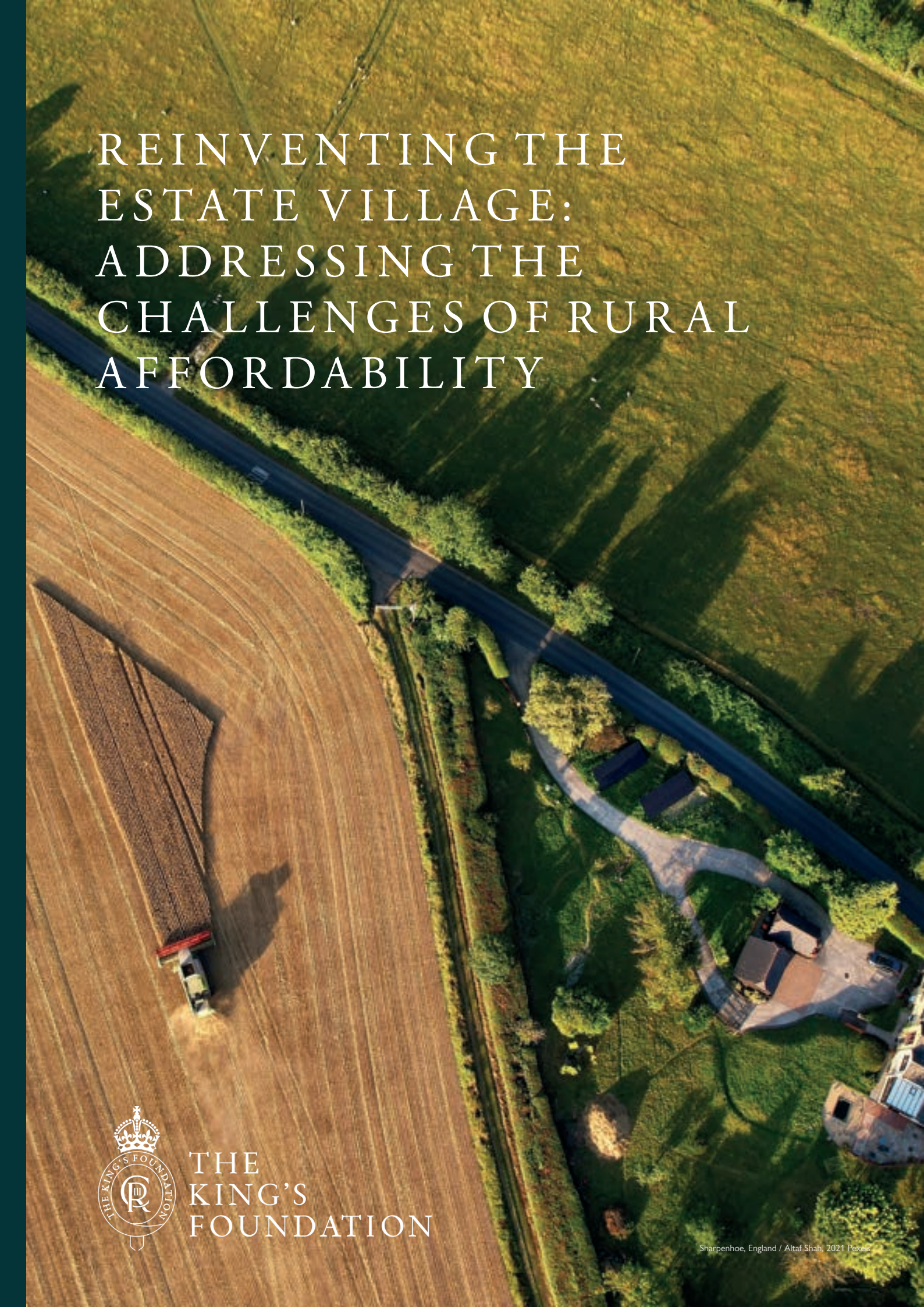


An aerial photograph of a rural landscape. A dark asphalt road runs diagonally from the top left towards the bottom right. To the left of the road is a large, brown, tilled field. To the right is a lush green field. A small village with several buildings and trees is visible in the bottom right corner. Long shadows are cast across the fields, suggesting late afternoon or early morning light.

REINVENTING THE ESTATE VILLAGE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL AFFORDABILITY



THE
KING'S
FOUNDATION



Kellogg College
University of Oxford



Global Centre on
Healthcare & Urbanisation

This report has been developed through The King's Foundation's Building a Legacy programme.
Designed by Zayna Zubair.



This year's report, focusing on rural communities and the reinvention of the modern estate village, is particularly timely. His Majesty The King recently hosted senior members of the artificial intelligence community at Dumfries House to explore the future impacts and opportunities of AI. This rapidly advancing technology is beyond most people's understanding. Studying its potential impact at the scale of the village—the smallest unit of community, with a close relationship to the land around it—offers a useful way of thinking ahead: both about how we might embrace it and how we should respond to the changes it may bring.

Human societies have, of course, undergone profound periods of change before. Perhaps the most recent comparable example is the Industrial Revolution, when communities previously powered by muscle were transformed by the machine. Many advances in science and technology brought enormous benefits, but there were also damaging consequences for the essential fabric of community and the mix of activities that made daily life both efficient and enjoyable. Many villages have since lost their shop, butcher, baker, blacksmith, pub and even their church.

As we consider the potential risks and opportunities of AI, we must seek to shape a future in which technology supports thriving communities—and the animals, landscapes and ecology with which we share our places. Many of the landowners within our growing Building a Legacy network have been careful stewards in the past. You now have an important role to play in helping rural communities across the country reinvent themselves for the intelligence age ahead.

Emily Cherrington,

Chief Executive, The King's Foundation

Contents

- 06 OUR BUILDINGS
1 SHAPE US **Dr. Eve Poole OBE,**
Church of England
- 12 THE INTELLI-
2 GENCEAGE VILLAGE **Ben Bol-**
gar, The King's Foundation
- M20 MODERNISING THE
3 ESTATE VILLAGE **Dr. David**
Howard, University of Oxford

- 26 COMMUNITY BUSI-
NESSES - REAL COL-
LABORATION, NOT
JUST CONSULTA-
TION

Harriet English,
Plunkett UK

- 28 COMMUNITY STEW-
ARDSHIP FOR THE
MODERN VILLAGE

Tom Chance, Communi-
ty Land Trust Network

- 30 HERITAGE RETROFIT
FOR A RESILIENT FU-
TURE

Sarah Robinson
& Megi Zala, The King's
Foundation

- 32 BLENHEIM PALACE
CASE STUDY
Dr. Paul Jackson
& Dr. Matthias Rolf, Oxford
Brookes University

1
34 LESSONS IN URBAN
DEVELOPMENT FROM
SMALL SETTLEMENTS:
ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY

Rui Castellino, BA

2
3
38 Geography student,
University of Oxford

2
3
38 BUILDING HEALTH BACK IN: LEARNING FROM
BRITAIN'S SMALL TOWNS

48 CONCLUSION

Dr. David Howard University of Oxford

50 REFERENCES

Grace Baldauf, MSc
*Sustainable Urban
Development student,*
University of Oxford

1
44 IMAGINED
COMMUNITY: IS VILLAGE LIFE
JUST A DREAM FOR PEOPLE IN
MODERN TOWNS AND CITIES?

Greta Stone
BA English Student,
University of Oxford

Our Buildings Shape Us

DR. EVE POOLE OBE
CHURCH OF ENGLAND

What do you see when you look at a city, a town or a village?

Perhaps your eye is drawn to the houses or the shops; or to the roads or the trees; or maybe to the people who are walking or driving around. Some townscapes are so famous that they have their own iconography, like the Manhattan skyline. It is always telling what is depicted and what is left out. For instance, the Wikipedia page on Estate Villages generally uses a picture of the church to illustrate each village.

It was in the context of a 1943 debate on the rebuilding of the House of Commons that Winston Churchill made his famous comment that ‘we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us’ (Hansard, Vol. 393, col. 403). I thought of this quote, visiting an office in the City that had on the wall the famous panorama of London before the Great Fire, engraved by Visscher in 1616, depicting London as a blizzard of churches. Looking out of the window, all I could see was Canary Wharf. What do we, now, physically look up to? It used to be these monuments to God, and now, in our cities, it is monuments to Mammon. And I suspect this is indicative of a deeper cultural shift than we might at first imagine.

I straddle the worlds of God and Mammon, having an MBA as well as degrees in Theology and Capitalism,

and having worked both in the City and for the Church. However, it turns out that my exposure to economics might not bode well for my immortal soul. Several studies, usefully summarised by Adam Grant (Grant, 2013), have argued that studying economics has a deleterious effect on personal ethics. My siblings certainly noticed I got much better at Monopoly after the MBA. It has also been argued that the richer you get, the less ethical you become (e.g., Piff et al, 2012). The hypothesis behind this finding is that when you stop needing other people, and everything becomes a transaction, you do not need to invest in your relating skills or try hard to build social bonds, because your money will do that for you. Everyone is paid to be nice to you and to make your life run smoothly. As the very rich tend to find, no-one will risk upsetting you by speaking truth to power, so you remain in blessed ignorance of your shortcomings (Kleiner, 2003; Drezner, 2026). You can also disregard any criticism from society as envy rather than disapproval, which dilutes the effect of what Adam Smith would call the impartial observer, who in his Theory Of Moral Sentiments (Smith, 1759 & 2002) keeps us on the straight and narrow because of the risk of public shame. I am not yet rich enough not to need other people, but I think this particular finding has wider relevance to the debate on place-making and AI.



Efficiency

AI is the particular culmination of centuries of progress in which humans have tried so hard to improve their efficiency that their labour may not now be needed in the future at all. Efficiency has also been at the heart of town-planning, epitomised in the UK by the famous Milton Keynes road system, whose roundabouts were supposed to keep the traffic in perpetual motion. Inspired by American design, the fashion was to remove friction, so that we could move effortlessly from A to B, between our lifts and our cars and our offices, without ever really needing to meet anyone. By the way, AI can do all of that design for us now at a fraction of the cost – the virtual worlds built for gaming and cinema can now become real, without the need for expensive architects and designers, and with robots already replacing the labourers we used to need to build them.

