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## The rural rides of William Cobbett : RRA and sustainable agriculture in the 1820s

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We talk of RRA and the underlying principles and rationale as being relatively new to the analysis of rural systems. Yet let me take you back 160 years or so to England in the 1820s, the time of William Cobbett, journalist, politician and farmer. Later to become a Member of Parliament, Cobbett was at this time producing the popular 'Political Register'. To gather material for this journal, Cobbett set out on his 'Rural Rides', a series of rides across the countryside of southern England, with the express purpose of:

*"Finding out the real state of the countryside"*.

These rural rides, conducted between 1822 and 1826 and first published in 1830, are the first example I have come across of Rapid Rural Appraisal.

His objectives were quite clear: he would write articles based upon his findings to further the causes of political and financial reform. He was determined to find evidence that would support his theories. Yet his approach makes fascinating reading, and there are many parallels with current research and development activities. Writing on the evening of his first days travel from London he very quickly makes clear his intentions regarding spatial, and in particular road, biases: despite setting off in rather a drizzling rain he said:

*"It is very true that I could have gone to Uphusband by travelling only about 66 miles, and in the space of about 8 hours. But, my object was, not to see inns at turnpike-roads, but to see the country; to see the farmers at home, and to see the labourers in the fields;*

*and to do this you must go either on foot or on horseback" (his emphases).*

His whole approach was to travel on horseback through lanes and paths to talk to people, stop at cottages and to understand intimately what was going on in the countryside. Later that year he stated proudly:

*"I have crossed nearly the whole of this country from the NW to the SE, without going 500 yards on a turnpike road, and, as nearly as I could do it, in a straight line"*.

He was well aware that his behaviour was rather unconventional:

*"They think you are mad if you express your wish to avoid turnpike roads"*.

And the following year in Kent, on a wet August afternoon:

*"I made not the least haste to get out of this rain. I stopped, here and there, as usual, and asked questions about the corn, the hops, and other things"*.

Discovering the unusual requires a degree of stubbornness, often to overcome a tendency to take the path of least resistance, whether it is a line of questioning, or a route of travel. And Cobbett was frequently stubborn: he will not be put off from a desire to see certain features, trying to put himself in situations that may throw up some unexpected discovery:

*"I asked a man the way to Thursley. 'You must go to Liphook, Sir', said he. 'But', I said, 'I will not go to Liphook"*.

He had resolved to see and understand the 'low countries', and wished to avoid the hill over Hindhead. On another occasion he wishes to pass over and down the precipitous wooded hillside of Hawkley Hanger in Hampshire. On asking the route he receives strong advice and warnings of the dangers of that route, but he simply asks whether people were in the habit of going along that route. On learning that they did, he immediately sets off through lanes with high banks and steep turns, and then:

*"Out we came, all in a moment, at the very edge of the hanger! And, never, in all my life, was I so surprised and so delighted! I pulled up my horse, and sat and looked; and it was like looking from the top of a castle down into the sea, except that the valley was land and not water".*

He admonishes his warning informants thus:

*"Those who had so strenuously dwelt on the dirt and dangers of this route, had not said a word about beauties, the matchless beauties of the scenery".*

But beauty was not enough - it was the combination of people and the environment that was critical to Cobbett. As a later editor, George Woodcock, put it:

*"There was nothing that made him (Cobbett) more uneasy than a landscape without people".*

One consequence, though, of this admirable approach of only accepting those facts he saw with his own eyes was that he was perhaps subject to another set of biases. 'Official' census figures put the population growth at 40% between 1801 and 1831, yet Cobbett was determined to disprove this trend. In the Committee Rooms of the Houses of Parliament the:

*"mad wretches...are bothering this half-distracted nation to death about a surplus population".*

Cobbett was quite against the proposed policy of enforced transportation of people away from England, and all because of the principles of one Thomas Mathus:

*"a monster who furnished the unfeeling oligarchs...with the pretence that man has a natural propensity to breed faster than food can be raised for the increase".*

There was an 'Emigration Committee':

*"sitting to devise the means of getting rid, not of the idlers, not of the pensioners, not of the dead-weight...not of the soldiers; but to devise means of getting rid of these working people, who are grudged even the miserable morsel they get!"*

