Anarchist Communist Federation
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but the fact that it is owned at all! In addition, he seems naive about the term 'community', which masks class divisions and reinforces the idea of 'ownership' of the land. In any 'community' there will be some with more power than others and any community take-over, therefore, will not mean that everyone has an equal say in how the estate would be run. Also, local communities should not be able to do anything they want with the land anymore than a private landowner. What happens if the local community decides to rent land for a nuclear power plant or to ban black people from walking on the land? In Knoydart, the community is continuing with bloodsports so not much has changed there in terms of how the land is being used.

Shift

It is clear how much the so-called Left has shifted to the right when even they do not call for the 'nationalisation of the land'. Now as anarchists we would also not be in favour of this, but for different reasons having to do with our analysis of the state. But the fact that no one is even putting this forward as an idea is indicative of the mildness of the Scottish Parliament and the political scene. However, amongst the urban and rural working class, there remains a hatred of the landowners that will not be satisfied with the pathetic efforts of their new Parliament. Perhaps then, they will realise that if they want to seriously challenge landowners in Scotland, they will have to do it themselves, keeping in mind that the same struggle is going on in the rest of Britain and the world.

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and making public the terms of any sale of land. This is all for "further study" or for action without legislation. This means, if the landowner wants to do it he can. Landowners will be 'encouraged' to consult with the community and to pursue policies on their land which don't harm the environment. In other words, there is no effective land reform at all. A few landowners can continue to own most of Scotland, and this in secrecy. They can continue the practice of doing what they want with the land, disregarding the local community and environmental concerns.

Community Right to Buy

The other part of the proposals is to give communities the "right to buy". However, they will only be able to do so when the land comes on the market. There is no provision for compulsory purchase and it is not that often that a suitable property comes on the market. Many of the estates don't have many people living on them anyway and have been developed in such a way that a community would have to put in a lot of investment to make it something that could give them a living. And even if a suitable property did come on the market, the community would have to be very well-organised and would still have to raise a considerable amount of money.

Andy Wightman has correctly pointed out the Emperor's New Clothes aspect of the land reform proposals. However, his own proposals, written in conjunction with a member of the Democratic Left,(the "EuroCommunists") are not much more radical. Yes, he is in favour of getting rid of absentee landowners, regulating the land market and having a tax on land which would make a bit of a dent in the landowners' power, but he doesn't question the very nature of land ownership. He seems to favour the break-up of land into smaller parcels to create a rural society of petit-bourgeois farmers. Looking at countries like France where this is the case, small farmers can be just as reactionary as their larger counterparts. What he fails to realise is that the root of the issue is not who owns the land

ing for centuries, remembered vividly in the Highland Clearances. The wealth of the landowners is contrasted with the low wages of their employees. Two-thirds of households in rural Scotland have income below the Low Pay Unit Poverty Threshold.

Illusions

Unfortunately, like the illusions in a Labour government, the Scottish Parliament is seen as the means to achieve the long-awaited goal of land reform. Lack of progress before was blamed on the 'English' Parliament with its landowner-dominated House of Lords. Now that this obstacle is removed, land reform is thought it be possible. However, these illusions will soon be shattered. A state is a state no matter what nationality it calls itself and the Scottish Parliament will do what all parliaments do best: manage the country in the interests of the ruling class.

This can be seen already by examining the proposals of the Land Reform Policy group which was set up to make recommendations on land reform. Their proposals were published in January 1999 and are to be the basis for new legislation. When they were first published there was the usual media scare of revolution around the corner, but landowners can rest easy. Andy Wightman in his just published book, Land and Power, has exposed the reforms for what they are.

The main plank of the recommendations is the abolition of feudalism. Now this is positive in that there will no longer be vassals and superiors and people who buy a house are free from obligations to the previous landowner, but it mainly means that landowners, instead of being seen as vassals of the Crown, are outright owners of the land. This gives them even more right to do whatever they want on their land. So it is not surprising that the landowners, acting like they have just made a major concession, are quite in favour of this reform. There are no proposals for legislation on absentee landowners or for forcing landowners to register their land

WHOSE LAND IS IT ANYWAY?

