

# Editorial – Nobody’s business

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Is money to be gathered? cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it’s nobody’s business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce, the counting-house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly forty years ago, the pioneer environmental economist E.F. Schumacher published the key text which led to the idea of an ‘alternative technology’.<sup>2</sup> Schumacher argued that an ecological society would develop –indeed would *need* to develop – a new and different kind of technology; inexpensive, ecologically benign, economically decentralising, and subject to local, democratic political control. But even as I write, here in Cornwall something very different – a ‘solar-voltaic klondike’ – is currently taking place, with farmers and developers scrambling to install solar photovoltaic arrays (SPVs) and wind turbines all across the county. Many of these developments portray themselves as ‘green’, but in fact represent a travesty of the term ‘alternative technology’, in that they are neither ‘small’, or in any sense ‘beautiful’, and produce electricity on an industrial scale, which is then fed into a *national*, not a local grid. They also exert severe adverse social and psychological effects on local people and local communities, a tendency which Schumacher, who believed deeply in the possibility of a ‘benign’ and controllable technology, would surely have rejected.

Many members of our local community feel disempowered and disillusioned with the planning process, and with local democracy. What we are experiencing are the combined effects of global economic forces and misguided UK government policy, operating on a local scale. So far, we have identified about two hun-

dred screening applications for SPVs for the whole of Cornwall,<sup>3</sup> most of them located in officially designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or of Great Landscape Value, with a cluster (about eighty) in East Cornwall, where there are also at least forty applications for wind farms. Many of these are also located on the best agricultural land,<sup>4</sup> in what is essentially a process of industrialisation of the countryside, in pursuit of a 'green' energy which is not really green at all. A recent fall in the price of solar voltaic cells – manufactured mostly in China – means that despite last year's government reduction of the Feed-in Tariff for solar electricity to the National Grid, many schemes formerly abandoned or shelved are now viable again. And as the Tariff is calculated on national basis, using climate data for the English Midlands, they are also now particularly profitable in the much sunnier environment of Cornwall. The new *National Planning Policy Framework*, with its 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' (defined as 'positive growth ... for this and future generations'), and 'ensuring that the planning system does ... not act as an impediment to sustainable growth',<sup>5</sup> has clearly been taken by some as a signal for unbridled development.

Opponents of these applications are not against solar power or wind energy *per se*, but to the piecemeal approval of wind farms and SPVs on an industrial scale, with no real strategy for renewable energy provision in the county.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they suggest that solar power should not be generated on agricultural land, but on all public and other large buildings – not just those belonging to Cornwall Council, as is already happening – but on all factories, barns, livestock housings, schools, colleges, shops and especially supermarkets. In future, this should be a condition of planning approval of all such buildings, especially the last. Wind turbines and SPVs should only be sited on 'brown field' sites (of which Cornwall has a great many), and not on good agricultural land. Some people are also opposed to installation of SPVs and turbines by commercial developers, and would prefer them to be built by local communities, as at Gorran Lanes near Mevagissey, Mid-Cornwall, where two community wind turbines have now been operating successfully for a year.<sup>7</sup> That way, revenues are fed back into the local economy, and not into the pockets of developers, many of whom have at best only a passing interest in the local community, and the local environment.

There are also widespread reservations about the potential impact of wholesale installation of SPVs across the landscape on tourism, which provides 25% of Cornwall's income, and 20% of its jobs. Many people are bewildered by the pace and extent of proposed change. Some also fear the effects of potentially divisive planning applications on community consciousness and morale. Experience of past local planning controversies suggests that community morale will suffer: our own village has not really recovered from the last such episode, some fifteen years ago. At the same time, and despite the formal existence of local democracy, there are no real avenues *via* which to express opposition. Parish Councillors'

objections are ignored, and there is no local forum in which issues which cut across parishes can be discussed. Consequently, we are considering establishing our own network for this part of Cornwall (the East Looe Valley), and reaching out to groups in other parts of the county to press for a moratorium on all new approvals of wind farms and SPVs until a more rational policy, under more direct local democratic control, is introduced.

It is really the commitment of successive UK Secretaries of State for Energy to ‘keeping the lights on’<sup>8</sup> – i.e. to maintaining *supply* – which is driving current industrialisation of the Cornish countryside. In contrast, and until very recently, little attention ever seems to have been paid in Britain to reducing *demand* (e.g. *via* a national scheme of building insulation).<sup>9</sup> But at a time of increasing climatic uncertainty, and warnings from such diverse organisations as Oxfam, The Stockholm International Water Institute and the World Bank<sup>10</sup> that world food prices are about to experience another ‘spike’ like that of 2008, it surely makes no sense at all that good agricultural land be used to produce electricity, and not to grow food. Indeed, having believed for most of the 2000s that Britain did not need to feed itself, but could rely on imports, in 2010 (and in direct response to the 2008 ‘spike’) the UK Department for Food and Rural Affairs reversed its policy, and committed the nation to producing as much food as possible, a policy the coalition government has more or less maintained.<sup>11</sup> Approving energy generation on farmland, however ‘green’, is not consistent with this new policy.

