

Feature: Remembering Alun Howkins

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Alun Howkins, 1947-2018

The death of Alun Howkins, in July 2018, has deprived modern British history of one of its most influential and charismatic academics and *History Workshop Journal* of one of its original, long-serving collective members. Whilst Alun's interests and publications were broad, cutting across disciplinary boundaries and historical approaches, his central commitment was always to the history of the modern British countryside and the men and women who lived and worked there. This was partly a reflection of his own background and also of the training he had received at Ruskin College in the late 1960s under Raphael Samuel's maxim of 'dig where you stand'.

Alun was born in 1947 in Bicester, Oxfordshire, the eldest of two children. His father Harold had served a seven-year apprenticeship as a motor mechanic in the 1920s, but badly injured in the Middle East during the Second World War, he only found work intermittently in that trade after the war and was forced to move to a series of semi and unskilled jobs. As his father's income fell in the mid 1950s, his mother Lillian went out to work, first as an orderly and then cook in the local night hospital before moving to the Ministry of Defense Central Ordnance Depot in Bicester, a large local employer. The Howkins family lived in a rented terrace house on the edge of Bicester, which like many small rural market towns was undergoing post-war transformation. Growing up there didn't produce any great attachment; for the teenage Alun it was a trap, somewhere to escape. Drawing upon A. E. Houseman's famous poem 'Into my heart an air that kills', he later wrote that 'the background to my own

story – the land of lost content where “... I went and cannot come again” is my past as well as the past of rural England and Wales’.¹

Nor did the education system cultivate any early academic ambitions. Alun failed the eleven-plus and then attended Highfield Secondary Modern School in Bicester. He left with the County Leaving Certificate at the age of 15, aware that he, like many other working-class children, had been discarded at the bottom of the post-war tripartite education system. He then moved to Banbury Tech to begin an ‘O’ Level course but was thrown out after nine fairly undistinguished months. Over the next couple of years he worked locally in and around Bicester and Oxford in a variety of jobs. The first was as an agricultural apprentice on two local farms. He was meant to attend college one day a week but on the whole found himself working as a general labourer and all-round dogsbody. There was no romance attached to this farm work; it was exploitative, isolated, and mechanized. He then went to work for the Central Ordnance Depot in Bicester, before moving to the Pergamon Press in Oxford as a copyeditor for nine months in 1965-6, and on being sacked from that, as a bookseller at Blackwell’s until the autumn of 1967. After this he moved to Longman’s in Harlow as an Education copywriter, preparing jacket copy and press advertising. A career in publishing beckoned.

These early working years were formative in many respects. They widened the circles in which he moved and began to shape his understanding of the world he was from. As a teenager he was involved in youth theatre, and became increasingly interested in jazz and folk music. The latter became

especially important, and from the early 1960s he began to spend evenings and weekends in Oxford, frequenting the Oxford University folk club, Heritage, amongst others. Mistrustful of pop music (it was a bourgeois conspiracy) and unsure of American folk, it was traditional English and Irish songs that really captivated him. He began to learn songs by sound (he didn't play an instrument at this stage) and to perform. His lifelong commitment to the English folk revival had begun. Although his father had been a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain from the 1930s to the early 1950s, it was the heady atmosphere of the folk clubs rather than any familial guidance that fuelled his attraction to far-left politics. He heard Ewan McColl sing at a Communist Party meeting in 1964, and became active through the Young Communist League. Although the party never dominated his life, he became politically committed and spent some of his spare time selling newspapers and fundraising. He also joined his first trade union whilst working on the farms (the National Union of Agricultural Workers). At Pergamon although he was officially sacked for being idle, which he admitted was probably true, he was also seen as disruptive by management, having set up a branch of the Clerical and Administrative Workers Union. His affiliation to the union cause never ceased.

His passion for reading, which had only intermittently been fired during his formal schooling, also flourished. At the age of 16, whilst working his way through the shelves of the local public library, he happened to pick out George Ewart Evans' *Ask the Fellows that Cut the Hay* (1956). It was a book about his world, and through it he began to realise that the work culture, skills and

lifestyle of his fellow farmworkers, was not a source of embarrassment but contained a rich and diverse history. He later wrote that this book was 'in an almost literal sense the base on which all my subsequent work has been built'.² But this was in the future. The young teenage romantic in him, now living in unencumbered squalor on an Oxford houseboat with four other lads and self-consciously fashioning a new bohemian image, tended to favour poetry and the French and Russian classics. He spent much of his time at Pergamon reading Dostoevsky in the toilet and dreamed of becoming a great writer or poet himself; at Blackwell's he helped himself to the stock to satiate his habit.

