

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘There wasn’t all that much to do . . . at least not here’: memories of growing up in rural south-west England in the early twentieth century

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## Abstract

Stan was born in 1911 in a small village near the north Somerset coast. When recalling his life in the countryside, he felt that ‘there wasn’t much to do in the evenings . . . at least not here’. Drawing upon evidence from personal accounts of growing up in the south-west of England in the early twentieth century, this article examines memories of youth in the countryside, with a particular focus on the leisure lives of young people and their experiences of rural space and place. In addition to adding to our knowledge on the lives of rural youth, this study also provides new insights into the complex relationship between people and their environment, and has implications for our understandings of the early formation of a distinct youthful identity in England. The countryside was not simply a backdrop in these recollections; rather, it was formative in how those that grew up in rural communities understood their experience of being young.

## Introduction

Stan was born in 1911 in a small village near the north Somerset coast, and grew up in what he described as a ‘typical country cottage’. He felt that ‘there wasn’t all that much to do in the evenings’, adding ‘there were no such things as cinemas being opened, for instance, and dance halls and other entertainments, at least not here’.<sup>1</sup> Harry, who grew up in Uley, Gloucestershire, spent his childhood exploring the fields and lanes of the village and surrounding countryside, but also remembered that ‘entertainment in rural areas was sparse, except self-created jokes and fun’. Similarly, Herbert, who grew up in a village on the Somerset Levels, noted how ‘life in the village was really quiet, there was nothing much happening’.<sup>2</sup> This article draws upon evidence from personal accounts of growing up in the early twentieth century to examine memories of youth in the countryside, with a particular focus on the leisure lives of young people and their experiences of rural environments. Leisure is often associated with the development of a distinct youthful identity in the early twentieth century, but historical understandings of youthful leisure have largely been told from an urban perspective.<sup>3</sup> Tracing episodes, experiences and memories of adolescence in oral history interviews and memoirs, this article examines how narratives of being young in the countryside have been shaped and retold. Drawing on literature and insights from histories of youth, social and cultural histories of the countryside, oral history theory, and social geography, this study adds to our knowledge on the lives of rural young people, provides new insights into the complex relationship between people and their environment, and has significant implications for our understanding of the development of a distinct youthful culture and sense of identity in England.

While I draw on experiences and particular examples of growing up in the south-west of England, the themes explored here are not limited to this context. The discussion should have

particular relevance for historians of youth in this period, and contributes to the developing literature on the lives and experiences of rural young people in a historical context.<sup>4</sup> The article begins with a discussion of the existing literature on young people in the early twentieth century, noting that rural youth has been largely neglected in historical work; something that has important implications for our understanding of youthful identity. I then move on to a consideration of the sources used to examine recollections of youth in the countryside, focusing on questions of memory, nostalgia, and the interplay between the past and the present in accounts of growing up. By way of wider context, the place of the countryside in the historical and popular imagination is also addressed. The final section of the article offers an analysis of a range of accounts of growing up in rural communities in the south-west of England, drawing out the various and complex ways that the rural has been remembered and understood. In doing so, I argue that the countryside was not simply a backdrop to memories of being young, instead, it helped to develop a distinct sense of youthful identity.

### Rural youth and the life cycle

The lives of rural young people, as distinct from children, have received comparatively little attention in the historical literature, with the notable exception of Sian Edwards's work on youth movements and the English countryside from the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Although there are numerous published and unpublished autobiographies offering rich accounts of individual experience, and a range of both local and national oral history collections that include detailed reflections on growing up in rural areas, these seem to have made a limited impact on histories of youth, leisure, and social histories of rural life in the early twentieth century. This is a rather surprising omission, given that existing histories of youth have demonstrated that the early twentieth century was a pivotal period in the lives, experiences and representations of young people.<sup>6</sup> These years witnessed various efforts to define youth, with academic attention increasingly given to the problem of adolescence. The American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, writing in 1904, identified adolescence as a universal life stage, suggesting that youth was a time in which young people were both problematic and vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> For Hall, adolescence began with puberty and ended in the early twenties, though he argued that women never fully grew out of the immaturity that characterised the adolescent life stage.<sup>8</sup> Young people needed guidance to navigate the moral dangers found in the corrupting – largely urban – environment, and concerns around the physical status of young men were expressed following the *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, which highlighted the poor physical condition of recruits for the Boer War.<sup>9</sup>

Other attention was also being directed to the youth 'problem', a problem that was largely characterised as a male, urban, working-class phenomenon. As explored by Stephen Humphries, Geoffrey Pearson, Andrew Davies and others, the later years of the nineteenth century saw increasing middle-class anxieties around working-class 'hooligans', largely young men, who loitered on street corners, made a nuisance of themselves in the streets, or joined neighbourhood gangs and fought vicious battles over territory.<sup>10</sup> How young people spent their spare time in the early twentieth century was a subject of considerable interest, and while much of this attention focused on male youths, young women and girls were also under increasing scrutiny. Young female adolescents were seen as being both in moral danger, but also as presenting a threat to the moral welfare of young men. For Lily Montagu, it was 'because of their individualistic, irresponsible, and pleasure loving tendencies that we find so many unsatisfactory elements in the working girl's influence over the boy'.<sup>11</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that many urban areas witnessed the first stirrings of an increasingly distinct youth culture around the turn of the twentieth century, a culture that was defined by generational leisure patterns, and largely based around informal street and neighbourhood based recreation.<sup>12</sup> The importance of the early twentieth century in youth history makes a lack of

consideration of rural experience in this period particularly notable.<sup>13</sup> The countryside remains something of a shadowy backdrop to many histories of youth in this period; invoked in opposition to concerns about the urban youth ‘problem’ and the negative connotations of urban life, or appearing fleetingly in accounts of young agricultural labourers and domestic service workers increasingly deserting the countryside for better opportunities in the towns and cities of industrialised Britain. Yet without a consideration of the lives of those young men and women who grew up in rural areas, we are ignoring the experience of a large number of young people, and are left with something of an incomplete picture of youthful life and identity in the early twentieth century. Important markers in the life cycle, such as leaving school and entering paid employment, earning but not running a home, and – in theory at least – a period for relatively unrestricted leisure and courtship opportunities, have been associated with a distinct youthful identity in this period, but were they experienced in the same way by young people in urban and rural environments? Was youth a distinct and memorable life stage for rural residents in the same way as their urban counterparts?

