Title: 'As relevant as banning polo in Greenland' (George 1999:41). The

absence of ethnographic insight into country sports in the UK.

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Key words.

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Abstract.

The article argues for the reinvigoration of sociological and ethnographic interest in the rural. It makes this case in three stages. First, Newby's work is used to demonstrate early ethnographic insight into the rural. The second stage then critiques the missed ethnographic opportunities in contemporary qualitative studies of country sports. Finally, new empirical visual research findings on gamekeeping in the United Kingdom are introduced to demonstrate what an ethnographic approach *can* bring to rural studies. It concludes with the argument that the contested and differentiated nature of the British countryside warrants greater sociological interest and that ethnographic research is well positioned to offer rich insights.

Introduction.

In 1990, Hamilton noted the lack "'demand' for […] [rural] sociology – either from the agricultural sector or rural society, but more significantly, none from the profession of sociology itself" (Hamilton, 1990:229). Such a lack of prominence for UK rural sociology is surprising given the flourishing status of United States and UK cultural and human geography rural studies[1] and the degree of change facing rural areas. The latter includes new structural cleavages such as environmentalism and amenity pressures, conflicts over land use and the reconfiguration of rural agencies as well as the traumas of foot-and-mouth disease, bovine tuberculosis and badgers, hunting and the current diagnosis of avian flu in the UK wild bird population. Most profound of all, the impact of European-level Common Agricultural Policy reform and

the decline of the dominant 'productivist' paradigm in agriculture is set to transform the economic basis of agriculture with an inevitable impact upon rural societies.

Collectively, these factors create an opportunity – even a demand – for sociology to contribute to rural research. Given the climate, the English rural village alone needs to be problematised to examine a 'post-productivist' rural economy no longer dominated by agriculture, but with an increasing emphasis upon leisure and non-agrarian forms of work. This article argues that ethnography is well positioned to examine such complexities and demonstrates this via a three-stage thesis. First, a retrospective of an early British rural sociologist, Howard Newby, is used to show what theoretical insights a rural ethnography can yield (Newby 1977a, 1977b, Newby et al. 1978, Newby 1985). Secondly, the contemporary issue of hunting in the UK via qualitative research is explored and evaluated (Cox et al. 1994, Cox and Winter 1997, Milbourne 2003a, 2003b) and critiques their reach and drawbacks. The article finally introduces new fieldwork experiments with visual data exploring game shooting and argues that ethnography can challenge our taken-for-granted perception of rural life by unravelling the rituals, practices and meanings of hither-to neglected rural issues. The article concludes that ethnography can show the contradictions and myths surrounding the rural and that visual research techniques have a useful part to play.

I. Newby and the Deferential Worker Thesis.

The deferential worker thesis was based upon Newby's doctoral field research on the social situation of farm workers. Conducted in the 1970s, Newby's work can retrospectively be positioned alongside a new wave of qualitative research in sociology: in crime (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973), health (Dingwall 1976, Atkinson 1997 [1981]) and education (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970, Lambart

1970). Yet Newby's approach differed from, for example, the social anthropology of Gluckman's Manchester School educational case studies (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970, Lambart 1970) as Newby perceived his research to be an occupational case study. As such, he drew heavily upon Lockwood's (1966) occupational research, rather than the community or village-based studies that characterised early rural sociology (cf. Williams 1956, Dennis et al. 1956, Frankenberg 1957). In doing so, he avoided an excessive emphasis upon geographic milieu that others had been critiqued (Pahl 1968).

The study, initially, blended quantitative and qualitative research methods and it was only during the fieldwork that the project became primarily qualitative (Newby 1977a, 1977b). Whilst living with a farm worker's family in rural East Anglia for six months, Newby compiled a detailed survey and conducted extended structured interviews with farm workers.[2] The residential nature of his fieldwork became significant as it drew him into the daily round or social activities of the local farming community. For example, he attended local events and attempted to blend into the rural social scene by wearing his hair shorter than was then the fashion (Newby 1977b). It was this observational data and his focus upon occupation drew his attention to the hierarchical power structures between landowner and farm worker. He perceived the highly uneven distribution of rewards between employer and employee – essentially bourgeoisie and proletariat relations in an agricultural context. This concern with the manifestation and maintenance of class relations was formalised by the application of the then emergent theoretical ideas in the UK of Erving Goffman. In its simplest terms, the deferential worker thesis is Goffman's work on deference and demeanour (Goffman 1956) applied to the farm labourer.