In 1968, six years after leaving school, juggling early married life and a young son with working at Longmans, Alun was persuaded to apply to do a childcare course at Ruskin College, Oxford. After a challenging interview, he was instead offered a place on the University Diploma in Social Sciences, which came with a mandatory grant from the Department of Education. Longman's offered him an editorial position in an effort to keep him there, and had they done so a few months earlier, he would have taken it. But his mind was made up. He viewed getting into Ruskin in 1968 as his greatest achievement and the turning point in his life. He went initially to study Politics and Economics, with a view to working in the trade union movement, but within a few weeks had switched to History under the guidance and encouragement of Raphael Samuel. Alun liked to tell the story of their first encounter, in the Ruskin canteen at Headington in November 1968, where, when Alun had told him where he was from, Raphael had responded with the singular line, 'Bicester is

the most extraordinarily interesting place ...'. Although skeptical of that proclamation, Alun was encouraged by Raphael's view that every student had a history to tell and that history began 'at home'. At Ruskin, after courses on early modern and nineteenth century British history, the history of non-conformity and the labour movement, he began to work on the rural poor in Oxfordshire. He wrote a dissertation on poaching in the mid nineteenth century, which included his first forays into oral history interviewing, and, as part of a group of other Ruskin students interested in popular culture, he researched the history of the Whitsun holiday in the county. This was turned into a History Workshop Pamphlet in 1974, his first publication.³

At Ruskin Alun became heavily involved in the History Workshop movement. After his first marriage broke down he threw himself into its heady mix of graduate students, labour movement activists, and young radical academics and his contributions to the social and cultural life of the workshops, particularly the folk music sessions, cemented his reputation as a generous, quick-witted and charismatic comrade. He first presented his own material, on poaching, at the fourth workshop in November 1969, in a session on 'Proletarian Oxfordshire', alongside David Morgan, Raphael Samuel, Sally Alexander and Bernard Reaney. The third workshop however, the previous year, had been on the English countryside in the nineteenth century. It had included a session on common rights, which, together with talks by Bernard Reaney, E. P. Thompson and Bob Malcolmson, featured a project report by first year students on the fight for the Headington Magdalenes in the late nineteenth century. Led by Raphael, Alun became involved in that project,

conducting some of the oral interviews. Written up by Raphael, it was published as 'Quarry Roughs' in the first History Workshop volume *Village Life and Labour* in 1975.

This was significant to Alun for a number of reasons. He maintained it was one of the most important articles of post-war social history, groundbreaking on how the history of rural areas might be approached and understood. Oral history was instrumental to its success, giving a voice to working people usually marginalised in the written records, and enabling the recreation of the detailed fabric of everyday life. The fight for common rights at Headington was one that Raphael and Alun continued to think about, albeit intermittently, over the next two decades, and one Alun came back to at the end of his career, forming the backdrop to his Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture in 2012.⁴ The fact that 'Quarry Roughs' was rural social history, and that the first volume in the Workshop series was centred on the rural, including contributions by David H. Morgan on harvesters and Jennie Kitteringham on country work girls, in addition to the quarry roughs, was also salient. From its inception social history had an incendiary edge, borne of the history of poverty and inequality it uncovered, but it was a history dominated by the urban and the industrial. This was 'particularly true', Alun wrote in 2002, 'of the traditions of radical and socialist historiography with which I have been identified all my working life'.⁵ The place of the rural within the Workshop collective was one he always argued and fought for. As a founding member of *History Workshop Journal*, he felt it was important that the first issue, published in 1976, included a piece on Ewart Evans, not because Evans' politics chimed with the

aims of the journal (although they did), but because of his commitment to the spoken word of the ordinary men and women of East Anglia, and the fact that this underpinned his practice as a teacher, researcher and writer. In his first book, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923*, published in the *History Workshop Series* in 1985, Alun thanked the journal collective 'who despite an urban bias have put up with me'.⁶

