



Farming's Role in Devonshire Society in the 21st Century

Prof Michael Winter
Director Centre for Rural Policy Research
Department of Politics

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Pondering the title

- **‘Farming’ not just farmers.** In other words I am asked to consider the significance of agricultural activities to society as well as farmers’ role within society.
- They are not necessarily the same thing.
- The farming undertaken by an intensive poultry farmer on a small land base, producing entirely for a national retailer may have relatively little impact on Devon society. But the farmer may be a pillar of the local community.
- By contrast, a large farmer may own some wonderful amenity land with public access, thereby having an important societal role, but may be a total recluse!

The 'title' continued

- And **Devonshire society** implies not just the local rural community but a diverse and growing population, many urban-based, of around a million people.
- Thus we are looking to at least four areas of relationship if we are to tackle the topic:

Farming & Devonshire

	Local Society	Wider (Devon) Society
Farmers as Land Managers		
Farmers as Citizens		

- I am not suggesting this grid is anything other than a simplification, nor that it captures everything there is to say sociologically about farmers.
- For example, it ignores interesting issues about farmers in the political context – the changing role of the NFU for example.
- But at least it provides some sort of framework to consider the question and implies that there is no simple answer.
- It also takes us away from the rather crude argument that is sometimes made of a desolated agriculture. It goes something like this:

The Myth of Social Desolation

Market and structural change in farming



Fewer farmers



+ *Counterurbanisation*



Diminishing social significance of farmers



Social marginalisation

The role of myth

- I deliberately use the word 'myth' rather than 'fallacy' or 'fiction'. Myths contain kernels of truth and have a bigger message. The 'myth' of social desolation is empirically true for some in some circumstances.
- We have enough evidence about rural stress for that to be the undoubted case.
- But it is not the whole story or even the most likely future outcome.
- Indeed, one of the purposes of myth is to highlight potential disaster and point to alternative futures.

- The social desolation myth is based around a rather crude and uni-linear reading of policy & markets change.
- But policies and markets *change* (note the recent up-turn in some commodity markets).
- And policy itself is not one-dimensional.
- For example, the Strategy for Sustainable Farming & Food can be seen as offering three over-lapping but distinctive models of farmers in the future:

- Farmers as producers of food commodities in a global free market.
- Farmers as multifunctional – producers of public goods for which there is not an existing market.
- Farmers as land-based entrepreneurs within a diversified rural economy.

Policies that flow from the 3 models:

- WTO compliance and CAP reform – principles of decoupling and removal of trade barriers.
- Rewarding farmers for the provision of public goods – agri-environment schemes, etc.
- Facilitating diverse rural economic development – easing of planning restrictions, encouragement of regional/local food initiatives, renewable energy, etc.

- If we consider these three models alongside our earlier grid we begin to get a sense of alternative, overlapping and diverse futures.
- Let's look at the possibilities within one cell:

Farming & Devonshire

	Local Society	Wider (Devon) Society
Farmers as Land Managers		
Farmers as Citizens		

The Purple Cell

Types of Land Management:	Farmers Involvement in Local Society LOW → → → → → → → → → High		
Organic – Mass Markets	*****	****	*
Organic – Local Sales	*	****	*****
High Agri-Env't emphasis	***	***	***

Farming: A Positive Role?

- In other words farming's role in Devonshire society in the twentieth century is likely to be considerably more fragmented and diverse than in the 20th century which was dominated by a homogenous market place.
- I happen to believe that farmers have a crucial and special role to play for a number of reasons:
- 1) They may be few in number but farmers are highly visible in terms of the land management function – 'glorious Devon'.

A Positive Role?

- 2) An increasing number of farmers will produce food or non-food commodities marketed (or available) directly to Devon's consumers (and citizens). Re-connections are being re-established through food. There may be other possibilities through local energy schemes.
- 3) The traditional family farm, as we knew it in the 20th century, may be in decline but that decline is not characterised by large-scale land sales. The social infrastructure of family farming is in some ways rather more robust than the farming structure.

A Positive Role?

- 4) The high value of farm properties whilst inhibiting the old 'farming ladder' serves to maintain confidence in the farming sector.
- 5) Sometimes (not always) those buying into farming (as much for residential reasons as for production) have high social expectations and as consequence inject life into communities.
- 6) Finally, I detect a change in society's attitudes to land and its activities as a result of the climate change debate: After a couple of decades in

A Positive Role?

- which we have deluded ourselves that global mobility, technology and markets have somehow reduced our dependence on the land, we are suddenly aware again that land and those who manage it are rather important to society's wellbeing.