Class struggle anarchists focus their activities on the conflict between the working class and the bosses. The struggle has traditionally been in manufacturing industries but increasingly it is recognised that capitalism has expanded into services such as retailing, banking and leisure. The Marxist analysis, of capitalism replacing feudalism, has been taken on board and the image of the ruling class as industrialists and financiers is one that we have in our heads when we think of the class enemy. They are the source of power, the owners of capital. Though we all hate the Royals and froth at the mouth at the idea of the aristos enjoying their hunts and balls, it is not the land owning aristocracy which are considered to be the main source of capitalist power but rather they are seen as remnants of feudalism. Most anarchists live in urban areas, along with the rest of the working class. We don't usually come into contact with the land owning part of the ruling class. Some of us got our first glimpse of them while protesting at the Countryside Alliance demo. And, as the percentage of people employed on the land is under 2%, it is not the agricultural or forestry workers that are the focus of our activity.

But in this article we see the landowners as an integral part of the ruling class, both in the sense of holding real economic power and in the ideological role they play in keeping the working class in their place. The Countryside Alliance demonstrations in London may have had the purpose of forcing the government to back down on any plans for change such as banning foxhunting, but the presence of thousands of 'country folk' on the streets of London should send us another message. The land owning class and their lackeys are a fundamental part of the British ruling class and are immensely powerful and well-organised. We ignore them at our peril.

Landowners exercise their role three ways: as members of the ruling class: economic, political and ideological power. Most of the

information for this article came from Marion Shoard's excellent book, This Land is Our Land, but the interpretation is our own. Some of the facts might appear to be out of date since the original book was published in 1987, but as she points out in her 1997 update, nothing has really changed.

Economic Power

Despite propaganda about impoverished aristos and the supposed increase in land ownership by the government and the National Trust, around 80% of Britain's land is in private hands. A hard core of titled families own almost 1/3 of Britain, with 2/3 of these owning at least 5,000 acres. An example of this is the Duke of Buccleuch who owns 277,000 acres of Scotland and 11,000 acres of Northamptonshire. The remaining land in private hands is either owned by untitled barons or owner-occupiers. But despite the image of the struggling farmer promoted by the Countryside Alliance, the average farm size is 170 acres, much higher than the average in the rest of the EC. The average would be even higher if Northern Ireland were excluded as there is a greater percentage of small farmers there than in Britain. And the tendency has been to move from smaller to larger farms. When a farm is sold it is other farmers that buy it, further increasing the concentration of land. Most people could never think of buying land as the price has dramatically increased in recent years. It is therefore a close-knit group of people who own and control the vast majority of land in Britain. We have not even discussed the Crown's holdings which are distinct from private landowners. These holdings are enormous: 335,000 acres of farmland, 38,285 acres of commercial forest, the entire shoreline, half the foreshore, to name just some of the properties! The Queen's private holdings are separate and count as private land. These include 50,000 at Balmoral, 20,000 acres at Sandringham and 50,000 acres of Lancaster.

of Eigg where the owner had been a German artist who had made only two visits in two years. The spotlight has usually focused on foreign landowners, fuelled by the increase in nationalist sentiment. it is these landowners who are seen to not have the best interest of the community at heart. This is compounded by the fact that land ownership is shrouded in secrecy, with land often owned by faceless offshore companies and private trusts.

Bloodsports

Even the traditional live-in laird has come under attack because of the way estates are managed without any regard to the wider economic and environmental issues. Some estates have managed to diversify but many are still run solely for the purpose of blood sports. Many people have begun to question whether this is a good use of land on a number of grounds. First, some argue that the amount of jobs created and income generated is not as great as the estates claim. Despite the existence of quite a few trigger-happy German, Italian and American rich who come to do what they can't do in their own country, more income and more jobs come from other forms of tourism that are often in direct conflict with the closed nature of the sporting estate. Environmentalists and conservationists have also attacked the problems caused by too many red deer for the regeneration of natural woodland and the eyesore caused by all the bull-dozed tracks that carry landrovers full of gun-toting tourists to within a few steps of their target. There have also been cases where gamekeepers are known to have deliberately shot birds of prey because they eat the young grouse. Recently, a gamekeeper in the central Highlands killed a nest of golden eagles as a result of leaving out a poisoned carcass. He claims he did not intend to do this, but such stories only add to anti-laird feeling.

But basically there is just general discontent and hostility from the urban and rural working class for a situation where a few own so much and have so much power- a discontent that has been brew-

landowners, then even the very modest proposals will be watered down such that the power of the landowners remains.

