

Towards a revanchist British rural in post-COVID times? A challenge to those seeking a good countryside

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Abstract

The last decade has seen at least three still ongoing shocks impact strongly on rural Britain: Brexit, COVID-19 and the Russia–Ukraine war. This paper introduces all three of these after setting the scene prior to the 2016 Brexit vote by first summarising the seeming shift across rural Britain from productivism to post-productivism in the years after 1945. Each of the three sources of rural disruption are then described, but also argued to be building what is termed a ‘revanchist rural’. This development seeks to challenge many of the post-productivist attempts to diversify the countryside by restating a narrower conservative ‘traditional’ rural geography. It is also a rural vision largely in opposition to Mark Shucksmith’s utopian Good Countryside, introduced in the final section. However, a revanchist rural is not the only option for the British countryside in 2023 and the paper goes on to note a broader revival of debate and interest in the rural in recent years. This has let loose a variety of currents, briefly noted, more in tune with the Good Countryside, such that the future for rural Britain in 2023, it is concluded, is very much still there for the making.

KEYWORDS

Brexit, COVID, neo-productivism, rural, rural revanchism, Ukraine war

The rallying cry of the revanchist city might well be: ‘Who lost the city? And on whom is revenge to be exacted?’

(Smith, 1996, p. 227)

1 | INTRODUCTION: AN EMERGENT ALLIANCE OF RURAL DISRUPTION

A core representational element of the British countryside—beloved by many, resented by others—is its sense of timelessness, predictability and stability, providing for many people a metaphorical bolt-hole, castle or life-raft for survival within everyday life (Halfacree, 2010). While such a representation in itself merits critical scrutiny, it is today being sorely

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disrupted and questioned by the emerging and ongoing impacts of one, two and now seemingly three major challenges. Two of these are to be found across the rural world of the Global North to varying levels of significance, making them of international concern, but in Britain all three challenge any lazy consensus that may have become established of how our rural spaces are being produced, reproduced and transformed on a daily basis.

This paper briefly introduces each of these three challenges—Brexite, COVID-19 and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war—suggesting that together they comprise an alliance of rural disruption indicative of a very uncertain and unclear future for the British countryside. It is structured as follows. First, after this introduction, I give a short and tight summary of the Millennial consensus (sic.) for contemporary rural Britain that the three specific recent and ongoing challenges are subjecting to sharp questioning and possible refutation and redirection. Next, I engage with each of these challenges in turn, suggesting how they are building, albeit often roughly and inconsistently, what will be termed (inspired by Smith, 1996) a revanchist British rural. This expresses a striving—sometimes active, sometimes more passive—for a conservative ‘traditional’ countryside resistant to pressures to diversify coming from either left-liberal or right-neo-liberal interests. The concluding section, however, after suggesting that such a revanchist rural gives no support for alternative rural visions such as Shucksmith’s (2018) utopian Good Countryside, finishes by flagging up other elements that have come to prominence and are still developing in the present rural turmoil that *are* much more in tune with the Good Countryside ideal.

2 | POST-1945 RURAL BRITAIN: A PRODUCTIVISM TO POST-PRODUCTIVISM METANARRATIVE

Historically, the end of World War II in 1945 makes a suitable starting point for mapping the ongoing emergence of our ‘contemporary’ British (or wider European) countryside. This can be noted clearly with respect to agriculture (and other primary production), to people resident in the countryside, and to efforts to regulate the rural through planning. All three of these arguably consolidated and shifted—often slowly, often reluctantly—towards at least some manifestations—again often unevenly—of geographical diversity and openness towards the Millennium.

Taking agriculture first, investments and reorganisations through the war, plus the experiences of the whole country more generally in terms of food provision, paved the way for farming’s consolidation via a productivist revolution (Howkins, 2003; Marsden et al., 1993), with all that flowed from this in producing rural space. However, its overwhelming success prompted increasingly tough critical questions by the end of the last century on its direction and how this had been aided by state support. The result was a still ongoing (re-)statement of diversity across the farming landscape by size, prosperity, farming type, mechanisation and so on—and, again, also for rural space generally—expressed through terms such as post-productivism (Halfacree, 1997, 2006) and the differentiated countryside (Marsden, 1998).

