

The slow death of my English village: Author ROBIN PAGE on the decline of the Cambridgeshire idyll where neighbours never say hello..and the birdsong has vanished

By [Robin Page For The Daily Mail](#)

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Kingfisher Gardens, Lapwing Avenue, Skylark Road and Partridge Close: the mere signs fill me with rage.

All four roads have the look of East [Germany](#) before the fall of the [Berlin](#) Wall and blight the countryside around the once beautiful city of Cambridge.

Worse, those street names are a crass and insensitive reminder of the wonderful variety of native English wildlife that lived there until the bulldozers came 40 years ago. And the despoliation continues.



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When I wrote the book 45 years ago, these threats posed were mere 'plans'. Now they have arrived in the countryside like a tsunami – houses, development and people on a scale never before seen. Robin Page is pictured in Kingfisher Gardens

A new Park and Ride is planned on a site visited each year by migrating golden plovers, though not, perhaps, for much longer. What will they call it, I wonder? Golden Plover Park and Ride?

I've lived in the village of Barton, just outside Cambridge, all my life and first wrote about it 45 years ago in my book *The Decline Of An English Village*. Sadly, I've been unlucky enough to see Barton and the countryside around it changed beyond all recognition. The decline I first wrote about in the 1970s now seems terminal.

When I was born in 1943, life remained very much as it had for centuries. Farms were still a mixture of small fields and copses, of arable and pastoral, of horse power and manual labour. Our water was pumped by hand, the bucket lavatory – a horror familiar to many of my vintage – was across a small concrete path. The garden, like most at that time, had daisies in the lawn and a vegetable patch near the back door. Hens scrapped busily and fine old country smells wafted through the house – chutney, jams, pies and homemade bread. Not a scrap of food was wasted.

Every day gave some fresh experience. Summer mornings wet with dew, shafts of orange sunlight drifting through the gossamer threads of a spider's web; a row of headless hens after a visit from a fox.

The village itself has 'growth' threatening it from many sides – a sea of houses plus the roads and street lamps that go with them is getting nearer, blighting the horizon, filling the area with traffic, the schools and the doctors' surgeries with people. Modern-day 'progress' is an illusion. It reduces the quality of life for practically everybody – except those who rule us

But the greatest adventure of all was on the farm. There were animals to watch or chase, puddles in which to splash or fall and, if we were lucky, we would get a ride in Grandfather's pony and trap.

Each season had a different attraction, but it was harvest time that we children liked best, with picnic teas 'down the harvest field' and bottles of cider for the thirsty farm labourers.

A few weeks earlier came plum picking, when boxes full of Early Rivers and dark purple Czars were piled on to a trailer and taken to the small railway station a mile away, to be sent to Liverpool and Manchester.

The railway also served another purpose: I'm not sure why, but whenever trains could be heard loud and clear in the village, it was a sure sign of rain – a far more reliable guide than the BBC forecast.

When we children grew tired of watching the work, there were other pastimes – clambering over roof tops, watching mosquito larvae in water butts, playing football and cricket or ranging over the nearby fields and spinneys.

Seventy years have disappeared since then and, in that time, the heart of the village has died with its soul now vanishing, too. They have been years of laughter and tears, hope and disappointment.

But above all they have been decades of political betrayal, in which village and country life have taken second place and third place to the superficial gods of 'progress', 'efficiency' and 'development'.

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Today's children do not excitedly watch tadpoles in the village pond in the spring, listen to the cuckoo and pick cowslips for the flower show. The destruction of the English countryside, its beauty, its history, its people and its culture is nearing completion.

Computer games and technobabble have replaced bird song and play in the open fields.

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But the biggest change of all is the noise – the physical manifestation of the car economy and the free market.

In an age when we have the technology to free people from work, or at least reduce their hours drastically, the exact opposite has happened. Each morning, five days a week, cars stream through the village into Cambridge.

The tailback often stretches back three, four, five miles – a tribute to the trapped minds of planners, economists and politicians.

The toll on wildlife of all this traffic is enormous, but who counts and who cares? I've seen dead cats, birds, foxes, badgers and at least one otter on the road.

The old farmers and the old farms have gone. Farming itself has changed almost beyond recognition. In recent decades, the ploughshare and chemical spray have ruled supreme, aided and abetted by Dutch elm disease.

The fungus arrived in foreign elms – imported illegally with their bark still attached and overlooked by idle officials not doing their jobs.

The effect has been deep and devastating. In a landscape dominated by the elm for hundreds of years, the most majestic of trees has virtually gone.

The tree where I saw my first kestrel chicks died. The ancient trunk where I found fox cubs blew over and the rooks had to search for other places to nest. No jackdaws breed in the southern half of the village – there are no large trees with accommodating holes.

The swallows' nests of childhood disappeared, as did the corn bunting, the English partridge, the song thrush, the turtle dove and the once-common brown hare. Even the once-abundant house sparrow has become scarce.

One bright summer's day I was puzzled. Something was missing – a familiar part of my landscape was gone. And then it came to me, shocking, wounding me: I could not hear a lark. The anthem of an English summer had been silenced.

Wildlife has not been the only part of the parish and its immediate surroundings to disappear: in just 45 years, six farms have vanished – absorbed by larger holdings.

The farmyard where my mother spent her childhood has been turned into executive houses and, each year, young 'suits' called Rupert or Julian knock on my door and say: 'Your farmyard is in the 'village envelope' you know – we could help you to develop it.' They mention sums of money with many noughts. There is only one snag – I want my farmyard to remain a farmyard.

