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Landscape in the making

The landscapes surrounding power stations commissioned by the nationalised electricity industry and the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) offered significant opportunities for landscape architects in post-war Britain, and had a huge impact on the development of the profession in the UK.



1. 'Landscape in the making – a commentary by Glyn England Chairman of the CEGB and Rex Savidge Architect to the Board' London

© CEGB Press and Publicity Office 1982

2. Wachter, R. E. 'Power and the Countryside' London

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In their book 'Landscape by Design', celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Landscape Institute, Tony Aldous and Brian Clouston paid particular attention to the unique situation of the post-war nationalised electricity industry and its relation to the transformation of the British countryside. As they argued, "Here was a major state industry, set up by Parliament working under statutory guidelines which required it not simply to produce electricity as cheaply as possible, with little cosmetic landscaping tacked on as a gesture; but consciously to balance in each project the twin objectives of cheap electricity efficiently produced and respect for the environment."¹

The nationalisation of electricity provision in Britain was a result of the 1947 Electricity Act. In 1948, the British Electricity Authority (BEA) was established, and became responsible for generation and transmission to local boards, as well as for the development and maintenance of the supply system. The BEA (replaced by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA in 1955) worked with 14 regional boards, known as 'area boards', across the country. The 1957 Electricity Act dissolved the CEA and replaced it with the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) and the Electricity Council. The Board was responsible for the production and transmission of electricity in England and Wales, and in 1987 it operated 79 power stations and almost 8000km route of double circuit transmission lines.

The CEGB became the largest spender (outside Whitehall) in the British economy in the post-war period and had two statutory duties, deriving from Section 37 of the 1957 Electricity Act, the so-called 'Amenity Clause'. Firstly, to develop and maintain an efficient, coordinated and economical system of electricity supply, and secondly to take into account any effect which their proposals would have on the natural beauty of the countryside and on the flora and fauna. The 'Amenity Clause' was even more crucial if we take into account that, next to road building, electricity generation and transmission probably had a more immense impact on Britain's landscape than any other activity. It manifested itself in the erection of transmission lines and towers across the country, in the building of nuclear and hydro-electric power stations, in remote coastlands and national parks, and the relocation of coal-fired power stations away from town centres into settings perceived as rural. As Sylvia Crowe phrased it in the 1950s, "in the present influx of gigantic constructions and power lines, the landscape of the British Isles faces the greatest crisis of its history", and that "never before has the countryside been invaded by so many objects, nor by constructions comparable in size to the modern power stations, hydro-electric schemes and airfields."²

The CEGB appointed Sir William Holford as a part-time member of the Board with special responsibility for architecture and amenity. The distinguished architect, town planner and educator was also a Fellow of the Institute of Landscape Architects from December 1938. He worked together with a core team of members of the Institute during the War, then led by Geoffrey Jellicoe, to make sure the profession played an indispensable role in the post-war reconstruction. As Aldous and Clouston remembered, "behind the scenes in Whitehall men like Lord (then plain William)



Holford were laying the foundations for the profession's future growth by writing a landscape element into the proposed statutory guidelines for future public clients" – an idea crucial to the work of the CEGB under Holford's guidance.³ He and his chairman, Sir Christopher Hinton, set out their approach in two papers presented at the Royal Society of Arts in 1959 – and published together under the title 'Power Production and Transmission in the Countryside: Preserving Amenities' – in which he declared that "the Board now seeks the advice of the best landscape architects they can find, for an appreciation of the amenity problems raised by the location of plant in different kinds of landscape."⁴

Archival records of the Institute held at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, as well as the CEGB's records held at the Special Collections and Archives at the University of Liverpool, suggest that Holford took his promise seriously. He asked then-president Sylvia Crowe to provide a list of practices that could undertake this type of work, and the series of minutes in the archives shows an impressive list of names, including Brenda Colvin, Sylvia Crowe, Sheila Haywood, Ken and Patricia Booth, Peter Shephard, Peter Youngman, Leslie Milner White and Derek Lovejoy being involved. Their collaboration with the CEGB led to numerous award-winning landscape projects across the country.

However, the CEGB's role did not stop at employing consultants for the design of the power station sites. It had its own landscape team, responsible for other aspects of

landscapes. The first landscape assistant to the board, John Herbert, handled preparatory work and research outside the scope of the consultant landscape architects. He was succeeded by Alan Murray, and in 1970 the 'Generation Development and Construction Division' was created within the CEBG, which had its own landscape team, led by Ronald Hebblethwaite.

The team had a particular research agenda, and one of the key areas of their work was to develop computer and photogrammetry techniques to assess the 'Zone of Visual Influence' (ZVI) of power stations – the equivalent of today's LVIA. This evolving area of research – 'Methods of Landscape Analysis' – was the topic of the first symposium, chaired by Lord Holford, of the still active Landscape Research Group, formed in 1967, of which Murray was the first Honorary Secretary. Hebblethwaite later developed the computerized version of the ZVI methods, which he published in 1975. As Moa Carsson's research showed, both the analogue and computerized methods were used between 1960 and 1970 to select sites and assist the design and configurations of the built structures, the screening and the landscape.⁵ Hebblethwaite's collaboration with Derek Lovejoy and Frederick Gibberd led to award-winning power station landscapes, such as West Burton and the now demolished Didcot power station.



