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Cultural and Social History

The Journal of the Social History Society

ISSN: 1478-0038 (Print) 1478-0046 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfcs20

# Rural Modernity in an Interwar English County Magazine: *Cheshire Life*, 1934–39

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**To cite this article:** Andrew Hobbs (21 Oct 2025): Rural Modernity in an Interwar English County Magazine: *Cheshire Life*, 1934–39, Cultural and Social History, DOI: 10.1080/14780038.2025.2558067

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2025.2558067



Published online: 21 Oct 2025.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2025.2558067

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# Rural Modernity in an Interwar English County Magazine: *Cheshire Life*, 1934–39

Andrew Hobbs

School of Arts and Media, University of Lancashire, Preston, UK

**ABSTRACT**

There are some eighty-five county magazines across England, read by millions. This case study of 1930s *Cheshire Life* explains their appeal and demonstrates their value for twentieth-century social and cultural history. The birth of this middle-brow non-metropolitan publishing genre is outlined, using back copies, archival sources and interviews. Content analysis finds these magazines are the voice of 'the county set', a neglected subculture. Themes include county identities, attitudes to the countryside, the rise of the middle classes and decline of the gentry, sense of place and modernity. *Cheshire Life*'s 1930s countryside is modern and void of nostalgia.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 31 March 2023
Accepted 3 September 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Rural modernity; county magazines; county set; middle classes; 1930s

## Introduction

Eighty-five county and regional magazines were published in England in 2025, with sales or free distribution totalling more than a million, and a readership many times higher.[1] Magazines such as the *Sussex County Magazine, Cheshire Life* and *East Anglian Magazine* first appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, and grew into a successful publishing genre. Their middlebrow, middle-class, non-metropolitan readership gives them a low status in the cultural hierarchies of journalism and academic history, yet their readers love them. This article explains their appeal and demonstrates the value of their rich content (advertising and editorial, image and text) as a source for twentieth-century social and cultural history. In particular, they spoke on behalf of the 'county set', a neglected provincial subculture of aristocrats, gentry and upper middle-class families. They also used the ethos and myths of the county set to feed the aspirations, fantasies and curiosity of a wider readership, lower down the social scale. This article describes the birth of the publishing genre, who was involved, and why it emerged when it did. The first 6 years of *Cheshire Life*, one of the most successful county magazines, are used as a case study, and the concept of 'rural modernity' is presented as one among many analytical frameworks which can be applied to this source, using content analysis methods.

**CONTACT** Andrew Hobbs andhobbs@hotmail.com School of Arts and Media, University of Lancashire, 100A Stocks Rd, Ashton, Preston, Lancashire PR2 2SY, UK

[1]Thanks to Joanne Goodwin, current editor of *Cheshire Life*, for permission to reproduce images from the magazine. A search in the marketing database BRAD (13 June 2025) for magazines in England, with a county or region (e.g. Cotswolds, Isle of Wight) in their title, found eighty-five magazines, with a combined circulation of 1,282,508 ; current estimates of magazine readership reckon on seven or eight readers per copy.

One of the first twentieth-century county magazine was the *Sussex County Magazine*, launched in 1926, followed in 1931 by *Derbyshire Countryside, Gloucestershire Countryside, Somerset Countryman* and *Leicestershire* (there had been county magazines in the nineteenth century, but these were more narrowly literary and antiquarian). These four, and the *Kent County Journal* in 1932, were all published by Charles Wood, originally, a publisher of parish magazines based in Leeds; he went on to publish eight more county magazines in the 1940s.[2] Many of Wood's titles were associated with rural community councils, part of a post-First World War movement to revive life in the countryside, which co-ordinated activities such as Women's Institutes, working men's clubs, the Workers' Educational Association, the English Folk Dance Society, village halls and county libraries.[3] A few months after the *Sussex County Magazine* was launched, a more ambitious title with a national remit was published in 1927 from an Oxfordshire manor house: *Countryman*. The brainchild of veteran journalist JW Robertson Scott, this progressive quarterly magazine had similar aims to the rural community council movement, dedicating itself to 'reinforcing and co-ordinating the forces of rural progress, and throwing light on the path the forward movement was taking and ought to take . . .'[4] Robertson's bright and engaging writing style made the magazine a great success. Two articles from the April 1929 issue give a flavour of its modern approach: 'The Country-House Aeroplane: Practical Hints for the Novice' and a travel article 'by A Magistrate' on nudism in Germany and Austria. *Countryman* was an important influence on county magazines connected with Rural Community Councils.

The 'county' of the English county magazine had many social and cultural associations, and still does today, to a lesser extent. In the 1930s, it referred, of course, to an administrative area, governed by a county council which provided services outside the self-governing large towns. These county councils had been introduced in 1889, within living memory for many adults in the 1930s, replacing quarterly meetings of county magistrates which had been controlled by unelected aristocrats and gentry. Many members of this elite continued to rule, as county councillors, and also continued their traditional social life of balls, hunting and house parties, creating a widely understood culture of the county set, county society or simply 'the county', taken to mean some members of the upper middle class alongside aristocrats and gentry. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) captures this world of deference to local aristocrats, hunting, children at private schools and intense awareness of the latest London trends.[5] While the protagonists of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) all feel that country life is inferior to town life, county magazines were more confident in their provincialism, perhaps related to their strong sense of place.[6]

The division of England into counties seemed a natural structure to follow for the publishers of countryside books (less so for other parts of the British Isles); these books

[2]Interview with Barrie Wood, son of Charles Wood (May 3, 2011).
[3]Burchardt, "A New Rural Civilisation," 83.
[4]Scott, '*We' and Me*, 188.
[5]Hobbs, '*Cheshire Life*'; Delafield, *Diary*.
[6]On the other hand, Pugh argues that, from the 1930s, 'the economic and cultural vigour of the English regions . . . dwindled'. This may have created greater demand for non-metropolitan magazines such as *Cheshire Life*, alongside resistance to the centralising ethos of the BBC and the decline of the provincial morning newspaper: Pugh, *State and Society*, 250–51.

became hugely popular in the 1930s. These series set out to cover the whole country, county by county, and included Longman's *English Heritage* series (1929), Batsford's *British Heritage* (25 out of 30 books were about England) and *Face of England* series (both 1930), Dent's *Open Air Library* (1932), the *Shell Guides* (edited by John Betjeman, 1934; all but five of the thirty books are about England) and the Victor Gollancz series of illustrated countryside books (1935). The writers of these books were a mixture of regional novelists such as H.E. Bates and journalists such as H.J. Massingham, who also wrote for, respectively, national and county magazines such as *Country Life* and *Gloucestershire Countryside*.[7]

While such books are valuable as sources for the study of interwar attitudes to landscape and the countryside, I argue that county magazines add something more, because of the nature of magazines: opportunistic and quick to respond to changing public concerns, and their clever mix of aspiration and reality.[8] They are also more complex than books in their combination of continuity with change, as each individual issue differs slightly from the one before and contains a combination of text, image and advertising, and a mixture of voices and themes (often contradictory).[9] Some of these voices belong to readers, who can contribute articles, poems, letters or photographs, or to advertisers, who shape a magazine overtly through their adverts on the page, and covertly through their economic sway over publishers.[10] County magazines in particular offer another unique aspect, their many places of publication, opening a window onto something often forgotten in much of the literature on the countryside and national identity: a sense of place at the local, county and regional level.[11] Academic study of the connections between English landscape and nation are alert to how only a small selection of specific landscapes, such as the South Downs, the Cotswolds and other places, mainly in the south of England, make up a 'canon' of rural Englishness.[12] County magazines also have their canons of favourite photogenic or historic sites, but there are many more of them, offering a more national picture of feelings about landscapes in England. Inevitably, this picture is more complicated than the national canon and therefore more informative.

