocolate-box idea of the picturesque. Tidiness is absent: no lawns here. If there is grassland, it is likely to be coarse and shaggy, perhaps grazed by a few sheep enclosed by derelict fencing. If ungrazed, it will be swamped by a riot of wild, invasive plants, fragments of tarmac, wrecks of cars and derelict buildings. We applaud the absence of litter in a landscape: the interface sucks in the detritus of modern life. Not only is litter and household

waste casually dumped there, but formal waste-processing operations, such as car crushing, sewage treatment, or waste transfer are often deliberately located here, lest they despoil preferred environments. Edgeland rubbish tips may eventually be grassed over, but the cosmetic treatment of unsavoury artefacts is considered less necessary here than in either town or country.

### Wild at Heart

Though usually either unloved or ignored, edgeland does fulfil vital functions — not least as a refuge for wildlife. Take, for instance, the 13.8 hectares of Molesey Heath, on the edge of southwest London, an area that takes in raised reservoirs, an industrial estate, an abandoned sewage works, an equestrian centre, a council housing estate, piecemeal private housing (some of it on plotlands), and a camping and caravan site. The heath is the recent result of gravel extraction followed by infilling of rubbish. A few horses belonging to local travellers prevent encroaching fennel, blackberries and hawthorn from overwhelming the purple, pink, white and yellow jungle of goat's-beard, musk thistle, wall rockets, vetches and mallows — 311 species of flowering plants and ferns in all.

This diversity of plant life partly results from the dumping of many sorts of soil, for instance builders' rubble, juxtaposed in a way which would be highly unlikely in nature. The pH may range from 2 to 12, the nutrients from excessive to almost non-existent. Every soil classification is here, including some which



Two classic post-industrial landscapes illustrating the multiple uses of edgelands: a scavenger's paradise, and a spontaneous nature reserve.



have never been properly described.<sup>2</sup> Bits of broken glass do not affect the nature conservation value of the site, nor worry the grasshoppers and crickets that sing there in high summer. So disregarded is the lake formed after gravel extraction that it bears no name, yet before rubbish infilling and thus its partial destruction, kingfishers, great-crested grebes, coots, moorhens, sedge warblers, frogs, toads, newts and twelve species of dragonfly bred here.

Plants and animals being driven out of the countryside by modern agricultural methods often survive in the interface because farming is pursued less intensively here, by owners who are not altogether serious about agriculture; farmers who are waiting with pieces of land that they hope they can sell for development. So this is farmland in a minimal state, farmed in a desultory way. Land uses that replace farming, like grazing for horses or mineral excavation, however scruffy, are often better for wildlife than modern industrial agriculture. Horses are reared for casual exercise, not meat production, so those who keep them do not turn their pasture into a ryegrass monoculture as stock farmers usually do; lakes are filled by rainwater and groundwater, unpolluted by effluents from agricultural land or rivers. Having no inflow or outflow such bodies of water contain none of the large bottom-dwelling fish like bream that stir up mud and stunt the growth of underwater plants. Young amphibians flourish in this predator-free environment. Interfacial sites are biologically diverse precisely because they are unmanaged. Such wildernesses are left to find their own accommodation with nature, evolving silently and unhindered.

A major threat to the edgelands, which relish what other landscapes reject, is attempts to castrate it by turning it into something more “desirable”, as if the interface has nothing to offer as a landscape in its own right. Afforestation is one fashionable mechanism for transforming the edgelands into something more acceptable to polite society, and hiding as much as possible of the rest of it from view. So-called ‘community forests’, enabled by substantial government grants, have seen thousands of acres bordering large towns planted with millions of trees to lure industrialists and prospective homeowners alike, to fill the grim world of the edgelands with happy workers and laughing families. All over Britain, unkempt wasteland is being turned into something more respectable and legitimate — such as woodland.

### The Case for Planning

The edgelands were scarcely noticed by planners until the 1960s, when Professor Alice Coleman of King’s College London, during a land utilisation survey,<sup>3</sup> uncovered the existence of fringe land that fell outside the neat land-use pattern of either farmscape or townscape. She called this ‘the rural fringe’, where the distinction between town and country is blurred and, as a result, farmland is fragmented, or abandoned. She recommended that the rural fringe should be reduced or eliminated either by being turned into proper townscape, with neatly rounded-off development or into productive farmland. Her views legitimised subsequent attempts to sanitise or otherwise neuter the edgelands up and down the country.



Edward Ardizzone

Children find abandoned land a wonderful place to play. Clive King’s *Stig of the Dump* celebrates the joys of old chalk-pits, where the inner Neanderthal in all of us can flourish.

Large-scale development in the interface really took off during the Thatcher years when planning deregulation was fashionable; planning consent refused by local authorities would be allowed on appeal by central government. As further applications came in, councils felt they had no choice but to grant them, and extract some benefit from planning-gain agreements.

Interfacial areas assemble themselves in response to whatever needs are thrust upon them, and in whatever way they can, shaped largely by the planning applications that happen to come in, rather than by proactive planning with the use of instruments such as compulsory purchase and town plans, to assert a public realm. Far lower standards of design are required than elsewhere: warehouses, and the rest, pursue their purposes without even a nod to aesthetic conventions, in a nakedly functional challenge to landscape “good taste”. Where tree-planting is required, it is for screening, acknowledging the ugliness of what it hides. Tasteful facades are considered unnecessary in a landscape that nobody is actually trying to pretend is other than it is.

