

# Who Does Own Britain Today?

## *Land Ownership in the 1970s*

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In this article the trade union supported [Labour Research Department](#) provides a brief overview of the state of land ownership in Britain in the late 1970s. It reveals that over half of Britain is owned by three distinct types of owners: the public sector – 19 percent; establishment institution – 2 percent; and aristocratic estates – 32 percent.

### **Contents:**

Who does own Britain today?  
Public Ownership  
The Establishment  
The Aristocracy  
Further Information

### **Who does own Britain today?**

Last month, two aristocratic landowners, the Dukes of Westminster and Argyll, featured prominently in the press. The trustees of the Duke of Argyll's estate, which consists of approximately 73,400 acres in Scotland, announced they would sell 5,000 acres, including the island of Iona, to meet death duties. The day before, the death of the Duke of Westminster had focused attention on the Grosvenor Estate, reported to be worth over £2-billion pounds. The new Duke; "*whose two O-levels*", according to the *Daily Telegraph*, "*have not apparently prevented him from mastering the intricacies of running one of the biggest property empires in the world*", now not only controls 300 acres of extremely valuable property in London's Mayfair and Belgravia, but also owns large agricultural estates in Shropshire and Cheshire.

Who does own Britain today? What is the extent of aristocratic landownership? The facts about landownership are difficult to establish, because although government does collect information it is not available to the public. In fact, the last census took place in 1873. Although the purpose of this *New Domesday* survey was to show that landownership was becoming more widely spread, it established that 7,000 people, most of them titled, owned 80 percent of the country. Since then landownership has become less concentrated; it has been estimated that between 1918 and 1927, six to eight million acres, including at least 25 percent of Britain's farmland changed hands.

Both home ownership and farm ownership have increased. In 1908 only 12 percent of agricultural land was worked by owners; the bulk of it, 88 percent, was farmed on a tenancy basis. By 1972 the owner-occupied share of farmland had risen to 56 percent, and at least 50 percent of all housing is now owner-occupied. However, in spite of the increasing spread of property ownership, it should be noted that the amounts of land

involved are relatively small. In the case of housing, all the urban land – which includes other uses in addition to housing – amounts to only 8 percent of Great Britain? And most owner-occupied farms are small; 57 percent are less than 500 acres. The fact is that half of Britain’s land is now held by three types of owners:

- *the public sector;*
- “*establishment*” *institutions* (such as the monarchy, the Church and universities); and
- *great private estates.*

## **Public Ownership**

Today, a substantial amount of Britain, 10 million acres or about 19 percent, is in public ownership, held by either: *central government, nationalised industries, public services, or local authorities.* As the state has extended its functions and assumed responsibility for transport, defence, etc, so have its landholdings increased. Most of the acreage is rural, and by far the largest amount 3 million acres, is mostly woodland managed by the Forestry Commission for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) holds about 664,000 acres in the form of military ranges airfields, etc.

Nationalised industries such as British Rail and the National Coal Board also own substantial amounts of land. The National Coal Board holds 258,000 acres, while British Rail’s holdings are about 175,000 acres consisting mostly of tracks and stations. Altogether, nationalised industries and public services such as Water Boards hold about 2 percent of Britain’s land, much of it being in transport or rural uses. Local authorities are estimated to own about 8 percent of Britain, the bulk of the holdings consisting of smallholdings and water undertakings and commons.

## **The Establishment**

In addition to these public landowners, there are also a number of “*establishment*” *institutions* with significant estates. The largest and best known of these are the monarchy and the Church of England, but other institutions like Oxford and Cambridge colleges are also included in this category. Most of these *establishment estates* are the remains of much more extensive landholdings from earlier times. For example, the Church Commissioners today own about 170,000 acres or 0.3 percent of Britain. Some of these holdings originated in feudal times, when the Church was a large landowner; other lands were willed to the Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although about 93 percent of the holdings currently consist of agricultural land, the Church does also own urban land. In fact, the Church Commissioners are London’s second largest private residential landlords. The other large establishment landowner is the monarchy that is the Crown Estate and the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall. In 1806, the monarchy owned about 20 percent of England, but its holdings have dwindled to 538,000 acres, or 1 percent of Britain. Today the Crown Estate and the two Duchies do own some urban land, notably Regent’s Park, Regent Street, tracts of Kennington, and the Oval in London, but again the bulk of the holdings are agricultural. In total, about 2 percent of Britain is owned by the Crown, the Church and Universities.

