

Flying kites a view from Wales

James Robertson

Having been away for some weeks, I find it is a joy to be home. The land which I manage is ready with surprises. Water-plantain has erupted in a pond, my first record for this species. A rock by a gateway, which 20 years ago was below the surface, has emerged through the ground as if thrust up by a subterranean force. I am reminded that there is nothing static about nature.

Last May, Joanna and I explored the Gwendraeth Valley, in Carmarthenshire, staying on a holding which had once been part of the Glyn Abbey estate. Two-and-a-half centuries ago a canal opened up the valley, and in 1804 it was replaced by a railway, which took coal (and anthracite) into Kidwelly, on the coast, where fuel was needed for the rapidly expanding tin-plate works. We walked part of the line, now much overgrown, and circled back along a network of lanes. The sun lit a troop of Southern Marsh-orchid spikes in a wet field. I climbed the gate and found Whorled Caraway among wetland plants such as Meadowsweet, Common Fleabane and Marsh Bedstraw. Confirming that all was well with the world, a Cuckoo started calling, though these days I hear it as a melancholy echo of times past.

Talking to our hosts gave us a sense of the enormous changes which had swept over the valley since the canal was built, and in particular the farming revolution of the last 50 years. Yet the place was filled with wildlife, threaded with history, with much to delight the visitor. I reflected that change happens, and is not necessarily bad.

I have mentioned before that my small farm looks out over a much larger estate farm, now let to new tenants. Their business idea is to introduce New Zealand-style dairying, in pursuit of which they have had fields drained, sprayed and reseeded, lime and fertiliser applied, hedges cut back, buildings erected, and a hill levelled to provide soil to construct miles of cattle tracks. This comes at a cost to nature and archaeology. But farming has to change, and can I really object if dairying moves to where the grass is greenest, and bovine tuberculosis is not a problem?

Perhaps not, but it is reasonable that I should object to my taxes subsidising my neighbours' enterprise, which is what is currently happening through basic farm payments. Post-CAP reform, done well, could end perverse subsidies of this sort, benefiting nature, reducing flooding and carbon emissions, and removing an obstruction to the flow of food from producer to

consumer. It could also maintain many upland or difficult farms which deliver public benefits. As a quid pro quo, most CAP bureaucracy, which achieves absolutely nothing for nature or people, should go without a backward glance. That does not mean that there is no place for advice and enforcement, but the agencies responsible need to be refreshed, and staff allowed to use their initiative.

I promised myself that I would not stray into the sad affairs of the failed agency known as Natural Resources Wales (or Not Really Working), but the results of its latest staff-morale survey require a mention. NRW management's ratings in the first survey last year were dismal. This year they are abysmal: the proportion of staff having confidence in senior managers' decisions has halved to just 11%. That's about the same as the proportion of senior managers. With massive changes on the horizon after Brexit, the time may be right for the creation of an independent, evidence-based, people-friendly Welsh environmental organisation. Step forward CCW mark 2.

CCW's first Chief Executive was the belligerent yet charismatic visionary Ian Mercer. His obituary in the *Guardian* drew attention to his sterling efforts to integrate the countryside and conservation parts of the organisation's remit. Former staff will smile at this. Ian's

natural element was the farmhouse kitchen, not the board room, and his disdain for 'Victorian naturalists', as he characterised former NCC staff, applied equally to those like me who welcomed the merger of the then Countryside Commission and Nature Conservancy Council remits. He had many good ideas, and could be wonderful company if you were on the right side of him. If not, he would turn on you with the look of a maddened bull, and bellow 'I hear the sound of grinding axes'. These were usually his own.

Yet there is much to credit him with, and I was sad to hear of his passing. He influenced real places and living things, as good a legacy as I can imagine. Over the ridge from my mix of wetland, woodland and meadow habitats is a great reedbed, the result of a partnership between nature and skilful, dedicated RSPB wardens over two decades. Earlier this year I had my first sighting there of a Marsh Harrier, back as a Welsh breeding bird after a 40-year gap, and Bitterns are breeding on Anglesey once again. Now there is a change to celebrate.

