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Landscape Now

Cover image: David Alesworth, *Unter den Linden*, 2010, horticultural intervention, public art project, terminalia arjuna seeds (sterilized) yellow paint.. Digital image courtesy of David Alesworth.

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Ruins and Reveals in Britain, Corinne Silva and Val Williams

Abstract

The landscape historian W.G. Hoskins is widely credited as a pioneer of local and landscape history. His 1955 book, The Making of the English Landscape, and the guidebooks and television series he wrote and contributed to, made a historical narrative of the English landscape available to a broad public. Hoskins' work was radical—with so much of England damaged after the Second World War, Hoskins and his collaborator, the photographer F.L. Attenborough, gave ruination a context and insisted on the timelessness and permanence of the English landscape. This article describes the cultural and historical contexts that inform Lines in the Landscape, a new research project by the artist Corinne Silva and the curator/writer Val Williams, which will retrace the footsteps of Hoskins and Attenborough during their collaboration on the 1948 guidebook Touring Leicestershire. It also explores the project's intention to discover the visual embodiments of change in urban and rural landscapes, and to explore the possibilities of interdisciplinarity and partnership in scholarship today.

Authors

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Introduction

The collaborative project, *Lines in the Landscape: Ruins and Reveals in Britain*, is a journey into the British landscape, in which we retrace the steps of the landscape historian William George Hoskins and the academic and photographer Frederick Attenborough (Fig. 1). Our trips so far, carried out in 2018, have taken us to Leicestershire and the hinterlands of south and east London, experimenting with new ways of researching and producing art. The motorists' guidebook, *Touring Leicestershire*, that Hoskins and Attenborough compiled in 1948, and the emerging interest in localness and oral history in 1950s and 1960s Britain are at the core of the project (Fig. 2). Then, as now, the work of both operated as entry points into the landscape, directing visitors to particular locations and informing tastes. This essay is a meditation on the routes we will take following Hoskins and Attenborough. We are setting out ideas at the beginning of the project, rather than waiting for the conclusions at its end, sketching out the paths that our journey together will take and noting where they confer, and differ, with those of Hoskins and Attenborough. In a time of specialist and carefully guarded disciplines—monitored by academia, the art world, the press, and a host of others—we are working to transcend barriers and to understand the nature of collaboration.

Figure 1.

Unknown, W.G. Hoskins (centre) and unknown companion, Cornwall, date unknown, photograph. Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester. Digital image courtesy of Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester.

Figure 2.

W.G. Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire*, 1948, photographs by F.L. Attenborough (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau, 1948). Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

Our research on Hoskins and our ideas about the ways in which this speculative research will be made are both in their early stages. We are working in the archives of Leicester University where the Hoskins' papers are preserved, and have begun to explore the photographs made

by Attenborough. After having seen Attenborough's photographs previously only as poor reproductions, it has been enlightening to see the original plates and to be able to consider them alongside the colour photographs of the contemporaneous photographers of *Country Life* magazine or the heroic mountainscapes made by William Arthur Poucher (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

Figure 3.

Country Life, 24 July 1958, featuring photograph titled "On the Way to Snowdon Llyn Peris, Caernarvon" by E.H. Box, date unknown. Digital image courtesy of Country Life Limited.

Figure 4.

Walter Arthur Poucher, Walkers on Hardknott Path, the Lake District, reproduced in *Country Life Picture Book of The Lake District in Colour* (London: Country Life Limited, 1961) no. 11. Digital image courtesy of Country Life Limited.

Hoskins' illustrated book *The Making of the English Landscape* was first published in 1955 and has remained in print ever since (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). In the 1970s, it was required reading, along with Willmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*, Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, and Philip Larkin's poems—all giving clues about the paradoxical and transforming post-war country that Britons lived in. The journalist Ray Gosling's radio and television programmes, and re-runs of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker's experimental documentaries BBC Radio Ballads were equally attractive to a generation who had grown up during post-war austerity, economic and social change in the 1960s, and industrial decline in the 1970s. The urge to develop new narratives around contemporary British history, using the relatively new technologies of recording and televising, as well as the traditional ones of print, became manifest in numerous ways. This was particularly evident in the new independent documentary photography, which had emerged from radical changes in photographic education, a new government-driven regionalism, and the use of state funding for "new" art forms. The photographer Daniel Meadows, making a photographic tour around England in a double-decker bus in the early 1970s, remembers how he was influenced by Gosling's love of the "ordinary"

and by his social and cultural archaeology.¹ Meadows and fellow photographer Martin Parr were inspired to document a Salford street by their shared interest in the ITV television series *Coronation Street*.²

Figure 5.

