

FOLK DESIGN: Common Ground and Local Distinctiveness.

www.commonground.org.uk

Common Ground is a community conservation movement which promotes the importance of local distinctiveness and the common culture. It does this by forging close links between local landscapes and the arts, using the arts to reveal how we engage with the subjective values of place. This was initiated because landscape values revealed objectively and scientifically only resulted in the rare and spectacular aspects of our environment being seen as valuable, meanwhile those familiar landscapes which held great value for communities were being lost at an alarming rate.

To enable people to give value to familiar places, common ground has produced books, paintings, sculpture and events, all of which reveal the power of partnerships between artists and local communities to make manifest subjective values and meanings embedded in landscapes.

Their model projects and events are highly creative. They can be summarised within five broad categories:

Trees, Woods, and Green Man projects,
The Parish Maps projects,
The Local Distinctness projects,
the New Milestone Projects and
the Rivers and Water projects.

Trees, Woods and the Green Man Projects

These are projects which express people's deep cultural need for trees. The projects aim to heighten awareness of trees by stressing their cultural, spiritual and aesthetic value. The projects include events, publications and exhibitions.



Events are ways in which people can become actively involved in celebrating their connectedness with the land. Common Ground suggests that interventions in the annual calendar are an appropriate way to highlight the on-going and cyclical aspects of our cultural landscapes and their conservation.

One such event is Tree Dressing Day which occurs during the first weekend in December. As with all Common Ground events, an initial project was run by Common Ground in London launched with a clear message and strong publicity. Tree Dressing was a response to the devastation of the storms in 1987 which resulted in many old

trees, steeped in history being lost or subsequently felled out of fear. Common Ground was anxious to show people that old trees are very valuable in our landscape for cultural reasons.



The initial Tree Dressing Day was launched in December 1990, when three London Planes in Shaftesbury Avenue were dressed with large ceramic numbers. Posters were placed in all the surrounding shops and theatres saying 'Every Tree Counts'. The activity received sufficient publicity for Tree Dressing to be launched as an annual event in local communities. These activities are facilitated by local community artists. In association with the annual event, seminars are run about conservation of trees and their cultural significance. As well Common Ground put out publications such as a poetry anthology called *In a Nutshell* and a range of small publications such as *Leaves* by Andy Galsworthy. The following slides show some of the Tree Dressing Day events since 1990.



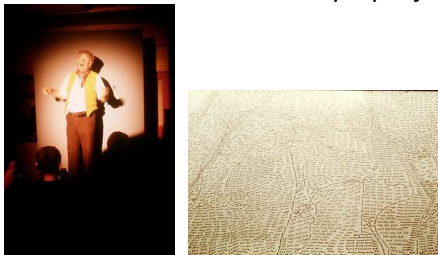
The Parish Maps Project

Another successful aspect of the work of Common Ground in assisting people to understand and value their cultural landscape is the Parish Maps Project. This began in 1985 with the publication of two booklets about how to map local places and an action guide for local conservation titled, *Holding Your Ground*.

As with all Common Ground projects, it began with a group of artists making 'maps' of their favourite places. These were then exhibited in a gallery in London with wide publicity and the launching of the booklets. Subsequently thousands of communities in Britain have undertaken mapping projects which have resulted in diverse forms such as weavings, sculpture, ballads, posters and in Australia a mural created from tiles made in a mobile kiln which moved to remote communities in the area.



The act of map making empowered community groups and a number of conservation and rehabilitation landscape projects have resulted.



Local Distinctiveness Projects

One of the main areas of concern for Common Ground is the erosion or even complete loss of local distinctiveness of places. They maintain that this erosion of difference and bleaching of identity, detail, craftsmanship and meaning affect us all emotionally and culturally. While they accept change is vital, they point out that the scale, type and rate of change occurring now is unprecedented and is capable of obliterating all that has gone before, particularly the common things that give character to our places.

Erosion of local distinctiveness is not only as a result of development, there are many small changes which rob places of their local diversity. These include replacing an ancient hedgerow with a neat row of cypress pines, landscaping an old pit tip out of recognition, straightening a suburban road, an orchard now turned into a housing estate, old shopping streets losing another family business to a national chain store and so on.

