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Engaging in the counter mapping of a place awaiting development and investigating what is at stake, ecologically and culturally, in the production of large-scale suburban housing.

This was all fields: Ecological value, cultural value, and volume housing production

Julia Heslop

'This was all fields': something my Gran said to me frequently while looking out of the window of her 1950s bungalow. Her house was new when she bought it, the only one on the street, surrounded by fields. An old prisoner of war camp lay behind the house, which my mum and uncle used to play in. As a child, and still to this day, I remained in awe of this remark. I imagined, and imagine, what the view looked like when you could see for miles. I wonder: who tramped the fields? How did old lanes become roads? What animals and birds used to live here? What grew here? What did the air smell like? What was lost? This last question has been most prominent for me, both in terms of the ecology of the landscape – the hedgerows, birds, scrub, plants, and wildlife, as well as the cultural meanings – the relationship between people and land.

Through a discussion about a place awaiting development, this article asks: what is at stake ecologically and culturally in the production of large-scale, suburban housing? In his renowned book exploring the characteristics of the landscape and how they came to be, historical ecologist Oliver Rackham highlighted the vast change in the British landscape since the Second World War:

> *Except for town expansion, almost every hedge, wood, heath, fen, etc. on the Ordnance Survey large-scale maps of 1870 is still there on the air photographs of 1940. The seventy eventful years between, and even World War II itself, were less destructive than any five years since. Much of England in 1945 would have been instantly recognizable by Sir Thomas More, and some areas would have been recognised by the Emperor Claudius.*[1]

The UK is one of the most biodiversity-depleted countries in the world. The 2023 *State of Nature* report on UK wildlife shows that the species studied have, on average, declined by 19% since monitoring began in 1970.[2] This article probes the link between biodiversity loss, landscape change, and the production of buildings by examining a proposed development for a volume housing estate on greenfield, arable land in North Tyneside [1, 2][3]. The article brings together analysis of the political and economic factors driving development, as well as the cultural, social, and ecological factors at risk, by analysing the landscape pre-development. This is a first step in a ten-year project, which is tracking how this landscape changes pre-, during, and post-development.

A multi-narrative account

What follows is a multi-narrative account of a place awaiting development. It includes diary entries, surveys, policy analysis, creative responses, interviews, and prose. It uses extracts from interviews with thirty-six residents and survey responses sent to over six hundred residents living on the periphery of the proposed development site. In interviews, residents were asked how the area has changed, how they use the fields, what they appreciate about them, what wildlife and plant life they see, and what may be the impacts of new development. The project has also involved bird and plant surveys in collaboration with local naturalists, creative responses, and activities with local schoolchildren. These activities have interweaved physical (ecological, topographical, geological, etc.), historical, institutional (policies, governance processes) and psychological (meanings, memories, stories, spiritual qualities) representations of place, enabling an integrated understanding of what is at stake. In fully understanding the extractive nature of contemporary housing development, there is a need to bring together both a political economy perspective (an understanding of planning policy and urban governance processes/actors) from critical urban studies[4] with a cultural perspective (e.g., a micro-focus on affect and place attachment) from cultural geography and landscape studies.[5] Often these methodological and scholarly approaches don't talk to one another. By bringing them together here, however, I hope to analyse the multifaceted drivers and risks of volume housing developments.

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1 The Murton fields, with Murton Village in the centre of the area.

2 The proposed development. The area shaded in white on the bottom right is already in construction.

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The 'last lung':[6] 'Murton Gap'

As usual on my birthday it's bloody freezing. This morning I've been caught in a hailstorm on the fields. That freezing wind blowing all the way across the fields, across and across to the sea and the wind turbines. I cursed the weather. The weather everywhere. All over me. In my hair, across my legs, right to the tips of my fingers. Weather getting on the camera lens.

I gave up.

I sheltered in some scrubby bushes. The place is full with rubble rubbish, piles of stones from a broken wall, an old milk bottle – rinse and return (it was never returned), a Farm Foods plastic carrier bag. It's an edgeland landscape.

Violence has happened here. Violence happens here. The trees and bushes have been ripped from their roots. Strands of trunk are snapped in half. But not from the wind. Field margins are burnt and brown from the pesticides that get caught on the wind and spread across the land. This is man-made sorrow.

But things also survive here, make it their home. They survive through it all.

In 2017 North Tyneside Council published a new *Local Plan* for the borough. This set out the Council's policies and proposals to guide planning decisions until 2032. It covers a range of matters, including the number of new homes needed and where they should be located. The Plan set out an initial development proposal for 'Murton Gap', a new estate of over 2,700 houses with a school, 1,000 square metres of retail space, and a new Metro Station across a 240-hectare site.

