

SUBVERTING THE MYTH

Politics, reconstruction and Englishness: Eric Ravilious and the English landscape between the wars.

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1) Introduction

“Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*” T.S. Eliot ¹

Eliot’s ironically depressing assessment of the interwar period (during which he produced *The Waste Land*, recognised as one of the most outstanding pieces of Modernist literature) does not match the reality of what emerged as a very significant period in British cultural history and practice. The twenty one years between 1918 and 1939 was an era of intense change and progress for British society, culture and politics. The Great War had a profound effect on the nation and initiated a cultural shift from the turmoil of the Victorian age, through the relative complacency of the Edwardian period to Britain emerging as a modern world nation.² Wars have a tendency to speed up technical advancement and social change, so Britain entered the war on horseback and emerged with huge technical advances in land and air transport. It also entered with a society defined by its class structure and emerged with society demanding more social equality, ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’, and greater rights for women.³ A significant percentage of the male population of all social classes had been killed or wounded, as soldiers and officers and, in some cases, whole rural communities were decimated.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the period saw huge changes in the countryside and the agricultural economy, which was vital during the war but became depressed when it ended and remained so until 1939. However, the changes were not simply because of agrarian economics but were the result of deliberate government policies

¹ From T. S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’ *The Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 1946

² The term, ‘The Great War’ is used throughout as the 1914-1918 war was not called the First World War until 1939.

³ The ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’ campaign for returning soldiers led to the Housing Act 1919 enabling local Councils to provide housing.

to reconstruct the countryside socially and physically; not just to make it more efficient but to emphasise its place as the symbol of Englishness and nationhood, and to restore the qualities and values that were perceived to have existed before 1914. This was a complex process which included investing in agriculture, renewing the rural infrastructure, controlling built development and reviving, and even creating, myths and traditions. This resulted in clashes between different points of view; particularly the debate between preservationists and modernisers. Since the Industrial Revolution cities had suffered unplanned growth, become unhealthy and were potential sources of unrest. They may have been at the heart of the British economy, but they did not represent the nation as far as Government, institutions and many influential people were concerned.⁴

The arts in Britain were also in a confused state. In literature, British writers such as Lawrence, Woolf, Eliot and Joyce were in the Modernist avant-garde; but in other artistic fields the country was deemed to be well behind the rest of Europe, particularly France. Writing in 1920, the critic Clive Bell cynically used a horse racing analogy when referring to English painting: "In painting, English form is normally a stone below the French".⁵

Part of the change to the image and value of the countryside was a different response to the landscape, and to the representation of landscape. As Wells points out, the notion of landscape arises from the time when human beings became physically and economically separate from the land, and this was brought on by industrialisation and urbanisation because it was not necessary to represent the land

⁴ Similar concerns about cities also influenced political changes in Italy and Germany, and prompted nationalism and Fascism.

⁵ Cited in Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, 2nd edition, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994 p147

pictorially when it was the sole source of human experience and sustenance. When urban life became the norm the genre of landscape painting emerged and, from an early stage, represented an idealised view of pastoral life. For centuries landscape paintings were commissioned to celebrate and signify ownership, but the breaking up of large English estates in the 1920s and 1930s (due to Death Duty legislation and general economic decline) reduced the significance of the ownership of the land; whilst, at the same time reinforced the value of the landscape as an ideal for urban dwellers. Wells contends that 20th Century landscapes were not commissioned or purchased to express an actual ownership but a virtual ownership with purchasers acquiring an idea of the pastoral and bucolic.⁶ This fitted very well into the creation of a new or imagined countryside that was the focus of the reconstruction.

Alfrey argues that the fragmented history of landscape painting in the 19th Century led many 20th Century artists to assume that the landscape tradition had died out and, therefore, it became a marginalised genre of painting.⁷ Certainly the pre-war avant-garde, represented by the Vorticists, had placed little emphasis on landscape as a genre (except in a few aerial paintings), but the war had generated a new and dramatic response to landscape painting. Emerging from this were painters such as Paul and John Nash who would have a huge effect on the next wave of artists and former Vorticists such as Wadsworth and Nevinson, who would revert to more traditional painting.

Amongst the many significant students and protégés of Paul Nash when he taught at the Royal College of Art in the early 1920s, was Eric Ravilious. Ravilious became a leading designer, muralist and illustrator, but his landscape painting was almost

⁶ Liz Wells, *International Library of Cultural Studies: Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*, I.B.Taurus, London, 2011

⁷ Nicholas Alfrey, et al, *Towards a New Landscape* Bernard Jacob Ltd, London, 1993 p18

entirely undertaken in watercolour. Although this was a medium that Paul Nash used very effectively, it was generally regarded as the favourite of the amateur painter, since the development of pre-mixed and portable paints. Technically and formally Ravilious was apparently working against the trends of the avant-garde and Modernism itself. Throughout the 1930s Ravilious produced landscapes and domestic watercolours of the South Downs, Essex and Welsh borders countryside, until becoming a war artist with the Royal Marines and his death in 1942. His short, but productive, career runs parallel with the social reconstruction of the English landscape during which he developed a unique formal and critical approach to the practice of watercolour landscapes. The landscape that Ravilious wanted to paint was not the one that preservationists wanted to protect, nor the one that many artists continued to imagine; it was the actuality of a working landscape with all the interventions and detritus of the Machine Age and rural industry. In the 1930s when the ideal landscape, exemplified by the South Downs and Home Counties, was a dominant force in English nationhood, Ravilious chose to subvert this myth and produce his own narrative, valuing the qualities and prestige of the South of England, whilst at the same time maintaining a tradition of English watercolour painting that went back to Turner, Cotman, Cox and Palmer.

In the history of European Modernism, the majority of English landscape painters were not considered to be major players. As Pevsner said when writing on Englishness in the 1950s:

“The romantic topography of Christopher Wood and then Mr John Piper, Eric Ravilious and some others may delight us and be specifically English, but I doubt whether in a future display of twentieth century painting the English will be among the principal contributors.”⁸

⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner , *The Englishness of English Art*, Penguin Books, London, 1964 (first published in 1955) p195

Pevsner was writing as a comparatively recent German émigré and observer of English culture and the place of Ravilious has since been reassessed in the last 10 to 15 years. However, the major critical histories of Modernism in England, such as Charles Harrison's *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, first published in 1981; do not recognise the contribution of Ravilious.

This dissertation looks specifically at Ravilious's watercolour landscapes and the context, in which they were created. It concentrates on those landscapes painted between 1930 and 1939 that he specifically chose to paint and not his illustrations or design work or work as a war artist, which, although fascinating, were commissioned for a specific purpose.

The following chapters will consider in more detail, Ravilious as an artist; the social, cultural and political changes to the English landscape and the politics of the English art world that influenced his unique watercolour landscapes. It will be argued that Ravilious is subverting the representation of the landscape in the 1930s through introducing the apparent intrusions of the modern, the industrial and the mechanical and that those paintings contain a narrative which is uniquely Modernist by introducing the unexpected and disturbing the order and harmony expected in both a landscape painting and in a picture of Englishness.

2) Connecting landscape and politics: Ravilious the artist

“Cheerfulness kept creeping in...” Douglas Percy Bliss describing Eric Ravilious⁹

Eric Ravilious was born in London in 1903 and died whilst serving as a war artist in 1942. He was brought up in Eastbourne, Sussex and his art education was at the Eastbourne School of Art and in 1922 he obtained a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, where he was considered an exemplary student. At the Royal College he primarily trained as an illustrator learning wood engraving from Paul Nash. Ravilious was a quintessentially English artist, who did not leave the country, apart from his war service; a travelling scholarship to Tuscany in 1924 to look at the work of Renaissance artists and a brief visit to Normandy.¹⁰ He also almost exclusively painted the South East of England; his home and the perceived centre of Englishness. Despite his love of the area, this did not impede him being visually critical of the conservative understanding of Englishness, although it did not tempt him to experiment in European concepts such as Surrealism, Cubism or abstraction, unlike many of his friends and peers.