We need to rethink this approach. Although one could argue that it is a contradiction to try to intrude the dead hand of the planner into something whose character is to be free, I nonetheless think that we should. If we do not chronicle and assert the special wildlife and historical value of parts of our edgelands, for instance, these will disappear anyway. In the context of the edgelands, we need to see the planner not as the shaper of an entire environment but as a handmaiden, who helps along a universe he or she does not seek to control.

### Kindling an Interest

We also need to kindle greater interest in the edgelands and their component parts. We should see reservoirs and rubbish-tips as sources of fascination; by housing much of the apparatus without which settlements could not exist, they tell us about the



Who's in charge here? Colonising whatever open space is available in built-up areas is something children have always excelled at.

way our society is. Car scrapyards are not only interesting but evoke new perceptions of contemporary life. Advertisements show cars in pristine form. In a scrapyard we see how they break, how they crumple and go rusty; in doing so we may find it easier to break free of their stranglehold over our lives and our environment.

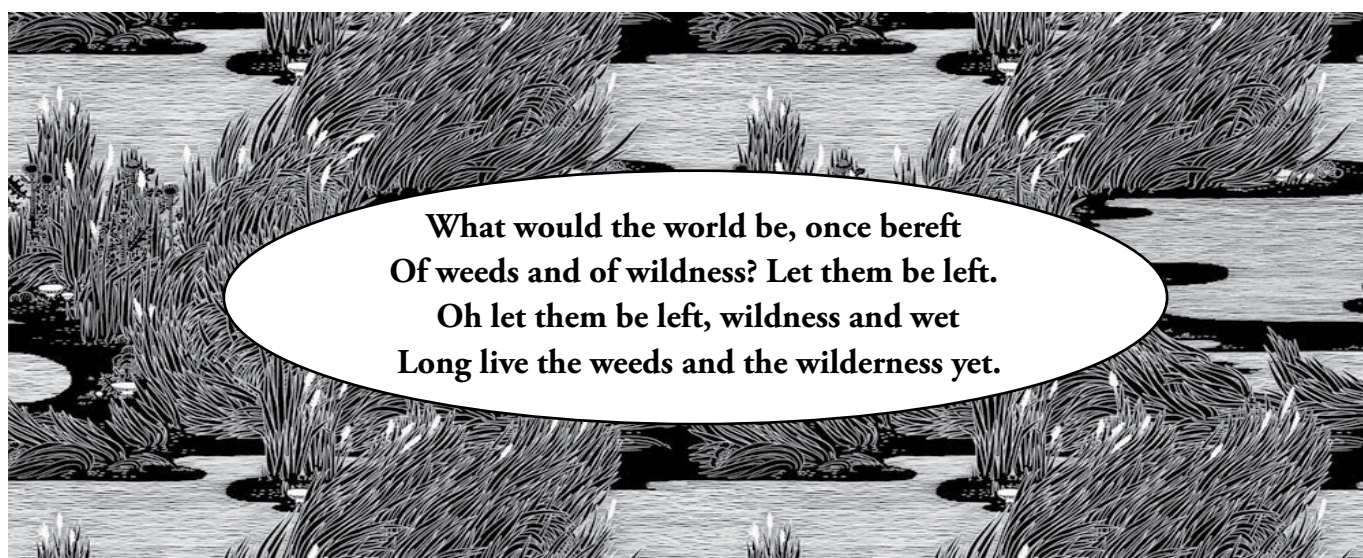
Film festivals could discuss the ways in which the aura of excitement and apparent lawlessness of the edgelands have been exploited in film. It would be interesting to see artistic expression of the dynamism that the interface enshrines, rather than simply the decay and redundancy with which artists usually identify it. Interest could be encouraged through the promotion of exhibitions or competitions by local authorities with a stake in interfacial territory. Studies could build up a picture of human demography, industrial use, archaeological features and so on. Older citizens could be invited to describe the changes they have witnessed to their local edgelands during their lifetimes. Guidebooks and guided walks should open up this new world.

It may seem an uphill task to transform perceptions of a landscape as reviled as that of the edgelands, but history teaches that this may not be as big a challenge as it seems. In the eighteenth century the idea that stretches of grassland dotted with trees should be viewed as the new top landscape — parkland — must have been quite revolutionary. Moors and mountains were once considered hideous places. Yet in the twentieth century the protection of mountain and moorland became an overriding component of rural policy. It is time for the edgelands to get the recognition that Emily Bronte and William Wordsworth moors and mountains and John Betjeman to the suburbs. They too have their story. It is the more cogent and urgent for being the story of our age.

Abridged and revised with permission from an award-winning essay first published in *Remaking the Landscape*, edited by Jennifer Jenkins (Profile Books, 2002). Marion Shoard is the author of *This Land is Our Land*, Paladin 1987, A new edition was published as a Gaia Classic in 1997. Further information at [www.marionshoard.co.uk](http://www.marionshoard.co.uk)

#### REFERENCES

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2. Kendle, T and Forbes, S (1997) *Urban Nature Conservation*, Spon, London
3. Coleman, A (1976) 'Is Planning Really Necessary?' *The Geographical Journal*, 142, 3, 411-434 and Coleman, A (1977) 'Land Use Planning - Success or Failure?' *Architects' Journal*, 19 January, 1977, 94-134.



**What would the world be, once bereft  
Of weeds and of wildness? Let them be left.  
Oh let them be left, wildness and wet  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.**