W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948). Digital image courtesy of Hodder & Stoughton.

Figure 6.

W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970). Digital image courtesy of Germano Facetti, Bruce Robertson, and Penguin Books.

Writing, photography, and broadcasting were all part of a growing interest in the “ordinary”, in everyday rituals and hidden lives, which developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. Made manifest across the arts and media, from John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* establishing the British genre of “Kitchen Sink drama”, to Paul Thompson’s founding of the Oral History Society in 1971 and the later publication of his highly influential work on oral history *The Voice of the Past* (1978), in which he wrote:

through history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives: wars, social transformations like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power, or personal migration to a new community. Family history especially can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death. Through local history a village or town seeks meaning for its own changing character and newcomers can gain a sense of roots in personal historical knowledge. Through political and social history taught in schools, children are helped to understand, and accept, how the political and social

system under which they live came about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution.³

Figure 7.

Geographical Projects Ltd, *About Britain No 5: Chilterns to Black Country*, A New Guide Book, with a portrait by W.G. Hoskins (Glasgow: Wm. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1951). Digital image courtesy of Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.

These new social narratives of the post-war years were often personally motivated and highly opinionated. These were no neutral observations on the history of the British landscape, but were written with a style and tone that carried the force of their authors' often adversarial positions. When Shell reinvigorated its pre-war guidebook series, designed for adventurous, culturally minded motorists, in the late 1950s and 1960s, the publications were infused by the voices of their authors (one of whom was W.G. Hoskins), who frequently decried the ways that both suburbia and the industrial had despoiled their idea of the English landscape. The Shell Guide editor John Betjeman and principal Shell guide photographer (and subsequent editor) John Piper, together with many of the writers and historians engaged to edit the guides, critiqued the modernising forces that were reshaping the British countryside. For Hoskins, industry had ravaged the landscape; this opinion was expressed in his writing for the Shell series and other publications alike. In *From Chilterns to Black Country* (Fig. 7), which was published in 1951 as the fifth in "About Britain", a series of small volumes edited by the passionate conservationist Geoffrey Grigson, to coincide with the Festival of Britain, Hoskins wrote:

The Potteries should not be avoided by anyone who wishes to know Britain. Their ugliness is so demonic that it is fascinating to look upon it from the marginal hills, especially from the ridge that runs just east of Tunstall and Burslem. It is a picture of the uninhibited workings of the Industrial Revolution in its worst period: hundreds of bottle-shaped

kilns, black with their own dirt of generations, massed in groups mostly on or near the hidden canal, with square miles of blackened streets of little black houses, and chapels, churches, spires and towers, tall chimneys of iron and steel works steam from innumerable railways lines that thread their way through the incredible tangle of junctions: as a spectacle, it should never be missed.⁴

For the British public, one of the most dramatic and influential manifestations of the new post-war narrative was perhaps theatre director Peter Hall's 1974 reworking of Ronald Blythe's oral history recorded in 1969 as *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*. Hall's film, *Akenfield*, with music by Michael Tippett, cinematography by Ivan Strasburg, and the parts played by local people using their own improvised dialogue, was an entirely new cinematic experience. Although the cinematography in *Akenfield* is placid and beautiful, the narrative is harsh and shocking—these are no good old days, as villagers remember the trenches of the First World War and the servitude of agricultural labour. *Akenfield* was shown on BBC television in 1975 after premiering at the London Film Festival the year before, where it had attracted large audiences and contributed to the growing popularity of local and oral histories.