County magazines rarely discuss national identity explicitly, much as fish rarely discuss water. But Englishness is everywhere in these magazines, in their repertoire of topics (threatened countryside, history, motoring, field sports, 'old' families, country houses), the books they review (SPB Mais, *England's Character*, Sir Edward Grigg, *The faith of an Englishman* in the February 1937 issue of *Cheshire Life*) and in the conservative attitudes of the writers. This secure national identity meant that it rarely needed to be mentioned.[13] These magazines saw county identity as an unproblematic part of national identity, a 'national-provincial' 'structure of feeling', in Dave Russell's words, based on an understanding of 'national' as a coming together of localities, counties, regions and even constituent nations.[14] In *Cheshire Life*, the county could be a synecdoche ('Cheshire is an

[7]Lowerson, "Battles," 262; Bluemel, "Windmills," 84, 94.
[8]Hackney and Bigham, "Cottage."
[9]Beetham, "Open and Closed."
[10]Hammill and Smith, *Magazines*, 9–1
[11]Agnew argues that place should have equal status as a theoretical concept to class, status, nation, state and firm: Agnew, "Space and Place," 323.
[12]Kohl, "North," 93; Howkins, "Discovery," 74.
[13]Pugh, *State and Society*, 250.
[14]Russell, "Heaton Review," 346.

epitome of English life'), a vital ingredient without which the nation would be incomplete ('that virility of the North which has given so much towards the making of the English nation') or an unproblematic part of the nation and even the empire (as in an advertisement for Cheshire cheese boasting that it is part of a national quality control scheme, showing a map of England and Wales and the slogan 'Empire buying begins at home').[15] These combinations of place identities only become problematic if 'national' is understood in the tradition of Arnold and Forster, as something metropolitan or placeless, and opposed to the provincial.[16]

Much has been written about the influence of print culture on feelings of national and local identities, less on regional identities, and almost nothing on county identities.[17] Do such feelings even exist? A glance at any county magazine suggests that publishers, writers and advertisers believed in county patriotism, appealing to the love of the county to sell magazines, cheese, cider and many other goods.[18] The success of the genre suggests that these feelings were shared by readers.

## Cheshire life magazine

*Cheshire Life* magazine was first published in May 1934, the same year that the Mersey tunnel was opened, linking the city of Liverpool with the largely rural peninsula of the Wirral at the Western end of Cheshire. Like the tunnel, the magazine connected the urban and the rural, and appealed to an increasingly affluent middle class who commuted by car to new suburban homes in the countryside. The magazine was an amateur affair for the first year of its life, initiated by a group of friends in Middlewich, led by young solicitor Norman H Hignett.[19] Hignett was also secretary of the Cheshire Publicity and Industrial Development Council (CPIDC), a body convened to attract inward investment and reduce unemployment during the Depression. He seems to have persuaded the development council to underwrite the magazine.[20] The new black-and-white monthly, price sixpence, included a round-up of economic development in the county, while another article reported a 'remarkable development at Stockport', where Murray & Ramsden Ltd were producing 200,000 india-rubber balls a week. There was a history of Cheshire salt and a guide to motoring around the east of the county, pictures of steam locomotives being built at Crewe, horses pulling a plough, the half-timbered Little Moreton Hall, and a view of the verdant Cheshire plain. Adverts included one for the Stalybridge, Hyde, Mossley and Dukinfield Tramways and Electricity Board, and another for fishery salt ('sterile, free from the red micrococcus'). In the second issue, 'A Wirral Reader' wrote that 'There is

[15]Editorial by Norman H Hignett, May 1935, 13; editorial by Hignett, May 1934, 15; advertisement, May 1934, inside back cover.
[16]Arnold, 'Literary influences' and Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, cited in Gibson, "Regionalism and Provincialism," 450.
[17]For a hugely influential linking of print culture and nationalism, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; for the example of newspapers and Welsh identity, see Jones, "19th Century Media"; for the contribution of cultural history to the study of regions, localities, nations and identities, see Royle, "Introduction"; for discussions of the meaning of the cultural region, see Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place* and Paasi, "Region and place" and for how literature can link region to nation, see Brace, *Finding England;* for a case study of print culture and the region of North West England, see Russell, *Looking North*, chap. 3; Goose ('Regions') argues that county identities, influenced by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century county histories, are older than regional identities, which were strengthened by writers such as Daniel Defoe; for the role of newspapers in influencing local identities, see Hobbs, *Fleet Street*, chap. 7.
[18]See Hobbs, "Cheshire Life" for the techniques used to build, and build on, county patriotism.
[19]K. Lawrence, 'Cheshire Life', *Winsford Chronicle*, December 11, 1948, 5
[20]See also Nulty, *Guardian Country*, 87–88.

very good stuff in it . . .' but too few readers agreed, and within months the development council asked the publisher of the *Warrington Guardian* to take the magazine off their hands.[21] Instead, it was bought by a Manchester printer of advertising brochures, the Philips Park Press, who transformed the magazine (Figure 1) and its fortunes.[22]

The new publisher not only changed *Cheshire Life*, but invented the county magazine as we know it today. The Philips Park Press was owned by Christopher Nicholls (1882–1957), whose upward social mobility was soon reflected in the magazine. Nicholls grew up in a back street near Manchester's Piccadilly station, the son of a canal traffic inspector, and went from printer's salesman to owner of his own company, based at a huge printing plant in north Manchester.[23] He moved to a country mansion, Cloverley Hall near Whitchurch, and took up hunting.[24] He had travelled in Europe and the US, and brought back some of the ideas which were revolutionising magazine and advertising design, including a more visually attractive page design, featuring more images, and display advertising.[25]

gThe first issue under new ownership showed British influences too, notably illustrated gossip weeklies such as *The Bystander* (1903–40) and *Tatler* (1901-), in *Cheshire Life*'s pages of photographs taken at hunt balls and other social events.[26] Similar magazines appear in Hitchcock's *Suspicion* and the satirical *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, to establish the characters' upper middle-class status. Delafield's entry for 17 December gives a flavour:

> Immerse myself in illustrated weekly. Am informed by it that Lord Toto Finch (inset) is responsible for camera-study (herewith) of the Loveliest Legs in Los Angeles, belonging to well-known English Society girl, near relation (by the way) of famous racing peer, father of well-known Smart Set twins (portrait overleaf).[27]

