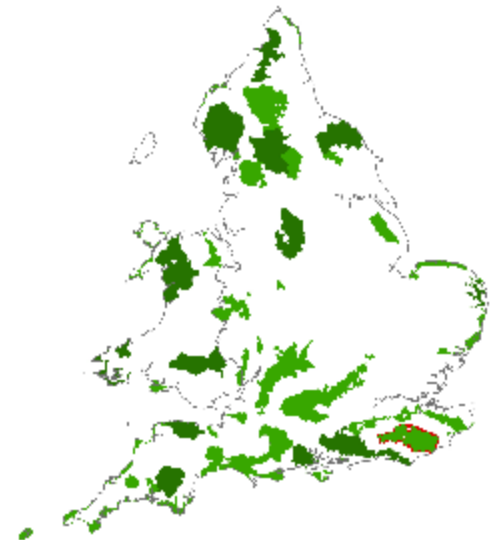


Cultural landscapes and rewilding

A UK Protected Landscape perspective

Dr Sally Marsh

Co-Director High Weald National Landscape Partnership



Cultural landscapes v rewilding?

Cultural landscapes:

‘The combined works of nature and man’ UNESCO 2023

But 80 years ago what we now call cultural landscapes were considered to be the **natural countryside** of Britain



6 July 2023

Agroecological farming vs rewilding session at the Oxford Real Farming Conference 2024

‘... positions have been polarised... there are two positions: land sharing in which biodiversity is part of agroecological farming, and land sparing in which people are packed together in one place and the land around is given over to rewilding’

(landforwhatlandforwhom.org)





UK Protected Landscapes are all cultural landscapes

In 1949, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act sought to protect the best examples of 'natural' (traditional) countryside

Policy makers were well aware that no part of the UK is truly wild

At the time these areas were considered by policy makers and scientists to be:

- the best examples of different types of cultural landscape
- of high scientific interest - **the most biodiverse and bio-abundant at a landscape scale (wrapping around SSSIs and NNRs)**
- associated with distinctive cultures, customs, language, buildings, or traditional practices

(This combination of qualities was termed natural beauty. These areas were designated to conserve and enhance natural beauty)



How did these areas remain so rich in nature into the early 20 century?