But the vision of an efficient friction-free world falls into the same trap as it seems do the isolated rich. If you never have to deal with other people, or interruptions, or delays, you do not need much emotional intelligence to survive, and nor particularly would you need morals or ethics. Worse, this vision of an efficient world, turbo-charged by AI, arguably removes the need for humans altogether. The arguments of transhumanism and post-

humanism, popular in Silicon Valley, reckon that waiting for improvement through evolution is too slow: happily we can now overcome all our deficiencies by harvesting our best features and using AI to give them a future with no mistakes, no degeneration, and no end.

I think this is a terrible misunderstanding both of human design and of human formation. It is also why we need the modern Estate village, to show us all in 3D how we should ideally live. How can people feel secure, valued, connected, and able to contribute? I will come on to why I am hoping those pictures of churches might help, too. My argument builds on a version of human design that pays particular attention to our supposed inefficiencies, to try to better understand their purpose. It then looks at how the human race has learned to live with these so-called inefficiencies, and how care for these features was traditionally embedded into the physical world we built around us to live in. I shall use those estate churches on Wikipedia as my illustration, but similar routines, practices and disciplines can be found in homes, in schools, and in all communal spaces where life is lived out.



London, UK / Chengxin Zhao, 2024 © Pexels

Human Design and Junk Code

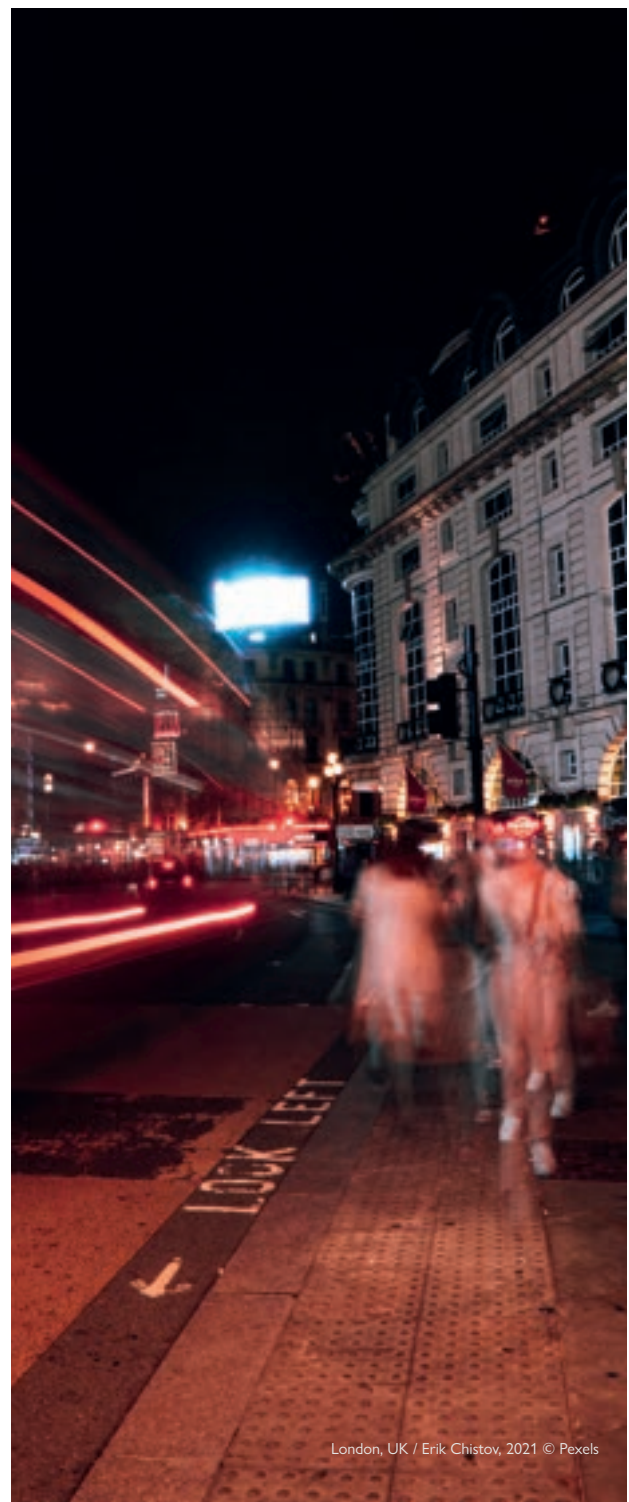
As a Christian theologian, I own a bias in my thinking about human design, because of a belief that we were made in the image of God. Others may only see the marvel of evolution in play, but in either case, it is remarkable that in spite of centuries of disaster, error and war, the species has prevailed. This suggests that there is something rather successful at the core of human design. Its cleverness is, ironically, best seen through an examination of all the bits that AI has left out - all the bits that were left on the cutting room floor, because they did not fit the narrative of a highly rational mind; all the messy bits that looks like 'junk code' (Poole, 2024).

And there is a peculiar logic to it all. Imagine, if you will, that you are in a lab poring over the blueprints for the design of humanity. To my mind, there are 7 key elements of our written-off junk code. First, **Free Will**. If you think about it, It is a disastrous design choice. Letting creatures do what they want is highly likely to lead to their rapid extinction, so it would be extremely wise to design in some risk mitigation. Hence **Emotion**. Humans are a very vulnerable species because their young take 9 months to gestate, and are largely helpless for their first few years. Emotion is a good design choice because it makes these creatures bond with their children, and in their communities, to protect the vulnerable.

Next, you design in a Sixth Sense, so that when there is no clear data to inform a decision, your species can use their **intuition** to access wisdom from the collective unconscious, which helps de-risk decision-making. Then we need to consolidate this by designing in **Uncertainty**. A capacity to cope with ambiguity will stop them rushing into precipitous decision-making, and make them seek out others for wise counsel. And if their design leads them to make **Mistakes**? Well, they will learn from them. And mistakes that make them feel bad will develop in them a healthy conscience, which will steer them away from repeated harms in future.

Now that we have corrected their design to promote survival, what motivators are needed for their future flourishing? Well, they need to want to get out of bed on a dark day, so we fit them with a capacity for **Meaning-making**, because a species that can discern

or create meaning and purpose in the world will find reasons to keep living in the face of any adversity. And to keep the species going over generations? We design in a super-power of **Storytelling**, because stories allow communities to transmit their core values and purpose, down the generations, in a highly sticky way. Stories last for centuries, future-proofing the species through the learned wisdom of our ancestors, and the human species prevails. Our design is really quite brilliant when you look at it like that. Clearly this 'junk code' is not about flaws, it is about features, and features that have secured our survival over thousands of years.





Differences in Knowing Between AI and Humans

But if 7 elements of Junk Code are too much to hold in your head, a good way to sum up the essential difference between humans and AI is to examine how we know things. The English language no longer distinguishes between types of knowing in the way that many other languages still do. If you learned French and German at school, you would have learned the distinction between *savoir* and *connaître*, and *wissen* and *kennen*. In both instances, the former is a form of knowing that is about objective facts and data. It is about information that is fungible and can still be reliably understood second- and third-hand. The latter, on the other hand, relates to subjective knowing, the kind of knowledge that is obtained through direct experience: knowing the person rather than about the person. This epistemological distinction helps to explain what is happening in AI.

By design, AI is built to surpass us on both *savoir* and *wissen*. It is easy to extract facts, turn them into code, and programme them in: translation and transmission is exactly how we use this kind of knowledge as people. But the key to *connaître* and *kennen* is our human embodiment: we are so much more than just our minds. Take the example of lying. The reason that fake news is so hard to discern is that it is *savoir* without *connaître*, *wissen* without *kennen*. When a person lies to us, we have much more to go on: we know them. Is this consistent? Are they acting weird? Are they avoiding eye contact, blinking a lot, or playing with an earlobe? Is

their voice a bit off? Lie-detecting is about searching our minds, but it is also about listening to our bodies. We were made to feel. The philosophers of consciousness call those feels “qualia.” These phenomenological experiences that we have: the sights and sounds; the smells and tastes and touches; our memories and our intuitions — these are the ways in which we as humans crown and test our intellectual knowing. This is what it means to “know” as a human. It is very physical, and occurs in bodies, in places, in 3D.

Human Formation and the Role of the Churches

Junk Code therefore relies on the physical, and is in turn shaped both by other physical beings and by physical surroundings. Here is an example. In your villages, the central religious building is a Christian church. In other countries, and in some other communities of the UK, religious buildings host different faiths. But if you remember that all wisdom traditions do broadly similar things to promote human flourishing, it becomes easier to see the common practices lying behind them. Helping with Junk Code is their core-competence, and is the reason religion is such a sticky aspect of the human experience. Parents and schools throughout the centuries have worked hard to nurture Junk Code too, but institutionally it is the faiths that have led this effort at the level of community and for society as a whole.

Looking at each element of Junk Code in turn, it is evident that the Christian church – as all religions- is

an institution of **meaning-making** par excellence, and is the guardian of the **stories** that we regard as definitive for humanity. We tell them back to our community, day in day out, through a liturgy structured to keep the full range of them at the forefront of our collective worship, using preaching and exegesis to keep their meaning fresh in every generation, and we have been doing this for over two thousand years. It is why we built churches, too, as stories in stone, and ways of marking out meaning in the landscape around us. The Church also takes our **emotions** very seriously, with formal and public rites for all the peak emotional moments of our lives: births, marriages, and deaths; with music, art and architecture to tool our emotions throughout the liturgical year. The Church teaches us to check our **intuition**, through prayer and the seeking of wise counsel, to make sure we are not misled by false instincts, but it is careful to acknowledge that intuitions are real, and could even be the voice of God. The Church does sterling work helping us with our **mistakes**, too. We start every service apologising for them and promising to do better. Routines of repentance take our remorse and mobilise it towards therapeutic reparation, all within a narrative in Christian theology that promises us that we are ultimately forgiven for all our mistakes. And this provides the backdrop for the Church's teaching on **free will** as a precious gift that must be carefully nurtured, away from sin and towards the exercise of our status as the redeemed people of God. And **uncertainty**? In Christianity we have 4 Gospels that cheerfully disagree with each other; as well as a Saviour who is both God and Man, and part of a rather mysterious Holy Trinity that is indivisible - and frankly completely perplexing as a concept.