The influence of *Country Life* (1897-) can be seen in the new features on country houses and gardening. The advertising also changed, from targeting business readers who might buy diesel lorries or land for development, to targeting consumers interested in clothes, furniture, houses and cars. Nicholls would be fully aware of the consumer boom caused by a sharp rise in the standard of living due to falling prices, which benefited a growing middle class and the majority of the working population untouched by the Depression.[28] Editorial worked together with advertising in *Cheshire Life* to provide a retreat into the 'comfort zone' of domesticity and the countryside.[29]

## Contributors

The editors, writers, photographers and illustrators who created the editorial part of *Cheshire Life* were a typical county magazine mixture of media professionals and aspirants, amateurs and experts. Their biographies reveal that county magazines were fully integrated into the media ecology of the time, with contributors also writing books,

[21]Ibid.
[22]*Philips Park Press*. Thanks to Graham Greer of the Newberry Library, Chicago for providing a copy.
[23]1891 Census.
[24]Obituary, *Cheshire Life*, November 1957.
[25]*Philips Park Press*; Cox and Mowatt, *Revolutions from Grub Street*, 69.
[26]The May 29, 1935 issue of *The Bystander* included a photo of Nicholls's new daughter-in-law Joan Harris of Neyland House, Pembrokeshire.
[27]Delafield, *Diary*, 30.
[28]Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, 12; Pugh, *We Danced All Night*, viii.
[29]Pugh, *State and Society*, 250.

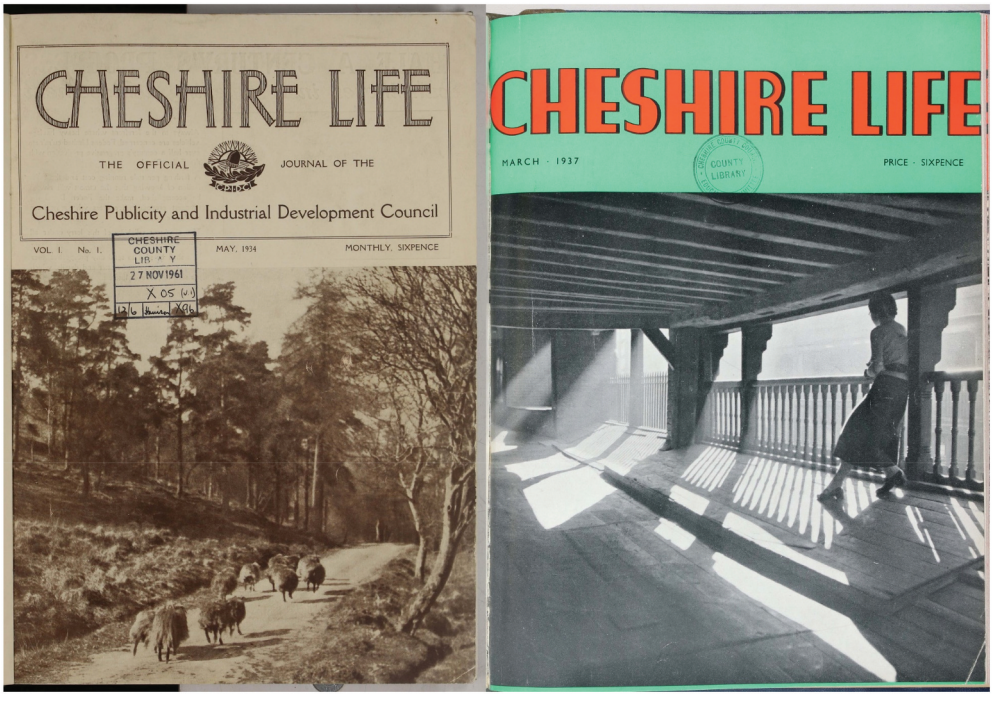


**Figure 1.** Cover of the first issue (left), published by Cheshire publicity and industrial development council, and (right) the more stylish March 1937 issue, produced by a commercial publisher (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

working for national, regional and local newspapers and broadcasting on BBC radio. For the professionals these magazines, *Cheshire Life* included, were sources of income, although the embarrassingly low status of the genre, in journalistic and literary circles, meant that these publications rarely appear in bibliographies, obituaries or biographies. Examples include Cyril Ray (1908–91), the socialist food and wine writer, who went on to write for the *Sunday Times* and *Spectator;* he was *Cheshire Life's* film critic in the late 1930s, whilst on the staff of the *Manchester Guardian;* Sidney F Wicks (1882–1956), a former US correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, acted as advertising manager whilst working for a local newspaper group in Manchester.[30] They were part of Manchester's pool of journalistic talent at a time when many national newspapers had regional offices in the city, enabling successful careers without moving to London. Aspirants included Nigel C Bridge, who wrote book reviews in 1936, and is probably Nigel Cyprian Bridge (1917–2007), who was working as a local newspaper reporter in Lancashire after leaving Marlborough College. He later became a judge, presiding over the discredited Birmingham Six trial.[31]

Professional photographers and agencies used by *Cheshire Life* included the Stewart Bale photo agency, the Northern Press Photo Agency, the well-known portrait photographer Lenare of London, the Manchester studio of Yevonde (and a more frequent

[30]Obituary, *Guardian*, September 26, 1991.
[31]Philip Eade, "Lord Bridge of Harwich," *Guardian*, November 28, 2007.

contributor, Liverpool-based Anglo-Irish photographer Edward Fitzmaurice Chambre Hardman (1898–1988).[32] Hardman, remembered for his landscapes and documentation of the port of Liverpool, earned his living from society portraits and industrial publicity commissions. He photographed many of the society beauties who appeared in full-page portraits in *Cheshire Life;* the magazine also published his landscapes (often as cover images) and industrial photos, for example, 'The quarry, Wales' (1937), 'Mersey tunnel ventilator' (1934) and 'Birth of the Ark Royal' (1950), his most famous picture. He often exhibited in London shows.[33]

Amateurs and experts included the launch editor, Hignett, who was a solicitor, and two headmasters who both wrote on history: Herbert James Hewitt, MA, PhD (1890–-1986), headmaster of Saltash County Grammar School in Devon and author of academic medieval histories, and Harry Wardale (1880–1945) of Altrincham, who wrote 'Cheshire's contribution to English Literature' (July 1935, a typical county magazine subject) and historical articles; he was head of Cornbrook Park elementary school, Stretford. He also wrote occasional history articles for scholarly journals and local newspapers. Philip Harwood Francis (1901–87), curate of Knutsford in 1937 then vicar of Marthall from 1938, wrote on rugby 1938–39; a Cambridge graduate, he was a prolific author, on athletics, biology and his theory that the sun is not hot.[34] Heber Ridgway, probably 'Roy' Ridgway (1916–2000), wrote 'Books of the Month, Series No.1' (January 1936, p. 18). He was a conscientious objector in the Second World War, and later won the Albert Schweitzer gold medal for humanitarian work and was part of a Nobel prizewinning peace team.[35]