Ravilious was and is a very popular artist because, on the surface, his pictures are accessible, well constructed, subtly coloured and, apparently, uncomplicated. The precision of his watercolours is in part due to his skills as an observer, designer and printer and his commitment to portraying the *genius loci*, the spirit of a place. His application of colour was innovative and is influenced by Paul Nash and, possibly, the flat colours of Quattrocento Tuscan murals (such as those of Giotto) he had visited. His popularity and watercolour skills should not be confused with

⁹ From Douglas Percy Bliss, *Edward Bawden*, The Pendomer Press, Godalming, Surrey, 1979 and cited in Binyon p27

¹⁰ This is an interesting coincidence as, in Fascist Italy, Tuscany was described by the pro-rural *Strapaese* movement, symbolically and politically as *toscanita*, the quintessential landscape of Italy.

superficiality or nostalgia, as his minimal interest in the critical debates around Modernism did not stop him producing work that is modern, critically interesting and often has considerable depth.

Neve argues that Ravilious's painting, like all painting can be ambiguous but, he believes that his apparent light-hearted approach does not mean that he is not serious about his subject or his painting.¹¹ However, although he recognises this feature of Ravilious's character, Neve contends that he did not differentiate between "an ideal setting and the light industrial encroachments of the thirties".¹² This is a misrepresentation of Ravilious's output; as it is evident that he understood the difference perfectly well and, in carefully selecting his subjects, he was consciously taking a position on the state of the South Downs landscape in the 1930s and, thus, commenting on the contemporary world. Wells argues that landscape painting has developed an association with an 'idealised rural' representation and that the inclusion of the industrial rural 'indicates the otherness of that which is not pastoral'.¹³ It is apparent from his pictures that this was a major theme of Ravilious and he specifically selected to represent that 'otherness' in constructing his landscape narratives.

A Ravilious picture may be easy on the eye, but it has ideas and meanings which cannot or should not be ignored. Although Ravilious did not express overtly political views, his landscape paintings will sustain a political reading and interpretation and are an important contribution to the cultural history of the English landscape. As

¹¹ Ravilious's wit, sense of humour and positive approach to life is separately recorded by his fellow students Douglas Percy Bliss and Helen Binyon; who both also see him as a serious and committed artist.

¹² Christopher Neve, *Unquiet Landscape: Places and Ideas in Twentieth Century English Painting*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990 p17

¹³ Wells, *ibid.* P23

Andrews asserts, landscape cannot be disconnected from urban and political life.¹⁴ Yet the economic interdependency between urban and rural life is not often apparent in paintings especially when the countryside is seen as an escape from the stresses of urban life, as it was in the 1920s and 1930s. As the form of the landscape is determined by ownership and by government policies and strategies the presence of, for example, a road, railway line, ruin, industrial or agro-industrial use serves to underline that urban and rural interdependency. It is precisely this tension and symbiotic relationship that Ravilious selects and, in doing so, raises questions on its values and impact.

Ravilious is part of the long tradition of English watercolour landscape painters and the Romantic artists were a very important influence for him. Binyon reports that whilst he was teaching at Eastbourne School of Art he told a student that “his greatest ambition was to revive the English tradition of watercolour painting”.¹⁵ He would have come across English watercolours at an early age in his father’s antique shop in Eastbourne and later, whilst a student in London, he studied the masters of English watercolours in the public collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum print room, and other galleries.¹⁶ According to Powers, he had also studied the book *Water Colour Painting* by Alfred W. Rich, published in 1918, in which Rich wrote of the virtues of the pre-Victorian watercolour artists.¹⁷ Ravilious did not copy the 18th and 19th Century watercolourists but developed his own techniques for layering watercolours, the use of dry colour; stippling and sponged effects and the use of a wax resist retaining white spaces. Discussing Ravilious in the context of the development of English Modernism, Powers suggests:

¹⁴ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, 1999 p156

¹⁵ Helen Binyon, *Eric Ravilious: memoir of an artist*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 1983 p43

¹⁶ *ibid* Binyon p29

¹⁷ Alan Powers, *Eric Ravilious: Imagined Realities*, Imperial War Museum, Philip Wilson Publisher, London, 2003

" one English response to modernism had been to recognise the affinity between the emotionally cool but intuitively structural paintings of the generation before Turner and the more conscious principles of modernism....." ¹⁸

He was an exacting artist and only showed one out of the 4 or 5 paintings that he made, destroying the others. He always started his paintings outdoors, without preparatory drawings, but worked on them in his studio, and often from memory. The architectural quality of some of his paintings and his accuracy of line is one of the most notable features of his work and most likely comes from his design training and, perhaps, his studies in architectural drawing in the School of Architecture in his first term at the Royal College of Art, and also represents a Modernist perspective. ¹⁹

Ravilious clearly has some affinities with Turner, not just because they were both masters and innovators in the use of watercolour, but also because they appear to share similar artistic objectives. After the boom years of the Napoleonic wars British agricultural production went into decline, just as it did after the Great War, forcing many rural workers off the land into the new industrial cities. During the early 19th Century, the more conservative Constable continued to paint an apparent pre-war rural life, whilst, conversely, Turner faced the realities and truths of industry in the landscape and, in the 1830s, was radically representing the industrial 'sublime' in a series of Midlands watercolour landscapes such as *Dudley* c1832 (illustration 1). Ruskin was critical of Constable because he did not show the realities of the contemporary countryside but praised Turner for representing the truth of mans 'rottenness and clutter'. ²⁰ There is a distinct parallel with what was interesting

¹⁸ ibid Powers p33

¹⁹ Binyon relates how, to his surprise, he and other students, were placed in the School of Architecture, although not training as architects. p26

²⁰ Cited by Norbert Lynton in Alfrey et al p45

Ravilious 100 years later and the preservationist versus moderniser debate, and it is reasonable to believe that Ravilious might be influenced by Turner's example.

a. Ravilious and the art market

Ravilious only had two major solo exhibitions of his watercolours in his lifetime, and one shared one. The solo ones were at the Zwemmer Gallery, Litchfield Street, London in 1933 and 1936 with 37 paintings in each. The shared one, with Timothy Eden, was at the Arthur Tooth and Son's Gallery in Haymarket, London in May 1939 with 27 paintings. His exhibitions were relatively successful, 20 paintings sold from the 1933 one and 25 in 1936.²¹ The last exhibition was very well reviewed in both the Observer and the Sunday Times. The Observer critic, Eric Newton reported:

“... I had never realised the wiriness of wire netting before looking at his *Cliffs in March*. With few exceptions each of his watercolours contains a new revelation of this kind...”²²

The Sunday Times was equally impressed by his skills of observation and representation and in both cases the critics see beyond the image and perceive the depths of his work. It is not clear who bought Ravilious's landscapes but, currently, they appear about equally divided between public and private collections. Some pictures were bought directly by or for public galleries, for example, *Cement Works 2* was bought for Sheffield Museum and Galleries and others by the V and A. In February 1940 Ravilious was commissioned as a war artist and all subsequent work was produced for this purpose. A selection of lithographs of submarines were printed and sold from the Leicester Galleries, London in the spring of 1941.

Although he lived modestly, landscape painting could not have been Ravilious's primary source of income, which must have been his design and illustration

²¹ Source Binyon p61 and p98

²² Cited in Binyon p108

commissions for companies like Wedgwood and the Curwen Press and his decorative commissions from private clients, such as the architect Oliver Hill for the Midland Hotel, Morecombe (ill.2). In 1935 the London Transport Publicity Committee agreed a table of fees for artists. A small design by an unknown artist would earn 4 guineas (£4.20) a famous artist, presumably like Nash or Sutherland, could earn £94.10s (worth £3500 at 2005 values) and Eric Ravilious would be paid 12 guineas (worth around £470 at 2005 values) for a watercolour, from which expenses and a commissioning fee would be deducted.²³ The average price for a painting at his first exhibition in 1933 was 10 guineas (£390 in 2005 values) and for his last one in 1939 around 16 guineas (£480 in 2005 values).²⁴ Even by current standards these are low prices for an artist with a reputation and it is interesting that London Transport did not consider Ravilious to be a famous artist, and he was paid accordingly. There is a huge difference between his commissioned works, much of which are light and frivolous, although fit for purpose, and his personal work, which is often darker and more intense. It is apparent that Ravilious was trying to say something very personal and different in his landscapes from his day to day work and that they reflect much more his beliefs, anxieties and values.

