

LAND:

what is the countryside for?

Rapporteur's Report
on the RSA's 2001/2002 lecture series
on Land Use in the UK

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Section A: The Lectures

Introduction

The events of 2001 opened up considerable debate about the condition and future of the British countryside. Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) caused widespread problems, not only within the agricultural industry, but also for the wider economies of rural areas. While the main priority during the year was understandably the control and eradication of the disease, many commentators raised questions about the priorities for public policy and rural business development after FMD.

These questions have centred on:

- a) the process of rural recovery, including the priorities for various sub-national rural recovery programmes;
- b) the reform of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and particularly the UK's position in the CAP's mid-term review;
- c) the prospects for the future competitiveness and viability of British farming;
- d) the relative merits of supporting agriculture's food production and environmental management roles; and
- e) the balance of production (farming and forestry) and consumption (leisure, amenity and housing) functions of rural areas, and the reflection of this balance in public policy and spending.

In part as a response to these issues, a series of policy reviews and Government statements have been produced in recent months. These have included the report of the Rural Task Force (October 2001)¹ and Lord Haskins report into rural recovery (October 2001)² and the Government's response to these two reports (December 2001),³ followed by the report of the Policy Commission on Future of Food and Farming (January 2002).⁴ It was in this context of policy review, and heightened public and political debate, that the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (RSA) decided to launch a lecture series on the future of the countryside. The aim of the series was to encourage debate and forward thinking about the nature of land use and how it can best be guided towards a more sustainable future.

Section A of this paper reviews the content of the lecture series and draws out the main points and arguments developed by each speaker. Section B presents a brief synthesis of the series as a whole, highlighting common themes and issues and identifying gaps in the debate. Section C draws conclusions and sets out some possible next steps for consideration by the RSA.

¹ Rural Task Force (2001) *Tackling the Impacts of Foot and Mouth Disease on the Rural Economy*, London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

² Haskins, C. (2001) *Rural Recovery After Foot and Mouth Disease*, London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

³ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2001) *England's Rural Future*, London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

⁴ Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming (2002) *Farming and Food: A Sustainable Future*, London: Cabinet Office.

1) CHALLENGING THE MYTHS: WHAT IS THE COUNTRYSIDE FOR? (LONDON, 4/12/01)

Chris Baines, Vice President of the Wildlife Trusts; & Trustee, National Heritage Memorial Fund
Alan Evans, Professor of Environmental Economics, University of Reading

The first pair of lectures took place at the RSA in London on the 4th December. Both speakers challenged the prevailing myths that often dominate the ways in which the countryside is talked about and thought about. Alan Evans argued that the term 'countryside' is loaded with a specific meaning. It implies a pastoral, agricultural landscape – farmed and pretty. Equating the countryside with farming has led to special treatment for the agricultural industry. Farmers are perceived to be the custodians or 'stewards' of the countryside, which results in an acceptance of subsidies to the industry and its special treatment in the planning system. A set of myths help underpin the view that agriculture should be financially supported and left free from aspects of planning control. The first is the myth of 'over-urbanisation' – the view that the rate of development of greenfield land is too high. The second is the 'green belt myth' – that planning protection for green belts will provide recreational and amenity land for the benefit of urban dwellers. The third is the 'sustainability myth' – that urban containment contributes to sustainability objectives. Professor Evans challenged each of these myths. He argued that the countryside is about much more than farming and, moreover, because the urban majority bears most of the cost of current rural policies, they should have a legitimate say in shaping these policies.

Chris Baines' central message was that it is not just inadvisable but impossible to separate the urban and the rural. This simple division conceals the diversity within both town and country. The differences between rural Cumbria and Cambridgeshire, he argued, are probably far greater than any similarities that unite them under the label 'rural'. Urban people should have a legitimate say in what happens in rural areas, but the main task is to improve the 'joined up' and holistic handling of policy issues, which is hampered by the artificial divide between policy areas. He spoke of flourishing greenery in towns and cities under threat from development as brownfield land, in order to protect green country spaces. He argued that the lack of engagement by consumers with how their food is produced in part accounts for problems such as BSE. A third example – the cryptosporidium pathogen in water that comes from livestock waste – is posing a big challenge for the water industry and represents a direct link between urban consumers and rural land managers. A further example of the need to deal with rural land management in a more holistic way concerns flooding. The insurance industry estimates that property damage claims from the 2000 floods were £3billion. The floodwater came mainly from farmland. Yet there has been insufficient thinking about the connections between rural land management and the downstream consequences. Billions are being spent on insurance claims and on end-of-pipe solutions to the flooding problem, but different types of management upstream could reduce flood risk. Unfortunately, land use management decisions are completely outside any form of control by the urban community downstream.