Forms of Collaboration

Hoskins and Attenborough began working together in the late 1940s and their first known collaboration was for *Touring Leicestershire*, published by the City of Leicester in 1948. They had met as academics in Leicester and began a creative partnership that lasted until Attenborough's death in 1973. Though Attenborough worked with other authors, and Hoskins also, from time to time, worked with other photographers, they were friends who also shared professional and familial bonds central to their working practices. Collaborations between writers and photographers—although never clear-cut and substantially under-documented—are interesting in many ways. Our project poses the questions: what is the balance between the visual and the written? Do photographs dictate text or vice versa? Collaborations of interest include those between the photographers and writers Percy Hennell and Geoffrey Grigson, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, Walker Evans and James Agee, and Paul Nash and John Betjeman, respectively. In our

planned research around the partnership of Hoskins and Attenborough, and others like them, we intend to explore the possibilities of collaboration and interdisciplinary research.

The histories of Hoskins and the Attenborough family are fascinatingly intertwined. They encompass the rise of local history and of both scholarly and popular education. They were intimately involved with the growth of television and non-fiction paperback publishing. Hoskins began his teaching career at the University College, Leicester in 1931, where Attenborough was Principal from 1931–1951. Hoskins also taught evening classes at the Vaughan Working Men's College. He became Reader in English Local History at University College, Leicester in 1938, and in 1948, was appointed Head of Department of the Centre for English Local History. Significantly, Attenborough was also the parent of Richard, David, and John Attenborough. David was to play a central part in Hoskins' later career as a television historian. When *The Making of the English Landscape* was first published, Hoskins had moved to Oxford University, where he was Reader in Economic History, but his connection to Leicester remained strong, becoming Hatton Professor of English History in 1965 and continuing his relationship with the Attenboroughs after F.L.'s death in 1973.

When David Attenborough became Controller of BBC 2 in the 1960s, he was instrumental in the commissioning of Hoskins to make a series of programmes about the landscape, screened in 1976 and 1978 as *Landscapes of England*. They were produced by Peter Jones, who became interested in the natural world while working at Granada in the 1960s, and who later became a producer of *Horizon*, a successful television series which played an important part in the popularization of science. *Landscapes of England* was, in its time, a radical view of English rural history formed through local history studies and a close reading of the landscape. Twelve films were made, in two series of six. Hoskins' relationship with the Attenborough family, together with the success of *The Making of the English Landscape* undoubtedly accounted for his emergence as a television historian of landscape and local history. Like Hoskins, David Attenborough was a popularizer; early in his career, he presented *Zoo Quest*, and in 1969, he commissioned *Civilization*, Kenneth Clarke's hugely popular series on the History of Art.

While W.G. Hoskins is well known as a historian, Attenborough's achievements as a photographer have remained obscure, perhaps because of his status as an "amateur" photographer, and accentuated by the poor printing of many of his photographs in Hoskins' books. In the first edition of *The Making of the English Landscape*, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1955, Attenborough provided seventeen of the eighty plates, outnumbering any other single contributor (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9).⁵ Many more photographs were needed for this larger book than Attenborough had made for *Touring*

Leicestershire—as an amateur photographer, it was unlikely that he could have provided all the photographs needed for that title. Yet the collaborative bond between Hoskins and Attenborough was strong, and Hoskins does not appear to have worked with any other specific photographer, being content to instead source additional required photographs from agencies and companies. Later, in the 1960s, photographs by John Piper appeared in Hoskins' Shell Guides and we hope to trace correspondence between them as the research proceeds.

Figure 8.

F.L. Attenborough, Cropston Reservoir, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 44. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

Figure 9.

F.L. Attenborough, Ashby Castle: Lord Hastings' Tower, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 40. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

Hoskins was known to be a particularly poor photographer, while Attenborough was a highly skilled amateur. Hoskins could not drive, while Attenborough was a keen motorist. Together they made a pragmatic and imaginative team, though we are given very few glimpses of their relationship. We do know that Attenborough and Hoskins sought out the places Hoskins had established as central to his reading of the landscape; Hoskins wanted this intimate connection between text and photography that stock library photographs could not provide. Precise, located photography made in collaboration was important to Hoskins, as it enabled him to use images to illustrate his observations so that readers could more easily recognize the features he was describing. People were used to looking at photographs—wartime magazines such as *Picture Post* had championed the use of good photography, and formed the basis of photojournalism in Britain in the post-war years. When Attenborough made a photograph of three hawthorn trees and a hedge, Hoskins captioned it:

The landscape of parliamentary enclosure in Rutland, on the road from Empingham to Exton. Here oolitic limestone walls take the place of quickset, but hawthorn trees are planted at intervals and are at their best in late May. The photograph also shows the grass verge that is characteristic of by-roads laid out by the enclosure commissioners. ⁶

Attenborough's photographs were badly reproduced in the first edition of *The Making of the English Landscape*, and the quality did not improve in the subsequent Pelican paperback editions published from 1971, which were reprinted almost every year for the next decade. As part of our project, we have examined some of the original glass plates, and the quality is high.⁷ This posed a question for us: we used a variety of photographic technologies to record the journeys that we began in October 2018, using the routes described by Hoskins in *Touring Leicestershire*. Our means of recording ranged from a smartphone to sophisticated photography equipment. This led us to think about production, outputs, and the values we place on certain kinds of visual imagery or recorded material. Why are we disseminating our material on Instagram rather than in a scholarly volume? Are some photographs more valuable than others? Moreover, do we write differently depending on the medium we are using? Instagram posts, for example, lend themselves to intimacy. We have no clues about how Attenborough thought about his own photographs, except to know that photography was clearly a serious pursuit for him and that he worked independently of Hoskins on other projects.

When the BBC published Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* in 1973, no Attenborough photographs were used. Instead, included in the selection were seventeen photographs by the distinguished landscape photographer Edwin Smith, whose elegiac photographs of the English landscape as a place of beauty and mystery have continued to engage the English imagination. This contributed to Attenborough's work disappearing from view.

Touring Leicestershire, 1948

Touring Leicestershire is a fifty-two-page stapled book that was published by the City of Leicester in 1948. Eight motor tours of Leicestershire were included, along with a list of bus companies, hotels, and cafés. The landscape that Hoskins describes is, on the one hand, remote and beautiful (in his words, a "milder Dartmoor"), and on the other, as he and Attenborough travelled to the industrialised parts of the county, "ugly, commonplace and ruined". The collision of this denuded landscape, the result of what Hoskins saw as industrial folly, and a landscape of ruins, presented as fascinating and full of clues to the past, was to be a constant tension in Hoskins' work. Attenborough captured this in his photography, as he depicted the remoteness of the Leicestershire Hills and the edge of Rutland, the expanses of heathland, fragmented buildings, and the ridges and furrows of medieval farming (Fig. 10). Hoskins' chronicle of the disintegration of medieval village life is one of disease and intense political change, as villages disappeared during the plague years, and farming changed dramatically after the Enclosures. In *Touring Leicestershire*, there

are no indications of Hoskins and Attenborough's politics, but in two *Shell Guides* that Hoskins edited later, on Rutland (in 1963) and Leicestershire (in 1970), Hoskins expresses his anxiety about pylons and increasing traffic, as well as some disdain about the cheap materials used for building new council houses.

Figure 10.

F.L. Attenborough, The pattern of Ridge and Furrow seen from Burrough Hill: A Fossilised Medieval Field System Preserved under Grass, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins, photographs by F.L. Attenborough (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 12., date unknown. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

In *Touring Leicestershire*, Hoskins divides the county into two distinct halves: the "rural and untouched by industry" and the west "industrialised: hosiery and boot-and-shoe villages and small towns crowd on the landscape".⁸ He notes that it is one of the wealthiest regions of England, and that the local "buses are everywhere full of prosperous-looking work-people (especially on Saturdays journeying towards the local cinema or market) but the landscape has been ruined in the process."⁸ Signs of Leicestershire's historical wealth are everywhere on Hoskins' routes, from the grand buildings of Leicester itself to the manor houses and mansions of the countryside (Fig. 11). The granite industry provided a significant economic boost to the area around Mountsorrel (and continues to do so); the modern tourist industry was founded in Leicester by Thomas Cook; and the hosiery, boot and shoe, and engineering industries brought prosperity to the region. Leicester still seems to thrive today: its "Golden Mile" of predominantly Asian restaurants and shops has become a destination; the university quarter is leafy and sedate; it hosts the corporate headquarters of the clothing firm NEXT, the household goods retailer Dunelm, Triumph motorcycles, and Walkers crisps. Hoskins had great fondness for Leicester, appreciating its origins as a mediaeval settlement and admiring its nineteenth-century buildings and wide, tree-lined streets.