Turning, second, to people resident in the contemporary British countryside, this again was soon seen to have shifted after 1945 from an initial experience of depopulation—not least as farming ‘modernised’—to being turned around by the increasingly consolidated—if, admittedly, never all-encompassing—counterurbanisation pro-rural trend (Fielding, 1982). While this latter trend may well have been (and continues to be) dominated by the middle classes, increasingly it was also noted that within the ‘new’ rural population are to be found a great diversity of ‘rural others’ alongside ‘Mr Average’ (Philo, 1992). Moreover, this diversity was also suggested via the appeal of the rural not only for residence but also for other consumption uses (Halfacree, 2014).

Thirdly, as already suggested, the state was far from sitting in the background over the post-1945 period in its consolidation of efforts to control and regulate how British rural space was being shaped. This was readily apparent within agriculture, not least from the impact of the Agriculture Act 1947 and its legacy, but extended strongly into all aspects of life. Building on the landmark Town and Country Planning Act 1947, strong top-down efforts were first made to regulate the development of rural Britain before this legislative mentality (Bauman, 1987) became increasingly challenged by a desire to give greater grassroots voice to those ‘on the ground’. These people, as already noted, were increasingly recognised as being multiply diverse when observed in detail, so that the stage was at least again set for rural diversity to come through.

Together, therefore, rural Britain circa 2000 was increasingly a place where diversity could be found, at least if read ‘for difference rather than dominance’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, pp. xxxi–xxxii; Halfacree, 2010). This was notwithstanding powerful countering trends asserting dominance, such as high house prices, service decline and limited employment that still made it a very selective space overall at the macro scale. Uneven as it clearly was, some who studied the rural could nevertheless see the value of extending the post-productivist conceptualisation away from ‘just’ agriculture to embrace rural space and its people more broadly (Halfacree, 1997, 2006).

Of course, perhaps inevitably, with diversity came contestation around who and/or what fits 'Millennial rural Britain', including a tension between more liberal appeals for promoting inclusivity, such as diversifying the ethnic make-up of rural places, and more neo-liberal calls to 'open up' rural places for diverse forms of development, for example. Certainly, however, an emerging post-productivist rural Britain was not solely 'stuck in the past' but was a dynamic and evolving space.

But what of the present and the future? Where does the contested but diverse post-productivist position stand in 2023? Is substantial change afoot? The paper now introduces the three recent aforementioned challenges that significantly raise these questions and briefly describes how they seek, intentionally or not, to disrupt any historical-geographical-experiential consensus. First up is Brexit.

3 | CHALLENGE 1: POST-BREXIT INTRODUCING RURAL REVANCHISM

Various academic commentators have written about some of the consequences from the Brexit vote in 2016 for rural Britain, many of which are still emerging, most being still quite uncertain, and with some almost certainly still missed or unappreciated (compare Little, 2021; Ojo et al., 2021; Rebanks, 2021). Here, of course, it should be noted when reading of these consequences that rural Britain as a whole voted in favour of Brexit (Halfacree, 2020).

Rural consequences of the Brexit vote most clearly and obviously start with withdrawal of the UK from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the huge funds this involved (Halfacree, 2020, 2023a), such as over 4 billion euros in 2015 (Institute for Government, 2021). To what extent quantitatively and exactly how this will be replaced via the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) (Institute for Government, 2021; Little et al., 2023) is only now finally taking shape (DEFRA, 2023). Besides CAP funding and policy, numerous other EU directives and regulations have also worked to shape the economic, social, environmental and cultural make-up of rural Britain, but are now also to be lost (Heron, 2023). All of this change, in sum, raises serious questions around many farms' viability (Attorp & Hubbard, 2023; Ojo et al., 2021), with the NAO (2019), for example, noting that nearly half would have made a loss in recent years without direct payments. The still considerable diversity of the agricultural community today, understood in its broadest sense, must surely be seen as under threat here.