It is not surprising that land reform is on the agenda. The facts speak for themselves. Scotland has the most unequal distribution of land in western Europe and it is even more unequal than Brazil which is well-known for its land injustices. In a country of over 19 million acres, over 16 million acres is privately owned rural land. Two-thirds of this land is owned by 1252 landowners, (0.025% of the population). And these estates are extremely large. One quarter of the privately owned rural land is in estates of 30,700 acres and larger, owned by just 66 landowners (Wightman: 1999). Part of the reason for the large size of estates is the law of primogeniture where it is the eldest son who inherits the whole estate. Not only is the distribution unequal, land ownership is still based on feudal laws, a system that dates back to the 11th century. This means that the land still officially belongs to the 'Crown' and the landowner is a vassal. However, this vassal can become a 'superior' by 'feuing' land to someone else who then becomes his vassal. Even though the owner has sold the land, feuing means that the superior still has a say in how that land is developed. This has of course caused many problems when people have bought a house and then have to get the permission of the 'superior' before they can do anything. And of course there are many landowners who are ready to take advantage of this situation by asking for money in return for permission.

Another impetus for land reform has come media coverage of what are called 'bad' landowners . There was the recent case in Knoydart were this very large estate had changed hands many times in a few years, leaving the local community in an insecure position. The landowners were usually absentee who came a few times a year for a dose of killing animals for fun. Things came to a head, however, when the latest owners were done for fraud, one is now in a German jail. The community ended up making a much-publicised buy-out. The same thing happened on the island

Owning land may not appear to confer economic power and wealth in an economy dominated by industry and commerce. Many landowners like to give the impression that it is a great burden. It is very difficult to disprove their claim as exact statistics do not exist. The Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth had just begun its work when it was abolished three months after Thatcher came to power in 1979. But, other figures can give some indication of how wealthy landowners are. For example, of the 10 people between 1970 and 1979 who left over five million pounds when they died, five were landowners. Looked at more carefully, even without exact figures, land ownership clearly brings enormous benefits.

The value of the land itself is the first source of wealth. Since the Development land tax was abolished in 1985, gains from an increase in land values are subject only to a capital gains tax. In one case £11 million was made when an area was released for development; a tidy sum for not doing anything! Other ways of making money from the land include leasing it out to farmers, hunting and fishing rights and mining. For example, the Duke of Derbyshire receives an estimated £1.8 million in royalties every year for the mining of Derbyshire limestone. Even when coal was nationalised, landowners made a killing. The government paid out £2,875 million at 1985 prices. In addition, though landowners are associated with the countryside, these 'rural' landowners own much of urban Britain. The most well-known example is the Duke of Westminster who owns a large chunk of central London including Mayfair and Belgravia.

It is agriculture and forestry which bring the greatest benefits. The obvious advantage is the receiving of subsidies. Farmers are exempt from rates on agricultural land and buildings which was estimated to be worth £360 million in 1984–85. They are also exempt from paying VAT, worth £300 million, and can average their profits over 5 years for tax purposes. It is estimated that the combined benefit from all the subsidies comes to £20,000 per year per

farmer. This doesn't include anything they actually earn from sales. Forestry is another good source of income (and hand-outs). There has been a great increase in afforestation in recent years of which 80% is in the private sector. This may sound like a good thing, but the planting has been 95% conifers which offer a quick return and cause many ecological problems.

It is argued that despite all this wealth, it is soon taken by the government through inheritance taxes. However, this is misleading. The inheritance tax system was amended by Thatcher and it is easy to transfer land to heirs as long as it is done before death. Another system used is to set up a Trust. Therefore, land ownership is clearly a major source of wealth and power over key aspects of the economy that has few, if any, disadvantages.

Political Power

Along with economic power goes political power. Firstly, there is the power over the employees. 70% of agricultural workers live in tied cottages. It is not really surprising that so many farm and estate workers attended the Countryside Alliance demos. Though not the only reason, their dependence on their employer is certainly a factor. Landowners also play an important role in local politics. In 1981, membership of county councils had a disproportionate number of landowners and farmers. In Lincolnshire, for example, they represent 2% of the population but made up 22% of council members. They also have control over other important institutions. In 1983–84 the chairman of all 9 water authorities' agriculture and drainage committees were farmers.

