Physical features can shape settlements, as the River Severn does at Shrewsbury

GeographyReview*Extras*

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The concept of place
Characteristics, change and connections

What is meant by a 'place' in A-level geography, and what frameworks can we use to study places?

Villages, small towns and city neighbourhoods are all local places. Each, in turn, is embedded in a larger-scale geographical context, such as a region or city. The inner-city district of Bootle and the fringe village of Formby both belong to the city of Liverpool in the northwest of England, for instance. All these entities — Bootle, Formby, Liverpool, the northwest — can be understood as places, because each possesses a set of physical and human features which can be mapped objectively.

For practical (fieldwork) reasons, however, a place is best understood in A-level geography as a distinctive locality at a geographical scale somewhere between a street and a city (as the first sentence suggests).

This column focuses on the objective ('real') characteristics of local places, as opposed to subjective ('imagined') perceptions and meanings (which are explored in a future column). It considers how:
■ place characteristics are dynamic: they change over time
■ places change due to their constantly evolving connections with other places (both nationally and globally)

Place characteristics

Box 1 ('What's in a place?') provides one possible framework for the study of place characteristics. This approach draws on well-established geographical concepts: physical factors, economic functions and the cultural landscape. These three elements are interconnected and interdependent (Figure 1).

Physical features

The site of a place is the actual land it is built on. Settlements have historically taken root wherever geographical site factors favour economic activities that cannot be carried out as profitably elsewhere. In other words, local resources such as coal or water explain why some places are where they are. Particular places within large cities have their own advantageous site factors and topography. The high elevation of London's Hampstead neighbourhood, for example, provided wealthy Victorians with clean air and safe water. It remains an affluent place.

Economic functions

The economic function of a place is what it does in terms of providing services and work for people. Originally, this tended to be linked with site factors. Many places have changed their function over time. Liverpool and Manchester are now post-industrial cities where consumer services have replaced manufacturing industries. In some post-productive rural places, agriculture has given way to tourism. Economic functions and site factors are interconnected insofar as industry may cause physical changes (resources eventually become depleted, groundwater abstraction can lead to ground subsidence or other physical change).

Cultural landscape

The cultural landscape is everything we see in a place. It is the totality of the changes which people have brought to the natural landscape, including the architecture, infrastructure, heritage and demography of a place. It also includes the art, music (soundscape) and sporting life of a place. Originally, football teams drew their amateur players from local factories (the cannon on Arsenal's badge reflects the club's birth in the 1880s among the munitions factories of Woolwich, by the River Thames). Cultural landscape are:

- shaped by a place's economic functions (which may derive from the physical site itself)
- sometimes modified in ways which change the economic functions and physical site of a place. An example of this is land reclamation alongside rivers to create new land uses (e.g. the construction of London's Victoria Embankment in the 1860s)

Some places have clear boundaries:

- Local boroughs, wards and electoral constituencies are clearly marked out on administrative maps.
- In some places, rivers and coastlines provide at least one well-defined settlement margin.

Other places are far less clearly bounded, however. Some urban neighbourhoods do not actually correspond with 'official' administrative areas and don't have definitive margins. In London, it is not clear where Clapham or Chelsea actually begin and end, for instance. In rural regions, topography and vegetation can create a sense of place but it is often difficult to establish practically where an upland environment ends and a lowland area begins.

The geographical challenge of boundary-making is indicated by the use of a dashed line in Figure 1.

Changing places, changing connections

Changes in local places have two possible causes. The first is an internal (or endogenous) change affecting one of the elements shown in Figure 1. The second is an external (or exogenous) change. A particular place may become altered as a result of its connections with other near or distant places. Think for instance of the many ways in which China's economic transition has affected other people and places worldwide, possibly including the place where you live. Place connectivity is an important geographical understanding for A-level students.

Internal place changes

The physical geography and landscape of a place can change over time on its own, irrespective of any external connections. The city of Chester experienced deindustrialisation centuries ago (long before other places in Europe). The naturally-occurring process of silt deposition in the Dee estuary led to fewer ships being able to reach Chester by the 1700s. Eventually, the city lost its shipping trade and port industries to neighbouring Liverpool and the deeper waters of the Mersey estuary. As a result of this Chester changed as a place: a new economic and cultural landscape developed which was focused less on manufacturing industry and more on shopping and services.