Many contributors also wrote books, such as J Fairfax-Blakeborough (1883–1976), who contributed articles on hunting and racing to *Cheshire Life* and other county magazines and published more than 50 books, mainly on horses and country life.[36] J Robin Allen's monthly tales of Cheshire characters, 'Every so often', were republished in book form. Allen (1897–1956) was works manager of ICI's Lostock Works, and also wrote Cheshire history books. Contributors in the 1940s included Cheshire novelists Arthur Behrend (author of *The House of the Spaniard*) and Beatrice Tunstall (author of *The Long Day Closes*).[37] There were also links to the BBC's regional radio service: Sidney G Goldschmidt (1869–1949) broadcast on sport and old furniture. He was head of the Manchester shipping merchants Goldschmidt, Hahlo & Co Ltd and wrote on antiques and hunting for *Cheshire Life*. In the 1940s, Norman Ellison ('Nomad' of the BBC's *Children's* Hour) became a regular contributor.[38]

Most contributors were male (29 recognisably male bylines, compared to 15 recognisably female, in a sample of 701 articles; the proportion of women photographers was

[32]Stewart Bale was a Liverpool-based family agency specialising in commercial and industrial photography. Liverpool Museums hold their archive;, Yevonde's Manchester studio was run by Muriel Oliver, a school friend and former apprentice of Yevonde; the latter was known for her colour portraiture, including surreal portraits of women dressed as goddesses: Freestone, *Yevonde*, 220; De Ville, *Lenare*.

[33]Hagerty, "Continuity of Landscape Representation"; Harker, "Edward Chambre Hardman"; BBC documentary narrated by John Peel, who was photographed by Hardman as a baby. Hardman's house and studio at 59 Rodney Street, Liverpool is now run by the National Trust, where early editions of *Cheshire Life* can be found in the re-created waiting room.

[34]Francis, "Temperate Sun."

[35]Simon House, 'Roy Ridgway', *Guardian*, December 16, 2000.

[36]'Writings from a Very Special Diary', *Darlington & Stockton Times*, September 30, 2022, 175th anniversary supplement.

[37]Hayns, "The Enigmatic Beatrice Tunstall."

[38]Ellison's papers are in Liverpool Archives.

even lower, 6–15). But there were distinguished women, including Winifred M Comber (b. 1896) of Knutsford, who took many of the landscape and village photographs in the early issues, and later wrote a column on the county's Women's Institutes. She served with the Red Cross in the First World War and was a member of the House of Laity of the Church Assembly, part of the Church of England's governing body.[39] Margaret Esther Chettle MBE (1907–79) had an article and two photographs published in two 1935 issues; during the 1939–45 war she drove a mobile canteen for British troops through Europe with the YMCA and later worked for the Women's Royal Voluntary Service. Laura Cornelius Wheeler wrote on gardening and horticulture in 1935–36. She was the principal of a private horticultural college at Aldersey Hall near Chester, which she ran with her three sisters; they also had a florist's shop in Chester; she chaired the Education and Employment Committee of the Women's Farm and Garden Association and sat on the WI Agricultural Committee and the Women's Land Army Committee.[40] These unmarried women leaders were a new phenomenon, the 'middle-aged spinster presiding over rural and urban landscapes' as seen in novels such as *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and *South Riding* (1936). This 'formerly pitiable' figure 'has been energised and empowered by her new citizenship and by her war experience'.[41]

## Rural modernity: Past and present, urban and rural in the county

In the first issue of *Cheshire Life*, at the end of an article headed 'Preserving our Heritage of Beauty: Sound development need not destroy', is a half-page photograph (by Chambre Hardman) captioned 'Unspoiled Cheshire', a view from a hill of the Cheshire plain, with wooded hills in the distance. On the facing page, the next article is headed 'Progress of Cheshire Industry: Development and expansion taking place'. On one page a landscape to be celebrated, loved and protected, on the other a landscape to be filled with factories and jobs. In that same launch issue, the editorial ties together past, present and future in a move typical of interwar county magazines, arguing that Cheshire is an epitome of English life in 'this age of change' when 'the historical background is essential to the appreciation of the present and the realisation of the future'.[42]Attitudes to time fluctuated in county magazines, reflecting their competing influences: a focus on the past in nineteenth-century local and regional literary and historical journals, an emphasis on stability and tradition from *Country Life* and attention to the present and future in the *Countryman*. This conflict makes county magazines fascinating reading, as they grapple with romantic notions of the countryside as unchanging, whilst sometimes acknowledging, at other times, ignoring the pylons, tractors, factory farms, bypasses, petrol stations, roadhouses, country clubs and ribbon development of suburban villas. In this section, I touch on differing class attitudes to modernity, before introducing the idea of

[39]'Contributors' Who's Who – 4', *Cheshire Life* June 1948, p. 17; 'Miss Winifred Comber: Cheshire W.I. personality leaving for Kent', *Crewe Chronicle* May 30, 1968, 4.
[40]Meredith, "Horticultural Education in England," 74–75; *Chester Chronicle* September 14, 1940, p.12.
[41]Deen, "The Spinster in Eden," 135.
[42]'The idea of continuity between the past, present and future was a prominent element of the British experience of modernity': Readman, *Storied Ground*, 15. Harris, in *Romantic Moderns* (29–33), argues that English writers and artists made connections between eighteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism, typified by John Piper and Geoffrey Grigson.

'rural modernity' and using it to analyse changes in *Cheshire Life*'s content before and after its takeover by a commercial publisher.

Attitudes to urban and rural were complex in *Cheshire Life* and other interwar county magazines, and often interwoven with attitudes to the past and present. The old county, of the gentry and the aristocracy, felt threatened by the modernity of the new county of the rising professional middle class. Another editorial, presumably by Hignett, who personified this growing class, is relatively positive about industrial development, claiming that the magazine

> breathes through its pages the pulsating life of modern industrial communities, – of Wirrral and the Ship Canal zone, – of North-East Cheshire, – of Mid-Cheshire, – and of all the other industrial belts of the county. Side-by-side with this it presents a picture of an agricultural life whose continued prosperity and development will, in the end, be found to be an essential condition of the prosperity of industry . . . it seeks to gather together all that the county has of history, of tradition, and of beauty . . . [but] 'in any such effort there must inevitably be some conflict of ideas and some clashing of ideals . . .[43]

These conflicts are apparent in an equivocal message of support in the launch issue from the Bishop of Chester:

> if this publication were concerned only with industrial development, I should have no reason to commend it . . . We know only too well what havoc has been wrought in England by such development, when pursued without regard to other interests. I commend it because it includes in its purview other aspects of life in Cheshire and gives full value to the historical associations of the county, to its natural beauties and to its rural life.[44]

Another article, by the county secretary of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), condemns the spoiling of buildings 'by an unnecessary display of crudely coloured enamel signs, which not only confuse the eye but also destroy the surrounding amenities'.[45] In contrast to the parvenu Hignett, the bishop, Geoffrey Fisher (future Archbishop of Canterbury), from an old Leicestershire family of parsons, was born in a nine-bedroom rectory and attended the private Marlborough College and Oxford, while the CPRE secretary, Miss A Joan Royden, was from an old Wirral gentry family.

