



When we walked in fields of gold

Our three million hectares of cereal crops are more than ‘the bread basket of Britain’, sustaining the imaginations of both artists and writers, discovers Deborah Nicholls-Lee

OLD, old England, lands of golden peace,/Thy fields are spun with gossameres of gold,/And golden garners gather thy increase.’

Thus wrote poet and Nobel prize-winner Sir Ronald Ross in 1914, as war cast a shadow over the British countryside.

The ‘golden peace’ of our cereal fields remains central to our national identity today, spanning three million hectares of land, from the rolling chalk hills of the South Downs to the flat Fens of East Anglia, known as the bread basket of Britain. Swathes of sun-coloured crops brighten many of our most beloved artworks, too.

At first glance, Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, of about 1750, appears to focus on the couple taking repose at their Suffolk farm after a shooting expedition. Then, however, the eye journeys across the fields, following rows of stubble to the fruits of their land: plump sheaves of corn—emblems of productivity, property and pride. In *Reapers* (1785), George Stubbs, too, shows the landowner taking in the bounty of his estate. Seated on horseback, the master towers over the workers as they slice into the wheat with their sickles.

‘This honey-coloured landscape lingered in the consciousness of John Constable, the son of a corn merchant’

The reassuringly familiar sight of this honey-coloured landscape lingered in the consciousness of John Constable, the son of a corn merchant. ‘I live almost wholly in the fields and see nobody but the harvest men,’ he wrote in August 1815, as he worked on *The Wheat Field*, a subject that his son, Lionel, resumed in his own work. Framed by poppies and featuring children in bonnets gathering discarded crops as if they were bouquets of flowers, the elder Constable scene offers up an idyllic image of the harvest, where even the accoutrements of a picnic appear to loll in the sun.

Fifty years later, with agriculture radically reshaped by industrialisation, John Linnell’s nostalgic *Reapers*, *Noonday Rest* is even more storybook, depicting labourers sleeping beneath a shelter made of hay →

Many hands of all ages are called upon to gather in the crops in the idealised, pre-industrial scene of *Harvest Time* by the Victorian artist Myles Birket Foster



Hitting the hay: Gary Bunt's farmer, in trademark cap and braces, and faithful friend muse on a harvesting job well done in *By His Side*

sheaves as their obedient dog watches over the harvest.

By the time Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* came out in 1891, the cereal field had become the site of a battle between tradition and technology. Although his heroine clings to the past, 'holding the corn in an embrace like that of a lover', the sheaves she gathers are now 'gulped down' by a 'buzzing red glutton' in the form of a steam-powered threshing machine.

Later, artists made technology part of the tableau. The bold geometric forms of modern intrusions such as telegraph poles or a wind engine add drama to Eric Ravilious's ash-blond fields. A cherry-red tractor contrasted against a backdrop of yellow wheat is a recurrent motif in the naive art of Gary Bunt. We experience these scenes through the eyes of a farmer in cap and braces who populates many of his paintings, gazing out at a sea of corn or napping in a squashy haystack.

Cereal fields, so crucial to our survival, have long been associated with reproduction. Romans worshipped Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and fertility (from whom the word 'cereal' is derived), and sprinkled grains on the animals sacrificed to her. In Britain and elsewhere, it was believed that the grain spirit dwelled in the fields and so corn dollies were woven from the last sheaf, to preserve its life force throughout winter. Writers have drawn on this rich mythology,



making the grain field a potent symbol of fecundity and passion. For 18th-century poet James Thomson, author of the extended meditation *The Seasons*, it is the stage for a burgeoning romance. When 'Autumn nodding o'er the yellow plain/Comes jovial on' and the harvesting season begins, landowner Palemon is drawn to the unassuming Lavinia, a gleaner who is gathering leftover crops in 'soft-inclining fields of corn'.

In L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* of 1953, there is intrigue at play as the thickly growing crop fields help conceal an illicit exchange of letters between tenant farmer Ted Burgess and his social superior Marian Maudsley, facilitated by the young Leo Colston, a guest at her Norfolk home, Brandham Hall. The cornfield echoes Burgess's virility and fluctuating power. At first, he is as 'ripe for reaping' as the corn he cultivates, we read; but, when he learns of Maudsley's engagement to Lord Trimingham, he



Fields of dreams: the march of mechanisation has yet to shatter the rural idyll of John Linnell's nostalgic *Reapers, Noonday Rest*, 1865

becomes 'like corn that had been cut and left in the sun... the husk of the man he had been'.

