

Project Plans to Reveal Britain's Hidden Landvaluescape

A major research project with potentially global impact, way beyond its use for LVT, begins in London this autumn. Initially confined in application to Britain, it will involve global studies of existing practice and plans for the use of geographic information systems (GIS) in the study of changes undergone by economies over space and time, at local and national scale.

Visualising Landvaluescape: developing a conceptual framework for Britain is the brainchild of the man behind the creation of Progressive Forum, Tony Vickers, a former military mapper and land surveyor. His programme of study has just been accepted as the basis of a degree of Master of Philosophy with possible transfer to Doctorate by Kingston University Graduate School in South London. Studying part-time while also conducting associated research on land values in London and Liverpool, he aims to complete the work by 2006, proving that GIS-generated land value maps are viable for full-scale development in Britain.

"We've had computer-generated landscapes in airline pilots' simulators and arcade games for decades," says Vickers. "GIS technology is widely used for countless public purposes by governments around the world. It is in every-day use on our TV screens to reveal fast-changing intangibles such as weather, so why not use it to map land values?"

Although not himself a "hands-on" expert in GIS, Vickers spent 14 years in the British Army and at Ordnance Survey selling the idea as a revenue-earner and helping develop GIS projects within the defence and civil government communities. His military service included spells of duty in land taxing Hong Kong and Australia. Since retirement he has

served on the Corporate Affairs Committee of the Association for Geographic Information in Britain and co-authored a report in 1996 on the future of Britain's national mapping agency, which has now totally computerised its product line.

In a questionnaire put to hundreds of property taxpayers recently, as part of a Fellowship in LVT awarded by the American Lincoln Institute, he found overwhelming agreement with the statement that "land value maps ought to be part of a national land information system". Earlier this year, using a "show-card" of typical GIS-based land value maps, business owners in Liverpool were interviewed about property taxes, the last question being: "Do you think this would help you understand and accept land tax assessments?" **Over 80% agreed.**

The Head of Modernisation at the Valuation Office Agency, which is responsible for all property tax assessments in England & Wales, has asked Vickers to demonstrate his GIS tool later this year to a private audience of officials and consultees. VOA is working on the procedures for the next national valuation for non-domestic business rates in 2005, expecting that over half the recent 2000 tax assessments will be appealed. Vickers has suggested that GIS could help reduce the level and cost of appeals, as well as provide a potential source of revenue for VOA from sales of aggregated land-value data in map form.

Vickers has secured the services of one of the leading UK specialists in the use of GIS for commercial property studies to devise the Visualising Landvaluescape tool. Mark Thurstain-Goodwin is a researcher at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) at University College London's Faculty of Geomatics. They are initially using a data set supplied free by the Chief Assessor of Lucas County Ohio. Their demonstration will be shown first to the national conference of the Scottish branch of the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV) when Vickers presents a paper: *Site Value Rating: Is It A Viable Alternative?* on 5 September. Later he will show it at an academic seminar in Belfast, Northern Ireland in November.

In April Vickers and Thurstain-Goodwin hope to present a paper, incorporating the responses to their ideas so far, to the 23rd World Congress of Surveyors, in Washington DC. Part of Vickers' first year postgraduate studies is a survey of current practice worldwide in the use of land value maps in GIS.

The last such survey on land value maps was carried out over twenty years ago, before the invention of the personal computer (PC). Even mainframe computers were then only just becoming powerful enough to handle the large volumes of data in paper maps: the Chief Executive of one of the world's largest computer companies was saying that he couldn't see why anybody would want a computer in their home! There are now wrist-watches that can display moving maps and Denmark has just passed a law allowing its land value maps to be made freely available over the internet.

Vickers' project has a small injection of funds from the American Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, which specially asked him to include work on developing a demonstrator in this year's Stage of his Lincoln Fellowship. Lincoln has also just awarded a grant to fellow

Vickers to Leave HGF Paul Brandon

THE Chief Executive of the Henry George Foundation of Great Britain (HGF), Tony Vickers, has announced that he will leave the post as soon as a replacement can be found. He has decided to concentrate on his own research project Visualising Landvaluescape and developing PF's activities as its Convenor. HGF has commissioned an outside consultant, Brian Niblett, to help them plan future strategy for the next three years.

Vickers was appointed to run HGF in October 1998, on a two-year contract. As his original contract ran out, he was approached by the Head of the School of Surveying at Kingston University, London, Dr Sarah Sayce and asked to continue his research as a postgraduate there. This August he learned that his research proposal had been accepted by Kingston's Graduate School.

"Although my post at HGF is only part-time, I am finding it hard to give enough time to the wider needs of the Foundation while having to meet my personal research deadlines," said Vickers. "I feel that I have achieved as much as I can at HGF within the constraints of limited resources. Managing my research programme is now a full-time job in itself and much of the work cannot be delegated, especially now I have postgraduate studies to think about."

During Vickers' time at HGF, he con-

ceived and launched PF with the help of distinguished academics and property professionals such as Professor Lord Raymond Plant, James Robertson and Professor Nat Lichfield. Through PF the circulation of L&L has increased significantly as have activities such as lectures, seminars and conferences. Income from grants and donations in the period has been over £150,000.

Controversially, Vickers has concentrated on a gradual and incremental approach to the introduction of land-value taxation in Britain. "A movement as small as the Georgists cannot hope to take on the establishment with radical ideas for overturning key economic policies in one go," he says.

"We have to create a living laboratory somewhere, using the present Government's penchant for pilots. I personally don't think local site value rating, especially in a pepper-pot fashion like in Pennsylvania, is the answer here. But one or two pilots would raise the level of debate in Britain, which is almost non-existent about LVT specifically, despite growing realisation that failure to recover resource rents for revenue is a major problem. And it would enable certain processes – such as the use of land value maps and computer assisted land valuation – to be tested out before a nation-wide LVT implementation."

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