Alun left Ruskin in the summer of 1970, moving to Queen's College to study for a BA in History. Whilst this kept him in Oxford and in close touch with Ruskin and the Workshop, the traditionalism of the college wasn't a natural fit for him. Despite his best efforts, he did manage to graduate with a 2:1 and under the guidance of Tim Mason, who had taught him in his second and third years, he was persuaded to consider the possibilities of further academic research. Having met Paul Thompson through the Workshop, and keen to extend his use of oral history, in the autumn of 1973 Alun moved to the University of Essex to undertake a PhD under Paul's supervision. The move from a conventional history school at Oxford to the Department of Sociology at Essex was befitting. The methodology at Essex was derived from the community studies tradition of sociology, and although not as explicitly political as Ruskin/the Workshop, the university had a radical reputation and he settled in well. Whilst at Essex he became book reviews editor for *Oral History* and he met and got to know Ewart Evans, the great chronicler of the East Anglian poor whose insistence on really listening to the spoken word of working people inspired Alun. In the late summer of 1974 he spent six months conducting interviews with men and women who had worked on the land in

Norfolk in the early part of the twentieth century. In the introduction to the book that this PhD research eventually became, *Poor Labouring Men*, he wrote that if the voice of the labourer, his or her hopes and aspirations, did not resonate with the reader 'I will have failed'.⁷

His research on Norfolk radicalism was motivated on one level, by a gap in the historiography on agricultural trade unionism, which, at that time, largely focused on the history of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union and its wily self-publicising leader, Joseph Arch. This, Alun thought, ignored the real strength of unionism, which was to be found at the local level. His research covered the fifty or so years between the first great flowering of rural unionism in the early 1870s to the watershed strike of 1923. He divided these years into two periods. The first, up to the turn of the twentieth century, was characterized by what he termed 'local consciousness'. Although the chapels, friendly societies and trade unions of the 1870s and 1880s had links to the wider world, they were, he claimed, essentially borne of and shaped by local society. Central here was the relationship between rural radicalism and Primitive Methodism. Chapels were used extensively for union meetings, provided a democratic structural model and a training ground in office holding, in sobriety, leadership and self-discipline for working-class men, which was transferred into the unions of this era. Although the chapel continued to be important after 1900, the second phase of agricultural unionism, begun in 1906, looked more towards national rather than local concerns, allying gradually with the broader labour movement and the TUC and, in the wake of the decline of Liberalism, to the Labour Party. The fight for a national

minimum agricultural wage was central to this new outlook, and was realized under the 1917 Corn Production Act, albeit temporarily.

It was using oral history that allowed Alun to go beyond this chronological framework, to interrogate the experiences of farm workers and the conditions that motivated them to organize, to really get into their world. One of the most important and overarching themes of *Poor Labouring Men* is that working relationships on Norfolk farms were exploitative across the whole period and that conflict was endemic. Whilst the personal and face-to-face relationship between 'master' and 'man' on farms led to much discrimination and tyranny, in a pre-wages board era it also opened up scope for argument, negotiation and confrontation. Most important was the dispute that sprang from the very nature of farm work, what Alun termed structural conflict. Here, the rhythm of the seasons was key. Hours and wages increased in the spring, and again in the summer, before being cut back in the winter months. There were certain points in the year, particularly in the summer, when the withdrawal of labour could therefore cause considerable difficulty to the farmer, and when the farm worker could exert some power. Skilled farm workers, those at the top of the labour hierarchy, were in a better position to bargain and walk off site, and conflict was particularly prevalent over certain work done by the piece, notably the corn harvest. These lightning strikes were very localized, sometimes effective but often not, and were not widely supported by the union, who saw them as costly, not only in financial terms but also to the reputation of unionism as it moved towards a national agenda in the early years of the twentieth century. These stoppages, at the level of the individual farm and

beyond the control of the unions, were not covered in the local press unless they reached a certain level of seriousness, and it was only through the oral history interviews that Alun was able to reveal their nature and extent. His own background in class politics, and the sympathy and respect he felt for the farmworkers he interviewed, permeates *Poor Labouring Men*. Of all his publications, it was this one that he felt most proud.

