

Changes in rural settlement in Britain

Within the British Isles, there are areas, especially those nearer to urban centres, where the rural population is increasing and others, usually in more remote locations, where the rural population is decreasing (rural depopulation). These population changes affect the size, morphology and functions of villages. Figure 14.20 shows that there is some relationship between the type and rate of change in a rural settlement and its distance from, and accessibility to, a large urban area.

Accessibility to urban centres

As public and private transport improved during the inter-war period (1919–39), British cities expanded into the surrounding countryside at a rapid and uncontrolled rate. In an attempt to prevent this urban sprawl, a **green belt** was created around London following the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. The concept of a green belt, later applied to most of Britain's conurbations, was to restrict the erection of houses and other buildings and to preserve and conserve areas of countryside for farming and recreational purposes.

Beyond the green belt, **new towns** and **overspill towns** were built, initially to accommodate new arrivals seeking work in the nearby city and, later, those forced to leave it due to various redevelopment schemes. These new settlements, designed to become self-supporting both economically and socially, developed urban characteristics and functions. New towns, overspill and green belts were part of a wider land-use planning process which aimed to manage urban growth (compare Figure 14.22).

Meanwhile, despite the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act, uncontrolled growth also

continued in many small villages beyond the green belt. Referred to during the inter-war period as **dormitory** or **commuter villages** (page 375), these settlements have increasingly adopted some of the characteristics of nearby urban areas and have been termed **suburbanised villages**. Figure 14.21 lists some of the changes which occur as a village becomes increasingly suburbanised.

Less accessible settlements

These villages are further in distance from, or have poorer transport links to, the nearest city, i.e. they are beyond commuting range. This makes the journey longer in time, more expensive and less convenient. Though these villages may be relatively stable in size, their social and economic make-up is changing. Many in the younger age groups move out, pushed by a shortage of jobs and social life. They are replaced by retired people seeking quietness and a pleasant environment but who often do not realise that rural areas lack many of the services required by the elderly such as shops, buses, doctors and libraries.

Villages in National Parks and other areas of attractive scenery in upland or coastal areas are being changed by the increased popularity of **second** or **holiday homes** (Figure 14.20 and Places 50). Wealthy urban dwellers, seeking relaxation away from the stress of their own working and living environment, have bought vacant properties at prices that local people cannot afford. While this may improve trade at the village shop and pub during holiday periods, and improve the quality of some buildings, it often means local people cannot afford the inflated house prices, properties standing empty for much of the year, many jobs being seasonal, and an end of public transport.

Figure 14.20
Rural settlements and distance from large urban areas (after Cloke, 1977; see page 393)

