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Author: David Storey

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‘New’ Migrants in the British Countryside

David Storey

Department of Geography, Institute of Science and the Environment
University of Worcester
Worcester, U.K.
d.storey@worc.ac.uk

Abstract

The eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) in the early 2000s had a number of consequences. One of these, deriving from the EU principle of freedom of movement and the associated relaxation of border restrictions, was a marked increase in migration from the new member states into the longer established western ones. Within the United Kingdom much of that migration was towards larger urban centres, but a relatively high (and perhaps unexpected) proportion was to smaller towns, villages and more rural areas. This article explores the extent of this migration and, more specifically, it seeks to highlight some of the reactions to it. In doing so, there is a focus on rural parts of the English west midlands, in particular the county of Herefordshire. The article places this migratory movement within the context of increased east-west migration more generally, the regulatory environment surrounding it, and the broader responses to it at a national level.

Keywords: migration, Eastern Europe, employment, media reactions, xenophobia

1.0 East-west Migration in the European Union

The EU expanded in May 2004 to incorporate eight central European countries: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia (along with Cyprus and Malta). One effect of this territorial expansion was to open up the borders of existing EU member states to migrants from the accession countries. Many western countries placed restrictions on the ability of eastern migrants from the so-called A-8 to fully participate in the workforce but the UK (together with Ireland and Sweden) allowed migrants from these countries full access to the job market. The only restriction was that A-8 migrants, while entitled to work, were ineligible for forms of social welfare unless they had worked continuously in the UK for 12 months and had registered under the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS). In 2007, two more eastern European countries—Bulgaria and Romania—joined the EU. On this occasion restrictions were placed on the right of Bulgarians and Romanians to work in the UK. Migrants from those countries could only obtain employment in sectors where there were apparent difficulties recruiting labour. Of particular relevance in a rural context is the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), a quota-based system under which, as of January 2008, certain jobs in the agricultural sector could be given to Bulgarian or Romanian workers for a specified period of time (UK Border Agency, 2013).

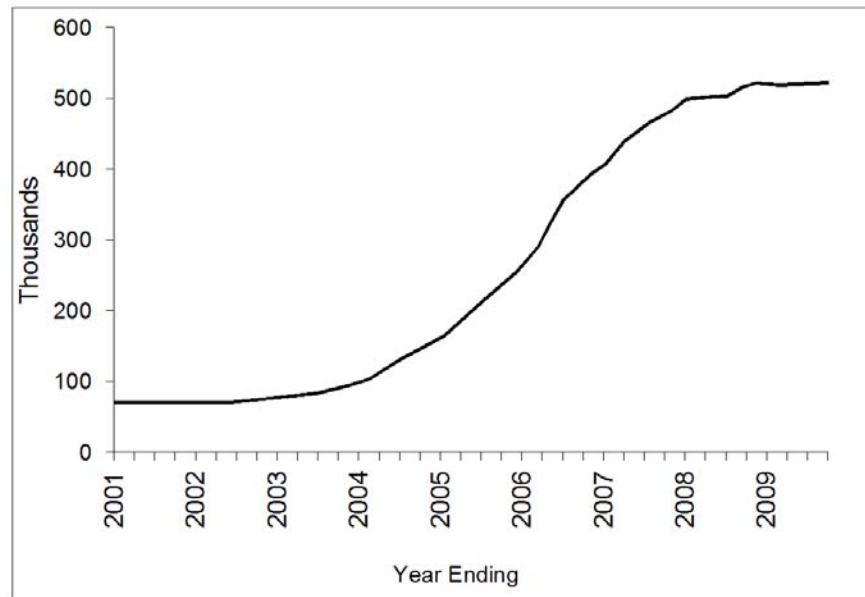
Statistics on the numbers of eastern European migrants in the UK have been derived from a range of sources with the Office for National Statistics utilising figures drawn from the Labour Force Survey (conducted on a quarterly basis), National Insurance registrations, the WRS and SAWS. There are limitations attached to all of these. For example, the requirement to register under the WRS

did not apply to self-employed workers and it also appears not to have been rigorously enforced thereby casting some doubts on its accuracy. Under the terms of the original accession agreement, this scheme was abolished in May 2011. Information on Bulgarian and Romanian workers derives principally from the SAWS under which Bulgarian and Romanian workers could be employed through pre-arranged agreements by an employer for periods up to 6 months. Obviously, the data that exists does not account for those immigrant workers who may have been employed, but who were never formally recorded. Despite these limitations, the available figures from differing sources combine to provide a reasonable indication of the volume of in-migration.