²³ *ibid* Bownes and Green p17

²⁴ The source for the exhibition prices is Binyon p142, and, for the conversion to 2005 prices, it is the National Archives website www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

3) 'The Village in the Mind': the political and social significance of the English landscape after 1918

"The real trouble of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness. The country is so lovely: the man-made England is so vile." D.H. Lawrence 1930²⁵

"I may be a wage slave on Monday, but I am a free man on Sunday." Ewan McColl *Manchester Rambler* 1932²⁶

By the beginning of the 20th Century the English landscape was the result of centuries of intervention by man and much of it, particularly in the South and the industrial North and Midlands was relatively densely inhabited. As Lawrence observes in his assessment of Nottinghamshire in 1930, the cities and mining villages of the Midlands were dirty and dominated by industrial processes, so by contrast the countryside was an escape from urban realities. Earlier in the century, British painters seeking to emulate the Impressionists or Post-Impressionists even believed some parts of the landscape to be wild and unspoilt, such as the west of Ireland, North Wales and Cornwall, although, in reality, these areas were heavily managed for agriculture and mineral extraction.²⁷

Nowhere in Britain was free from marks of human intervention. It had been comprehensively mapped for military purposes by the Ordnance Survey during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries and for centuries the countryside had been exploited for agriculture, grazing, hunting, recreation, extraction of raw materials or industry and, in many areas, mediated by landscaping to create artificial views, vistas and patterns of planting and forestation. In the 19th Century significant rural

²⁵ D. H. Lawrence,, 'Nottingham and the Mining Country' *The New Adelphi Magazine*, June- August 1930

²⁶ The song *Manchester Rambler* was written by Ewan McColl in 1932 in support of the Kinder Scout trespass.

²⁷ Holt points out that some British artists sought true untamed 'authentic' landscapes in southern France and moved there to imitate the work of French Impressionists in the right environment. See: Ysanne Holt, *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Aldershot, 2003

depopulation began, particularly to the industrialised cities in the North and Midlands and this resulted in much social change and discontent, as skilled rural workers used to seasonal patterns of work, became unskilled factory workers working to rigid time patterns. However, urban wages were better and more reliable, even if urban living conditions were often appalling.²⁸ In addition, there were rapid improvements to the transport infrastructure bringing the urban closer to the rural, beginning with canals and toll roads; swiftly moving on to railways and, by the 1920s more motorised transport created the need for road improvements, bypasses and even motorways were being planned.²⁹

a. Urbanism and rural change

By 1918, Britain was a substantially urban society and this trend was to continue as it moved rapidly from the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution's heavy industries to the 'light, subtle and clean' benefits of the First Machine Age.³⁰ It was two decades of huge progress, social unrest and change which included significant events that were to have long term implications. The first steps to women's suffrage were passed in 1918 followed by universal suffrage for women over 21 in 1928; the First Labour Government of 1924, the second of 1929-1931 and the General Strike in 1926 strengthened the position of the labour movement only to be weakened by the impact of the worldwide Depression in 1929, and events like the Jarrow March of 1935 reinforced the position of trade unions. Whilst it was a poor time for industry, agriculture and the working population as a whole, the middle class, particularly in

²⁸ A very few enlightened industrialists such as the Lever brothers and George Cadbury improved conditions for working people in the late 19th Century by building self contained urban villages at Port Sunlight on the Wirral and Bournville in Birmingham. Bournville, although a suburb of Birmingham, is modelled on the concept of an ideal rural village.

²⁹ British transport planners were very impressed with the Italian 'autostrade' and the German 'autobahns' both created by modernising Fascist regimes. However, despite plans made in the 1920s the first British motorway was not built until the late 1950s.

³⁰ Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 1960 p11

the South of England, remained relatively untouched by events and were able to spend more time and money on property, travel, leisure and the purchase of art.

By the end of the Great War, agriculture was becoming significantly mechanised and, for example, the first affordable lightweight tractor made by the American company Fordson (later Ford) was being used on British farms in 1918; although, as Russell points out, there were still half a million shire horses still in use in 1935.³¹

The economic structures of agriculture were also changing and in the late 1920s and early 1930s the old landed estates that had dominated farming and employment were being broken up for financial reasons.³² By the end of the war even rural workers were more likely to work in mines, mineral and stone extraction or mills than in agriculture. The popularity of small holdings reduced between the wars as they became unviable and, therefore, unattractive, even to returning soldiers. Larger farms were better able to survive the economic changes and more businessmen became interested in the potential of farming and invested in mechanisation and better business practices. All of these factors resulted in continued rural depopulation and, Burchardt even suggests that the advantage of improved education for rural children increased this as they were taught skills more useful for urban work rather than rural occupations.³³

Rural mechanisation was not a new phenomenon, as Flora Thompson wrote in the early 1940's in her novels about the late 19th century, *Lark Rise to Candleford*:

³¹ James Russell, *Ravilious in Pictures: Sussex and the Downs*, The Mainstone Press, Norwich, 2009

³² The 1937 National Trust Act helped landowners to donate their homes to the NT without paying death duties, eventually turning country houses and gardens into visitor attractions, whilst the estate farmlands were broken up.

³³ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change since 1800*, I.B.Taurus, London, 2002

“Every Autumn appeared a pair of large traction engines, which, posted one on each side of a field, drew a plough across and across by means of a cable”³⁴

However, as Holt observes, these images were not represented in paintings of the time, because artists and their urban middle class clients preferred to see “dignified and time honoured land workers” as these were the abiding images of the English countryside. To represent them as they really were, a discontented, rural poor would not sell pictures, but images of noble peasants working in close relationship with the land, did. Paintings represented a type not an individual; a sanitised community which did not contain poor rural workers, who were generally regarded as uneducated and a potential threat to the wealthier commuting urbanites that began occupying the Home Counties towns and villages in the early part of the century.³⁵ Despite the influence of more realist French artists like Millet, this imagery of English rural workers persisted to and beyond the Great War. Holt quotes a critic of the Art Journal discussing the work of Edward Stott, who painted scenes of the South Downs at the end of the 19th Century, as having a vision that “enabled him to strip actuality of ugliness”.³⁶

Holt also suggests that by the Great War the image of the labourer had lost its place in the foreground of landscape painting and had become “an accessory and no longer an essential icon”.³⁷ This enhanced the rural mythology even further because by removing from their pictures the people who lived, worked and created the English countryside, artists decided to remove the key figures in the management of

³⁴ cited in Holt pg 12

³⁵ The sociologist Ray Pahl described this as ‘Urbes in Rure’ in a seminal report on rural Hertfordshire in 1965

³⁶ ibid Holt p14

³⁷ ibid Holt pp26/27

the landscape. Artists appeared to believe that if representing the disaffected farm worker might destroy the ideal then they should not be included at all and the landscape should deliver the message alone. This allowed the urban dweller who bought these pictures to imagine his or her own bucolic picture of what country life was about; introducing reality into this fantasy was not going to be popular nor would it sell pictures.

This practice in the representation of the landscape continued long after the war and artists, with the exception of Ravilious, did not choose to disturb the rural mythology by portraying its realities. Although Ravilious's landscapes are rarely inhabited, when people did appear in his paintings they were not idealised. His paintings *No29 Bus* 1934 (ill.3) and *The Tractor* 1933 (ill.4) show the grubby corners of South Downs farms which were full of the rubbish and wrecks of a former era. *Cement Works 2* 1934 (ill.5) shows rural industrial workers, not as noble land workers, but as faceless and exhausted. However, Ravilious's circle of left-wing middle class artists and intellectuals were also not immune from romanticising the rural life, choosing to live a bohemian rural existence at Peggy Angus's cottage 'The Furlongs' on the South Downs, as shown in *Interior at Furlongs* 1939 (ill.6) and a number of other domestic scenes.³⁸

³⁸ Peggy Angus was a friend of Ravilious from his student days. An eccentric character, artist, Socialist and supporter of the Soviet Union she was also known as 'Red' Angus. She was a host to many influential artists at her rented cottage 'The Furlongs'. Ravilious and his wife Tirzah were regular visitors as were Helen Binyon, John Piper, the Constructivist Laszlo Moholy Nagy and the modernist architect Serge Chermayeff.

b. The Green and Pleasant Land

In the context of considering the issues affecting post-unification Italy, Dickie argues that nations are a social fiction and nationhood is an imagined but collectively agreed story of a country.³⁹ In England, this might be the notion of the 'green and pleasant land'.⁴⁰ Dickie describes nationhood as being symbolic, such as the football team, the thatched cottage or Big Ben. He argues that the more real the symbols, the more potent they become as a cipher for the nation as a whole. Nationhood is also expressed as a geographical entity or space, which is to be protected from literal or cultural invasion. The English countryside became the geographical space chosen to represent the essence of Englishness after the Great War. Using Dickie's analysis, it also became the fictional space that was to be preserved and fought for, and, to the present day, still retains a mythical quality, despite the apparently overwhelming influence of modernity and internationalism on English culture.