The idea of 'rural modernity' is a helpful way of approaching the distinctive combination of time and place found in county magazines, especially in the 1930s. Bluemel and McCluskey describe rural modernity as 'the actual, lived, everyday realities of rural people living in and reacting to their modern times and to their experiences of modernisation'.[46] It challenges three received ideas about the countryside and modernity: that the countryside is unchanging, while the town is where progress happens; that urban and rural are separate, and that modernism is higher up the cultural hierarchy than the middlebrow of modernity.[47] On the first point, 'the countryside' (especially in southern England) has often been used as a place of escape for middle-class artists, 'a site of nostalgic retreat divorced from modernity and modernisation'. Yet rural areas are often 'sites and sources of innovation and experimentation' and Harris argues that many of the

[43]Editorial, *Cheshire Life*, January 1935, 226.
[44]'Messages', *Cheshire Life*, May 1934, 6.
[45]Miss A Joan Royden, 'Advertisements – good or bad?', *Cheshire Life*, June 1934, p. 55.
[46]Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction," 6.
[47]Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction"; Shirley, *Rural Modernity*.

writers and artists who had homes in the villages of the South Downs and the Cotswolds were seeking to combine tradition and innovation.[48] Vaughan mocks 'painters of the rural scene in the twentieth century [who] have been notorious for their inability to see pylons and silage towers. "Discussing the Milk Quota" and "Artificial Insemination Day" are still, I believe, subjects awaiting their debut at the Royal Academy'.[49] Such subjects were pictured, and reported on, in the news pages of *Cheshire Life*, but pylons, petrol stations and other modern rural sights were excluded from most landscape photographs.

On the second point, urban and rural are deeply connected, by motor transport, on roads, often moving goods in supply chains, and by the people who pass between town and countryside, through the Mersey tunnel, for example. The mobility of all classes, particularly those lower down the scale, is often under-played. In the adverts of *Cheshire Life*, rural life seems to involve frequent trips to 'town', to fashionable shops in Manchester and Liverpool, similar to Delafield's 'provincial lady' and her trips to London and the nearest big town, Plymouth. Further up the social scale, residents of Cheshire's country houses might spend 'the season' in London or even have a house there.[50] Yet modernism often positioned the rural as the other, the opposite of urban modernity.[51]

The challenge to cultural hierarchies is particularly important when studying magazines of the 1930s. Scholarly attention has been given mainly to modernist 'little magazines', but in recent years a growing interest in 'middlebrow' literature and (to a lesser extent) newspapers and magazines has examined intellectuals' anxieties 'that ordinary, unsophisticated people were bidding in some illegitimate way for cultural goods which were "beyond" them'.[52] Hammill and Smith study aspirational magazines offering intellectual cultural capital to lower middle-class readers (which books, films or plays to talk about), but their analysis also fits county magazines, with their more material and class-based aspirations (which clothes to wear, which social events to attend). As part of this reclaiming of the middlebrow, scholars such as Bluemel and Shirley have moved beyond modernism to a broader interest in modernity. Surprisingly little modernism is found in county magazines (less than in *Country Life*): in *Cheshire Life* there is occasional mention in the theatre and film pages of the later 1930s, and there are modernist illustrations in some fashion editorial and advertising (Figures 2 and 3).[53] Modernist writers and artists occasionally appear in county magazines, if they have escaped to the country, perhaps searching for 'a place apart, out of the stream of life', a type of modern pastoral.[54]

The countryside was overwhelmingly modern in the *Cheshire Life* of the 1930s, although most of the magazine was about towns and cities, perhaps surprising for a county magazine. It was focused on the present, and increasingly so as time went by, suggesting a growing confidence (Figure 4).[55] These findings are based on content analysis, in which I classified editorial content in the sampled issues by their focus on time: past, present or future? For example, from the May 1934 issue, Lionel M Angus-Butterworth's feature, 'Cheshire's history

[48]Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction," 2, 8; Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 169.
[49]Vaughan, "Leisure and Toil"; cited in Short, "Images and Realities," 4.
[50]Lee, *Social Leaders*, 5, 22, 93.
[51]Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction,: 2; Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 294.
[52]Hammill and Smith, 7; see also Brown and Grover, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*.
[53]'Between the two world wars, *Country Life* embraced modernism': Strong, *Country Life*, 104.
[54]Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction," 5–6.
[55]The desire to appear modern could explain the striking absence of Christianity in *Cheshire Life*, even in its most superficial forms.

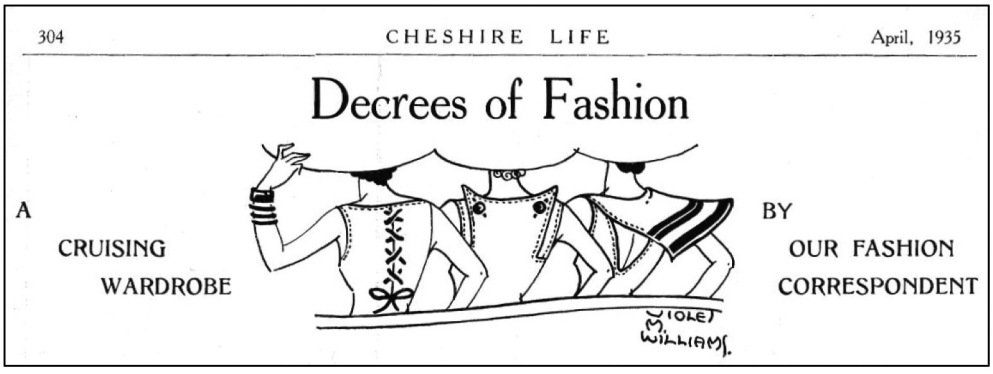


**Figure 2.** Modernist fashion cartouche by Zoe M Williams, April 1935, p. 304 (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

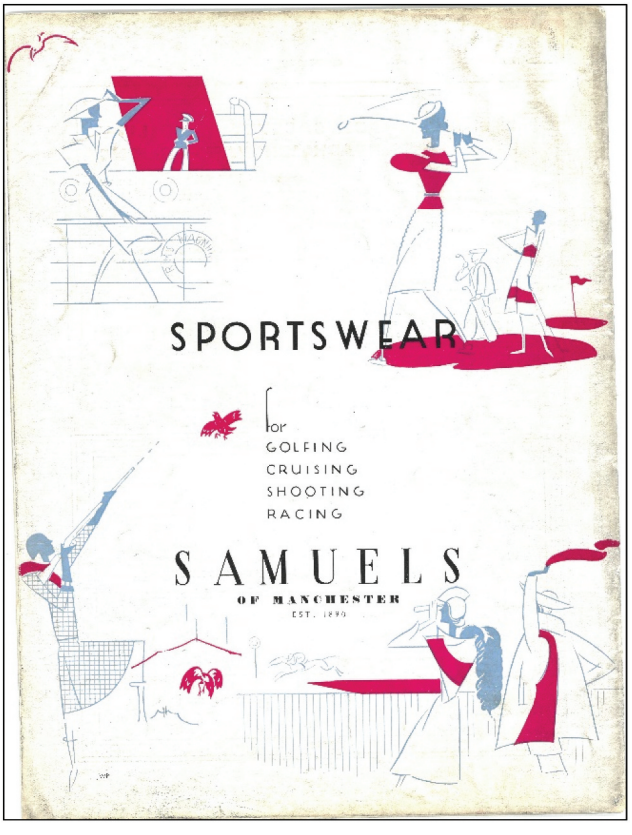


**Figure 3.** Modernist-style illustration in fashion advertisement, April 1939, back cover (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

in wood and stone: a survey of the county's ancient monuments' was classified as past, a map of Cheshire showing locations of different types of industry as present, and 'The old order changeth . . . Lessons from a wheelbarrow' by WB Mercer, about agricultural improvement, as