### Remembering youth

The accounts of young people’s experiences utilised here have been traced through references in a range of personal accounts, both published and unpublished autobiographical material, and a number of existing collections of oral history testimony. The Bristol People’s Oral History Project includes around 175 recollections of childhood and youth from working-class men and women in Bristol and the south-west born between 1890 and 1925, a number of whom spent their early years in the countryside. The Somerset Voices Oral History Archive comprises over 600 recordings of Somerset people, and features interviewees discussing their lives in agriculture, rural industries and crafts, as well as childhood memories and accounts of youthful life.<sup>14</sup> As part of his project ‘The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918’, Paul Thompson collected over 450 interviews from men and women born before 1918, with a selection of interviewees recalling their childhood or teenage years in rural communities in the south-west.<sup>15</sup> Transcripts and, where available, recordings held as part of these collections have been consulted. This has allowed me to analyse the memories and recalled experiences of men and women who grew up in rural communities of the south-west, and to explore how adult narrators form their own understandings of growing up in the countryside. However, as Linda Shopes has noted, it is important to recognise the limitations of carrying out a secondary analysis of oral history interviews gathered by other groups or researchers, with different aims and approaches to the material.<sup>16</sup> As Rosemary Elliot has cautioned, one of the most important factors to consider when using existing oral history data is the ‘fit’ of the material; how far can the new research questions be answered by the original materials?<sup>17</sup> In drawing from a number of oral history collections with individual recollections relevant to life in the south-west of England, this study engages with materials collected in different ways and using different methodologies, and understanding the history and context of the collections is an important part of the analysis. Each collection of interviews broadly follows a life-history approach, though the Bristol People’s Oral History Project focuses particularly on recollections of working-class resistance to authority during childhood and youth. In all of the interviews the interviewer is a strong presence, and at times interviewees are prompted and directed, often towards discussing their earliest memories of childhood, family life, and recollections of work and leisure. This did lead to some frustrations; interviewees and narrators often spend a great deal of time on memories of childhood, and in some cases rather glossed over discussions of youthful experiences. In a number of cases, there was little attempt to establish precisely the age of the narrator during the events they are describing, and there are slippages between childhood and youthful memories. In other instances, potential avenues of interest to my research were not explored or followed up by the original interviewer, and there are limits to what can be drawn out

of the materials. There is also the potential that in revisiting material, the transcripts and recordings are interpreted differently than the narrator originally intended, or nuance found in the original interviewer-narrator relationship is missed.<sup>18</sup> However, the broad nature of many of these interviews provide a useful source for an exploration of meanings assigned by adults to their experiences of growing up in rural areas, and gaps, silences, and hesitations can be just as meaningful as detailed recollections.

The oral testimony has been supplemented by published memoirs of life in the south-west, which together with unpublished autobiographical materials provide detail about growing up in rural communities, and substantiate a number of common themes discussed in the oral history testimony. The autobiographers are typically writing in later life, and the process of writing provides a means to retrospectively chart a life; to arrange, organise and redraft who and what is remembered. The materials referred to here have largely been sourced from the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies, which has been consulted for accounts reflecting on life in the south-west of England.<sup>19</sup> Some of these accounts – which reveal as much about the time of writing as they do about the past – fill just a few pages, others are more detailed but focus on a defined period within the life cycle. However, reflections on childhood, youth, and family life in these accounts are often ‘marked by sharp visual and sensory detail’.<sup>20</sup> They provide a space for the author to write about themselves and their place in the world, and a form through which to articulate the important elements of a personal identity.

These accounts are almost exclusively adult narrators recounting their experiences of growing up at a much later date, and have been collected and produced with the intention of reflecting back on the past. They can give a rich insight into how young people lived their lives in the countryside, and reveal much about youthful leisure activities as well as young people’s engagement with rural spaces; they are also contradictory and confusing. Narrators are often talking about some of their earliest recollections, and such accounts must contend with the hazy world of early memories, and are informed by the experiences of a twentieth century where much has changed. Childhood often holds a particularly compelling place in these memories. Herbert, who was born in 1890 and interviewed in 1977, told the interviewer: ‘it’s a funny thing that I can remember more about my childhood than [*coughs*] I can remember things that happened say a week or a month ago’.<sup>21</sup> It is important to acknowledge the distortions memories are subject to, especially with elderly interviewees and authors, and in his memoir of growing up in rural Gloucestershire, Arthur Stanley Bullock joked the working title for his recollections was *Before I Forget!*<sup>22</sup>

This also raises many questions about the ways that memory, nostalgia and popular representations of the past shape an individuals’ recollections. Joe Moran has highlighted the complexities of childhood nostalgia, in both personal and political forms, and these complexities are of key importance when discussing youthful life, leisure and landscape in the past.<sup>23</sup> Stuart Tannock has argued that while nostalgic reminiscences can be critiqued for distortions and limitations they also provide a valuable way of approaching the past, and in his work on postwar working-class autobiography Ben Jones has noted that nostalgia can be an effective means of engaging with and challenging the present.<sup>24</sup> Oral history narrators and those who wrote down their memories of growing up regularly make their past comprehensible in relation to the present, and compare their experiences of growing up with particular perceptions of the lives of children and young people later in the twentieth century. Arthur Frederick Goffin, whose memoir is part of the Burnett collection, touches upon the changing world of the twentieth century:

It is the peculiar privilege of the older folk to talk of bygone days. Who has not heard with interest of the old man’s ‘Now, when I was a lad . . .’. Of course the young people will listen patiently – perhaps, but not very interestedly. Their world contains so much which is more thrilling and exciting.<sup>25</sup>

Mr Wilcox, who was born in 1897 and interviewed in 1972, was particularly keen to stress how behaviour among young men had changed: 'I don't think in those days there was so much amongst the boys you know – the swearing, I don't think so . . . It was different in those days.'<sup>26</sup> Herbert, interviewed as part of the Somerset Voices collection, similarly concluded: 'it's different today with things that's carried on by the present day generation. I really can't understand it.'<sup>27</sup>

The interviews for Paul Thompson's Edwardians project were primarily recorded in the early 1970s, while the Somerset Voices collection was begun in 1973, and the Bristol People's Oral History Project in the late 1970s. Concerns about troublesome, working-class urban youth pre-occupied social commentators throughout the decade, much as they had at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> Rising unemployment, de-industrialisation and lower wages led to greater insecurity in the lives of young people, and from the mid-1970s in particular there were increasingly negative responses to youth and its subcultures.<sup>29</sup> Many of these stereotypes of the 'bovver boy', the 'inner city youth' or 'yob' had little to do with the actual lives of young people, but were regularly deployed by observers and reporters to comment on wider social, political and economic issues, with a rhetoric of 'crisis' and decline.<sup>30</sup> It was within this specific context that the oral history narrators and many of the autobiographers, as adults who had experienced a rural childhood and youth, increasingly recognised this rurality as something distinctive, significant, and even formative. Nostalgic memories of childhood and youth were part of the process through which these narrators made meaning of their present. Memory is not just a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings; a process of making sense of the past, and one that becomes particularly important when discussing youthful life in the countryside.<sup>31</sup> It is the subjective nature of these materials that make them so important when trying to understand the multiple and complex ways the countryside functioned and fashioned in the lives of its young residents.