Their power extends even beyond the locality. Though they represented only 9% of MPs in the House of Commons in 1983, they obviously dominate in the House of Lords. In addition, one-third of Thatcher's cabinet in 1985 were landowners. They also appear in a whole range of other capacities: National Park Boards, Countryside Commissions and Nature Conservancy. For example, Mr.

eventual repeal of the Corn Laws was seen as a victory of the industrialists over the landowners. However, the power of the landowners was never effectively destroyed. As we saw in the last issue of Organise! there was too close a connection between the industrialists and the landowners. The redistribution of land and the emergence of more small farmers did not alter the fundamental system or its ideology. In many respects, the new owners were even more committed to the old ideology, including the interest in blood sports. The industrialists often were landowners themselves but they didn't need to own land to adopt the culture of the land owning aristocracy. They rented shooting rights, with the London rich taking hunting boxes in the shires. According to Sutherland (an academic writer on land ownership), "By the 1930s, however, foxhunting was completely unrepresentative of the countryside".

The 20th century brought considerable pressure for reform. But despite the passing of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act in 1949, in terms of the mass of the people having any real access to the land itself or decisions about how the land is used, nothing has changed. Whether it is said by the Duke of Westminster or his ancestor the Norman bandit, the message is still the same: "Get Off My Land". It's about time we did something about it.

LAND REFORM IN SCOTLAND?

Don't Hold Your Breath!

The new Scottish Parliament is full of rhetoric about how it's going to make substantial changes to the landowning system in Scotland. Land reform is one of the main pieces of legislation which is to be put to Parliament in the coming session. However, despite the fighting talk, it is clear that the actual intention is very mild indeed, and once the politicians succumb to the usual pressure from

He was a keen hunter and would open the letters from his gamekeeper in Norfolk before the state papers.

Poaching

For the peasants, the situation seemed to get even worse under early capitalism. Laws against poaching were tightened and deer stealing was punished by hanging. It was even forbidden for smallholders to own hunting implements like snares in case they took game that strayed onto their land. The Black Act (named after the poachers who blackened their faces) passed in the early 18th century created 50 new offences which were punishable by death. Common rights were also attacked more vigorously than they had been under feudalism. Landowners wanted their privately 'agreed' enclosures to have the backing of law. During the 18th and 19th centuries 7 million acres of land was enclosed. The enclosed land was used for sheep, mining and cattle rearing. In addition, access to the countryside was curtailed. The old tracks were blocked by enclosures. Traditional recreation activities of the peasants such as fairs and football couldn't take place because there was no available land. This was of course welcomed by the Calvinist capitalists who thought such activities detracted from a disciplined workforce. The end result was the end of the peasantry and their transformation into an urban working class or emigrant labour.

Corn Laws

In the 19th century, the urban middle class gained strength both economically and politically and there were moves toward the reduction of the influence of the landowners. The controversy over the Corn Laws symbolised this conflict. It was against industrial interests to have import restrictions on corn and there was a major campaign to repeal the Corn laws which had imposed these restrictions. This, of course, was opposed by the landowners. The

Dunning is an executive member of the Country Landowners Association. He runs his own 700 acre farm in the Lake District and was appointed in 1971 to the lake District Special Planning Board to represent the national conservation and recreation interest in the planning of the Lake District national park. He is chairman of Rural Voice and spoke at the Conservative Party Conference in 1985. He is also a member of the Forestry Commission working group. The list goes on! And Dunning is not even an aristo!

The political influence of the landowners can be seen even more clearly in the farming and forestry lobbies. The main lobbies include the Country Landowners Association (CLA), the Scottish Landowners Association and the National Farmers Union. Most of the CLA's work is done behind closed doors through a long-established history of personal contacts. To succeed, the CLA doesn't have to achieve anything but just stop anyone else from changing the status quo. Examples of their accomplishments include removal of investment surcharge, abolition of three generation security for tenants, the reduction of the capital transfer tax as well as many features (e.g. trespass) of the Criminal Justice Act.

The National Farmers Union, in addition to contacts in high places, relies on a massive publicity machine. In 1985 they spent £8.8 million compared to the £350,000 spent by the Ramblers Association. They have active local branches who lobby local MPs as well as maintaining daily contact with civil servants. In 1983 they had an average of 4.6 broadcasts a week. They keep a tab on public opinion so that they can act quickly. For example, we now see a number of ads for eating meat, an obvious response to the increase in vegetarianism. The Forestry lobby is also powerful but they don't need to manipulate civil servants or public opinion to the same extent because the Forestry Commission has been run by landowners since it was set up in 1919!

There are whole aspects of land owning power that we know nothing about because of the secrecy surrounding information on who owns what. There is no public land registry open to the pub-

lic or even to government officials, very unlike the documentation on the ownership of companies which is very detailed and accessible. This secrecy alone gives enormous power as the government cannot formulate policy on land if they don't know the basic facts, even if they did want to do anything.

