

“24 Square Miles”

“Can anything be done to preserve the amenities of the countryside and the beauty of the rural scene, so that the destruction and the desecration arising from want of thought, from lack of taste, or from the pursuit of profit, which were spreading through the country on an ever increasing scale in the years before the war, may be brought under control?”

Reading the first four lines, this could be an extract from a mission statement for the Mid-Cherwell Plan until the mention of “war”. In fact, it is part of the introduction to “Country Planning” first published in 1944, a government paper which was transposed to the screen in 1946 in the form of “24 Square Miles” and played by SAVA to a full village hall in April. The film was not the only draw. Royston Kinch provided a compelling extra feature in expanding upon farming life at the time the film was produced. Both the film and Royston’s talk recalled a time and way of life that seems to have only recently disappeared but which has left behind enough traces to evoke a wistful longing for something that has been lost.

Steeple Aston was not itself shown, the 24 square miles in question being delimited to a single square on the Ordnance Survey Map to the south-west of Banbury, stretching to Chipping Norton in one direction and Deddington in the other. But there was no mistaking the similarities in the character of the featured villages like Barford St. John and South Newington. In the former, the chain-smoking Albert Woolgrove of Mead Farm outlined the changes he had seen and the considerable threats he viewed in the future to his mixed farm (threats which no longer included his German former POW farm hand called Adolph!)

Royston was able to offer a riveting commentary on stills from the film, pointing out the intricacies of harnessing the horses to pull and secure carts whilst identifying the crops and time of year even from grainy black and white film. He supplemented these with his own collection of photographs and farming hardware, inviting the audience to guess at their uses. Particularly fascinating was the photo of the old pump from Manor Farm with its many channels ingeniously devised to serve the farm’s requirements.

The 1944 book “Country Planning” was the work of a group of academics at the Oxford Agricultural Economics Research Institute under the leadership of Charles Stewart Orwin. The intention was to plan for a post-war Britain when it was hoped the fruits of victory in the war would be shared by those living in rural areas, echoing Lloyd George’s call in 1918 to provide “a home fit for heroes”. The subsequent film, “24 Square Miles” was made to reach a wider audience through the cinema.

Agriculture was not the only activity under scrutiny. The book and film also comprehensively covered issues about employment, housing, recreation, education and local government. Consequently we saw contemporary footage of kitchens, schoolrooms, pubs and village halls with darts, dancing and debating.

The comparison with today was not lost on the audience. Rising house prices, the absence of poverty, improved road and rail links attracting commuters, the emergence of Cotswold chic in the form of the Daylesford effect have changed the character of the area considerably but problems of poor infrastructure, the “want” of affordable housing and the loss of countryside as highlighted in the Mid-Cherwell plan and “24 Square Miles”, remain.

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