Chris Baines argued for a different view of the role of the countryside, delivering a whole range of products – reliable food, drinking water and solace. Farmers say they don't want to be park keepers, but it is possible to farm the land in a different way that delivers much more highly valued products. There is a broad community of interest, with broad demands, but people are disenfranchised from decision making at the moment. The question is how do we get the kind of debate that begins to shape the countryside according to the new functions we are identifying for it.

2) THE ECONOMICS OF LAND USE (LONDON, 11/12/01)

Patrick Keiller, architect & film-maker
Paul Ormerod, Director, Volterra Consulting

The second pair of lectures took place at the RSA in London on the 11th December. The speakers addressed the issue of the economics of land use. Paul Ormerod echoed many of the themes of the first pair of speakers in his lecture, and presented a stridently market-oriented and deregulatory agenda for rural land use. He equated the treatment of the British countryside with a Soviet Union-style attachment to particular ideologies of intervention and critiqued public attitudes to the countryside, farming and policy. The idea that hill farmers deserve more money than they actually get because they work long hours he likened to Marx's labour theory of value. The agricultural industry's overly comfortable relationship with the state had insulated it from the market, and given it special status and treatment. A general instinct to plan and to regulate permeates thinking on rural land use policy, he argued, calling for an end to the special treatment of agriculture, the removal of all subsidies, and a move towards a more free market approach to land use. The role of regulation of land use, he argued, is best left to the local level and local communities.

Patrick Keiller's lecture developed an alternative perspective. He linked ways of valuing the land with ways of valuing the quality of life, and developed the idea of two contrasting material cultures in Britain. The *first*, which measures success by the volume and quality of what it imports and consumes, is more associated with the conservative, commercial capitalism of southern England. The *second*, which measures success by the quality and volume of what it produces and exports, is more associated with the radical and manufacturing traditions of the north. The dominance of the southern stereotype, he thought, may be responsible for the poor quality of British food. His argument was that rethinking the role and value of rural land would require a radical critique of British attitudes to our material culture. He called, in particular, for a reconsideration of ideas of permanence and private property in the ways that rural land is used and developed. Drawing on the historical examples of the Essex plotlands – the low density, self-built developments of the 1890s – he called for the development of more imaginative, eco-friendly, hi-tech and non-permanent settlements in which more people could both live and work in the countryside.

3) RESHAPING THE LANDSCAPE/RETHINKING THE LAND (LONDON, 31/1/02)

Jonathan Bate, Professor of English Literature, University of Liverpool
Richard Morris, Commissioner, English Heritage

The third pair of lectures took place at the RSA in London on the 31st January. The speakers addressed the issue of the role of rural land in our cultural heritage. Jonathan Bate's lecture reflected on the historical, philosophical and cultural dimensions to the debate about the countryside and rural land. Drawing on the works of William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and John Ruskin, he argued that what counts as natural beauty is not immutable, but changes over time. The mountains of the Lake District were once seen as uncivilised and of little value, but from the mid-18th century the rural landscape came to be valued as an aesthetic phenomenon through the rise of picturesque tourism. Wordsworth helped formulate the idea that particular rural landscapes were a national asset to be preserved and treasured. However, a purely picturesque view risks losing sight of the complex relationships between the human and the non-human that characterise the countryside. This risk is accentuated by the persistence of