The 'Gap' is a derogatory term, like the area has always been an empty space, devoid of anything worthwhile, just waiting to be filled by development. It seems to disregard the life and livelihoods that exist and existed here. Colin tells me, 'It's a gap to be filled in. Like it's not important, so the people that live around there don't matter.'[7]

The area is surrounded to the south, west, and east by the established communities of New York, Shiremoor, and Monkseaton *[3]*. The small village of Murton lies near the centre of the area. To the north lies the Metro line and the green belt.[8] The land is farmed by tenant farmers, planting crops including beans, oil seed rape, winter wheat, and ryegrass. It is crossed by numerous well-used paths and public rights of way. Houses will be built across three phases over a fifteen-year period and will cover about half the area, with the rest taken up by Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems and green space. While the development will include some amenities, there is to be no sports, community, or health provision, in an area already hard pressed for these services.



3 **Murton fields looking North to the Cheviot Hills.**

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4 Computer visualisation of a street scene showing low-density housing.

A system going round: volume housebuilding

> [T]*hey've seen land, they've seen profit, and everything else, does it matter?*[9]
>
> [T]*he network of power and influence of the land and property sector affects the whole spectrum of political, cultural and economic issues in the UK.*[10]

Tramping the fields it's easy to forget that these paths, ditches, hedges, and the soil beneath all of it, is owned. Since the Covid pandemic, people walk around every field, not sticking to the rights of way, making ownership seem almost invisible. But the story of landownership here is one of land banking and the monopolisation of housebuilding. It tells a longer story about a feudal system of landownership that still exists in the UK today. Nigel, who lives on the edge of the fields in a small 1960s estate attached to the old mining village of Shiremoor, told me that:

> *When we moved in here it was leasehold. We had to pay ground rent to the Duke* [of Northumberland] [...] *So even though Leech had bought the land* [...] *from the Duke* [...] *they bought the leasehold and they passed that onto you when you bought the house* [...] *to keep control over the land in some way. Keep control, keep their wealth tucked up.*[11]

Nigel highlights that landownership has, and continues to be, a way to exert power, control, and influence.

In 1985 William Leech was bought by the housebuilder C.H. Beazer, which was then bought by Persimmon Homes in 2001 for £612 million. These acquisitions highlight the monopolisation of the housebuilding industry – how 'volume housebuilders' have absorbed dozens of smaller builders and their land banks.[12] In 1960, the ten biggest housebuilders built just 9% of all homes. Now, that share has mushroomed to more than half and looks set to further increase. Small- and medium-sized builders have been effectively squeezed out of the market. These enormous companies are listed on the stock exchange and are closely integrated with the financial sector. They have numerous subsidiaries, including holdings, asset management, construction and manufacturing companies, charitable arms, and more.

Volume housebuilders are not just enabled by having a ready bank of land, built up over long periods of time, and through absorbing the land banks of smaller developers, but through government policy. Housing targets were introduced in the 2012 *National Planning Policy Framework*. Recalling a consultation event, Cath, a resident living on the periphery of the fields said:

> *We were told* [by planning officers] *at the time that* [...] *'the government have told us we have to have a plan because then we can stop the developments and have some control over the development'* [...] [But] *clearly it was to push through the development of various places.*[13]

Councils have to calculate their housing need and then plan to deliver it, identifying sites and timeframes for build-out. All councils must now have a five-year housing and land supply assessment that determines the suitability of land in their area for housing, based on population and employment forecasts *[4]*. North Tyneside Council's *Local Plan* aimed to deliver at least 16,593 homes from 2011/12 to 2031/32, building an average of 790 new homes per year.[14] Many residents feel that the *Local Plan* became less about creating sustainable communities and more about hitting housing targets, and as a strategic housing allocation area, the 'Gap' is worth a lot.

Housing produced by volume housebuilders has been criticised as being a 'race to the bottom' in quality. Commenting on a smaller development going up on one edge of the fields, one resident said:

> *I don't know how you justify the price when they're so quickly built out the poor materials. It's all show. When you go around, knock on walls, it's then you discover they're not that substantial.*[15]

Another continued:

> *They're just wood, plywood, silver paper, insulation, and if you're lucky, a brick or stone face, and if not, cladding. And I wouldn't give yer anything for them. There's nothing in 'em; they are second, third or fourth rate compared to what's already available.*[16]

94% of new build homeowners report at least one defect after their property is complete. The average

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property now comes with as many as 157 defects, up by 96% from 80 in 2005. Over the same period, the price of the average new build home has soared by 44% to £340,936. Archer and Cole found that before the 2008 financial crisis, an average home built by one of the nine biggest housebuilders netted a pre-tax profit of around £30,000.[17] By 2017, that had doubled to more than £62,000, with shareholder dividends rising from £400 million to more than £1.8 billion. Yet the bumper rewards for shareholders and bosses is no reflection of the quality of the product.