Convinced of the significance of the countryside and the landscape, rather than the cities, as the essence of Englishness and, anxious to stem rural depopulation, post-war governments invested in the reconstruction of rural areas and life. Although this process had started before the war it was accelerated after it and, working alongside voluntary organisations such as the Women's Institute, the Boy Scouts and the Girl

³⁹ John Dickie, 'Imagined Italies', in *Italian Cultural Studies: an introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994 p23

⁴⁰ 'Green and pleasant land' is commonly used to describe England (including for the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony). It is a quote from William Blake's anti-industrial poem '*And did those feet in ancient time*' c1808, which was renamed '*Jerusalem*' and set to music as a patriotic anthem in 1916 by the nationalist composer Sir Hubert Parry. It was later appropriated as the anthem of the Suffragette movement and the Women's Institute, the latter being one of the agencies charged with socially revitalising the countryside.

Guides, governments sought to recreate a perceived pre-war countryside; what Boyes describes as the 'imagined village'.⁴¹ Burkhardt suggests that:

"... (what) those committed to rural reconstruction were ultimately seeking to reconstruct was not any actual village, but a mythical image of a tranquil village England from before the shattering effect of the war, the 'village in the mind'.⁴²

This was also paralleled by the other revivals in real and imagined rural cultural tradition, such as music and dance, which sought to identify an authentic English music (as opposed to the German classical music that dominated the concert hall) and helped reinforce middle class perceptions of a rural ideal. In the folk revival, as in painting, old and forgotten rural cultures were identified as a true alternative and uncultivated art, enhancing the dominant idea of the noble, skilled rural worker, compared to the urban machine operator. Songs and dances were not simply catalogued for archival purposes, but designed to be performed as instruments of cultural change ensuring that the folk revival contributed to rural reconstruction by giving it a cultural as well as a social base. Boyes records how this resulted in folk dancing being taught in primary schools and the rise of adult dance and music groups, as well as the appropriation of folk music themes in classical compositions by composers such as Vaughan Williams.⁴³

Critical to the reconstruction was the investment in community facilities such as village halls, as part of the 'imagined' village culture. However, Burchardt considers that these were often used to import more urban leisure pursuits such as film shows,

⁴¹ Georgina Boyes, *The imagined village: culture, ideology and the English Folk Revival*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, England, 1993

⁴² *ibid* Burchardt p146

⁴³ *ibid* Boyes

fashionable dances and keep fit classes, all of which brought urban values to rural areas.⁴⁴ None of this investment reduced the flow of people to the cities and a severe slump in agricultural prices between 1929 and 1932 continued to encourage depopulation and reduced the need for farm workers, allowing the middle classes to move in to the villages, particularly those who were able to choose to live outside the cities of the South and the Midlands and commute into work. Two impacts of this were the suburbanisation of cities and, for the more aspirational and adventurous, a move to the countryside, even though roads were still relatively poor and cars unreliable. This was ultimately made easier by the expansion of the railways, improvements to the road network, improved bus services and increased car ownership.

It is interesting to compare what was happening in the social reinvention of the English countryside with what was happening in France during the same period. In both countries the rural landscape became an emblem of nationalism and national pride, and the newly defined rural communities became idealised. In France the rural peasant was made into a cult figure and was targeted politically by the Right as the symbol of the Republic. The English reconstruction was largely social, but Golan shows that, in France, reconstruction was also literal, because of the devastation caused to towns, villages and the landscape by the hostilities, particularly in the North.⁴⁵ Both reconstructions fuelled the argument for nationalism in the 1930s, although the creation of popular nationalist political movements that drew on revived rural or folk traditions was more successful in Germany and, to a certain extent, in

⁴⁴ *ibid* Burchardt p148

⁴⁵ Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: art and politics in France between the wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995

France, than in Britain; which rejected ultra-nationalists like the British Union of Fascists who tried to propagate Italian, German and French models.

In France, as in England, there was a collective ethos to restore what the country had been like before the Great War. Golan asserts that by late 1920s architects and artists were distancing themselves from the 'machine aesthetic' of Modernism and there was a return to naturalism and historicism partly because this would make complex cultural issues appear simpler and unproblematic.⁴⁶ She argues that there was a resurgence of traditional landscape painting which was not just a return to the pre-avant-garde France but a need to reaffirm 'cultural supremacy' and the role of the rural at the centre of French culture, thereby, symbolically repairing the landscape damaged by war. Even towns and cities destroyed by the war were reconstructed as facsimiles of their pre-war form.⁴⁷ The new urbanism ideas of Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect living and working in France, were probably more popular in Italy than in France after 1918. In the 1920s memory and nostalgia became dominant forces in both English and French landscape art and reconstruction and it was not until the 1930s that radical English artists were beginning to belatedly adopt the ideas of the pre-war French Modernists thus moving in the opposite artistic direction.

c. Suburbanisation and recreation

In addition to the social reconstruction, investment had considerable effect on the shape of the English landscape. The Forestry Commission was established in 1918

⁴⁶ *ibid* Golan Preface p x

⁴⁷ For example, the city of Arras, which was virtually destroyed in two major offensives, was reconstructed with replicas of its former Gothic and 19th Century buildings.

to provided sustainable sources of timber to replace those used during the war, principally in the trenches, and planted large areas of new forest to replenish timber stocks, although this was largely in the North of England.⁴⁸ The changing patterns of farming, land ownership and mechanisation impacted on field configurations. Critically, suburbanisation resulted in nearly 4 million houses being built in the countryside during the two decades.⁴⁹ By the mid 1920s and 1930s the pattern of leisure use of the countryside increased tremendously as more and urban workers were able to take holidays (culminating in the statutory requirement to give holiday pay under the Holiday Pay Act of 1938). Improved roads, greater car ownership (which rose 10 fold in 20 years), improved public transport and the expansion of organised bus and charabanc trips from industrial centres all started putting pressure on the landscape. For the many who could not afford cars, walking and cycling were the real alternatives. The 1920's and 1930's become a golden age for cycle touring thanks to improved touring bicycle design and the creation of cycle clubs, such as the socialist Clarion club, which popularised the activity.⁵⁰ All this was supported by improved information for tourists and visitors. The Shell Guides to areas of interest in Britain started in 1934 edited by John Piper and John Betjeman, and using artists, including Paul Nash, to illustrate them. Ordnance Survey maps were specifically published for leisure use in the 1930s and in 1930 the Youth Hostel Association and, in 1931, the National Council of Ramblers' Federations (later the Ramblers Association) were founded.

⁴⁸ Source: The Forestry Commission website www.forestry.gov.uk

⁴⁹ Source: Mary and Neville Ward, *Home in the Twenties and Thirties*, Ian Allan Ltd, London, 1978 p70

⁵⁰ The National Clarion Cycling Club was formed in Birmingham in 1894, but reached its peak between the wars. Source: www.clarioncc.org

For people living in London, the Home Counties (the less industrialised home of the ideal English rural landscape) were opened up by extended and improved public transport services such as the London Transport country bus services and extended over ground commuter train networks. In 1915 the Metropolitan Railway *Metroland* brochure was published which prompted the development of northern suburbs and access to the countryside outside central London. Between 1924 and 26 the Northern line was extended to Edgware, 10 miles north of Charing Cross and south to Morden. Bus and underground trips from London to the Home Counties countryside were promoted as early as 1910 but in 1930 the Green Line bus service to towns in the Home Counties was introduced, and in 1932 to 1934 the Piccadilly line was extended west and north. London Transport managers thought that the introduction of landscape paintings on posters in railway stations, promoting day trips to the countryside would also be uplifting for urban workers travelling to and from work.⁵¹

Elsewhere, the development of better train services also increased access and London Transport and the regional rail networks invested a great deal in advertising to encourage off peak recreational rail travel; commissioning many notable artists and illustrators to design these campaigns. The development and promotion of London Transport was important to the career of Ravilious. The campaigns were encouraged by the visionary Frank Pick, and although Ravilious did not produce any posters, in fact two commissioned to promote visits to Greenwich were not used (ill.7); he did, however, illustrate a number of brochures promoting countryside activities. The breadth of Pick's support for English artists can be seen in other

⁵¹ David Bownes and Oliver Green, *London Transport Posters: a Century of Art and Design*, Lund Humphries and London Transport Museum, London, 2008 p33

posters (ills. 8/9/10). Pick's personal taste was quite conservative, but he did provide the opportunity for very Modernist work such as the Graham Sutherland's Surrealist poster *Go out into the Country* (ill.10).