The thesis was completed, and *Poor Labouring Men* written after Alun's move to the University of Sussex. He began his first teaching post there in 1976, and despite being nearly tempted away a couple of times, he stayed for the rest of his career, firstly in the School of Cultural and Community Studies, then English and American Studies, where he served as Sub-Dean of both. Following restructuring into discipline-led Schools he became the first Director of the Graduate School in Humanities. If he was nurtured and moulded by his early days at Ruskin and then Essex, the University of Sussex, based on its founding principle of interdisciplinarity and its strong core of British social historians, gave him the perfect space to develop his academic dexterity. Although he taught courses based on his own interests, including a Special Subject The Remaking of Rural England, much of the under-graduate teaching that he did into the 1990s was interdisciplinary School courses such as English Rural Communities (with Brian Short), The Common People from 1660 to the Present; Politics, Literature and Society in the 1930s, and the History of Social Policy. He loved this interdisciplinary and collaborative style of teaching, which was both rewarding and challenging in equal measure, and it transferred into his writing, where he published on subjects such as the

CPGB in the 1930s, J.M.W. Turner and the politics of landscape, the social history of Non-Conformity, popular ballads, plough plays and folk song. It also brought rewards of a more personal nature; it was teaching social policy students in his second year at Sussex where he met first Linda Merricks. They married in 1979.

A brilliant teacher, whose stunning intellectual range, passion for his subject and propensity to burst into song at any point inspired loyalty and dedication – and some well-taken teasing – amongst his students. A sweepstake was run on how long it would take him to sing at his Inaugural Professorial Lecture in October 2001 (it was about eight minutes!). Throughout his time at Sussex the Thursday afternoon ‘Work-in-Progress’ seminars were the meeting point for staff and post-graduate students, the discussions and arguments spilling over from the seminar room to the Gardner Arts Centre, and later IDS bar, and onwards into Brighton. In the School of Humanities he was the lynchpin of the post-graduate community, its social and intellectual force. He introduced a successful MA in Local History and formally supervised about 30 DPhil’s. Many of these were on subjects beyond his research specialism, but he also supervised some important studies closer to his own interests. On traditional music Vic Gammon researched folk song collecting in nineteenth-century Sussex and Surrey, and Reg Hall completed a study of Irish music and dance in London between 1890 and 1970. He also saw through several ground-breaking projects on rural women, including Karen Sayer’s on representations of rural working women, Judy Gielgud’s on nineteenth-century farm women in Northumberland and Cumbria, Maggie Andrews’ project on the Women’s

Institute movement, Anne Meredith's on middle-class women and horticulture, and Christine Jesman's on Conservative women and the Primrose League. Several of these DPhil's went on to be published.⁸ But every post-graduate student who was in Humanities felt in some ways that Alun was their supervisor, even if he wasn't, such was his willingness to listen, argue, advise and give of his time. The Graduate School under his direction was a very broad church and he welcomed students from a variety of non-traditional backgrounds, partly due to his own past but also because he believed in people and was interested in what they had to offer. Many remember the battles he fought on their behalf to negotiate university regulations to get them through, his sympathy for those with illness and with caring responsibilities, his ability to find obscure pots of money for those without funding, and his lack of interest in status and hierarchy.

The interdisciplinary context of the Sussex system encouraged his range and broad interests but, after the positive reception for *Poor Labouring Men*, he took the decision to develop his research in the history of the modern British countryside. Alun was at the forefront of the emergence of 'new' rural history in the late 1980s and early 1990s, explained in his contribution to the first issue of the newly launched journal *Rural History* in 1990. Here he argued that dominant 'ways of seeing' the agricultural worker in labour history had narrowed the focus of research and in doing so excluded key areas. He cited the way that early writers of labour history, such as the Hammonds and Reg Groves, tended to see rural society as backward, conditions as oppressive and acquiescence of workers so total that any kind of resistance was

impossible. Episodes of confrontation, such as the Swing Riots of the early 1830s or the formation of agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s, thus became characterised as 'special cases'. Other writing, most notably that of Howard Newby, which came out of post-war empirical sociology, highlighted the deference of farm workers in face of the power the rural elite still held over their workplace, home and community life in the second half of the twentieth century, and ascribed patchy agricultural unionism to structural political weaknesses. Alun called for modern historians to move away from 'a kind of enlightened and social-democratic Whig view of history or a weary reworking of mono-causal explanations' in favour of 'An articulation of gender, of class, of place and of process' in rural history.⁹