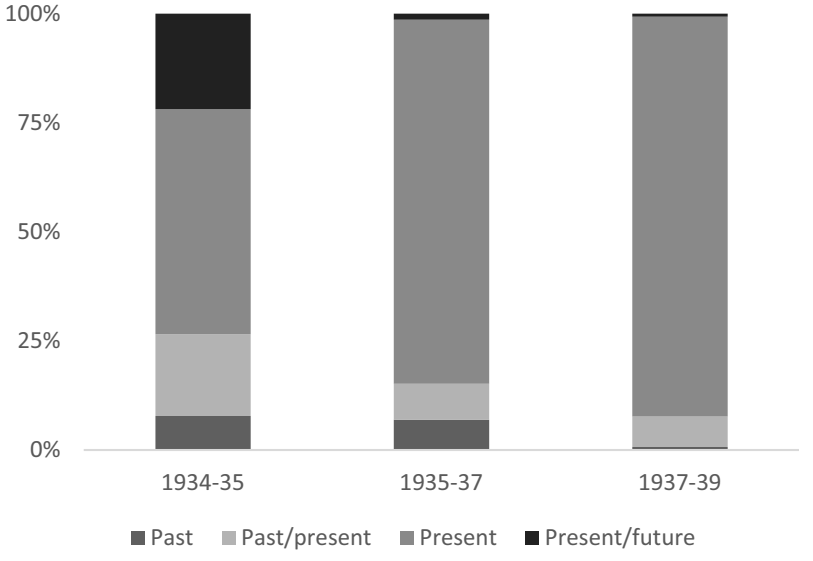


**Figure 4.** Cheshire Life, past, present or future? Change over time, 1934–39.

present and future combined (no editorial content was solely future-oriented). In the first year, when the magazine was published by the development council, around half the articles (33 out of 64) were about the present, increasing to 83% in a transitional experimental period in the year after Nicholls bought it, and then to 91% in a 'mature period' of 1937–39, when the mix of content settled down. There are few references to the First World War, the General Strike or the Depression. This relentlessly upbeat magazine was increasingly representing what John Berger calls a 'culture of progress', a confidence in the present and a belief that the future would be even better.[56]

Articles and photographs about rural topics were always in a minority, but were almost entirely about the present or future. Rural items made up 28% of editorial content in the development council period, 35% in the experimental period and 30% in the mature period, while urban topics increased steadily from 42% to 54%, then 59% (Figure 5, largely because there were fewer articles covering urban and rural areas together, as the number of countywide survey articles and editorials declined after the development council period). Examples of the three categories are 'The festal programme' by Mary Burgess, on Christmas shopping, dinner dances and society weddings in Chester and Knutsford (urban, December 1936), EK Willett's feature on the history of Eaton Hall, the Duke of Westminster's palace near Chester (rural, December 1936), and 'Progress of Cheshire Industry', covering agriculture and heavy industry (rural and urban combined, October 1934). For other county magazines of the time, their connection with Rural Community Councils decreed that they would focus more on the countryside.[57] *Cheshire Life*, in contrast, was largely urban.

[56]Berger, "Peasant Experience," 351; Chase and Straw, "Dimensions of Nostalgia," 1–3.
[57]In *Leicestershire* magazine, twenty-two of twenty-five editorial items in the July 1932 and summer 1933 issues were about rural topics; in *Somerset Countryman*'s summer 1932 issue, forty-three of fifty-seven (seventy-five per cent) of editorial items were rural, and even in *Sussex County Magazine*, not affiliated to an RCC, forty-four of fifty-eight (seventy-six per cent) editorial items in the January 1930 and April 1931 issues were rural.

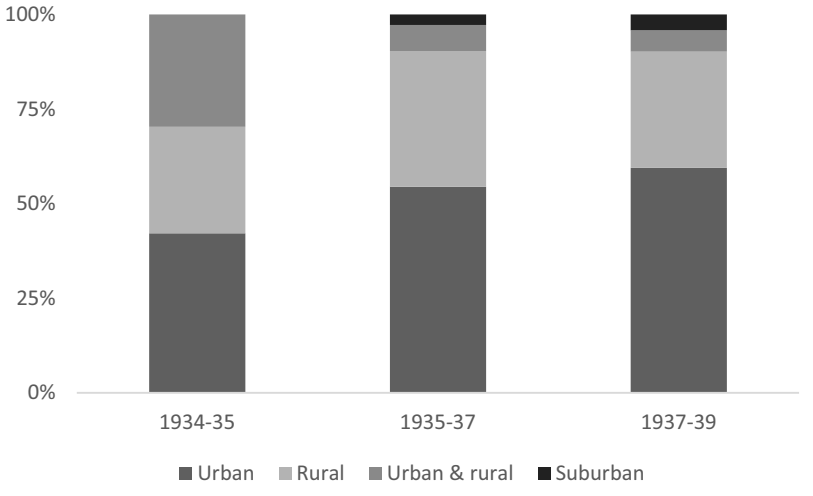


**Figure 5.** Cheshire Life, urban or rural? Change over time, 1934–39.

Two-thirds of rural articles and photographs were present- or future-oriented in the development council period, rising to 78% in the experimental period and 90% in the mature period (Figure 6). For *Cheshire Life*, Raymond Williams's claim that 'the common image of the country is now an image of the past' was wrong.[58]

In the first year of *Cheshire Life*, rural modernity meant new infrastructure, innovation and industry; after the takeover by a commercial publisher, it meant consumerism, display and wealth. New infrastructure can be seen in the advert for Crosville buses (Figure 7, May 1934), boasting that 'every single town and village is served by Crosville Motor Services' and in adverts from electricity companies[59]; innovation in the replacement of horse and cart by a motorised milk van (Figure 8, May 1934) and industry in the article 'Progress of Cheshire industry: Development and expansion taking place' (May 1934), which lists new factories being built in the countryside along the banks of the River Dee and the Manchester Ship Canal, and around Northwich. The magazine began to promote a different type of rural modernity after Nicholls took over as publisher; display and wealth can be seen in the many photos of 'county' social occasions such as the Cheshire Hunt ball at Vale Royal, the seat of Lord and Lady Delamere (December 1936) or in the portraits of Cheshire 'girls with pearls'. Consumerism can be seen in the adverts for luxury cars such as Daimler, Bentley and Rolls Royce, usually pictured against a rural background or outside a country house (Figure 9). Motoring, still linked with affluence and leisure in the 1930s, is perhaps the dominant example of rural modernity in *Cheshire Life*.[60]

## Motoring

Cars and motoring featured in *Cheshire Life* from the first issue, 35 years after one of its influences, *Country Life*, had begun its motoring column in 1899, devoting up to 20 pages

[58]Williams, "Between Country and City," 297.
[59]For rural electrification, see Shirley, "Electricity Comes to the Countryside."
[60]O'Connell, *The Car and British Society*, 77.