Brexit's rural consequences are not solely rooted in changing agriculture subsidy and policy, however (Halfacree, 2020, 2023a). Greater legal controls on international in-migrant flows, a major stimulus for pro-Brexit voting (Clarke et al., 2017), immediately impacted on rural economies, notably the agri-food sector (Harris, 2021; Milbourne & Coulson, 2021). As early as 2017 a survey claimed horticulture had over 4000 (12.5%) unfilled labour vacancies (Guardian, 2018) and by 2022 the National Farmers' Union (2021, n.p.) saw a 'perfect storm, [with] a shortage of workers bringing to a halt the UK's just-in-time supply chains in some places'. Furthermore, loss of working age international labour migrants has also impacted on service employment in rural tourist spots, such as the Scottish Highlands (Guardian, 2021), where migrant workers have been important for caring for the growing ageing rural population. Policies are now emerging to encourage pro-rural labour migration, not least by (non-EU) international migrants, but these seem to be promoting an emphasis on labour functionality more than the development of a diverse rural population, ultimately signifying 'an ongoing process of "othering" and unsettling' (Guma & Jones, 2018, p. 7) more than diverse inclusion.

A key overarching theme, already suggested above, that emerges from these practical consequences of Brexit is how the earlier suggested momentum towards a more diverse countryside is being significantly set back by Britain's going-it-alone political stance since freeing itself from the 'shackles of Brussels' (sic.). This extends practically from, for example, loss of farmer diversity and workers settling in the British countryside to how rural Britain is represented. Specifically, in the battle of rural representations and their role in expressing and shaping rural life, a version of the ever-ubiquitous 'rural idyll', with its 'power-infused discourse of an imagined golden age of indeterminate date' (Shucksmith, 2018, p. 171), has been resurrected and/or rejuvenated, selectivity notably to the fore (Halfacree, 2020, 2023a). Within the often torrid and bitter debate that led up to (and has exceeded) the Brexit referendum, this selective 'British countryside' socio-spatial representation renewed itself as some kind of post-Brexit 'ideal' for how Britain could be when 'free' from the EU. It was, in short, a strongly conservative, even reactionary goal for a re-born distinctively different 'post-European' Britain. On 23 June 2016, the day of the Brexit ballot, voters 'went to sleep in Great Britain and woke up in Little England' (Calhoun, 2016, p. 56), an England (and Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) at least metaphorically rural in a specific but arguably less diverse way.

Going further with critical analysis of this idyllic resurgence and drawing directly on Smith's (1996) language and analysis of currents within urban gentrification, the rural idyll representation now often expresses itself within a 'revanchist

rural' (Halfacree, 2020, 2023a). Revanchism, a term derived from the French for revenge, expressed for Smith a 'broad, vengeful right-wing reaction against *both* ... "liberalism" ... and the predations of capital' (Smith, 1996, p. 43, emphasis added). In his urban usage it comes across as a kickback from a 'race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites' (Smith, 1996, p. 206), seeking to reinstate firmly the latter's power and authority. Adapted for a rural British context, the 'revanchist rural' seeks to reassert a similarly relatively narrow 'traditional' rural geography against the pushes for diversification being sought by *both* liberal and neo-liberal rural futures, as expressed in the post-productivist countryside concept or in overwhelmingly economically driven uses and shaping of rural space, respectively. A revanchist rural has increasingly 'overtaken gentrification as a script for the [rural] future ... [albeit still with] gentrification ... [an] integral part' (Smith, 1996, pp. 43–4), through feeding on the essentialist Brexit rhetoric and its rejection of the diverse 'European' rural future.

4 | CHALLENGE 2: COVID-19 SETTING BACK ACCESS TO RURAL SPACE

At first sight, the impact of the (still ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic on rural Britain probably may at first seem to challenge any narrow and exclusive essentialist revanchist momentum impacting rural Britain that had been put in motion via Brexit. However, it has often worked in favour of this reactionary attempted repossession. Certainly, as with Brexit, COVID-19's full rural significance has taken a while to be more fully noted, Reed (2021, n.p.) having observed how 'The pandemic has been framed too often through the urban experience of locked down and deserted cities, of people leaving urban life for a rural sanctuary'.

However, if we follow Reed's 'urban exiles' and consider both their subsequent rural experiences and those of pre-COVID rurally located people, we find, first, a predominantly urban Britain seemingly once again 'discovering' the rural as somewhere very much to be engaged with. But, as with matters of the heart, the joys of the resulting entanglements from rediscovery can vary considerably for the parties involved.

