



The actions of key agents in facilitating rural super-gentrification: Evidence from the English countryside

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ABSTRACT

Whilst the process of gentrification in rural spaces is widely recognised, there has been less focus to date on the emergence of rural super-gentrification - defined as the displacement of the wealthy from rural communities by the super-wealthy. Of the limited work which has been conducted on super-gentrification, this has focused on the nature and outcomes of displacement taking place in different rural settings without considering the actions of key agents, such as planners and estate agents. Consequently, this paper explores the role of gentrifying agents - namely planners and estate agents - in shaping processes of rural super-gentrification in the English countryside. The paper highlights how restrictive planning regimes, including constraints on higher plot densities, contribute to 'rural exclusivity' and rural super-gentrification. Within such contexts, the promotional and steering strategies of estate agents - based upon incomers perceived economic and cultural capital - also facilitate rural super-gentrification. In such a way, the paper advances existing consumption-side theories of gentrification by highlighting desires by super-wealthy incomers for consuming rural village locations with local services, a slower pace of life and a 'sense of community'. In addition, the importance of privacy and seclusion, urban proximity and connectivity and access to educational circuits by incomers also shape the promotional and steering strategies of estate agents. Consequently, the paper highlights how more localised 'micro-geographies' of rural super-gentrification are of relevance to rural areas in comparison to urban contexts, where super-gentrification is argued to be a neighbourhood-level phenomenon.

1. Introduction

This paper provides important new insights into the process of rural 'super-gentrification' - the displacement of the wealthy by the super-wealthy from rural communities. Goldsmiths (2018) notes how notwithstanding the vast amounts of interest in the 'super-wealthy', we know relatively little about how and where they live (Beaverstock et al., 2004; Burrows, 2013), nor the influences shaping their settlement patterns in rural areas and subsequent impacts. Through a focus on gentrifying agents, namely planners and estate agents, this paper explores how such actors are shaping processes of rural super-gentrification, including the emergence of new micro-geographies of rural super-gentrification.

There has long been an interest by rural geographers in the drivers and outcomes of rural demographic change (Williams, 1973; Cloke and Moseley, 1990). In this context, the gentrification of rural communities - involving not only a re-composition of class structures but also the

restructuring of local property markets in rural areas - has received increasing attention (Woods, 2005). Phillip's (1993) work in the 1990s in the Gower peninsula in South Wales, UK was one of the first studies to explore the impact of counter urbanization and return migration on the displacement of lower income groups. Since this date, there has been a burgeoning of interest in both processes and impacts of rural gentrification, including work which has explored 'embryonic' (early-stage) gentrification (Stockdale, 2010), 'greentrification' and a demand by incomers for 'green' residential space and subsequent displacement (Smith and Phillips, 2001) and 'horsification' - involving the migration of ex-urban lifestyle property seekers (Sutherland, 2019). A definition of gentrification is specified by Davidson and Lees (2005) who identify four characteristics of contemporary gentrification, and which can be applied to different contexts and forms of rural gentrification: the reinvestment of capital, social upgrading of locale by incoming high-income groups, landscape change, and direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups.

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Reflecting work conducted in an urban context - both production-led (supply-side) and consumption-led (demand-side) theories of rural gentrification have also been developed (Guimond and Simard, 2010). *Production-side* theories focus on how processes of agricultural restructuring in rural areas can create a 'rent gap' in terms of the return from using the land for agriculture vis a vis the potential return after converting the land for residential use (Nelson and Dwight-Hines, 2018). Indeed, it has been charted how processes of agricultural restructuring have - in some rural communities - led to out-migration and provided a ready supply of rural property for renovation by existing rural residents (marginal gentrification) and larger developers who subsequently turn a profit through the revaluing of land and buildings. Such processes can be reinforced through the role of the state in restricting new housing development to key settlements in the countryside and also through planning regimes limiting 'new build' in the countryside (Nelson and Dwight-Hines, 2018).

On the other hand, consumption-side theories have identified how the acquisition of symbolic capital (Smith and Phillips, 2001) and a desire to create a lifestyle organised around the consumption of nature and rurality has been an integral element of middle-class incomers pursuit of identity, belonging and status (Darling, 2005). Such trends have often been reinforced in local planning arenas, where newcomers and middle-class interests mobilise to preserve and resist any further development in rural areas, and who subsequently benefit from an increase in the revaluing of rural property as demand outstrips supply (Guimond and Simard, 2010). Together, these influences act as key drivers of rural gentrification and the displacement of existing residents who are unable to afford to remain in such areas.

