



Northumberland & Newcastle Society

For Our Future Heritage

In Wilderness Lies the Soul of Mankind Or Why Northumberland is Special An Economic and Social Tour de Horizon

Speaker: Lord Vinson

**A talk delivered to
Members of the
Northumberland and Newcastle Society
at their AGM
at Blagdon on 4th June, 2014**

PREVIOUS ANNUAL LECTURES

AGM 2011

The Venerable Geoff Miller the Archdeacon of Northumberland
'It's not all in ruins! A short reflection on the contribution of local churches to the cultural heritage of the North East'

AGM 2012

Professor Simin Davoudi School of Architecture, Planning and
Landscape at Newcastle University
'Environment, Wellbeing and Fairness in the North East of England'

AGM 2013

Lord Shipley
'Growth, Conservation and Nimbyism'

In Wilderness Lies the Soul of Mankind Or Why Northumberland is Special An Economic and Social Tour de Horizon

It is a great pleasure to be asked to speak to your well-established and very influential society. My wife and I came up here 40 years ago, and the first thing we were asked was: "What brought you here? Eeh, you're a southerner." To which I replied: "I know I'm a southerner – but I got here as quick as I could."

But what brought me here is much the same reason that makes all of you members of this Society – the love of Northumberland. Its ancient history positively reaches into your bones as you walk over those timeless hills. One is refreshed by its honesty and its beauty.

And one is reminded of those words by Keats:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'

Indeed, because of the beauty of its wilderness, the "soul of mankind" lies therein, - and that is why this talk is entitled accordingly.

Northumberland is of course a very diverse county, deeply urban one end and sparsely populated at the other – and it is here that my speech will principally dwell. As underneath this rural beauty there are many problems caused by its very remoteness and sparseness.

I rather like the expression that "poverty comes no better just because it comes thatched". The very remoteness of its small towns and villages, and the farms emanating from them, makes it particularly difficult, for those who haven't got a car, to access services. But that relative sparsity of population, does in fact forge a special good neighbourliness, and also a sort of self-confidence, and the spirit that one finds in Geordies, which shows in their can-do attitudes.

A Geordie never talks up to you or down to you but only talks across to you. People in Northumberland know they are different but equal.

This is reflected in an experience I had - some years ago I returned from London to find a distraught farm worker's wife. Her child's fingers had been caught in the slamming door – an inevitable accident when you live in windy Northumberland. She had jumped into her old car, and taken him to Alnwick where the nurse had one look at the hand and said: No you must go at once to Accident and Emergency at Ashington. So at her own expense, she drove there and waited while they looked at the hand. They did their best and said: Come back tomorrow and we will re-dress it. They didn't stop to think that it was an 80 mile round trip between

the hospital and her home. But like most Northumbrians she was stoic and just got on with it.

Indeed this sort of stoicism, which is much to be admired, in fact creates one of the problems of Northumberland where families, who are often entitled to free school meals, send their children to school with a packed lunch. They do so because they are wonderfully proud and self-reliant and don't want their kids to be stigmatised as poor.

But then, sadly, the school itself fails to get a full allocation of grant because their free school meal numbers are not high enough to qualify.

And sparsity is also no help to the young and unemployed - because it is extremely costly to get to and from a job interview. And so, whilst the young move out to jobs elsewhere, the retired move in, buying homes for half the price of the one they sold in the south of England.

Much of this, as you well know, is the natural pattern of events and broadly irreversible.

But what can be done to ameliorate or help those in need - retired or otherwise?

Well they say Northumberland is a big village, where everybody knows and helps everybody. And indeed, as I have mentioned, it is this good neighbourliness that holds its society together. Fine institutions like the Citizens Advice Bureau, Meals on Wheels, the Church, the Womens Institute - and others that are well known to you - all play their essential part – not least Help the Aged.

But one should not talk about the people of Northumberland without a look at the farming industry. Farming still remains a major employer in the county – albeit a diminishing one.

The landscape of Northumberland has been shaped by prehistoric agriculture and in particular by the price of corn. Marginal land above 500 feet has been in and out of production over the centuries. To many in this room the land was ploughed by horses when they were very young, and yields were a ton of wheat to the acre. Now they are ploughed by 200 horse power tractors, and yields are 4 tonnes to the acre – or 10 tonnes to the hectare. But this huge increase in productivity and the relative fall in the price of food it has brought about, has not been reflected, to any degree, in farm wages. And the reason for this is that farming is not only a very high risk business but also part of a world industry.