But my home has been changed beyond comprehension, all the same. Of those who went to the village school with me in the 1940s and 50s, just four remain. The rest have been forced out, unable to afford the prices.

My own ex-farmworker's cottage, bought for £20,000 in the 1980s, is worth £250,000, an absurdity beyond my comprehension. Others see things differently.

Faced with a choice between Mammon and God, the Diocese of Ely sold the vicarage in the heart of the village's conservation area to a developer. Mammon apparently won.

When a retired potter died in her small bungalow with its pleasant garden of flowers, grass and fruit trees, her children – who lived away – quickly sold up. The bungalow was flattened and two mini-mansions were built and sold for £1million each. Ugh.

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The Squire's old house was turned into offices. More astonishingly, the tiny thatched cottage where Mrs Hawkes was the last villager to cook on a paraffin stove has been 'modernised' and turned into two even tinier starter homes at £145,000 each. Changing direction in the kitchens is by three-point turn.

'Mobility of labour' still rules, with people rarely staying any length of time. Why not stability of labour, encouraging roots, social cohesion, continuity, culture and community?

Sadly, I too have changed during the past 45 years. I once believed in the decency of people, including politicians, and I had faith in our system of democracy that has so failed the countryside.

I am told by those who want to improve me that my standard of living has increased, that I have the benefit of new roads, runways, street lights, wheelie-bins, health centres, houses and

cars, as well as access to more gadgets and electronic wonders than apples on a tree. But as my 'standard of living' has increased, so the quality of my life has dramatically decreased.

Nowadays, living in the village where I have spent most of my life make me something of an oddity, part of a different age.

Most of the villagers are 'blow-ins' come here for work or retirement. They stay briefly or for longer periods depending on job stability, family and, in some cases, longevity.

One of the few old villagers in the High Street bemoans the loss of simple neighbourliness.

'People walk by,' he says, 'and there is no eye contact. Many don't speak – they don't even see us. Leaning on the garden gate chatting was once part of village life, but no more,' he sighs.

As we speak a man approached along the footpath gazing into his phone. As he passed we both said 'Hello'. His gaze never wavers from his screen, he neither speaks nor looks at us. There is no eye-contact whatsoever.

They don't see the likes of us. We are unimportant – invisible.

Over the years the post office-cum-village shop has migrated to the far end of the High Street next to the village pond and is now run by a Sri Lankan family.

The clogged roads mean there are no newspaper deliveries now. Instead a gaggle of geriatrics (including me) wait for the shop blinds to be raised so that we can get our papers.

I played football for many years on the recreation ground. I loved it and did not retire until well over 40. But there is no village team now. New players were taken on from outside the village and at the start of one season the whole team and club disappeared to another village several miles away.

Many of the houses in the High Street were once 'council houses' – cheap, social housing, which allowed local people to continue to live locally, adding the word 'continuity' to 'community'.

Then politicians came up with the idea of selling council houses – 'the right to buy', at huge discounts to the tenants.

If the same discounts had then applied to the resale of the houses in the future – up to 70 per cent – then all would have been well and there would still be a pool of good, affordable social housing.

Instead, the structure of the village changed. Local people from ordinary backgrounds have been priced out. With hindsight, the sale of council houses has been a social and community disaster, in my part of the country, at least.

Front gardens became car parks and back garden vegetable plots have virtually disappeared. It is easier to buy aubergines and mangetout at the supermarket, and not many people in the houses eat turnips any more. Small houses and bungalows are in demand, to be 'upgraded' by developers.

But this is only the start. Twenty years ago the population of Britain was said to be well under 60 million.

Today it is well over 66 million and it could be 68 million or even higher – the Government has no idea just how many people, legal and illegal, now live here.

Yet political correctness prevents discussion of over-population, labelling it 'racism' and 'prejudice'. It is no such thing. Over-population is an environmental disaster wherever it is in the world. Locally, new housing estates, developments and even towns are lowering the quality of life for those of us already here.

Much of the development is not based on 'rural planning' but on construction figures demanded by central Government and welcomed by land owners, particularly Cambridge colleges and the Ministry of Defence.

Instead of homes being built with local material to local designs, the cheapest possible houses are built of the lowest-cost materials: tomorrow's slums today.

What, then, is the long-term future of the countryside in over-crowded, urbanised Britain? A countryside that has been ignored for years, whose people are ignored?

It seems to me that the life and soul of the countryside will continue to haemorrhage unless some of the old principles re-emerge: courage, free speech and vision.

The biggest dangers to conservation, wildlife and the country way of life are simple. They come from the ignorance of politicians, the deceit of designer conservationists who have remained silent while the countryside has been ruined, the infiltration of Disneyfied animal rights and the gullibility of much of the urban- metropolitan establishment.

The main hope comes from the people. In the 45 years since the first publication of my book, much wildlife has been lost but we have also been learning how to get it back through wildlife-friendly farming.

In Barton, with friends, we founded The Countryside Restoration Trust 26 years ago and on its Lark Rise Farm in the parish, much wildlife has returned. The village may have changed considerably, but the small patch is like an oasis from the past.

For the few people willing to stop and listen as they walk by the farm and its fields, they will hear that the skylark is singing again – up there between heaven and earth – beautiful, inspiring, astonishing.

The Decline Of An English Village, by Robin Page, is published by Quiller Publishing and priced £18.95.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7196313/The-slow-death-English-village-Author-ROBIN-PAGE-decline-Cambridgeshire-idyll.html>