## The Aristocracy

However, in spite of the extent of public and establishment ownership, 32 percent of Britain is owned (or held in trust) by titled families. Although over the years taxation and other economic pressures have led to the break-up and sale of some aristocratic estates, a large number of them still survive today. It has been estimated that these 18 million acres, consisting of estates 5,000 acres and larger, are owned by just 200 titled families. The bulk of the land is rural, and the largest estates are in Scotland, where there has been less land sold off than in England. But who are today's aristocratic landowners and how do they survive?

The table below lists some of the larger aristocratic estates: most of those with more than 100,000 acres are in Scotland.

<b>Aristocratic Owners</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Duke of Buccleuch	268,000	Bowhill Castle; Drumlanrig Castle; estates in Dumfriesshire, Selkirkshire and Roxburghshire
Countess of Sutherland	150,000	Dunrobin Castle; owns most of Sutherland
Duke of Westminster	138,000	Urban property - Oxford Street; Grosvenor Square; Rural estates – Bridgewater estate, Shropshire; Pale estate, Merioneth; and Easton estate, Cheshire
Countess of Seafield	138,000	Cullen house and estates in coastal Banffshire and Grantown on Spey
Duke of Atholl	130,000	Blair Castle; estate in Perthshire
Duke of Northumberland	80,000	Alnwick Castle
Duke of Argyll	73,400	Inveraray Castle, Argyll; islands of Iona, Coll and Tiree
Earl of Lonsdale	71,000	Lowther estate

The largest private landowner in Britain is the Duke of Buccleuch; with 268,000 acres (430 square miles) his holdings are about equivalent to those of the National Coal Board. Most estates consist primarily of rural land, and the Scottish ones in particular include very large tracts of hill land and moors. Very few titled landowners are as fortunate as the Duke of Westminster in owning lucrative London property; but those that do have from early times engaged in property development. For example, Covent Garden was developed by the Earl of Bedford in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The rents from these urban holdings have been an important source of income, helping keep estates together in times when agriculture was depressed. But for the majority of aristocratic estates, agriculture and forestry form the economic basis. And although stately landowners can often be heard complaining about the cost of keeping up the family castle, and about the low return from the farms, not all have had to open safari parks to survive.

Today farming is a profitable industry and forestry attracts large government subsidies in the form of cash grants and tax exemptions. The Lonsdale estate which combines farming, development and recreational activities had a turnover of almost £2 million pounds in 1972. On the Buccleuch estates the revenue (from agriculture and forestry) is bolstered to an increasing degree by foreign currency which is lured by the promise of shooting at the Duke's pheasant and grouse.

### Summary of Land Ownership in Britain by Types of Owner (1970s)

Types of Owners	Percentage of Total Acreage of Britain	Amount of Acres
<b>PUBLIC OWNERSHIP 19 percent 10 million acres</b>		
Central Government Departments	9%	MoD 664,000acres Forestry Commission 3million acres <b>4.74million acres</b> (estimate)
Nationalised Industries & Public Services	2%	British Rail 175,000acres National Coal Board 258,000acres <b>1.05million acres</b> (estimate)
Local Authorities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smallholdings</li> <li>• Water Undertakings</li> <li>• Commons</li> </ul>	8%	<b>4.21million acres</b> (estimate)
<b>ESTABLISHMENT OWNERSHIP 2 percent</b>		
Church of England	0.3%	170,000acres
Monarchy – The Crown	1%	538,000acres
Universities	0.7%	
<b>ARISTOCRATIC OWNERSHIP 32 percent 18 million acres</b>		
<b>OWNER OCCUPIED FARMS &amp; HOMES 47 percent</b>		

### Further Information

The [Labour Research Department](http://www.labourresearch.org.uk) is an independent research organisation set up in 1912. Its primary purpose is to publish news and information for UK trade unionists. Around 2,000 trade union organisations are affiliated to LRD representing more than 99 percent of total Trade Union Congress (TUC) membership.