Figure 11.

F.L. Attenborough, Carlton Curlieu Hall: Seventeenth-Century opulence based on sheep and cattle pastures, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins, photographs by F.L. Attenborough (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 49., date unknown. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

Hoskins and Attenborough's journeys into the eastern regions for *Touring Leicestershire* were expeditions into a quiet (and seemingly completely unpopulated) landscape of hedgerows, fields, forest, and ruins. Apart from the noise made by Hoskins and Attenborough's motor car, silence must have

been near complete. Hoskins is at pains to emphasise the lack of public transport in east Leicestershire “but after all, this is precisely what has kept so much of it quite unspoilt” (Fig. 12).⁹ There is an evocative air of mystery around Hoskins and Attenborough’s journeys as they happen upon ruins and arrive at deserted villages (Fig. 13). Difficulties, wrong-turnings, and lengthy meanderings are all part of the process of their “touring”. In Tour 3, “[Kirby] Hall is difficult to find but will amply reward all the effort of finding it.”¹⁰ It was approached through the industrial spoil of the Midlands: “The titanic works of Corby are well in view here, and the winding country road runs for some way between the great dumps of waste from the iron ore quarrying, an example of ‘robber economy at its worst’.”¹¹ In Tour 5, they seek out Ragdale Old Hall “a melancholy ruin, gutted and broken, but still retaining much of its original beauty”. As Hoskins notes in his 1970 *Shell Guide to Leicestershire*, Ragdale Old Hall was demolished some ten years after he visited.¹²

Figure 12.

F.L. Attenborough, Hungerton: The true Leicestershire scene, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins, photographs by F.L. Attenborough (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 48., date unknown. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

Figure 13.

F.L. Attenborough, The Ruins of Ulverscroft Priory in the Heart of “The Forest”, reproduced in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins, photographs by F.L. Attenborough (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau), 43., date unknown. Digital image courtesy of City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

People are entirely missing from Attenborough and Hoskins’ travelogue—there are no interesting locals, no suspicious farmers, no decaying aristocrats. These are eerily empty landscapes. The style of travel writing that depends on random meetings and informative conversations has no place in these journeys across an empty landscape. Like the *Shell Guides* of the 1930s, *Touring Leicestershire* was about atmosphere and mystery, and much of this was created by the mood of Attenborough’s photographs. Very little attention was given to creature comforts, though Hoskins, in one of the *Shell Guides*, went to some lengths to describe the delights of wine drinking on a grassy verge, only pausing to caution drivers against falling asleep. As John Betjeman had learnt during his time at the *Architectural Review* and later, in the early 1930s, as editor of the first *Shell Guides*, photography was much more than illustration—it went to the heart of the place, conjured up mystery, created narrative.

Attenborough's photographs, even more than Hoskins' words, are what make *Touring Leicestershire* much more than a guidebook for motorists. The subjects of his images haunt the pages like spectres, ghosts from the past: decaying mansions, deserted hills, ominous trees, silent streams. They offer a post-war vision of ruination and silence, a landscape devoid of life, traumatically still—the Wreak Valley, High Leicestershire, the ruins of Ragdale and Ashby Castle. Architectural and visual traces of lives past are everywhere in Hoskins and Attenborough's journeys—the ghostly remains of monasteries, deserted medieval villages, the outlines of ancient strip farming—all indicated a harsh and dramatic rural history. Attenborough's photographs were of all that was left, the bare bones of history, and were thoughtful and rich in association and symbol. When John Piper's photographs appeared extensively in Hoskins 1970 edition of the *Shell Guide to Leicestershire*, they resembled Attenborough's in their quiet presence, redolent with secrets.

