

Marion Shoard

Born 6.4.1949.

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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This life story was extracted in 2020, with Marion Shoard's permission, from her personal website at www.marionshoard.co.uk and contains other material which she has provided.

1. My Early Career



Ramsgate.

I was born in the west of Cornwall in 1949 and spent most of my childhood in Ramsgate, east Kent. I read zoology at Oxford University and, in order to work in countryside conservation, spent two years at the then Kingston-upon-Thames Polytechnic, studying town and country planning.

I then worked for four years at the national office of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), campaigning in fields ranging from national parks to forestry, and rural public transport to wildlife conservation. However, I had become more and more convinced that the main threat to the beauty and diversity of England's countryside was the expansion and intensification of agriculture and, with the help of a grant from the Sidney Perry Foundation, I left CPRE to research and write *The Theft of the Countryside* (1980).

This book struck a chord with the public and sparked off a lively debate, with thirty letters published in *The Times*, for example. During the following few years I wrote articles and gave talks on the book's theme, lobbied on rural issues in Parliament and helped set up countryside action groups. *The Theft of the Countryside* included proposals to establish new national parks in lowland England.

2. A Right to Roam

A second book, *This Land is Our Land* (1987), examined the history of the relationship between landowners and the landless, and suggested it should be placed on a new footing. This book also attracted attention.

I presented a one-hour documentary on its subject matter made by London Weekend Television for Channel 4 and called *Power in the Land*.



Marion Shoard in a still from her 1980s Channel 4 documentary *Power in the Land*.

During the next few years, I wrote numerous articles and gave many talks about a wide range of rural issues. I also taught countryside planning and land management to students at universities, including Reading and University College London. Gaia Books reissued *This Land is Our Land*, expanded and updated, as a Gaia Classic in 1997.

One element of the arrangements I had put forward in *This Land is Our Land* was the replacement of the UK's trespass régime with a general right of public access to the countryside, providing much greater freedom to roam.

With the help of grants from the Nuffield Foundation and The Leverhulme Trust, I set to work out how such a right could operate on the ground, after making trips to Scandinavia, France and Germany to see for myself the very different access systems operating in those countries. My conclusions on access were published in *A Right to Roam* (1999), which was acclaimed as Environment Book of the Year in 2000 by the Outdoor Writers Guild.

In 2005, I supported Jean Perraton's call for a right to swim in inland waters in the UK, through penning the foreword to her book *Swimming against the Stream: Reclaiming Lakes and Rivers for People to Enjoy*.

I was delighted to see that the Scottish Parliament introduced a legal right of responsible access to the countryside in one of its first laws, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003. I have long considered that if a general right of responsible access on foot to the countryside is not enacted in England and Wales (as I urged in my books *This Land is Our Land* and *A Right to Roam*), we should add further

categories to the types of land to which the Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000 provides access, most obviously woodland, parkland and river- and lakeside. A Right to Roam examines the extent of access to these features and the feasibility of introducing wider access to them, while I explore the case for a right of access to woodland alone in an article entitled 'Into the Woods' published in *The Land* in 2018.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000 provided a highly damaging sop to landowners in return for the introduction of a right of access to stretches of mountain, moor, heath, down and coastal land. Under section 53, rights of passage along routes in the countryside of England and Wales which were never incorporated into the official maps as public rights of way will be extinguished on 1st January 2026, if no claim to add them to the official maps has been submitted by then.

Conversations with county footpaths officers as part of the research for my book *This Land is Our Land* revealed that two of the most important reasons for the omission of many routes was confusion about which ones should be recorded as rights of way and the power of landed estates in the parish councils in the 1950s and 60s which provided much of the data on which the official maps were based. I believe that the provision for removal of these historic rights of passage should be repealed forthwith, as explained in the following letter I published in 2019 in the *New Statesman*:

The prospect of many important public footpaths and bridleways being wiped out in 2026 ('Beach-shaming Britain: The real story behind coronavirus crowds', 30 June) is appalling. The routes recorded on today's OS maps were identified mainly by parish councils in the 50s and 60s when landowners were even more powerful than they are today, dominating rural communities. They ensured that key routes through their estates, fought for by past generations, would be left off official maps. The provision that these could be deleted six years from now was a sop provided to the landowning lobby by the Blair government in 2000. It should now be withdrawn.