We must also keep in mind that the landowners are not really a distinct part of the ruling class. Rural landowners in fact own many urban properties and have control over the major primary industries that form the basis of any economy. In addition, many landowners are also industrialists or financiers or both. For example, Benwells in Newcastle went from being landowners to industrialists and now are both, wielding considerable power in both state and financial institutions. As Shoard puts it, "for power, however it originates, tends to turn into land owning power" (p. 195). This is because of not only the economic overlaps, with banks investing in land, media magnates buying up Highland estates etc., but because of the ideological and cultural role that the landowners play in maintaining the coherence of the ruling class.

Ideological Power

Since the Industrial Revolution those capitalists who made their money from industry and later finance have all aspired to be like the land owning aristocracy in terms of their way of life. The industrialists may have had great wealth, but the landowners had 'cultural capital'. Even if industrialists didn't buy land themselves, they were integrated into the 'club' through participation in a certain way of life which includes blood sports. This is not only true of industrialists but also of the non-aristocratic farmers of all sizes. Many of Scotland's estates have been bought by millionaires who want to pretend that they have 'breeding'. A classic example is of American billionaire Kluge whose new wife (an ex-wife of Russell Gay, porn magnate and herself a small-time porn star) was obsessed with the British aristocracy. He bought her the Mar Lodge

the commercial motive predominated and this changed the nature of the land owning class to a certain extent. Henry VIII sold much of the confiscated church land to the emerging bourgeoisie and this process was accelerated under Cromwell. As capitalism became the dominant economic system, all landowners were forced to look for ways of increasing income from their land such as growing grain, raising livestock, forestry and land leasing.

Sheep

One of the main sources of income discovered by landowners was sheep, and this was to cause the erosion of the few rights the peasants did have, and would eventually contribute to the demise of the peasantry. The desire for sheep-grazing land led to an encroachment on common land, and an increased disregard for this peasant right. Common land was increasingly fenced off and used for sheep grazing. As they did not want to give up any of their hunting land, it was the common land they enclosed. The so-called English revolution, in fact, strengthened the position of the landowners. Half the members elected from the Midlands in Cromwell's Parliament had been fined for throwing people off common land or belonged to families who had. In 1646 the King no longer had ultimate control of the land and this was passed to the landowner, without giving any power to the peasants, causing further peasant revolts.

Capitalism, supposed to represent the overthrow of the feudal system by the new capitalist class did not change but instead reinforced many features of the old system. The power and ideology of the land owning class fused with and influenced the development of capitalism. Accumulation of wealth and the protection of private property was now an even stronger ideology perpetuated by the state. Parliament was dominated by landowners. The hunting obsession continued with renewed vigour; the landowners joined by reinforcements from the bourgeoisie. Sir Robert Walpole was Prime minister for 21 years and oversaw many of the enclosures.

This system of land management was developed purely for the satisfaction of the blood sports obsession. Not only did the peasants not benefit from it, it was hardly a productive use of land for the country as a whole. And the problem is that very little has changed. Though much land has now been turned over to agriculture and forestry, there are still huge areas, for example much of Scotland, where hunting is the main use of the land. it is still accepted that the ruling class can do what they will with their land, regardless of the impact on the rest of the community or on the land itself. But as we have seen, this 'tradition' is based on conquest and usurpation.

Struggles

Peasants did not succumb passively to the exploitation of the landowners. (See accompanying article). As a result of their struggles, some reforms were made. But the past 900 years have been a history of continuing exploitation. Reforms would be made and then a new form of exploitation would emerge, causing further resistance. By the 14th century there was a sort of social contract. Common land and common rights had been reduced but still existed. Peasants also had a right of passage over any land that was uncultivated, except deer parks and other hunting areas. Landowners had an obligation to see that the main tracks were maintained. The Forest laws were relaxed and Henry III started allowing the felling of the Royal timber, the killing of game and the cultivation of certain tracts of forest. Penalties were also reduced.

The development of agrarian capitalism in the 15th-17th centuries was the cause of some reforms but also created new forms of exploitation. Peasants could now sell food on the market rather than being tied to their lord, but with the decline of feudalism many were left in a position of insecurity. Landowners no longer had an obligation to the peasants. Between the 11th-17th centuries,

estate, just down the road from Balmoral in the Cairngorms, as a birthday present. It is now in the hands of the National Trust for Scotland, sold when Kluge got divorced.