> *On the edge of the Gap one housebuilder went first, designing a smaller development to get planning permission through fast. Fenced off from the rest of the fields, a huge ditch surrounds the site on its southern edge where the water is meant to flow off the fields. These fields are known to flood. Walking around the fields one spring evening, John tells me, 'You used to look down here and all you could see was trees. You couldn't see the road. Beautiful.' Huge pieces of Heras fencing separate us from the building site. Diggers break up the earth, piling it onto a dumper truck to be taken away. Where to, I don't know. Soil displaced. Dust flies up and settles on the surface of pools of water that won't go now until the height of the summer. Here the builders put up what John calls 'little tents'. The top soil is removed, sliced off and the ground compacted. John laughs and says, 'And the homeowner comes out and says, 'Oh yes, this is lovely here. I'll have this.' Then the grass in their garden dies in the first year, no matter how much they water it. There's no air, the roots can't grow, it lies dormant. We see a truck coming into the site with materials piled on top. The joists are only a couple of inches thick. John tells me that sometimes the roofs begin to bow between the joists after less than a year. 'They're not built to last', he sighs.*[18]

In all new developments there should be a certain percentage of 'affordable housing' as per local planning policy.[19] In North Tyneside this is set at 25% of the total. However, many housebuilders produce long and complex viability assessments on why building affordable homes would be 'unviable' in terms of achieving profit margins. Residents are not dumb to this situation, as Nigel tells me:

> *Developers have a canny knack of reneging on deals to provide either affordable houses or social housing. You won't find any social housing, which this country needs more desperately than anything else* [...] *they always find a way to move it.*[20]

Gerry, a local resident, bemoaned this 'system going round':

> *They say, 'Five hundred houses, but we want to make more money so we want another thirty houses.' So instead of having 10 metres between houses, they'll cut it down to 5 metres or they'll cut it down so there's just enough room to push a bin through* [...] *instead of getting one hundred social houses you may only get seventy, you may even get less, and by the time the whole system goes around, there'll be no social housing.*[21]

Most residents understood that housing was needed but it was the scale of the development and the type of housing they disliked:

> *I think no one has a problem with* [building houses]. *I think it's the execution of it that people question* [...] *do you have to do it on such a great expanse?*[22]

Many residents seemed confused about 'where these new people are coming from', feeling that the new houses would be too expensive for most local buyers, and especially for first time buyers:

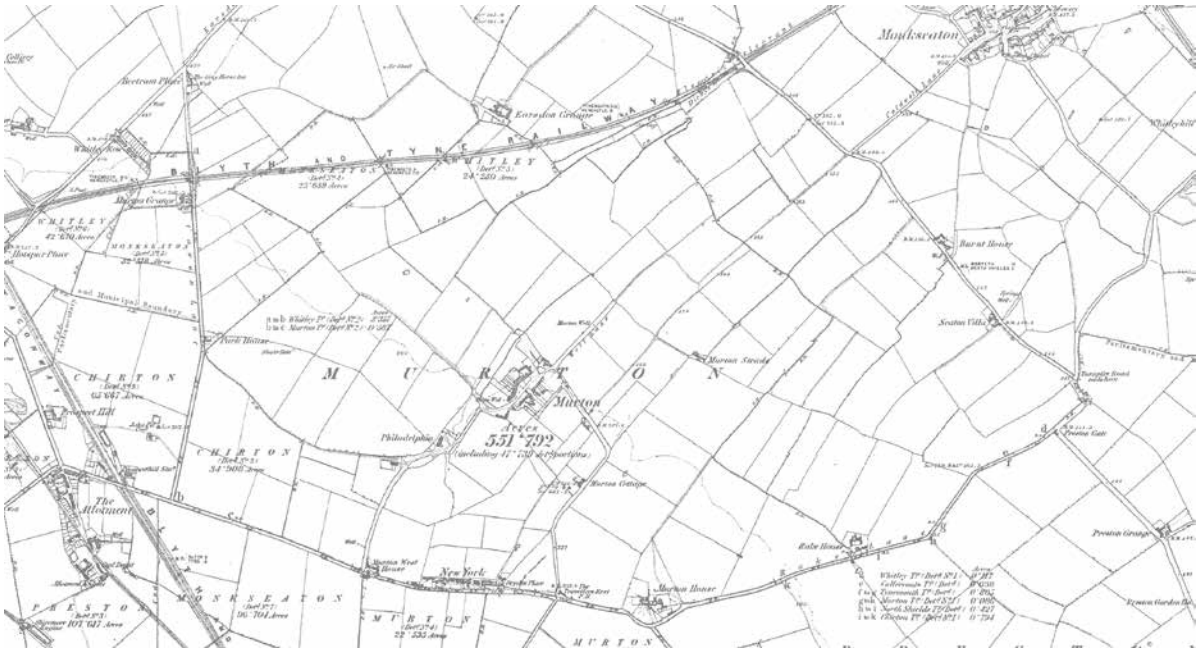
> *To my mind, they should build more social houses, instead of just letting builders come in and put executive type houses in. Not that I call them executive like. They might have three toilets, but that's about the only thing they've got.*
>
> *I can understand the social housing need, because the waiting list for a council house or a council flat is huge, but building houses for £250 grand a pop is not going to solve that problem. People need to get on the property ladder somehow, and that's not the way to do it.*[23]

There is a lack of affordable and social housing, the residents believe, the value of poor quality homes is inflated (with too much profit going to developers/housebuilders) and there is a lack of housing choice. Furthermore, developments lack density, they don't use land efficiently, are not always constructed with net zero targets in mind and seldom building socially sustainable *communities* by failing to include community infrastructure. All the while, volume housebuilders are being enabled by a series of governments fixated on housing targets as the way to drive supply.