Curiously, despite the increase in leisure activities and housing development in the countryside and the consequent pressures on areas like the South Downs and the South Coast, Ravilious did not choose to portray its impact. His landscape watercolours rarely contained people, and where they did, they were usually his friends or anonymous rural workers. He also rarely showed vehicles, except ships and trains and, when he did they were always had an essential role in the narrative of the picture. This is in sharp contrast to his murals and other decorative works which were full of people and activity, often engaged in leisure pursuits. His numerous paintings of Newhaven are unpopulated; *Newhaven Harbour* 1935/36 (ill.11) shows a cross Channel ferry from France about to enter the harbour on a sunny day, but there are no people shown working on the dock or any waiting for the ship.⁵² His painting *Late August Beach* 1938, illustrates 19th Century bathing huts on the beach in Aldeburgh, Suffolk; the doors are open but there are no bathers. Nor are there any visitors at very popular sites like the The White Horse, Westbury. This is not because Ravilious could not draw figures, nor that these spaces are likely to have been empty, he has deliberately chosen to exclude them from his pictures. It appears that he has removed images of people or displays of pleasure from these pictures to focus exclusively on what these landscapes have to say for themselves; to separate frivolity from his serious intent. Rather as the pictures of farmyard rubbish (*No29 Bus* and *The Tractor*) hint at rural decline and poverty; the seaside

⁵² *Newhaven Harbour* is one of a number of lithographs commissioned from a selection of artists to be sold to schools and the public to popularise the purchase and appreciation of art.

pictures only hint at pleasure, travel and movement. In an island culture the coastline has other meanings; it is the first line of defence and the area most vulnerable to attack. In the years leading up to another war it is possible that Ravillious is showing those parts of England and Englishness that needed to be valued and protected, not because they are picturesque (Newhaven Harbour is a working dock), but because they are emblematic of or gateways to English culture. Perhaps the best example of this is *Beachy Head* c1939 (ill.12), painted around the beginning of the Second World War and showing a night scene in which a lighthouse, a symbol of safety and security, illuminates the edges of the South Downs and the English Channel; the vulnerable junction between the landscape of Englishness and the threat of invasion.

d. The South Downs

The huge cultural and social differences between the English regions were an important factor in the use of and access to the landscape, particularly the rugged landscape of the industrial North and the gentler downs of the rural South. The landscape that became defined as the most representative and characteristic of English scenery (and therefore, English aspirations) was the chalk down lands of the South in Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Berkshire, Wiltshire and Dorset. The pressure to preserve this area is reflected in the early purchases of the National Trust. Burkhardt argues that this was also the most benign and conservative of the English landscapes and had been created and developed by wealthy landowners and had the most perfect juxtaposition of buildings with churches, manor houses, cottages and farms.⁵³

⁵³ ibid Burchardt

In the Northern industrial areas access for the urban working class became a political issue and interventions like the mass trespass of Kinder Scout in 1932, by industrial workers and walkers from Manchester and Sheffield (what Ewan McColl describes as a 'wage slave'), eventually helped the move for greater access to the countryside and the creation of national paths and national parks through legislation in the 1940s; even though at the time it was not supported by the National Council of Ramblers' Federations. For people living in London and the South East access was encouraged and relatively easy. Transport networks were good and car ownership was high. For artists like Ravilious the rolling chalk lands of the South Downs had ancient footways and tracks which had been accessible for centuries. Even so, Ravilious's 1935 painting *Chalk Paths* (ill.13) shows these ancient tracks physically separated from public access by a heavy barbed wire fence, and there was an access rally near the White Horse at Westbury in June 1937.⁵⁴

Ravilious subsequently painted *The Westbury Horse* in 1939 and this painting also expresses his perspective on the changing countryside (ill.14). The Westbury White Horse is one of a number in Wiltshire and is thought to have been created in the late 17th Century as a "mock-Saxon" folly.⁵⁵ By the time Ravilious painted it, it had been restored a number of times and was stabilised with concrete, but it was valued as a representation of the heritage and the unique chalk environment of the Downs. A recent photograph (ill.15) suggests that Ravilious's picture is topographically correct, although he has softened the contours of the hill. In the painting the horse carving and the hill that it occupies are in the foreground of the picture and in sunlight but the

⁵⁴ It is perhaps an indication of the attitudes of the time that, in the North, the working class campaign for access was a violently resisted 'trespass', whereas in the South the more middle class protest was a congenial 'rally'.

⁵⁵ Source: wiltshirewhitehorses.org.uk

plain below the hill is in a grey monotone and the sky looks ominous and stormy. Ravilious chooses to show the railway line, the Great Western line between London and Penzance, which still exists but is not even visible on the photograph, by having a train run through the centre of the image. The train is out of scale and is typical of his portrayal of moving trains, which look more like toys, rather than the real thing.⁵⁶

If he wanted to appeal to the conceit of the rural ideal he might have painted a topographical representation of the Wiltshire landscape contrasting the downs with the plain to the north and highlighting the unique heritage of the White Horse, and the changing weather conditions. However, by disrupting the White Horse picture with what appears to be a freight train (an iron horse) he immediately introduces an element of modernity, industry and functionalism into the scene disturbing the pastoral and picturesque with detailed reality and, dramatically, contrasting the old and the new. He could also be taking a preservationist perspective in this picture by highlighting the vibrant colours of the old and contrasting this with the grim monotone of the new. However, in selecting both, Ravilious is in effect opening up the debate, by asking the question of which is the most relevant image; the White Horse or the iron horse, and which expresses England and the Englishness the most on the eve of another war?⁵⁷

His painting *Train Landscape* (ill.16), also painted in 1939, appears to reverse the scene, showing the horse from a train. The emphasis here is on the detail of the train carriage, showing Ravilious's interest in train travel and he is also updating an often painted perspective, as in Augustus Egg's *Travelling Companions* 1862 (ill.17),

⁵⁶ Russell suggests that Ravilious painted this in his studio using a toy train as a model.

⁵⁷ In 1947 Auden, reviewing some poems by John Betjeman, described the British attachment to the landscape as 'topophilia': "Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophil because it is lacking in history..... history manifested by objects is essential, the quantity of the history and the quality of the object are irrelevant; a branch railroad is as valuable as a Roman wall..." cited by Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape 1927-1955*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007 p1

Frederick Cayley Johnson's *The Long Journey* 1923 (ill.18) and Tirzah Garwood's (Ravilious's wife) 1929-30 etching, *The Train Journey* (ill.19). In fact, Ravilious originally painted the Wilmington Giant in the background but was not happy with it, so Tirzah later took a section of another painting with the White Horse in it and pasted it over the Giant.⁵⁸ So this is not a reversal of *The Westbury Horse* but a collage, however, its significance is the contrast between the old and the modern which is a strong theme of his landscapes.

e. Archaeology and Modernism

The chalk figures of the South Downs are defined by the geography, geology and historic settlement of the area. Although they are many centuries old they are modern in the sense that they create the link between the past and the present in the same landscape and representing them in art is a feature of English Modernism. They also symbolise longevity and permanence in the midst of a rapidly changing world and cultural climate and it is no accident that these monuments still exist and are still maintained whilst many examples of 20th Century modernity have disappeared or gone into obscurity. One of the functions of the heritage movement and industry is to preserve that which is not only valuable but also is valued by society; in the early 21st Century, as in the early 20th Century, the objects and the myths that are preserved are substantially the same.

Ravilious's interest in the White Horse at Westbury and other ancient and historic sites reflected a renewed public and artistic interest in the ancient marks and remains that covered the English countryside. Ancient sites were venerated as symbols of national heritage as many were unique to British culture and, therefore,

⁵⁸ *ibid* Russell p38

British identity and Englishness.⁵⁹ Archaeology was popularised in the 1920s and 1930s by prominent excavations such as those started at Maiden Castle in Dorset in 1934 and the discovery of Sutton Hoo treasure in Suffolk in 1939. The Ordnance Survey published seven tourist maps of ancient sites between 1924 and 1939 and the Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882 was revised in 1913 and 1931 and, by 1932; there were over 3000 scheduled monuments. The purpose of the scheduling was to protect them from encroaching development and, for example, in the 1930s the Scottish marmalade magnate, Keiller, acquired the Avebury circle site in Wiltshire, stopping development and restoring it to what was believed to be its prehistoric state.