Following the accession of the A-8 countries the volume of east-west migration increased with many eastern Europeans arriving in the UK and other western countries. Employment prospects, higher wage rates and the increasing range of relatively cheap travel options contributed to making western European countries attractive options for eastern migrants. Cheap flights operated by low-cost airlines between eastern European cities and UK regional airports both reflected and facilitated this movement. For residents of countries where freedom of movement had been severely restricted in the communist era until the 1990s, the ease and comparative low cost of travel contributed to the sizeable westward flow. From 2004 onwards the numbers of eastern European migrants into the UK increased sharply, a trend exemplified by the rise in the number of Polish-born people resident in the country (See Figure 1). Although calculating accurate figures has proved difficult (as suggested above), indications are that almost one fifth of A-8 migrant workers went to the UK which also became the major western European destination for Polish migrants (Okólski, 2007; Duvell & Garapich, 2011). It is estimated that between 2004 and 2007 over 650,000 migrant workers from the A-8 countries entered the UK; about two thirds of these were from Poland and approximately one quarter of the total worked in rural areas at some stage. The economic downturn of recent years has seen rising unemployment in the UK and an associated levelling out of the immigration figures with reduced inward flows from Eastern Europe (Experian, 2011). At the same time, the Polish economy has performed comparatively better than many western European ones leading to many Polish migrants returning 'home'. Indeed, there have been campaigns by the Polish authorities aimed at encouraging migrant workers to return.

This east-west migration has had a significant effect. In 1996 there were 13,000 eastern European workers in the UK (0.05% of the workforce) while by 2009 that figure had grown substantially to 472,000 (1.63% of the workforce). By 2009 the cumulative total of WRS applications approached one million, of which about two thirds were from Poland (Duvell & Garapich, 2011). While these figures highlight the volume of migration into the UK they have been invoked (quite often in an alarmist manner) by those worried about the phenomenon and concerned about its possible consequences. However, care needs to be taken here and it is important to stress that not all of these migrants were in the UK at any one time (Blanchflower et al., 2007). For example, it is estimated that in the region of one fifth of Polish-born migrants have been temporary or seasonal workers suggesting that, for some, their stay within the UK has been relatively short. For others, residence in the UK has been discontinuous with workers leaving the country for periods of time before returning. A focus on aggregate numbers entering the country has tended to ignore the duration of stay and overly simplify the often complex circularity of migrant flows.

Figure 1: Numbers of Polish-born people resident in the United Kingdom.



Source: Office for National Statistics

2.0 Reactions

This 'new' migratory trend provoked many varied responses articulated by politicians, the media and the public. In summarising these it might be suggested they have tended to fall into three broad categories. One response is characterised by a strong negative view of immigration focusing on the presumed impact on employment, increased pressures on services and potential cultural implications. A second type of response marshals economic, social and cultural arguments to suggest that inward migration has had a beneficial impact. A third response adopts a humanitarian perspective characterised by a concern with the experiences of migrant workers with attention drawn to issues of exploitation and poor living conditions.

The negative reactions have tended to focus on the idea that British workers are being displaced by immigrant labour. In part this perspective is tied into a widely held and longstanding view that immigrants tend to be prepared to work for lower wages. An industrial dispute at Lindsay oil refinery in Lincolnshire in eastern England in 2009 centred over the use of Portuguese and Italian workers who were employed via an Italian sub-contracting company. This dispute fuelled a wider economic and political debate over what were portrayed as British jobs going to foreign workers (Wainwright, 2009). The controversy served to highlight the complexity of labour issues in what might be seen as a global labour market. In addition to the jobs argument, it has also been suggested that increased strains have been placed on a range of services such as health and education. The provision of translation services and the production of information in a range of different languages by local authorities have raised further concerns about the perceived cost of immigration. While the economic and labour market impacts of immigration are complex and difficult to disentangle, there appears to be little evidence of a negative impact on employment or on wage rates (Blanchflower et al, 2007; Lemos & Portes, 2008).