Road Trips

For Hoskins, understanding rural architecture was a route towards deciphering history. He also knew how to read ditches, heaths, hedgerows, and copses, and his books and television programmes explore what these clues in the urban and rural landscapes revealed about the shaping of the land and its populations. Though later geographers (and as Hoskins himself happily admitted, some of his own students) have critiqued Hoskins work, his status does not seem to have suffered unduly and his work is still in print. We have come together to work on *Lines in the Landscape* in the spirit of this radicalism, but from a contemporary and feminist perspective. Women's voices are notably missing from the radical chorus of the 1950s and 1960s as exemplified by, among others, Hoskins, Gosling, and Thompson.

As described, Hoskins and Attenborough, like many photographers and writers, made road trips, and some of our work will follow that well-trodden route. The women's road trip is not a recent phenomenon. Journey makers include the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, who travelled across the American Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Berenice Abbot's 1954 photographic US Route 1 road trip from Maine to Florida was made a year before Robert Frank's seminal photobook *The Americans*, but was never published. Though *The Americans* remains one of the central pillars of post-war documentary photography, Berenice Abbott is considered a marginal figure. Other women's road trips include Susan Lipper's 1993–1999 photographic road trip, published as *Trip* (Fig. 14); Simone de Beauvoir's 1947 *America Day by Day* (Fig. 15); and Rebecca Solnit's numerous explorations across Ireland and the USA, chronicled in publications such as *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* and *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland* (Fig. 16).

Figure 14.

Susan Lipper and Frederick Barthelme, *Trip*, front cover, photographs by Susan Lipper and text by Frederick Barthelme (New York: powerHouse Books, 1999).

Figure 15.

Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, front cover featuring the photograph “A Portrait of Simone de Beauvoir Taken in the Latin Quarter, Paris, 1944” by Henri Cartier-Bresson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), first published 1954, translated edition published 1999. Ina Clausen and Nicole Hayward (design).

Figure 16.

Rebecca Solnit, *wanderlust: A History of Walking*, designed by Mark Melnick (London: Verso, 2001). Cover featuring photograph “The Long Walk, Windsor” by Roger Fenton, ca. 1858.

The notion of the journey from place to place, from innocence to experience, underlies these lengthy trips just as it does the shorter explorations undertaken by Hoskins and Attenborough in *Touring Leicestershire* or John and Myfanwy Piper motoring around Devon with John Betjeman, preparing *Shell Guides*. Our planned retracing of the Hoskins/Attenborough road trips has, unlike theirs or the Pipers’, a very speculative outcome. For Hoskins and Attenborough to ponder on what their journeys meant, as a set of relationships, or of self-discovery and the making of identity, would without a doubt have seemed preposterous to them. For us, it is integral. Hoskins makes no small talk in *Touring Leicestershire*; he visits the sites of antiquity with gravity and a sense of deep allegiance to the past. A ruined church sits in the middle of a field, a decaying Georgian mansion looms at the end of an unmade road in the heart of hunting country, the rolling acres of a country park were once the home of a short-lived queen. Hoskins’ relationship was with the land and with the past, fuelled by the fear of change. For Simone de Beauvoir, her trip to America, at the beginning of 1947—just a year before Hoskins and Attenborough published *Touring Leicestershire*—was “the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me”. ¹³

If Hoskins and Attenborough were mapping territory that they were clearly already familiar with, our first two journeys across Leicestershire, made in October 2018, brought constant surprises. The Georgian house which Hoskins describes so enthusiastically is now decayed and collapsed in parts (Fig. 17). We met the elderly owner and toured the deserted rooms, taking photographs. She talked about hunting and land, and longed for the past. Every morning, we made an Instagram post about our journey of the previous day, and reflected on our project. We talked with a woman walking her neighbour’s dog about the incidence of “dogging” at Groby Pool, and how

the car park there is mentioned in a guide to gay meeting places in the East Midlands (“particularly busy in the afternoons”). We saw a group of men and women clustered at a gate waiting for the hunt to pass, and like Simone de Beauvoir in post-war New York, we were transported to a different world and were unwillingly entranced by the certainties of these country people. We were out of place, but no one gave us a second look.