### Growing up in the south-west

The south-west of England has been selected as an area of study in part because of its predominantly rural character, providing a useful contrast to both the overwhelmingly urban histories of youth, where London and the industrial north in particular have dominated the literature, and accounts of rural life and agriculture that have often focused on the south east of England.<sup>32</sup> In the first part of the twentieth century, agriculture dominated in the region, and in Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall it continued to be the largest occupation for men until well into the middle of the century.<sup>33</sup> In a report on the Somerset village of Luccombe published in 1944, it was recorded that 'the men of Luccombe all work with their hands, on the land, with horses, trees, stones and paint'.<sup>34</sup> Domestic service was the key occupation for young women in the region, and Alun Howkins has argued that servants working at local farms may be responsible for its continuation as a leading occupation in rural areas.<sup>35</sup> Other work for young people was available at local mills and factories, and some of those who lived in rural areas did travel daily to larger settlements for work. Alfred Williams recalled the journey made by employees in Swindon's railway industry from surrounding Wiltshire villages, writing of his own experience: 'I have many times, as a boy, run from village to the factory, four miles distant, in thirty-five minutes, as the result of oversleeping.'<sup>36</sup>

When considering rural lives and experiences, it is important to recognise the complexity and diversity of rural society. There were great regional differences in landscape, farming, and settlement patterns, but even within regions and sometimes relatively small areas there could be important distinctions.<sup>37</sup> When A. D. Hall toured through Britain in the early twentieth century 'with a view to learning something of the diversity of British farming' he saw contrasts within as well as between counties, and the topography of the south-west of England is extremely varied.<sup>38</sup> The mixed landscape of parts of the south-west would be familiar to the readers of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* – Tess moved from the 'low and sheltered valley agriculture of her youth, through

the dairy farms of slightly higher ground, to the open chalk downland with its mixture of poor arable land and sheep'.<sup>39</sup> To discuss rural life in the first half of the twentieth century involves consideration of the hamlet, the village, the farm and the small market town, and, as Howkins suggests, even the term village itself covers a range of settlement types.<sup>40</sup> The oral and written evidence utilised here is largely drawn from those who grew up in villages and on farms in the south-west of England, though any narrators who considered themselves to have grown up in rural areas have been included. Respondents certainly had a sense that they grew up in the countryside, and often recalled their environment in emotive terms, despite a lack of direct questioning in the interviews about their feelings of local, regional, or rural identity. The general picture of rural life is one of variation – there was no homogenous rural world, and local landscapes and contexts had a key influence on how adults recalled their experiences of growing up.

Country life in the early twentieth century was also the focus of an increasing amount of attention. As its agricultural importance declined, the cultural significance of the countryside grew, and rural England was 'discovered' and explored, both physically and in print.<sup>41</sup> The English countryside increasingly found a place in the hearts and minds of English people, and as historians and cultural geographers have highlighted, English national identity became centred on a rural idyll, as clearly illustrated by Stanley Baldwin's oft-quoted address to the Royal Society of St George in 1924: 'to me, England is the country, and the country is England'.<sup>42</sup> The movement of male workers from rural areas into urban districts caused increasing concern as young agricultural labourers flocked from the countryside to employment opportunities in towns and cities.<sup>43</sup> In their 1913 study of rural labour, *How the Labourer Lives*, Seebom Rowntree and May Kendall opened the book with the question: 'How to stop the steady drift of the population to towns?', a theme that was repeated in a headline of the *Western Morning News* in 1927: 'Land Losing Young Men: The Lure of the Big Towns – Fears of Labour Shortage'.<sup>44</sup> It was not only, or even mainly, men or male workers who left the countryside, and young women also moved to urban centres. Winifred grew up in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire in the years after the First World War, and in her memoir wrote of how 'there was no employment for us in the village, and leaving home was common to us all'.<sup>45</sup> Although Winifred felt she had 'no choice' about leaving, she was determined to be the mistress of her own fate: 'I was going to London'.<sup>46</sup> Alice who grew up in the Mendip Hills similarly recalled that as soon as she left school 'we were sent off to earn our living, and often, of course, out of the village because there was no industry here'.<sup>47</sup>

Life in the countryside was often discussed in opposition to negative connotations of urban life. The rural and the urban were constructed in relation to one another, with distinctions between urban life and idealised country living based on broad generalisations that disguised the complex and variable relationship. Rural areas experienced extreme poverty and inadequate housing, and not all of urban life was dirty, overcrowded and unsanitary, or populated by rowdy youths intent on causing trouble. Nevertheless, these images of town versus country remained important and remarkably persistent – in the minds of both town and country dwellers. After a visit to Bristol, Mrs Prescott told a Mass Observation investigator recording life in her village of Luccombe, Somerset in 1944: 'Oh my word. I don't know how people can stick living in a town. It seems so dirty and the people look so shabby!', though this comment should be understood within the context of the large number of urban residents who took to the countryside during the Second World War.<sup>48</sup> This distinction between rural and urban was also important in the recollections of growing up in the countryside, where country childhood is often remembered as the ideal combination of innocence, play, adventure, nature and freedom, with many of the most persistent recollections related to outdoor rural places. As Caitlin Adams has argued: 'childhood, but especially country childhood, is typically recalled in nostalgic terms and contact with the natural environment is a mark of special favour'.<sup>49</sup> These recollections often mirror the way that rural childhoods have been depicted by adults in literature and in wider popular culture. As Owain Jones has identified, key books like Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959) and Flora Thompson's *Larkrise to Candleford* (1945) present powerful evocations of recollected childhoods

that celebrate the countryside as a rural idyll, and perpetuate the idea that rural areas are good places in which to grow up.<sup>50</sup>

Oral history testimony and written recollections draw heavily on the nostalgia of places past, and for many narrators, childhood is recollected as part of a comfortable, local rural environment. Winifred, who grew up in the Forest of Dean, noted how her village ‘was remote and self-contained. We were cut off from the world . . . as children we didn’t think about whether we were isolated, of course.’<sup>51</sup> Emotional attachments made in childhood to the rural environment were recalled even a number of years later, and childhood was recalled both emotionally and sensorily through the landscape. Ethel, who grew up in Woolaston, a small village in Gloucestershire, described the particular geography developed by children in the village, recalling the specific fields that were a favourite place to gather and play:

Mary Anne’s Meadow, Junie’s Piece, Rocky Leaze, Smokey, Foxholes, Fair Oaks and Piccadilly. We all knew Marling’s Mead which we called Mallin’s Med, and all knew Swine’s Close, commonly known as Shewin’s Close. Mallin’s Med was a favourite place for children from our end of the village.<sup>52</sup>

Reg Beeston, who grew up in Uley, Gloucestershire, had similar memories of his village, writing as an adult about the names given by him and his fellow children to particular local features: ‘Crawley Bottom, Goblin Gate, Fairy Lane, Devil’s Den, Cuckoo’s Brook’.<sup>53</sup> Children explore and name places that they feel some attachment to and, as Simon Sleight has argued, ‘to name an area is to seize rhetorical possession of it’.<sup>54</sup>

