

RURAL ARTS

What that means where I live

John Holden



When people ask me whether I live in the country my answer is always equivocal. On the one hand, I can sit on my terrace at dusk and watch deer, rabbits, foxes, owls and bats feeding. I am lucky enough to be able to see the darkness of the night sky and hear the racket of the dawn chorus. We have no mains drains, and no gas, and we have power cuts every winter. But on the other hand, we are only two miles away from Sainsbury's and Blockbuster, and I travel to London several times a week, so it's hardly the back of beyond.

We moved to our present house 25 years ago, heavily influenced by the self-sufficiency movement and the books of John Seymour, with dreams of getting back to the land and achieving a real connection with the natural world. To some extent we did it, despite the fact that I stuck a garden fork through my wellingtons on the first day. As our children grew, they experienced the joy of collecting their breakfast eggs from the hen-coop, and were exposed to the realities of where a pork chop comes from. In fact, it was keeping pigs that taught me one important lesson about evaluating the arts. There are two ways that you can tell whether a pig is doing well. You can take its temperature, assess its feeding regime and weigh it every day to make sure that it is putting on weight - the scientific method. Or you can cast an expert eye over the animal, gained through years of pig-watching, and make a judgement. In other words, you can rely on either evidence or professionalism, and the choice is a pragmatic one. Neither method is foolproof, neither is perfect, but one's a lot easier and cheaper, and the results are more often than not the same.

Our village is a very 'cohesive community', to use current political jargon. People look after each other and keep an eye out. We drink together, celebrate together and entertain each other; and we get cross with each other too, when dogs stray or



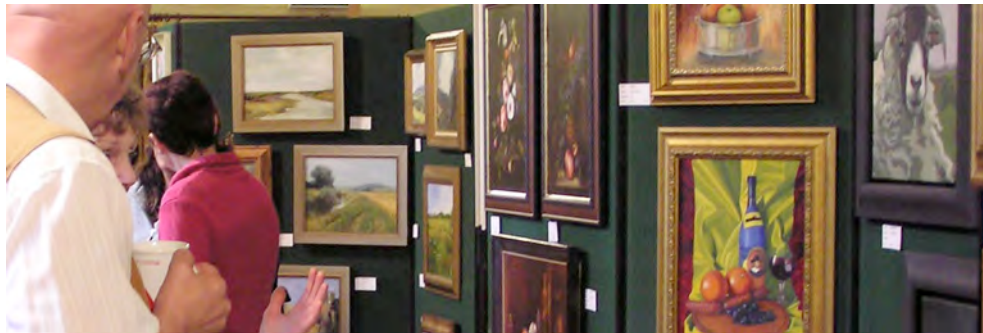
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hedges grow. The population is less static than it once was, but also more uniform. When we arrived in 1983, there were still many residents who worked, or had worked, on the land. They lived in tied cottages and pre-right-to-buy council houses.

But now that the dairy herds and sheep flocks have given way to cereals, all that has changed, because it takes only two men and their machines to look after the local acreage. Instead of agricultural workers we have computer engineers and accountants who leave the village during the day, and lots of others who don't - people working at home, mothers and fathers looking after children, retired fifty-somethings, retired eighty-somethings. There is less inequality in the village than there used to be, but only because almost everyone is well-off: you have to be to afford the house prices. And almost everyone is white.



The arts and culture flourish richly in this soil - but often not in ways that count, as far as government is concerned. Several people, and not always those you might suspect, buy subscriptions to see every classical concert in the season at the concert hall in the nearest town. Two people are on the Boards of arts organisations. Three volunteer at a National Trust property. One could have been a concert pianist (really), but decided to become a banker instead. There are folk singers, choir singers, clog dancers, many adult musicians and teenage band members, a sporadic watercolour class in the Village Hall, a pre-school music group, and Scottish Country Dancing group. There are many very proficient musicians, and a significant number of retired people involved in serious study of the arts, including a 90 year old doing an Open University degree in music.

Every two years we have a song-and-dance Harvest Festival, and about every five years someone puts on an am-dram. There have been occasional talks about Opera in the village hall, and frequent choral concerts in the church. A few years ago there was a touring theatre company that came every Christmas, but they put on something that scared the children, so they've never been re-booked. Last year there was a painting competition to choose things to put on the walls of the new parish room at

the church. So the 'amateur arts' flourish, and many of us spend time and money enjoying the professional arts.



There is also a great interest in architecture and landscape. Sense of place is a distinguishing feature of village life, and preserving the look of our village is a big concern; two years ago, 25 villagers spent hundreds of hours putting together a Village Design Statement in an attempt to ensure the visual integrity of the buildings and the continued use of local vernacular building materials.

Place is important, but so is time. The seasons, festivals and anniversaries are all celebrated in some way. The Church Choir visits every house at Christmas; the village fête marks the high point of summer with morris dancers; on D-Day or a Royal Jubilee the trestle tables come out for a general knees-up.

So in our village we do have art and culture. We consume high culture and popular culture and folk culture. We have a stab at singing Bach and acting Wilde, but mostly we produce folk culture. Doubtless the clog dances and watercolours would be dismissed by seekers after 'quality' and by any objective standard there is plenty of rubbish about.

But at least some of what we make and do should be welcomed by seekers of authenticity. The Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller said that when he curated his Folk Art Archive exhibition last year, 'One reviewer said to me "What will you say to artists who now won't be able to show at the Barbican for the next three months?" She was absolutely serious and she was shaking with anger. Like we'd taken away an opportunity for proper artists'.

Nobody in my village would call themselves a 'proper artist', but that doesn't mean that their lives are in any way divorced from the richness of their heritage or the enjoyment of contemporary culture.

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