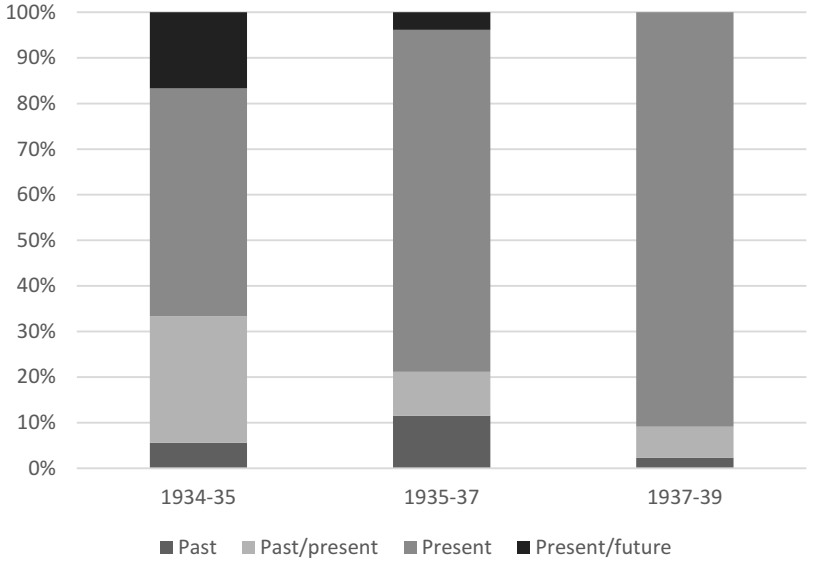


**Figure 6.** Cheshire Life, orientation to time in rural topics, 1934–39.


**Figure 7.** Expanding bus services, an example of modern rural infrastructure: advert for Crosville motor services, May 1934 (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).


**Figure 8.** 'Exit dobbin': the milkman's horse and cart are replaced by a motorised milk van, May 1934 (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

plus advertisements to the topic by 1914, showing that speed and the countryside went together.[61] Motor manufacturers and petrol companies, through their advertising and, in the case of Shell, their innovative motoring guides, connected motoring 'with Britain's heritage and the "beauty spot", and sought to bring together urban and countryside interests and values'.[62] A new genre of domestic motor tourism writing developed, led by HV Morton's popular *In Search of England* (1927).[63] Matless calls this type of writing 'motoring pastoral', in which 'motoring became styled as a modern practice in pursuit of an older England', and the monthly motoring guides to the beauty spots of Cheshire in the first six issues of *Cheshire Life* follow this route map.[64] These 'Motoring in Cheshire' articles were illustrated by landscape photography and pictures of empty villages, cars strangely absent, building a catalogue of picturesque spots month by month. Motoring returned when the new publisher took over in 1935, but in a new form: road tests and news of the latest models, more aligned to advertisers' needs (although by 1938 HE Symons, test driver and motoring correspondent of the *Sketch*, wrote regularly in *Cheshire Life* about his international adventures). Car adverts appeared for the first time under the new publisher, and increased steadily. Among other signs of modernity (women's growing public prominence, new roads and bridges, industrial and agricultural developments, electricity, new leisure facilities), none took up as much space in the

[61] Strong, *Country Life*, 40; Shirley, *Rural Modernity*, 37–38. In contrast, cycling is entirely absent from *Cheshire Life*, despite its popularity, probably because it had become a working-class pursuit and lacked any association with luxury.
[62] Jeremiah, "Motoring and the British Countryside," 234.
[63] Shirley, *Rural Modernity*, 47.
[64] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 64.

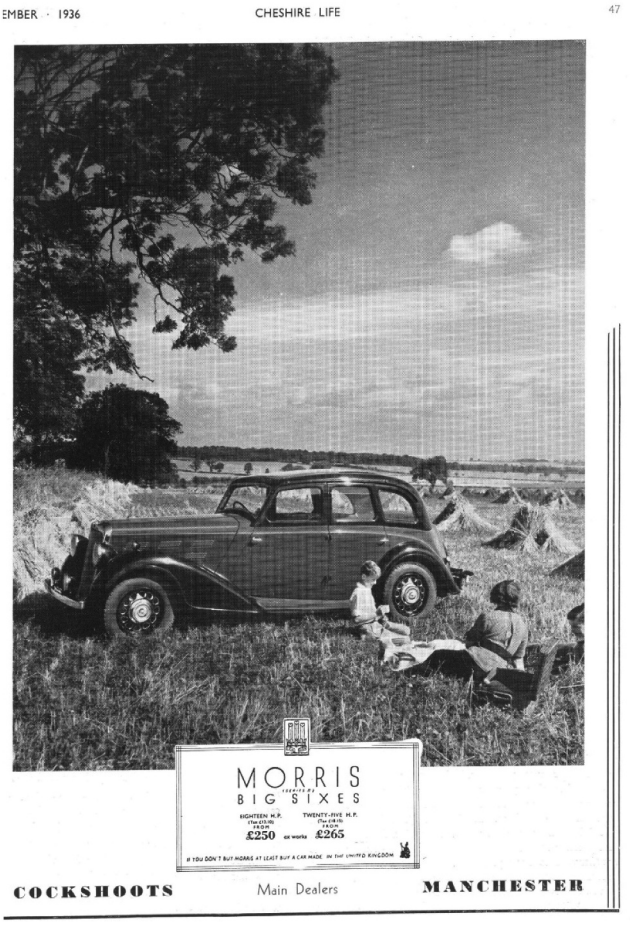


**Figure 9.** This advert places the modern car in a rural setting that could easily be Cheshire, where a mother (presumably the driver) picnics with her children, December 1936 (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

magazine as cars and lorries (mainly cars), with more than 10% of the magazine devoted to motoring editorial and advertising in some 1935 and 1936 issues.

Cars depended on, and enabled, modern buildings and infrastructure in the countryside, such as new roads, petrol stations, motor repair garages, and leisure facilities, including tea rooms, inns, hotels, roadhouses and country clubs. As with cars themselves, these developments were acknowledged, reported and sometimes photographed, but were not included in the magazine's aesthetic of picturesque landscape photography.[65] One such news photo showed 'an interesting experiment … at Elworth, near Sandbach, where Mrs FJ Poole has built a combined smithy and garage' (March 1935). The picture of the 'really attractive building' shows cart horses on one side, a car on the other (Figure 10). A similar mix of old and new could be found in the country clubs springing up around Cheshire, similar to the 'roadhouses'

[65]The February 1939 Hardman cover photo of the Widnes-Runcorn transporter bridge was a rare exception.

