

# Who pays for the right to roam?

Geoffrey Lee

## A RIGHT TO ROAM

by Marion Shoard

Oxford University Press, £8.99

**I**F HENRY George's proposals were implemented, paying rent for the use of your site would give you exclusive use of this land. If the public had access, then you would pay less rent. If it were parkland open freely to all then you would pay nothing. That seems reasonable. Miss Shoard mentions Henry George and his impact on Britain but does not develop this aspect of his theories.

The Government proposes to give a statutory right of access to mountain, moor, down and common land in England and Wales. Marion Shoard wants a universal right of access to the whole of the countryside without compensation to landowners since, she says, they should never have enjoyed the right to exclude in the first place.

This is perfectly true and Miss Shoard gives a well researched history of the roots of exclusion from the Norman Conquest, through the Enclosures to the demands of intensively cultivated farming. But the truth is that we have lived with land ownership for many hundreds of years and it cannot easily be set aside. Indeed, set-aside (no pun intended) is already paid for by the Government.

Although it does seem reasonable to open mountain, moor, down and common land, with safeguards and, if necessary, the payment of a management fee, to the public, it is quite a different matter to allow access to farm and woodland. I have farming friends who already have people driving their cars into fields without permission for picnics and recreation. On the whole, farmers don't mind this but do take exception to those who leave their litter behind or fail to close gates so that cattle stray onto fields of growing crops or, even worse, into the roads. Miss Shoard doesn't think this a problem but then she is a university lecturer and not a farmer.

She complains that 90% of the woodlands of Oxfordshire are closed to the public. Do we have to believe that the 10% that are open are flooded with walkers desperate for more woodland? Or that the other 90% are much different from the 10% already available? I think not.

My experience is that there is no great pressure of numbers on the countryside (except for a few honeypot areas) and anyway a large proportion of visitors never stray far beyond the picnic area next to the car park. The right to roam needs much more debate.

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