Memories of life in the countryside were fluid, and they often developed as narrators recalled growing from childhood into young adulthood. Denis Cluett, who grew up in Sampford Peverell, Devon in the years before the First World War recalled a childhood spent ‘roaming the lanes and fields’, and ‘never remembered feeling bored because there always seemed to be so much to do in the country’, but many oral history respondents commented on increased feelings of dissatisfaction and boredom with rural life as they grew older.<sup>55</sup> This has been reflected in contemporary research, which suggests that life can be restrictive for young people who grow up in rural areas. Geographers and sociologists have examined the relationship between rural young people and their environment, questioning the narrative of the rural idyll, highlighting the problems of limited employment opportunities, poor transport options, a lack of leisure facilities and amenities, and the sense of having ‘nothing to do’ in rural areas, exploring issues of growing up, going out, and growing out of the countryside in Britain and beyond.<sup>56</sup> In her recent work on the postwar period, Sian Edwards has also suggested that memories of adolescence were often framed by an idea that by growing up in the countryside, rural youths felt as though they had in some way missed out on the ‘authentic’ experience of being a teenager.<sup>57</sup>

In their analysis of young people’s own accounts of growing up in rural Scotland, Anthony Glendinning et al. found that their teenage interviewees were careful to point out distinctions between childhood and youth: ‘the countryside was good for children; not so good for teenagers’.<sup>58</sup> For many of the oral history respondents, an environment that may have once been seen as a space of adventure became increasingly associated with feelings of restriction and dissatisfaction; reflected in Winifred’s ‘as children we didn’t think about whether we were isolated, of course’.<sup>59</sup> Margaret, who turned fifteen at the turn of the twentieth century, described her village in rural Dorset, as a ‘typical village’ with the nearest town ‘four miles away’. This town could only be reached in two ways – by walking, or taking the small open horse-drawn wagon known locally as the village carrier. This carrier came by once a week, and those who decided to take the four-mile walk ‘had the pleasure of walking up all the hills . . . on roads either thick with dust or deep with mud’. Margaret concluded: ‘it was not all that easy to get about, and we mostly stayed at home’.<sup>60</sup> Mr Wilcox recalled that as young men he and his friends were fairly confined to the village: ‘there was no buses, couldn’t get out very much, we were confined to this area practically all us life’.<sup>61</sup>

Villages and rural areas were remembered as places of close-knit personal relations, which for many children provided a sense of community, but could also feel repressive, particularly as young people grew older. Ethel noted how in Woolaston, ‘neighbours knew everyone’s business’.<sup>62</sup> Harry Alfred West, who grew up in Upper Stanton, Somerset, recalled that ‘village life was generally more social and intimate, especially in those days. Everybody knew everybody, their lives, joys, troubles and sicknesses.’<sup>63</sup> For young people, this could foster a sense of surveillance, a feeling that was often magnified due to the small scale of space and more intimate social relations. Arthur Frederick Goffin noted how ‘as I entered manhood I began to . . . resent the repression on all sides. I began to feel I deserved more freedom, if in a rather limited sense. I felt I should be able to come and go without my parents’ permission and I did not think it incumbent on me to say where I had been, or what I did, or what I thought.’<sup>64</sup>

Feelings of repression in adolescence may of course have been familiar to young people growing up in close-knit urban communities, but they had a particular resonance for rural youths. In a series of radio broadcasts in the early 1930s, writer C. Delise Burns discussed the frustrations of rural life for young people. In the associated publication *Leisure in the Modern World*, he included a selection of listener’s letters, including one from ‘an interested youth in the country’ who wrote:

The fault lies, I think, not in the youth themselves, but in the very nature of their environment . . . There is not much to talk about and as people must talk, what is more interesting to gossip over than who so-and-so was seen talking to, who so-and-so danced with? Heads begin to nod and tongues to wag, which may be quite harmless, no doubt, but frightfully depressing when one has to live amongst it.

The ‘youth’ goes on to compare the range of encounters available in the city with ‘the stiff narrow little meetings of the country church social union . . . where everyone present knows the history of every other from birth . . . the town spells “escape” to youth, natural freedom and equality. The country jogs along, thirty years behind the times.’<sup>65</sup> This was mirrored in the Mass Observation report on Luccombe, Somerset, which concluded in 1944 that ‘one of the features of life in Luccombe is talk – talk is often gossip, rumour, opinions about other people’, later noting: ‘many rumours circulate in the village about the morals of others’. Luccombe was chosen by the Mass Observation investigators precisely because it was a ‘small community remote from town facilities and pleasures’.<sup>66</sup>

For some young people, these inadequacies of village life only became apparent after leaving their local communities. Winifred came back to her village in the Forest of Dean to visit her parents after spending a few months in London in her first position in service:

When . . . I began the walk home I realised how much I had seen, how many new sights and sensations I had absorbed in those few months in London. I had seen a mountain to measure a molehill by. The endless green sward to the old brickworks was but a quarter-mile’s walk of rough, open, sheep-grazing pastureland . . . everything seemed to have shrunk in that forest cleaning . . . The old magic came back as I entered the last part of my walk, through the forest surrounding our village. *Now* I was back home. But oh, how pitiful, how small home seemed!<sup>67</sup>

### Memories of rural life and leisure

One particular source of both frustration and celebration for those recalling growing up in the countryside was leisure. In her examination of an Edwardian rural community, *Life in an English Village; An Economic and Historical Survey of the Parish of Corsley in Wiltshire* (1909), Maud Davies reported that: ‘a large proportion of the young people of Corsley quit the parish on leaving school . . . the few young girls who stay with their parents usually complain that it is “dull”, especially in the winter, when they often go out very little’.<sup>68</sup> In their study of rural

labourers in 1913, Rowntree and Kendall suggested that the recreational offerings of many rural locations were lacking, with one Leicestershire village described as providing ‘no anything!’<sup>69</sup>

Much of our understanding of youth in the early twentieth century is related to the significant developments in young people’s leisure lives, with young people considered to be relatively privileged consumers of leisure in this period. Young workers became increasingly prominent leisure consumers from the late nineteenth century, particularly in larger urban centres, and this has been linked to the creation of an increasingly distinct youth culture, foreshadowing both the greater commercial leisure opportunities available in the interwar years, and the ‘youth explosion’ of the postwar period and the emergence of the teenager in the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> Young people living in urban areas were increasingly marked by a degree of personal independence, and greater leisure time and opportunities helped to distinguish young people from both their parents and younger siblings. Leisure was an important part of youth, yet we know relatively little about the leisure experiences of rural youth in this period.<sup>71</sup> How did those who grew up in the countryside reflect on their leisure opportunities?

