

Speech made by Mark Whitley, current Editor of *The Countryman*, at the unveiling of the Blue Plaque at Greyhounds, Burford, on 22 June 2014

By the 1920s, little had changed in rural areas for many decades. Most working-class country folk still lived a simple life, few people had cars, and the bulk of visitors were the better-off from the cities and larger towns.

In 1927, the countryside was in the midst of an agricultural depression, with low wages and poor housing, and there was much talk amongst the chattering classes about what was termed ‘Rural Problems’. In that same year, John W. Robertson Scott decided to create a magazine for the countryside: *The Countryman*.

Robertson Scott was a remarkable individual. He was a man of strong principles, a vegetarian who disliked hunting and shooting, and a naturalist, he was well-connected, and well-read. Photographs of him depict a tall, well-dressed man, with a shock of white hair and beard that made him look like George Bernard Shaw’s more elegant brother. He was sixty when he founded *The Countryman*, which shows that it is never too late in life to embark on a life-changing adventure.

Writers and artists had been depicting the countryside for hundreds of years, but usually in a sentimental and nostalgic way that bore little resemblance to the realities of rural life. Robertson Scott disliked that depiction, and set about, with *The Countryman*, to try and change people’s perceptions of the countryside.

To Robertson Scott, the countryside was not “the abode of an entertainingly bucolic and out-of-date folk” – “The British countryside,” he wrote, “is that part of Britain from which our race springs, and the vigour, on which depends the intellectual balance of the nation and its power to serve not only its own people but the world.”

Robertson Scott also wanted to improve the lives of country folk, with a kind of evangelical zeal – his stated aim was “to make rural life what it ought to be, and can be, within our time”. He did not shy away from showing his readership the squalid side of rural life, the “dank, dark, incommodious cottages, a shame to Britain”. He argued for better housing, fairer wages, and better facilities such as new village halls – or what he termed “adequate opportunities for intelligence and adaptability”.

The cover of the first issue, April 1927, has what is called in modern parlance a strapline of ‘An illustrated review and miscellany of rural life edited in the

country, and written by countrymen and countrywomen throughout the world'. The cost was half-a-crown, quarterly.

Robertson Scott was assiduous in exploiting his connections in the artistic and political worlds, and the upper echelons of society in which he moved. Contributors in those early years included George Bernard Shaw, Stanley Baldwin, H. E. Bates, and Hugh Walpole. The topics ranged from such worthy considerations as the spread of electricity to rural communities to the strange behaviour of wildlife, and *The Country House Aeroplane*, which offered instructions on how to build one's own airfield.

The magazine was avowedly non-political, and anti-bloodsports. And throughout was the imprimatur of Robertson Scott himself.

When one thinks of *The Countryman* magazine, the two things that spring to mind are Robertson Scott; and Greyhounds, here in Sheep Street, Burford, its editorial home for fifty years. But in fact Robertson Scott did not edit the magazine during its time here. It was on Robertson Scott's retirement as editor that the magazine moved from its birthplace, Idbury Manor a few miles to the north, to Burford.

It was John Cripps, Robertson Scott's successor as editor, who oversaw the move from Idbury to Burford, and edited the magazine until 1971. John actually met his wife Ann when she was working in *The Countryman* offices here at Burford.

On his retirement as editor, Robertson Scott mused on this new chapter in his life – "We now seek, for a few years, quiet, rest, more time in the open air, opportunities of looking on refreshing scenes, leisure for reading, the possibility of seeing, face-to-face, friends whom we have only known by letter only". Which sounds like the perfect retirement. In fact, Robertson Scott never did move away from Idbury, and lived for more than 'a few years' – he died at Idbury Manor in December 1962, aged 96.

There have been many changes in the countryside since the magazine was founded. Consequently, over the last 80-plus years *The Countryman* has had to change and adapt, as the countryside has had to change and adapt. But the magazine is still based in the countryside, in the Yorkshire Dales. And I hope that we still reflect Robertson Scott's ethos of being 'a champion of rural causes'.

And on that note I would like to unveil this plaque which honours J. W. Robertson Scott and *The Countryman's* time at Burford.