There are no SPVs in *News from Nowhere*, although there are, of course, the mysterious ‘force barges’, which some think must be powered by electricity, which, in Morris’s time, was just being introduced. *We are* told however, that ‘... all along the Thames there were abundance of mills *used for various purposes*; none of which were in any degree unsightly, and many strikingly beautiful ...’, at least one of them ‘as beautiful in its way as a Gothic cathedral’.<sup>12</sup> From the context, it seems that these are water mills – not really a profound deduction for a tale set by a river – but that does not preclude the existence of windmills (probably introduced to Britain during the twelfth century CE) in other parts of the country not visited by William Guest. But like all technology in *Nowhere*, such machines are the tools of humanity, not its master.

... labour-saving machines? Yes, they were meant to ‘save labour’ (or, to speak more plainly, the lives of men) on one piece of work in order that it might be expended – I will say wasted – on another, probably useless, piece of work. Friend, all their devices for cheapening labour simply resulted in increasing the burden of labour.<sup>13</sup>

Some years earlier, in an uncanny flash of prescience, Morris had made an almost exact prediction of ‘alternative technology’

... I believe ... that a state of social order would probably lead at first to a great development of machinery for really useful purposes, because people will still be anxious about getting through the work necessary to holding society together; but that after a while they will find that there is not so much work to do as they expected, and that then they will have leisure to reconsider the whole subject; and if it seems to them that a certain industry would be carried on more pleasantly as regards the worker, and more effectually as regards the goods, by using hand-work rather than machinery, they will certainly get rid of their machinery, because it will be possible for them to do so. It isn't possible now; we are not at liberty to do so; we are slaves to the monsters which we have created. And I have a kind of hope that the very elaboration of machinery in a society whose purpose is not the multiplication of labour, as it now is, but the carrying on of a pleasant life, as it would be under social order—that the elaboration of machinery, I say, will lead the simplification of life, and so once more to the limitation of machinery.<sup>14</sup>

As to disempowerment, in the polity of Nowhere, autonomy is devolved to the local community

‘... let us take one of our units of management, a commune, or a ward, or a parish ... In such a district, as you would call it, some neighbours think that something ought to be done or undone: a new town-hall built; a clearance of inconvenient houses; or say a stone bridge substituted for some ugly old iron one, — there you have undoing and doing in one. Well, at the next ordinary meeting of the neighbours, or Mote, as we call it, according to the ancient tongue of the times before bureaucracy, a neighbour proposes the change and of course, if everybody agrees, there is an end of discussion except about details. Equally, if no one backs the proposer ... the matter drops for the time being; a thing not likely to happen amongst reasonable (people) however, as the proposer is sure to have talked it over with others before the Mote. But supposing the affair proposed and seconded, if a few of the neighbours disagree to it, if they think that the beastly iron bridge will serve a little longer and they don't want to be bothered with building a new one just then, they don't count heads that time, but put off the formal discussion to the next Mote; and meantime arguments *pro* and *con* are flying about, and some get printed, so that everybody knows what is going on; and when the Mote comes together again there is a regular discussion and at last a vote by show of hands. If the division is a close one, the question is again put off for further discussion; if the division is a wide one, the minority are asked if they will yield to the more general opinion, which they often, nay, most commonly do. If they refuse, the question is debated a third time, when, if the minority has not perceptibly grown, they always give way; though I believe there is some

half-forgotten rule by which they might still carry it on further; but I say, what always happens is that they are convinced not perhaps that their view is the wrong one, but they cannot persuade or force the community to adopt it.'

'Very good,' said I; 'but what happens if the divisions are still narrow?'

Said he: 'As a matter of principle and according to the rule of such cases, the question must then lapse, and the majority, if so narrow, has to submit to sitting down under the *status quo*. But I must tell you that in point of fact the minority very seldom enforces this rule, but generally yields in a friendly manner.'<sup>15</sup>

The Cornish landscape is indeed a place of great inherent worth – its capacity to provide pleasure and inspiration to human beings – and intrinsic value; that which it derives from such properties as its diversity and its 'ancientness'. But if this landscape is not soon to be covered by grey, ugly 'solar farms', there will indeed need to be a great revival of local democracy, perhaps not on the scale of Nowhere, or Aragón in 1936, but certainly of current events in Spain, Portugal and Greece. Nothing can be preserved for ever, as change is inherent in Nature, but perhaps a mosaic of different ways of generating alternative energy, some semi-industrial (on the poorest land!) and others individual and local, as appears at least partly to have been achieved in Orkney, may be possible, if communities can win back democratic control of their surroundings.

Daphne du Maurier described Cornwall as a magical place, full of sudden surprises. I hope it is not too prosaic of me to point out that this romantic potential is largely a function of its geomorphology; the spine of granite moors surrounded by an almost flat slate plateau, and a set of river valleys deeply incised in their lower courses by Plio-Pleistocene downcutting. It is these 'hidden' valleys near the coast, and their narrow, winding access roads, which afford many of the surprises. At the edges of the moors, as du Maurier also indicates, the ruins of a previous episode of industrialisation – eighteenth and nineteenth century copper and tin mining – now provide a large part of Cornwall's scenic appeal. But I doubt somehow that SPVs will become the engine houses of the twenty second century.