3. Edgelands



The term edgelands, coined by Marion Shoard, has come into wide use. The photo above is reproduced, with acknowledgement and thanks, from *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, Jonathan Cape, 2011.

Marion Shoard's interest in edgelands was described in the following extract of her April 2018 interview published in The Simple Things.

An assiduous observer of changes in the British landscape, Marion coined the term 'edgelands' in an essay published in 2002, which inspired much discussion about the semi-industrial periphery of our towns and cities and further recent books on the subject (such as Rob Cowen's *Common Ground* and Paul Evans' *Field Notes from the Edge*).

She's keen for the environmental and historical value of these brownfield sites to be taken seriously. "There's a general assumption that anything brownfield should be developed," she says, "and it's often in these overlooked edgeland areas that wildlife develops in its own way. They're more wild somehow than, say, the fells of the Lake District, which are managed for sheep grazing. But they often look threatening and chaotic, and partly for that reason people tend to ignore them."

Marion Shoard wrote about edgelands, the overlooked fringe between city and country, in the following article, reproduced with acknowledgement and thanks from The Land magazine.

Britain's towns and cities do not usually sit cheek by jowl with its countryside, as we often casually assume. Between urban and rural stands a kind of landscape quite different from either. Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently

scruffy, farmland. All these heterogenous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. This peculiar landscape is only the latest version of an interfacial rim that has always separated settlements from the countryside. In our own age, however, this zone has expanded vastly in area, complexity and singularity. Huge numbers of people now spend much of their time living, working or moving within or through it. Yet for most of us, most of the time, this mysterious no man's land passes unnoticed: in our imaginations, as opposed to our actual lives, it barely exists. When we deliberately visit it, this is often for mundane activities like taking the car to be serviced or household waste to the disposal plant, which we choose to discount as part of our lives. If we actually live or work there, we usually wish we did not

Often these areas are so little acknowledged that they have no name, or have names that fail to reflect their current character. For instance, until the mid 1980s, 'Westwood' in the Isle of Thanet, east Kent, was the name of the crossroads serving the area's three coastal resorts — Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate. Today, it denotes a vast, developed sprawl in the centre of Thanet, featuring massive retail and business parks and a branch of the University of Kent, all rubbing shoulders with cabbage fields, old, isolated farmhouses and farm-workers' cottages, and a closed mental hospital; the road names bespeak the juxtaposition of old and new — 'Poorhole Lane' beside 'Enterprise Road'. Westwood, in an area long denuded of tree cover, offers no hint of the character that the place name suggests.

Once the suburbs were also a netherworld whose existence went unacknowledged. These sudden accretions to ancient settlements also failed to signify, long after they had become far bigger than the towns that spawned them. Eventually, however, the suburbs won recognition.. They are still not universally loved, but they enjoy a place in our world view and their function is respected.

Yet no similar recognition has been extended to the urban-rural interface. How could it? These jungles of marshalling yards and gravel pits, water-works and car scrapyards seem no more than repositories for functions we prefer not to think about: blots on the landscape. The apparently random pattern in which they are assembled seems to defy the concepts of orderly planning by humans and of harmony in nature. Should these edgelands follow the suburbs from the dark pit of universal disdain into the sunlit uplands of appreciation? Their story is at least as interesting as that of the suburbs.

Tasting a Landscape

In 1965, two scholars set out to discover what common features of landscapes are most admired in England. They concluded that 'What is considered "essentially English" is a calm and peaceful deer park, with slow-moving streams and wide expanses of meadowland dotted with fine trees. The scene should include free-ranging domestic animals . . . When it is arable land, hedgerows and small fields are usually obligatory.' The English do not like geometrical, obviously pre-planned landscapes, nor evidence of the present-day, and particularly dislike anything obviously functional. But they do applaud tidiness and neatness, and evidence of

age — old buildings and trees. The countryside beloved by the great majority is tamed and inhabited, warm, comfortable, humanized.’

Interfacial landscapes are the very antithesis of all this. The edgelands are raw and rough, and rather than seeming people-friendly are often sombre and menacing, flaunting their participation in activities we do not wholly understand. They certainly do not conform to people's chocolate-box idea of the picturesque. Tidiness is absent: no lawns here. If there is grassland, it is likely to be coarse and shaggy, perhaps grazed by a few sheep enclosed by derelict fencing. If ungrazed, it will be swamped by a riot of wild, invasive plants, fragments of tarmac, wrecks of cars and derelict buildings.