The influence of Newby's fieldwork and its interactional richness was key in the development of the deferential worker thesis. The deferential thesis unravelled contractual bargaining or negotiation between the two class groups, which he termed paternalistic authority. This interest in the *negotiation* of paternalistic authority then led the interviews came to take prominence over the social survey during the course of the fieldwork, to the extent that 'the survey' became a means by which to explain his presence in the field. In this sense, the more generic observations of the social situation of farm workers refined his original focus. We are made privy to some of the exchanges he witnessed, such as the disinterest of a landowner's son who exchanged pleasantries with a farm worker's family, noting that "they obviously had no interest whatsoever in the conversation. I found their demeanour condescending in the extreme and deeply offensive" whilst the farm worker's family did not (Newby, 1977b:125).

The dialectic between theoretical ideas and qualitative data formed the basis of the deferential worker thesis' premise: that paternalistic forms of authority were generated through their everyday interactions with the farm-workers. The thesis applied the term 'total situation' (a blend of Goffman's 1961 total institution with Thomas' 1927 definition of the situation) to capture the systems of constraint and exploitation facing the farm worker. Paternalism, for Newby meant the use of traditional forms of authority outside the work situation to enable landowners or farmers to obtain the identification of their employees, the result of which was that paternalistic relationships continued to operate beyond the sphere of work:

> The creation of the farm as a greedy institution[3] thus promotes the
> stabilization of deference relationships by limiting access to alternative
> definitions of the situation, while constantly promoting on a personal basis

those definitions more conducive to reinforcing the legitimacy of the employer.

<div align="right">(Newby 1977a:428)</div>

Newby's (1977a) unravelled how a paternalistic web was achieved by farmers both through geographic proximity to the farm and also ideologically by providing definitions of the situation. For example, Newby's (1977a) explicated the interactional systems through which deference was achieved. These included good communication; a constant interpretation of the work situation in such a way as to reinforce harmony and identification; close personal contact and; the organizational structure of the farm itself:

> part of the expected obligations upon employers which deference entails is the recognition of duties beyond the minimum level necessary under the agreed terms of contract. Because they go beyond the formal wage bargain any extra rewards are typically regarded as gifts and are attributed to the generosity of the employer. In return they are expected to evoke feelings of gratitude and affection among employees. In monetary terms such gifts – pleasant housing conditions, occasional farm produce, the free use of farm implements and facilities, presents at Christmas, periodic 'treats' of various kinds – may not amount to much, but their symbolic importance is inestimable.

<div align="right">(Newby 1977a:429)</div>

Collectively, Newby argued that paternalism when performed on an interactional level 'thus tends to disguise, however imperfectly, fundamental conflicts of interest and to mediate, however unjustly, between one class and another' (Newby

<div align="right">6</div>

1977:430). The deferential thesis therefore captured how personal and pervasive, facework and interaction was key in the achievement of deference and therefore the maintenance of hierarchical relations:

> Ultimately the structure of the [farmers'] relationship with his workers, however matey its content, is an extremely hierarchical one. […] He must convey the correct mixture of social intimacy and social distance which will enable the exercise of his authority to proceed smoothly. Much of this involves the ostensibly petty nuances of behaviour – demeanour rather than articulated speech.
>
> (Newby *et al* 1978:179)

Newby (1977a), in effect, produced an occupational study that blended Marxist concerns with class relations with the social significance of geographic location and the fine nuances of facework. Whilst other commentators have labelled Newby's approach as neo-Weberian (Crow et al. 1990), in the case of the deferential worker, the influences shift through the course of the study and when the outcome is compared with Newby's original intentions it can be seen to have become an ethnographic and interactionist thesis almost unwittingly.

In his latter work with colleagues at Essex, Newby further developed the thesis to link the farmer's type of management with the size of their estate or holding:

> Most farmers are quite prepared to construct an intricate web of paternalistic labour relations in order to obtain the identification of their workers; on the smaller farms this will occur spontaneously out of the much closer

involvement of employers and employees in the work situation, whereas on the larger farms it is often a matter of conscious or unconscious policy.

<div align="right">(Newby et al. 1978:189)</div>

This work continued to explicate how deference characterised rural social exchanges but in a rapidly changing agricultural sector. For example, as the size of farms increases and their increased scale of business begin to lose the high level of interpersonal contact, Newby and his colleagues explicated how employers took steps to mitigate the consequences and that this accounted for the higher degree of involvement in the lives of workers outside the work situation. On smaller farms, in contrast, contact in the work situation often remained so continuous that there was no need, or even desire, to continue it outside. Therefore, technological advancements granted farm workers more workplace autonomy, yet Newby's et al.'s (1978) unravelled how such developments made it even more imperative that farm workers possessed a set of beliefs and values that would not lead them to be uncooperative. Newby et al. (1978) explicated the values and beliefs that farmers wished to promote through metaphors such as team/ family/ community/ partnership:

Once the correct team spirit is inculcated […] then the whole system will run reasonably smoothly. Farmers will be pleased to consult their workers for they will usually be given the advice they want to hear.