So whether or not you subscribe to the particular brand of faith and morality that any given church of faith offers, they are all fundamentally designed to be experts at Junk Code. Faith is after all the daily schooling of uncertainty to render it purposeful. In various ways, village life echoes these Junk Code practices, through local history, festivals, local colloquialisms and accents; all the rituals of childhood and the milestones of adulthood, from playgrounds to the village pub, your first Saturday job, and watching the eclipse together. Perhaps it is obvious where some of these elements show up in village life. We have already learned that from a rich literature from the likes of Jane Austen

and George Eliot, stories all about Junk Code at work in the parlours, market-places and assembly rooms, and Englefield has recently been the set for filming a story of modern community living. Indeed, the reason UK costume dramas are so popular abroad is largely because of the alluring way in which the backdrop of your estates turn all of that Junk Code into gorgeous and high-quality entertainment. But even the less obvious ways that Junk Code shows up are interesting: 'naked street' projects like Exhibition Road in London are based on using uncertainty to force increased awareness, promoting better shared use of the roads. I wonder what else you might find if you used Junk Code as a deliberate lens for village design? To paraphrase Churchill, how are your villages shaping the people who live there?

Stewardship and Designing for Friction

Many of your estates have been in existence for centuries. There is little of life and history and so-called progress that they have not seen. And as each generation responds to the vicissitudes of their age, they have adapted and survived, and they are adapting still. Indeed, many smaller villages have been thrown a lifeline by the trend for home-working, facilitated by advanced communications and AI. Excellent virtual working and reliable delivery services are already enabling productive activity to return to those smaller settlements that had previously lost out to towns where the majority of jobs used to be physically located.

But as you take on that stewardship in this generation, the attraction of using AI to make life seem easier and more efficient will be compelling. My plea is for you to use it to design in more friction, not less; to design in more opportunity for everyone to bump into everyone else regularly enough, that it is indeed the whole village that raises the child, and not just an AI tutor.

So, if the advent of AI makes us take more seriously human Junk Code as the very essence of our humanity, what kinds of villages, institutions and economies can best protect and nurture it? How can we build villages, institutions and economies to enable people to remain secure, valued, connected and useful in the intelligence age? And what kind of stewardship is needed to bring this into being?



London, UK / Oliver King, 2025 © Pexels

The Intelligence-Age Village

Rediscovering human scale in an age of disruption.

**BEN BOLGAR THE KING'S
FOUNDATION**

For centuries, villages, towns and cities were the bedrock of human organisation in Britain. They were not really planned in the sense that we understand planning today. They evolved, gradually and organically, through a very close relationship between people, the land and what it was actually possible to do.

For most of human history, almost everything ultimately came down to muscle power - principally human beings, horses and oxen. That put very real limits on how far you could travel, how much you could carry, how much land you could cultivate and, therefore, on the scale at which communities could function ([Wrigley, 2016](#)).

The hamlet had the closest relationship with the land. The village grew to a scale which could support everyday life and agriculture - the butcher, the baker, the blacksmith, the church, the school, the pub. The

market town existed at roughly the scale at which goods and services could be brought together and exchanged ([Centre for Metropolitan History, 1995](#)). And cities became the centres of learning, government, culture, finance and more specialised activities.

Even the dimensions of the landscape were related to this. Furlongs, rods and chains were not abstract numbers dreamt up on a drawing board ([Science Museum Group, n.d.](#)). Field dimensions and patterns evolved from the practical business of working land - the quality of the soil, the lie of the land, drainage, and how far people and animals could reasonably plough and work.

So there was an extraordinarily intimate relationship between people, place, work and nature. It was refined over centuries. And whilst life was undoubtedly hard, what emerged was a kind of natural, organic scaling of people and the land.

A black and white photograph of an industrial facility. A tall, cylindrical smokestack is the central focus, emitting a thick, dark plume of smoke that rises into the sky. The smokestack has several platforms and ladders. To the left, there is a complex network of pipes, valves, and structural steel, including a large horizontal cylindrical tank. The overall scene is industrial and somewhat somber due to the monochrome palette and the thick smoke.

*And then the Industrial
Revolution changed everything.*

When the Machine entered The System

Machinery and fossil fuels allowed us to extend ourselves far beyond muscle power ([Ellul, 1983](#); [Smil, 2017](#)). Railways suddenly allowed people and goods to travel enormous distances. The internal combustion engine extended that freedom further. Mechanisation transformed agriculture and manufacturing. But something else happened which is perhaps just as important. We began to break everything into compartments.

William Morris understood this very well ([Morris, 1884](#)). The traditional furniture maker might select the timber, understand where it had grown, design the chair, make it and perhaps even know the person who bought it. Industrialisation progressively broke that chain apart.

One person grows the timber. Somebody else harvests and transports it. Somebody buys it. Somebody designs the chair, another makes one component, another markets it. The person who might once have understood the whole process can eventually become the person who presses a button on a machine that makes one of the legs.

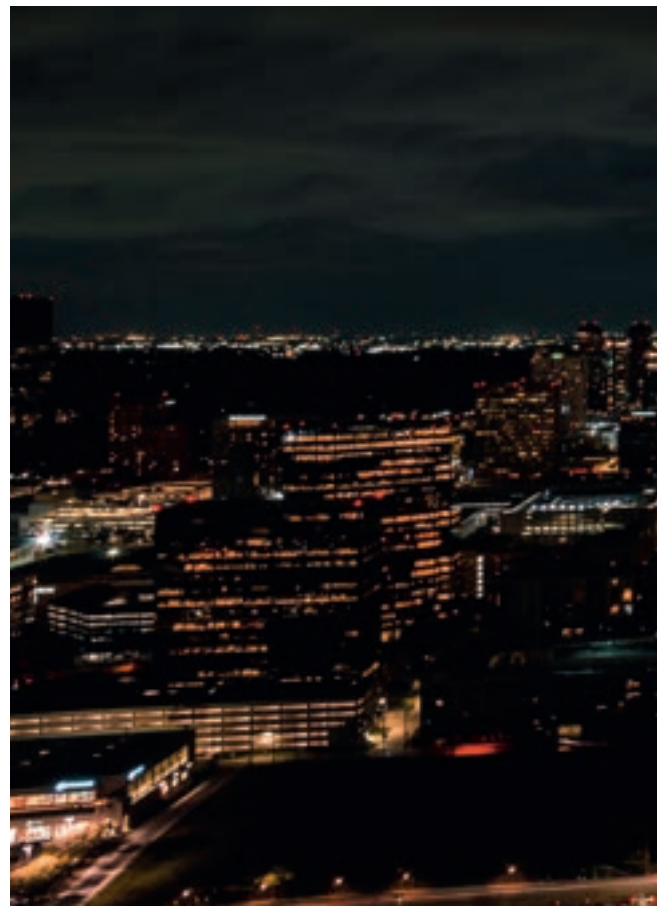
The machine was inserted into the system wherever it could add speed and power. There were enormous benefits to this. We should not romanticise a world in which people spent their lives undertaking exhausting and sometimes dangerous physical labour. Industrialisation created prosperity on a scale that would previously have been unimaginable. But it also changed our settlements.

Cities became centres of industrial production and, in many cases, filthy places to live. Those who could afford to escaped to the suburbs in search of clean air and space. Market towns adapted themselves to the motor car. Ring roads and bypasses allowed us to get into them and out of them more efficiently, but gradually many town centres became places principally for shopping and offices - busy during parts of the day and strangely dead at night ([English Heritage, 2013](#)). And the village underwent perhaps the strangest transformation of all. The working village - the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker - gradually became the commuter village.

The butcher went. Then the baker. The workshop became a house. The school struggled. The shop closed. Eventually, in some places, the pub disappeared too ([DEFRA, 2026a](#)).

What was left could still look exactly like a village - indeed, often an exceptionally beautiful and expensive one - but the productive life which had created it had largely disappeared.

The façade of village life remained, while much of the machinery behind it had gone. And there is a strange irony today that living in the countryside can involve spending an enormous amount of your life in a car ([DEFRA, 2026b](#)). You drive your children to school. You drive to the shop. You drive to work. You drive to see friends in the evening. Some villages can now feel noisier than city neighbourhoods, with cars flying through them, and the rural landscape increasingly cluttered with roundabouts, road signs and junctions. So perhaps it is worth asking how we got ourselves here.



From Muscle Power to Intelligence

We are now at the beginning of another revolution, and potentially one every bit as disruptive as the Industrial Revolution. If the Industrial Revolution freed us progressively from physical labour, the Intelligence Revolution may free us from a great deal of intellectual labour. That is a rather extraordinary prospect.

For generations, progress has meant moving away from working with our hands ([Shaw-Taylor, 2026](#)). Across Britain, this was accompanied by a long-term shift away from agricultural and industrial employment towards an increasingly service-based economy ([Aucott & Southall, 2022](#)). The aspiration was to leave the field or the factory and get a job in the dry and relative comfort of an office. And there we increasingly sit, staring at screens.

The golf-ball typewriter became the word processor, the word processor became the computer, and the computer allowed us to produce information at an extraordinary rate ([Haigh, 2006](#)). And, inevitably perhaps, we created systems that required ever more information to sustain them. You can see this particularly clearly in the building industry. Once, most of the effort required to make a building was actually spent making the building; finding materials, moving them and putting them together.

Today an extraordinary amount of the effort happens before anybody lays a brick ([CMA, 2024](#)). We prepare planning applications, surveys, environmental assessments, viability assessments, design statements, legal agreements, procurement documents, warranties, contracts and reports. We can argue for years about the principle of whether something should be built at all.

Because the process has been divided between so many people and organisations, we then create vast quantities of legal documentation partly to substitute for the trust that no longer exists between them. And eventually, after all that, we bring together hundreds, sometimes thousands, of individual components from all over the world to make something which is actually relatively simple: four walls and a roof.

There is something slightly insane about this. The construction industry is characterised by extensive subcontracting and fragmentation, while an increasing share of expenditure is devoted to planning, design and other professional services ([ONS, 2021](#)). Yet the buildings produced are not obviously better, more beautiful or more environmentally responsible than those we produced 200 years ago. Perhaps AI will at least give us the opportunity to stand back and ask why.