The deficiencies in information on actual numbers of immigrants (alluded to earlier) were also in themselves seen as a cause for concern with a view in some

quarters that official figures were underestimating the actual extent of the phenomenon (Cekalova, 2008). The seemingly large numbers led some to argue (in a more general context) that there would be long-term impacts on culture and society (Coleman, 2008). As well as concerns over the consequences for British identity, amongst these broad socio-cultural arguments are suggestions that some migrants engage in anti-social behaviour with (in cases) a degree of association with criminal activity (whether as perpetrators or victims). This leads to concerns over large numbers of migrant labourers living in particular places, debates which tend to essentialise a disparate group of people and classify them en masse as an undifferentiated 'other', a stance which echoes long-standing rhetoric on the supposed negative impacts of immigration. Paradoxically (though not surprisingly) this westerly migrant flow has been paralleled by western investment in Poland and other eastern European economies so that negative attitudes towards westward migration have been accompanied by the encouragement of capital flows eastward (Favell, 2008).

Within this debate the media has of course played a key role in the construction and dissemination of particular views. While media reaction has by no means been wholly negative, some coverage has served to reproduce prejudicial stereotypes. In 2008 the Federation of Poles in Great Britain complained to the Press Complaints Commission over what it saw as negative reporting of Polish migrants in a national newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. This, the federation claimed, was exemplified through headlines such as those in Table 1. As already suggested, it is obvious that the debates surrounding eastern European migration were not unlike those which tend to surround other migrant groups with a considerable degree of stereotyping, prejudice, and panic-mongering through which a heterogeneous variety of people are portrayed in a reductive and simplistic manner. Such processes of othering are a well-established phenomenon and negative and xenophobic attitudes towards those seen as 'alien' have a long history in the UK and elsewhere (Winder, 2004).

Alongside these negative perspectives, westward migration was also cast in much more positive terms. Rather than job displacement, migrant workers were seen to be filling gaps within the labour market and undertaking work not currently being done by the indigenous workforce. In some discourses the apparent work ethic displayed by migrant workers has been contrasted positively with the supposed reluctance of British workers to undertake certain jobs. Some employers have expressed a preference for eastern European workers, based on their apparent willingness to work hard as well as additional considerations related to the possession of certain skills and (perhaps not surprisingly) being cheaper to employ (Experian, 2011). Such views tend to utilise contrasting stereotypes of hard-working migrants with 'lazy' British workers. In this sense a class-based view of the short-comings of British workers permeates the discourse. Other more positive arguments have also tended to focus on the potential cultural enrichment brought about through a more multi-cultural workforce. The emergence of eastern European food shops and the appearance of such items as Polish and Czech beers in shops and supermarkets have been cast in a positive light, simultaneously adding to cultural diversity while widening consumer choice (Thring, 2010).

A third strand of discourse has focused on the treatment of immigrant labour with accusations that some employers have operated illegally through such practices as paying workers rates lower than the minimum wage, charging workers excessive sums for accommodation and other facilities, and treating them in a highly exploitative manner. Not surprisingly, specific incidents provide added impetus to these arguments surrounding the health and welfare of

migrants. The drowning of 23 Chinese cockle pickers at Morecambe Bay in the north west of England in 2004 served to highlight many of the issues surrounding the use of migrant labour, particularly the ways in which workers were treated and their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation (Tait, 2005). This, and other incidents, drew attention to the role of agents and gangmasters in procuring migrant workers for employers. This heightened scrutiny led to changes in the laws regulating the way in which gangmasters operate and legislation designed to combat the exploitation of labour in agriculture and related sectors. The remainder of this article now focuses more specifically on how this in-migration from eastern European countries played out in rural areas and the responses it engendered.