First, consider the COVID-19-generated recuperation (sic.) of urban people 'beyond the city' in the heterotopic space of the rural. This was generated from the notably little time it took for COVID-19 to bring to centre-stage positive values of a rural 'safe haven' (Maclaren & Philip, 2021) associated with its low population density, clean air and initially almost virus-free space. These values and their acknowledgement particularly emerged from a commonplace response to defining features of the pandemic, namely the stress, anxiety and general mental ill health problems associated with urban lockdown conditions. When the urban became thus associated, our commonplace dualistic thinking soon made people look the other way and see the opposite in the alternative of rural space. Specifically, for example, pandemic news reports quickly switched attention from bemoaning urban mental stress to observing and celebrating our countryside as a source of rejuvenation, connection and inspiration in troubled times. In summary, under COVID-19's menacing shadow, "urban" shift[ed] from places of sophistication to places of threat[,] while "rural" shift[ed] from rustic to safe' (Malatzky et al., 2020, p. 3).

Such an association very soon came to be expressed by urban residents visiting the British countryside temporarily for a fix of 'green Prozac' (Barkham, 2020) to keep them going. This manifested itself in many ways, from simply taking a country walk to a resurgence of rural raves 'in a cultural space in which to dance outside' (Ashford & O'Brien, 2022, p. 248). For some urban residents, however, a relatively short rural fix was not enough and they sought more permanent reduced urban lockdown stress through counterurban residential relocation (Marsh, 2020). While researchers are now questioning just how significant and lasting any seeming upsurge in counterurbanisation from the experience of COVID really is (Gallent et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2022)—post-lockdown experiences often not quite hitting the utopian levels perhaps at first imagined, as the poverty of much rural life, for example, is noted (Butler, 2020)—positive experiences for the 'urban exiles' can all too easily overlook the experiences of people already living in the British countryside when COVID-19 struck. Thus, the section turns, second, to those who were already 'at home' in rural Britain in 2019 and then experienced the 'shock waves' (Rowe et al., 2022, p. 12) of a pro-rural urban resurgence.

On the one hand, the 'already existing' rural population did seemingly benefit in a number of ways through COVID-19, at least in relative terms. For a start, there were economic opportunities presented by the aforementioned urban visitors, which may have helped to some extent to counter COVID-19's substantial suppression of rural tourism and hospitality. There was also talk of some rural areas expressing a blossoming of innovative community support and cohesion (Maclaren & Philip, 2021).

On the other hand, however, throughout the same period there also developed a strong sense of 'urban threat' from at least two directions. First, there was the feared potential of 'outsiders' bringing COVID-19 into rural communities. This

concern was especially targeted at second home owners and caravanners who had come into rural areas to self-isolate in a more open environment than the cities had become, with the added fear of their potential demand on often fragile social services, for example (Maclaren & Philip, 2021). While one may be understanding of such concerns, a desire to exclude 'outsiders' could soon manifest itself in much more negative ways, such as in 'tensions between traveller groups and local communities' (Ashford & O'Brien, 2022, p. 253).

Second, the spectre of more permanent in-migration of 'urban refugees' in a (post-)COVID-19 'race for space' was feared likely to amplify the sadly now 'classic' challenge for many rural families, namely to find affordable housing when financially out-competed by in-migrants' rural gentrification. A further spin on this broad historical and geographical challenge was a resurgence of the fear of 'cultural genocide' in rural Welsh-speaking communities from rising home purchases by non-Welsh-speakers (Morris, 2021).

With the shock to and temporary pausing of much of the taken-for-granted everyday operation of rural life that COVID-19 instigated, opportunities also arose to think, rethink and ideally then remodel some established British rural practices along more diverse and egalitarian lines. Results were patchy, however. For example, from the agricultural sector, as a result of COVID-19's dramatic acceleration of the loss of migrant labour that Brexit had set in play, a national attempt to persuade unemployed Britons to take up jobs in the fields or food packing plants failed spectacularly (Milbourne & Coulson, 2021). The pre-existing system simply strove to keep going and re-establish itself with a failed and still unresolved attempt to recruit different frontline workers.