What is left for us to do?

There is understandably an enormous amount of anxiety about artificial intelligence ([International Labour Organization, 2025](#)). Jobs will disappear, professions will change, skills which people have spent decades acquiring may suddenly become less valuable, but there is another way of looking at it.

If the Industrial Revolution freed human beings from much physical labour, and the Intelligence Revolution frees us from much intellectual labour, what exactly is left for us to do?

It sounds like a rather flippant question, but actually it takes us remarkably quickly towards the meaning of life. If artificial intelligence combined with robotics ([Reuters, 2026](#)) allows us eventually to make almost anything we want, increasingly close to home and at relatively little cost, we may find ourselves in a world of extraordinary abundance. And perhaps abundance itself will cease to be terribly interesting.

Once you can have almost anything, the scarce things become rather different: friendship, love, beauty, belonging, trust, purpose, being needed and having some sense that your life has meaning ([WHO, 2025](#)). Which brings us, strangely enough, back to the village.

The Intelligence-Age Village

I am not suggesting that we return to some imaginary medieval idyll, or that everybody should become a farmer. Life was hard and communities could be claustrophobic as well as supportive. But perhaps we can rediscover some of the things that worked and combine them with technology our predecessors could scarcely have imagined.

During Covid something interesting happened ([ONS, 2020](#)). People started growing things, they baked bread, they cooked, they walked, they changed their relationship with nature ([ONS, 2021a](#)). They got to know neighbours whom they had previously walked past. Perhaps some of that happened simply because there wasn't much else to do. But I suspect not all of it did. There is something inherently satisfying about growing something well, making something well, or cooking something carefully for other people.

So imagine a village where productive growing returns - market gardens, orchards and perhaps animals - not because everybody has to grow their own food to survive, but because people actually enjoy doing it. The carrots you eat might have been grown by somebody you know. Somebody else might have made the bowl. The table might have been made in the village from timber grown nearby.

These are small things, but perhaps that is the point. And this would not be a retreat from technology. At the bottom of the garden there might equally be a shed containing robots capable of repairing a 1970s calculator or making components for a drone.

A young person could have an idea in the morning, discuss it with an intelligence vastly more knowledgeable than any individual human being, develop it ([Otis et al., 2024](#)), prototype it locally ([Srai et al., 2020](#)), test it that afternoon and potentially sell it anywhere in the world. That is quite an extraordinary possibility.

The same could happen with agriculture. Instead of enormous machines spraying fertiliser or chemicals across hundreds of acres, perhaps small robots and drones will manage individual plants, soil, water and animals with extraordinary care and precision ([Rejeb et al., 2022](#); [Yang et al., 2023](#)). The irony may be that some of the world's most advanced technology allows us to return to a much more intimate relationship with the land.

Not Self-Sufficiency, but Interdependence

This is not really 'The Good Life'; one family trying to become self-sufficient at the bottom of the garden. Villages never worked like that anyway. They worked because people needed each other.

One person could grow food. Another could make furniture. Somebody repaired things. Somebody taught children. Somebody cared for people. Somebody kept accounts. Somebody ran the pub. The opportunity now is to rediscover that interdependence, but without giving up the extraordinary freedoms and opportunities of the modern world.

There might be shared workshops, market gardens, kitchens, orchards and tools. There might be apprenticeships where older people pass practical knowledge to younger people, while younger people bring completely new technological skills into the same workshop. Some people will run businesses, increasingly able to use technologies such as generative AI to achieve things that once required much larger organisations ([OECD, 2025](#)). Some will work remotely for organisations on the other side of the world. Some will grow things. Some will care for others. Some will make things simply because they enjoy making them. Not everybody needs to be economically productive every hour of the day. But perhaps everybody should have the opportunity to be useful. That is a rather different ambition.

A Challenge to Landowners

And this is where landowners have a particularly interesting role. Perhaps we need to think beyond supporting a village simply by building some houses beside it.

A hundred new houses occupied by people who drive somewhere else to work, somewhere else to shop, somewhere else to take their children to school and somewhere else to spend their leisure time may increase the population without increasing the life of the village at all. Perhaps the better question is: does development increase the productive and communal capacity of the village?

That means thinking about land, work, food, homes, energy, water, workshops, schools, pubs, landscape and community together - and making space available cheaply enough for somebody to experiment. The young craftsperson, grower or inventor who cannot pay the highest commercial rent may ultimately be considerably more valuable to the village than another expensive house. And it requires patience.

Landowners, particularly those who expect to remain associated with a place for generations, have an unusual ability to provide that patience. They can retain buildings, make land available, support businesses and apprenticeships, provide shared infrastructure

and allow some of the value created by development to circulate back through the community ([The King's Foundation, 2025](#); [RICS, 2021](#)).

Perhaps we also need to measure success rather differently.

Not simply: what is the land worth?

But: are people healthier? Do they know one another? Can young people afford to remain? Is nature recovering? Are there useful things to do? And, most importantly perhaps, do people feel secure, valued, connected and able to contribute?

The growing evidence on social connection suggests that relationships, belonging and participation are themselves fundamental to individual and community well-being ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)).



Start the Conversation Now

There are good reasons to be frightened of artificial intelligence. We are creating something whose intelligence may ultimately exceed our own, and history does not provide us with many reassuring examples of a less intelligent species remaining in control of a more intelligent one. So the risks are real enough to take seriously. But this technology is coming whether villages discuss it or not.

The Industrial Revolution happened to our settlements. Railways arrived. Factories arrived. Cars arrived. And over time we adapted our villages, towns and cities around them, often without really standing back to ask what sort of life we wanted those technologies to support. Perhaps this time we can ask the question earlier.

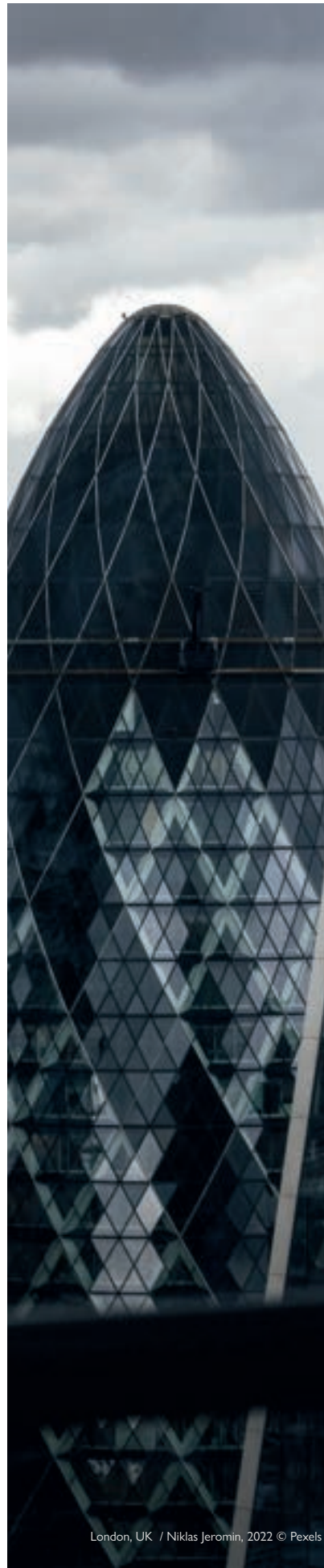
Rather than simply asking “what will AI do to us?”, we could ask what might we want to do with it? And I think the village is a very good place to start. It is still perhaps the smallest real cell of community: large enough to contain different people, skills and institutions, but small enough for people to know one another and to feel that what they do matters.

So I would urge every landowner in the country to start a conversation in their village. Talk to the farmers, school, pub, young people, older people, businesses, craftspeople and those who understand these technologies. Ask what is disappearing, what people would like to bring back, what could be grown, made, repaired or shared locally, and what AI and robotics might now make possible. And ask young people in particular.

They may experience the greatest disruption, but they also have the least reason to accept the strange systems we have inherited as inevitable.

Perhaps the modern estate village can become a place in which the oldest human activities - growing, making, cooking, caring, teaching and simply being useful to one another - sit alongside some of the most sophisticated technologies we have ever created.

That is not a return to the past.
It may be one way of finding our way into the future.



Modernising the Estate Village

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Villages, and Routes for Rural Development

Rural communities face a complex set of pressures: demographic change, economic fragility, environmental challenges, declining local services, and the gradual erosion of the social networks that have historically sustained village life. Against this background, the question of what enables rural places not merely to survive, but to remain viable, distinctive, and durable has become increasingly important. Historic estates occupy a potentially significant position within this debate. As long-standing landowners, custodians of historic buildings and landscapes, employers, housing providers and, in some cases, organisers or supporters of community infrastructure, they may possess an unusual capacity to influence the social, economic, and environmental life of the places around them. Their role raises opportunities and challenges for stewardship, and for recognising the progressive aspects of the past, that can be relayed into a sustainable future.

Looking further back, four publications written across nearly ninety years provide a particularly useful historical frame for the challenge today. These publications have been heralded in their time, and cover a century of dramatic change. The UK in the 1930s

faced the prospect of another war on the global scale, while what was considered then to be traditional rural livelihoods were being further pressed by modernising waves of industrialisation, ever advancing urbanisation, and ongoing demographic shifts to larger towns and cities. Francis Brett Young's *Portrait of a Village* (1937), Thomas Sharp's *The Anatomy of the Village* (1946), Tom Shipside's *I Lived in a Village* (1956), and the recent collection of essays, *Future Rural: imagining tomorrow's countryside* (2026) approach rural life from varied perspectives: literary and social portraiture, professional planning, local reminiscence, and contemporary environmental and social commentary. Read together, they show that the village is neither simply an inherited physical form, nor a bucolic refuge from urban life. It is a living socio-economic and ecological system whose viability depends on the continuing interaction of housing, work, services, landscape, institutions, memory, and local agency.