Historical attachments

> *In her downstairs flat, Jeanie sat in her wingback chair and unfolded the map* [...] *She traced her finger out over houses and roads, offices and shops – there's the park with the pram, the pitch for the match and the cemetery paths. And back in the middle, the Gap. It looked surrounded, besieged, enwrapped. Where were the crannies, the rigs and furrows? Where were the colours? It looked blank and flat.*[24]
>
> *Leaning forward in his armchair, Gerry looks at me and tells me that once upon a time, 'this was a part of the moor which stretched from the coast way up past Killingworth. And these were just dirt tracks originally, the odd farm building, and that was it. In winter time it was desolate because you haven't got what you've got now.' Gerry tells me about Will-o'-the-wisp. Not just a tale or a story, not just a spirit or ghost light but an actual existence. Born from the gases and light given off by organic substances in the earth. Walking across the bog on the moor at night, the wisp could look like a flickering lantern or a candle in the window of a house. Walking towards it, it vanishes as quickly as it appeared.*[25]

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Murton
Murton
Murton

months there were lakes in that field, top and bottom […] *with water about 2 feet deep.*[28]

One of the most striking things that came up in interviews was how the area has been 'filled in' by development in living memory: 'the bits that would separate the old villages out […] kind of everything's been filled in';[29] 'I mean, it's obviously now a satellite of Newcastle. It used to be a separate entity, and it no longer is';[30] 'So like over the years, you can see, houses gradually just encroaching and encroaching, on all the green space that used to be here and Murton is the last sort of big green space, in North Tyneside I would say.'[31]

Land-as-teacher

On a bright but windy day in April we get on our coats, hats and boots and tramp out into the fields. Each child is given a tote bag with a pencil, crayons, chalks, a clipboard with paper, and a piece of modelling clay flattened and cut into a square tile.

The children take out paper and pencils and look closely at the landscape to draw what they see. They focus on the colours, shapes, and lines. Exploring textures the children press the clay tiles into the surfaces of trees, leaves, and sticks. The tiles end up as landscapes with deep ravines cut into them, tributaries of veins and the soft curves of children's fingers on the back sides. The children write down what they hear: 'It was very quiet, the birds were singing and it was beautiful', 'smashing of puddles, Zach whistling, people stomping, birds tweeting, the wind, the grass getting squished, the train'. Sitting in the field, chomping on carrots, slurping cartons of milk or a snack brought from home, the children put their noses into the air and smell. 'Dog poo', says Eli. 'Flowers, pollen, grass, manure and air', Fatima says. I ask them how they feel about being here. Rosie says, 'It feels special. I feel happy, calm and relaxed. I feel tired and very hot and it is amazing.'

A resident who is planting flowers on the periphery of the fields gives us some broken clay pipes. She tells us that there used to be a small pipe factory on the fields, and when the farmer churns up the fields ready for the next planting they come to the surface. At the edge of one of the fields, where the farmer has ploughed, the children find bits of broken crockery and shells. Blue and white patterns, chunks of dishes and what look like oyster shells. I am later told by Nigel that people once lived on oysters because they were cheap, and the shells went into the midden which was then emptied onto the field as fertiliser.

Bags heavy with found objects, drawings, and clay tiles the children bound back to school ready for dinner.

Raffan discusses how the land may act as a teacher in shaping perceptions of place *[7]*.[32] Exploring the fields through the senses, and acknowledging the cognitive and emotional aspects of landscape, was vital to understanding how people attach to the fields. This project used a range of methods to undertake a deep study of the landscape, which involved walking, documenting (through film, photography, and painting), and surveying. Working with three Fine Art students, I took four groups of fifteen children – eight- and nine-year-olds – out on a 'sensory walk' from Langley First School, which overlooks the fields, to look, listen, and sense the landscape. Back at school we then looked at old maps and pinpointed where the school and their homes were, and discussed what might have been there before they were built. This helped the children to imagine landscape change over time. Using the drawings and clay tiles they had made on the walk, they created monoprints representing the various textures and characteristics of the landscape *[8, 9]*.