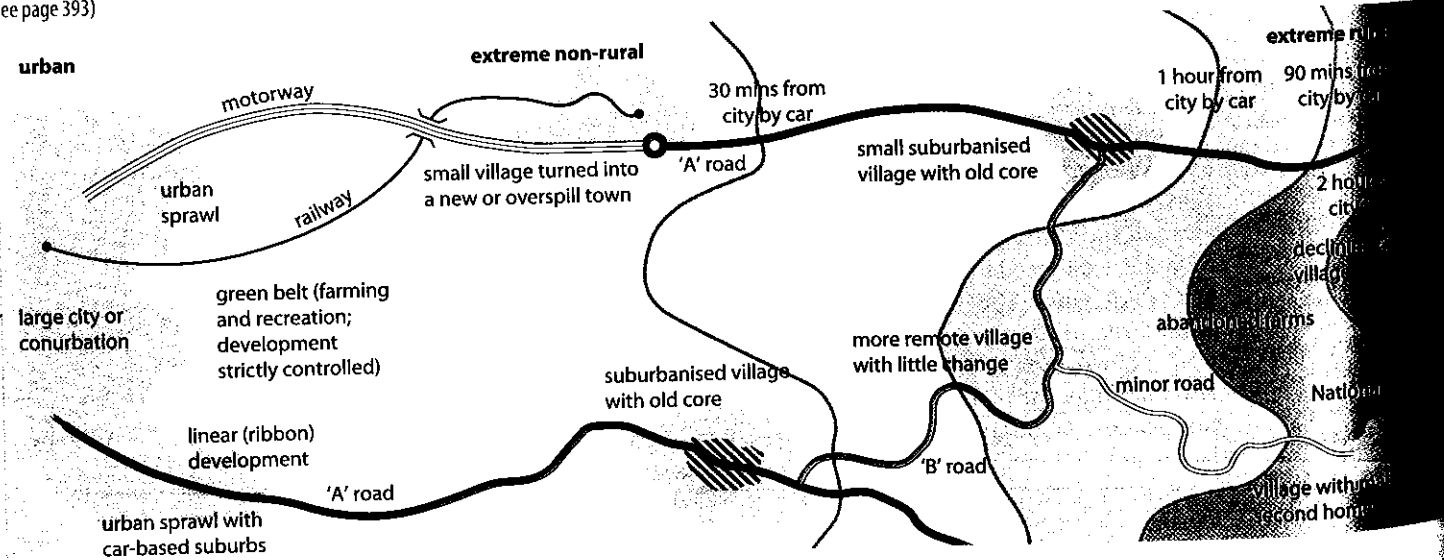


Figure 14.21
Social, economic and environmental change in British villages

Characteristic	Extreme non-rural (increasingly suburbanised)	Original village	Extreme rural (increasingly depopulated)
Housing	Many new detached houses, semi-detached houses and bungalows; renovated barns and cottages; expensive estates	Detached, stone-built houses/cottages with slate/thatch roofs; some farms, many over 200 years old; barns	Poor housing lacking basic amenities; old stone houses, some derelict, some converted into holiday/second homes
Population structure	Young/middle-aged married couples with children; very few born in village; professional/executive groups; some wealthy retired people	An ageing population; most born in village; labouring/manual groups	Mainly elderly/retired; born and lived all life locally; labouring/manual groups; younger people have moved away
Employment	New light industry (high-tech and food processing); good salaries; many commuters (well-paid); tourist shops	Farming and other primary activities (forestry, mining); low-paid local jobs	Low-paid; unemployment; farming jobs (declining if in marginal areas) and other primary activities; some tourist-related jobs
Transport	Good bus service (unless reduced by private car); most families have one or two cars; improved roads	Bus service (limited); some cars; narrow/winding roads	No public transport; poor roads
Services	More shops; enlarged school; modern public houses/restaurants; garage	Village shop; small junior school; public house; village hall	Shop and school closed; perhaps a public house
Community/social	Local community swamped; division between local people and newcomers; may be deserted during day (commuters absent)	Close-knit community (many are related)	A small community; more isolated
Environment	Increase in noise and pollution, especially from traffic; loss of farmland/open space	Quiet, relatively pollution-free	Quiet; increase in conserved areas (National Parks/forestry)

Remote areas

These areas suffer from a population loss which, by leaving houses empty and villages decreasing in size, adds to the problems of rural deprivation (Figure 14.21 and Places 50). Resultant problems include a lack of job opportunities, fewer services and poor transport facilities. Employment is often limited to the shrinking primary industries

which are low-paid and lack future prospects. The cost of providing services to remote areas is high, and there is often insufficient demand to keep the local shop or village school open. With fewer inhabitants to use public transport, bus services may decline or stop altogether, forcing people to move to more accessible areas.

Places 50 Bickington, Devon: a village

Bickington is a village of some 270 residents set on the edge of Dartmoor National Park. Now by-passed by the busy A38 road, it encapsulates most of the problems faced by many small rural settlements. Until recently it was a thriving farming community with its own post office, pub, garage, two churches, a children's nursery and a police house. Today, apart from an ailing village hall and the one remaining church, which has had to advertise for more worshippers, all have gone.

Bickington's location in such an attractive area has meant that property prices have been driven up far beyond the reach of local people and planning restrictions have meant no new affordable housing has been built. Without public transport, inhabitants have become increasingly reliant on the car and, by travelling to supermarkets and other public amenities in nearby Newton Abbot or further afield in Exeter, have caused the closure of the village shop, pub and post office. Meanwhile the nursery group, run in the

church hall, was forced to close after government inspectors demanded improvements to the building that the church could not afford. The positive sign in 2008 is that the local community realises the need for radical action and is about to ask for exceptional permission to build affordable homes in the village, covenanted and price-capped so that they can only be sold to local workers, and to group together with five other nearby villages to share facilities.

Bickington's problems are shared by villages across the country. The Commission for Rural Communities claims that in villages each year 800 shops, 400 garages, over 100 churches and 7 primary schools close, while 27 village pubs close each week. Added to this, 95 per cent of village halls are struggling and most of the few remaining village hospitals are under threat. To many villages the death-knell may be the government's decision, in 2008, to close most village post offices, many of which had doubled up as the local shop.