Perhaps one of the most insistent memories of leisure was a lack of time to experience it, and oral history respondents regularly make note of their long hours of work, which placed a particular limitation on leisure. Mr Wilcox, an agricultural worker who grew up in south Devon recalled:

You used to have to be in bed by – by nine o’clock. You had to get up at half-past-five and – perhaps before that sometimes you know. It was – some – it wasn’t much of a life but we took- we- we- we didn’t know any difference. Made the most of it, we didn’t know the difference did we?<sup>72</sup>

The regularisation of work and leisure experienced by many factory, shop and industrial workers did not always apply to agricultural workers. Farm labourers regularly worked long hours, often including Saturdays and Sundays, as also demonstrated by Rowntree and Kendall’s 1913 study.<sup>73</sup> Long hours were often dependent on time and season, with farm labourers regularly having to work more intensively in the winter season: ‘in winter we had to put in more, more hours of work, see, on account of the [animals], besides milking we had to do the cleaning out and the feeding’.<sup>74</sup> Alongside agricultural labourers, rural domestic servants often worked long hours with little free time, with some employers also feeling entitled to direct the social lives of their servants, believing their conduct could reflect on the moral position of the household. Mary, who worked in farm service from the age of thirteen remembered: ‘There wadn’t no Saturday afternoons. You ‘ad to do the same Saturday as you’d to do Sundays, everything had to be done.’<sup>75</sup> This was something that persisted well into the middle of the twentieth century, and Selina Todd found that in the 1940s in Devon some domestic servants in their teens worked ‘between fifty and ninety hours per week’.<sup>76</sup> Muriel, who left school aged fourteen to work in service, was initially only given one day off a month, later extended to weekly, but even on those rare days away from work ‘we had to be in by nine o’clock and we had to go to bed as soon as we could after that’. On a Sunday she was allowed time off – as long as she used it to go to church, an experience also recounted by urban domestic workers.<sup>77</sup> As with their urban counterparts, material, moral and gender constraints could impact opportunities for leisure.<sup>78</sup>

For those with the free time, memories of leisure opportunities in rural communities often align with the accounts of Maud Davies and Rowntree and Kendall. In the oral history testimony and written recollections of rural life in the south-west, adults regularly recalled the lack of things to do, and emphasised the complete absence of commercial and recreational opportunities. Stan remembered there being ‘nothing much at all to do . . . at least not here’.<sup>79</sup> William Radford was born in 1897 and grew up on a farm around three miles out from the town of Ashburton, in Devon. When he was asked about his leisure activities he similarly emphasised the lack of opportunities, in what the transcript suggests was a particularly awkward part of the interview:

- Interviewer (I): Did you ever go fishing at all?  
 Radford (R): Fishing, no. No.  
 I: How about walking, did you ever go for walks at all?  
 R: No.  
 I: Bicycling, did you have a bicycle?  
 R: No.  
 I: Did you ever take part in any sports?  
 R: No.  
 I: You didn't play football or anything like that?  
 R: No, no, wasn't about then.  
 I: Did you go to any theatres?  
 R: No. Weren't nothing.  
 I: Concerts?  
 R: No.  
 ...  
 I: You don't remember any sort of organised entertainments like theatres and cinemas?  
 R: No. No. No.  
 I: Did they ever have any sort of village concerts?  
 R: No. No, wouldn't be nothing like that then. No.  
 I: Do you remember anything like a fair or a circus?  
 R: No. Nothing – nothing like that then.  
 I: Did your parents ever give you any pocket money?  
 ...  
 R: No, only – no. Well I used to – well I used to and father – mother used to help keep the home going then.  
 I: This is when you were earning money?  
 R: Yes. Well that – that used to go towards the home.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, when she was interviewed in 1972 about how she spent her free time as a young woman near Torpoint, Cornwall, in the early years of the twentieth century, Mrs Deacon recalled: 'well – I suppose – we didn't think it was monotonous in those days, but – anybody today would wonder how you survived really'.<sup>81</sup> This was particularly felt in the cold winter months, when Herbert remembered 'wintertime was nothing doing ... we had to remain in doors in the winter and off to bed early'.<sup>82</sup>

These accounts suggest a complete dearth of leisure culture for young people growing up in the countryside, and despite the different individual contexts and experiences, the similarities in recollections suggest that interviewees are comparing their recollections of youth with the experiences both of young people later in the twentieth century, and with ideas about different urban experiences of growing up. William Palmer, born in 1884, told his interviewer 'I've never been to the cinemas ... never been to a dance'.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, a number of the oral history interviewees and writers are keen to suggest they had an ability to entertain themselves, without the need for external sources of fun, speaking proudly of the lack of commercial opportunities and recounting other moments of snatched pleasure that they associated with being young. Margaret, born in 1885, noted 'although we had nothing that we did not provide for ourselves; no wireless, cinema, WI or TV, I don't remember that we were ever dull ... there was not much time for recreation, but we did have what would seem nowadays to be very mild pastimes'.<sup>84</sup> Stan, discussing his experiences over twenty years later than William and Margaret similarly noted that though 'there was nothing very much going on' in his village, he and his friends would 'just go out' and 'knock about ... that's the sort of thing we did'. They were able to gather on the lanes and roads as 'of course there was very little traffic about in them days, compared to what

there is now'.<sup>85</sup> By the interwar years there were greater leisure opportunities for rural youth; increasingly reliable transport links made the town and country closer than ever before, and as Jeremy Burchardt has demonstrated, the growth of the village hall from the 1920s provided a space for dancing, games and sports.<sup>86</sup> This perceived continuity in experience, despite what historians have suggested about an increase in rural leisure opportunities, reinforces the notion of a dominant narrative of rural distinctiveness.

Walks with friends and potential partners, gossiping, idling on the way to work, and other informal activities are regularly discussed by oral history narrators and autobiographers as forming both a significant part of their leisure time, and a key indicator of being young. Ethel described how on Saturdays 'lots of young folk walked from Woolaston to Parkhill, the Chase and on to the Lily Beds as we called them'.<sup>87</sup> It is apparent in these accounts that the narrators are again marking the distinctiveness of their rural experience; different to both urban leisure lives – which were associated with the new mass leisure forms of the period – and to the experiences of young people in the later twentieth century.<sup>88</sup> The recollections suggest that informal leisure activities, those that cost little or nothing, and particularly those which involved contact with the natural environment, were especially important in the lives of young men and women, and retained a privileged position in their adult recollections of youth.

One of the most persistent memories of youth in the countryside was the opportunity for engagement with the opposite sex. Margaret highlighted the lack of time for leisure, but added 'of course, there was time for courtship and marriage', a sentiment echoed by Stan: 'everyone always seemed to find the time for that, somehow [*laughs*]'.<sup>89</sup> Courtship was considered a significant rite of passage for both young men and women, and within a society where marriage was expected, it became a formative stage of youth in which emotional attachments could be made and developed. It also helped to further distinguish young people from their parents or younger siblings; courtship was an important part of youth, a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. The recollections demonstrate that parents were particularly concerned to protect the respectability and welfare of daughters when it came to courtship, and often tried to regulate young women's involvement in youthful activities that presented opportunities for courting. Mrs Pender noted that up until marriage she was expected home by nine o'clock, and she 'had to give an account of myself, and where I'd been and who I'd been with. They were very strict if you were out in the night. They never thought that . . . it was nice for a young woman to be out late'.<sup>90</sup> Ethel was often required to act as a form of surveillance on her older sister, being asked by her parents to walk with her to any social events in the village. As she remembered: 'this served two purposes, or it was supposed to'. Firstly, keeping Ethel entertained, but also: 'if I were with her she would not be able to have a boyfriend bring her home alone'. However, Ethel's sister did find ways to subvert this form of parental control, with Ethel writing: 'it did not work that way as I was detailed [by my sister] to go ahead with someone and wait for her'.<sup>91</sup>