Figure 17.

Val Williams, Part-derelict house, described by Hoskins as “a spectacular example of early Georgian architecture”, 2018. Following Tour 1 in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau, 1948). Digital image courtesy of Val Williams.

An ancient abbey high up in the bleak Leicestershire hills had become a Christian retreat and we wandered through the gardens, finding a hut with armchairs and books, and a walled vegetable garden. Everywhere there seemed to be possibilities. Where Hoskins was brisk, we wandered, taking wrong turns, retracing our steps, finding peculiar objects—a scarlet basque at the edge of a field, an ancient dog in a derelict house. Hoskins and Attenborough searched for traces of the past, and we searched for traces of them, tantalizingly out of reach ([Fig. 18](#), [Fig. 19](#), and [Fig. 20](#)). Our road trips were conversational, excited; we had never taken a journey together before. Worked out on paper, the project came alive and the trips help us to establish what terms mean within the scope of our project: landscape, habitat, comradeship.

Figure 18.

Val Williams, Corinne Silva at Launde Abbey, 2018. Following Tour 1 in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau, 1948).

Figure 19.

Corinne Silva, Mountsorrel quarry, 2018. Following Tour 1 in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins, (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau, 1948).

Figure 20.

Corinne Silva, Bradgate Park, once home to Lady Jane Grey, Following Tour 1 in *Touring Leicestershire* by W.G. Hoskins (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau, 1948).

Hoskins liked localness, and even though he travelled the country, his most compelling and passionate work was produced in the Midlands, which played such an important part in his career. Before embarking on the Leicestershire

road trips, we explored our own localness. We made excursions around London to look at post-war sites such as South London’s newly built Kidbrooke Village, with its “village hall”, school, and local amenities (Fig. 21 and Fig. 22). It had replaced the enormous Ferrers housing estate, made problematic by the social engineering of Greenwich Council and the lack of a bus service, before it was eventually demolished (Fig. 23). Will these new “villages” one day be deserted and obscured like the ones that Hoskins and Attenborough discovered in the English countryside or will they become strong and effective communities? We realized that localness is a central part of how we understand landscape—we are driven by a desire to map, to have agency, to be legitimate explorers in an already explored landscape. To make new discoveries, we need to bring ourselves into the project; Hoskins and Attenborough appeared to exclude personality from process, but research will perhaps bring further elucidation on the relationship between the two travellers.

Another new
London

“village” to be
explored is

Figure 22.

Val Williams, Kidbrooke Village Hall, 2016.

Figure 21.

Val Williams, Kidbrooke Village, 2017.

Greenwich

Millennium Village, built on
the site of the former
Greenwich gasworks, and
part of a millennial

Figure 23.

Val Williams, Fragment of Ferrers Estate after demolition, 2016.

development, which included the O2 arena. With its stirring advertising slogan of “The New Settlers” (all-white families in covered wagons), it has, despite the advertising, begun to comfortably mellow in its older parts into a slightly shabby multicultural personalized space. Interspersed with public art, immaculate lawns, and a riotous wild garden and series of lakes, Greenwich Millennium Village is an enigma, as corporateness vies with idiosyncrasy in intriguing ways. And there is the doomed Elephant and Castle with its disappeared Heygate Estate and its soon to be demolished Shopping Centre and Coronet Cinema, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the Lakeside Centre, and the lakes, towers, and wild environs of Thamesmead as it makes some uneasy but exciting transitions. Sutcliffe Park in Kidbrooke has mutated from a gloomy “rec” ground into an ecological zone, and there is the immovable and idiosyncratic Mudchute Farm, Walthamstow Wetlands, Croydon, and many more essentially localized London spaces. As Hoskins traversed Leicestershire, Rutland, and the Black Country, he found deserted villages and Roman villas, signs of the Black Death, vast heathlands, and the remnants of castles, viewed through a lens of post-war austerity and a fascination with the almost-gone.