Central province (*light blue*)
Village landscapes and open field systems



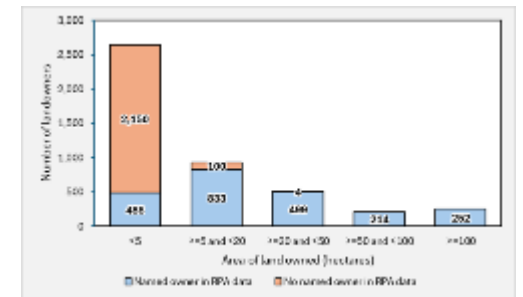
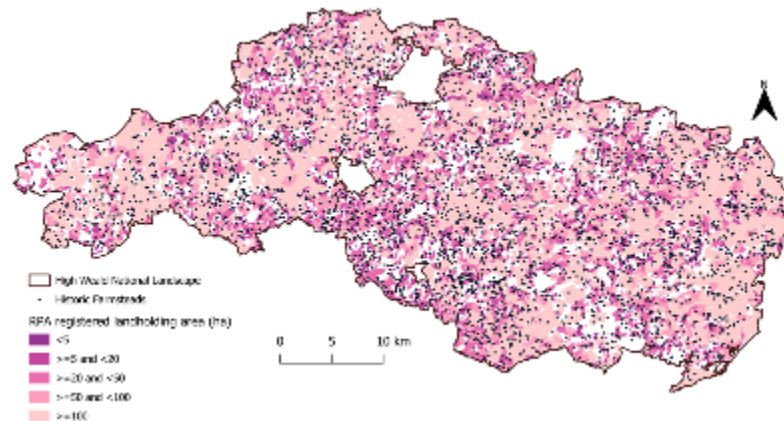
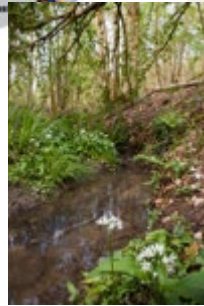
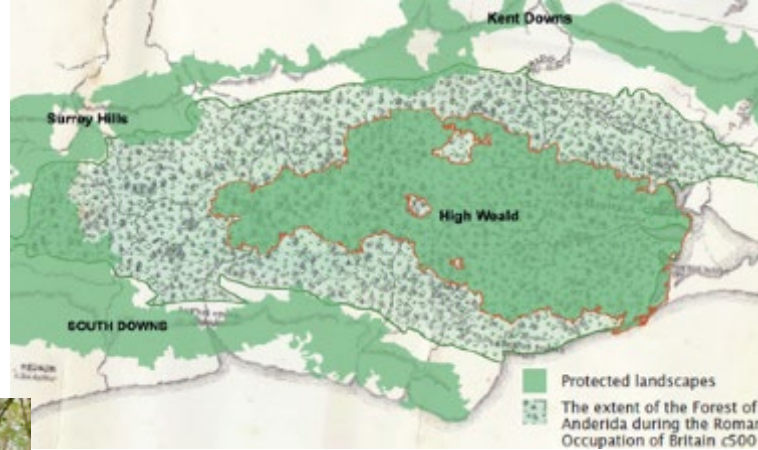
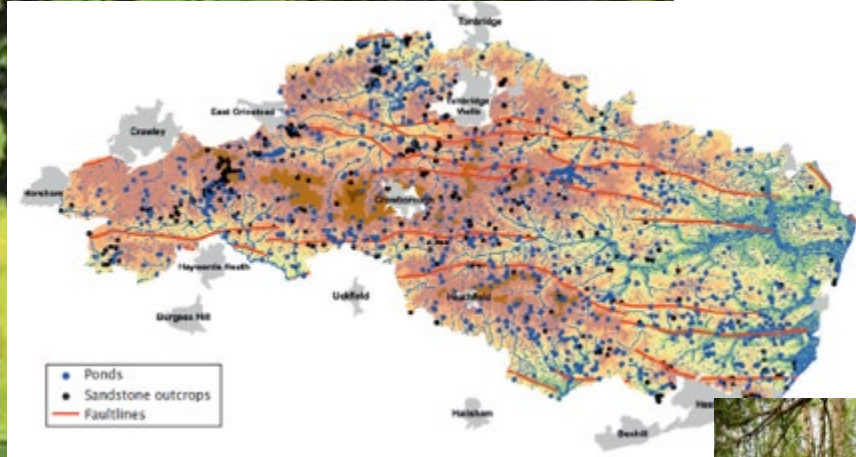
Landscapes of dispersed historic settlement (*dark blue*)
Isolated farmsteads and hamlets surrounded by their own fields interspersed with rough land and woodland



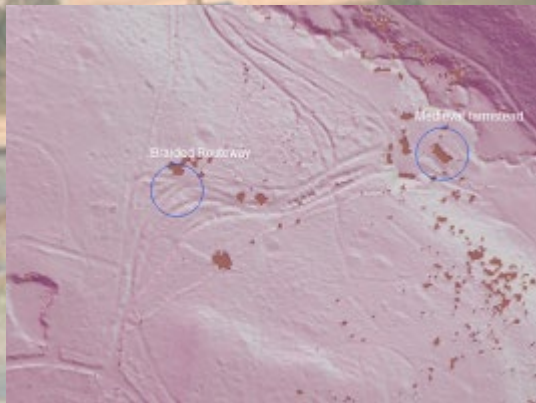
 National Landscape (AONB)
 National Park