He was also frustrated with the rural past as represented by the form of agricultural history that had dominated the post-Second World War profession, and continued to be influential in the 1980s and early 1990s. In a polemical article published in the leading journal of the field, *Agricultural History Review*, in 1994, he accused agrarian history of still being driven by economic determinism, which stressed the formal and functional nature of the farm worker in the production system, with rarely a human face seen. It was, he argued, a history dominated by Anglo-centrism (and within that a focus on the southern and eastern English arable counties), which therefore confined the experiences of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, as well as large parts of rural England, to the 'fringes'. It was also a tradition that was overwhelmingly concerned with the male worker. He called for further work, already begun by

some notable local studies, including his own, to tease out the complex and differential nature of rural society in the modern past.¹⁰

He led the way by publishing two wide-ranging and influential books that detailed the impact of social change in the countryside in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *The Reshaping of Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (1991) and *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (2003). Increasingly uncomfortable with the growing theorisation of oral history as a method, these instead draw upon a wide range of published and archival sources, including Parliamentary Papers, farm account books, newspapers, autobiographies, diaries and in the latter, material from Mass Observation. They moved away from an in-depth study of one locality to broad national surveys that considered the experiences of men and women across the social scale. Both books are structured around a periodization based upon the fortunes of the agricultural sector. *Reshaping of Rural England* is divided into three periods; the largely (at least on the surface) harmonious years of 1850-75, which gave way to a period of crisis between c.1875 and 1895, which in turn were followed by three decades of adjustment. *The Death of Rural England* is structured into four parts. The first covers the years up to the 'great betrayal' of 1921, the end of the first agricultural wages boards, the second the fluctuating fortunes of the interwar years. The third part assesses the scale of the 'second agricultural revolution', firstly during the Second World War and then in the decades that followed. The final part also covers the post-1945 years, asking 'What is the countryside for?' Whilst these chronologies may be criticised for allowing the

narrative to be driven by orthodox agrarian concerns, they allowed him to bring clarity to the numerous and sometimes overlapping continuities and changes that characterised the nineteenth and twentieth-century countryside.

These books, as well as his numerous other articles and book chapters, have shaped our understanding of modern rural history in a number of ways. First is their emphasis on regional diversity. Throughout his published work he reminds us that rural England, let alone Britain, was not a homogeneous unit but a series of regional economies, defined by different landscape, geology, and farming systems, which in turn structured diverse settlement patterns, employment practices, living arrangements, wage levels, workforce hierarchies and identities. These led to a spectrum of social and economic relationships, both between employer and employee and between the different classes. Second is their focus on occupational hierarchy. The farm workforce was far from an undifferentiated mass of 'hodges' but was acutely stratified, by age and gender, and by gradations of skill, prestige and wage levels, all shaped by regional and local systems. 'What it meant to be a labourer in different parts of England', he wrote, 'was literally to live in different worlds'.¹¹

His most important work has been on the agricultural worker, and here it was the length of hiring that was crucial, with the key divide, in the nineteenth century at least, being between farm servants, hired by a long-term contract (usually six or twelve months), which included board and lodging and was upheld by law, and agricultural labourers. But these two occupational labels

obscured a range of regional experiences. Different forms of service – ‘classic’, ‘modern’ and ‘family’ – were practiced in different regions across the British Isles and remained important well into the twentieth century, even in some parts of England where it had previously been thought of as extinct. For the labourer there was a differentiation between the core or ‘constant’ agricultural labourers, hired across the whole year (many of whom worked with livestock), the ‘ordinary’ labourers, hired by the week but whose employment could be considered regular in that it continued across much of the year, and the seasonal and casual workers, some taking on highly skilled contract work such as mowing, threshing, hedging, ditching and harvesting, others a cheap local resource, exploited to fulfil the temporary need for large inputs of labour at certain point of the agricultural calendar. Although their numbers declined significantly and the nature of their work changed radically through a long process of mechanisation, regional farming systems still shaped the experiences of working on the land in the twentieth century.