<div align="right">(Newby *et al* 1978:175)</div>

In his final, more essayistic, rural work, Newby offered a broader commentary. Whilst new field research data was absent, his analysis nevertheless remained concerned with power and the interaction order. He noted that 'English rural society

is no longer entirely, nor even predominantly, an agrarian society' and the resultant disappearance of the village occupational community (Newby 1985:183):

> there was another community, a locally based working-class sub-culture, which excluded 'them' in authority. This subculture represented the core of the occupational community. It was basically a neighbourly association of kin and workmates, not dissimilar to that which existed in many urban working-class neighbourhoods, but which the outsider could find virtually impenetrable. It was sustained by the isolation of the rural village, by the strong kinship links between the village inhabitants and by the need for cooperation in times of family crisis [...] *it forged out of the overlap between workplace and village [...] relationships established at work spilled into leisure hours [...] the accepted code of behaviour [...] followed in the village also applied in the work situation*.
>
> (Newby 1985:159-160, emphasis added)

Newby argued that 'social change in the village has [...] accompanied the upheavals in the nature of agricultural work itself' and as a result 'the agricultural worker, however, reacts to the possibility of being deprived of his former status in his own village by changing the rules of the competition. [...] The basis of length of residence is one of the few ways in which local workers can retain any of their old status in the village (Newby 1985:183, 169). In this sense, the territories had shifted towards emergent tensions between newcomers ('furriners') and rural folk.

The legacy Newby lays down for rural sociology is dynamic, empirically-based and theoretically sustained and unhindered by an undue emphasis on locale. The early insights of ethnographically-informed research formed the basis of subsequent

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research expanded to a much larger scale. His work provided a dynamic model of change how old systems of patronage were being phased out by new technologies and how new systems of maintaining a work ethic were generated *beyond* the constant supervision and monitoring of work. In his final works, the implications of the increasing dominance of non-agricultural, affluent newcomers, to whom a well-ploughed field is indistinguishable from one poorly ploughed, were considered. Throughout, power has remained central in the observational nuances of seemingly civil exchanges between landowner and long-term village residents. This emphasis upon the 'importance of such personally transmitted definitions of the situation' shows what ethnographically-informed research can bring to rural studies (Newby 1977a:426). The article now seeks to develop this thesis further and show what qualitative research can bring to contemporary rural studies. It evaluates the contributions of contemporary qualitative research in rural studies on the contentious issue of country sports.

II. Qualitative treatments of country sports in the UK: the case of hunting.

UK country sports comprise of hunting, shooting and fishing. The methodological approaches of studies engaging with hunting are considered here, largely due to a lack of literature approaching these other activities. The climate is one in which considerable scrutiny is being placed on the hunting community, one year following the ban. The ban on hunting came into force on the 19th of February 2005 and followed an election pledge first made by New Labour in 1997. This government had first commissioned a portfolio of research bridging the natural and social sciences and this and other funded qualitative research is evaluated here.

The Burns Inquiry (chaired by Lord Burns) awarded social science research contracts to researchers at Cardiff University (headed by Paul Milbourne) and a Bath University/ Royal Agricultural College (RAC) consortium.

Milbourne and his colleagues at the Department of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University and with the assistance of Market and Opinion Research International (MORI), explored 'the effects of hunting with dogs on the social and cultural life of the countryside in England and Wales' (Home Office 2000). Their remit therefore explored:

> firstly, […] what *involvement* or contact individuals in different hunt localities have with hunting and its associated social activities; secondly, to explore *what impact hunting and these activities have on their lives*; and thirdly, to examine *attitudes* towards hunting and related activities.
>
> (Milbourne, 2003a:161, emphasis added)

Milbourne's (2003a, 2003b) methodology included material supplied by the local hunts in four selected study areas (Cumbria, Leicestershire, Powys and Exmoor); interviews with key local citizens (parish/ community councils); structured interviews with households across the four areas (N=617) and; semi-structured interviews with a further sample of participants drawn from the structured interviews. Such techniques reveal that he 'approached the issue of hunting from the perspectives of the broader rural community' and this is reflected in the findings, namely, an emphasis upon understanding communities *inside* communities (Milbourne 2003a:161). Milbourne's (2003a, 2003b) findings outlined the means by which dominant discourses about hunting in hunt countries overcame local non-hunting residents' opposition to the local hunt.