For some courting couples, the wider countryside offered a space that could be used for both innocent and more illicit meetings, looking for spaces where they could socialise, be seen by others of their own age, but also escape from adult supervision. Mr Stinchcombe's future wife was a live-in farm domestic, and the couple courted for three years, developing a system of short cuts across the fields in order to meet with one another.<sup>92</sup> Lily recalled that both her parents and employers had very strict attitudes towards boyfriends: 'Oh god help us if we looked at boys.' However, her weekly Sunday routine offered an opportunity to escape supervision:

After Bible class we came 'ome and we lingered. The boys and girls. And we used to come back the long way home. And 'er, coming down the street, 'er towards home I saw, 'er a young man there he's been to he'd his pigs. And I had to pass the gate where he was and 'er he saw me and we always stood there talking. My father come down and Ah! Oooh, it wasn't if you were seen talking to boys. And I was sixteen then.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has drawn out some of the remembered experiences of growing up in the countryside in the early twentieth century through an examination of a range of oral history narratives and written recollections of life in the south-west of England. Adult reflections on growing up will never offer the same perspective as those of young people themselves, but they do provide a glimpse of everyday rural life in the past, and – perhaps more importantly – suggest what moments or memories are important to the identity of an individual who grew up in the countryside.

Memories of rural life and leisure were complex and fluid, yet despite clear differences in experience, shaped by class, gender and the local context, there are also a number of striking similarities in accounts of growing up in the rural south-west of England across this period. Respondents often defined their experiences of rural life and leisure against what they perceived as different opportunities and experiences available in towns and cities, as well as in comparison with their distinct feelings about rural childhood, and the lives of children and young people in the later twentieth century. These personal memories clearly demonstrate that individuals can hold different perspectives on place, environment, and life in the countryside at different moments in time; memories are not static, and childhood and youth are regularly presented as distinct stages of life. Some of the accounts of what might be termed a rather idyllic rural childhood, characterised by Denis Cluett's memories of 'never . . . feeling bored because there always seemed to be so much to do in the country' suggest the continuing power of ideas about nature and childhood, as well as the broader romanticisation of rural life and the early twentieth century more generally.<sup>94</sup> It is impossible to ever fully untangle collective and personal memory, and these memories of a rural childhood and youth were also integral to a sense of self in the present.<sup>95</sup> Local places could clearly mean a great deal to people, with landscapes and spaces recalled in detail even a number of years later. These memories could also develop as adults recalled their youth in rural communities. When remembering their adolescence, recollections regularly moved to the perceived problems of growing up in the countryside; isolation, a lack of 'something to do', and a landscape of adult supervision and surveillance. Experiences of leisure were characterised by a lack of opportunity, but also by an insistence on the ability of rural adolescents to make their own fun, and to entertain themselves.

Some of these narratives resonate with universal experiences of growing up, and in historical accounts those who grew up in urban environments also recounted feeling their communities constraining, and had to negotiate parental concerns, employment opportunities, and adult supervision.<sup>96</sup> The importance of courtship was recalled as a key marker of the life cycle for rural youths, much as with their urban counterparts, yet what is apparent in many of the first-person accounts consulted here is the awareness, and at times insistence, that their experiences of growing up were different. The countryside was not simply a backdrop, it occupied a central position in how those that grew up in rural communities understood being young. There were leisure opportunities for rural youths, and those growing up in the countryside could engage in activities that took place in towns and cities when transport, funds and time permitted, but this is not what they as adults remembered. Participants dwell upon the lack of leisure, or on the ability to make their own fun, highlighting the differences between urban and rural life, between childhood and youth, and between the past and the present. The rural played a key part in how individuals recounted their own histories and stories, and those who grew up in the countryside looked back on it as a formative element in their experience.

There were many ways of experiencing rural life, but oral history accounts and personal recollections provide a useful way to examine how those that grew up in rural communities understood their own youthful identity, and reveals the complex nature of the relationship between young people, their adult selves, and their rural environments. This article has drawn upon a very small fraction of the wealth of sources available in community oral history archives and national collections, suggesting that further use of these materials can provide fruitful for research on

young people and recollections of growing up in the countryside. Using first-person accounts can provide both a richer understanding of rural life and community, and contribute to our knowledge on the experiences of young people. Neglecting the rural in histories of youth disregards a significant number of young people, and limits our understanding of the development of a distinct youthful identity at an important period in the history of youth and youth culture.

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## Notes

- 1 Bristol Central Library, Bristol People's Oral History Project (hereafter BPOHP) R093, 'A Social History of Childhood and Youth, 1870–1950 (1979–1980)', interview with 'Stan', born 1911. Names have been anonymised where requested.
- 2 Brunel University London, Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies, Harry Alfred West, *Autobiography of Harry Alfred West: Facts and Comments*, 1:745. Somerset Archives and Local Studies, Somerset Voices Oral History Archive (hereafter SVA) A\CMQ/2/12, interview with 'Herbert', born 1890.
- 3 Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 82–108; Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920–1960* (Manchester, 2000); Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850–1945* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 113–18; Katherine Milcoy, *When the Girls Come Out To Play: Teenage Working-Class Girls' Leisure Between the Wars* (London, 2017); Laura Harrison, *Dangerous Amusements: Leisure, the Young Working Class and Urban Space in Britain, c. 1870–1939* (Manchester, forthcoming).
- 4 In her work on youth movements, citizenship and the English countryside, Sian Edwards has noted the need for additional historical work on the experiences of rural youth, particularly from a local or regional perspective. Sian Edwards, *Youth Movements, Citizenship and the English Countryside: Creating Good Citizens, 1930–1960* (London, 2018), p. 261.
- 5 Edwards, *Youth Movements, Citizenship and the English Countryside*; Sian Edwards, "Nothing gets her goat!": the farmer's wife and the duality of rural femininity in the Young Farmers' Club movement in 1950s Britain', *Women's History Review*, 26:1 (2017), 26–45. The other limited work on rural youth has also focused on the interwar and immediate postwar years. See, for example, Selina Todd, 'Young women, work and family in interwar rural England', *The Historical Journal*, 48:3 (2005), 789–809 and Rebecca Andrew, 'The Leisure Identities of Rural Youth: Tradition, Change and Sense of Place in Lakeland, 1930–early 1950s' (unpublished PhD thesis: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2012).
- 6 Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 82–108; Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain*, pp. 113–18; Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Youth: A History of Youth in Modern Britain* (London, 2016), pp. 10–14; Harrison, *Dangerous Amusements*.
- 7 G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York, 1904).
- 8 Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981), p. 118; Tebbutt, *Making Youth*, p. 12.
- 9 *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, vol. 1: Report and Appendix* (London, 1904).
- 10 Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889–1939* (Oxford, 1981); Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (Basingstoke, 1993); Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*; Andrew Davies, 'Youth gangs, masculinity and violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford', *Journal of Social History*, 32:2 (1998), 349–69; Andrew Davies, *The Gangs of Manchester: The Story of the Scuttlers, Britain's First Youth Cult* (Wrea Green, 2009).
- 11 Lily Montagu, 'The Girl in the Background', in E. J. Urwick, ed., *Studies of Boy Life in Our Cities* (London, 1904), p. 239.
- 12 Harrison, *Dangerous Amusements*.
- 13 As noted above, the existing historical work on rural youth has focused almost exclusively on the interwar and postwar period.
- 14 Bristol People's Oral History Project: A Social History of Childhood and Youth 1870–1950 (1979–1980) and Somerset Voices Oral History Archive.
- 15 The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, 1870–1973 (hereafter Edwardians). A number of the oral history narrators discuss their 'teens' or 'teenage days', with a small minority referring to themselves as 'teenagers'. For example, SVA A\CMQ/2/3b, interview with 'Alice', born 1889; Edwardians, 2000int002, interview with Mr Stinchcombe, born 1896; and 2000int434, interview with Frank Waldegrave, born 1892. However, the term 'teenager' was not in common use in the years before the Second World War. It was popularised in the United States in the 1940s, and in the 1950s in Britain was increasingly associated with the rise of a new youthful consumer, characterised by Mark Abrams in *The*