Artists showed a strong interest in ancient sites and in the early 1930's Paul Nash first started photographing Avebury and used it as the basis for one of his most famous Surrealist paintings *Equivalents for the Megaliths* 1935 (ill.20). Nash reduces the stone circle to a group of geometrical shapes located in a natural landscape with an impression of nearby Silbury Hill in the background. Ravilious's approach to ancient and historic monuments, particularly the chalk cut figures of the South Downs was more conventional and, with the exception of *The Train Journey* collage, located them in their natural landscape. The chalk figures are both abstract and spiritual (in the sense that there is no evidence of literal meanings for most of them) and in Ravilious's pictures, their mystical essence contrasts and juxtaposes with the reality of other landscape features that he chooses to select. It is this dichotomy of the contrast between the machine aesthetic of the modern age and the past (as Ravilious represents in *The Westbury Horse*); that Smiles describes as

⁵⁹ British culture after the war was described as 'English', ignoring the Welsh, Irish or Scottish influence.

between the 'mechanical' and 'humane'; and which was at the centre of the preservationist and modernisers debate.⁶⁰

“ To produce works of art, or to write about them, with reference to that prehistoric landscape in the twentieth century is thus to resist the idea of modernity as a rupture and in its place to attempt an accommodation with the past.”⁶¹

Two of Ravilious's most interesting interpretations of the historic landscape are his paintings of *The Cerne Abbas Giant* (ill.21) and *The Wilmington Giant* (ill.22) both painted in 1939, although the Wilmington Giant also figures as a symbol in Ravilious and Edward Bawden's early commission for a mural at Morley College, London in 1928.⁶² Russell suggests that the lack of earlier evidence indicates that both giants were also carved around the end of the 17th Century, but in an ancient style.⁶³ The presence of mature crops in *The Wilmington Giant* suggests it was painted in late summer and the absence of leaves on the trees in *The Cerne Abbas Giant* suggests late autumn or early winter. War was declared on 3 September 1939 so in these pictures war was either imminent or had begun. Both pictures are painted in dark muted greys and greens as though storms are approaching, but also appearing to represent the camouflage colours that were so prevalent in, and representative of, war. The juxtaposition between modernity and the historic is exemplified by the detailed rendering of the fencing forming the field boundaries in the foreground of each picture, particularly the barbed wire. Although barbed wire had been used in agriculture in England since the latter half of the 19th Century, in the public

⁶⁰ Sam Smiles, 'Equivalent for the Megaliths: prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50' in David Peter Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell, editors, *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880 – 1940*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002 p206

⁶¹ *ibid* Smiles p220

⁶² The Wilmington Giant was donated to the Sussex Archaeological Society in the 1920s by the 9th Duke of Devonshire, the same landowner who violently resisted the Kinder Scout trespass in 1932.

⁶³ *ibid* Russell p36 and p46

imagination it was associated with Great War trench warfare of 20 years earlier and a relatively few miles away in Northern France and Flanders. Therefore, these pictures have complex iconography; the continuation of the debate between the old and the new; the implication of shadow of war over the Southern English landscape and the potent symbolism of barbed wire as a reminder of the last war and a foretelling of the conflict to come. In *The Cerne Abbas Giant*, in particular, the representation of barbed wire fences has a strong resonance with many Great War paintings (ill.23). Both figures were turfed over in 1939 to camouflage them from enemy aircraft, so Ravilious was also recording symbols of a threatened Englishness.

f. The politics of preservation

The opening up and revitalisation of the countryside was not without its political and social battles and led to conflicts between modernisers and preservationists. The aggressive nature of the Kinder Scout trespass which culminated in fights between trespassers and the Duke of Devonshire's game keepers, and the environmental impact of bus loads of working class day trippers, became a source of concern for the more conservative preservationists. Some saw access to the countryside as a class issue and were concerned about the potential chaos that might ensue if freedoms were not controlled. This also applied to built development which might also ruin the ideal of the English landscape as small plots of land were being bought up by individuals who desired the rural life and they were living in such oddities as redundant railway carriages, as well as building cheap bungalows.⁶⁴ However, their initiative undermined the whole ethos of ordered reconstruction. There emerged two

⁶⁴ A prefabricated bungalow called the 'Cottabunga' could be delivered to a site for £245 (£12000 in current prices) in 1928. Source: David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, Reaktion Books, London, 1998 p41

rural environments; the preservationists ideal rural Englishness and the uncontrolled developments of plots bought by people looking for freedom and individuality. The architect Clough William Ellis, in his 1928 book *England and the Octopus*, criticised South Downs speculative developers:

...." you found five thousand acres of Downland pasture - the immemorial resort of peaceful wanderers from the adjacent towns: you left it a forlorn and struggling camp of slatternly shacks and gimcrack bungalows, unfinished roads and weatherbeaten advertisements.....You brought chaos out of order." ⁶⁵

Ravilious appears happy to upset the ideals of the preservationists and in 1936 bought two old Boer War fever wagons that had been used for workers lodgings whilst the Alpha Cement Works was developed, and converted them for use as studios and to live in if Peggy Angus's lease on 'The Furlongs' came to an end. His 1936 painting of the wagons, *Caravans* (ill.24) is an interesting reading of the landscape. It is a dark, almost monochrome, late autumn scene; the trees are nearly stripped of leaves, several bare branches lie on the ground and the wagons stand starkly silhouetted on the brow of a hill against a grey sky. The lane is also crossed with electricity wires, a sign of modernity that also offended some preservationists. It is almost as though the preservationist's fears of the despoliation of the landscape are encapsulated in one picture. Ravilious did not paint it to show what might happen; he is showing what was really there. He was fascinated by and sought out such views of the landscape and this can be read as a celebration, not a critique.

In fact, the whole Alpha Cement Works, which he painted a number of times, (see ill.5) was the subject of local controversy as a result of its impact on the landscape, and is a microcosm of the preservation and conservation debate. When developed in

⁶⁵ Cited in Matless, p40

1928, the cement works and its quarry surrounded Asham House which, until 1919, had been leased by the Bloomsbury Modernists Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. The house was acquired by the cement works in 1932, eventually became uninhabitable and was finally demolished in 1994. The despoliation of the house and the surrounding area by quarrying and cement manufacturing became a cause celebre for local conservationists in the 1930s. Yet Ravilious found this environmental damage and industrial use fascinating when he was first shown the site by Peggy Angus. The paintings were not part of a conservationist's campaign but a deliberate selection of the most invasive structure in an otherwise perfect English landscape as if to emphasise the point that the countryside was not the idealists dream but had to sustain the rural economy and support urban demands for products such as cement.

According to Matless, preservationists visualised the countryside as a maternal woman whose honour was under threat from disfiguring and inappropriate development.⁶⁶ Some saw agriculture not as an industry, but a backdrop to the ideal village and in 1931 the planner Dudley Stamp argued for the improvement of agricultural land for aesthetic as well as productive reasons. The planner Patrick Abercrombie, who had travelled in China, even advocated the application of Feng Shui to the design of the landscape.⁶⁷ All these concerns were a reason for the tightening of planning controls, particularly on suburban and 'ribbon' development and to the foundation of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) in 1926, through the initiative of Abercrombie. The CPRE was not a conservative

⁶⁶ Feminising the landscape was also an Italian Fascist theme, particularly in the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, Matless p46

preservationist lobby group but wanted to see appropriate and sympathetic planning and development in the countryside.⁶⁸

Alongside the debate between the preservationists and the modernisers ran a parallel argument between the traditionalists and Modernists in the arts, often operating from the same political platforms. The next chapter goes on to look at this debate, how it affected the development of landscape painting in England, and Ravilious's place within this.

⁶⁸ For example, as a result of CPRE pressure in 1935 the first green belt was proposed around London but was not implemented until 1955, after the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act.