powerful binary notions of town and country and of nature and culture that have taken hold over the last 150 years or so. Professor Bate raised the question of how modern urbanites should relate to the countryside, and the images and idealisations of the countryside that culture produces. One response is to dismiss 'nostalgic escapism' as a myth that doesn't really matter. He warned against this, arguing that myths serve as necessary fictions that tell us 'deep truths'. The idea that the essence of the countryside is being lost forever could be a useful admonitory force – an ecological early warning system. However, the myth of rural England also brings risks of atavistic conservatism and the perpetuation of an almost wholly white, middle-class experience of rural heritage tourism. From Ruskin's writings on questions of property and political economy, we can find ideas still pertinent to the question of farming and rural land, even 130 years on, he argued. The merely pragmatic, the utilitarian, the economic approach to these questions is part of the problem, not the solution. If we talk of notions of stewardship, duties, responsibilities, then we move from the realm of the economic to that of moral philosophy. What is therefore needed is a reconnection of economics with some sense of environmental responsibility.

Richard Morris set recent environmental change in the countryside within an even longer historical perspective in his lecture, stretching back tens of thousands of years. He argued that the meaning in our surroundings is strongly influenced by what we bring to those surroundings – our questions and our expectations. While the intellectual and emotional potential of our surroundings is growing, and may develop rapidly, its physical reality is being ever faster eroded. Bearing in mind the tension between what we find in the landscape and what we bring to it, the pace and whereabouts of the erosion of our physical heritage are things over which we might want to exercise some choice. Recent changes have been revolutionary rather than evolutionary. Between 1945 and 1995, a tenth of all cases of monument destruction were attributable to agricultural damage. A third of England's hedges were lost between 1984 and 1993. A study of unlisted field barns in the Yorkshire Dales in 1997 found less than 60% of them to be intact. Ill-considered change – our mania for tidying things up – can risk destroying historical artefacts of great value and interest. This is not to argue against modernity, but is to point out that a respect for, and curiosity about, our surroundings is a prerequisite for being in a position to rejoice in historical finds. Times of upswing in economic activities can paradoxically accelerate discoveries about the past. Yet when we build in cities, we should also be sure that the quality of what we build merits the sacrifice of what we destroy elsewhere to build it (such as the mining of aggregates in the countryside). Sadly, the historic environment has not figured prominently in debates about farming, rural land use planning and sustainability.

4) IMAGINE THE FUTURE: HOW SHOULD WE USE THE LAND? (LONDON, 28/2/02)

Roger Scruton, openDemocracy
Richard Wakeford, Chief Executive, Countryside Agency

The fourth pair of lectures took place at the RSA in London on the 28th February. The speakers addressed the issue of the future of rural land use. Richard Wakeford's lecture was one of the few occasions on which discussions about rural land use drew upon the international context. The coming accession of Hungary and Poland to the European Union means that we are approaching a turning point in the way we shape our farmed countryside. When this is set alongside the potential for a fundamental change in the system of land use planning, we could be faced with the biggest opportunity for change in countryside policy since the end of the Second World War. The post-war policy framework has become overtaken by events. The planning system is too oriented to development control with insufficient emphasis on forward-looking and enabling strategies, linking infrastructure development and public and

private investment. Agricultural support has become dysfunctional, and out of touch with what the public demands. A greater emphasis on agri-environment schemes could help rectify this. However, rural change has to be understood in a wider context. Climate change and technological changes will alter land use practices. Growing affluence and social change will change consumer preferences and lifestyles. The appeal of rural places for homes and housing is likely to continue to be strong. Yet there is a need to set out a vision. Some possibilities were set out. The rural canvas of our finest landscapes may need little change. Perhaps some land could be 'left to nature'. Landscapes around towns have much potential for providing opportunities for discovery and pleasure. In the wider farmed countryside, energy crops – such as miscanthus – could help reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Crucially, however, people should have a clearer say in decisions about the use of public money to shape the landscape. The Countryside Agency is proposing land management strategies that involve the public in guiding public investment in land management.