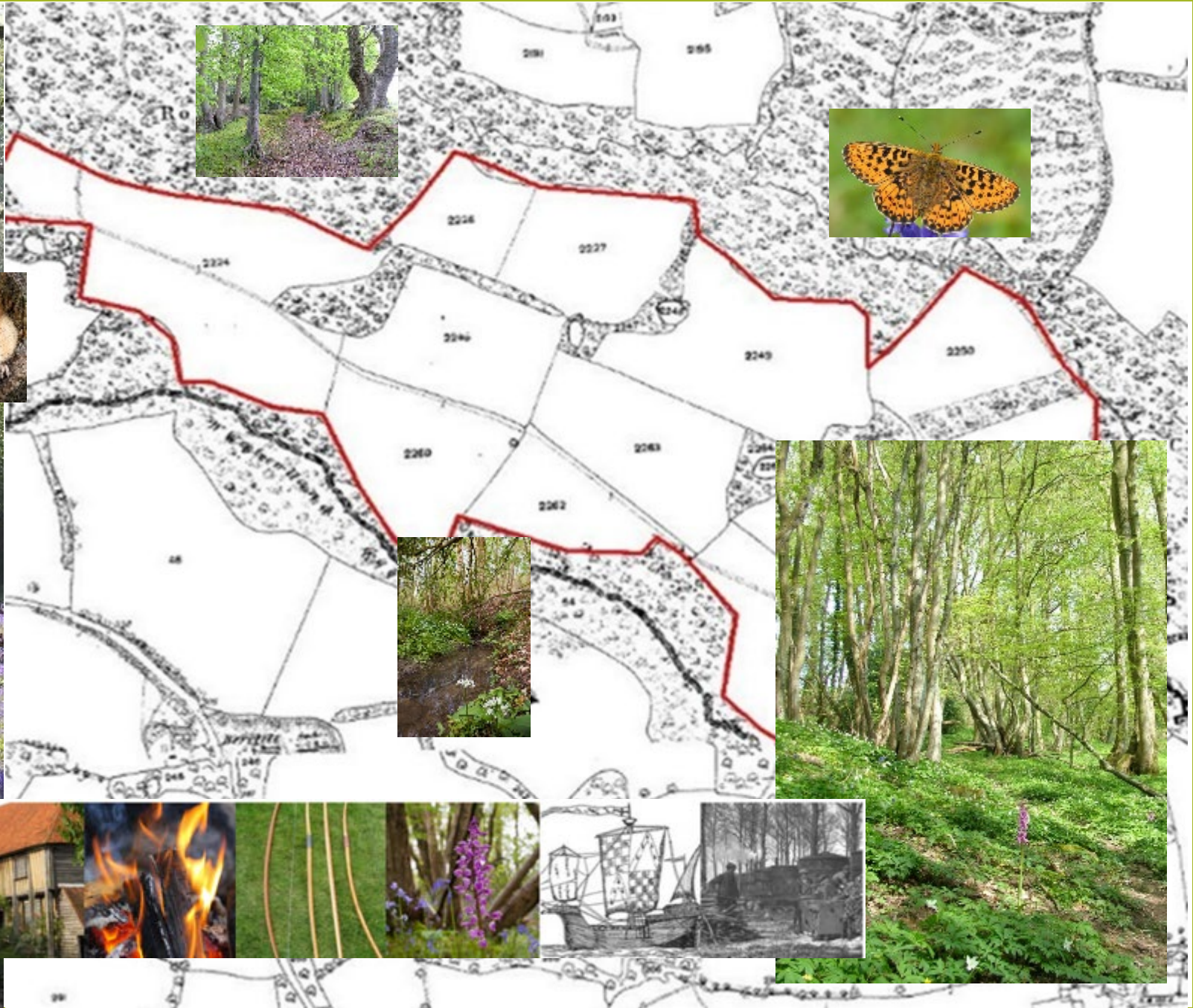
Understanding spatial and temporal heterogeneity - landscape history



Sunken routeways and dispersed farmsteads



Traditional coppice systems



Pause for discussion

Any initial thoughts?

Where do cultural landscapes fit into the rewilding framework (do they fit)?

How do we get the best outcomes for biodiversity across the wider landscape?

Rewilding*

‘setting an identified socio-ecological system on a preferred trajectory’

Purpose

- Sustainable human-wildlife coexistence
- Well-functioning ecosystems

Principles

- Restoring ecosystem health
- Restoring ecosystem services
- Minimizing ongoing management (human intervention)
- Willing to accept novel species compositions (to improve resilience)
- Open to species introductions (based on functional traits)

• Singer et al. 2025





A chronicler of the culture and customs of rural labourers in the early 20th century, George Bourne, admiringly described rural labourers as ‘human fauna’.

Rewilding definitions tend to rely on the idea of letting nature heal itself, allowing natural processes to do what they do (with limited human intervention) but this idea relies on a world view that sees people and nature as separate things. **Are they?**

Social and economic characteristics contributing to historic spatial and temporal heterogeneity in cultural landscapes



Economic necessity and self-sufficiency as the main drivers for management – land served a variety of functions



Livestock and people as the main tools for management – soils mostly undisturbed



Stable land management systems allowing habituated species assembles to flourish



Circular economy – nothing wasted



An absence of industrial machinery, synthetic pesticides and inorganic fertilizers