Changing external connections

Some place changes are driven by external events and processes. Globalisation has brought economic and cultural change to rural and urban places throughout the UK. The effects of global flows of people, money, technology and information are clearly visible in most local high streets. Inescapable
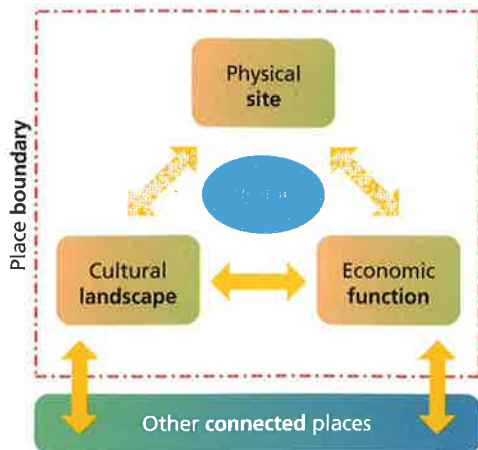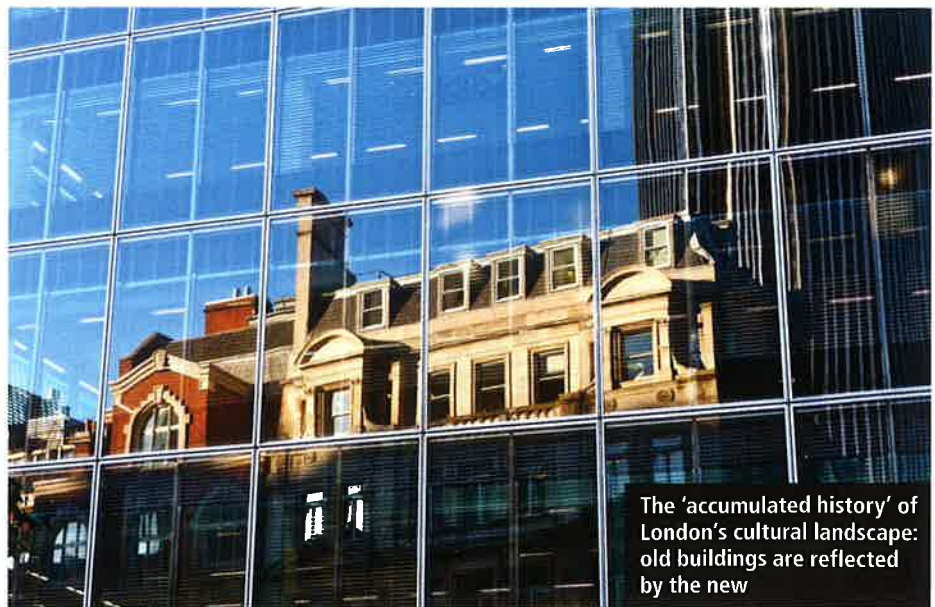

Figure 1 Elements of place

The 'accumulated history' of London's cultural landscape: old buildings are reflected by the new

Infrastructure such as sewers brings positive changes: here the Fleet Street sewer under construction in 1845

macro-scale forces have restructured the British economy and people's work. Diversity of food, fashion and faces has increased throughout the UK, and not just in its major cities.

Viewed historically, however, the effects of globalisation are merely the latest round in a far longer series of externally-driven changes influencing the characteristics of places in the UK:

- **International migration** from distant places in mainland Europe brought all kinds of demographic, economic and cultural change to early settlements in the British Isles. Roman, Viking and Norman invaders all left their mark.
- **Resource flows** fostered the industrialisation of urban places in the 1700s. Global trade supplied Sheffield's steel industry with ivory for its knife handles; and some places in Sheffield grew very wealthy from exporting cutlery.
- **Rural–urban migration** transformed urban societies and landscapes during the 1800s. At first, soaring population and increasing housing density created squalor and congestion. Later, Victorian engineers tackled these problems with new infrastructure, including public transport and sewer systems, thereby changing urban places in positive ways.

Place stories may therefore have several chapters, each of which features important connections with other near or far places (Figure 2). These layered connections have built up to produce an 'accumulated history' shown in each place's cultural landscape. Roman pottery, Viking burials and medieval building foundations lie under the streets of York. Surviving buildings from different eras are reflected in the contemporary glass structures in the City of London. Flows of goods, people and money have shaped these places over millennia to produce 'a nexus of connections and linkages'.

