

Sustainable Utopias: Exploring the Past to Change the Present



RESEARCHER

Dr Jacqueline Yallop

THE OVERVIEW

Dr Jacqueline Yallop's research on utopian projects of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries has enabled readers of her writing, and participants in associated projects, to make sustainable lifestyle changes for themselves and their communities.

Her interdisciplinary work explores ways in which utopias are constructed and expressed, enhancing public awareness, inspiring new public activities and festivals, changing heritage consumption and encouraging a revision of personal food ethics.



THE RESEARCH

Dr Yallop's research reveals the motives behind a range of utopian projects throughout history, in order to explore how we understand and express the utopian ideal now, and how this might change attitudes to the current built and rural environment.

The first element of the research addresses the utopias of the past and the motives of those who constructed them. Published works including *Marlford* and *Dreamstreets* interrogate the reasons for the growth and decline of planned workers' villages, considering what lessons can be learned from these utopian experiments. The research offers an insight into rural estates and their associated villages, establishing a critique of the mid-twentieth-century decline of social cohesion and responsibility, as well as examining key examples of the utopian village throughout Britain from the long nineteenth century. Through new interdisciplinary links, the research uncovers a number of common threads linking utopian projects of the past.

The second element of Dr Yallop's research investigates competing ideas of a rural utopia (social, literary, philosophical), raising debate about sustainable living. *Big Pig, Little Pig* examines Dr Yallop's personal experience of raising and slaughtering animals in the context of changing landscapes and rural habits. This research draws in particular on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archives to explore ways in which an understanding of the motives of the past can influence a sustainable future, providing insights into land use and ownership, as well as changing notions of social responsibility.

THE IMPACT

ENHANCING PUBLIC DISCUSSION AND INTRODUCING NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY, FOOD CONSUMPTION AND ACTIVE COMMUNITY-BUILDING

A series of public lectures, discussions and readings, as well as a number of radio features, introduced Dr Yallop's research to an extensive audience. Her books have been translated into Dutch and German. *Dreamstreets* featured in a BBC Radio 4 'Start the Week' discussion and in a Radio 4 series *Streets Apart: A History of Social Housing*. An abridged version of *Big Pig, Little Pig* was broadcast as BBC Book of the Week with an estimated reach of 3.2 million listeners. Dr Yallop was invited to give more than twenty public talks and lectures at bookshops and literary festivals and her research also formed the basis of a series of public masterclasses held at the Faber Academy and *The Guardian* newspaper.

Responses to her research evidence the work's ability to impact on the reader. A common theme in these responses is the research's significance in challenging readers to think differently or to reconsider their habitual approaches to life. *Big Pig, Little Pig* in particular raised a heated debate among readers and radio listeners with one reader noting how the book 'finally gave me the push I needed to become a vegetarian... But isn't that amazing? The power of books to change a life'.

Dr Yallop's work also informed the thinking behind a series of exhibitions at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield exploring utopian visions for a sustainable post-industrial society and which centred around the work of the nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin. The Ruskin Collection went on to inspire a programme of events across Sheffield - 'Ruskin in Sheffield' - revisiting Ruskin's aspirations for the city.

The project worked with local communities, cultural organisations, artists, environmentalists, historians and activists to create pop-up museums, performances, festivals and new displays in the Ruskin Collection. Through these activities, over 24,000 people engaged with their Ruskin heritage, craftsmanship, good livelihoods, utopian thinking, social justice and their local community. Responding to Dr Yallop's research, a variety of local and community artists then developed their own practice. Highlights included a community play ('Boots, Fresh Air and Ginger Beer'), the 'Contra Flow' poetry walk (encouraging new writing) and 'Crafting the Land' (linking craft projects to biodynamic gardening).

INFLUENCING CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

In August 2019, a series of public and school workshops, *Imagining Utopias* (based on *Dreamstreets*), encouraged participants to construct workable contemporary utopias. The project included a national competition for creative interpretations of utopia, and social media activity. The successful #ModelVillageMonday series reached 8,000 Twitter impressions over 28 days.

Feedback from the workshops evidence a change in conceptual understanding, from not recognising the word 'utopia' at all to identifying the principle of 'community and environment... an ideal place to live'.