Milbourne's research was embedded in traditional forms of social research and made no claims to be ethnography, nevertheless, his approach succeeded in layering the different cultures co-existing within rural communities. This served to show that different understandings of hunts and hunting practices (within hunt countries) were not necessarily derived from firsthand experiences:

> knowledge was not derived not from any personal participation in the practice, but from residence within the local areas that have long histories of hunting. Consequently, hunting had become an embedded part of the local rural social fabric.

> (Milbourne 1993a:164)

Milbourne's account demonstrated the new pluralism within rural communities, by showing that cultural understandings of traditional rural activities are as diverse as the groups within that population. In respect to hunting, 'dominant discourses of nature exhibit strong references to rurality and located within these natural discourses of rurality are powerful images of hunting' (Milbourne, 2003a:169). That is, attitudes towards hunting are associated with dominant ideas of nature and 'passive knowledge of hunting' is therefore intertwined with complex socio-natural constructions of rurality (Milbourne, 2003a:170).

Milbourne's findings are interesting the manner in which they outline a complex vision of the rural in which competing notions of 'valid' rural activities co-exist. Whilst there is an emphasis upon fine-grain detail such as dominant discourses the methodological underpinnings of his account are nevertheless problematic. For example, the means by which he sought to complement his survey data with further

interviews and the selection of social involvement indicators are questionable. His sample for semi-structured interviews was drawn from those who had already participated in the household structured interview phase of the research whom had indicated a willingness to take part, 'potential interviewees were drawn from those residents who had responded to the household survey ([N=]617) and who had agreed to take part in the second phase of the research ([N=]231)' (Milbourne, 2003a:162). Whilst a sample of over two hundred interviews is indeed substantial, Milbourne (2003a) relied upon a self-selected sample to comment upon a highly contentious issue. Whilst he stated his concern to counter previous studies that focused solely upon on the participants and elite hunts, the manner in which the rural community was accessed was far from reflexive. Again, in relation to the selections of indicators, he concluded that the local public house and local church were more socially significant, on the basis that they had been more regularly frequented. That is, participants had visited them over the 12 months preceding the survey with the caveat that the 'question asked related to social events specifically organised by the pub, and not those organised by other bodies and taking place there' (Milbourne, 2003a:167). However, such events could constitute events as significant as an annual beer festival at the pub and a flower festival at the local church – none of which indicate that the church or pub occupies a regular or significant part of local resident's lives. Finally, he somewhat naively cites MORI poll results which were funded by expressly anti-hunting, political campaigning organisations (the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Campaigning to Protect Hunted Animals). The findings of politically-motivated surveys has been attacked by both pro- and anti- hunting organisations alike (Countryside Alliance 2004, League Against Cruel Sports 2004). On this basis, questions must be raised concerning the validity of his results vis-à-vis his initial remit.

In summary, Milbourne's conclusions succeeded in placing hunting in its community context and drew upon diverse case studies from elite hunts to small-scaled hunts, yet little more is revealed than that 'new middle-class groups are conforming to existing dominant cultures of hunting within these areas' (Milbourne 2003a:169). On what basis this conformity is achieved, remains unclear.

An alternative methodological approach to the study of hunting was offered by Graham Cox based the University of Bath. Cox, with Will Manley, Julia Hallett and Graham Smith at the RAC, examined 'drag and Bloodhound hunting' on behalf of the Burns Inquiry and Cox also conducted empirical research into the experience of hunt followers (Cox and Winter 1997, Cox et al. 1994). It is the latter of these which offers the most marked contrast to Milbourne and is therefore used here. Funded by the UK's National Trust, Cox et al. (1994) researched red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) hunting.

Cox et al. (1994) began with the argument that knowledge of and participation in hunting needed to be placed into its social context due to 'the irretrievably social nature of our being in the world and the knowledge we have of it' (Cox et al. 1994:191). Their study unravelled hunting terminology, rituals of dress and the nuances of membership, using case studies of two stag hunts in the southwest. To further highlight the compelling nature of participating in hunting, they evoked Goffman's (1961) metaphor of the total institution and argued that hunts also acted as 'extraordinarily effective agencies of socialization' (Cox et al., 1994:190). This was, however, without the profoundly negative connotations of Goffman's (1961) original use[4] of the term:

the total institution image is not an entirely appropriate one. For, although it is important to understand the part played by apparently rigid boundaries, it is no less vital to appreciate the extent to which the *hunts are integrated with, and draw upon, wider sets of social relations.*

(Cox et al. 1994:190, emphasis added)

In this sense, Cox et al. (1994), like Milbourne (2003a), were concerned to position hunting within the structure of the wider rural community. However, for Cox et al. (1994), the concept of community was intrinsic to their analysis to the extent that an analogy with a total institution was warranted. For example, 'hunting, for those that take part in it, has a paradigmatic quality that makes the delineation of community particularly compelling' (Cox et al. 1994:191). Unlike Milbourne, the exact means by which boundaries were established and maintained guided their approach, as 'a satisfactory explanatory strategy demands that the analysis of social barriers occupy a central position' (Cox et al., 1994:191). They concluded that geographic proximity to the hunt and personal familiarity with the hunt were less important than appreciating that for participants hunt country was non-spatial, but rather 'a 'country' of the mind' (Cox et al., 1994:191).