Hence from a theoretical perspective we develop - in the course of this paper - further new insights in relation to the explanatory power of consumption-side theories for understanding processes of gentrification and rural super-gentrification. We do so by focusing on the different types of rural consumption demanded by rural super-gentrifiers. Rural super-gentrification involves "the transformation of already gentrified prosperous and solidly upper-middle-class neighbourhoods into much more exclusive and expensive enclaves" (Lees, 2003, p.2487). In simple terms, this has also been referred to as the local rich being displaced by the super-rich (Forrest et al., 2017), and portrayed through the conceptualization of the 'haves' and 'have yachts' (Burrows and Knowles, 2019). Typically, the limited work on this topic in rural contexts has generally focused on displacement and outcomes emerging with super-gentrification (see Stockdale, 2010; Mamonova and Sutherland, 2015; Smith et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020, 2021).

However, there has been less attention to date on the importance of key facilitators/agents of rural super-gentrification, such as estate agents, defined broadly as those selling and renting out buildings and land for clients. We therefore draw attention to the role of planners and their actions on restricting development - and the densification of development - in rural areas, as well as the promotional and steering strategies of estate agents in steering the super-wealthy towards particular rural places. Furthermore, the paper provides new insights into the different types of rural consumption that wealthy incomers demand - and which shapes the actions of estate agents based upon incomers perceived economic and cultural capital. In so doing, we extend and update previous work on how planners and estate agents contribute to gentrification more broadly in the rural (see Scott et al., 2011; Smith, 2002; Smith and Phillips, 2001) and also provide new insights into how their actions are also leading to new micro-geographies of super-gentrification - in essence, a much more localised pattern of super-gentrification than has been reported in urban contexts.

2. Rural super-gentrification and the role of gentrifying agents

2.1. Theorising rural super-gentrification

The phenomena of super-gentrification were first recognised by Lees

(2003) in relation to Brooklyn Heights, New York City. It denoted "the transformation of already-gentrified, prosperous and solidly upper-middle-class neighbourhoods into much more exclusive and expensive enclaves." (Lees 2003, p.2487). As such, Brooklyn Heights was seen as a site of intense investment and conspicuous consumption by a new generation of super-rich 'financiers' (Lees, 2003). However, to date there has been limited research into the super-gentrification of rural spaces, with the exception of one or two notable studies. For example, Stockdale (2010, p.35) highlighted how the town of Crieff in Scotland, UK was undergoing a process of relative rural 'super-gentrification' similar to that reported in several cities (see Lees, 2003; Butler and Lees, 2006) given in-migrants possessed higher incomes relative to the pre-existing population. Nevertheless, she argued that more work was required on the extent to which the wealthy were being replaced by the super-wealthy. In addition, Mamonova and Sutherland (2015) also argued that rural super-gentrification was occurring in relation to former Soviet gated dacha settlements (second country homes) in Russia, and with wealthy Russians buying deteriorating dachas of former elites and refurbishing or demolishing them and building new dachas.

More recently, Smith et al. (2019) and Phillips et al. (2020) have drawn attention to processes of rural super-gentrification in England, UK (Tewin Wood, Hertfordshire). They note how housing demand is being fuelled by affluent in-migrants purchasing large plots for new-build housing projects and declare how "this new expression of rural gentrification within Tewin Wood might be viewed as an instance of super-gentrification" (Smith et al., 2019, p.43). Likewise, Phillips et al. (2020) also draw attention to the in-migration of those with high incomes to Tewin Wood - and the associated refurbishing or re-building of (already substantial) properties. Furthermore, when researching rural gentrification and differentiating the lived landscape into 'the wood', 'the village' and 'the moortop', Phillips et al. (2021) advocate that Tewin Wood has experienced super-gentrification. In so doing, they highlight a difference between the landscapes of 'the wood' and 'the village', highlighting that 'the woods surrounding the village are experiencing super-gentrification owing to mock-Tudor houses being demolished to be replaced by properties of a larger size and different design.

Hence these initial studies of rural super-gentrification highlight new demands by super-wealthy incomers for locations and property commensurate with a perceived 'rural way of life'. This is consistent with consumption-side theories of gentrification processes more broadly (see Smith, 1998; Smith and Phillips, 2001; Ghose, 2004) and to which this paper provides a further significant contribution. For example, Dwight-Hines (2010a, 2010b, 2012) highlights elements of the rural idyll and representations of rurality in the context of the American West, and argues Montana occupies a position in the national discourse of 'rural' America. He makes reference to demands by incomers for a 'rural idyll' which encompasses various dimensions, including nature, recreational lifestyles, a sense of community and (community) empowerment. It also includes a demand for (and perceptions of) 'green' residential space from incomers - defined as 'greentrification' by Smith (1998).