Table 1: *Selected Daily Mail Headlines*

Date	Headline
7-11-06	Britain is Country of Choice for many "Feckless" Poles
2-2-07	One in Five of UK Home Buyers are Polish
31-3-07	British Workers Priced out by Wave of Low-Paid Migrants
25-6-07	East Europe Migrants bring Surge in pickpocketing Crime
28-6-07	Polish Immigrants take £1bn out of the UK economy
29-7-07	Biggest Threat to Britain's Carp is Eastern European Migrants
02-8-07	Eastern Europeans Cause 15% of Fatal Accidents on Rural Roads
14-8-07	Foreigners Commit 20% of Crime in London, says Police
03-9-07	Eastern European Immigrants with Cancer could Swamp the NHS
17-10-07	Influx of Immigrants costs Every UK Household £350 a Year
26-10-07	Immigration Influx from Eastern Europe is Driving Down Wages
18-1-8	One in Every 4 Poles in Britain plans to Stay, says Survey
16-2-8	Now Poles begin Mass Desertion of Britain as Soaring Prices send them Home

Source: Federation of Poles in Great Britain

3.0 Movement to Rural Areas

Before proceeding to assess aspects of eastern European migration into rural areas, it is important to remember that the arrival of newcomers in the countryside (as with immigrants at a national level) is also nothing new—nor indeed are the types of responses which it has provoked. Rural places in the UK have long been attractive to various types of in-migrant whether they be counter-urbanisers seeking an idyllic escape from urban living (Phillips, 2007; Stockdale, 2010), counter-cultural migrants searching for alternative lifestyles (Halfacree, 2007), or gypsies and travellers endeavouring to maintain particular nomadic traditions (Shubin, 2011). There is an extensive literature dealing with

the issues raised by these movements and the varied experiences of rural in-migrants. Some research has drawn attention to the problems faced by migrants from minority ethnic groups (Panelli et al., 2009) and there is some emerging work on aspects of eastern European migration into rural areas (for example, Woods & Watkin, 2008; McAreavey, 2010). However, little systematic research exists on the topic. In part, it could be argued, this is a consequence of both the absence of accurate statistics and the transient nature of some of this population movement. More extensive research has occurred in the United States where the notable tendency for Latino immigrants to move towards more rural locations in recent years has been investigated (Kandel et al., 2011) and the ways in which this movement impacts on small towns has been explored (Smith & Furuseth, 2006; Trabalzi & Sandoval, 2010). The remainder of this article endeavours to shed some light on this recent migration trend in rural Britain.

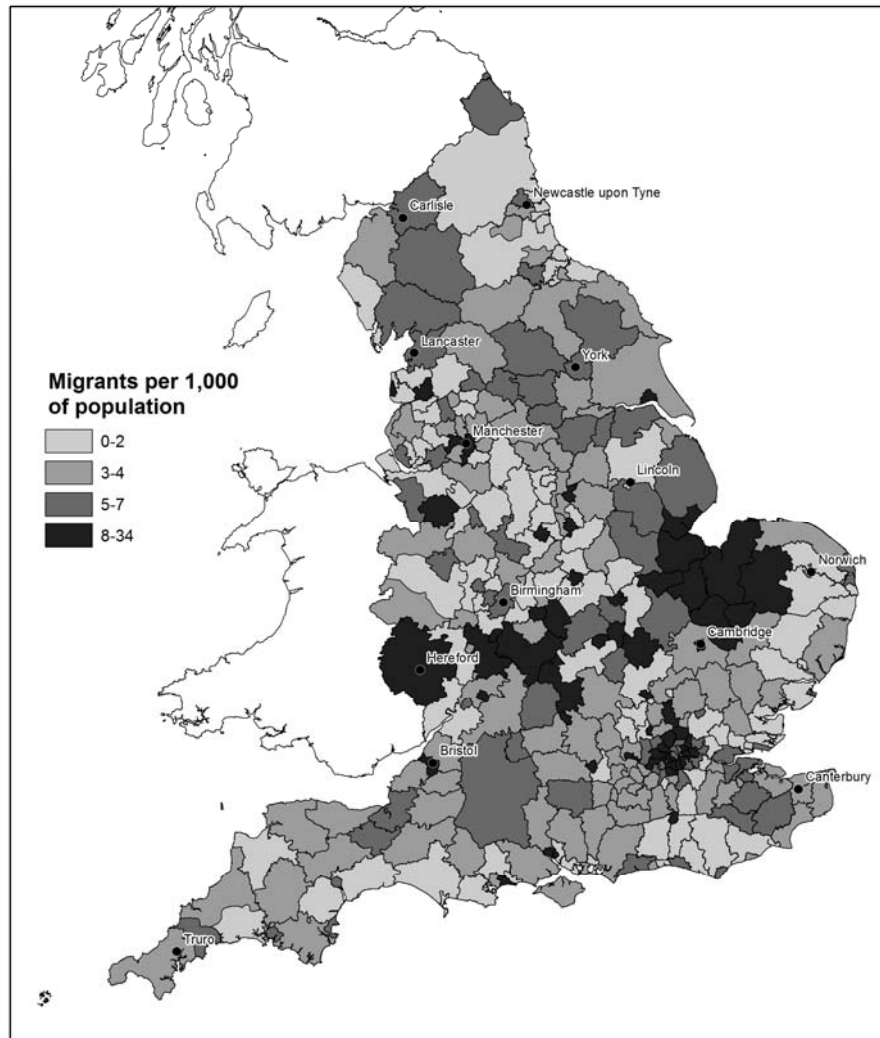
A traditional migrant route is in the direction of cities and larger towns as people are lured by perceived employment prospects. However, as already noted, migration from Eastern Europe displayed a much more diverse geography with significant levels of movement to smaller towns and villages. It seems clear that the availability of jobs in specific sectors, in particular agriculture, food processing and services, has played an important role in this. It is also clear, as already suggested, that some of the migratory movement has been temporary and seasonal, linked to the nature of jobs in those sectors. The migration pattern into rural Britain has also exhibited considerable spatial differentiation. Data from the Commission for Rural Communities has indicated higher concentrations of migrants in some parts of the country, most notably in Lincolnshire and Norfolk in the east and in Herefordshire and Worcestershire in the west midlands; areas where employment in agriculture and related industries appears to have played a role in luring migrants (See Figure 2).