The definition of such a state of mind was detailed, including the rituals and practices of hunting. They argued that understanding such nuances is vital as 'many features of the social organization of hunting make it an exceptional case: not least the ritualistic aspects that are integral rather than incidental to the activity'(Cox et al., 1994:191). Their account detailed various rituals, such as the clarification of a litany of terms; the order of the hunting day and; the hunt's organisational hierarchy. Terminology (of tufters and harbourers) was outlined, dress codes were explicated

(the distinction between ratcatcher and black coats) and the totalising character of hunting explained:

> Hunting is a world of elaborate ritual, reflected in the customs and practices associated with the activity of hunting itself, strict conventions concerning dress and the habitual use of an esoteric linguistic code. Like all ritual, *this serves to confer a clear sense of exclusion for those not familiar with the mores of hunting.* The uninitiated are, for example, typically immediately identifiable because of their inappropriate use of language.
>
> (Cox et al., 1994:193, emphasis added)

Cox et al. (1994) also moved to a meso level of analysis and discussed the significance of the organisational structure of the hunt. They argued that the 'distinction between members and subscribers is an important one; [for] membership can neither be applied for nor openly sought' (Cox et al. 1994:194). Their two case studies of two hunts outlined the constitution of hunt subscribers (farmers make up 53 per cent of those economically active in the total sample) alongside the geographical proximity of hunt participants to the hunt itself. Cox et al. (1994) like Milbourne, found that not all those resident in hunt countries participate:

> the majority of Hunt followers live within the Hunt Country itself and that this country is rural in character and relatively thinly populated, it is nonetheless important to note that only a small proportion of the area's population are directly involved in hunting.
>
> (Cox et al. 1994:199)

However, Cox et al.'s (1994) picture of the social hunt community is quite distinct from that of Milbourne in the way it penetrates the role that hunt social activities perform:

> The social organization of hunting entails a succession of commemorative ceremonies that are almost entirely performative in character. The very particular kind of belonging that constitutes a lived sense of community is thus re-affirmed and given practical expression.

> (Cox et al. 1994:204)

The hunting community's actions, language and demeanour becomes even more significant when placed in its political context:

> Those who take part in field sports and reflect with any degree of seriousness on their activity cannot but be aware that many find it ethically unacceptable. Convinced, as they inevitably are, of their own moral rectitude, they are bound to consider themselves misunderstood by the very substantial majority of the population that neither lives in rural areas nor has any familiarity with what they consider quintessential rural ways […] stag hunting is something of an esoteric activity and those who pursue it are very much a minority of a minority'

> (Cox et al. 1994:200)

As such this exacerbates their sense of difference. Cox et al. (1994) therefore offer an insight into hunting, which emphasised the social, but also remained mindful of the geographic and political climates.

In terms of their methodological approach, Cox and his colleagues' analysis, like Milbourne, used interviews with hunting households. However, whereas Milbourne's data catalogued participation in hunt social activities, Cox et al. (1994) sought to understand the depth of meaning associated with participating in such activities. For example, how socially significant the hunt was. They found that 'hunts are socially least important to those who lived outside the hunting countries' based on an analysis of 33 functions organised by one of the case study hunts, from the high-profile of the winter and summer hunt balls to bingo (Cox et al., 1994:2002). Their data explicated their social significance by detailing attendance and also depth of participation. For instance, subscribers, or any member of their household, were asked if they 'had been 'involved in the organizing or running' any of the events listed 'including clearing up afterwards' (Cox et al. 1994:202). They found that 48 per cent of respondents 'had been directly involved in helping in some way at these functions' and conclude (Cox et al. 1994:203):

> Our evidence suggests high levels of involvement and cohesiveness encompassing the whole age range and providing numerous occasions on which people from isolated rural areas get together. There is, in that sense, a community that is based on shared activities as well as shared values.
>
> (Cox et al. 1994:203)

