



Stone age... Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire

The empire strikes back

Culture secretary Chris Smith has just told the V&A to get its act together. Now it faces its first test, with the opening of two new exhibitions. **Sarah Wise** checks out BB Turner's landscape photographs (below) and a huge survey of the Victorian era (right)

The countryside is in crisis and farming is on its knees. Prices for produce are being driven ever lower. Local shops are disappearing as farmers sell up and agricultural workers move to the town in search of a better living. Those who stay are relying on money from the public purse to augment their wage. Church congregations are falling. No one can see a way out of this decline.

It is the 1840s, and it's the 1820s. It is also the 1750s, and many other points in history as far back as you care to go. The countryside has a past as chequered with change as any town or industrial area. But the idea of the country as a place of stability and continuity is the one constant thing about it, and one of its most ardent believers was one Benjamin Brecknell Turner (1815-1894) - businessman and townie incarnate, who lived most of his life in the Haymarket, central London.

Turner's lucrative soap- and candle-manufacturing firm gave him

the money to buy a licence to use one of Henry Fox Talbot's photographic cameras; and he had the time to travel around England by means of another new invention, the railways. The astonishing results of Turner's country excursions are now on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum - 60 photographs taken between 1852 and 1854 of English rural life, ruined abbeys and castles and tottering Tudor buildings. The large (11in by 16in) paper prints feature barns, cottages, rutted lanes, hedgerows, knotty, sculptural trees and farmyards artfully strewn with agricultural paraphernalia, and in none of them does the 19th century intrude. Carts, ploughs, barrels, fences, ladders are all ruggedly hand-crafted, with no smooth edge of machine-manufacture in sight. So the barbed wire in the picture Scotch Firs, Hawkhurst, comes as a surprise. It's a shot that captures textures so brilliantly your hands prickle with imaginary splinters from the firs' bark or the unvarnished palings in the foreground. Turner's loyalty to



Where is everyone?... Benjamin Brecknell Turner's The Willowsway, Hawkhurst

paper negatives, as most other early practitioners went over to glass negatives, helped to enhance the textural qualities he was exploring: the image seeped into the paper, instead of sitting on top of a hard surface.

By excluding the present, Turner was presenting a vision of eternal England; but his work is much more than some crass attempt at oaks'n'yokels nationalism. They are also worlds away from the revolting mawkishness of many early photographic efforts at pastoral - winsome wives and children dressed as gypsies and posed in a sylvan setting. One third of his album Photographic Views From Nature (the single copy is held by the V&A) features the Worcestershire village of Bredicot, and its quietly crumbling wattle-and-daub, clapboard and thatch buildings seem to be dozing their way through an eternal summer afternoon.

This no-time, all-time quality of Turner's work derives partly from the near absence of shadows - a result of the paper negative's inability to render half-tones as well as the rival

glass process. The utter stillness of this world reflects the windless conditions required in an age when exposure times were 30 minutes to one hour (and Turner had to spend the same amount of time developing the image on the spot in his portable tent-darkroom). There is never any indication of what time of day or atmospheric conditions each shot shows: the bleached-out skies were another feature of choosing paper over glass, but there is evidence that Turner manipulated the negative to block out features from his skies to ensure vast empty heavens. And where is everybody? It's like coming upon an abandoned village, with the objects that were left behind caught on the point of returning to the materials from which they were crafted by fleeting, disruptive humankind.

Always out of shot in the Bredicot pictures is the railway, which passed right behind one of his favourite subjects, Bredicot Court, from 1840, pumping steam across its farmyard; and there is no reference

whatever to the massive structural changes brought by the enclosure of local farmlands in 1846. Organic change was Turner's true subject - he captured the secret life of inanimate things. His shots of Ludlow Castle show ivy engulfing the ruins; at Whitby Abbey, the stones of the collapsed tower are returning to earth from where man dragged them.

Barns appear to emerge from the straw surrounding them; stone houses from the boulders at their base, rocks from the river water swirling around them - this was a time when moving water could not be captured on camera, and Turner's shots at Lyndale, north Devon, show the river as a treacherous mass, caught halfway to solidifying into rock. Vegetation is triumphant in Hedgerow Trees, Clerkenleap, Worcestershire, the only Photographic View to feature a human - a listless-looking figure slumped alongside two savagely pollarded oaks

whose new shoots are erupting like hands raised in victory.

It is a shock to see Francis Frith's cheesy, later-19th-century shots of Stonehenge, Devon beaches, Italian towns and various points around the globe robbed of flavour and served up to the armchair tourist. Frith's photographs mark the start of the companion exhibition *Where Are We?*, in which curator Martin Barnes follows through the 20th-century issues Turner's pictures raise in the minds of the modern viewer. *Where Are We?* encompass American work, but its *Visions of Britain* section asks: whose countryside is it? What type of Briton is welcome there? Is tourism the saviour or ruin of rural areas? Vinca Peterson's new age travellers - the focus of so much early 1990s hubbub as fields were appropriated for raves - are captured in lurid laser-jet prints. Ingrid Pollard's series explores the invisibility of non-white Britons in the countryside; what role do quiet hamlets, portrayed and portraying themselves as the quintessence of Englishness, have

in breeding intolerance? When will black faces cease to be presumed urban?