Experiencing the landscape in a grounded, everyday way is clearly important for local people. Stories were told about how, 'it can be pretty wild here because you get all the weather coming this way',[33] how in the winter the waning sun casts long shadows across the earth, and in the full summer the haybales are lit with the 'golden kiss' of the long sunny evenings, as Denise told me:

Everything comes to you. You start to notice, in an evening, the sun over there, comes straight across those fields, and there's nothing to stop it. It just comes parallel into the garden and into the house. And even if you don't want to say, 'Wow, look at that', you can't help it.[34]

These are almost numinous connections to place: awe-inspiring experiences or feelings that transcend the rational, as Raffan discusses.[35] 'Numinous' attachments are the spiritual bonds between people and place. As Steve said, recalling his physical engagements with the fields: 'We've been known to stop and just put a hand on a tree, just to sort of feel, perhaps at one with another living creature.'[36] This highlights an attachment for more-than-human nature that is not always easy to describe. There was also an inability from some people to fully describe the feeling the landscape gives:

I think living adjacent to somewhere like that has an effect on you. It almost, em, I don't know what the word is, it's sort of gets inside you without you realising it.[37]

7 **Children drawing on the fields.**



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One cold dewy morning on the fields the mist is just burning off the land. The rising sun amplifying the haze. A fox runs across my path, first sauntering away and then getting up some pace. Crows pick at the fields, feeding. Peck, peck, peck. I take my brush and paint a sienna stroke across the page. And then some ochre, umber, and cadmium. As the sun comes up I reach for the cobalt and ultramarine, watered down with water. I draw the lines, all perspective leading my eye into the distance. Lines next to lines next to lines. A perfect geometry of nature. Or rather the perfect geometry of the seed drill.



8

Sometimes words are not an adequate mechanism for communicating a feeling or an experience of place. Coupled with the school walks and workshops, over the last year I have extensively documented the area through film, photography, painting, *[10]* and drawing to show the seasonal changes of the landscape before it is altered forever.

Skylarks at the end of the street

Then a rabbit ran past, a lapwing, a swallow, a linnet, a jackdaw, a pippet, a blackcap, that chiff-chaff. Jeanie threw her shoulders back and she heard it in her head, his laugh. In all the bird-whizzing, fox-scamming, rabbit-thumping, toad-jumping, weasel-weaseling menagerie of the Gap.[38]

The Murton Fields are home to an array of birds and other wildlife. The small scrubby sections that have been left to grow up and the hedgerows and field margins that the farmer gets subsidies for under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), are important areas of wildlife habitat.[39] Stories of the wildlife, past and present were a common feature in conversations with residents. Living in an urban edgeland, 'on the edge of the countryside', as one resident said, makes you feel you are 'more connected to the seasons, and the rhythms of the landscape and the wildlife.'[40] Tony recalls a pheasant called Fred who used to come into the kitchen to be fed.[41] Sam tells us that the redwings come tumbling in, falling out of the sky in the winter.[42] Cath says she'll miss

the smells from the fields […] *the little beasties* […] *little black flies. Wheat flies, or corn flies. It's always on a hot day when you want your windows open and you can't open them* […] *I will miss them, cause that's part of* […] *the seasons.*[43]



9

8 Pressing leaves into a clay tile to explore the textures of the fields.

9 Children drawing with found materials.

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10

10 **Julia Heslop, *Gap*, Watercolour on paper, 2024.**

An area in the far north-east of the site, called Dickey's Holm, once a smallholding and since left to go wild, is a particularly vibrant area for birdlife as residents noted: 'the amount of birds in there, it's amazing, it's a real wildlife haven […] there's a cacophony of bird song in there. You see birds in there that you don't see around the rest of the area.'[44]

> *That is the magic place of all magic places. That place is just unbelievable for birds, particularly for migrant species that come in the summer so Chiff Chaff, Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Whitethroat.*[45]

The skylarks, one of the many red listed birds that have seen a recent and drastic decline across the UK, use the fields. From the 1970s to the 1990s, as a result of agricultural intensification, the UK's skylark population has declined by 60%.[46] As a farmland species, skylarks rely on a large range of forage. Open areas, such as arable land and grassland enable them to fly up to 300 metres, allowing sightings of predators from high above. Residents spoke about living with these birds in an everyday way, hearing them at the bottom of the street, as 'you're putting the washing out'[47]: when they're 'just whistling and singing away, it's just magical.'[48] As Nigel says, 'we should give it more protection',[49] while Sam, a local naturalist, was real to the possibility that 'we'll lose most of them from the site.'[50] At the same time this is a landscape that is not well managed, as Fred said:

> *If I'm honest, a lot of it's a bit man-made, isn't it? You know, the farmers, they dig the crops up and then they replant and they plough and what have you, so it's industrial farmland, that's what I call it.*[51]

At one time these fields would have grown vegetables, but are now a monoculture of rye grass and cereal crops, as Jim recalled:

> *There used to be a farm shop on Rake Lane, bordering these fields, where everybody used to go for the fresh produce, because it was all locally grown when I came here. They were still picking spuds and cabbages there, and then gradually the vegetable sections disappeared and it became rye grass.*[52]