Hunting is a symbol of the ruling class and the rituals involved in foxhunting, pheasant and grouse shooting and deer stalking have a powerful ideological role in integrating all sections of the ruling class as well as ensuring the loyalty of the small farmers and employees who are caught up in the charade. The importance that the ruling class puts on blood sports is shown in the lengths they went to mobilise two mass demonstrations for the first time ever, essentially for the purpose of defeating the anti foxhunting bill. It can also be seen in the outrage and subsequent behind-the scenes manoeuvring that is taking place as a result of the National Trust banning stag hunting with hounds on their land.

It is the image of a 'way of life' that props up the ruling class. This is closely linked with the Royal family who epitomise this, portrayed as the paternalistic, caring guardians of all that is 'traditionally' British. This 'traditional Britain' is synonymous with rural Britain. The message is that if the 'countryside' way of life disappeared, then Britain itself would be destroyed. Despite the Industrial Revolution and the fact that Britain has little of its economy devoted to agriculture or forestry, it is amazing that it is 'rural' Britain which is the symbol of the soul of the nation.

It is a powerful message and gives the landowners a pivotal role within the ruling class that is much greater than their economic and overt political power would suggest. In addition, it is the landowners who through their activities and control of the land have the most impact on the environment. Many anarchists and campaigners such as hunt saboteurs and anti-roads protesters will already be aware of this. This awareness must be spread to the working class as a whole and the landowners must be made a focus of our struggles against capitalism.

Organise! will be looking in more detail at the landowners and their relationship to class struggle in the next few issues. This se-

ries will include: a historical background to land ownership and previous struggles, blood sports, agriculture, conservation and the environment and the right to roam and access.

GET OFF MY LAND!

This is the message the landowners of Britain have been giving working people throughout the centuries. And this message remains the same today. With the government backing down (what a surprise!) on its Right to Roam legislation the mass of the people remain not only excluded from the land unless the landowner deigns to grant access, but also excluded from any decision-making about what is done with this land. We need to question this myth of land 'ownership'. For, in fact, the whole land-owning system is based on theft. To understand this we need to go back to the times of the Norman Conquest.

Without romanticising the Saxon period (slavery was widespread and it was clearly a class system), peasants before the Norman conquest had a certain control over the land. Free, independent peasant owners called ceorls cultivated their own areas. They owed certain duties to the king, but there were no non-cultivating landowners. This situation started to deteriorate even before the Normans arrived. As a result of various military campaigns, lords were granted control over certain territories. The treatment and extent of the peasants' exploitation depended on the whim of the particular thegn (lord). Some peasants found themselves forced to sell land to the thegn and had to become wage labourers. However, there was still extensive common land which was available for grazing, fuel collecting and gathering.

The Norman Conquest fundamentally changed the Saxon system. The land was taken from the peasants and put firmly in the hands of a land-owning class whose sole aim was to manage the land for the benefit of themselves. William, who now claimed to own all the land, needed to reward the military. As a result he gave the barons and other knights the rights to tracts of land on the condition that they provide soldiers for wars. The ceorls lost their position as freeholders and became serfs. They could only use the land if they paid for it by providing free labour. Worse than not owning the land, they themselves were now owned by the barons. The whole basis of land ownership in Britain is thus based on conquest; the consequences of which are still with us today. Some landowners such as the Grosvenor family (present Duke of Westminster) trace their ownership back to this time. Their ancestor, Hugh Le Gros Veneur, was given major land holdings by William.

Blood Sports

It is not just a grossly unequal system of land ownership that dates from the Norman Conquest but also the tradition of blood sports, so dear to the hearts of the present ruling class. In many respects, this obsession with hunting is one of the primary influences on the way the land has been managed and developed. William was a passionate hunter and set aside huge areas of land for this purpose. 'Royal Forests' covered almost a quarter of England by the mid-12th century. And these 'forests', which included much more than forests, were subject to Forest Law, designed with the sole purpose of protecting and breeding game which William and his cronies could then kill. Forest officials made sure that grazing animals were kept out and even barons couldn't plough up the land. Poaching, of course, was a serious offence, often resulting in the death of someone who dared interfere with the King's pleasure. The barons and knights, eager to ape the King, also took to hunting and set up areas that were called 'Chases'. The most highly controlled areas, 'Deer Parks', were fenced and maintained by serf labour. Many of these places still exist and are often the main areas that the public is denied access to e.g. the 3,000 acres of Hulne Park owned by the Duke of Northumberland.