Water shortage in Somerset, 1935

GOING GREEN

SUSTAINABILITY PAST & PRESENT

For more than 150 years, unease has been voiced at the clash between human activity and the natural world.

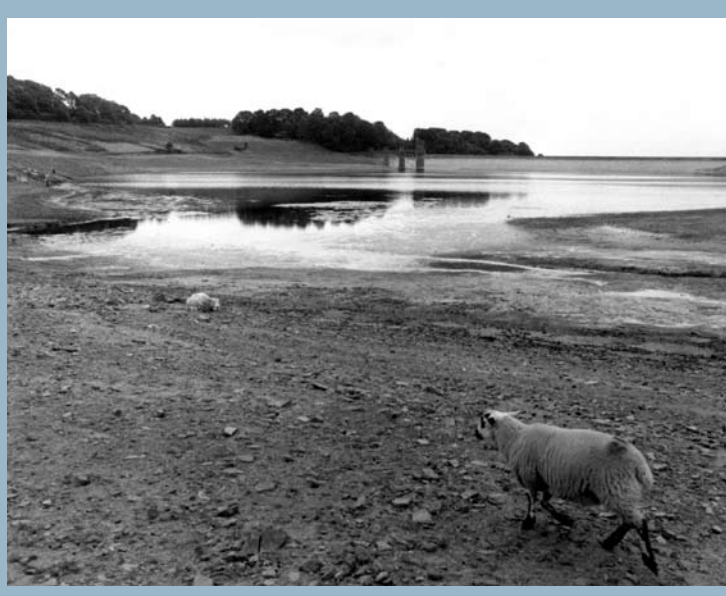
The modern environmental movement emerged in the 1960s, initially over concerns about the effects of chemical pesticides. Organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace date from the early 1970s and the first Earth Summit was held in 1972.

The term *sustainable development* first appeared in 1987 and was defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

In the 2000s, everyone is talking about the future of the planet. This exhibition attempts to present parts of the Museum's collection within the context of today's debate.

Deep snow drifts on the Whitby moors, February 1963

Storm damage in Essex, September 1935



Dangerously low reservoir in August, 1976

CLIMATE CHANGE

There have been famous extremes of climate over the last century. The great floods of 1953 devastated eastern England and killed over 300 people. In the winter of 1962/3, the coldest since 1795, even the sea froze in Kent and the west country saw snow drifts six metres deep. The long hot summer of 1976 remains unsurpassed and the Great Storm of 1987 felled 15 million trees.

Global warming is now likely to affect long term weather patterns. Attention has focused on the part played in this process by the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