Young's *Portrait of a Village* constructs the fictional Worcestershire village of Monk's Norton as a detailed social world, describing its streets and buildings and, importantly, the residents, occupations, status relationships, and everyday institutions through which village life is made. The text should not be reduced to



Caldecotte, UK / Altaf Shah, 2018 © Pexels

nostalgic glance at a supposedly self-contained, now long-gone rural past. The lesson or narrative cast is that the character of a village derives from interdependence: shops, trades, professional services, meeting places, local employment, and informal neighbourly relations together create a community, rather than merely a collection of attractive buildings (Young, 1937). For contemporary rural policy, the implication is that conserving historic fabric without sustaining the everyday functions that give it social meaning will preserve the appearance of a village, while hollowing it out.

The Anatomy of the Village makes this relationship between inheritance and adaptation explicit. Written out of wartime and post-war planning work, it was intended to establish principles for village planning at a moment when substantial rural development was expected. Sharp valued the English village tradition, but he did not argue for imitation or stasis: the tradition was, in his view, something to be understood, and evolved. He stressed the importance of site, existing plan form, compactness, social mixture, and a sufficient population to sustain basic facilities, while warning against development that simply suburbanised the countryside, or reproduced historic forms without understanding or depth

(Sharp, 1946). Rather than treating villages as places in which development should generally be resisted, Sharp suggests a case for planned, context-sensitive growth: new housing and employment should reinforce existing settlement structure; help maintain community services and facilities; respond to local landscape and topography, and accommodate current and future needs, without turning villages into dispersed, car-dependent dormitories.

Tom Shipside's *I Lived in a Village*, a collection of stories about Nottinghamshire generally and Oxtun in particular, offers a different kind of evidence. It is a work of local memory and social history, rather than a formal prescription for rural development. Shipside documents village life and customs from the perspective of someone embedded within the community. Its value for today lies precisely in this granular perspective. Sustainable rural development is not only a question of spatial planning, housing numbers, or environmental targets; it also concerns the less easily measured forms of social capital through which people understand a place as their own - shared stories, customs, voluntarism, local knowledge, and inter-generational relationships. The implication is that heritage policy should take intangible culture and community memory seriously, while development

processes should involve residents as participants and knowledge-holders rather than treating them simply as consultees or consumers of a finished scheme.

A current collection of essays, *Future Rural* (Cooper 2026), brings these historical concerns into the twenty-first century context. Published to mark CPRE's centenary, the series of reflections brings together writers, farmers, activists, ecologists, and others vested in rural matters to examine a countryside facing rapid environmental, economic, and social change. Affordable housing, rapid technological change, responses to climate change and habitat loss, and examples of rural resilience and regeneration are brought under analysis. The narratives shift the emphasis from protecting a fixed idea of 'the countryside' towards enabling rural places to remain inhabited, economically productive, environmentally and socially healthy. The essays focus on an integrated agenda: affordable homes for people with local connections and essential workers; land-use strategies that combine food production, nature recovery and climate resilience; wider access to land and decisionmaking; support for rural enterprise and services; and development that is judged by its contribution to longterm community and environmental capacity, rather than by preservation or economic growth alone.

Across the four books, a consistent proposition emerges despite their very different dates and purposes. Villages endure when they retain enough people, purposes and institutions to reproduce community life, while also being able to change. The dense social, economic, and environmental relationships that made earlier villages function are highlighted. These relationships in turn require thoughtful spatial planning at appropriate scales, which increasingly include the imperatives of housing affordability, ecological recovery, climate adaptation, and apposite engagement with emerging technologies. This has direct implications for the future role of historic estates. Their long-time horizons, landholdings, built environment, and capacity for stewardship can make them unusually well placed to coordinate housing, employment opportunities, landscape management, renewable energy, nature recovery, and community infrastructure within a coherent, and integrated vision for the future. The strongest case for modernising the estate village may be conditional: an estate is a valuable

enabling institution, where it uses assets to permit carefully planned growth, reinvests in local services and environmental quality, supports a mixed local economy, and shares knowledge and agency with the community. The estate village embodies transition, and the principle of long-term interdependence between land, livelihoods, institutions, and people.

Establishing the Evidence Base

A substantive part of this report addresses current and past evidence of the role of the village in rural development. Similar to previous *Building a Legacy* publications, this report is grounded in evidencebased research, and again has been completed in partnership with the [Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation](#) at the University of Oxford. This year's report follows a similar methodological format. Reviews of relevant research literature and 300 peer-reviewed studies were completed by the research team to provide the evidence for this report. A series of keywords were used to conduct a review of peer-reviewed research projects focusing on villages a key drivers in rural development, with a specific focus on the estate village. Each scoping review of published evidence was performed using the Scopus and Google Scholar online searches to survey the most relevant literature for the key themes, potential benefits, and possible problems. Reports and papers were accessed via the [University of Oxford's Bodleian Libraries](#), if not available by online open access.

The three essays that follow analyse current evidence, and approach these wider questions indirectly, examining what can be learned from small towns, villages and planned settlements about the conditions that allow communities to flourish. Taken together, they identify three closely connected dimensions of rural sustainability: environmental stewardship, health and the built environment, and social cohesion. In doing so, they provide a useful framework for considering the contribution that historic estates might make to contemporary rural life, and the challenges faced.

'Lessons in urban development from small settlements' considers villages and small towns as places from which wider lessons in sustainable development – social,



economic, and environmental can be drawn. This essay identifies environmental governance, low-carbon living, and sustainable tourism as three particularly important areas. Rural settlements can act as 'green laboratories', combining traditional knowledge, newer technologies, local energy production and circular economy practices. At the same time, their cultural and historic character can itself become an economic and environmental asset when tourism and adaptive reuse are managed carefully, rather than allowed to undermine the landscapes and communities on which they depend. 'Building Health Back In' next adds a historical perspective, tracing attempts to develop health and well-being into settlements from nineteenth-century model villages through garden cities, and the post-war new towns. Model settlements such as Saltaire, Bournville, and Port Sunlight sought to improve living conditions through decent housing, green space, community facilities and proximity to employment, while the Garden City movement attempted to combine the economic advantages of urban life with the social, environmental and sanitary benefits associated with the countryside. The later history of the New Towns, however, demonstrates that good physical design alone is insufficient. As settlements grew larger, became more car-dependent and experienced declining local investment and services, some of their original health-promoting qualities were weakened.

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The essay emphasises the importance of providing continuing governance, reinvestment and institutional

commitment as communities and their needs change over time.

'Imagined Community' considers villages and small towns as places from which wider lessons in sustainable development – social, economic, and environmental can be drawn. This essay identifies environmental governance, low-carbon living, and sustainable tourism as three particularly important areas. Rural settlements can act as 'green laboratories', combining traditional knowledge, newer technologies, local energy production and circular-economy practices. At the same time, their cultural and historic character can itself become an economic and environmental asset when tourism and adaptive reuse are managed carefully, rather than allowed to undermine the landscapes and communities on which they depend. 'Building Health Back In' next adds a historical perspective, tracing attempts to develop health and well-being into settlements from nineteenth-century model villages through garden cities, and the post-war new towns. Model settlements such as Saltaire, Bournville, and Port Sunlight sought to improve living conditions through decent housing, green space, community facilities and proximity to employment, while the Garden City movement attempted to combine the economic advantages of urban life with the social, environmental and sanitary benefits associated with the countryside. The later history of the New Towns, however, demonstrates that good physical design alone is insufficient. As settlements grew larger, became more car-dependent and experienced declining local investment and services, some of their original health-promoting qualities were weakened.

Read together these essays, and this report overall, complicates any simple notion that the survival of rural communities depends upon preserving the past. The historic settlement is not a static model, but shows the capacity of particular institutions, landscapes, and patterns of rural development to support enduring relationships between people and place. The evidence base presented here provides a useful starting point for examining the role of historic estates.

A central question is not simply whether such estates preserve rural heritage, but how the resources, land, institutions, and long-term stewardship associated with them can be mobilised in ways that sustain estate villages as vital bodies for the future of rural areas.



Community Businesses – Real Collaboration, not just Consultation

**HARRIET ENGLISH,
PLUKETT UK**

Arguably the climate has never been more challenging for rural businesses – the local shop, the village post office, the country pub. Rising staffing costs, ever-increasing energy bills, and business rates that are applied as liberally in a remote rural community as on a town high street. Coupled with fast-changing and more demanding consumer trends and behaviours the traditional commercial operator model is cracking under the pressure.

The average small or medium enterprise has less than a 40% chance of surviving five years. A UK pub closes its doors for the last time roughly once a day. Thousands of rural shops lie empty. “Third spaces” — the shop counter, the pub bar, welcoming chair to sit with a coffee and chat – are disappearing at pace - where are village communities actually meant to meet?

And yet the community business sector tells an entirely different story: a 94% long-term survival rate, and a growing reputation as the model of choice for saving and running vital rural services. But why is this model working when the rural businesses are under so much pressure? What is the magic ingredient?

But more pertinently, can the sector give confidence to estate owners to reverse the traditional estate-village model, in which provision flows top-down from landowner to resident, and instead hand the keys - quite literally - to the community itself?

The answer is that it unlocks something no commercial operator can replicate: connection. The community-owned business model means that the owners are also the customers, the shop or the pub is shaped around how local people actually want to use it. Under the community benefit society model, economic impact plays out on a very local and tangible scale for local residents - the more the business is used, the more profit is reinvested straight back into local projects. The model will also strengthen the localised estate eco-system as a shop or pub could be a route to consumer for an estate market garden or farming enterprise. Community ownership could also help trigger diversification – having a thriving community pub would generate demand for an estate-owned and run brewery or distillery for example – all contributing to a localised estate food ecosystem.



London, UK / Himalay Patel, 2026 / Pexels

Ownership is also truly democratic, which again brings real meaning to everyone involved. Everyone can play a part, whether behind the till, managing payroll, or simply as a regular customer, and that breadth of contribution is what gives an asset genuine long-term protection.

Admittedly, technology can sit awkwardly inside this model. On one hand, self-service can cut costs and improve efficiency, but it strips out exactly the social interaction that is fundamental to the business model. Can technology instead be used to better identify and source from local producers, as they do at Dunsfold Village Shop, and again reinforcing and retaining local economic benefit?

It is clear that loyalty and connection is a vital currency in the future of rural community businesses. For example, volunteering quietly rooting that sense of ownership and belonging, it also improves the economics of running the business. And in turn the dual role of owner and customer means that community business evolves as the community itself changes, rather

than applying a standardised model that may work elsewhere, but is not in tune with the needs of the hyper-local community.

