

Press release

New book asks: Should walkers have to take a countryside test?

Should walkers and ramblers be required to take a compulsory test before venturing out into the countryside? A sort of driving test, one which would assess their walking knowledge and competence? That's the suggestion floated by award winning outdoor writer Andrew Bibby at one point in his new book on Scottish and English border landscapes, **The Borders: The Lands We Share**.

Andrew Bibby admits that his proposal is intended to be tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless he says: "It's always struck me as a little surprising that many people who enjoy walking in our beautiful countryside don't take more of an interest in the way that the land is being used economically, particularly for farming. A little test for walkers on how the new agricultural subsidies work, and how upland farmers in particular are trying to survive financially – well, why not?"

Andrew Bibby's book offers an accessible and more enjoyable alternative to the potential need to cram for such a test. In a fascinating chapter on the issues currently facing hill farmers he communicates in lay terms the complex story of how the replacement to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is being developed – with his task helped at one point by an analogy to the toppings on a pizza.

Farming is the focus of just one of the twenty-one chapters in the book, however. "My aim is to try to interpret why the landscapes on both sides of the Scottish and English border look the way they do, and that has meant looking at a wide range of land issues," he says. There are chapters dedicated, for example, to exploring what's happening with woodlands and commercial forestry, with peatland degradation and restoration, and with nature conservation and the loss of biodiversity. The author also analyses how our national parks are faring and how the long and hard-fought campaign for the right to walk freely in the countryside has developed separately in Scotland and England.

Andrew Bibby explores in particular the effects that climate change is already having on our landscapes. “The last few years have seen a massive growth in the market for carbon offsetting by companies who are buying future credits in carbon which – it is hoped - will be captured in due course in newly planted forests. This is having the effect of driving up land values and changing the look of our land. We certainly need to need to get carbon out of the atmosphere but many people argue that companies are taking an easy way out by buying carbon credits when first they should be focusing on reducing their emissions.”

As a thread running through Andrew Bibby’s book is the two-hundred mile backpacking walk he undertook from Edinburgh Castle south through Peebles, Selkirk, Melrose and Jedburgh to the English border and then further south through Hexham, Barnard Castle and Richmond until he eventually met the old Great North Road at the river Swale. “Walking has its own rhythm, a slow rhythm, one which allows you the time you need to absorb what you see. After a day or two of steady walking life settles down to a quieter pace. Although I hope that this is more than simply a book about a walk I don’t think I’d have been able to write it if I hadn’t first explored the land on foot,” he says.

So why has the book been given the title ‘The Lands We Share’? Andrew Bibby says that he is not trying to gainsay the significance which the Scottish/English border plays both economically and politically. What he does claim, however, is that the responsibility of tackling the two great global challenges we currently face – that of combating global warming and reversing the decline in biodiversity – is one that we all share, whichever side of the border we live on.

He argues too that our landscapes are something shared through time. “We share this countryside with all those past generations who also made their mark on the land, back to the days of the Romans and even earlier times. They changed the look of the land in their efforts to survive and prosper. We need to cherish the landscapes we have inherited from them, and pass them on to future generations in as healthy a state as possible,” he says.

The book **The Borders: The Lands We Share** is published on March 1st by Gritstone Publishing and will be available from bookshops and other outlets (£15). Andrew Bibby's previous books on landscape issues include the very well-reviewed **The Backbone of England: Landscape and Life on the Pennine Watershed** and **Back Roads through Middle England**, winner of the Outdoor Book of the Year for 2018.

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Editor's notes:

Review copies can be requested at gritstonecoop@gmail.com. Images and other material (including a PDF of the book) are available from www.gritstonecoop.co.uk/media-resources/ using the password 'media'. Andrew Bibby can be contacted on 07989 965315, andrew@andrewbibby.com.