The total institution of hunting is such 'despite the fact that those who hunt are often strongly connected to worlds beyond hunting and many do not reside within the geographical community' (Cox et al. 1994:204). Rather 'the hunting community, in short, […] is less derived from spatial proximity than complex networks of shared language, values and activities (Cox et al. 1994:191). To summarise, Cox et al.'s (1994) methodology allows a more detailed reading of hunting terminology, practice

and the nature of a hunt than that of Milbourne. In criticism, little was made of the meaning of hunting to individual participants,[5] yet their multi-strategy approach, incorporating postal questionnaires (with a response rate of 31% of all subscribers), 12 interviews and two seminars and numerous follow-up conversations and discussions yielded data richer than that of the other study discussed here. Disappointingly, however, whilst the symbols, language and some of the passion is conveyed through Cox's account, it was to the neglect of their synergy into a more interactional account of hunting. In overview, then both approaches detailed here are more informed by a government-led agenda than by seeking to advance theoretical and methodological developments in rural research and therefore remain quite particular accounts.

The article now moves to propose an alternative approach to the study of country sports using visual methods within an ethnographic framework to show the benefits of such an approach for understanding the country sport of game shooting. This also serves to contextualise the broader argument about the contemporary absence of rural ethnography. Visual methods are first introduced and their use then qualified with reference to the author's own fieldwork experiments with visual studies.

III. Visual methods and sociology.
The use of visual approaches to studying the social world enjoys a long history that can be traced back through anthropology and, for example, the work of Malinowski (Ball and Smith (2001). Yet it is only relatively recently that their appeal within sociology has become widespread, as evidenced by the rising number of texts available (Ball and Smith 1992, Pink 2001, Pole 2004, Sweetman and Knowles 2004, Hamilton 2005, Fish *forthcoming*, Pink *forthcoming*). The application of visual methods in sociology has varied. Bolton et al. (2001) offered disposable cameras to

teenage workers as a means for them to document their working lives. Felstead et al. (2004) employed photographs in a variety of ways to explore modern forms of work, both making the photographs themselves and inviting respondents to do so. The researcher generated photographs, for example, included photographs of workstations in the home capturing the degree to which working spaces were integrated or segregated within the home environment. Photographs taken by respondents included spaces of work taken over the course of a week – a form of autophotography. Ball (2005) discusses the use of visual material as a surveillance and evidential base for police work, with reference to road traffic speed restriction signs and speed cameras. He also notes how technologically generated images that record socio-cultural arrangements warrant further exploration, for example in understanding forms of work.

In respect to rural visual research, the work of American sociologist Douglas Harper has been instrumental in reflecting upon both the epistemology and empirical application of visual methods. Harper (1998) called for the reflexive use of visual techniques, rather than Collier's (1967) model of a more inductive, photographic ethnography:

> In the documentary movement there was very little, if any discussion of the issues of representation, ideology, or how the relationships with subjects influenced these photographic studies […] these studies were characterized by the sense that the photographer should expose social problems in order to educate the public in order to change society.
>
> (Harper 1998:28)

Harper favoured Becker's (1974) argument that photographs "are more precisely reflections of the photographer's point of view, biases, and knowledge, or lack of knowledge" (Harper 1998:29). In research practice, Harper sought to position photographs *inside* the process of data generation and employed photographs to facilitate interviews:

> In the photo-elicitation interview, interview/ discussion is stimulated and guided by images. Typically these are photographs that the researcher has made of the subject's world […] A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker (often having slaved over creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image.
>
> (Harper 1998:35)

This technique of photo-elicitation assumes that the research subject's "taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher" (Harper 1998:35). It is unsurprising that such a technique had appealed to sociologists of work. For example, Bolton et al. (2001) focused upon the working lives of children, defining the "children as active participants, not passive subjects" (Bolton et al. 2001:504). This and their concern "to go beyond visual representation" led them to put the cameras in the hands of the participants – the children themselves (Bolton et al. 2001:502):

> Their choice of what to include in the frame and what to leave out provides us as the researchers not merely with data as illustration, but with a form of data which has been selected and subject to a process of analysis for its

significance to the culture of the research participants. With this reading of
our photographs, the distinction between those who are researching and
those who are being researched becomes blurred.

(Bolton et al. 2001:507)

Bolton et al. (2001) are careful here to qualify their approach and to avoid a naïve
realism or anarchistic postmodernist perspective. Rather, they favour "ethnographic
standards of immersion in subject and striving towards wholeness of account" and
seek to avoid "an introverted celebration of the researcher's view in which
participants are largely sidelined" and "analytical attempts" – namely "where mere
surface representation is all" (Bolton et al. 2001:510). The article now introduces
new fieldwork experiments with visual methods focusing on one form of rural work.