Alun’s work led the way in recognising the important contribution that women made to the rural economy. Whilst agricultural history had traditionally ignored, or at best sidelined women, and the dominant narrative of women’s work in agriculture was one of decline, Alun argued that women’s paid work on the land remained a vital element of the rural economy where local demographic and economic structures demanded it. He set the agenda in 1990:

Regionally women remained important to all branches of labour until the Great War, not as a declining or marginal group of casual workers, but as a central part of the workforce without whom agricultural production could not have continued.¹²

The scale and nature of this work was again determined by region and lifecycle. In the north-east for example, particularly Northumberland and the border regions of south-east Scotland, family hiring and the bondager system meant women were extensively employed throughout the year on a wide and varied range of tasks, with Northumberland accounting for the highest percentage of female agricultural labour in any English county in 1851 and 1871. Women were also seasoned hand milkers and although their work in the dairy processing the milk was skilled and physical, it was seen as acceptable to Victorian commentators as it was connected to the household and the indoors. The commercialisation of the dairy industry and increased mechanisation pushed women out of this sector, but this was a gradual process, not complete until the mid twentieth century. In other areas, most notably the fenlands of eastern England, women's work was casual and organised into public gangs, and although this sent Victorian commentators into overdrive, it was vital to seasonal farm production in that region. Although the use of bondagers and gang labour declined in the late nineteenth century, women's work remained important to agriculture in the twentieth, both in times and war and peace, and women's earnings remained a vital part of the social economy of rural families. The emergence of women's history from the margins of agrarian history in the 1990s and 2000s owed much to Alun's lead,

and has resulted in a substantial body of literature on, amongst other things, the scale and nature of the female workforce in agriculture, on women's wages, on agricultural gangs and the Women's Land Army.

He was though, sceptical of applying the label 'proletariat' to certain groups of agricultural workers. He argued that farm work only corresponded with the classic Marxist definition of proletarian on large cereal farms in parts of southern, midland and eastern England and eastern Scotland for a brief historical period between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even then only among parts of the labour force. Farm servants, he argued, with their long-term contracts and various forms of payments in kind, fell outside the definition of proletarian labour, as did numerous groups of migrant, seasonal and casual workers (although they contained elements akin to it). This view did not go unchallenged, with others arguing that farm servants sold their labour as a commodity in the open market and despite the tradition of bargaining at the hiring fair, servant-farmer relations were inherently unequal.¹³

But perhaps the largest group, and the most problematic, which did not fit the proletarian designation, were those Alun termed 'peasants', a contentious category, usually seen as long vanished from England, if not Britain, by the nineteenth century. Taking 50 acres as a realistic measure of a 'peasant' holding, he argued that a large percentage of farms, even in so-called advanced areas of lowland England, let alone the rest of the British Isles, fitted into this category, even in the late nineteenth century. They existed

more or less within capitalist market production but worked their holdings in the interests of their family, not of profit. Relationships between family and community were therefore key, with barter and exchange of goods, tools and labour essential. Some peasants moved in and out of the conventional labour market at different points of the agricultural calendar (most notably the Irish harvesters) and the unpaid labour of family members to maintain the viability of holding was essential. The existence of a British peasantry in the nineteenth century was one Alun remained convinced of at the end of his career.¹⁴

Moving away from the agricultural workforce, his contribution to the debate on the place of ruralism within English national identity has also been highly influential. What he called an 'exploratory rather than definitive' piece, 'The discovery of rural England', part of a collection edited by Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd, *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (1986), became his most cited work.¹⁵ In it he argued that a perceived crisis in late nineteenth century urban life generated a cultural response that placed the rural at the heart of English national identity. It was a specific version of ruralism that was popularised, the rolling green hills and picturesque villages of the 'south country', an ideal landscape and social structure that represented order, stability, continuity and classlessness. By 1914, he argued, this had spread far across English art, music, architecture, and particularly literature, through the writing of authors and poets such as W. H. Hudson, Rudyard Kipling and Edward Thomas. The Great War cemented the image of rural Englishness, an idealised vision of home set against the hell of the trenches, and it was further

popularised in the interwar years as new suburban housing estates embraced the aesthetic of the rural, and the countryside became more accessible for voguish leisure activities such as rambling, cycling and motoring. Alun argued that this form of Englishness did not remain confined to an artistic or literary elite but spread 'outwards and downwards' to become a central part of the cultural construction of the nation in the twentieth century.