The ecological appraisal completed to support the planning application states that, while 'the hedgerows within the Site are generally species-poor and poorly managed, they form part of a wider habitat network where this habitat provides the only habitat linkages in an otherwise impoverished landscape.'[53] This 'impoverished landscape' is largely a product of intensive agriculture, from the loss of mixed farming to the extensive use of pesticides *[11]*. As one resident stated, 'the fields are quite ecologically barren really. They're not farmed sensitively.'[54] A large field margin on the east of the site has been left for wildlife, but is burnt and brown from the pesticides sprayed on the crops, swept along by the wind. As Sam said, 'This was wheat, and you know what they do to wheat to ripen it? They spray it with glyphosate and it's wind drifted and killed all the grass. Is this responsible farming?'[55]

As discussed above, residents could also offer the long view of how the area had changed ecologically,

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highlighting the wildlife that used to be seen at a time of pasture farming:

> *Other birds that used to be in this area like lapwings and plovers, you don't see any of them anymore. The lapwings lived on grassland* […] *which the farms had at the time 'cause a lot of the farms had dairy herds and things like that. It's a sad thing.*[56]
>
> *We used to see hares. In February, March time you'd walk round the fields and see maybe three, four hares boxing, what they call March Hares, when they start to mate and they start to fight. You never see any hares, none whatsoever 'cause they're all gone.*[57]
>
> *As a young kid up here, there used to be every little bird you could imagine, chaffinches, hawfinches, greenfinches, linnets, skylarks. This year, I only counted about three pair of skylarks. We used to have millions here* […] *I don't know where, just gone.*[58]

These accounts are important because they offer a long-term trajectory of change that cannot be given by a 'one spot' or 'one time' survey completed by an ecological consultant. Instead they present a picture of the fields as the area has become encroached with housing and as farming methods have changed. As John, a longtime resident of Murton stated, 'All the wildlife is being squeezed. Closer and closer and smaller places […] they've got nowhere to go.'[59]

Counter mapping

The decline in species numbers across the fields means that the ecological baseline is already low. Some residents feel that the current ecological condition of the fields has helped to drive development, because the fields weren't seen as being ecologically important. As with all developments of this size, many reports have been undertaken to support the planning application, including an Ecological Survey, Wintering and Breeding Bird Surveys, an Environmental Impact Assessment, reports on Cultural Heritage, Archaeology, and many more.[60] The loss of habitat for ground nesting, red listed species such as the golden plover, skylark, grey partridge, and others is planned to be compensated for elsewhere, on three sites in the nearby county of Northumberland, funded through 'biodiversity net gain' (BNG) or biodiversity offsetting. This is designed to compensate for losses in biodiversity, ensuring that when a development damages nature (and this cannot be avoided or mitigated) new nature sites will be created. Increasingly BNG is delivered offsite, often miles from the development. The problems of this are highlighted by John when speaking about the grey partridge on the fields:

> *You cannot move partridge from one site to another, it just doesn't work. They're sort of territorial, they stay on the same plot of land where they're born and bred sort of thing, so they're all gonna go.*[61]

The Murton fields are themselves a mitigation area for the golden plover from a previous development elsewhere in the borough. This means that the proposed development at Murton will destroy the mitigation area and attempt to recreate it on another



11 Field margins damaged by pesticide use.

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site, highlighting the lack of legal protection and failed mitigation in some cases. Apostolopoulou and Adams note how offsetting treats the more-than-human as ecological 'commodities' allowing 'planning decisions to be streamlined to support extended urbanisation […] contribut[ing] to foreclosing public debate about controversial urban development projects.'[62] Furthermore, by providing BNG offsite local people also lose out, needing to travel to other open spaces (probably by car), which in turn may place significant strains on other (often protected) areas.

I was interested in how the narrative of the Council, developers, and consultants might be countered, not only by highlighting the cultural meaning of the fields, but also by providing evidence of the wildlife and plant life in this area that is being overlooked or merely moved elsewhere. I was especially interested in the practice of 'counter mapping': a term first used by Pelusoto describe mapping work that challenges maps/surveys made by governments and corporate authorities.[63] From winter 2023 until winter 2024, local resident and naturalist Sam Fisher undertook five surveys plus extra wintering and breeding bird surveys for the project. Sam has birded here for ten years. Through these surveys he found an array of birds on site, noting the red and amber listed species at risk, as this excerpt from the June survey highlights:

> *A total of 38 bird species were recorded on or over the site. A broad selection of farmland and common garden and edge land species was noted, with breeding territories well distributed across the Murton Gap site.* […] *Of the total number of species observed, ten are red listed (26%) and fourteen are amber listed (37%) birds of conservation concern.*[64]