*Teenage Consumer*. Selina Todd in particular has criticised the use of the term 'teenager' to describe the lives and experiences of interwar youth by David Fowler. Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer* (London, 1959); David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995); and Selina Todd, 'Breadwinners and dependants: working-class young people in England, 1918–1956', *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007), 58.

16 Linda Shopes, 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes and Possibilities', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 2006), pp. 261–70.

17 Rosemary Elliot, 'Growing up and giving up: smoking in Paul Thompson's 100 families', *Oral History*, 29:1 (2001), 74.  
18 For further discussion of some of the methodological and ethical challenges of using existing oral history collections, see Joanna Bornat, 'A second take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose', *Oral History*, 31:1 (2003), 47–53; April Galloway, 'The rewards of using archived oral histories in research: the case of the millennium memory bank', *Oral History*, 41:1 (2013), 37–50; Abigail Knight, Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell, 'Re-using community oral history sources on food and family life in the First World War', *Oral History*, 43:1 (2015), 63–71.

19 Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies (hereafter Burnett Archive). For discussion of the use of autobiographies, including reflections on nostalgia, see: David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1982); John Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1982); John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1994); Ben Jones, 'The uses of nostalgia: autobiography, community publishing and working class neighbourhoods in post-war England', *Cultural and Social History*, 7:3 (2010), 355–74; Helen Rogers and Emily Cuming, 'Revealing fragments: close and distant reading of working-class autobiography', *Family and Community History*, 21:3 (2018), 180–201.

20 Rogers and Cuming, 'Revealing fragments', p. 185.

21 SVA A\CMQ/2/12, interview with 'Herbert', born 1890.

22 Arthur Stanley Bullock, *Gloucestershire Between the Wars: A Memoir* (Cheltenham, 2009); John A. Neuenschwander, 'Remembrance of things past: oral historians and long-term memory', *The Oral History Review*, 6 (1978), 45–53; Neal R. Norrick, 'Talking about remembering and forgetfulness in oral history interviews', *Oral History Review*, 32:2 (2005), 1–20, both explore the issue of long-term memory in oral history interviews.

23 Joe Moran, 'Childhood and nostalgia in contemporary culture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5:2 (2002), 155–72. There is a significant literature that touches upon questions of nostalgia, landscape and community in the past. See, for example, David Lowenthal, 'Past time, present place: landscape and memory', *Geographical Review*, 65 (1975), 1–36; Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, 1979). For more recent work, see Anna Green, 'Coffee and bun, Sergeant Bonnington and the Tornado: myth and place in frankton junction', *Oral History*, 28:2 (2000), 26–34; Jones, 'The uses of nostalgia', pp. 355–74; Stefan Ramsden, "'The community spirit was a wonderful thing": on nostalgia and the politics of belonging', *Oral History*, 44:1 (2016), 89–97.

24 Stuart Tannock, 'Nostalgia critique', *Cultural Studies*, 9:3 (1995), 453–64; Jones, 'The uses of nostalgia', p. 369.

25 Burnett Archive, Arthur Frederick Goffin, *A Grey Life*, 1:271.

26 Edwardians, 2000int344, interview with Mr W. H. Wilcox, born 1897.

27 SVA A\CMQ/2/12, interview with 'Herbert'.

28 Though accounts of troublesome youths in the 1970s had increasingly distinct racial connotations, particularly in the figure of the 'mugger'. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London, 1978).

29 For example, see *Daily Mirror*, 'Aggro: The Cult of the Bover Boy', 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1970; 'Rampage of the Bully Boys', 21<sup>st</sup> August 1974; 'Yobs', 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1976.

30 Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*; Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 104–16; Bill Osgerby, *Youth Media* (London, 2004); Bill Osgerby, "'Bovver" books of the 1970s: subcultures, crisis and "youth-sploitation" novels', *Contemporary British History*, 26:3 (2012), 299–331.

31 Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different?', in Perks and Thompson, eds, *The Oral History Reader*, p. 69.

32 For example, David Fowler's *The First Teenagers* focuses almost exclusively on Manchester, with little explanation as to why his examples are typical, or otherwise, of other regions. A number of the most influential sociological studies of British youth have also been based in London, or the larger cities of the north of England, which has led to the lives and experiences of these young people being taken as representative of the lifestyles of British youth in general. Barry Reay uses a local study of the Blean area of Kent to explore social and agricultural change: Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800–1930* (Cambridge, 1996).

33 *Census of England and Wales*, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1951.

34 Mass Observation Online (hereafter MO Online), 2093, Report on a Somerset Village, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944.

35 Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London, 2003), p. 90.

36 Alfred Williams, *Life in a Railway Factory* (London, 1915), p. 127.

37 Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850–1925* (London, 1991), p. 14.

38 A. D. Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming, 1910–1912* (London, 1913), vii; Barry Reay, *Rural England: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 10.