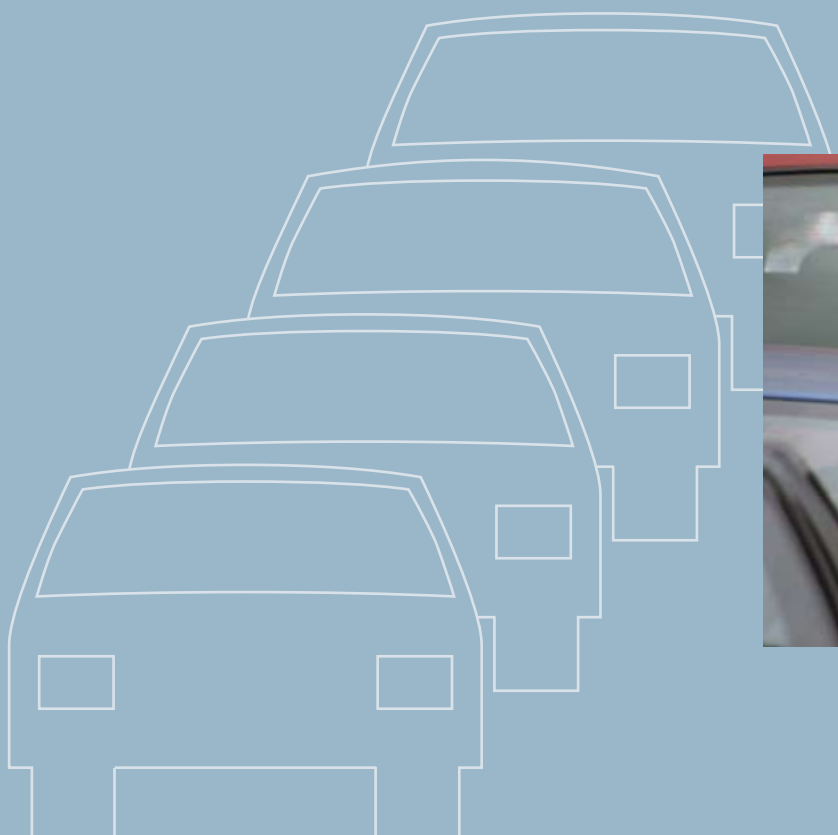
The school run, 1950s style

TRANSPORT

Renewable transport
hauling renewable fuel

A century ago, three million horses still provided a sustainable form of local transport. Horses are powered by a renewable fuel and produce waste that can be recycled. In rural districts, adults and children commonly walked or cycled many miles on a daily basis to get to work or school.

Motor vehicles – there are 33 million on British roads alone – are today major contributors to greenhouse gases. Cleaner engines, alternative fuels, fewer journeys, and a switch to more sustainable forms of transport are part of the solution.



Recycling scrap metal was given great prominence in World War Two.

RECYCLING

In less affluent times, re-using materials was often a matter of necessity. Clothes were handed down through the family, and ultimately could be re-cycled into rag rugs. Great skill was taken to repair articles or re-work them into something else. Packaging was often made from biodegradable material such as wood or basketry.

Each household in Britain today throws away about 1.2 tonnes of waste a year. Currently only about a quarter of this is re-cycled and much of the rest goes to landfill sites.

A village watermill

Milking by hand in Surrey, 1930

RENEWABLE ENERGY

The Victorian sky was clouded by the smoke from coal fires and furnaces. Coal-fired steam engines even found their way onto farms, to be replaced by oil-fuelled tractors. But wind and water have also been used as a source of power for centuries. Biomass, in the form of plant matter, animal fats, and wood, have been burned to provide heat, light and warmth. Hand power was the commonest form of renewable energy for tasks big and small that have since become motorised.

Exploiting renewable sources of energy, such as wind, wave and solar power, is now vital because they cause less pollution and will not run out.

A ‘spraycopter’ at work, 1948

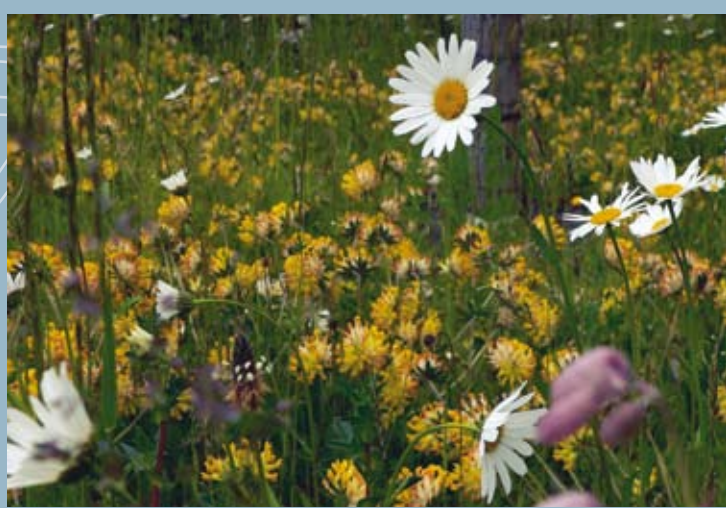
Nicotine gassing a crop of strawberries, 1943

Spraying apple trees in blossom to kill weevil, 1950

BIODIVERSITY

Plants, animals and landscape have all been subject to human intervention. Sometimes, perhaps, it has gone too far. Intense selective breeding of cattle and pigs in the early 1800s, for example, produced grossly fat prize animals. The drive for more efficient farm production, in developing new controls of disease and pests or in using bigger machines on bigger fields, could result in unforeseen consequences for native flora and fauna.