Alongside this, we undertook sound recordings of birdlife at dawn and dusk with writer/composer Martin Heslop. Residents and I undertook a botany walk around the fields accompanied by naturalist James Common *[12]*. The species recorded on the walk thrive on the field margins due to nutrient enrichment from fertiliser. Many species are adapted to farmland life and field margins provide an important habitat. Some of the plants we recorded enjoy disturbed ground – when soil is cultivated seeds lying deep in the soil are stirred up and given chance to grow. The quick sprouting varieties are often at advantage such as redshank, scarlet pimpernel, and ribbed melilot. Ribbed melilot fixes nitrogen in the soil, improving soil fertility and health. It is also used to 'clean' soils contaminated by dioxins. Hedgerow plants provide a vital food source for birds, and as woodland has disappeared, many small animals have adapted to living in and around them. While none of these plants found are 'rare', they contribute to a vital assemblage of arable plants, cultivating habitats that contribute to biodiversity.

These 'counter' or 'citizen surveying' activities become a vital source of evidence for tracking what stays, and what goes, on these fields as they are developed in the coming years. They also provide an alternative narrative with regards to what exists in the fields, and the value this holds. These surveys, interview excerpts, and archival research have been brought together into a printed 'Field Guide', which serves as an appreciation of the area before it's gone.[65]

12 **Botany walk with naturalist James Common on the fields.**



12

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Multifaceted and multi-narrative accounts

It's just a shame for those who are to come because, you see, you cannot get it back once it's gone.[66]

What they're spoiling [...] can never be returned.[67]

In this article I have highlighted the need for more multifaceted and multi-narrative accounts of what is at stake with regards to the production of volume housing projects. These narratives take into account the political and economic drivers of development. They also offer an embedded approach to examining what cultural and ecological elements are at risk. These cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. Instead, there is a need to build a holistic picture of housing production from a range of perspectives, both human and more-than-human, both political-economic and cultural, using a range of sources and approaches, both creative and scientific.

This project highlights the need to rethink value and care in the production of housing. As humans there is a need to internalise nature: not to think of it as 'out there', but to understand we are part of it. If people – citizens, councils, or housing developers – begin with this conviction, then the questions and solutions that are proposed with regards to planning decisions, will and must change. Philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood argued that there is a need to break down the dualism between humans and other species, challenging the dualist narrative of mind-matter, which allocates all mind to humans, and leaves the more-than-human as mere matter.[68] Social theorist Murray Bookchin, meanwhile, ecologised a socialist critique of the hierarchical order of society, linking the capitalist 'grow-or-die imperative' with ecological crises.[69] These worldviews align with that of many people I interviewed. The sense of the more-than-human nature having intrinsic value, which should not and could not be subsumed by notions of economic growth and value.

On the basis of this research, it seems clear that ecological threat and damage must become a central thread running through housing production. While BNG offers a method for ensuring that there is some protection for biodiversity, there are clearly difficulties with the method's effectiveness. Indeed, further ethical issues arise when bringing more-than-human nature into an economic framing.

To extend the methods I have used here, there is need for an ongoing evidence base to track what ecological, social, and cultural change occurs as a result of development over decades. This would provide a much-needed 'long view' of landscape change. Citizen and counter surveying could offer one approach.

One rewarding area offering some hope, is the 'rights of nature' legal framework.[70] This prioritises the intrinsic rights of nature and the undeniable inter-connection between the human and more-than-human world. If enacted, it would give governments the legal authority, and indeed a responsibility, to enforce rights on behalf of ecosystems. There is already a small movement examining how building production and planning could be impacted by such an approach.[71] Valuing, rather than damaging, more-than-human nature – and recognising that all life and all ecosystems are deeply intertwined – must clearly become a priority for the production of housing, and associated housing policies. As Kenny, a local resident and keen birdwatcher said, once land is developed it is unlikely to be returned:

Keep it. Keep it. It's the last bit. We've got no more and you'll never get it back.[72]

Notes

1. Oliver Rackham, *A History of the Countryside* (1986; repr. London: Phoenix. 2000), p. 26.
2. State of Nature Partnership, *State of Nature* (London: State of Nature Partnership, 2023), p. 4.
3. In the UK, so-called greenfield is land that has not previously been built on, whereas brownfield land has had previous development.
4. See Neil Brenner, 'What is Critical Urban Theory?', *City*, 13:2–3 (2010), 198–207; Vanesa Castán Broto and Enora Robin, 'Towards a Postcolonial Perspective on Climate Urbanism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 45:5 (2021), 869–78; David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso Books, 2016).
5. See Owain Jones, '"Not Promising a Landfall ...": An Autotopographical Account of Loss of Place, Memory and Landscape', *Environmental Humanities*, 6:1 (2015), 1–27;

