

# 15. Our Beautiful Island

*In this response, environmental geographer Dr Alex Arnall explores the concept of the rural idyll and how it works in relation to both this jigsaw puzzle and the wider countryside. Can the rural ever live up to popular ideas of what life in the countryside should be like? What changes might we see as a result of the pandemic? Do rural spaces live up to our expectations?*

**Tower Press, Our Beautiful Island jigsaw puzzle, circa 1951**



Jigsaw puzzle, box, and accompanying flyers. This is just one of many examples of rurally-themed jigsaw puzzles in The MERL collection (MERL 2012/283).

As has been reported in the British media in recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have resulted in a surge of interest in home-based crafting, hobby, and puzzling activities. There has been particular demand for adults' jigsaw puzzles, with UK sales up by 38% in 2020 compared to the previous year. What's more, as a result of the crisis, puzzlers have reportedly been driven to assembling "scenes of nostalgia, 'cosy sheds' and animals" (Wood, 2021). In February 2021, *The Guardian* newspaper quoted the Dorset based jigsaw maker, JHG Puzzles, as saying, "Nostalgia is big... Animals and birds but also what people call 'chocolate box' [art]: pubs, inns and cottages are popular." A quick look on Amazon confirms this, with most jigsaw makers offering a range of bucolic-themed images. For example, one of the more popular makers, Gibsons, is selling puzzles illustrating village fetes, shops and street scenes, traditional farms, small fishing hamlets, cottage kitchens and

living rooms, summer houses, ‘secret gardens’, allotments, and hideaways. Many of these are full of simple rural folk surrounded by trees, meadows, streams, flowers, and birds.

What is it about this rural cosiness—often referred to as the ‘rural idyll’—that causes it to endure as an idea? And why is the notion so powerful? In recent years, much as been written by academics about what the rural idyll is, the ways in which it has been constructed over time, and the effects that it has had on different groups of people. Perhaps the clearest definition of the rural idyll is provided by the Dictionary of Human Geography, which describes it as “an idealized, romanticized construct that presents rural areas as happier, healthier, and with fewer problems than urban areas”. The rural idyll originated from the onset of the industrial revolution, a harking back by the urbanised middle-classes to times gone by when people lived simpler, traditional lives, and life was relatively uncomplicated. Havinden (2018) summed this retrospective sentiment up well when he wrote, “The desire to retreat to a self-sufficient, co-operative rural settlement is very ancient. No doubt it embodies a faint folk memory of ancient village communities, as well as a reaction against the pressures and tensions of city life (which were reinforced in the nineteenth century by the dirt, disease, noise, and squalor of so many new industrial towns)”.



Box lid for ‘Our Beautiful Island’ jigsaw puzzle, showing the idealised scene described here (MERL 2012/283).

According to Rofe (2013), the rural idyll’s key components are “community cohesion, harmony with nature, and physical and moral vigour borne of honest labour”. These components are clearly discernible in the object that has inspired this piece, the 1950s jigsaw puzzle entitled “Our Beautiful

Island: A Cottage in Somerset” and produced by the London-based Tower Press company. The puzzle’s image depicts a country cottage and its garden. In the foreground, a gardener digs a flowerbed running alongside a low garden wall. Three children can be seen, two playing with a ball on the lawn, and a third opening a window from inside the cottage. The children are well-dressed and healthy. The property is open and spacious, an important contrast to the cramped, polluted conditions found in many industrial cities at the time. The importance of ample living space is further reinforced by the writing on the jigsaw’s pamphlet: “For scenes from spacious Yesterdays: ‘DAYS GONE BY’”. In the mid-twentieth century, many rural properties, especially those of farm labourers who made up the majority of rural habitants, were small, dark and cramped. However, this social reality of the time is a long way from the large cottage depicted on the jigsaw.



Another jigsaw puzzle showing a similar rural cottage scene adorns the walls of the ‘Making Rural England’ gallery at The MERL (MERL 2012/206/1-2).

Connecting with the vitality of nature is another central tenet of the rural idyll. The jigsaw’s soft-edged image reflects this verdancy; the bright garden is full of the abundance of summer and the colours of the flowers are vibrant. The cottage’s roof is made of thatch and the garden wall of stone, building materials that minimise the presence of modernity. Beside the cottage, the tree is laden with fruit or flowers and a bird box has been erected. This lush backdrop sets the scene for two additional key characteristics of rural idealisation: masculinity and childhood. In the 1930s, concerns around the bodies of English working-class men were wrapped up in wider anxieties regarding ‘national decline’ across many areas of government policy. As a result, an ideal workman’s body started to take shape, one that was brawny, muscular and upright, traits associated with resourcefulness, moral vigour and independence. In the jigsaw’s image, these ideals are reflected in the strong shape of the

gardener as he works on the flowerbed. Rural places are also often idealised as places to bring up children; the countryside is seen as a healthier and safer place than urban areas, and therefore more likely to produce vigorous, productive adults. These ideas are not just reflected in jigsaw puzzles, but are also replete in literature, lifestyle magazines and toys. They reinforce the idea that there is something ‘authentic’ and ‘organic’ about a child growing up in the countryside, an image unconfused by the disorder and squalor of towns and cities.



The idea of the rural idyll is explored throughout The MERL displays, as with this section about village life from the ‘Town and Country’ gallery.

Even though the ‘Our Beautiful Island’ puzzle is from the early 1950s, many of the rural idyll’s core ideas continue to resonate today, in the UK as well as further afield, and not just in jigsaws. Farming is still romanticised as a ‘frontier industry’ and the UK government’s proposed Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, which forms part of the country’s post-Brexit reform strategy, is full of narratives linked to rural beauty. The COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly led to a surge of interest in rural properties and living, as urban inhabitants seek to relocate to the uncrowded, open spaces of the countryside. In these ways, the rural idyll is frequently reflected in modern-day sentiment,

commonly overshadowing the problems associated with country living. This so-called 'dark side' of the rural idyll challenges many of the ideas explored above and includes problems such as social isolation, lack of services and job, rural poverty and crime, and prejudice and discrimination. These more challenging associations, however, are far removed from the notions celebrated in 'Our Beautiful Island' and in countless books, films, and other popular representations (re)produced since.

## Further Information:

For information about the 'Our Beautiful Island' jigsaw puzzle see – [MERL 2012/283/1-4](#)

For more about the research interests of the author of this piece see – [Dr Alex Arnall](#)

For more about the puzzle on the wall of the Making Rural England gallery see – [MERL 2012/206/1-2](#)

For more about other jigsaw puzzles in The MERL collection see – [Julie Peverett jigsaw puzzles](#)

For more about the Making Rural England gallery see – [Making Rural England gallery](#)

For more about the Town and Country gallery see – [Town and Country gallery](#)

## References cited above:

Havinden, M. (2018) The model village. *The Rural Idyll*. G. E. Mingay. London, Routledge.

Rofe, M. (2013) Considering the limits of rural place making opportunities: rural dystopias and dark tourism. *Landscape Research* 38(2): 262-272.

Wood, Z. (2021) UK jigsaw puzzle sales hit £100m as 'people find a balance in their lives'. *The Guardian*, 1 February 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/01/uk-jigsaw-puzzle-sales-hit-100m-as-people-find-a-balance-in-their-lives-covid>