What other business activity doesn't know what price it is going to get two years in advance? Its product can be ravaged by weather or disease and when it comes to sell it, like milk, it is perishable and cannot be stored for long. Last but not least, its price is dictated by the value of the pound and international commodity prices.

Because of these inherent risks, farming is protected, always has been and always needs to be, because, without some form of price guarantees in this competitive world, bankruptcy would loom. This problem is recognised worldwide. Agriculture is supported almost universally to ensure continuity of food supply. However, the current system of subsidy, which pays out without regard for the market price, and with detailed and meddlesome European Union interference, is near the point of lunacy. It has replaced the far more effective way of support through deficiency payments, whereby the government stepped in if the price dropped seriously below the cost of production, but only then if we are ever to run our own affairs again, this system is bound to be re-adopted.

And of course food production matters. As the world population increases, possibly by 1 billion people over the next 20 years, the nation's land use will become more important than ever.

In the United Kingdom we are hugely fortunate to have the right climate for growing grass and wheat – and of course wheat is a form of grass. The wonderful thing about growing corn is that each year it produces nature's bounty - the new product – or you might say an annual dividend from the work invested. Taking 10% of this dividend, by way of tithes or rent, has – throughout history – made the acquisition of land and its ownership a prime national goal, whereby the aggressor or landowner acquired increasing wealth. A prized form of income.

The pattern of land ownership is a fascinating subject and Northumberland reflects its history. There is a legacy of early Norman ownership. Though to this day the word conduit is pronounced cundy – the pipe under a bridge. Rothill for Redhill has Danish derivations. My wife is half Danish and when I suggested that we might move to Northumberland, how would she feel about it. She said to me: of course I shall love it. My ancestors conquered it 2000 years ago.

And then, of course, we have names of fields, often called after their purpose, such as Ox Close or Horse Close. Because they were handy to the stabling, beasts had less far to walk before they could start to plough. I expect most of you know of many other fascinating associations.

The ownership of land in France – based on the Code Napoleon - has led to the division of land amongst relatives, resulting in many small units which by themselves are uneconomic. Whereas here, primogeniture – where most goes to the first born son - has given us substantial land holdings, bigger farms and higher efficiency.

Because the climate in Northumberland was not, in most years, reliable enough to give a guaranteed harvest, the land then was mostly suitable for beef or sheep

production. Consequently, tenant farms had to be quite substantial to yield a living.

Today these same tenant farms, on good wheat land, have a much sounder economic base. And, like all farms, benefit from the fact that they are no longer growing fuel for horses – hay and oats for horses took up some 20% of a farm's output in the past, all of which is now given over to direct production for the market. The invention of the combine harvester meant that the harvest could be gathered far more quickly 'ere the winter storms begin. Consequently wheat production has not only moved well north in this country but throughout the world.

But the huge increase in productivity that agriculture has contributed to the standard of living has, as I mentioned before, not been reflected in overall farm profitability or farm wages. Hence the need for subsidy, where the public in fact pay a higher price for food than they realize because taxes are re-cycled back into food subsidy. But any discussion on the productivity of farms leads one to the question of farm jobs.

The farm labour force and the services that support it, throughout Northumberland, has dropped dramatically over the last 50 years, as elsewhere, bringing with it all the social pressures associated with the decline of school numbers and an ageing population.

But as one door closes another opens.

Northumberland's unique and special beauty appeals to others, as well as ourselves, and tourism is a booming development. Helpful in every way to job creation, except that it is inevitably seasonal and depends on the weather – and, to a substantial degree, on the value of the pound. The level of our currency.

The United Kingdom is blessed with a temperate climate and can hold its own in tourism and food production with anybody – but is handicapped today, indeed like swathes of industry, by an over-valued pound. This makes travelling abroad cheaper, imports cheaper, but exporting harder and inward tourism relatively expensive, all of which has consequently given us an imbalance of trade for over 30 years. This I fear lies at the heart of our enormous national borrowings – a current problem that is a nightmare for any government to deal with, not wishing to set in hand competitive de-valuations – but obliged to do something. Soon we shall be spending more international debt interest than we are on our own armed forces.