At the site of the new Kidbrooke Village, vestiges of the old Ferrers Estate cling on—a gateway cloaked by undergrowth, some bits of brutal concrete. But some of the places which informed this research have already reformed—just beyond Kidbrooke Village, the old featureless municipal and menacing Sutcliffe Park, has, because of flood level work, become an intriguing wetland. Gone is the mysterious secret garden with its pond and apple tree orchard, destroyed by the work beginning on the site of a new IKEA store in Greenwich.

Hoskins argued that geologists only read one layer of the land, revealing:

only the bones of the landscape, the fundamental structure that gives form and colour to the scene and produces a certain kind of topography and natural vegetation. But the flesh that covers the bones, and the details of the features, are the concern of the historian, whose task it is to show how man has clothed the geographical skeleton. ¹⁴

We are interested in the flesh, the surfaces of things, grass, glass, brick, paving. Architecture and the built environment are the context in which most other material culture is used, placed, and understood. To read architecture is to read its surfaces, its forms, and its materials. Surfaces are neither shallow nor superficial. The body and the earth and all other material substances meet at their surfaces.

Conclusion

Through this collaboration, we are looking for new strategies and methodologies to read and explore these surfaces. We are attempting to dissolve the boundaries between disciplines, skills, and predilections. In 2018, along with our continued explorations of London “villages”, we have begun to retrace the journeys that Hoskins and Attenborough made in Leicestershire by taking road trips by car. Each route must take no longer than a day, and along the way, we have explored the notion of collaboration and published a journal of our trip via social media (Instagram [@ruins_and_reveals](#)). Hoskins and Attenborough’s Leicestershire may have changed, some of it may well remain. Distanced by gender, by time, by class, and by interests, our discoveries will surely be very different from theirs.

Photographs and texts published via Instagram are becoming our homage to *The Making of the English Landscape* and our way of disseminating our work. Less refined perhaps, but capable of reaching audiences globally and disrupting the way that landscape is viewed across systems, networks, and

histories. Social media has become a natural home for the visual and the written, and the local has become international. In the spirit of Hoskins, we will use this as a means to connect with a wide audience of observers and participants. Though some high-profile academics use social media to communicate with a larger and more diverse audience, it is surprising how many avoid it.

Our intention to use Instagram as a means dissemination has been met with surprise by some in our academic networks, but discussing and illustrating our work via social media gives us the ability to converse with others and to use these conversations to shape the research to come. While we would not claim to be democratizing the project—as we are only too aware that social media networks are as bounded by class and culture as any others—we see this as a positive and fluid way of conversing and networking. Our connection with Hoskins and Attenborough is a tenuous but sincere one; we are intrigued by their combined histories and want to explore how historian and photographer worked together and to find out how we too can discover, or even just imagine, the new ruins of Britain.

Footnotes

- 1 Interview with Alan Dein, British Library Oral History of British Photography.
- 2 Val Williams, *Martin Parr: Photographic Works* (London: Phaidon, 2002).
- 3 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 [1978]), 2–3.
- 4 W.G. Hoskins, *About Britain No 5: Chilterns to Black Country* (London: Collins, 1951), 28.
- 5 Interestingly, a rare second edition of *Touring Leicestershire*, published in 1971, saw the cover photograph (Attenborough's austere view of church and hills) changed to a young couple consulting a map. Revised by Russell McClelland, the then publicity officer of the city of Leicester, there are a number of occasions where McClelland replaced Attenborough's photographs with his own—attempting perhaps to soften Hoskins and Attenborough's vision of Leicestershire as a gaunt and mysterious landscape.
- 6 W.G. Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire* (Leicester: City of Leicester Publicity Dept, 1948).
- 7 Attenborough's photographic work seems to have pre-dated his collaborations with Hoskins: in 1945, he provided twenty-five photographs of architectural details for Nikolaus Pevsner's King Penguin book *The Leaves of Southwell*. These beautiful photographs were finely printed in photogravure, perhaps the only time that Attenborough's photographs received the reproduction quality that they deserved.
- 8 Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire*, 7.
- 9 Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire*, 11.
- 10 Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire*, 24.
- 11 Hoskins, *Touring Leicestershire*, 23.
- 12 Hoskins, *Shell Guide to Leicestershire* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 90.
- 13 Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998 [1947]), 18.
- 14 Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*.

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