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Another significant area of research by the CEBG's landscape team was to develop techniques for establishing trees in pulverised fuel ash and in the especially difficult conditions of drawdown areas at hydroelectric schemes. One of the major centres for this research was in the grounds of Drakelow power station, in collaboration with the University of Leeds' Department of Agriculture. The landscape of Drakelow was designed by Brenda Colvin, and it was – as the CEBG declared – a "site where new concepts in conservation have their beginnings".⁶ Beyond the testing of using pulverised fuel ash as a growing medium, Drakelow also gave place to nurseries and greenhouses, where plants destined to be planted in the Midlands Region – consisting of 26 power stations and 116 sub-stations – were grown. At the same time, Drakelow was the first operating industrial site in Europe to open an 11-acre large field study centre for environmental education for local schools in 1967, and in 1970 they revealed a wildfowl reserve on parts of the site, as part of "an appropriate contribution to European Conservation Year and to Britain's Countryside in 1970 campaign."⁷ Drakelow's example was followed across the country, and by 1982, more than 20 CEBG sites were used for various public activities as well as environmental centres. Nature trails, bird and wildfowl reserves, environmental study centres, angling and water recreation centres were accompanied by ecological and conservation activities.

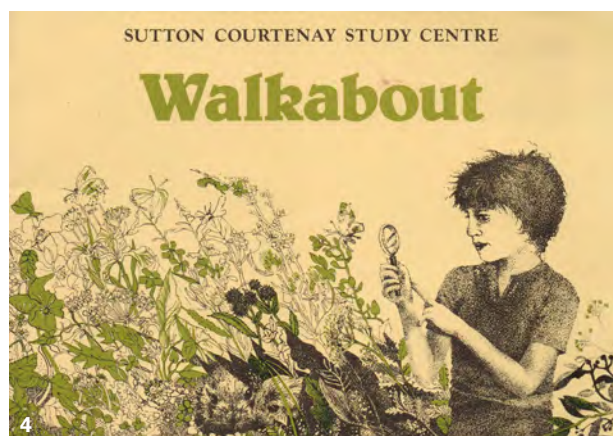
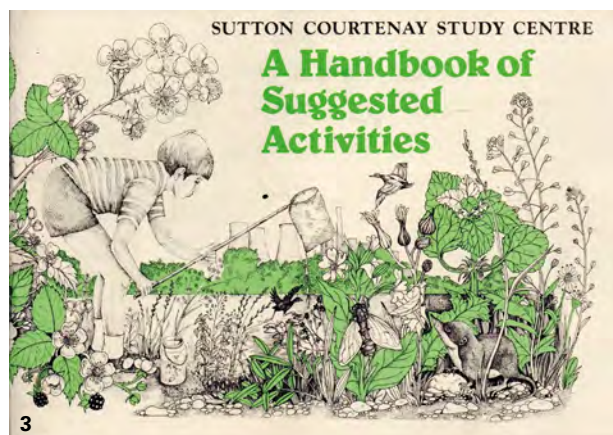
Official communications and the CEBG's own publications show an increased awareness of the importance of landscapes as part of their public image as well as fulfilling their statutory duties. As they wrote in 1982, "the landscapes, created by 'Capability' Brown and Repton and the great landowners of the day, now stand in full maturity as a symbol of their confidence and foresight. Through its

3. 'Sutton Courtenay Study Centre: A Handbook of Suggested Activities'

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4. 'Sutton Courtenay Study Centre: Walkabout'

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Text by Frank Poller,
Illustrations by Vana Haggerty



5. 'A Natural Concern'
Solihull

© CEBG Midlands Region 1970

¹ Aldous, T & Clouston B (1979) *Landscape by Design*. London: Heinemann p. 53

² Crowe, S. (1958) *Landscapes of Power*, London: Architectural Press

³ Aldous, T & Clouston B (1979) *Landscape by Design*. London: Heinemann pp 19-20.

⁴ Hinton, Christopher and Holford, Sir William (1960): 'Power Production and Transmission in the Countryside: Preserving Amenities' *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 108:5043 pp 180-210

⁵ Carlsson, M 2019, 'Locating the observer in computerised view analysis for urban and environmental planning', *Social Studies of Science*. p. 17

⁶ CEBG (1970) *A Natural Concern* Solihull: CEBG: Midlands Region p. 3

⁷ Burton Daily Mail, January 1970.

⁸ England, Glyn & Savidge, Rex (1982) *Landscape in the making* London: CEBG Press and Publicity Office p. 29

⁹ Central Electricity Generating Board (Dissolution) Order 2001,

¹⁰ CEBG (1970) *A Natural Concern* Solihull: CEBG: Midlands Region p. 14

¹¹ CEBG (1970) *A Natural Concern* Solihull: CEBG: Midlands Region p. 3



The profession of landscape architecture, both within and outside the Board itself, was instrumental in the realisation of the CEBG's vision that "conservation is everybody's business" and a moral duty as well as a statutory one.



patronage the board looks to its landscape architects to design for efficient and economic estate management today, and by developing the traditions of the past, contribute to the landscape of the future."⁸

The privatisation of the electricity industry started in the 1990s, and the CEBG was fully dissolved on 9 November 2001.⁹ While the built legacy of the board is disappearing with the decommissioning and the demolishing of the iconic cooling towers and the generating stations, it raises the question: what does the future hold for the 'landscapes of the future' their guardianship created? These landscapes are enduring reminders of a quite unique era when a nationalised industry had a statutory duty to "have account for the natural beauty of the countryside and for its wildlife in everything it does."¹⁰ The profession of landscape architecture, both within and outside the Board itself, was instrumental in the realisation of the CEBG's vision that "conservation is everybody's business" and a moral duty as well as a statutory one.¹¹ The CEBG's 'landscapes of the future' are our matured and highly valuable landscapes of the present. It is now the profession's duty to preserve their values for future generations to come.

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