Farmers today are increasingly being rewarded for protecting habitats. Further scientific manipulation of nature through genetic modification remains controversial. Development pressures on the countryside continue to threaten wildlife.



Washday at Little Faringdon, Glos, 1935

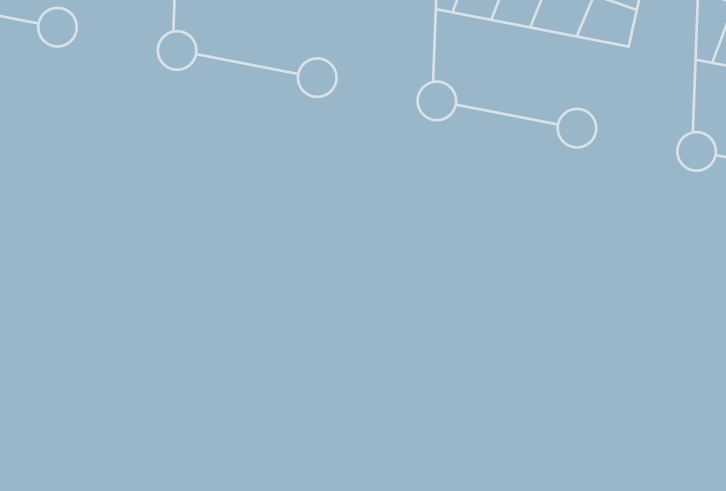
Water shortage in Somerset, 1935

WATER

Water shortages are not new. But water usage per head was much less before the twentieth century when it was rare for ordinary homes to have inside toilets and bathrooms, or even a tap. Improvements to health and sanitation through the plentiful supply of clean water has been a great civilising achievement of the last hundred years.

Today, we are each using about 160 litres of clean water a day. Only a small part of this, perhaps 15 litres, is for drinking and cooking. Looking after the water supply and using it wisely is one of society's greatest challenges.

Small-scale cheesemaking in Lancashire, 1949.
A record of each cheese was kept in a log.



A local livestock market

By the late 19th century, Britain was heavily dependent on imported food supplies.

FOOD

As a trading nation, England has long relied on food imports. From the 1870s, refrigeration enabled fresh meat and dairy products to be brought in from South America and Australia. A century ago, only a quarter of our wheat and cheese, and half our beef and lamb, were home produced.

By contrast, local markets and retailers remained as important links in the food chain. In rural areas, the cottage pig provided both a means of recycling waste and a source of food on the spot.

Today, the quality of our food and the distance that it travels to the plate are key issues in the sustainability debate.

Village wheelwrights at Marnhull, Dorset, 1938, serving a local market

May day celebrations,
Sulham School, Berkshire, 1916

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Small rural communities were once relatively self-sustaining. Villages had their own shops, trades and crafts serving the needs of the immediate area. These in turn drew on local supplies of food and raw materials and provided employment for the inhabitants. The villages were clustered around market towns which were the link for trade and communication with a wider world.

Village communities are less sustainable today. Modern farming employs less workers. More second homes and holiday cottages have resulted in fewer permanent residents to support shops, schools and other local services.

This Somerset lady photographed in 1911 (she died aged 92) was born in the same house and had never gone more than 10 miles from her village.

The carbon footprint of this rural couple in the 1880s would have been very low but in return they burned solid fuel inefficiently, lived in a smoky atmosphere in the winter, and put up with inadequate lighting.

LIFESTYLE

For many English people, life in the past was often short and hard with little opportunity for leisure or recreation beyond what they could provide for themselves. Animals, too, could be over-worked or badly treated to a level that we would find unacceptable today.

The modern consumer lifestyle depends more on goods shipped from around the world, on electronic entertainments, holidays in far away places, and high intakes of food and drink. Greater awareness of the effects of all this on the environment, on our own and other people's lives, and on the world's resources is now the order of the day.