Far away, in the sun-baked Tuscan hills, it was reportedly the lack of a suitable filming location that led Merchant Ivory to reimagine the famous kiss scene in the 1985 adaptation of E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908).

‘Writers have made the grain field a potent symbol of fecundity and passion’

However, perhaps it was also the fitting symbolism of a ripening cereal field interspersed with flushes of red that saw a bank 'carpeted with violets' replaced by a 'waving golden sea of barley touched with crimson stains of poppies'.

In 1832, in Lord Tennyson's lyrical ballad *The Lady of Shalott*, the humble cereal was already playing cupid, with the 'long fields of barley and of rye,/That clothe the wold and meet the sky' suggesting the sensuous →



Telegraph poles and a bright-red van bring the bleak beauty of Eric Ravilious's otherwise timeless, rolling English countryside into the modern world in *Wiltshire Landscape*, 1937



The fruits of the land: pride in a productive working landscape radiates from Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, about 1750

natural world that the Lady of Shalott, imprisoned in a tower, is forbidden to look at directly. Riding 'between the barley-sheaves' as he canters into Camelot comes the handsome Sir Lancelot—an image that is enough to make one blush and does not escape the attention of the Lady of Shalott, who, spying him in her mirror, casts her weaving aside and cranes her neck out the window. Curse or no curse, his 'coal-black curls' and 'mighty silver bugle' are more than she can resist.

‘Riding “between the barley-sheaves” as he canters into Camelot comes Sir Lancelot’

Grain fields acquired a new poignancy in the early 20th century as Britain emerged from the First World War, the calm order of their long, neat lines offering something soothing after years of chaos. In peacetime's early years, painter John Nash returned to the cereal field time and time again, creating preparatory sketches amid the Chiltern Hills of his beloved Buckinghamshire. The most famous of these would become *The Cornfield* (1918): a striped landscape foregrounded by corn sheaves cinched at the waist that bend and tilt like a procession of ballerinas. It was painted, he once remarked, 'in sheer relief at being still alive and back in the English countryside'.

Six, sept, wheat

In the 19th century, the cereal field was also a popular subject for Realist landscape painters in France, who were unafraid to show the harsher side of the harvest. Weatherworn peasants undertaking arduous work, such as Gustave Courbet's wheat sifters (1854) and Jean-François Millet's gleaners (1857), became the subjects of large canvases normally reserved for grander subjects, scandalising the Paris Salons. There was a post-apocalyptic feel to Millet's *The Plain of Chailly with Harrow and Plough* (right, 1862), with its abandoned farm equipment scattered beneath a swirling murder of crows, and Jules Breton's *Fire in a Stack of Wheat* (1856) brought jeopardy to a conventionally tranquil scene.

Both Millet and Breton made a strong impression on Vincent van Gogh, who described them as 'the voice of the wheat'. Based in France from 1886, he too saw a sinister side to these golden fields, moving from his bucolic *The*



Harvest, painted in Arles in 1888—when he was at his most productive—to the turbulent *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890), where menacing sky and frenzied brushstrokes appear to reflect his mental crisis. For the Dutch painter, these surroundings, the colour of his celebrated sunflowers, were a source of solace. Writing to his sister in 1889, he remarked: 'What else can one do, when we think of all the things we do not know the reason for, than go and look at a field of wheat?'

The visual spectacle of our golden crops, stretching as far as the eye can see, still speaks to the most creative spirits. Often overlooked in the oeuvre of David Hockney, who died in June, are his vibrant wheatfield paintings. Most were made *en plein air* in the mid 2000s when he returned to East Yorkshire, where, as a schoolboy, he worked

in the fields stooking corn. In *Wheat Field Near Fridaythorpe*, a crisp, uncut crop looms like a giant piece of toast and the energetic strokes of *Wheat Field off Woldgate* convey the ceaseless movement of the wheat in the wind. 'The camera can't get the beauty of this,' he stated at the time. 'It just can't get the space, the thrilling space.' 🍷