In Keith Arnatt's black and white *Scenes from an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty* (1982-84) a mouldering camper-van, bits of old carpet and various unsavoury items litter the foreground, while beyond, the Wye Valley broods on in misty beauty. Arnatt's work isn't nearly as misanthropic as such a description suggests, and has a wistful humour that's also there in Paul Graham's *Looking North* (1981), an across-the-fields shot of the A1 of his childhood - pylons, factory chimney, the motorway cafe and petrol station glowing comfortingly in the gloaming.

The people of Bredicot cannot accept Martin Barnes's invitation to a private view of the Turner exhibition. Foot-and-mouth means they may not leave the area. The countryside is in crisis.

Rural England through a Victorian Lens and *Where Are We?* are at the Canon Photography Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, London SW7 (020-7942 2000), until August 27.

The way we weren't

What do we think of that tribe, the Victorians? They don't like sex; they're sentimental, hypocritical and obsessed with religion. Their women simper, their menfolk are domineering and pompous. They bully and starve their working classes into submission. They love money and they're immensely proud of themselves and their achievements. Thank God they've gone.

There's another view: they're never satisfied, always tinkering with new ways of living - if it's not Marxism, it's free love and atheism. The workers are always organising some rally or strike; their womenfolk are out and about dispensing charity. And they're all dreadful worriers - constantly questioning the type of society they have brought into being. If only we could be a bit more like them.

The V&A's new blockbuster, *Inventing New Britain: the Victorian Vision*, reflects both these views. Consensus there will never be on the Victorians, and why should there be, on what was 64 years of tumultuous change?

The exhibition is the museum's response to the centenary of the death of Victoria; and perhaps it is deference to its founders that has led the V&A to place - misplace - so much emphasis on the royal family. There are five sections to the show - *Society, Nature, World and Technology* - but the first is *Royalty*. This expresses the idea that the century's "progress" flowed from its royal family, but the available evidence shows that the reverse was true.

In fact, the more interesting story is the effort made by Victoria and her husband to ingratiate themselves with their people. A huge PR campaign had to swing into operation to promote the royals as a dynamic, close-knit young family, thoroughly in tune with the nation. Albert had brought over from Saxe-Coburg, on his marriage in 1840, the much-loathed figure of Baron Stockmar - openly pilloried in the press for being a foreign influence. It was widely believed that the royal couple spoke only German in private; fashionable society deplored the dullness of court life. As late as 1887 there were anti-monarchist riots. But Victoria has been made pivotal to this show though she was in fact tangential. No amount of cult of personality will make it otherwise.

Still, the show has its strong points. Certain objects lodge in the mind. There are Indian emeralds; the world's first machine gun; a "naïve" Yoruba wood carving of Victoria; a vile silver dinner-table ornament designed by Albert to celebrate his dogs; and the so-called Empire typewriter.

It is worth a visit for the paintings alone. Frith's three panoramas, *Derby Day*, *The Railway Station* and *Ramsgate Sands*, hang together for the first time, while George Clausen's *Stonebreakers* gives a picture of rural



Queen and country... left, *The Empire Typewriter* (1897), by Lucien Fauré. Below, *The Secret of England's Greatness* (1863), by Thomas Jones Barker



poverty following the collapse of farming in the 1870s. In the *World* section, *The Secret of England's Greatness* (1863) by Thomas Jones Barker depicts Victoria handing one of her loyal subjects a Bible. This section is strangely depoliticised, conflating the empire's plunder and tribute with objects freely traded with such countries as Japan and the South American states. John Bell's *Octoroon* (1854) is a statue in marble of a woman garlanded by chains and her own long hair, with breasts and buttocks peeping out to titillate the viewer. The curators miss the opportunity to take apart Victorian racism: what type of mind would set itself to naming a human who had one-eighth negro blood?

This is an exhibition built around the obsessions of our own age. So we're told when the first football international was played (1872); when women could study at London University (1846); the launch date of the *News of the World* (1843); when sodomy ceased to be a capital offence (1861 - though no one had actually

been hanged for it since the early 1830s). There is little on the cataclysmic, but to us deadly dull divisions within the Anglican church which tore the Victorians' world apart. A glance at any Hansard of the century will show the vast amount of parliamentary time taken up by debating, in tedious detail, rates and land ownership issues in Ireland. But do we care? The "Woman Question" of the late 19th century is sex. The ceaseless (often successful) campaigning of the Quakers on humanitarian issues is not.

You long for some low art, a voice from the gutter. There is now a body of items reflecting organised labour and other working-class institutions, and it would be good to see a major exhibition covering that. You sometimes feel that the "multiplicity" of this show is simply people at the same dinner party in 1870 drunkenly debating the issues of the day.

Inventing New Britain: the Victorian Vision is at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London SW7 (020-7942 2000), until July 29.