Roger Scruton began his lecture by drawing a distinction between land and landscape. The former is an input into the business of production, while the latter is an object of contemplation. It is actually the landscape we have been worrying about, rather than the land. He argued for adopting an aesthetic perspective on the countryside – that is contemplating things for their meaning, for their human significance, and for the way that significance is reflected in appearance. From this perspective, the English countryside can be seen to be the result not of centralised decision-making, but of specific agricultural practices and patterns of ownership – particularly the landed estate and the family farm. Landed estates have a strong aesthetic purpose, currently reflected in the fact that so many of them now have been handed over to the National Trust. Small family farms are struggling. They contain an extraordinary concentration of diverse skills, but are sadly part of a world that is vanishing. Roger Scruton argued that the landed estate and the family farm are both effectively being killed off by the State, and we are witnessing a covert nationalisation of the landscape. He despaired of the right to roam legislation for breaking the connection between the rights exerted over the landscape and the duty to maintain it. Similarly, the proposed hunting ban would threaten the duty of care upon which the countryside depends. He also complained of the EU Nitrates Directive, which he saw as being imposed on farmers without consultation, and the Green Paper on planning, which proposes that large development decision be made centrally, by government. When asked 'what should be do with the land?', perhaps the answer is 'Nothing' because it is not 'we' who have the right to do anything, but the people who own the land, he concluded.

5) WHOSE LAND IS IT ANYWAY? (EDINBURGH, 7/4/02)

Robert Balfour, Scottish Landowners Federation
Kevin Cahill, author, *Who Owns Britain?*
Magnus Linklater, former Editor, *The Scotsman*
Tommy Sheridan MSP, Scottish Socialist Party

The fifth set of lectures took place at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh on the 7th April. The speakers addressed the question 'whose land is it anyway?' Robert Balfour, convenor of the Scottish Landowners' Federation, gave a landowner's perspective. He complained that landowners in Scotland were being unfairly cast as 'public enemy number one', but stressed the duties and responsibilities that go with land ownership. He argued that landowner's 'power' is exaggerated and that real power lies with planners, politicians and even journalists. In any case, landowners are constrained by environmental and heritage designations, health and safety, public liability and a host of other legislative constraints. In answer to the question 'whose land is it

anyway', Mr Balfour's argued that his bits were his. He recognised the public interest in his land, and was willing to share it with the Scottish people at large and with visitors to Scotland, but argued that not all stakeholders in the land have an equal stake. Instead of question 'whose land is it anyway', we should ask who is going to pay to keep it all going, through good times and bad, and still deliver public benefits.

Kevin Cahill took a contrasting position. He began by lambasting the Land Registry for England and Wales for its poor coverage of land ownership, and for its poor provision of information. He complained that landowners earned huge public subsidies, but often without any formal recorded title of ownership in the public record. He calculated that, on the basis of their assets, almost half of England's 96,000 agricultural landowners are millionaires, and argued that they could always sell their assets if farming was difficult.

Tommy Sheridan was unable to attend the event, but produced a summary paper. In it, he attacked the concentration of wealth to be found in Scottish landownership. Some 46 of the UK's richest 500 people, with a combined personal wealth of £10 billion, own 1.25 million acres of Scotland. He felt the Scottish Government's Land Reform Bill was quite a mild measure, and called for land nationalisation and a much more ambitious democratisation of land management. He concluded by asking 'how the hell can anybody own a mountain?'

Tommy Sheridan's place on the panel was taken by Magnus Linklater, former editor of *The Scotsman*, who remarked that many farmers and landowners felt undervalued by society and that bureaucratic interference in their work had got out of hand. He suggested that the underlying rationale for land reform in Scotland was a social reforming agenda, but he questioned whether land reform would improve the business of land, and argued that this should be the central guiding question. The debate about land ownership and land reform was important for historical reasons and has been very heated and controversial for emotional reasons but a more hard-headed and economic perspective in the analysis could usefully inform the debate.

6) DOES FARMING HAVE A FUTURE? (NORWICH, 11/4/02)

Martin Collison, East of England Development Agency
Philip Lowe, Professor of Rural Economy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Mark Thomasin-Foster, Country Land & Business Association

The final event in the series took place at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, on the 11th April. The speakers addressed the question of the future of farming. First, Martin Collinson set out the case that farming has got to change. Many farmers are unclear what is being asked of them as a sector, but a broader and more diverse approach to agricultural support and farming strategies is likely. He set out five types of farms of the future: i) large-scale, globally competitive commercial farms; ii) farms producing for local and niche markets; iii) more mobile contract farmers; iv) farm landscape managers; and v) lifestyle farmers. He argued that no one single group should be seen as more legitimate than the rest.