The literature surrounding UK game shooting has tended to be dominated by
environmental (Tapper 2005) and economic analyses (PACEC *forthcoming*), to the
neglect of social or cultural ones (Hillyard *forthcoming*). One implication of this
absence, as Newby (1977a) noted, is that associated understandings and
appreciation of traditional forms of rural skills has declined and that residents and
the academic community alike under appreciate the scope, role and function of rural
work. This dataset offers an account of game keeping work and attends to Ball's
(2005) call for using the visual to understand social arrangement and practical
accomplishments. The current political climate surrounding country sports is highly
charged and there is concern within the shooting community that shooting is under
threat.[6] There is therefore an opportunity to examine such activities and their social
constituents before a government-led or activist agenda dominates.

The dataset was created during the 2001-2 shooting season.[7] It consists of a total of 111 photographs taken in the North East of England from early July 2001 through to a matter of weeks after the estate's final shoot days. The gamekeeper himself instigated the collection, in order to record of his preparations for the shooting season to demonstrate his activities to his new employers following the ownership of the shoot changing hands. The gamekeeper did not personally take any of the photographs, but had invited a friend and amateur photographer to do so on his behalf. The collection was recorded via a process in which the gamekeeper indicated what aspects of his work he wanted to be incorporated (and we will see that this included rearing, cover crops and release pens) whilst his friend composed and took the photographs themselves.[8]

The background of the collection distinguishes it from Harper's (2002) use of an archive and that of a collection made by the sociologist (Woodward 2003, Felstead et al. 2004). Neither does it represent the imagery one would find of the gamekeeper to be found in popular culture (Lawrence 1960), on professional gamekeeping association websites[9] or in pictures from the shooting field celebrated in such titles as Shooting Times or The Field. The photographs, and the gamekeepers' explanations[10] of what they represent offer an opportunity to (a) destroy some myths surrounding gamekeeper's work, (b) see how photographs are a useful medium in unravelling some taken-for-granted aspects of the modern countryside and (c) to make a call for their greater use within an ethnographic approach to rural research.

Bolton et al. (2001:503) remind us of Chaplin's observation that sociologists make photographs, rather than taken them and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model is useful in this sense. The gamekeeper wished to use the photographic collection to

demonstrate to his new employer the 'back stage' preparations underpinning the running of a shoot. In this sense, the collection is 'made' not just as *proof* of work for the gamekeeper's new employer, but also an insight into preparatory stages leading up to the shooting season not celebrated in the shooting press and which would be unseen by the attending shooting party. The photographs therefore act as a means to see the back stage individual work of the gamekeeper and one country sport more generally.

The analysis of photographs is problematic and Bolton et al. (2001) suggest that 'paradoxically it may be the very power and ready accessibility of visual images, the apparent transparency of their message, which leads us to dismiss their value as a serious source of data and sociological understanding' (Bolton et al. 2001:504). The collection can be categorised into six main chronological stages: hatching; rearing pens; planting cover crops; the rearing field; cover crop growth and; release pens. The largest category involved landscape pictures and it was not until the features of such shots in the collection are unravelled, that a fuller appreciation of the placement and significance of such landscapes – and their message – becomes possible. This is akin to Harper's (1988) technique of photo-elicitation.

> In the photo-elicitation interview, interview/ discussion is stimulated and guided by images. Typically these are photographs that the researcher has made of the subject's world […] A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker (often having slaved over creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image.

> (Harper 1998:35)

The sheer number of photographs of the maize cover crops - almost two thirds. However, size matters here in three ways. First, the number of plots and their geographic location across the estate indicates the scale of the gamekeeper's job. Second, the plots of maize are positioned to make use of the landscape features (such as hedges and slopes) and therefore the gamekeeper is demonstrating the tactical placement of maize plots to maximise quality birds (i.e. high) on shoot days (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Landscape.

Thirdly, the height of the maize, which is unclear until the 'keeper appears next to the maize in one photograph, shows he had produced a healthy and effective cover crop. In a context in which the density and food offered by the crops will be vital of the birds are to remain close-by upon release and to have protection from predators[11] and inclement weather, this is a significant aspect of a gamekeeper's work (Steering Committee for the Code of Good Shooting Practice 2003). Therefore, the analysis of these visual images allows for some of the unseen, back stage aspects of contemporary rural work – the work of the modern gamekeeper – to be unravelled and the diversity of their jobs unravelled.