We applaud the absence of litter in a landscape: the interface sucks in the detritus of modern life. Not only is litter and household waste casually dumped there, but formal waste-processing operations, such as car crushing, sewage treatment, or waste transfer are often deliberately located here, lest they despoil preferred environments. Edgeland rubbish tips may eventually be grassed over, but the cosmetic treatment of unsavoury artefacts is considered less necessary here than in either town or country.

Wild at Heart

Though usually either unloved or ignored, edgeland does fulfil vital functions – not least as a refuge for wildlife. Take, for instance, the 13.8 hectares of Molesey Heath, on the edge of southwest London, an area that takes in raised reservoirs, an industrial estate, an abandoned sewage works, an equestrian centre, a council housing estate, piecemeal private housing (some of it on plotlands), and a camping and caravan site. The heath is the recent result of gravel extraction followed by infilling of rubbish. A few horses belonging to local travellers prevent encroaching fennel, blackberries and hawthorn from overwhelming the purple, pink, white and yellow jungle of goat's-beard, musk thistle, wall rockets, vetches and mallows — 311 species of flowering plants and ferns in all.

This diversity of plant life partly results from the dumping of many sorts of soil, for instance builders' rubble, juxtaposed in a way which would be highly unlikely in nature. The pH may range from 2 to 12, the nutrients from excessive to almost non-existent. Every soil classification is here, including some which have never been properly described. Bits of broken glass do not affect the nature conservation value of the site, nor worry the grasshoppers and crickets that sing there in high summer. So disregarded is the lake formed after gravel extraction that it bears no name, yet before rubbish infilling and thus its partial destruction, kingfishers, great-crested grebes, coots, moorhens, sedge warblers, frogs, toads, newts and twelve species of dragonfly bred here.

Plants and animals being driven out of the countryside by modern agricultural methods often survive in the interface because farming is pursued less intensively here, by owners who are not altogether serious about agriculture; farmers who are waiting with pieces of land that they hope they can sell for development. So this is farmland in a minimal state, farmed in a desultory way. Land uses that replace farming, like grazing for horses or mineral excavation, however scruffy, are often

better for wildlife than modern industrial agriculture. Horses are reared for casual exercise, not meat production, so those who keep them do not turn their pasture into a ryegrass monoculture as stock farmers usually do; lakes are filled by rainwater and groundwater, unpolluted by effluents from agricultural land or rivers. Having no inflow or outflow such bodies of water contain none of the large bottom-dwelling fish like bream that stir up mud and stunt the growth of underwater plants. Young amphibians flourish in this predator-free environment. Interfacial sites are biologically diverse precisely because they are unmanaged. Such wildernesses are left to find their own accommodation with nature, evolving silently and unhindered.

A major threat to the edgelands, which relish what other landscapes reject, is attempts to castrate it by turning it into something more "desirable", as if the interface has nothing to offer as a landscape in its own right. Afforestation is one fashionable mechanism for transforming the edgelands into something more acceptable to polite society, and hiding as much as possible of the rest of it from view. So-called 'community forests', enabled by substantial government grants, have seen thousands of acres bordering large towns planted with millions of trees to lure industrialists and prospective homeowners alike, to fill the grim world of the edgelands with happy workers and laughing families. All over Britain, unkempt wasteland is being turned into something more respectable and legitimate — such as woodland.

The Case for Planning

The edgelands were scarcely noticed by planners until the 1960s, when Professor Alice Coleman of King's College London, during a land utilisation survey, uncovered the existence of fringe land that fell outside the neat land-use pattern of either farmscape or townscape. She called this 'the rurban fringe', where the distinction between town and country is blurred and, as a result, farmland is fragmented, or abandoned. She recommended that the rurban fringe should be reduced or eliminated either by being turned into proper townscape, with neatly rounded-off development or into productive farmland. Her views legitimised subsequent attempts to sanitise or otherwise neuter the edgelands up and down the country.

Large-scale development in the interface really took off during the Thatcher years when planning deregulation was fashionable; planning consent refused by local authorities would be allowed on appeal by central government. As further applications came in, councils felt they had no choice but to grant them, and extract some benefit from planning-gain agreements.