None of this happens without a genuine leap of faith — an estate or landowner choosing to release real control, not just consultation, into community hands. But the evidence is that it pays dividends: rural decline isn't merely halted, it's reversed.

'When business owners collaborate rather than compete, when communities rally around their local shops, and when people invest in their own towns and villages, rural retail doesn't just survive – it thrives.'

– Mary Portas,
Future of Rural Retail Report, Plunkett UK

Community Stewardship for The Modern Village

**TOM CHANCE,
COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
NETWORK**

What if we modernise villages in the same way that they organically developed over hundreds of years?

Guild artisans defined village architecture. Yeoman and tenant farmers collectively managed open field systems. Local businesses like blacksmiths, millers and publicans clustered around village greens and crossroads, placemaking organically.

Today we disregard these processes with the notion that ‘communities’ are incapable, and are only to be mollified through consultation.

Community Land Trusts reject this, and give villagers a means to reassert their role as the wisest stewards of their place. They are working in partnership with their parish councils, local SME builders, housing associations and others, especially in villages that are being hollowed out by second homes, or that are losing amenities as they become dormitories.

Take Hook Norton, in Oxfordshire, for example. Here, a [CLT](#), was established in 2019 and within six years it had completed its first project. The community acquired a piece of overgrown land that was owned by Cherwell District Council and developed 12 low carbon affordable homes, with electric vehicle charging points, and a car sharing scheme for the whole village. They partnered with Greencore Homes to build the homes and Soha Housing to manage them on a long lease. They also built a new community centre and workshops, and a renewable energy microgrid, helping to sustain community life and business activity in the village.

This pattern has been repeated in over 100 villages across England, up to a 500 home mixed-use, infrastructure-first development in [Kennett](#), Cambridgeshire.

Communities as landowners, placemakers, partners, stewards, not just consultees; bringing the affordable homes, pubs, car share schemes, enterprise centres, orchards and other amenities essential for a thriving rural community in the 21st century.

We have worked for the past fifteen years, as a network of hundreds of CLTs, to patiently stitch the CLT into the [planning](#), [finance](#), [delivery](#) and [stewardship](#) models that otherwise disregard communities. In that time we’ve achieved a 27-fold increase in the number of community assets developed by CLTs each year.

Builders and landowners could embrace this movement, partnering with self-starting CLTs and even encouraging villages to set up a CLT around a site opportunity. Planners could positively encourage and incentivise these approaches, using policies we have secured such as the Community-Led Exception Site in the National Planning Policy Framework.

I began with a ‘what if’ question.

The answer is in our hands – the model is proven, it remains only for it to move from its niche into common practice.



Chester, UK / Daniel Wells, 2026 © Pexels

Heritage Retrofit for a Resilient Future

SARAH ROBINSON AND
MEGI ZALA, THE KING'S
FOUNDATION



Around 80% of buildings we will use in 2050 already exist today (*UK Green Building Council, 2019*). Some people seem to be surprised by this statistic, and yet, if you look around us – particularly in rural settings and across our historic estates – that seems obvious, the buildings that are being lived and worked in there, have been in constant use for 100 years or more.

So, as collective stewards of our inherited built environment it is vital that we find ways to ensure these buildings can continue to be used for the next 100 years, for the benefit of their communities (both for individuals who live and work in them, and for the collective sense of place they help to sustain), for the environment, and for greater long-term financial certainty. This doesn't necessarily mean preserving buildings exactly as they are but managing change carefully and adapting them for life today and tomorrow, i.e. retrofitting. Modernisation and conservation need not be in conflict; sensitive retrofit can help secure the continued use of historic buildings while retaining the qualities that make them distinctive.

Good retrofit begins with good maintenance: addressing defects early can prevent relatively minor

problems from developing into more significant deterioration. Thereafter it's about planning upgrades that are appropriate – to the building, to its significance, its construction and to its intended future use (all within the regulatory framework) and considering these measures together rather than as isolated interventions (*Historic England Whole Building Approach*). This might be upgrades to fabric: insulation; window and door upgrades; draught proofing etc, and services: lighting, ventilation, heating and hot water. It may also involve supporting a transition towards lower-carbon energy sources, particularly where rural properties remain dependent on more carbon-intensive heating systems. Further up the ladder retrofit might also include appropriate adaptations/ alterations or additions to a structure in order to secure a continuous viable future use.

'The Greenest Building is the one that is already built'
Carl Elefante 2007.

In all of this, careful consideration of a building's construction is always needed to ensure that unintended consequences can be avoided (such as sealing in moisture or changing the path of water through a



Beamish, UK / Frank Samet, 2022 © Pexels

structure), particularly as traditional buildings often manage heat, air and moisture differently from modern construction (*Historic England Interventions in Buildings of Traditional Construction*), and in doing so, ensuring that the health of occupants is at the forefront of decision making. Therefore, any works should start with a detailed understanding of the historic structure – its materiality, how it ventilates, heats and is operated. Providing that baseline data is vital to ensure that project planning is carefully informed.

Alongside this should be an eye on promoting the use of recycled materials, of natural and local materials that are aligned with the original construction (and which can in theory be more easily sourced for future proofing any maintenance and replacement needs) and are inherently sympathetic to the vernacular of the setting. This not only secures the process in regenerative design principles but also in a place-based and sensitive approach (*Historic England, 2026a*).

As ever, enacting these works takes time, and particularly when specialist local-authority historic environment capacity is under such resource pressure ([Essex County Council Report. Historic](#)

[England, 2025](#)). One way to streamline progress might be to apply for Local Listed Building Consent Orders for estate villages so that multiple similar properties could undergo the same types of works without the need to reapply for consent multiple times ([Historic England, 2015](#)).

The final piece of the retrofit plan should be for continual monitoring to look at the successes (and failures) of the works and to help plan future upgrades. It's here that technology can be harnessed to monitor how effectively these measures work for their occupants and for the buildings themselves through post occupancy and building performance evaluation.

Historic buildings are not static artefacts. Their continued survival has often depended upon their capacity to accommodate changing uses, technologies and ways of living. Modernising the estate village is therefore not about choosing between heritage and change, but about managing that change well, ensuring that these buildings remain useful, resilient and valued while safeguarding the distinctive character of the places they collectively create.

Harnessing AI for managing Heritage Sites: Blenheim Palace Case Study

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**DR. MATTHIAS ROLF, OXFORD
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Woodstock, UK / Clément Proust, 2024 © Pexels

In modernising an existing village, we face a twin challenge and opportunity. First and foremost, there are features of the built environment we want to respect and preserve. Indeed, we may have a legal and moral duty to do just that, especially as we maintain historic legacy structures. Secondly, as we do this, we are presented with a growing array of tools and techniques to help with the effort – not least, technologies like AI that offer new ways of understanding and managing the world.

For the past six years, a team at Oxford Brookes has been working with Blenheim Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site, to explore the potential role for AI. 300-year-old palaces were hardly built to incorporate emerging developments in digital devices. But that's exactly what we've done: retrofitted sensors and data infrastructure. Like many historic sites, Blenheim is open to the public and has a major placemaking role, receiving nearly a million visitors each year. Machine learning, a subset of AI, now plays an important part of coping with this, predicting visitor numbers, tracking people flows and anticipating surges in demand. Digital tools

are also being used to monitor palace buildings – both internally (for humidity and energy use) but also outside, particularly the surface recession of exterior stonework. Soil and air quality are also captured, as well as wildlife movements, such as bees and worms. In modernising our villages, we face similar issues and goals: giving people the lived experiences they desire, while attending to the needs of the natural environment. Capturing and analysing data – often in real-time – is critical here. If we can understand how and when people access and use a site (including its roads, footpaths and built facilities), we are more able to anticipate and plan accordingly (be it for hours, days or even years ahead). By modelling and monitoring features of interest, we can test and implement new policies and designs and evaluate the impacts of change.

If it sounds like an open-ended scientific experiment, then maybe it is: a conscious attempt to use digital tools and data to understand the world around us – and make it a better and more sustainable place to live.

Lessons in Urban Development from Small Settlements: Environmental Sustainability

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With the global population [shifting](#) from mostly rural to increasingly urban, the unprecedented urbanisation of land and population requires us to reflect on our responsibilities as ‘stewards’ of the environment. How can we provide for our increasingly urbanised societies while also protecting the natural environment? A scoping review of recent research on sustainability and environmental management in villages and small towns has revealed valuable insight for moving towards a more sustainable mediation between our growing urban world and the natural environments we rely on. Three key areas of concern have emerged: environmental governance, negotiating human-environment relations; low-carbon living, reducing our impact on the Earth; and sustainable tourism, rethinking rural development.

Environmental Governance

With our current lifestyles relying so heavily on nature’s resources, we are responsible for protecting the integrity of natural ecosystems. Within the complex contemporary networks of community and ownership,

treating the environment as a shared ‘commons’ rather than patchwork slices of private land offers a new approach to environmental governance. Research in Taiwan reveals that building policy around the values of all stakeholders in rural areas is [key](#) to achieving sustainable management of rural resources, and this insight can be applied beyond the natural environment: management of public spaces or infrastructure, for example, can all be treated as common resources. Considering the interests of everyone, including nonhuman stakeholders, therefore offers an approach to environmental governance that considers the needs of both the natural environment and rural communities.

In agricultural regions, newly emerging technology and digital tools present valuable opportunities for both environmental and socio-economic development. Modern technologies [offer](#) greater transparency for agricultural practices and improve conservation of limited resources, but public-private partnerships are necessary to achieve a coordinated roll-out of newer technologies. Widespread participation across different



Hunan, China / Cz Jen, 2022 © Pexels

rural actors is particularly [important](#) to ensuring that digital technologies can be established for effective management of the environment and its resources.

Development of rural areas, whether urbanising or industrial, can lead to significant environmental degradation if not dutifully managed; appropriate management depends on cooperation between many actors. Evidence [in China](#) suggests that rather than threatening agricultural producers with punitive schemes, raising environmental awareness and negotiating with farmers is more effective in promoting environmentally sustainable practices. Likewise, shifting the focus from land-grabbing developments towards context-specific approaches and the integration of novel technologies with traditional lifestyles has proved much [more beneficial](#) for sustainable energy production in California, USA. This approach can also be translated to urban contexts, rethinking development as a new and improved lifestyle that incorporates the best facets of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ life and restructures our relationship with the environment.