Mark Thomasin-Foster made the case that every individual farm should be seen as a multi-functional rural business, producing food, environmental and social benefits. He sketched out some of the challenges facing these businesses – the strength of the pound; increasing regulation; the erosion of property rights; and weakly developed partnership working between the farming sector, government and other bodies. He felt it likely that there will be a continuing trend towards switching subsidies away from direct commodity support payments towards support

for wider rural development, and the Country Land & Business Association was a long advocate of such switching. However, certain essential qualifications to modulating payments are required, such as a flat rate approach that does not discriminate between farms. He concluded by arguing that farmers need a sense of optimism in the future before they will invest. Demonstrating a will from government to invest in the wider role of the countryside would be an encouraging signal.

Philip Lowe's lecture focused on the rural economy and the changing relationship between agriculture and the rural economy. The UK – and particularly the English – situation is distinctive because in most other European countries agriculture *equals* rural development. In England, rural development policy tackles the problems left behind by agricultural policy. However, the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis has altered this relationship. It damaged rural economies and highlighted the relatively minor economic role of agriculture and the disparities between its treatment and that of the tourism industry. It showed how the economic value of the landscape that Cumbrian farmers help produce outweighs the value of the meat they produce. It showed how encouraging farmers to diversify into tourism enterprises built in new fragilities and posed new business risks. Professor Lowe called for a more strategic approach to the reintegration of agriculture into rural and regional economies and environments. This would require an emphasis on supply chains, but not just food supply chains. Others are energy supply chains (for energy crops), industrial crop supply chains, farming for environmental services supply chain and the speciality foods supply chain. He argued that the Curry Commission's review of agriculture paid insufficient attention to the rural economy dimensions, and called for greater responsibilities and funding programmes such as the Rural Enterprise Scheme, to be passed over to the Regional Development Agencies.

Section B: Synthesis and Issues

This section presents a brief synthesis of the lecture series as a whole, highlighting common themes and issues raised and identifying gaps in the debate.

The following were the most common themes and arguments to emerge:

- The countryside is about more than just farming. However, the policy-making that impacts upon rural areas is not only hampered by an overly-compartmentalised approach, but also suffers from the fact that concerns about the economic welfare of farming businesses continue to exercise disproportionate influence.
- Everyone has a legitimate stake and a legitimate say in the future of the countryside, whether they live in an urban or a rural area. This legitimacy flows from the fact that many rural activities – be they agricultural production or countryside management – rely on public subsidies financed from urban and well as rural areas.
- The rationale for public financial support for agriculture's food producing functions, and the associated special treatment of agriculture in the land use planning system, are increasingly seen as relics of a past age that have outlived their usefulness.
- A new approach is required, and the time is ripe for change. This is not only because of the fact that the policy framework for the farming sector is at a crossroads, but also because of the appetite for change in planning and environmental policy and in the ways that cross-cutting issues are handled.
- A narrowly economic and utilitarian perspective on rural land use risks marginalising those emotional and philosophical attributes that give the countryside its meaning and worth in Britain.

The main gaps and weaknesses in the debate were as follows:

- As is common in debates about the countryside, much of the discussion was parochially British (or, perhaps more accurately, *English*). Few speakers sought to set the national condition in the context of the important economic and political processes at work in the European and broader international spheres. Yet with pressures from EU enlargement and world trade liberalisation, the supra-national level is likely to have an increasingly important bearing on the prospects for rural land uses in the future.
- The lectures suffered from a lack of practical examples of local businesses and schemes that are currently successfully pursuing alternative development models (such as 'integrated rural development', 'integrated resource management' or genuinely participatory approaches that involve local people in planning and shaping rural development).
- From the lectures, it seems that the appetite for forward thinking is neither widespread, nor evenly spread among people and organisations with an interest in countryside and land use issues. More than is the case with many other areas of public policy, many individuals and organisations seem to find contemplating any change at all uncomfortable. Indeed, debates about the countryside often seem instinctively backward looking – drawing attention to what is being lost and to the way things used to be. In contrast, a forward-looking perspective should, on the basis of a shared vision, seek a strategy for how future change can best be exploited to maximum social benefit.