Interfacial areas assemble themselves in response to whatever needs are thrust upon them, and in whatever way they can, shaped largely by the planning applications that happen to come in, rather than by proactive planning with the use of instruments such as compulsory purchase and town plans, to assert a public realm. Far lower standards of design are required than elsewhere: warehouses, and the rest, pursue their purposes without even a nod to aesthetic conventions, in a nakedly functional challenge to landscape "good taste". Where tree-planting is required, it is for screening, acknowledging the ugliness of what it hides. Tasteful facades are

considered unnecessary in a landscape that nobody is actually trying to pretend is other than it is.

We need to rethink this approach. Although one could argue that it is a contradiction to try to intrude the dead hand of the planner into something whose character is to be free, I nonetheless think that we should. If we do not chronicle and assert the special wildlife and historical value of parts of our edgelands, for instance, these will disappear anyway. In the context of the edgelands, we need to see the planner not as the shaper of an entire environment but as a handmaiden, who helps along a universe he or she does not seek to control.

Kindling an Interest

We also need to kindle greater interest in the edgelands and their component parts. We should see reservoirs and rubbish-tips as sources of fascination; by housing much of the apparatus without which settlements could not exist, they tell us about the way our society is. Car scrapyards are not only interesting but evoke new perceptions of contemporary life.



Advertisements show cars in pristine form. In a scrapyard we see how they break, how they crumple and go rusty; in doing so we may find it easier to break free of their stranglehold over our lives and our environment.



Film festivals could discuss the ways in which the aura of excitement and apparent lawlessness of the edgelands have been exploited in film. It would be interesting to see artistic expression of the dynamism that the interface enshrines, rather than simply the decay and redundancy with which artists usually identify it. Interest could be encouraged through the promotion of exhibitions or competitions by local authorities with a stake in interfacial territory. Studies could build up a picture of human demography, industrial use, archaeological features and so on. Older citizens could be invited to describe the changes they have witnessed to their local edgelands during their lifetimes. Guidebooks and guided walks should open up this new world.

It may seem an uphill task to transform perceptions of a landscape as reviled as that of the edgelands, but history teaches that this may not be as big a challenge as it seems. In the eighteenth century the idea that stretches of grassland dotted with trees should be viewed as the new top landscape — parkland — must have been quite revolutionary. Moors and mountains were once considered hideous places. Yet in the twentieth century the protection of mountain and moorland became an overriding component of rural policy. It is time for the edgelands to get the recognition that Emily Bronte and William Wordsworth moors and mountains and John Betjeman to the suburbs. They too have their story. It is the more cogent and urgent for being the story of our age.

4. Older People's Advocate

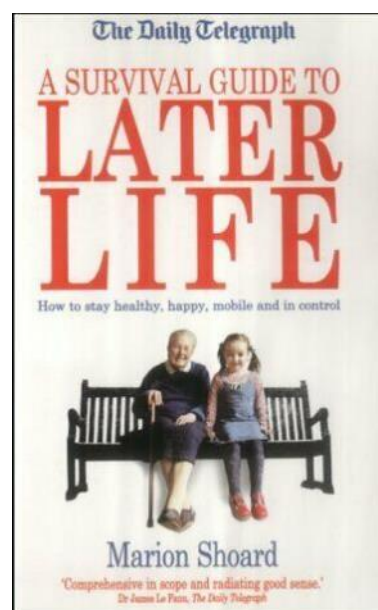
“The past is a foreign country,” Jan Morris once wrote, “but so is old age”. This is a land many of us are pitched into without forethought or preparation; it happened to me in the 1990s, when my mother, then in her mid-80s, was rapidly developing dementia and also losing her eyesight.

I soon discovered that the information I needed was sadly lacking. There were factsheets, certainly, but none of the straight-talking guidance I needed to confront the health and social systems which seemed to obstruct my search for good care for my mother rather than guide me to it. Little help was available to show ordinary people how somebody with dementia and doubly disorientated through near blindness should actually be cared for. This despite the fact that around one in six people over the age of 80 have dementia and one in four of our hospital beds are occupied by people with some degree of dementia.

I soon realised that my mother's plight, struggling with memory loss in a small terraced house, accessed up a steep step and without practical help close to hand might have been different had she addressed years before the possibility that she might fall victim to one of the common incurable, chronic illnesses of old age. Choices we make in type and location of our housing, for instance, are just one area in which it is prudent to bear in mind what the future might bring in terms of disability and isolation.