To pay for imports we are currently not only selling the family silver but also the family furniture – day after day many of our good companies, from Northumberland Water to Bendicks Bittermints, (Astra Zeneca) are taken over by foreign owners.

This helps balance the books but, at some stage, our borrowings will simply have to be reduced. Northumberland Water is now owned by a Hong Kong oligarch and all its profits flow to him and not to our pensioners; and Severn Trent is being eyed for purchase by the Canadian Teachers Pension Fund. It is fair to ask: why, if it is good for Canadian pensioners, is it not good for British pensioners? Or is it that the City's incentivisation scheme – bonuses for short term profits – is actually working against the wider national interest?

But I stray - though this is a national problem, it does indirectly reflect on the prosperity of Northumberland. It is all part of the economic background when planning for the future - a subject which I know concerns you all.

And at county level, how can we bring and maintain prosperity to this area without sacrificing its essential beauty?

So in the last part of this speech I would like to deal with the question: "what can we do about it?" – and what influence can your great Society bring to bear to help Northumberland's future?

First, obviously we need, between us, to help preserve its beauty.

Now is not the time and place to deal at length with wind turbines but until the problem of storing electricity is solved, their intermittency makes them hugely inefficient and costly. Putting them out to sea does not solve this problem. It makes it even worse due to the high level of corrosion and saline solution blowing past dynamos made out of copper and aluminium, giving them a life of half land-based ones, and their life is short enough anyway. A hugely costly way to generate energy.

Wind turbine development is so damaging to tourism because it brings an intrusive modern element to a totally harmonious and timeless landscape that makes our county so unique – and indirectly threatens the very job creation, through tourism, the county needs so badly. All of you will be pleased to see that the County Council has commissioned research to see whether wind turbines are damaging tourism. Not an easy thing to measure, I would have thought, but common sense indicates it cannot help.

So rightly, your Society has opposed the sprawl of wind turbines over Northumberland, realising that if they were going to save the world that might be one thing, but in reality their contribution to saving CO2 levels cannot even be measured on the global scale, and they are obviously an inappropriate solution.

But the right answer, I believe, lies just up the road. We don't even think about it, but our nuclear power stations have been quietly generating base-load electricity for 40 years.

So instead of trying to solve the world's CO2 problems over 20 years we should adopt, I believe, a much longer timetable, and aim for an all-electric world

progressively by the end of this century. By which time we shall have new forms of nuclear – fusion instead of fission – giving us safe, limitless CO2 free energy. Energy, and electricity in particular, is the life blood of a modern economy. This country pioneered nuclear development and if we hadn't discovered oil it would still be one of our major export activities which sadly has passed to France.

So, your Society's opposition to the spread of wind turbines as an inappropriate and ineffective way of meeting the challenge of possible global warming is a logical stand on both economic and environmental grounds. I applaud it. But what, on a more positive note, can increase the prosperity of Northumberland without damaging its eternal beauty?

First we need to use the assets we have at hand.

The Rural Development Commission managed to get the national planning regulations changed so that it was possible to convert redundant farm buildings into small offices and workshops. You have only got to look at the Milkhope development here at Blagdon to see how immensely successful that has been.

A perfect recognition of the fact that governments don't make jobs but they can help in their creation.

The development of redundant farm buildings has, throughout rural England, created hundreds of thousands of local jobs in rural areas, often to the great benefit of farm workers' wives – and without damage to the visual environment.

Then there are also bigger, what I call macro, issues – that would bring employment to the more urban parts of Northumberland without detriment to its landscape quality elsewhere.

If I were in control of planning in Northumberland, I would recognise that roads are the arteries of modern commerce and the life blood of tourism.

What other modern nation in the world would have its major highway, the A1, single track between its principal cities – Newcastle to Edinburgh? It is high time it is upgraded to motorway standard – bringing substantial economic benefit to the whole area. Paradoxically this country pours billions of pounds a year through the EU for the development of roads in Portugal, Spain, Ireland and elsewhere whilst here at home the A1 remains un-dualled.

But also, and I think probably more importantly, I would make the A69 into a proper motorway between Newcastle and Carlisle. Currently it reduces to virtually single lane traffic, at 16 foot wide Warwick Bridge. Upgrading the A69 would open up the access to Newcastle as a port – attracting much of the economic activity which goes further south to other east coast ports.