Meanwhile, the Arctic ice is melting ...

In this rather more slender issue than usual, we print an account by Martin Stott of yet another of Morris's unpublished letters recently come to light. It is interesting to speculate how many of these there may be, as well as those already identified but not yet published. This one describes part of the process of the production of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the first book Morris printed at his own Kelmscott Press (1891). Dustin Geeraert then discusses Morris's synthesis of design and content in that very same book. As indicated in previous editorials, interest among scholars in Morris's late romances is something which appears

to be on the increase. Third, Tony Pinkney provides an interesting commentary on Edward Bellamy's review of *News from Nowhere*; a review whose reciprocal is much better known. We also carry reviews of books on the *Collected Letters* of Jane Morris, on women in Old Norse literature and mythology, on Arts and Crafts book covers, of Robert Llewellyn's homage to *Nowhere*, *News from Gardenia*, and of what may well be Peter Preston's final book, *Working with Lawrence*.

## NOTES

1. 'The Lesser Arts', 1877, as in A.L. Morton, ed, *The Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, p. 53.
2. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful! A study of economics as if people mattered*, London: Blond & Briggs, 1973, 288 pp.
3. Cornwall Council; <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=25182> (as accessed 25 September 2012).
4. According to UK standard land classification, Cornwall does not possess any Grade 1 agricultural land, and very little Grade 2. Most of the best land is therefore Grade 3, which in comparison to land many parts of Central and Eastern England, is not very fertile (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales*, London: HMSO, 1988, 60 pp.; <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/land-use/documents/alc-guidelines-1988.pdf>, as accessed 3 October 2012). But it is the best in the county!
5. UK Department of Communities and Local Government, *National Planning Policy Framework*, 2012, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/nppf> (As accessed 28 September 2012), p. 4, p. ii, p. 6. (Afterwards *NPPF*)
6. In fact, Cornwall has developed a *Draft Sustainable Energy Action Plan* which – to its credit – exceeds EU emissions reduction targets, but this document discusses the issue of renewable energy largely in terms of business opportunities, with only two mentions of 'landscape'. (*Draft Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) for Cornwall*. Interim Report for Informal Consultation, July 2012, Planning and Regeneration, 52 pp; <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=29833>; as accessed 27 September 2012) Other documents on the County's planning website do address this issue (<http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=2783>, as accessed 2 October 2012)
7. Community Power Cornwall, <http://www.communitypowercornwall.coop/page26g.html> (As accessed 3 October 2012).
8. There are too many lights!
9. UK Department of Energy and Climate Change, *Green Deal*, 2011; <http://>

- [www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/tackling/green\\_deal/green\\_deal.aspx](http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/tackling/green_deal/green_deal.aspx)  
(As accessed 2 October 2012)
10. James Hansen, Makiko Sato & Reto Ruedy, 'Perception of climatic change', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 11 September 2012, vol. 109, part 37, pp. E2415–E2423; Online before print August 6, 2012, doi:10.1073/pnas.1205276109 (As accessed 28 September 2012); Larry Elliott, 'World Bank issues hunger warning after droughts in US and Europe'; *The Guardian*, 31 August 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/aug/30/world-bank-global-hunger-warning-drought?INTCMP=SRCH>; Oxfam, *Extreme weather, extreme prices. The costs of feeding a warming world*, <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/files/Extreme-Weather-Extreme-Prices.pdf>; Stockholm International Water Institute, *Feeding a thirsty world: Challenges and opportunities for a water and food secure world*, 2012, [http://www.siwi.org/sa/node.asp?node=52&csa\\_content\\_url=%2Fplugins%2FResources%2Fresource%2Easp&cid=318](http://www.siwi.org/sa/node.asp?node=52&csa_content_url=%2Fplugins%2FResources%2Fresource%2Easp&cid=318), (all as accessed 28 September 2012). See also 'Editorial – Looking Forward', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XIX, No.1, Winter 2010, pp. 3–8.
  11. UK Department of Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), *Food 2030: How we get there*, January 2010, <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/pdf/food2030strategy-summary.pdf>; DEFRA, *Green Food Project. Conclusions*, July 2012, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13794-greenfood-project-report.pdf>, (Both as accessed 29 September 2012).
  12. James Redmond, ed, *News from Nowhere or an epoch of rest*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, Chapter XXX, 'The Journey's End', p. 169 (italics added; afterwards *NfN*). Mills in Nowhere are not just used for grinding corn, then, but for several purposes, one of which might be to generate electricity. But this does not seem to have been used for lighting.
  13. *NfN*, Chapter XV, 'On the Lack of Incentive to Labour in a Communist Society', p. 80.
  14. 'How we live and how we might live', 1884. As in A.L. Morton, ed, *Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, pp. 134–158 (p. 156).
  15. *NfN*, Chapter XIV, 'How matters are managed', pp. 74–75.