A striking aspect of the collection are its absences. For example, people appeared in only 12 of the 111 photographs in the collection and then often only partially (for example, only their hands or their side). For example, the 'keeper himself only appears facing the camera in one photograph and on that occasion purely to demonstrate the height of the maize. However, *who* appears is significant, in that it demonstrates some of the exchange relationships and support systems that estates with a sole gamekeeper rely upon. In this case, it included the 'keeper's young daughter, his father, father-in-law and a neighbouring farmer. The impression here is that, whilst the gamekeeper works largely in isolation in comparison to the working lives of most urban employees, his own family contributes help at key times of the year. For instance, the photographs showed the cleaning of rearing pens and the placing of release pens adjacent to cover crops.

The technology and equipment appearing the collection also resists the front stage images of the gamekeeper celebrated in the shooting press. Figure 2, below, for example, demonstrates the hot, summer conditions of work (indicated by the wearing of shorts), but also new technologies (his mobile telephone and digital watch) as an important resource as he works at different locations around the estate. Similarly, in other photographs, the gamekeeper's modern four-wheel drive vehicle is seen transporting bird feed to the maize crops.

Figure 2. Cleaning.

The photographs offer, in summary, an insight into the construction of some aspects of the rural landscape. Whilst sociologists once talked of the anonymity of the city (Simmel 1971 [1908]), such anonymity ironically now characterises the rural in terms of aspects of the construction and management of the UK landscape. The observations that are possible from this dataset give rise to many more research questions. Echoing Ball and Smith (2001) the "greater use of visual methods is not a panacea for all of ethnography's ills nor is it the touchstone to startling ethnographic discoveries" (Ball and Smith, 2001:313). However, in the same manner as Mason's (2006) call for mixed methods, visual methods would benefit from being positioned *alongside* the techniques employed by Newby, Cox and Milbourne in order to better appreciate the daily round and social situation of rural workers such as gamekeepers. Indeed, how does the work of the UK gamekeeper differ from that of shooting organisers in shooting communities in the USA, Canada, Sweden, France and Spain and how best can these often unseen practices be researched and understood?

Conclusion.

Hamilton (1990) suggested sixteen years ago that sociologists in the UK have neglected rural studies. Despite strong research cultures existing in the US and in

UK human geography, this article argued that there is still scope for sociology – and particularly qualitative studies – to engage with and contribute to understanding important shifts in rural theoretical and methodological debates. Via a discussion of past, current and new qualitative rural research, the article argues that ethnographic research is well positioned to unravel the rituals, practices and meanings of hither-to neglected rural issues, such as the example of country sports used here. These insights, in turn need to be positioned within a countryside no longer characterised by the occupation community (Newby 1977a), but one with diverse constituents (Milbourne 2003a) and still very powerful and compelling patterns of participation (Cox et al. (1994). The English village, on this basis alone, needs to be problematised if such complexities and diversity are to be engaged with and represented. Ethnography is such a technique which can highlight the 'importance of such personally transmitted definitions of the situation' (Newby 1977a:426). The addition of visual techniques to ethnography's critical armoury represents one opportunity to challenge our taken-for-granted perception of rural life and open the rural up for examination and more sustained debate. Indeed, whilst there is still scope for rural issues such as game shooting to be researched *a priori* before a government-led or politically-opposed agenda becomes fixed.

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1 Exeter University is a leading example of critical mass of rural geographers, including the editors of the leading UK and European rural studies journals. The US also has an active rural sociology society (see http://ruralsociology.org/).

2 Quite why Newby embarked upon such a lengthy and residential period of field research is curious, given his desire to repeat Lockwood's work in a rural context. However, the intellectual influence of his supervisor Colin Bell (Newby 1977a), who had studied under W.M. Williams at Swansea may have inspired a more community-based orientation.

3 Here, we can see Goffman's influence upon Newby's work, the 'greedy institution' echoing Goffman's (1961) 'total institution.'

4 'A place of residence and work where a large numbers of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman 1961:11).

5 Admittedly, the principal aim of Cox and his colleagues' project lay elsewhere with the economic impact of hunting, leaving the social aspects as only an 'additional objective' (Cox et al., 1994:192).

6 The seriousness with which the shooting community has viewed its future is indicated by the formation of the campaign for shooting within the Countryside Alliance, alongside the campaign for hunting and, more recently, fishing.

7 The UK shooting season for partridge is from the 1st September to the 1st February. The pheasant season commences on 1st October and concludes on the 1st of February. Many shoots commence one month into the season and not all shoot throughout the season.

8 My access to the collection came through a friend of the shoot. I approached and was subsequently granted access to the photographs by the 'keeper.

9 Such as the National Gamekeeper's Organisation www.nationalgamekeepers.org.uk.

10 During unrecorded interviews.

[11] Such as birds of prey.