4) Going Modern: the politics of English Modernist art after the Great War

“Whether it is possible to ‘go modern’ and still ‘be British’ is a question vexing quite a few people today...The battle lines have been drawn up: internationalism versus an indigenous culture; renovation versus conservatism; the industrial versus the pastoral; the functional versus the futile.” Paul Nash ‘Going Modern and Being British’, 1932⁶⁹

Nash’s challenge summarises what he saw as the issues facing British painting in the early 1930s as the political and economic conditions of the era prompted greater political awareness by both painters and critics; however, it could equally be the opening of a debate about the countryside. This debate was important in the development of painting between the wars and also highlights the parallel protection of Englishness by the British art establishment. The work of Ravilious was caught between the protection of ideas of the landscape and the modernising of English art practice, and he steered a relatively safe, but individualistic path between them. Both debates were highly political and divided different ideological approaches. For example, Modernist approaches like abstraction, Cubism and Surrealism were argued by some conservative critics to be dangerously Left wing and, ultimately, contributing to a proletarian revolution. On the other hand, the art historian, Anthony Blunt, who was ideologically on the Left, criticised them as being bourgeois and incomprehensible to working people in 1937.

"the line of Daumier, Courbet, the early Van Gogh, Meunier and Dalou is that of the real art of the growing proletariat, while that of the bourgeoisie continues towards the abstraction of the twentieth century"⁷⁰

Political ideology was becoming more overtly connected with art and, the politics of critics and the public institutions that supported painting in Britain, were becoming more influential than the private patrons of previous centuries.

⁶⁹ Paul Nash, ‘Going Modern and Being British’ *The Weekend Review*, 12 March 1932

⁷⁰ Anthony Blunt ‘The Realism Quarrel’ *Left Review* April 1937

Apparently bourgeois and formally conservative painting, as produced by Ravilious, actually made very direct artistic and critical statements about the rural landscape. Although Ravilious was not politically active and was not part of the Modernism versus tradition debate, he did show an interest in Leftist ideals, through his connections with Peggy Angus and her many radical contacts, selling work to support the Republican cause in Spain and exhibiting in the *Artists Against Fascism* exhibition in 1937.⁷¹ As has been discussed earlier, Ravilious's political statements were made by subverting the landscape tradition and through the selection of specific imagery which implicitly made statements about the English countryside, the people who managed it, the attitudes of the preservationists and, more specifically, its image and place in the collective psyche of the nation. In addition, his linking of the historic and pre-historic marks on the landscape with the modern world, illustrate both the permanent and transient nature of the landscape, arguably a very Modernist perception, even if he has not been recognised as a significant Modernist artist, unlike many of his peers. Morphet notes that:

“An important difference between Ravilious and the abstract, Surrealist and Euston Road artists of the 1930s, was that he did not have a crusading attitude regarding the direction that art should take”⁷²

Not being a crusader did not exclude him from being radical, but it did exclude him from being noticed; in contrast to an artist Paul Nash who not only experimented with abstraction and Surrealism, but was also a critical theorist.

⁷¹ Binyon reports him being oblivious to Mussolini's Blackshirts marching in Florence whilst on his study tour to Tuscany, as well as supporting some Leftist causes. Binyon p31

⁷² Richard Morphet in the Introduction to Binyon p8

a. Ravilious and Modernism

The place of Modernism in English art in the 1920s is complex. The Impressionists and post-Impressionists had a significant influence on painting in England in the late 19th and early 20th Century both through the residence of artists like Monet, Pissaro, Sisley and Whistler, and the later works of Sickert, Gore and Gilman. It would be a reasonable assertion that work emanating from England made a contribution to the development of Modernism internationally, particularly the work of the Vorticists. Vorticism was a very radical but also very short lived movement that drew on some of the ideas of Italian Futurism, although its members (with the exception of Nevinson) did not sign up to Marinetti's Futurist manifesto and did not subscribe to his glorification of violence. It effectively died in the early days of the war as its key members experienced the horrors of the trenches. By the end of the war even Nevinson had reverted to painting realist war landscapes; whilst Marinetti's ideas lasted into the 1940s in Italy, as he espoused and supported Mussolini's regime.

In the 1920s English painting was traditionalist and isolated from European movements. Alfrey argues that there was a need to 'assert' a native art alongside European avant-garde, which is similar to the need to develop English music. Therefore, some Romantic artists such as Turner, Cotman, Constable and Palmer became influential. Speaking of Turner, Alfrey cites a relationship between his formal invention and a 'more comprehensive account of the workings of landscape', something Ravilious also aspired to.⁷³ He also contends that reasons for the decline in landscape painting may have been linked to the central medium, watercolour, becoming the province of the amateur and the conservative; the landscape itself degenerating and, therefore, becoming less interesting and landscape being linked

⁷³ *ibid* Alfrey et al p19

to escapism and 'nostalgia'; the province of the preservationist in the rural reconstruction. As a result there was an incompatibility between traditionalist and Modernist painters although conventional landscape painting became very marketable (the act of buying a piece of the imagined countryside) as did painting manuals for amateurs. Nevertheless, the medium was critically dismissed until artists like Nash and Piper started to paint watercolour landscapes in a Modernist way, but Ravilious's more subtle style of Modernism was scarcely acknowledged at all.

European Modernism did not really impact on English landscape painting until the 1930's. Harrison regrets that the excitement of this effectively led to the dismissal of earlier painters like William Nicholson, Augustus John and Wilson Steer:

"All three men continued for most of their lives to produce a fair number of good and professional paintings in comparatively conservative styles, and gradually fell from the view of modernist observers while many lesser painters became celebrated for their incompetent attempts to ape a modern manner".⁷⁴

This analysis encapsulates the prevalent attitude towards landscape painting in the early 20th Century. It was considered unfashionable, traditional, anti-modern and a cultural backwater in which many good painters got lost. In the visual arts fashion, critical and curatorial interests usually dictate what is debated and championed and not popularity or quality. As a result, the excitement of progress or the 'shock of the new' (as the critic Robert Hughes described it) can leave competent and significant artists in its wake. Some artists are happy to be left behind, others will move with the mood of the times and some will work within both tradition and change. Ravilious operated in the latter area.

⁷⁴ Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, 2nd edition, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994 p24

It is interesting to compare the work of William Nicholson with that of Ravilious. Nicholson painted moody, spare, almost minimalist South Downs landscapes before the Great War, such as *The Downs (Rottingdean)* 1909 (ill.25). It is easy to see why Harrison might admire Nicholson's formal skills and regret that he and others have been, in his opinion, sidelined whilst lesser attempts at Modernism have become prominent. However, the simple directness and subtle use of colour of Nicholson, is an insight into the later approach of Ravilious, who perhaps did not get the recognition that Nicholson achieved because of his chosen medium. In his analysis of English Modernism, Harrison does not mention Ravilious at all, but there is a clue to his attitude to the type of work Ravilious was producing, in his criticism of the artist Tristan Hillier who moved to France and, in Harrison's words 'virtually withdrew from participation in the modern movement' engaging in 'heightened realism'⁷⁵ Hillier's painting *La Route des Alpes* 1937 (ill.26) shows very similar realist interests to those of Ravilious, despite the formal differences.

Until the 1930s the commercial art market was the principal source of income for artists, in the absence of public institutions buying contemporary work, but it is always sensitive to the economy and the post war economic decline impacted on the market for art, leading to demobilised artists finding it difficult to work. In addition to this British painting was compared unfavourably to French painting which was the dominant market for English art dealers in the 1920s. In the 1920s most English artists were distant and isolated from the opportunities of engaging with Modernism that had existed pre-war. It was easy for French artists to get exhibitions in London, but English artists could not get exhibitions abroad and, therefore, had to work in an English context. However, by 1930, some artists, such as Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson

⁷⁵ ibid Harrison p310

and Henry Moore, had achieved sufficient international reputation to be recognised outside England. As the high point of European Modernism had been pre-war, this was a late recognition of the English contribution but enabled artists to travel more in Europe and mix with artists and not just dealers and galleries. In 1930, Paul Nash and Edward Burra went to the South of France together and, whilst in Paris, were able to see collections of contemporary French art which encouraged their interests in Surrealism. During this period Ravilious went on a short holiday to Normandy but did not produce much work, because of poor weather! Although he was not ignorant of what was happening he appears to have chosen to work outside of the English Modernist mainstream.⁷⁶

Harrison considers that in the 1920s culture was regressing rather than moving forward. He cites as an example the Seven and Five society, which was formed in 1919 by ex-servicemen artists (not war artists) and had a manifesto that expressed the view that there had been 'too much pioneering'. Harrison believes that the society was unsure, with no specific direction, and too concerned with the 'the essential realities', and valuing 'sincerity'.⁷⁷ He also finds regressive the historically uncontroversial return to the genres of still-life and landscape in the 1920s. The 1920s was a decade of political, social and economic upheaval but Harrison argues, the social class of the significant artists of this period left them untouched by these issues, and, therefore, visual art did not significantly comment on them. As a Marxist perspective, this has a ring of truth, but the situation had changed by the 1930s, particularly with the social realism of photographers such as Brandt.