My handbook *A Survival Guide to Later Life* (2004) sought to offer advice on many aspects of later life in fields as diverse as diet for older people, homecare, mobility problems, healthcare, access for elderly and disabled people to the urban and rural environment, housing choices, social connections, financial matters and choosing and living in a care home.

Since the *Survival Guide* appeared in 2004, much has changed. It is not only that laws such as the Equality Act have come onto the statute book and new inventions transformed the lives of older people and those with disabilities: society itself has changed. Particular illnesses have seen a change in public attitudes - not least, dementia. When my mother developed the condition in the final years of the last century, few people seemed to have much idea of what the word dementia meant and little support was available to families affected by the condition. Today, the amount of information and support has greatly increased, while people with dementia have become more assertive. However, there remain huge areas in which they could improve the quality of their lives, not least if people with mild dementia or none at all took greater interest in the powers they grant their financial and care attorneys.



My new book, *How to Handle Later Life*, published in 2017, contains 100 pages which explore the important field of legal representation. It covers the following topics:

- Carers' rights
- Retirement & extra care housing
- Powers of attorney
- Travel, transport & leisure
- Hospitals & hospices
- Exercise & nutrition
- The science of ageing
- Strokes, continence & falls
- Dementia & depression
- Employment rights
- Inheritance & state benefits
- New relationships & social groups
- Hiring help in the home
- Gadgets & mobility aids
- Psychological well-being
- End-of-life choices

I also campaign for change. Thus, for example, at the launch of *How to Handle Later Life* in Tunbridge Wells Waterstones, I urged that older and disabled people living in care homes should be given a right of access to the open air. This would be one of the main elements of a new set of rights I believe care home residents should enjoy.

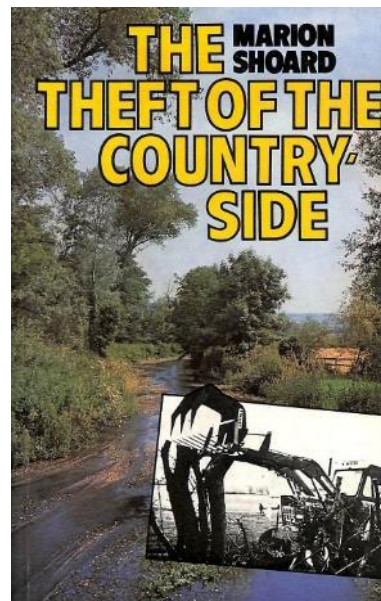
During the Covid-19 pandemic I have grown increasingly concerned about the isolation with which many older and disabled people living in care homes have had to contend. Many homes have failed to put in place means other than indoor, face-to-face visits for residents to keep in touch with their loved ones. I explored this area in an article entitled 'Care homes: how we could make amends' published in Summer 2020 and in a posting on the Amaranth Books website.

5. Books

The Theft of the Countryside, 1980.

Eighty per cent of Britain's land is countryside. The health of our wildlife depends more than any other single thing on the way in which farmers treat the wild plants and animals that exist in the soil, on the surface of the land and in the plants that rise above it. Today, our populations of farmland birds continue to decline, despite the subsidies paid to farmers for more than twenty years to grow food in an environmentally sensitive manner.

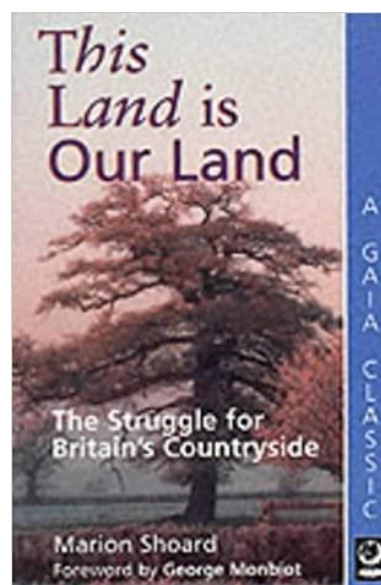
Much of what I wrote about in *The Theft of the Countryside* remains pertinent. I examined the reasons why modern farming was transforming the countryside and the subsidy machine which was fuelling not only damaging landscape change but also the over-production of food. I looked at the value of the English countryside to children, poets and ordinary people out seeking recreation, as well as to industries which rely on the countryside remaining beautiful, such as tourism. I explored the impact of agricultural change on the wildlife, landscape and archaeological remains of the countryside. I urged the introduction of controls to prevent further destruction, the designation of a string of new national parks to protect the most attractive landscapes which remain, and measures to reconstitute damaged landscapes. *The Theft of the Countryside* sparked off a debate which is still continuing.