Reflecting overall on the admittedly still far from certain post-COVID-19 situation, a consequence of *both* the seemingly positive offers emanating from rural areas to urban Britons and the contested experienced reality on the ground for the rural population has been further reassertion of the post-Brexit revanchist rural. In line with the latter's conservative 'traditional' representation, rural '[h]omogeneity has become safety, simplicity ... freedom, and resistance to change ... predictability' (Malatzky et al., 2020, p. 2). This revanchist association is further suggested by the resurgence of perceptions of 'rural locations as places of "whiteness"' that these researchers felt 'may have been an unspoken [additional] driver for the movement of city people to rural locations' (ibid.). Both the agents seemingly bringing about a new 'colonial countryside' (Ware, 2022) to retreat into *and* those challenging such a rural fate on the ground are thus together complicit in pushing forward further a revanchist rural Britain. This further reinforces the sense of rural Britain as an increasingly 'closed' and narrow space, as opposed to its at least nod towards greater diversity that post-productivism implied.

5 | CHALLENGE 3: WAR RETURNS TO RURAL BRITAIN

'[T]he British countryside is in a state of flux that it hasn't experienced since the Dig for Victory campaign of the Second World War ... armed conflict in Europe is once again reshaping our farms and fields' (Shirley, 2022, n.p.).

The third challenge identified as a likely significant potential force in reshaping rural Britain in the present day comes from the consequences of and issues raised by an actual war, not the invocation of a supposed Second World War 'Blitz spirit' made by both Brexiteers (Boyle et al., 2018) and politicians in the COVID pandemic (Williams, 2021). This is the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war and emanates, in particular, from the blockade of much of Ukraine and the impact of sanctions on Russia. It comes first from more explicit realisation of the fact that Ukraine is a major foodstuff exporter in peaceful times; together with Russia it accounted recently for 30% of world wheat exports (Farmers' Guide, 2022), for example. However, the ongoing war has seen a broad series of direct and interconnected knock-on effects: wheat price increases (including for livestock), higher energy/fuel and other input costs (notably fertiliser), lower CO₂ production from reduced fertiliser manufacture, disruption of food supplies and an overall sense of greater food insecurity (Farmers' Guide, 2022; Shirley, 2022).

A consequence of this perceived food security threat, in particular, is that promotion of the rural as fundamentally a food production space—even a 'neo-productivist' vision perhaps (Halfacree, 2023b)—has come to the fore in some discussions about the appropriate use of the British rural today, just as it did during earlier times of war (Howkins, 2003). A strong argument has started to emerge that support for domestic food production should be reinforced and foregrounded with, for example, NFU Cymru calling for direct 'stability payments' to grow food for the domestic market (Messenger, 2022).

Such restatement of the predominant food production role of the rural today at the expense of 'distractions', such as potentially downplaying this role via ELMS and the emerging Sustainable Farming Incentive (DEFRA, 2023) or by allowing large companies to buy up land for rewilding to offset their carbon footprint (Farmers' Guide, 2022; Messenger, 2022; Partridge, 2022; Shirley, 2022), can further work to reinforce a revanchist rural. To fit the latter, though,

food production and environmental priorities need to be seen as often strongly opposed, with choices thus having to be made in favour of one or the other. Fortunately, however, this paper's conclusion will now suggest, among other things, that such a simplistic narrative certainly does not have to be followed. A revanchist British rural is *not* inevitable.

6 | CONCLUSION: FROM A REVANCHIST RURAL FUTURE TO COUNTER-NARRATIVE INSPIRATIONS

In 2018 Mark Shucksmith suggested, as utopian provocation of what should constitute an appropriate vision for our rural future, the idea of a Good Countryside. Not least as a challenge to the rural idyll's well noted all round selectivity, his was a rival vision underpinned by four Rs:

- Repair: to all dimensions of the countryside's 'infrastructure'.
- Relatedness: meaningfully supporting diversity and difference already in the rural or which could and should be there.
- Rights: create empowered participation for all those with links to the rural.
- Re-enchantment: encouragement to celebrate the 'magic' of rural place(s).