Section C: Conclusions and Possible Next Steps

This section draws conclusions and sets out some possible next steps for consideration by the RSA. The RSA lecture series has been timely and fruitful. The debates at the events have been lively, well-attended, and have attracted the attention of senior policy-makers and officials.

Is there a ‘unique intervention’ that the RSA can continue to make? The answer is ‘quite possibly’. Agriculture and the countryside is a crowded policy area with a wide-range of interests – farming groups, the business and commercial world, a vast array of countryside and conservation quangos, the environmental lobby in many forms, local government, the voluntary sector – the list goes on. In many areas, interests are strongly entrenched, and views are relatively fixed and stable. There is therefore much to be gained when wholly independent bodies, with little specific interest at stake save for the desire for a critical and free-thinking debate, enter the scene.

As a stimulus to further thinking and discussion within the RSA, and between the RSA and its partner bodies and potential sponsors, the concept of the ‘Post-Agricultural Countryside’ is briefly introduced below. It is suggested that the themes of globalisation, enterprise and culture could usefully provide areas of further activity under this over-arching concept that warrant consideration.

THE POST-AGRICULTURAL COUNTRYSIDE

The concept of a Post-Agricultural Countryside does not imply the end of agriculture. It does, however, signal a break with the past, and a move away from an era when the priorities governing the use of rural land were driven by the strategic importance of protecting and modernising the agricultural industry. In the Post-Agricultural Countryside, conventional farming will be one land use among many, and rural land managers will receive public payments primarily in return for the provision of public goods such as environmental land management services. An important set of influences upon the transition to a post-agricultural countryside lies in the international arena. A key area of consideration should therefore be what globalisation might mean for the future of the countryside.

i) Globalisation and the Post-Agricultural Countryside

An increasingly globalised economic system is being developed and it is a fact of life that localities are becoming more interconnected as a result. All three major political parties in Britain agree that the advantages of globalisation outweigh the disadvantages, but globalisation is often seen as a threat to the economic fortunes and environmental qualities of rural areas, not least because rural areas are valued as places of stability, continuity and tradition. Nevertheless, continued changes in information and communication technologies, and in the biosciences, are likely to continue to alter the patterns of threats and opportunities facing those that live and work in rural areas. Increasing interconnectedness and mobility may open up new opportunities for sustainable economic development in Britain’s rural areas. Similarly, reform of agricultural policies in the European Union could have important implications for the direction of agricultural development in other poorer parts of the world. What is clear is that the relationships between rural land management in Britain and wider international processes of climate change, trade liberalisation and EU enlargement are still poorly understood. There is strong potential for RSA activity to make a unique intervention in this area, perhaps through commissioning reviews of research, hosting expert seminars, or organising further public lectures.

ii) Enterprise in the Post-Agricultural Countryside

A key challenge in the future is likely to centre upon how rural land managers can capitalise upon their assets in new ways, and by engaging with new market opportunities. The creation of jobs and sustaining of livelihoods will require new forms of enterprising behaviour, not just amongst business owners and managers, but also in public sector bodies and in partnership working between different sectors. There are examples of innovation and enterprising behaviour in rural development and rural land management, but project work is needed to clarify the common ingredients of success in areas such as the development of energy crop supply chains, farmer collaboration in local marketing initiatives, and local economic development schemes based on wildlife conservation. Here the RSA could either commission case study research of existing innovations or, with partners, directly support one or two practical schemes that hold potential for disseminating good practice in innovation and enterprise.

iii) Cultures of Countryside in Post-Agricultural Britain

One striking theme from the lecture series was the importance of ideas of rurality and countryside in our national cultural heritage. It is worth questioning the role of contemporary agriculture and other rural land uses in the production and reproduction of cultural meanings around land, landscape, nature and identity. How have the food and farming crises of the last decade affected popular understandings of the countryside? Moreover, as globalisation, increasing interconnectedness and mobility undermine the distinctions between urban and rural societies, how might rural communities in the post-agricultural countryside utilise their distinctive local landscapes and cultures for their social and economic benefit? Here, the RSA could commission work, in the form of a lecture or publication, on the contemporary cultural politics of rurality in 'modern' Britain, and a review of the exploitation of local cultural heritage in the economic development of rural places.

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