90% of the United Kingdom's freight is carried by road, and always will be because railways remain a three stage journey and are broadly uneconomic to use for under 200 miles. But an improved A69 would re-awaken the natural port of Newcastle by bringing in trade from the East coast of the United Kingdom and turn it into

a major hub for trans-shipment to the rest of Europe and the world, creating thousands of well-needed jobs. Roads indeed are the arteries of the modern world.

People want cars because it gives them freedom. The all-electric car will meet problems of pollution. The car is unlikely to go away. Perhaps this is an area your Society could look at more closely.

Meanwhile, I know you are looking at the problems of home development and the possibility of planning permission being given to develop green belt sites.

The fact remains that the nation is desperate for more housing, caused by a combination of factors.

Ageing population, immigration and excessive land rationing through the planning system has prevented natural housing development over the last three decades. Consequently a whole generation of people are now priced out of home ownership.

In the 1960s the land value of a house was some 25% of the overall cost. Today – in many parts of England – the land value is over 50% of the cost of a house. This means that any young couple attempting to buy a house today are paying an extra 25% of their mortgage costs due to land rationing causing scarcity. It is no longer possible for the working man to save and own a house and this I think, and I am sure you would agree, is a tragic situation.

So I will stick my neck out. We must build more houses.

First, I would encourage small-scale development and conversions, as there always has been in the past, and find good reason for agreeing to planning applications rather than resisting them. Let us welcome a return to living over the shop, in an attempt to bring back 24 hour life into our cities.

Then in urban areas manifestly every attempt should be made to develop brown field sites but, as you know, often due to land contamination and pollution, development can be costly and so should indeed be encouraged by subsidy – or it won't happen

But on a larger scale, there are many areas of green belt land which have little intrinsic beauty, are scruffy, and are squeezed in by development on either side.

So in some instances, but certainly not in all, it would be practical, I think, for housing development to go ahead BUT granted on the condition that substantial existing areas of green belt land would be specially retained and designated as Parks. So what is now green belt land could continue to be put to good long term recreational and leisure use in those parks.

Obviously areas of green belt land, where it is of high landscape and amenity value, should of course be left well alone, but the designation of much existing land use does, I believe, need to be re-examined in the wider national interest.

We need more houses – and we should give to others the benefit of home ownership that we enjoy.

If you fly over Great Britain generally, it is remarkable how much countryside there is – only 10% is classified as urban - so a marginal increase in the size of our towns, whilst inevitable, would not be the end of the world. Would anybody care to put their hand up whose house was not, at one stage, built on a green field?

In this short speech I realise that I may have been contentious and I will inevitably have failed to deal with any subjects in sufficient depth, nor in the shortness of time possibly given sufficient balance to many alternative arguments.

We all share a love of the countryside and I hope my tour of the horizons of Northumberland has high-lighted the inescapable issues that I know are of deep concern to you and close to all our hearts.

I do realise the many difficult planning tensions that your/our Society has to try and resolve and give a view on. I would only urge you to continue to make your powerful voice fully heard, so that common sense is brought into the planning process, by those who have the real experience of living and working in the county.

Between us all, I hope we can help preserve this wonderful, unspoilt, timeless, natural beauty that is the soul of Northumberland, whilst bringing prosperity to those who live and work in it.



Founded in 1924 the Northumberland & Newcastle Society continues to have influence in protecting the environmental wealth and heritage of the County and City as it has for the last 90 years.

Patron	His Grace the Duke of Northumberland
President	The Lord Mayor of Newcastle upon Tyne
Vice Presidents	Mr P Atkinson, Sir Alan Beith MP, Mr R Dower, Mr P T Deakin, Mr D M Hoblyn, Sir Nigel Sherlock, Her Grace the Duchess of Northumberland, Lord Vinson of Roddam, Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington and The Right Reverend Martin Wharton Bishop of Newcastle
Chairman	Dr A G Purves
Vice Chairman	Mr A T Hedworth QC
Honorary Treasurer	Dr A Armstrong
Executive Director	Mrs S E Howie
Directors	Mr A T Hedworth QC, Dr A G Purves and Mrs V Armstrong

Northumberland & Newcastle Society

Jesmond Methodist Church
St. George's Terrace
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE2 2DL

www.nandnsociety.org.uk
info@nandnsociety.org.uk

Tel. 0191 2816266

Registered Charity No. 247885
Company Limited by Guarantee No. 5528804