Measuring the dissemination of ruralism is difficult. In response, it has been depicted as a brief interlude at the tail end of the nineteenth-century among a small privileged group who were vocal, but ultimately insignificant, as the cultural tide turned decisively to the urban and the modern. To Alun this belittled some very significant cultural and political movements in the twentieth century. Coming back to the debate in 2001, he restressed the popularity of books such as *Georgian Poetry* ('widely regarded as the most popular poetry book of its period'), the centrality of English folk song to educational practice as decreed by the Board of Education, ('the body responsible for the curriculum development of every English state and local authority school') and the demand for smallholding and allotments, particularly in the wake of the Great War. Visions of the rural were mobilised again during the Second World War, and although challenged by the growing cultural and political confidence and of Wales, Ireland and Scotland and by the rise of a multi-racial society since 1945, the endurance of the rural to national – English – identity is, he maintains, striking.¹⁶

The debates on Englishness led him to explore how attitudes towards the countryside changed in the twentieth century more broadly. In an era when productive agriculture and the number of people working in the industry declined and when the vast majority of rural inhabitants had no contact with agriculture or land, who or what was the countryside for? In 1995 he worked with Mass Observation on a directive that asked participants 'do you think the countryside has changed in your lifetime?'¹⁷ The responses pointed to a series of conflicts – between 'incomers' and 'locals' in rural communities, between holiday-makers and preservationists, but most significantly between agriculturalists, who had succeeded in increasing output through the use of labour-saving machinery, factory-farming methods and chemicals, and environmentalists, increasingly concerned with how and where food is produced. Although some respondents acknowledged the decline of rural poverty and the benefits that increased access had brought, the overwhelming tendency was to note deterioration in the countryside. Road building and creeping urbanisation were seen as partly to blame but the main culprit was modern farming, with its highly mechanised and scientific practices destructive of hedgerows, wildlife and animal welfare, and farmers, driven by profit, exploiting access to subsidies to feather their own nests. The critique of farming methods was also seen in the campaign against the transport of live farm animals in the mid 1990s, and the spread of BSE in the late 1990s and the foot-and-mouth crisis of 2002 further condemned the industry in public discourse, all themes he addressed in the *Death of Rural England*.

This increasing focus on the twentieth century enabled him to grapple with issues of contemporary, popular concern, and Alun always saw himself as a public intellectual whose job was to move beyond the rarefied atmosphere of the university seminar or academic conference, to bring the history of rural Britain to different audiences. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he contributed many articles to the *New Statesman*, and he also built up an impressive portfolio of media work. His involvement in the media stretched back to the early 1980s with a film on the folk-song revival for the BBC, 'The Other Music'. He went on to make substantial contribution to, amongst other things, Timewatch ('The Land of Lost Content', broadcast in 1989), Music Matters for Radio 3, Making History and Archive Hour for Radio 4, and two four-part Radio 4 series 'The Long Weekend' and 'The Village'.

This led him to his best-known TV work, the breath-taking four-part series 'Fruitful Earth', a history of agriculture from pre-history to the modern day, made by BBC Cardiff, and first broadcast on BBC2 in 1999 to an average audience of two million viewers. It was filmed over the summer of 1998 at locations across the British Isles from Orkney to Ireland, Cornwall to East Anglia and he relished the camaraderie of working in a small team. Alun wrote the script, did all the to-camera shots and the voice-over and he insisted on maintaining final say on factuality, which guaranteed the academic integrity of the content. He was especially attached to the third programme of the series, John Bull was a Farmer, which covered the years 1750-1914, and which he thought was traditional BBC documentary making at its best. He went on to contribute to other popular programmes such as BBC4's 'Mud, Sweat and

tractors', and the BBC's 'living' farm series ('Victorian Farm' and 'Edwardian Farm'), and although he stepped back from actively pursuing a career in the media, he always saw it as an enjoyable, interesting experience and, above-all, an important component of his academic profile, through which the history of rural Britain became more widely known.

Although the media work and his interest in ruralism and national identity fed into each other, towards the end of his career Alun's academic concerns shifted back to the nineteenth century. He said he didn't want to write a history of his own times, and he returned to the world of Swing rioters, farm servants, and commoners. Despite his previous criticisms of it, he also became a long-serving committee member of the British Agricultural History Society, editing the section on 'Rural Society and Community' for volume VII of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (2000), and in 2010 was elected the Society's President. He enjoyed the serious conversations and arguments about rural and agricultural history, the mix of conference attendees, which included not only academic historians but also practicing and retired farmers, and he always signed off his Presidential speech by leading a rousing rendition of the traditional folk song 'To be a Farmer's Boy'. The affiliation that was a constant across his career however was *HWJ*. There at its inception in the mid-1970s, the final volumes he edited were in 2011 (71 and 72), with Sally Alexander, who he had first met when they both enrolled at Ruskin in the autumn of 1968.