Low-Carbon Living

Limiting greenhouse gas emissions is essential for longterm environmental sustainability, and the transitional process of urbanisation is a focal point for achieving low-carbon lifestyles globally. Initiatives such as the Cittaslow towns movement have had [great success](#) transforming towns across Europe into more liveable and sustainable places: traffic-calming measures in town centres, along with encouraging cycling and public transport use, not only enable low-carbon transport systems, but also improve the experience of town or village life. This ‘[strategic piggybacking](#)’ approach conveniently addresses multiple issues through a single project, by incorporating solutions to global environmental concerns with local, everyday problems.

The increased social cohesion in smaller settlements also offers an important opportunity for community development. In an unpredictable global market, green energy production can grant small settlements [independence](#) from reliance on global supply chains and fossil fuels, improving community resilience.

Pushing for a [locally-sourced culture](#) of sustainability fosters a unique community identity that brings residents together while simultaneously benefiting the environment. Small towns can thus become [valuable](#) 'green laboratories' by employing traditional and rural knowledges for circular economy (zero-waste) practices, integrating the 'old' into modern sustainability frameworks. The character of small settlements thereby provides a valuable perspective on the intersection of sustainability and community.

Sustainable Tourism

The increasing growth of tourism across rural areas presents new opportunities and challenges for sustainable tourism and accompanying management. Consolidating the primary industry economy (agriculture) while promoting the tourism sector is [key](#) to rural revitalisation, creating both economically and environmentally sustainable settlements in rural regions at risk of decline. Furthermore, joint development between villages reinforces the local economy; rather than dividing the rural and the urban, cooperation beyond boundaries could scale economic benefits across settlements while closely managing environmental impacts. This large-scale management can be [enhanced](#) by the use of 'big data' to inform management of resources in line with tourist flows and needs, particularly essential where sustainable visitor capacity is limited.

Rapid urban and industrial development risks the degradation of traditional lifestyles and natural landscapes, homogenising rural regions through universalised practices ignorant of context; alternatively, [maintaining](#) unique cultural and geographic landscapes can provide much richer tourist experiences. Cultural heritage, such as [historical buildings](#), can be repurposed and restored for sustainable, circular economy practices which minimises waste and strengthens cultural value. The unique and long-standing cultures in many small settlements should be preserved and incorporated into modern life, rather than homogenised in the course of forward-looking development.

Conclusion

As an interface between the rural and the urban, or the 'traditional' and the 'modern', small towns and villages provide unique insight into the dynamics of environmental sustainability in socio-economic contexts, highlighting unique cultural identities and geographical setting in the mediation between different stakeholders, values, and priorities. Learning from these small settlements, we can apply new ways of thinking about our responsibilities and relationships in our approach to urbanisation in larger settlements, bringing the urban back into its local, unique settings through a merging of many context-specific methods.



Building Health Back In: Learning from Britain's Small Towns

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Towns have long been testing sites for public health strategy in the United Kingdom. From the early model villages and garden cities to the 2015 Healthy New Towns programme, planned settlements have served as the tabula rasa on which planners could imprint their visions of a healthy modernity. Of course, these visions have not always led to the expected results. Many proved successful for the crises of the time but have spurred new challenges for future generations. Nevertheless, they offer valuable lessons on planning for health amidst a changing social and economic landscape. This article will explore the history of Britain's planned towns and villages from the 19th century until today to uncover what lessons past planning efforts may hold for the future health of our towns and cities.

The combined forces of the agricultural and industrial revolutions in the 18–19th century had created a crisis of density in British industrial cities. As populations streamed from country to city—in search of work or evicted by privatizing landowners—market demand for urban housing quickly outpaced cities' outdated [planning practices](#). The results were poorly built, tightly packed Dickensian living quarters offering limited to no sanitary infrastructure.

Rising disease, density, and deprivation bred growing discontent, leading to calls for new approaches to health and sanitation, with an increasingly spatial focus.

Epidemiological mapping of cholera-stricken London had revealed the geographical dimension of disease, while emerging theories of miasma encouraged stricter sanitation and waste removal efforts. It was quickly becoming clear that the physical design of cities and towns directly shaped the health and wellbeing of those living within them. By the end of the 19th century, a range of public health legislation had firmly positioned urban planning as an instrument of national health reform, and a distinct discipline capable of addressing the so-called [urban penalty](#).

However, while local authorities worked to install sewers and sanitary infrastructure within their cities, entrepreneurs and philanthropists were already looking outside city limits for more 'utopian' solutions. Industrialists, in particular, began moving their workers to new purpose-built towns, called model villages. These villages aimed to provide workers with decent housing and generous social infrastructure, close to their employment but shielded from cramped [inner-city conditions](#). Among the model villages were [Saltaire](#), founded by wool merchant Titus Salt; [Bournville](#), built on 120 acres of Cadbury land; and [Port Sunlight](#), inspired by William Lever's business model of 'prosperity sharing.'

Health and wellbeing were central to the planning of model villages. Town layouts prioritized low density, fresh air, and community facilities, offering schools,



green spaces, and [recreation centres](#). In Saltaire, a workers' survey was commissioned to determine the housing needs of multi-child families in the wool mill's [employment](#). In Bournville, residents were provided with gardens to promote physical activity and improved nutrition. By 1904, the mortality rate in Bournville was 6.9 per thousand, compared to nearby Birmingham's 19 per [thousand](#). This apparent success provided contemporaries with convincing evidence that health could be deliberately designed into new settlements, influencing housing reform policy and significantly improving living conditions into the [20th century](#).

The subsequent generation of utopian housing solutions would take direct inspiration from the reformist model village tradition. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Movement imagined a new form of urban living that would combine the accessibility and economic agglomeration effects of city life with the aesthetic, social, and sanitary benefits of [country living](#). Each garden city would be a concentric, self-contained settlement surrounded by a 'spatial wall'—the precursor to today's green belt. These spaces were intended to limit urban expansion and significant population growth, while providing residents with ample green space, agricultural zones, and [recreation](#). Within the green belt, the city would be divided into distinct housing quarters, with industry located along the periphery to protect residents from pollution while ensuring easy access to [employment](#). These features, in

Howard's view, would serve to make Garden Cities the '[healthiest in the nation](#)'.

Letchworth Garden City was the first project to attempt to bring Howard's idea to life. Founded in 1903, the so-called 'Social City' featured separate housing, agriculture, and industrial zones surrounding a main social and cultural centre. Communal amenities—shared gardens, cooperative kitchens, and public fruit trees—aimed to promote food self-sufficiency. Communal financing aimed to support economic independence. The second Garden City, Welwyn, maintained many of these features as well, but was later forced to abandon Howard's model of economic value [capture](#). Once again, the apparent benefits of health and wellbeing planning were reflected in the statistics: by 1938, infant mortality in Letchworth and Welwyn was approximately half the national average (33.6 and 25 per thousand versus 62 per thousand) and general mortality was significantly lower (8 and 5.9 versus 12 per thousand), along with tuberculosis rates (0.38 and 0.574 versus 0.804 per [thousand](#)).

Many of Howard's design concepts have remained hallmarks of healthy, sustainable town planning—if not radically so. Garden Cities were intended to be contained and walkable yet economically self-sufficient; densely populated yet green and spacious. However, the Garden Cities' greatest legacy may lie less in their



physical form than in the philosophy behind their design. In Howard's own words, planning should first determine 'what things are desirable for our health and happiness of body and mind,' before organising towns to achieve [them](#).

Thus, as "garden" designs later drifted farther from their health and social reformist roots, they revealed new weaknesses and long-term challenges. The practice of zoning, for example—introduced to limit pollution exposure and strengthen social ties—has yielded mixed results for modern-day public health. Later, Garden Suburbs adopted the aesthetics of the Garden City movement, but did not prioritise economic independence and accessibility, contributing to further urban sprawl and transport dependency, with its related health [impacts](#). Nevertheless, the principles of the Garden City movement continued to shape British planning, even as responsibility for town building shifted from philanthropists and private developers to the state.

The destruction of the Second World War spurred new visions of modernity. The apparent success of early planned communities, including Letchworth and Welwyn, had inspired confidence in the town planning movement. This optimism, combined with the urgent need for reconstruction, sparked growing calls for large-

scale development. New towns were proposed to address the growing population and post-war chaos of existing urban [centres](#).

The 1946 New Towns Act formally initiated the development of more than 20 towns, many located just outside of London's green [belt](#). While drawing on earlier traditions of model villages and the Garden City movement, these new towns represented a move away from philanthropic social experiments towards a more government-led approach to community building. Like the Garden Cities, the first generation of new towns aimed to be small (20,000–60,000 residents) and economically self-contained, with active and socially mixed communities across all social [classes](#). Health was a key consideration in planning decisions, with designs promoting walkability, recreation, and easy access to employment, healthcare, and welfare services.

Despite early intentions at social mixing, most new towns were targeted at young working-class families. Harlow New Town, for example, earned the moniker 'pram town,' as nearly 40% of its population were under the [age of 15](#). Much of this targeting was intentional, with some new towns offering employment on arrival and many aiming to provide a range of shops and services within '[pram pushing distance of every home](#).' Generally, the towns featured



a main shopping centre, then were subdivided into smaller neighbourhoods, or ‘villages,’ offering a few local shops and services. Footpaths and cycle lanes led to various amenities, green spaces, and recreation centres—many of which were actively promoted by local committees.

However, the post-war baby boom and mounting housing demand placed increasing pressure on the New Town programme. Rather than replicating the compact, self-contained settlements envisioned by Howard and the first-generation New Towns, subsequent developments were planned on a progressively larger scale—from 80,000–100,000 residents in second-generation towns such as Skelmersdale and Redditch to approximately 250,000 in the third-generation [Milton Keynes](#). Health became outranked by new priorities, including mass housing, economic development, individual choice, and consumerism.