This Land is Our Land, 1997.

Who owns the most fundamental resource in Britain - our land? How have Britain's landowners managed to fight off the succession of challenges they have faced since William the Conqueror's henchmen appropriated vast estates? If, as many of the descendants of those Norman barons believe, the countryside is their birthright, where does it leave the rest of us and not least those who share the 17th-century Diggers' belief that 'the earth is a common treasury for all mankind'?

How can landowners justify stopping the rest of us from strolling beside the streams, rivers and lakes of our native land? Why should the wealth tied up in land not be taxed at a time when middle-income and poor people are having to face cuts in public services and benefits? How could a land tax generate new revenue and help improve our environment in the process?

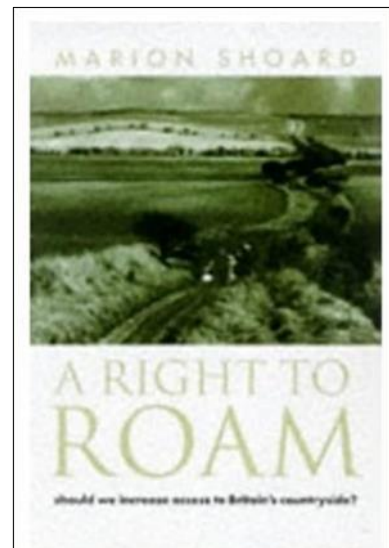


I examine the pattern of ownership of land in the UK, from the gold-dust estates of Bloomsbury and Belgravia to the deer forests of Sutherland. I chronicle the history of the struggle over land rights at home and abroad. I examine the extent of landowners' power – not only over land, but also over the social structure of the countryside and on the national stage. I analyse the key conflicts over the use of the countryside. I propose a new social contract between landowners and the people as a whole to enable the benefits of land ownership to be more widely shared.

A Right to Roam, 1999.

The countryside with its mountains and moors, woods, fields and parks, rivers and beaches offers a wealth of opportunities for spiritual refreshment which are not only unique: they are also free. Yet British citizens are barred from enjoying countless harmless pleasures that only the outdoors can bring through our antiquated law of trespass and landowners' desire to bar people rather than welcome them in. Restrictions on access to the countryside affect not only our freedom to use the outdoors: they also affect our idea of our land and its economic value.

Up until the early years of this century, Lancashire's vast private grouse moor, the Forestry of Bowland, had been almost all off-limits to ordinary walkers. The Blair government's 'right to roam' legislation, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, created a legal right for anybody to go there. Now the descendants of people who gazed longingly at Bowland's magnificent heathery heights can scale them.



But the Blair law confined itself (illogically and mistakenly) to opening up less than 10 per cent of the land of England and Wales – just that consisting of moors, mountains, heaths, down and commons. Why not woods and other types of countryside, as in Scotland?

In *A Right to Roam*, I work out the extent of access on foot to the countryside of the UK. I examine the arguments put forward by landowners for restricting access and the ways in which access systems operate overseas. I put forward a detailed plan of how a general right of access on foot to the countryside of the UK could work on the ground.

Detailed proposals covering everything from landowners' liability to ways in which any conflicts between different uses might be reconciled remain as relevant as ever.

This book received the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild's Book of the Year Award in 2000.

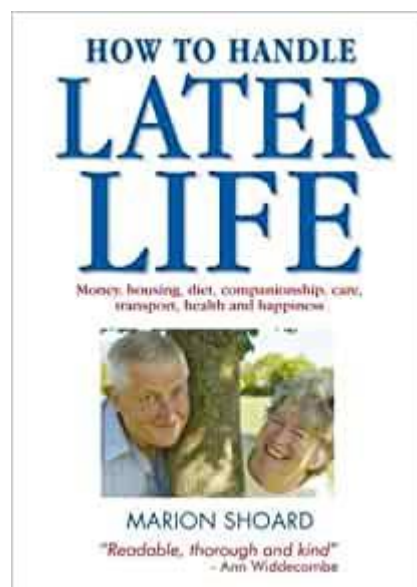
A Survival Guide to Later Life, 2004.