   Maria Lewica, 'Place Attachment: How Far have We Come in the Last 40 Years?', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 31:3 (2011), 207–30; Emma Waterton, 'More-than-Representational Landscapes', in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. by Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, Mick Atha (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 91–101; John Wylie, 'Landscape and Phenomenology', in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. by Howard, Thompson, Waterton, Atha, pp. 72–83.
6. A description of the proposed development site spoken by a resident in an interview, 2 July 2024.
7. Interview with a resident, 21 July 2023.
8. Green Belts are defined in the UK as areas on the periphery of some urban areas that are protected from most forms of development.
9. Interview with a resident, 2 July 2024.
10. Michael Edwards, *Prospects for Land, Rent and Housing in UK Cities* (London: Foresight, Government Office for Science, 2015), p. 8.
11. Interview with a resident, 4 July 2024.
12. See Bob Colenutt, *The Property Lobby: The Hidden Reality behind the Housing Crisis* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), p. 28 for a list of housebuilder mergers.
13. Interview with a resident, 30 July 2024.
14. North Tyneside Council, *North Tyneside Local Plan* (Newcastle upon Tyne: North Tyneside Council, 2017), p. 74.

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15. Interview with a resident, 15 July 2024.
16. Ibid.
17. Tom Archer and Ian Cole, 'The Financialisation of Housing Production: Exploring Capital Flows and Value Extraction among Major Housebuilders in the UK', *Housing and the Built Environment*, 36 (2021), 1367–87.
18. Interview with a resident, 21 July 2023.
19. Housing for sale or rent, which is at least 20% below local market rates. In many areas, because of inflated market prices, it is not necessarily 'affordable' to all.
20. Interview with a resident, 4 July 2024.
21. Interview with a resident, 15 July 2024.
22. Interview with a resident on 30 July 2024.
23. Interview with a resident on 28 June 2024.
24. Extract from Martin Heslop, *A Nursery Rhyme for Murton Gap* (2024).
25. Interview with a resident, 15 July 2024.
26. Interview with a resident, 29 July 2024.
27. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
28. Interview with a resident, 4 July 2024.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31 . 32 James Raffan, 'The Experience of Place: Exploring Land as Teacher', *Journal of Experiential Education*, 16:1 (1993), 39–45.
33. Interview with a resident, 23 July 2024.
34. Ibid.
35. James Raffan, 'The Experience of Place: Exploring Land as Teacher', *Journal of Experiential Education*, 16:1 (1993), pp. 39–45.
36. Interview with a resident, 15 July 2024.
37. Conversation with an ex-resident who grew up on the edges of the fields in the 1960s, 21 March 2024.
38. Extract from Heslop, *A Nursery Rhyme for Murton Gap*.
39. The SFI pays farmers and land managers to take up sustainable farming and land management practices that protect the environment and support food production.
40. Interview with a resident, 5 July 2024.
41. Conversation with a resident, 21 October 2023.
42. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
43. Interview with a resident, 30 July 2024.
44. Interview with a resident, 4 July 2024.
45. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
46. British Trust for Ornithology, Biodiversity Loss and the UK's Birds' <https://www.bto.org/learn/about-birds/articles/biodiversity-loss-uks-birds> [accessed 12 June 2025].
47. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
48. Interview with a resident, 5 July 2023.
49. Interview with a resident, 4 July 2023.
50. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
51. Interview with a resident, 14 June 2024.
52. Interview with a resident, 23 July 2023.
53. Stantec, *Murton Park, North Tyneside Environmental Statement, Chapter 13: Biodiversity* (London: Stantec, 2023), p. 66.
54. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 6 October 2023.
55. Conversation with local naturalist and resident, 21 November 2023.
56. Interview with a resident, 28 June 2023.
57. Interview with a resident, 28 June 2023.
58. Interview with a resident, 29 July 2023.
59. Interview with a resident, 28 June 2023.
60. This is a tool used to assess the effects of a development on the environment.
61. Interview with a resident, 28 June 2023.
62. Evangelia Apostolopoulou and William M. Adams, 'Biodiversity Offsetting and Conservation: Reframing Nature to Save it', *Oryx*, 51:1 (2017), 23–31 (p. 215).
63. Nancy L. Peluso, 'Whose Woods are These? Counter-Mapping Forest Territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia', *Antipode*, 27:4 (1995), 383–406.
64. Sam Fisher, *Summer Bird Survey* (2024).
65. Please contact the author if you require a digital or printed copy.
66. Interview with a resident, 30 July 2023.
67 Ibid.
68. Val Plumwood, 'Deep Ecology, Deep Pockets, and Deep Problems: A Feminist Ecosocialist Analysis', in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. by Eric Katz, Andrew Light, David Rothenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), pp. 60–81.
69. Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980); Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2005).
70. Emily Jones, 'Posthuman International Law and the Rights of Nature', *Posthuman Legalities,* 12 (2021), 82–101.
71. See Yettie Gram, Elsabe Fourie, Sarah Marshall, *Exploring Urban Rights for Nature: Possibility, Praxis, Pathways* (Vancouver: West Coast Environmental Law and the University of British Colombia, 2021).
72. Interview with a resident, 29 July 2023.

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