While I suggest that all four Rs can be imagined and developed within the frame of a post-productivist countryside—although certainly none of them are inevitable—in 2023 they now run a greater risk of staying firmly distant in the utopian imagination. This is because, in contrast to Shucksmith's hopes for rural development to at least engage with Good Countryside ideals, Brexit, COVID-19 and the Russia–Ukraine war all, both independently and combined, herald an uncertainty in development that ticks few if any of his utopian boxes. Instead, we see problematic and probably hard times in the rural present, especially if—albeit sometimes unintentionally or at least in an unscripted way—rural space is consolidating around revanchism, exacting revenge on those seen as helping Britain 'lose' its traditional rural geography (drawing on Smith's opening quote of the paper). However, the paper is *not* going to end with such a conclusion. Instead, inspired by a Gibson-Graham (2006) style 'reading for difference', it notes some of what else has been and still is being stirred up for the British rural over these last few traumatic years.

A first positive observation to stress is to emphasise just how 'alive' the (British) rural is in 2023, a space clearly to be fought over through representations, practices and lives (Halfacree, 2006). In short, notwithstanding many suggestions across the present author's scholarly years that 'the rural' may be a term whose time and geography as a potent category has been and gone (e.g., Hoggart, 1990), this is not how it has been seen recently 'on the ground' for all those covered above. And while it was argued that many of those so noted are pushing overall for a revanchist rural, others with an interest in the rural of 2023 certainly do not accept any potential hegemony for such a vision. Indeed, they have also been revitalised by the British rural's resurgent presence to seek to challenge any such fate.

A useful starting point for seeing this challenge is to take up where the brief account of the rural consequences of the Russia–Ukraine war left off. Specifically, instead of seeing the current rural 'battle' as between food production and the environment, it can and must surely be noted that 'farming' and 'nature' should *not* be seen as incompatible. As a Welsh Government spokesperson recently put it, sustainable production of food and positive environmental steps should be 'complementary, not competing agendas' (quoted in Messenger, 2022, n.p.). What Shirley (2022, n.p.) describes as a 'swift and brutal' no from environmental groups to any threat to ELMs can be supported by asserting how farmers should and surely can deliver food, environmental benefits and green energy together. This is expressed through ideas such as 'regenerative agriculture' (Lal, 2020), more specifically seen in individual pioneering examples such as the Farm Carbon Toolkit (Willson, 2022) being developed as part of Wild Ken Hill's aim to 'return ... land to nature and farming sustainably in coastal west Norfolk' (Wild Ken Hill, 2023, n.p.).

Finally, although there is not space to develop them here, there is what I will term further 'anti-revanchist hope' for our rural in many other developments. These include:

- Opportunities for more home-working promoting greater diversity in rural work(ers), with more opportunities for the creative classes and so on. Entangled with this is a renewed push for 'fit-for-purpose' digital technologies in rural areas (Maclaren & Philip, 2021) frequently needed to support such developments.
- Recognising urban voices' overview on and of the rural, with the critical perspective on the status quo and suggestions for alternative developments that this can bring.

- A push for the elusive ‘rural community’ to be more fully realised through greater self-care and self-sufficiency, reflected in the success of some buy local schemes and other communitarian initiatives, not least during COVID.
- Talk, once again, about a clampdown on rural second homes, not least via council taxing them more highly (Gallent et al., 2023), and foregrounding the rural housing unaffordability issue.
- A resurgent land rights and access debate (Halfacree, 2023b), with direct actions across England and Wales, led by inspiring campaigners such as Guy Shrubsole and Nick Hayes, and their associated Right to Roam campaign. It has been picked up by more mainstream groups, such as the Council for National Parks noting how little National Park land is accessible to walkers (Horton, 2022).
- A revival in pre-Christian rural celebrations of nature and the Earth, such as wassailing, now less ‘about escape from punishing impoverishment ... [and more about] escape from the onslaught of modernity’ (Rogers, 2022, p. 7). This is truly in the spirit of Good Countryside ‘re-enchantment’!

All these diverse developments, and others surely missed here, are certainly not in the spirit or practice of any ranchist imagined rural Britain for 2023, but are much more aimed at producing a rural very much in tune with a Good Countryside. Such a rural future is there to be produced.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would especially like to thank Darren for setting up ‘The “Recovery” or “Remission” of the Post-Pandemic Countryside?’ symposium at RGS-IBG Annual Conference, Newcastle University, 2 September 2022 at which this paper was first present, plus also for being a solid friend in challenging times.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data.

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How to cite this article: Halfacree, K. (2023) Towards a revanchist British rural in post-COVID times? A challenge to those seeking a good countryside. *The Geographical Journal*, 00, 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12549>