

# Half of all land in England owned by less than one percent of the population

By Margot Miller  
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The UK is one of the most unequal societies on the planet. The scale of this is effectively documented in new research revealing that one half of all the land in England is the private property of less than one percent of the population. This equates to just 25,000 people. England accounts for just over half (53 percent) of the total area of the UK.

The research is available in a new book by Guy Shrubsole, *Who Owns England?: How We Lost Our Green and Pleasant Land and How to Take It Back*. Shrubsole is a writer, campaigner and investigator at Friends of the Earth.

Although it was broadly understood that the ruling elite owned much of the land, this reality has generally been shrouded in secrecy. New developments in digital mapping, however, as well as the work of campaign groups enabling the release of data under Freedom of Information legislation (FOI), made possible the research that revealed the following statistics:

- The aristocracy and gentry still own 30 percent of the land.
- 18 percent is owned by corporations.
- 17 percent is in the possession of oligarchs and bankers.
- The crown and royal family own 1.4 percent and the Church of England 0.5 percent.

Therefore, this tiny stratum of society owns nearly 70 percent of all land privately. Moreover, it should be noted that the percentage attributed to the aristocracy is likely a vast underestimation, according to Shrubsole. The ownership of 17 percent of the land remains undeclared at the Land Registry—a database that registers property and land sold in England and Wales—because it has not been sold on the open market. This is most likely the property of the aristocracy, passing down the generations. This percentage has barely changed for centuries.

Among the pieces of land owned by the monarchy is the Crown Estate, the Queen's personal estate at Sandringham, Norfolk. The land within the Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster also provide vast amounts of income to Royal family members.

The public sector owns just 8.5 percent of English soil,

followed by home owners who own just five percent. Two percent is owned by conservation charities, including the National Trust.

Shrubsole lists the top 100 corporations that possess the most land in England, including some based abroad or offshore to avoid tax liabilities or for money-laundering purposes. The Land Registry, reportedly by accident, sent *Private Eye* investigative journalist Christian Eriksson, after a FOI request, a huge database of offshore companies that had purchased land in England and Wales from 2005 to 2014. This comprised 113,119 hectares of land worth an astonishing £170 billion [\$US 220 billion].

At the top of the list of landowning companies is United Utilities, formed when the Tories privatised the water industry in 1995. Much of the land surrounding its reservoirs is owned by the firm.

Pro-Brexit businessman Sir James Dyson is high on the list. He owns several large grouse moor estates and Beeswax Dyson Farming. Other household names owning vast swathes of land are Tesco, the UK's largest supermarket chain, Tata Steel and housebuilder Taylor Wimpey.

In an extract from *Who Owns England?* published in the *Guardian*, Shrubsole discusses the extensive interests of landowning company Peel Holdings and its many subsidiaries. The company owns up to 1,000 tracts of land nationally totaling around 13,000 hectares. Just in the northwest of England its land interests spread from Liverpool's John Lennon airport, through fracking country in Lancashire, to one of the largest wind farms in the UK, taking in shopping centres and ports, including the Port of Liverpool.

Peel was the developer behind the 15-hectare MediaCityUK in Salford, the main northern hub of the BBC and ITV. It is based on land next to the 36-mile Manchester Ship Canal that Peel bought in 1993.

Shrubsole searched for Peel Holdings and its subsidiaries on the Companies House website. This revealed a systematic lack of transparency with one holding company owned by another, "like a series of Russian dolls, one nested

inside another.”

“Peel Holdings... is also illustrative of corporate landowners everywhere,” continues Shrubsole, adding that “[c]ompanies with big enough budgets can often ride roughshod over the planning system, beating cash-strapped councils and volunteer community groups.”

The public sector, which includes central and local government as well as universities, is less secretive about the land they own. This is because they are compelled to advertise land for sale on the open market to offset austerity cuts—and in the process transfer even more land into private hands.

The sale of public land means it cannot be used for housebuilding or environmental improvements. In the last period, vast amounts of public spaces and parks in towns and cities have been hoovered up by the private sector. These landscaped areas are then out of bounds to the general public and especially public protests.

In 1980, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher introduced the sale of public housing under “right to buy” and council house building began to drastically decline. Britain was apparently to become a “nation of home owners.” However, most such housing consists of tiny “shoebox” units, as is indicated by the fact that all the 15.1 million homeowners in Britain own just 5 percent of the land.

The *Guardian* noted that “figures show that if the land were distributed evenly across England’s population, each person would have just over half an acre [0.2 hectare]—an area roughly half the size of Parliament Square in central London.”

Those who can afford to buy their own home may not necessarily own the land it stands on, but only lease it, which ensures not ownership but long-term tenancy. Leasehold properties comprise 27 percent of properties in England and Wales. An annual ground rent is paid to whoever owns the freehold for the length of the lease. After the lease runs out the freeholder becomes the owner of house and land, lock stock and barrel.

Developers are raking in a huge revenue stream in building leasehold properties. A House of Commons Library report revealed an increase in leasehold new builds, from seven percent in 1995 to 15 percent in 2016—with clauses in leases doubling the ground rent every ten years, which are sold on to speculators.

One of those companies that makes its money from the ground rents market is Wallace Estates, which possesses thousands of freehold properties, selling long leases for the annual rents. Wallace Estates is the company with the third-highest number of land titles, possessing a property portfolio worth £200m, the details of which are in the public

domain and owned by an elusive Italian count.

The buying up of land is also a convenient investment to avoid paying inheritance or capital gains tax.

Speculation in land has led to parasitical land banking. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Tesco, for example, purchased huge land banks for the future construction of out-of-town shopping complexes. The *Guardian* estimates that in 2014 the supermarket was sitting on enough land to accommodate 15,000 homes.

Some land promotion companies specialize in preparing land sites for development by doing the leg work of gaining planning permission for developers and then taking a cut from the final sales. The Gladman company made a pretax profit in 2016 of £11.6 million, while in the same year Gallagher’s raked in £79 million.

The Shelter housing charity revealed last month that almost of third of sites approved for building on five years ago have still not been completed. The top ten housing developers have land banks with space for more than 400,000 homes.

UK pension funds and insurance companies commonly buy land as a long-term investment. For example, Legal and General is in possession of 1,500 hectares stretching from Luton to Cardiff.

The *Telegraph* revealed that close associate of former Tory Prime Minister David Cameron, Tony Gallagher, head of the aforementioned company, sold his land promotions company after three decades for £250 million—lucrative indeed. This wealth propelled his total fortune to £850 million, but such is the enormity of the wealth of the richest of the rich in Britain that Gallagher was only able to place 52nd on the *Sunday Times* Rich List.

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