In 2010, following his retirement from the University of Sussex, Alun and Linda moved to the Norfolk countryside (or God's heartland as he called it),

realizing a long-held ambition to reconnect with the people and landscape of his early research. He threw himself into local life with his typical gusto, heavily involved in a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to renovate Diss Corn Hall, and becoming a trustee of Burston Strike School. It was into the small evocative room of that building that family, friends and colleagues packed on a warm day in the middle of August last year, to celebrate his life. On his melodeon was Vic Gammon, his one-time student and founding member of the Pump and Pluck band, who Alun sang and played with for twenty years. Vic led the gathering to sing, at Alun's instruction, Jerusalem, The World Turned Upside Down and a range of socialist anthems including The Internationale and The Red Flag. The venue, music and dedications were a fitting tribute and despite our singing, Alun would have enjoyed it immensely.

I was lucky enough to be taught by Alun when I was an undergraduate student at Sussex in the early 1990s, taking his Special Subject The Remaking of Rural England, and writing a dissertation on women's work in agriculture in Victorian Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire. Alun, and that course, have pretty much determined the path of my whole academic career. I, like many others, owe him a huge debt, for his warmth and wit, his intellectual guidance and exuberance, and his generosity and friendship. Whilst his legacy lives on in the new scholarship on rural history and protest history, there will never be another like him.

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¹ Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A social history of the countryside since 1900* (London, 2003), p. 3

² Alun Howkins, 'George Ewart Evans', *History Workshop Journal*, 1, 1 (1976), pp. 254-56 (p. 255)

³ Alun Howkins, 'Whitsun in 19th century Oxfordshire,' *History Workshop Pamphlet*, 8, 1974

⁴ Published as Alun Howkins, 'The use and abuse of English Commons, 1845-1914', *History Workshop Journal*, 78, 1 (Autumn 2014), pp. 107-32

⁵ Alun Howkins, 'From Diggers to Dongas: The Land in English radicalism, 1649-2000', *History Workshop Journal*, 54, 1 (2002), pp. 1-23 (p. 1)

⁶ Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923* (London, 1985), p. xiv

⁷ Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, p. xiii

⁸ Reg Hall, *Irish Music and Dance in London, 1845-1980*, 2 vols (London, 2009); Vic Gammon, 'Folk song collecting in Sussex and Surrey, 1843-1914', *History Workshop Journal*, 10, 1 (1980), pp. 61-89; Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of rural women in the nineteenth century* (Manchester, 1995); Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997); Anne Meredith, 'Horticultural education in England, 1900-1940: middle-class women and private gardening

schools', *Garden History*, 31/1 (2003), pp. 67-79

⁹ Alun Howkins, 'Labour history and the rural poor, 1850-1980', *Rural History*, 1/1 (1990), pp. 113-22 (p. 120)

¹⁰ Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, c. 1870-1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 42, 1 (1994), pp. 49-62

¹¹ Alun Howkins, 'The English farm labourer in the nineteenth century: farm, family and community', in Brian Short, ed., *The English Rural Community: Image and Reality* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 85-104 (p. 85)

¹² Howkins, 'Labour history and the rural poor', p. 118

¹³ See for example Richard Anthony, 'Farm Servant vs. Agricultural Labourer, 1870-1914: A Comment on Howkins', *Agricultural History Review*, 43, 1 (1995), pp. 61-64. In reply see Alun Howkins, 'Farm Servant vs Agricultural Labourer, 1870-1914: A Reply to Richard Anthony', *Agricultural History Review*, 43, 1 (1995), pp. 65-66

¹⁴ Alun Howkins, 'An English peasantry, revisited, 1800-1900', in John Broad, ed., *A Common Agricultural Heritage? Revising French and British Rural Divergence* (Exeter, 2009), pp. 55-67

¹⁵ Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd, eds, *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (London, 1986), pp. 62-88

¹⁶ Alun Howkins, 'Rural and English identity' in David Morley and Kevin Robins, eds, *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality and Identity* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 53-69

¹⁷ Alun Howkins, 'Quantifying the Evidence: Perceptions of rural change in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century', in David Gilbert, David Matless and Brian Short, eds, *Geographies of British Modernity: Space and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 97-111