The presence of these 'new' migrants in rural areas did not go unremarked in the national media. Just as the national trends outlined earlier produced a range of reactions, there was also a plethora of views regarding movement into more rural areas. Not surprisingly, the media played a role in highlighting (and sometimes exaggerating) the phenomenon. The apparent novelty of the trend led one national newspaper to pronounce that "immigrants head for the countryside" (*Daily Telegraph* 7-10-2007), while another asserted that the "number of immigrants in rural England trebles in three years" (*Daily Mail* 17-7-2007). The phenomenon was so marked that it was alleged by one media outlet that "immigration is changing rural England life" (*Daily Telegraph* 6-8-2007). It is therefore important to explore this trend in a little more detail focusing on one of the regions which appears to have attracted sizeable numbers of in-migrants.

4.0 Eastern European Migrants in the Rural West Midlands

Herefordshire, a county in the English west midlands and on the border with Wales, appears as one of those regions which attracted a noticeable number of migrants. WRS and SAWS registrations in the county appear to peak in 2006-07 at a little under 6,000. At that time two thirds of WRS registrations in Herefordshire were from Poland and up to 12 percent of the county's agricultural workforce was composed of immigrants in 2008 (Experian, 2011). However, as with the national situation there is a need to exercise some caution in how this data is interpreted. An emphasis on aggregate figures ignores the fact that the levels of net migration fluctuated and the impact may not be as significant as some might imagine with a focus on cumulative figures obscuring the fluid nature of this migration (Table 2, Figure 3).

Figure 2: Ratio of in-migrants to total population.



Source: Commission for Rural Communities, 2008

As with the broader national picture attitudes towards the arrival of eastern European migrants into rural areas can be classified utilising the three-fold division outlined earlier. In-migration to Herefordshire and neighbouring counties such as Worcestershire led, unsurprisingly, to some media exaggeration as (apparently) “Hereford has become a magnet for migrants (who) have swarmed to the area to work in the hospitality and catering trades and to pick or process fruit and vegetables” (*Daily Mail* 14-3-2009). Headlines such as this reflect a wider national phenomenon suggestive of an invasion of hordes of migrants from Poland, Slovakia and elsewhere swamping the countryside. However, not all coverage adopted this tone and local newspapers tended to avoid the hyperbole of sections of the national media, adopting a more circumspect approach. Nevertheless the impact of eastern European migration at a local level is reflected in headlines such as “Angling posters printed in Polish” (*Worcester News* 17-4-2010), “Migrants issue sparks some heated debates” (*Worcester News* 24-9-2009) and “Gangmaster sought over Worcestershire field children” (BBC Hereford and Worcester 25-10-2010). Attention was also drawn to the cultural impact with the growing phenomenon of eastern European food shops and the spread of *Polski sklep* in cities being mirrored in some smaller

towns. For example, a shop in a Herefordshire village was re-opened by two Lithuanian sisters and it stocks both 'local' and eastern European foodstuffs, a development which prompted favourable media coverage over the provision of a needed service.