⁷⁶ For example, Ravilious knew both Paul Nash (as his former teacher) and Henry Moore, who he had visited Tuscany with whilst at the Royal College of Art.

⁷⁷ *ibid* Harrison p164

Ravilious did not comment on the issues affecting the urban working class, but this was not a result of his social class as his representation of the rural landscape and rural industry certainly raises awareness of the position and the plight of the rural working class. His lack of overt political commitment suggests that he might have, at best, seen the debate on the political impact of art as being pointless or, indeed, been oblivious to it. Whilst artists and critics argued the political purpose of art, the market for it continued to be the middle classes who were relatively untouched by the economic depressions of the late 1920s and early 30s, and in that period were the clients for art and design.⁷⁸ In this context Ravilious's landscapes gave him the freedom of personal expression outside of the restraints of earning a living.

b. Protecting a 'native British art'

Exposure to European Modernism was limited for institutional reasons as there was no collection of modern European art in public galleries until the National Gallery of British Art (later called the Tate) opened its foreign gallery in 1926.⁷⁹ Prior to this artists and members of the general public that did not travel were rarely exposed to contemporary European art. Taylor argues that the situation was not helped because of a right-wing, traditionalist critical backlash against European avant-garde art and Modernism, which also accounts for the delay in a permanent public exhibition of European artists. Ebenezer Wake Cook, a watercolourist and the Honorary Secretary of the Royal British-Colonial Society of Artists, criticised contemporary art in *Vanity Fair* magazine in 1904: "The goddess of Vulgarity is ousting the modest

⁷⁸ In the absence of an equivalent to the Bauhaus or de Stijl movement in Britain, Paul Nash and other artists, architects and designers (not Ravilious) established *Unit One* to forge relationships between art and design, and to market their work collectively, inevitably to a middle class clientele.

⁷⁹ This was because of the restrictive conditions of The Chantrey Bequest, established in 1840, as the primary source for galleries to purchase British contemporary fine art. It was not until its conditions were amended in 1904 (following a House of Lords Select Committee Inquiry) that it could be used for purchasing foreign art, supporting the establishment of the Modern Foreign gallery 22 years later.

muse of Painting..... Fads, fudges, and foolish fashions displace first principles.....”⁸⁰

Roger Fry's *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* exhibition of 1910/11, which did enable artists and the public to see relatively recent European art, encouraged even more criticism from the British art establishment and some critics even considered Post-Impressionism to be degenerate. Although during the war there was less opposition to foreign contemporary art, the 1915 Curzon Committee inquiry into the purchasing policy of the National Gallery of British Art, referred to the:

“...occasionally ill-disciplined productions of some contemporaneous continental schools whose work might exercise a disturbing and even detrimental influence upon our young painters”⁸¹

The criticism of European art was aesthetic, xenophobic and racist and took place against a rising concern about immigration from Russia and in particular by Jews that had resulted in the Aliens Act of 1905. Much of the Right's vitriol was targeted at Jews, and art by Jewish artists.⁸² However, the Right wing positions of some of critics were misplaced as the only truly Fascist regime in Europe in the early 1920's, Italy, was actively supporting and commissioning Modernist artists and architects, some of them Jewish. This would not be the same in Germany where Modernist 'degenerate' art and artists were vilified and suppressed by Hitler after 1933.

Taylor also cites the rise in racist and fascist tendencies amongst the upper classes and the Tory right in the post-war period,(which culminated in the rise of Mosley's British Union of Fascists); although this had been confused and countered in the pre-

⁸⁰ Cited by Brandon Taylor, 'Foreigners and Fascists: Patterns of Hostility to Modern Art in Britain before and after the First World War' in Corbett et al p173

⁸¹ *ibid* Taylor p177

⁸² One of the most infamous examples was the outrage over the work of Jacob Epstein, exemplified by the removal of his frieze on the British Medical Association building in 1908.

war art world by the privileged, but more liberal, views of the Bloomsbury group and the Vorticists. The xenophobia continued after the war and, in a speech in spring 1926, the Tory Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin argued for England to be 'beautified' by 'native British art'.⁸³ The attitude of Baldwin to art has distinct resonances with the preservationist view of the countryside and the folk revival espousing native British music; it is England turning its back on the world and creating its own cultural cocoon. The conservative Cook, also equated Modernism in art with Bolshevism (as did the influential *Morning Post* newspaper) and the 1917 revolution in Russia must have made it very easy for the Right to draw simple, albeit inaccurate, parallels. As a watercolourist, he also defended well into the early 1920s the traditional and classical approach to the medium, because of its apparently higher artistic principles, mixing his political prejudices with his artistic ones.

These attacks on Modernism and contemporary art may have helped delay the absorption of European ideas but they did not stop progress completely, and the lesson learnt from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism had, at least, been absorbed into British painting and is evident before the war in the work of painters like Spencer Gore and William Nicholson. A comparison of both the subject and the style of Pissaro's *Lordship Lane Station* 1871 (ill.27) and Gore's *Letchworth Station* 1912 (ill.28) exemplifies this link. Working against this trend were the more radical Vorticists, the Bloomsbury Group and some war artists. Nevertheless, in this negative atmosphere it is not surprising that the 1920s were something of a vacuum for progress in landscape painting, which did not lose its Impressionist and Post-Impressionist ties until the 1930s. In this context the emergence of an artist like Ravilious who did not espouse the principles of Post-Impressionism but also did not

⁸³ Baldwin's influential patriotic speech 'England' was given to the Royal Society of British Sculptors and cited in Taylor p188

seek to emulate more radical European ideas, is important as he was able to reinvigorate English landscape painting and show that it could combine modern and traditional ideas and become a critical genre again.

5) Conclusion

The twenty one years between the wars the major Western European countries involved in the Great War; Germany, Britain, France, Belgium and Italy; became introspective and were dedicated to rebuilding nations and national pride. Britain became culturally isolated within Europe, seeking to develop a specifically English culture and identity centred on the notion of the 'green and pleasant land'. It needed art that would respect and express this position and, throughout the 1920s, the landscape was recorded and represented by work that still drew on pre-war influences and enhanced the image of the English countryside. By the 1930s the rest of Europe opened up to English artists again and the influence of the European avant-garde was felt in the work of range of notable artists, such as Nash, Ben Nicholson, Hepworth, Moore, and Burra, and a new English Modernism emerged.

In the midst of this, the less obviously radical work of Ravilious also developed. By 1930 he was at the peak of his short career but had not actively involved himself in the major debates between Modernism and traditionalism in the countryside or art. He also championed watercolour which was regarded as exemplifying conservative aesthetic and historical principles and he might well have been identified as a traditionalist and anti-Modernist. He was neither of these and he had managed both to innovate in his chosen medium and subvert his preferred subject matter, the English landscape, to create something radical, alternative and, thereby, implicitly critical of a changing world. He was undoubtedly Modernist conceptually, but he remained committed to his conviction that he could revive the English tradition of watercolour painting. It is apparent from his watercolours that reviving the tradition also meant remaining faithful to the genre of English landscape painting and the *genius loci* and not altering the form of the landscape through experimentation with

contemporary interpretations. His different viewpoints may appear contradictory, and this may be another reason why he has been marginalised in the history of English landscape painting until recent years. As the history of Modernism has tended to concentrate on the formal structure of painting rather than its content, Ravilious has been difficult to place. All this had been despite, or because of, his popularity and his selection as an artist ideally suited to recording the 1939-45 war.

Ravilious the craftsman has not been ignored, but what has been overlooked is the depth and critical value of his painting in subverting the representation of the landscape, its nationalist glorification and his unconventional representation of Englishness through the introduction of narratives that disturb order and harmony. The strength of Ravilious is that in a period of extremes in art and culture he was able to work both with and against tradition to produce work of lasting popularity and critical value.

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