- 39 Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, p. 17; Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1894, London, 2003).
- 40 Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, p. 24.
- 41 Catherine Brace, 'A pleasure ground for the noisy herds? Incompatible encounters with the Cotswolds and England, 1900–1950', *Rural History*, 11:1 (2000), 75–94; Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, eds, *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920* (London, 1986), pp. 85–112.
- 42 Stanley Baldwin, *On England and Other Addresses* (London, 1926), pp. 6–7; David Lowenthal, 'British national identity and the English landscape', *Rural History*, 2 (1991), 205–30; Catherine Brace, 'Finding England everywhere: regional identity and the construction of national identity, 1890–1940', *Ecumene*, 6:1 (1999), 90–109. Jeremy Burchardt has questioned the utility of the concept of the 'rural idyll', suggesting it is a dismissive abstraction that obscures the variety of attitudes towards the countryside, which have changed over time, across space, between groups and even within individuals, and does not do justice to the complexity of lived experience. Jeremy Burchardt, 'The Rural Idyll: A Critique', in Verity Elson and Rosemary Shirley, eds, *Creating the Countryside: The Rural Idyll Past and Present* (London, 2017), pp. 66–71.
- 43 When young people do feature in rural history, it is often as workers deserting the countryside. As Jeremy Burchardt has argued, many works on nineteenth- and twentieth-century rural England have privileged one particular aspect of the countryside – agriculture – and even those accounts that acknowledge other aspects of rural experience continue to structure their narratives around agricultural change. Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London, 2002), p. 1.
- 44 B. Seebohm Rowntree and May Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives: A Study of the Rural Labour Problem* (London, 1913), p. 9; *Western Morning News*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1927.
- 45 Winifred Foley, *A Child in the Forest* (London, 1985), p. 103.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 SVA A\CMQ/2/3b, interview with 'Alice', born 1889.
- 48 MO Online, Report on a Somerset Village.
- 49 Caitlin Adams, 'Rural Education and Reform between the Wars', in Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson, eds, *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 36.
- 50 Owain Jones, 'Little Figures, Big Shadows: Country Childhood Stories', in Paul J. Cloke and Jo Little, eds, *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality* (London, 1997), pp. 158–79.
- 51 Foley, *A Child in the Forest*, p. 7.
- 52 Burnett Archive, 2:148, Ethel M. Clark, *Their Small Corner*.
- 53 Burnett Archive, 2:56, Reg Beeston, *Some of My Memories of and about Uley until about 1930*.
- 54 Simon Sleight, *Young People and the Shaping of Public Space in Melbourne, 1870–1914* (London, 2016), p. 61. This idea is also explored by Carla Pascoe in her work on remembered childhood spaces in Australia in the 1950s. Carla Pascoe, *Spaces Imagined, Places Remembered: Childhood in 1950s Australia* (Newcastle, 2011). Jeremy Burchardt has examined the transfigurative naming practices of children and young people as a means of transforming familiar rural landscapes into exotic and unfamiliar ones. Jeremy Burchardt, 'Far away and close to home: children's toponyms and imagined geographies, c. 1870–c. 1950', *Journal of Historical Geography* (article in press) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2020.05.005>>.
- 55 Denis Cluett, *A Village Childhood: Memories of Living in Rural Devon Before the Age of the Motor Car* (Sampford Peverell, 2007), p. 8.
- 56 Colin Ward, *The Child in the Country* (London, 1990), pp. 159–67; G. Valentine, 'A safe place to grow up? Parenting, perceptions of children's safety and the rural idyll', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 13 (1997), 137–48; Hugh Matthews, Marl Taylor, Kenneth Sherwood, Faith Tucker and Melanie Limb, 'Growing up in the countryside: children and the rural idyll', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16 (2000), 141–53; Anthony Glendinning, Mark Nutall, Leo Hendry, Marion Kloep and Sheila Wood, 'Rural communities and well-being: a good place to grow up?', *The Sociological Review*, 51:1 (2003), 129–56; Robert Giddings and Richard Yarwood, 'Growing up, going out and growing out of the countryside: childhood experiences in rural England', *Children's Geographies*, 3:1 (2005), 101–14; Michael Leyshon, 'The betweenness of being a rural youth: inclusive and exclusive lifestyles', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9:1 (2008), 1–26.
- 57 Sian Edwards, "'Growing Up and Growing Out": The Rural Teenager in Post-War Britain', The Society for the History of Children and Youth Bi-Annual Conference, Sydney, Australia, 2019 (unpublished conference paper).
- 58 Glendinning et al., 'Rural communities and well-being', p. 139.
- 59 Foley, *A Child in the Forest*, p. 7.
- 60 Burnett Archive, 1:886, Margaret Scutt, *Untitled*.
- 61 Edwardians, 2000int344, interview with Mr W. H. Wilcox.
- 62 Burnett Archive, Clark, *Their Small Corner*.
- 63 Burnett Archive, West, *Autobiography of Harry Alfred West*.
- 64 Burnett Archive, Goffin, *A Grey Life*.
- 65 C. Delise Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World* (London, 1932).
- 66 MO Online, 2093, Report on a Somerset Village, 2093, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944, p. 1.
- 67 Foley, *A Child in the Forest*, p. 128.

- 68 Maud Davies, *Life in an English Village, An Economic and Historical Survey of the Parish of Corsley in Wiltshire* (London, 1909), p. 277.
- 69 Rowntree and Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, p. 228.
- 70 Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 82–108; Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men*, pp. 113–18; Harrison, *Dangerous Amusements*.
- 71 In the conclusion to her groundbreaking work on women's leisure in the twentieth century, Claire Langhamer argues that historians 'urgently need to address the leisure patterns of rural women', a statement that is equally applicable to young men and women. Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England*, pp. 190–1.
- 72 Edwardians, interview with Mr Wilcox, 2000int344.
- 73 Rowntree and Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*.
- 74 Edwardians, 2000int002, interview with Mr Stinchcombe, born 1896.
- 75 SVA A\CMQ/2/1a, interview with 'Mary', born 1894.
- 76 Selina Todd, 'Domestic service and class relations in Britain, 1900–1950', *Past & Present*, 203:5 (2009), 184.
- 77 SVA A\CMQ/2/71, interview with 'Muriel', born 1913.
- 78 Andrew Davies has noted the impact of class, poverty and gender on experiences of leisure in the first half of the twentieth century. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*.
- 79 BPOHP R093, interview with 'Stan'.
- 80 Edwardians, 2000int351, interview with William Radford, born 1897.
- 81 Edwardians, 2000int346, interview with Mrs Deacon, born 1898.
- 82 SVA A\CMQ/2/12, interview with 'Herbert'.
- 83 SVA A\CMQ/2/5a, interview with William Palmer, born 1884.
- 84 Burnett Archie, Scutt, *Untitled*.
- 85 BPOHP R093, interview with 'Stan'.
- 86 Jeremy Burchardt, "A New Rural Civilization": Village Halls, Community and Citizenship in the 1920s', in Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson, eds, *The English Countryside Between the Wars*, pp. 26–35.
- 87 Burnett Archive, Clark, *Their Small Corner*.
- 88 Mass leisure forms associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the music hall, dance hall, and later, the cinema, were generally concentrated in towns and larger urban settlements. This did not mean rural youths had no access to these leisure facilities, but clearly urban youths had greater choice.
- 89 Burnett Archie, Scutt, *Untitled* and BPOHP R093, interview with 'Stan'.
- 90 The Edwardians, 2000int345, interview with Mrs Pender.
- 91 Burnett Archive, Clark, *Their Small Corner*.
- 92 Edwardians, 2000int002, interview with Mr Stinchcombe.
- 93 BPOHP R100, interview with 'Lily', born 1889.
- 94 Cluett, *A Village Childhood*, p. 8.
- 95 Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990); Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', p. 66.
- 96 These themes certainly occur in oral history interviews conducted with adults who grew up in urban areas of Britain in the early twentieth century. For example, see accounts in Roberts, *A Woman's Place*; Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, pp. 83–9; and Harrison, *Dangerous Amusements*.