A Survival Guide to Later Life is a handbook offering advice to older people and their families in many different fields, from housing to mobility and finance to healthcare. It has been largely replaced by *How to Handle Later Life*.

How to Handle Later Life, 2017.

How to Handle Later Life is a 1,160-page guide to the issues facing older people, and the product of 15 years independent, UK-wide research. Its content includes:

How to Handle Later Life was published in September 2017 by Amaranth Books Ltd.



6. Interview

The following interview is reproduced, with acknowledgement and thanks, from The Simple Things, April 2018. The Simple Things website is www.thesimplethings.com.

“If you really care about something, you just get stuck in – or at least I do,” says lifelong campaigner Marion Shoard, who, as an environmentalist and writer, has had a tangible impact on our relationship with the landscape. Her influential books, *This Land is Our Land* and *A Right to Roam*, paved the way to greater access for walkers in the British countryside. And her first published work in 1980, *The Theft of the Countryside*, was an early warning against the impact of industrial farming. At her home in Strood, Kent, the sitting room is lined with books and papers, and she is fresh from attending a public inquiry the previous day, regarding a patch of open land on the outskirts of her home town. Such edgelands – the unsung brownfield sites of the urban fringe – were the subject of an award-winning essay she wrote in 2002, and she was among the first to outline their environmental importance.



Advocate for Older People

This has been a theme throughout her career; directing the public gaze towards places and people that both society and the Government have overlooked. Her latest cause, that of older people’s issues, is the subject of a new book, *How to Handle Later Life* – a practical guide to navigating the third age, from money and housing to diet and companionship – which runs to 1,160 pages and took 15 years to write. It’s a field she was thrust into when her mother developed dementia and began losing her eyesight in the late 1990s, and Marion struggled to find her adequate care. Eventually, she found her mother a place in an NHS unit, where she spent the last four years of her life. “I think it provided better care than she would have got in any care home, and it was also free,” she adds. “I thought: ‘I must try and help other people facing this and other problems that arise in later life’.”

Although there is more awareness these days of older people’s issues, many government policies, Marion says, remain fundamentally ageist. An example she gives is how all but the poorest people with dementia, osteoarthritis and Parkinson’s disease – common chronic conditions of old age – have to pay for the long-term practical help they need, as this ‘social care’ is means tested. “Now if, say, you get pregnant – which is a choice – you get all that care free (and I agree, you should),” says Marion. “That’s quite ageist, really.” Part of the wider problem is our attitude to ageing – which needs looking at in a new way, Marion suggests. “Although we’re all supposed to be very politically correct, if you scratch the surface, a lot of people still rather despise older people. They see them as weak and pathetic – and a burden on society. We need to show that these people are individuals, with their own contribution to give.”

It's a situation not helped perhaps by the fact that most of the faces we see in the media look ageless or younger than their years. "You do get some people on telly who look as old as they really are, like Sir David Attenborough and Mary Beard, but they tend to be the exception," Marion says. "I do worry that it's a bad example to set for younger people." Citing a government-funded survey published in 2017, she points out that a quarter of 14-year-old girls were found to have symptoms of depression. "It's partly exam stress but it's partly appearance anxiety," she continues. "If older people showed that it's OK to look how old you really are, then I think that could be useful.

Also – I have a one-year-old grandson – I think we owe it to our grandchildren and the younger generation to show that ageing is part of life. You have to cope with your own mortality at some stage." In her work as an older people's advocate – whether discussing death on Woman's Hour or calling for people in care homes to have a legal right to be taken out of doors for an hour a day at her recent book launch – Marion uses the same tactics as for environmental campaigning. She engages with decision makers, writes articles, addresses meetings, launches petitions and attends demonstrations.

A Right to Roam

Now in her late 60s, Marion has no desire to retire: "I like to feel I'm doing something worthwhile. I hope I'd always want to do that." Her campaign for a universal right to roam has been ongoing for more than 30 years, since *This Land is Our Land* came out in 1987. "It's an affront to us all that we don't have the right to move freely around our land," says Marion today.



A mass trespass in 1932 in the Peak District protesting lack of access for walkers. It would be another 68 years before our Right to Roam became part of legislation.