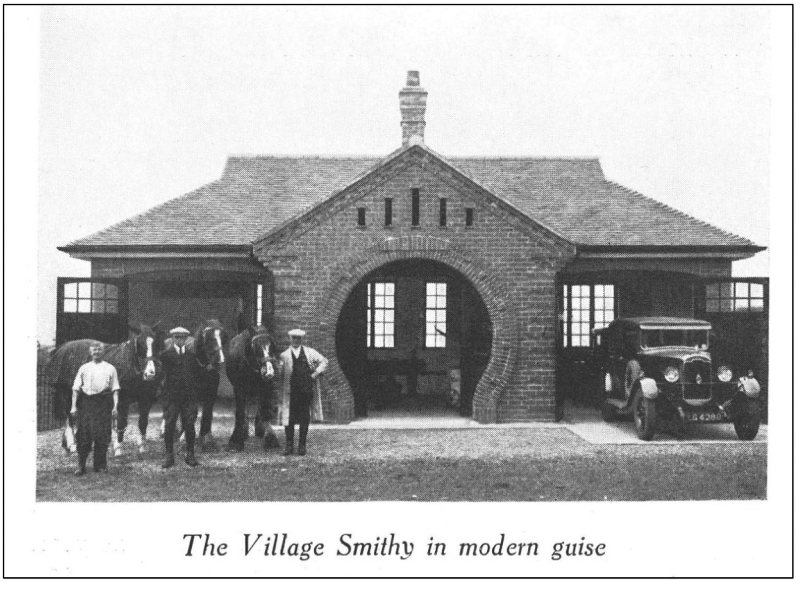


**Figure 10.** 'The village smithy in modern guise': a new building combining blacksmith's forge and motor repair shop, March 1935 (used by permission of *Cheshire Life*).

found along new arterial roads and bypasses in the countryside around London, both of them American imports, made distinctively British.[66] An item in the December 1934 issue noted that three country clubs had opened in the county in the three previous years, two of them in repurposed country houses. At Marbury, the former mansion now had a golf course and swimming pool. At Mere Hall (a regular advertiser), the old rose garden had been dug up for a swimming pool, and other attractions included golf, tennis, badminton, riding, dancing and bridge. In contrast, Four Ways at Delamere had modern purpose-built 'gay and inviting Club buildings … especially at night, when the Club's fanciful neon signs flash invitingly at the entrance of the car park'. The article acknowledged that

> there are those who will deplore the use to which Marbury and Mere have been put, but surely it is better that these family mansions which, for one reason or another, come on to the market should become Clubs, and continue to live, rather than that they should – as so many are – be turned into museums which make them seem only a shell of their former selves.[67]

Alongside the car, the tractor and the diesel lorry also brought modernity to the countryside in *Cheshire Life*.[68] Horses and ploughmen were more likely to appear in landscape images, but tractors were seen here and there. And an early advertiser, Foden of Sandbach, began building diesel trucks in 1931, halting production of their steam-powered trucks in 1934, the year of *Cheshire Life*'s launch.[69]

[66]Gutzke and Law, *Roadhouse*.
[67]'Notes and News', *Cheshire Life*, December 1934, 209–10
[68]Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, 32.
[69]Kelly, *Undertype Steam Road Waggon*.

## Conclusions

The county magazines of the 1930s represented a new publishing genre, and *Cheshire Life* was especially significant as a pioneering exponent, particularly after it was bought by a commercial publisher. Its formula, combining influences from older county, regional and local journals and from *Country Life, Countryman* and weekly illustrated gossip papers such as the *Bystander*, can still be seen in county magazines today.[70] County magazines of the 1930s spoke for 'the county', taken to mean a small subculture of aristocrats, gentry and upper middle-class families, whose power was by now more cultural than political. The magazine's rapid change in style and content under Christopher Nicholls in 1935 challenged its continuity as a 'serial object', testing readers' expectations of similarity from issue to issue.[71] Its contributors were a typical cross-section found in most county magazines around England, middlebrow writers and journalists, jobbing professional photographers, some of them distinguished, others amateurs or aspirants. The other outlets of these freelance contributors connected the magazine to networks of book, magazine and newspaper publishing and broadcasting.

Applying the concept of rural modernity to a county magazine such as *Cheshire Life* reveals that it was unusually urban in its focus, with around two-thirds of content focused on Manchester, Liverpool, London and Cheshire's large towns. However, when *Cheshire Life* was rural, it was rural in a modern way. It covered, or advertised, rural infrastructure such as electricity supply or bus services when it was an economic development magazine, switching to hunting, hunt balls and motoring when it became a middle-class society magazine after its purchase by a commercial publisher. This modernity was, however, a 'peculiar, conservative modernity', exemplified by the mock-Tudor semi full of 'labour-saving devices for the servantless housewife'.[72]

There are themes that this article has not touched on, including empire (it was a group of Cheshire peers and knights Lord Delamere of Vale Royal, Lord Egerton of Tatton and Sir Henry Delves Broughton – who were largely responsible for starting the first white settlements in Kenya).[73] The national yet decentralised nature of county magazine publishing makes them excellent sources for studies of how county and regional cultures on the one hand, and national cultures on the other, are linked. There are striking absences which deserve further study, including religion, any bad news, people of colour, working-class people, and the voices of farmers and other traditional rural inhabitants.

In the late 1930s *Cheshire Life* attracted prestigious advertisers such as Rolls-Royce, Bentley, and the major department stores of Manchester and Liverpool, suggesting that the 'quality' and quantity of its readership were significant. Cheshire aristocrats and gentry took the magazine seriously enough to welcome writers and photographers into their country houses, and allow portraits of their debutante daughters to appear in its pages. The well-used bound copies of such magazines in county archives suggest that they are taken seriously by local and regional historians. It is time that academic historians also took them seriously, as sources for the histories of the county (as one of the few repositories of a declining county identity), the middle classes, the middlebrow

[70]Hobbs, "Cheshire Life."
[71]Levay, "On the Uses of Seriality," vi.
[72]Mandler, *Fall & Rise*, 226, 230.
[73]Lee, *Social Leaders*, 92.

(especially for writing on landscape and the countryside), landscape photography, women, modernity, motoring, advertising and consumption.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was conducted during a sabbatical awarded by the School of Arts & Media, University of Lancashire.

## Notes on contributor

*Dr Andrew Hobbs* is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Lancashire, UK, and author of the first academic studies of the English county magazine. He studies how local and regional newspapers and magazines express place identities. He is a former associate editor of Cheshire Life magazine. His monograph, A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900 (2018) won the 2019 Colby Prize from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals.

## ORCID

Andrew Hobbs http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5943-475X

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