Table 2: *New National Insurance Registrations in Herefordshire, January 2002-April 2008*

Country of Origin	Numbers
Poland	4,400
Lithuania	980
Slovakia	720
Bulgaria	680
Latvia	400
Portugal	330
Hungary	270
Romania	210
India	200
South Africa	170
Philippines	160
Czech Republic	150
Estonia	100
Ukraine	100

Source: Herefordshire Council

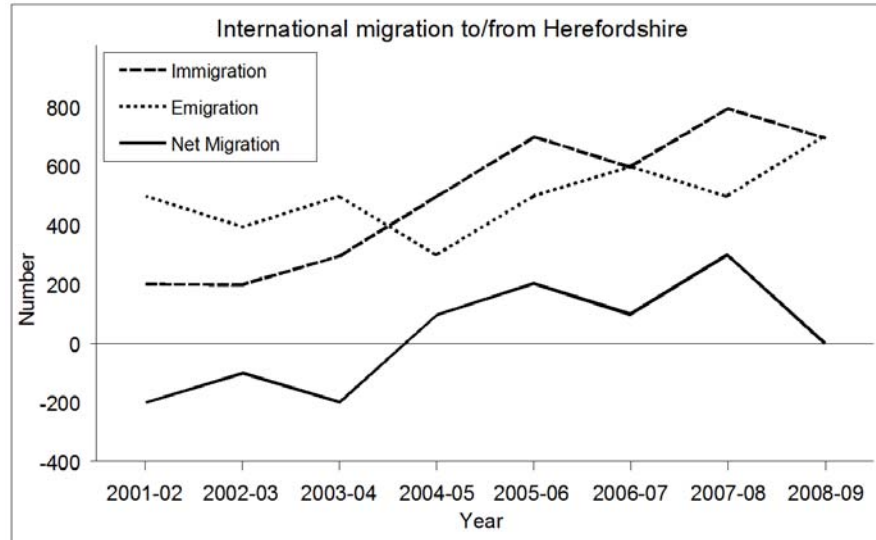
Statutory bodies adopted a broadly positive tone. In Herefordshire, the local authority placed the immigrant issue in a positive and functional light suggesting:

The arrival of workers from outside the UK provides significant benefits to the county. Some of these include: providing people to fill jobs which could not be filled from within the UK workforce, helping rural schools, businesses and public transport routes to remain viable, helping to lower the age profile of the county, bringing a new cultural diversity and different perspective to the county, e.g. delicatessens (Herefordshire Council).

The council also initiated a website (in conjunction with the regional police service) aimed at providing advice and information to migrant workers. The council also engaged in activities promoting Polish culture. This could be said to reflect a broader official response to what was seen as the economic benefits deriving from eastern European immigration. Such supportive and facilitative interventions were mirrored by some local voluntary groups where, for example, cultural events were organised as a means of integrating migrant workers into rural communities. Churches and religious groups have been prominent in this regard, reaching out to migrants, endeavouring to make them feel welcome and,

indeed, in commissioning research on the issue (Dawney, 2007). This sort of response is exemplified by the creation of a Friendship Centre in the market town of Leominster aimed at making migrants feel welcome. This mirrors the experience of other places in the UK where voluntary groupings have been instrumental in facilitating the integration of migrants into localities (McAreevey, 2010).

Figure 3: Migration flows in Herefordshire.



Source: Herefordshire Council

Just as issues of the exploitation of workers generated concerns nationally, the living and working conditions of some migrant workers in Herefordshire also provoked debate. One major source of employment for migrants in rural Herefordshire is the soft-fruit sector with many in-migrants arriving as temporary workers employed as fruit pickers in parts of the county. Soft fruit production (particularly strawberries) requires seasonal labour and many farms have employed eastern European migrants for this task. As elsewhere, some producers availed of the services of agents in providing a workforce drawn from specific countries. While there is no reason to suppose that all farms are guilty of exploitative practices, one fruit farm near Leominster employing large numbers of migrant workers has been faced with allegations of low wages and poor treatment. In this case, local media coverage has been broadly sympathetic to the apparent plight of the workers.