A keen walker and cyclist, she recalls living in Luton in her 20s and wanting to go for a walk in the country at weekends. "There was this wonderful estate on the edge of town with large parkland, a lake and woods. I longed to be able to walk on the grass and by the lake, and at the time, you couldn't – there was virtually no public access. Then I found out there were lots of situations like this."

While she's pleased that her activism and subsequent book, *A Right to Roam*, contributed to the partial access we now enjoy in England and Wales granted by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act in 2000 – and the general right to roam in Scotland – she maintains that more could be done. “What we did get was a right only to certain mapped lands that had to fall into certain categories: mountain, moor, heath, down or registered common land. Land around the coast has been added since then. And I just think we should have a universal right.” Marion wants to see an extension of this partial access to take in woodland, too: “A walk in the woods is part of the British landscape experience that we should all be entitled to.”

The way we enjoy the outdoors nowadays has become too much of an artificial experience, Marion fears, with visitors being shepherded along designated paths rather than roaming freely; or else we simply run or cycle past the landscape rather than engaging with it. “If you think back to people like Laurie Lee and Dylan Thomas, they were all about just exploring the countryside and it not just being a backdrop for other activities,” she says. When Marion received her Golden Eagle lifetime achievement award from the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild in 2009, she used her acceptance speech to mourn the “incarceration of our children”, who are no longer given the freedom to develop an instinctive relationship with the outside world, as they once did.

Such is her knowledge and experience of rural issues that she was recently invited to talk to civil servants at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs about her ideas for countryside policy post-Brexit. “At the moment, it's not possible to predict what's going to happen,” Marion says, “except that if our farmers are going to have to face tariff-free competition from other parts of the world, it's going to be quite tough for them and they're going to need some kind of support, as well as subsidies the Government says it's going to give them for conservation. There might be a lot of abandonment of farmland, of course, and re-wilding.” Depending on the outcome of current negotiations, Marion wonders if the impact of Brexit on the countryside could be the most visible of all.

With so many calls on her time, there is little left over for Marion's extra-curricular passions – such as her interest in the way landscapes inspire artists and writers. She is a long-time member of The Friends of the Dymock Poets, an organisation that celebrates the work of Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke and Robert Frost, among others. “They gathered in a very little known area where Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire meet, just before the outbreak of World War I. They walked the fields and did what they called ‘walks-talking’,” says Marion, who is giving a talk and a tour of the area this month. “Their poetry is in simple language and speaks to the heart,” she adds.

“When you're walking around that pocket of country, it's easy to see how the landscape affected them.” There is much still that drives her to keep campaigning and writing – not least a desperately needed improvement in the world of care homes. Our understanding of the third stage of life – now much longer than ever before – and what its purpose might be, is still very much in its infancy. Marion draws a comparison with childhood, which, as we know it now, was only really ‘invented’ in the last century. “Until late Victorian times or the early 20th century, a lot of children were just classed as miniature adults,” she says. “The idea that

ordinary children would be treated as they are today, with their individuality fostered and being encouraged to be creative – and that a whole multimillion pound industry would have grown up based on fulfilling their needs or demands – you wouldn't have imagined it.

“In future,” she continues, “I'd hope that we'd all debate just what later life is for, while according our most vulnerable older people real respect.” And, as with the invention of childhood, this might just enrich the lives of everyone.

Timeline

1949 Born in Cornwall. Marion grows up in Kent, and goes on to read zoology at Oxford University.

1970s Works for the Council for the Protection of Rural England.

1980 Publishes her first book, *The Theft of the Countryside*, shortly after the birth of her daughter, Catherine.

1987 Marion's book on land ownership in the countryside, *This Land is Our Land*, comes out. She also presents a documentary on the theme, *Power in the Land*, on Channel 4.

1999 *A Right to Roam* is published. A year later, the Government passes the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act*.

2004 Following a struggle to secure good care for her mother in her final years, Marion publishes: *A Survival Guide to Later Life*.

2006 Is named one of *The Guardian's* top 100 green campaigners of all time.

2009 Is the first woman to win the *Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild's* Golden Eagle Award for lifetime achievement in the outdoors field.

2017 *How to Handle Later Life* (Amaranth Books) is published. In a speech at an 800th anniversary celebration of the Charter of the Forest, she calls for greater access to woodland.