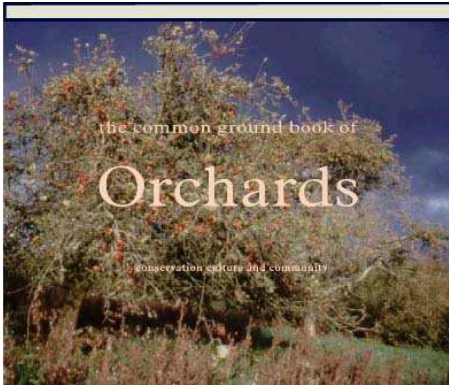
Local Distinctiveness Alphabet.

One project aimed at addressing this is encouraging communities to make a local distinctiveness alphabet. By listing all the things that make their place different, communities can not only identify their local character, they can ensure that this character is incorporated into new developments by using local materials and local craft practices.

Ammonites, ash trees, Arbour Day, allotment gardens, avenues, Barns, bluebells, bee skeps....

Taken from Local Distinctiveness pamphlet.

Apple Day



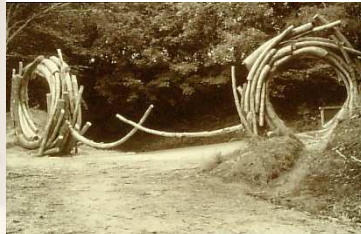
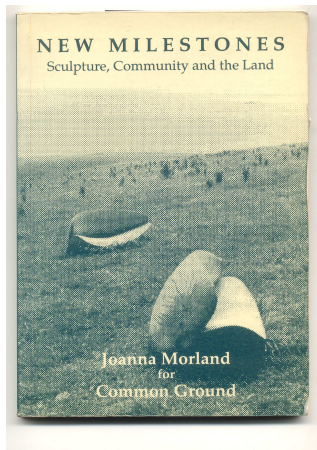
Apple Day like Tree Dressing is an event in the annual calendar, 21st October, when festivities occur which celebrate local apple varieties. This project came about when Common Ground realised that Britain was fast losing one of its most evocative landscape elements – local orchards. Until recently there were over 6000 different species of apple grown throughout Britain. Now there are only nine species of apple produced for the market. At one time, over 200 varieties of apple might be found growing in a single orchard. Now old orchards are being grubbed out and the land turned over to cereal production or housing. Common Ground point out that wild crabapple and other wild fruits are the ancestors to old orchards and some of the species were eaten in prehistoric times.

They started this project again by using an artist, this time the photographer, James Ravilious, to document the orchards in the south-west of England. At the same time they produced a small book called, *Orchards – A guide to Local Conservation*, which was launched at the exhibition of the photographs in a London gallery.

The next year they launched the concept of Apple Day, by holding a vast display of apple varieties in Covent Garden which since the 12th century had been the old apple market, that is, until the late 1970s when the produce market was removed and the area became a site for tourism.

Associated with this event, booklets about saving orchards were produced as well as lists of nurseries which could supply old varieties. Apple Day has continued to be strongly embraced by the British people, so much so that on Apple Day, supermarket chains allocate an area for the sale of local apples.

The New Milestones Projects



The new Milestones project operates at a more abstract level than Parish Mapping and Local Distinctiveness projects. This project seeks to encourage a new generation of town, village and countryside sculptures.



Common Ground point out that the remnants of people's past artistic endeavours bring us closer to our predecessors, offering tantalising glimpses of their imaginative and spiritual life. They cite examples such as the symbols engraved on stones by Neolithic people in Scotland and the Medieval preaching crosses to more recent obelisks and follies and they ask what the cultural legacy of our time will be to future inhabitants of the countryside which is in contrast to towns where numerous urban sculptures are commissioned.

Accordingly Common Ground have involved sculptors and crafts people with local communities to make sculptures that will become endearing features expressing an abstract sense of the place.

Projects to date include works in the fields and streams of Dorset, walls in ###, and gateways to forests to name a few.



River and Water Projects

The most recent initiative of Common Ground, known as ***Confluence***, has involved looking at our rivers and catchments. To achieve community awareness, they have been involved in a musical composition for one river and its entire catchment. This has been a 3 year project . It began in the upper reaches of the river Stour which flows through Dorset, beginning at the famous estate known as Stourhead. Each part of the catchment has involved various community activities involved with tracing the fine tributaries, old wells, bridges etc and thinking about water and landscape, using music as the vehicle to elicit subjective values.

Water markets have been held, local people have held concerts making their own musical instruments, choirs have performed songs composed for their local part of the river.

The whole project culminated in July this year at the mouth of the river in the English Channel, in a town called Christchurch where a massive concert was held in the Priory. This project will enter into the next stage by encouraging community groups, having located artefacts associated with their, often ancient, water history and heritage to ensure that this knowledge is sustained and kept in any new developments.