This period marked the rise of the ‘car-owning democracy,’ leading to new perspectives on [urban planning](#). As one Labour MP declared in April 1960, ‘[we must rebuild our whole environment of working and living in terms of the motor car](#).’ Town layouts became increasingly expansive and car-oriented, emphasizing regional connectivity and freedom of individual travel. If a resident didn’t like their nearest town centre, planners

believed they should be able to easily drive to one they [preferred](#).

Public health, too, was increasingly reframed as an issue of individual behaviour and therapeutics. From 1979, social and welfare services within the new towns began facing cutbacks. Profits from the new towns were channelled back to the Treasury, rather than locally [reinvested](#). Small-scale neighbourhood amenities and recreation began to disappear. The social and environmental conditions that had underpinned the new towns’ health ambitions became increasingly difficult to sustain. Urban planning became further uncoupled from its public health foundations.

In the decades since, these shifts have had lasting effects on the form and function of the new towns. Even today, many of the late-generation new towns remain among the most car-dependent areas in the UK, with Milton Keynes and Peterborough often topping the [list](#). This dependency is not simply a consequence of size—indeed, the country’s largest cities are also the least car dependent. Rather, the planning priorities have increasingly organised housing, employment, and services across wider spatial scales, making the private car central to everyday life in many planned towns across the UK.

The legacy of the New Towns experiment remains mixed. On one hand, the new towns represent some of the most ambitious attempts to design health into the built environment; on the other, their long-term trajectories have exposed significant limitations and inequalities. The early new towns reflect many of the best practices that are today associated with positive health outcomes: walkability, ample green spaces, recreation, and community building. Later generations of new towns prioritised scale and car usage, forgoing a collective health perspective for individualised health management and a focus on economic development.

However, almost all of the new towns were designed for young, economically active individuals—not the burgeoning population of over-65s who have aged in place. And as the demographic landscape has changed, the prevailing health challenges look different too. Even design solutions intended for public health have sometimes paved the way for new forms of unhealthy towns, exacerbated by increasing market dependency and individualization. Early zoning and low-density housing, for example, aimed to protect residents from Victorian-era pollution and disease, but later entrenched the dispersed, car-dependent landscapes contributing to social isolation and [chronic illness](#). While these effects were initially mitigated by local services, later cuts to public funding and reduced reinvestment have eroded many neighbourhood amenities and town centres.

Entering the 21st century, a range of initiatives have sought to reintegrate health into town planning discourse. From the UK Healthy Cities and Towns [network](#) to the NHS Healthy [New Towns programme](#), these initiatives recognise the importance of place-making in improving health outcomes. However, the emphasis often remains on downstream interventions: behaviour change, education, and disease management. Solutions include designing ‘dementia-friendly’ infrastructure, encouraging improved health education in schools, and facilitating online GP appointments to manage health from home. While these interventions are important for managing individual health, a return to a prevention-focused, holistic approach to public wellbeing will prove essential in addressing the root causes of today’s health [crises](#).

More recently, AI and smart technologies are transforming the field of urban planning, able to compute the increasingly complex data sets of our increasingly complicated urban realities. These technologies may facilitate a smoother reintegration of health and planning: already, deep learning models are analysing the built environment features that contribute to improved health outcomes, monitoring urban air quality, and optimising public transport [systems](#). Their precise and data-driven insights are being used by policymakers around the world to better inform planning decisions and support targeted public health [interventions](#).

However, as we yield expanding authority to these technological solutions, the lessons of Britain’s planned towns may be more relevant than ever. While AI provides invaluable quantitative knowledge of urban systems, it will not diminish the importance of qualitative factors in policymaking and governance. An overemphasis on technological efficiency and optimisation may risk marginalising public participation and the social values that underpin healthy places, raising questions of transparency, bias, and [equity](#). Alternatively, when humans and health are prioritised—as we’ve seen in the past—technological innovation can be harnessed to support healthier, happier, and more resilient communities.

Revisiting the history of Britain’s planned towns and villages reminds us that healthy places have never been the product of planning tools alone. The priorities that guide our future towns may shape health outcomes as much as the physical forms they produce. These planned communities demonstrate how health can be embedded within planning and governance, while also revealing the risks of path dependency when settlements fail to adapt to changing social, demographic, and health needs. Moreover, even the most well-intentioned towns cannot sustain or adapt their health-promoting qualities without continued governance, local reinvestment, and long-term political commitment.



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Imagined Community: Is Village Life Just a Dream for People in Modern Towns and Cities?

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Village life: chatting to neighbours, bumping into wall while surrounded by beautiful nature. It sounds idyllic, like a dream, even – but maybe that’s all it is. Does this kind of traditional village community exist anymore? If it does, does it still make for a desirable way of life in today’s world? This scoping review details some ways in which the social function of historic settlements can influence and be adapted to produce newer, often larger modern developments. From aspects of their physical design to their use of new technologies, traditional village communities offer valuable guidance with which we can better develop sustainable, connected, and community-focused modern lives.

Traditional village life has long influenced urban design theory, often for what are said to be its desirable innate qualities – ‘[security, sociability and economic purpose](#)’. Focusing within these on sociability, there are [four main concepts](#) that have been used to foster a village-like sense of community in larger new settlements, often through the designed area’s physical geography: com-

munity attachment, for example through ownership of land; community identity – through feeling that the place you live is unique, significant, and cohesive; social interaction – through formal and informal, planned and unplanned meetings with others; and pedestrianism – the neighbourhood being walkable and connected. In these ways, small settlements offer useful social frameworks for new developments, which can in turn bridge the gap between the traditional way of life and the modern world.

Similarly, [a study of two suburbs of Houston, Texas](#) exemplifies the social value of these design principles, with particular focus on connection between indoor and outdoor life through front porches, green sidewalks, and pedestrian trails leading to open nature. Clearly, the social and physical structures of the traditional small settlement are useful in developing connected and healthy modern communities. However, what both these studies also note is the importance of choice and control over where one lives – those that live in the less



connected, less community-driven areas in Maryland may value more privacy and space. Having a say over where you live, it seems, is one of the most important aspects of modern living.

In a similar vein, [Stuart Hodkinson](#) highlights the importance of a shared sense of choice and control over where and how people live, in both old and new settlements. He details how the introduction of enclosure in the early modern world led to diminished ‘common’ land, and, as a result, ‘the extinction of the village community’. Not only does Hodkinson demonstrate the importance of shared open space in fostering social interaction (not to mention its economic and environmental benefits), he also queries the widespread nostalgia surrounding village life. In reality, after enclosure it was defined by strict social hierarchy, privatisation, and ultimately a lack of control. Therefore, he queries the legacy of this feudalism that still underpins many modern neighbourhood developments literally built in the shadow of the big house, company, or landowner

that funded them. In light of this, Hodkinson highlights the importance of producing ‘urban commons’, in which the city and other modern neighbourhoods function as accessible, shared resource pools and spaces of sociality – fostering social interaction through physical space. [A study of community gardens](#) in urban and rural areas of New York state exemplify the social, economic, and environmental benefits of ‘commons’; in fact, people recorded greater social benefits in urban areas than rural, perhaps due to more intentional use of the spaces as means for interaction and cohesion.

This concept of the ‘commons’ points also to the importance of democratic control of neighbourhoods. [A study of the Island of Gigha in Scotland](#) demonstrates a turn towards shared ownership and management in a series of smaller rural settlements, as its residents came together to buy their land and set up a community-run management structure. This illustrates the kind of community resilience that small settlements can foster, and that is consolidated by democratic, common ownership of

land. The subsequent installation of a small sustainable wind farm and an increase in population on Gigha highlight the intertwined environmental and economic benefits borne out of positive sociality, clearly endorsing a focus on the [tripartite model](#) (security, sociability, and economic purpose) of village life when developing modern larger settlements.

Finally, then, we must recognize a uniquely modern element of small settlements – use of the internet. Through online platforms, groups, and media, communities are more ‘imagined’ than ever, and yet as a result they are also more real. [A study of two semi-rural Scottish towns](#) demonstrates how, perhaps unexpectedly, the internet is being harnessed to solidify community and civic mindedness, although only most effectively when used in combination with more traditional geographical neighbourhood features – the common green, village hall, and centralised shopping streets. Not only this, but the online community might actually lead to more [egalitarian relationships](#) between members, and function more naturally than traditional real-life village communities due to ‘[underlying human predispositions for relatively loose and fluid social bonds](#).’

Overall, the evidence makes clear that small settlements can offer useful social frameworks for new, bigger developments, particularly in their community connection and resilience that are often bolstered by features of physical geography. However, much evidence also highlights the fact that today’s world requires a move away from the historic, feudalistic systems that often underpin these settlements and their communities – we must ensure that modern developments are rooted in choice and control on an individual level, and, importantly, on a democratic ‘common’ scale.



Conclusion

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This report has addressed a wide range of concerns and opportunities for estate villages as UK society progresses through the current century, and beyond. The key task of taking the best from the past, while positively renewing interdependent rural lives, institutions, and economies, and then balancing this in the context of an age where emerging technologies race onwards with speeds unseen, and unfelt before. Estates often have the advantage of generational learning, allowing investment, stewardship, and ever essential, community-building and engagement to unfold successively.

Authors in this report have pointed toward recognising the intelligence-age village, as a key means to advance not only rural housing and employment, but the wider necessities of enhanced productive and community capacities. Shared production and learning in the midst of, and with new technologies, have been posited as the means to propel people's sense of security, value, connection, and even usefulness in often difficult economic circumstances. Complementary systems of shared ownership and stewardship, over consultation, have been promoted to support community rural businesses

and services, with Community Land Trust often providing pathways to affordable, and accessible housing and infrastructure. Reuse and retrofitting falls further into revisiting ideas of the circular economies at all scales. Re-evaluating the links between 'traditional' and 'modern', assisted by adapted and appropriate emerging technologies are reshaping the ways of building, using the obviousness of clear evidence bases to intervene, and reduce negative environmental impacts.

Perhaps the overall call has been to develop or intervene through the adoption of selective, appropriate technologies, at the local level, and on human terms. Many forms of technology have already, and can continue to reduce the costs of integrated rural development, as well as strengthen the material, and emotional bases of daily rural livelihoods and living. Efficiency alone cannot be the objective for the next century of estate village progress, and the core, timeless question of what type of villages do we want to create collectively remains at the forefront of all sustainable, and sensible concerns.



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