To support his argument Cobbett used the size of churches and the number of people they could comfortably hold as a proxy indicator for past local population size. In southern Kent:

*"The church at Appledore is very large. Big enough to hold 3000 people; and the place does not seem to contain half a thousand old enough to go to church...At 3 miles from Appledore I came through Snagate, a village with five houses, and with a church capable of holding 2000 people! At Brenzett (a mile further on)...a church here...and nobody to go to it...At Old Romney there is a church (two miles only from the last, mind!) fit to contain 1500 people, and there are, for the people of the parish to live in 22 or 23 houses! And yet the vagabonds have the impudence to tell us, that the population of England has vastly increased!"*

Later he rides up the valley of the Avon in Wiltshire, where there are 29 agricultural parishes containing churches within the distance of 30 miles. According to population returns these contained some 9000 people; according to him it was manifest that the population of the valley was once many times this value.

*"What, then, should all these churches be built for?"*

In three instances the church porches alone could have held all the inhabitants, even down to the bed-ridden and the babies. In the Wiltshire Vale there were 120 churches built for the apparent purpose of holding 2080 people.

*"In short, everything shows, that here was once a great and opulent population; that there was an abundance to eat, to wear, and to spare; that all the land that is now under cultivation, and a great deal that is not now under cultivation, was under cultivation in former times".*

Another major element of rural systems that fascinated Cobbett on his Rides was mixed and integrated farming. He ranted about the monoculture cereal lands, saying that there were:

*"no hedges, no ditches, no commons, no grassy lanes...All the rest is bare of trees and the wretched labourer has not a stick of wood, and has not place for a pig or cow to graze, or even to lie down upon...the poor day-labourers suffer from the want of fuel - for this reason they are greatly worse off than those of woodland counties. What a difference there is between the faces you see here, and the round, red faces that you see in the wealds and forests"*

But elsewhere, things could look quite different:

*"the labouring people look pretty well. They have pigs. They invariably do best in woodland and forest and wild counties...But as man is not to live on bread alone, so corn is not the only thing that the owners and occupiers of the land have to look to. There are timber, bark, underwood, wool, hides, pigs, sheep and cattle".*

Rural people's ability to carry a number of options in their livelihood basket is often seen as a strategy guarding against risk. If the door to one option is closed then it remains possible to substitute energy and attention to one of the other options. Evidence suggests that the poor and ultra-poor actively maximise the number of options open to them: they prefer and survive through multi-faceted livelihoods.

He also disapproves of the enclosures movement, not at this time in its height, but with a long history stretching back some 500 years. Common fields, woodlands and downs were enclosed to encourage increased food production, even at the possible loss to equity

and sustainability. Of the Longwood Warren he says:

*"These hills are amongst the most barren of the Downs; yet a part of them was broken up during the rage for improvements; during the rage for what empty men think was augmenting of the capital of the country...The herbage was not good, but it was something. Instead of grass it will now, for 20 years to come, bear nothing but species of weeds".*

These concerns of Cobbett identify him quite clearly with a long tradition of writers on rural and agricultural matters dating to the 13th century and Walter of Henley and the anonymous author of Husbandry. Both were familiar with these issues of diversity and sustainability. I have recently analysed the manorial agroecosystem of the 13th and 14th centuries. These manorial estates survived many centuries of change and appear to have been highly sustainable systems. Yet this sustainability was not achieved because of high agricultural productivity. Productivity was remarkably low and it appears that farmers were trading off low productivity against the more highly valued goals of sustainability and equity. These were promoted by the integrated nature of farming and use of natural resources; the great diversity of produce, including wild resources; the diversity of available livelihood strategies; and the high degree of co-operation, particularly on the local management of natural resources.

How history repeated itself. Cobbett was concerned with issues of rural depopulation and integrated land use. And in the 14th century, when some 1300 villages in rural England were deserted as the population crashed, those most likely to be deserted were solely agricultural. People tended to migrate from the agricultural village to villages situated by woodlands and forests, for they offered a greater diversity of livelihood options.

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