Part of the concern has revolved around the living conditions of workers housed in caravans on some fruit farms. This form of accommodation has also sparked broader debates with some residents opposing plans to construct relatively extensive 'caravan villages' to house migrant workers. A proposal in 2004 for a 'village' to house 1,000 temporary workers near Leominster was rejected. Within these cases there appears an inter-play of arguments surrounding the environment and the aesthetic impact of such developments on the one hand, and concerns over the welfare of migrants on the other. While there is a need to be cautious in interpreting the underlying reasons for opposition, the possibility of xenophobic factors lurking behind environmental concerns cannot be precluded, with some residents being perhaps worried by the presence and behaviour of 'others' in their locality. Overall, although responses have been positive in many respects, there has also been evidence of a negative racialising of eastern Europeans in the county with migrants cast as an alien 'other' (Dawney, 2008).

5.0 Discussion

Notwithstanding the exaggerated news stories surrounding the volume of movement, it is clear that there was a considerable influx of eastern European migrants into western countries including the UK. It is also clear that a proportion of this movement (though certainly not the majority of it) was to rural areas and to small and medium-sized towns. In addition, this migration provoked a variety of reactions, some hostile but others much more accommodating. In assessing recent in-migration (and reactions to it) from Eastern Europe it might be suggested that, rather than a new phenomenon, it is simply an extension of older established trends. As indicated earlier in this article there is a long history of migrant (particularly temporary) labour in rural areas, whether it be gypsies, Irish potato-pickers or navvies. Such groups have always filled specific niches within the workforce and have provoked various responses. As with previous migrations positive responses have been juxtaposed to more negative ones with obvious evidence of an essentialising of a diverse 'other'.

In broad terms a series of arguments surrounding eastern European migrant labour has emerged and, in the main, these echo arguments surrounding migration more generally with concerns raised over its economic, social and cultural implications (Gupta and Omoniyi 2007; Castles and Miller, 2009; Samers, 2010). From an economic perspective, it is suggested that migrants boost the economy through their consumption practices. A common argument also alludes to the supposedly positive work ethic of recent migrants. Their willingness to work long, often anti-social hours and to undertake certain tasks has been contrasted with the supposedly work-shy British in a binary distinction that serves to essentialise both indigenous and migrant labour, and has led to suggestions that British workers have been displaced. This type of argument has been used by employers to justify their hiring practices. Concerns, however, have been raised about the supposed strain placed on public services through catering for an expanded population. This is seen as particularly problematic in rural areas. From a social and cultural perspective migrants might be seen as unwelcome neighbours 'out of place', leading separate lives and unsettling senses of local and national identity. Seen differently it can be argued that eastern European migrants have precipitated a degree of cultural exchange and enriched the fabric of those areas in which they have settled.

The arguments surrounding eastern European migration tend to repeat older debates suggesting a certain degree of continuity with previous rounds of migration. In that sense, it might be argued there is nothing new about the migration of recent years other than the areas of origin of the migrants. However, in another sense we might identify some clear points of departure. This migration flow reflects an extended spatial reach with migrants who have travelled relatively long distances. The phenomenon quite clearly highlights the tensions between a more global labour market and ideas of the local. It is also the case that these more recent migrants display high levels of mobility, with evidence of considerable movement back and forth between home and host countries. Aided by modern communication systems migrants are retaining close connections (both real and virtual) to 'home'. There appears to be high levels of what has been termed 'population churn' with indications of high levels of return migration as well as internal movement by international migrants within the UK (Dennett & Stillwell, 2008). Duvell & Garapich (2011) point to evidence suggesting some migrants stayed very much in contact with their 'home' countries returning there regularly. Such movements mean that the traditional distinction between permanent and temporary becomes blurred as, for example, many Polish migrants remained locked into Polish networks (Garapich, 2008).

This is of course facilitated through the internet and also through cheap and frequent travel between 'home' and 'host'. What it also suggests is that we are seeing a more transnational set of migrants who are locked into a number of different social and cultural contexts (Vertovec, 2007). This more complex migratory pattern is also reflected in the phenomenon of relatively highly educated migrants often employed in more menial occupations such as agriculture and food processing (Drinkwater et al, 2009). In conclusion, while there are clear continuities with previous waves of migration, there are also notable differences in terms of the nature of movement and the migrant networks resulting from it.

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