Question for discussion

1 To what extent can Figure 2 be applied to the neighbourhood where you live?

Figure 2 Space–time changes for an inner-city neighbourhood: 'layered connections' have developed with other near and far places

New tourist and investment flows from national (near) and international (far) places

Arrival of EU citizens

2000s rebranded for urban tourism

Data flows and place marketing information

Departing EU citizens

Post-colonial migration flows from Asia and Caribbean

Parts for assembly industries

1960s light engineering, e.g. car making

Selective out-migration of affluent families towards suburbs and countryside

Engineered manufactured goods

Rural–urban migrants from surrounding countryside

Raw materials from near and far places

1800s heavy industry, e.g. steel making

Basic manufactured goods

Migration of the UK's people, languages and culture to distant places within the British empire

Early trade flows using canals

Arrival of Romans, Vikings, Normans, Huguenots

Early history traditional economy, e.g. metal-working

Conscripted soldiers and sailors fight wars in Europe

Early trade flows using canals

Time

Dr Simon Oakes is a geography, humanities and assessment consultant, and a senior examiner in geography, citizenship and law. He teaches at Bancroft's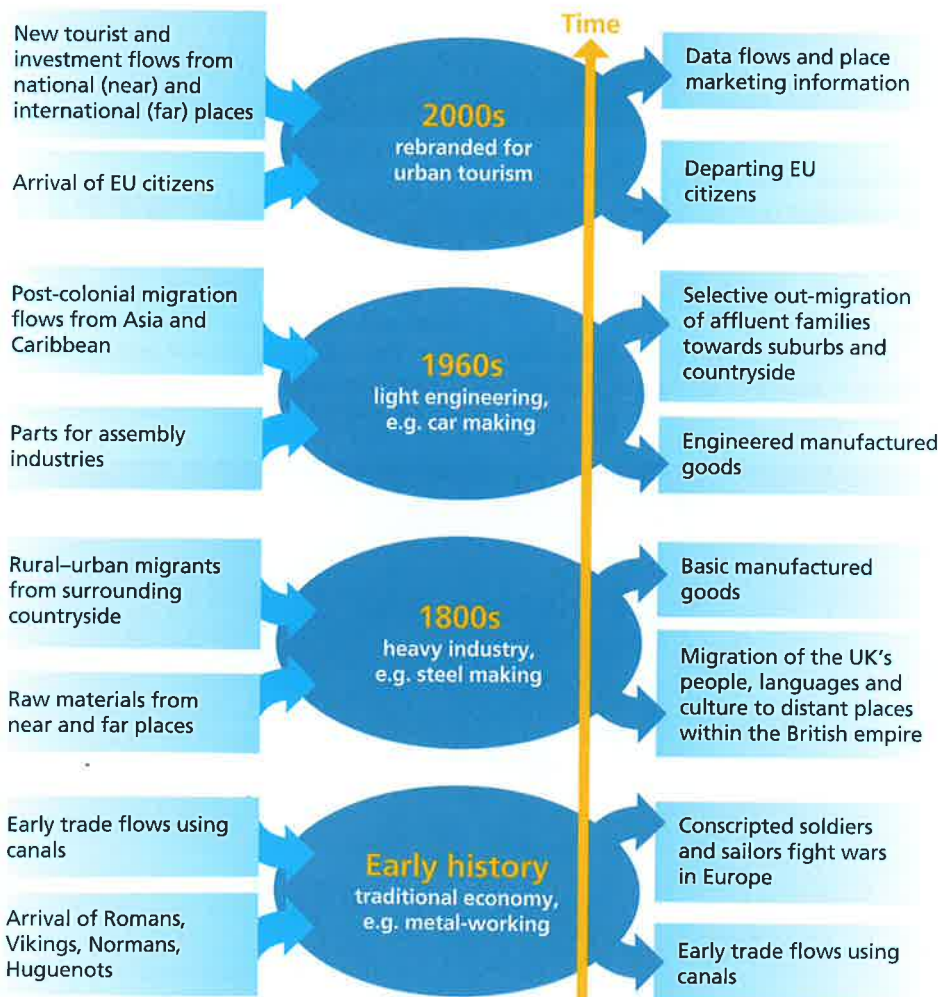 School and can be contacted at simon.oakes@bancrofts.org