Such demands can be framed with reference to Bourdieu's (1986) work on 'habitus' and cultural capital - individuals embodied characteristics and dispositions for particular 'ways of (rural) living' and attempts to secure and enhance identity, belonging and status in the rural. As Bourdieu (1986) has acknowledged, cultural capital can manifest in three forms: *embodied cultural capital* (long-lasting dispositions and 'ways of knowing' often informed by differential connections and experiences with others), *objectified cultural capital* (involving property and goods, and which can be used symbolically for conveying cultural capital) and *institutionalised cultural capital* (qualifications and educational credentials). Consequently, there is a need to consider how such features can shape the actions of others, such as estate agents.

2.2. Situating gentrifying agents in rural super-gentrification processes

To date, no study has yet explored the importance of different types of agents - such as planners or estate agents - in shaping rural super-gentrification. However, studies of rural gentrification more generally have identified how planners and estate agents can act as key agents influencing rural gentrification. From a planning perspective, existing studies have highlighted the importance of planning and development control policies restricting new development. Indeed, with reference to England (and which is the focus of this paper), the English planning system is responsible for ensuring the sustainable development of land and buildings whereby local councils are responsible for decision making, shaped by national and local planning policies (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). In this respect, Scott et al. (2011) argue that since 1945, planning in England has given priority to urban containment and with development control and housing policies attempting to protect the rural. Such an approach was engrained within the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. Moreover, through the investigation of rural gentrification in Norfolk, UK, Phillips (2004) illustrated how development control policies influenced and conditioned rural gentrification by restricting development, and with the planning system preserving past structures of land-use and settlement.

In the Republic of Ireland, Gkartzios and Scott (2012) have also noted how the planning system can inform rural gentrification processes dependent on the extent to which agricultural land is made available for residential use, along with the availability of cheap finance/capital to facilitate new housing development. In some instances, this has led to class replacement rather than displacement given the surplus supply of relatively cheap property which became available in many rural areas of Ireland following the global financial crisis in 2008. Additionally, they also highlight the role of the state in controlling and encouraging housing development within rural areas since the land-use planning system requires planning permission for all new development; therefore, planning can act as an agent of rural gentrification through restricting the supply of new houses. In a similar vein, it may also shape processes of rural super-gentrification, and dependent on the extent to which planning policies may serve to constrain the construction of new build properties in areas already subject to rural gentrification. This may also be shaped by categorisations of rural settlements in local planning and housing policies being either 'sustainable' - and thus offering the potential for further development - or not (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015).

Estate agents also shape rural gentrification processes. In the UK, estate agents are dependent upon house sales and the market conditions in which they operate; they act as agents of change and are theorised as gatekeepers responsible for directing certain individuals to certain areas (Williams, 1976). Of the limited work that has been undertaken in a rural context, Smith (2002) explored the role of estate agents in shaping rural gentrification in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, UK. He identified how the housing market in Hebden Bridge had high levels of owner-occupiers, and with estate agents influencing over eighty percent of households in terms of the choice of their present property. Furthermore, the role of local (and regional) planning frameworks in shaping housing supply was also recognised as shaping the steering strategies of estate agents.

Additionally, Smith and Phillips (2001) noted distinct socio-spatial patterns concerning the consumption of particular representations of rurality espoused by Estate Agents in Hebden Bridge, relating to a binary of 'remote greentrifiers' and 'village greentrifiers' and hence perceived consumer demands for 'Pennine moor-top rurality' and 'Pennine village rurality' respectively. Pennine moor-top rurality incorporates socio-spatial isolation, a continual detachment from the urban (notwithstanding the ability to commute to metropolitan areas), and a space for self-discovery. Consequently, such perceptions and a demand for isolation, self-discovery and accessibility to metropolitan areas shaped estate agents' actions in their promotional strategies and which

focused around encouraging certain individuals to locate to such areas (Smith, 2002). In contrast, Pennine village rurality relates to a sense of community, working from home, and a bucolic environment (Smith and Phillips, 2001). This sense of community and ability to work from home were thus perceived by estate agents as important for other types of individuals and hence once again informed their actions in promoting Hebden Bridge and the re-location of particular individuals from elsewhere (Smith, 2002).

Subsequently, the 'steering strategies' of estate agents were also important in directing in-migrants to particular property and parts of Hebden Bridge based on their perceived desires for certain locations and certain types of property (moor tops and village; Smith, 2002). Furthermore, Smith (2002) highlights an internal micro-geography of consumption within Hebden Bridge informed by estate agents' steering strategies drawing upon a topological 'dark-side' and 'sunny-side' division in the landscape, with the 'sunny-side' comprising of more affluent professionals, and with the less affluent on the 'dark-side' (Smith, 2002). Therefore, the perceived social class and wealth of individuals also shaped estate agents' steering strategies *within* the local community.

Such findings are of particular importance to rural super-gentrification research as we are dealing with the super-rich after all. However, from a consumption-side perspective, no research as of yet has explored whether the perceived wealth of such individuals may manifest in similar types of promotional and steering strategies as identified in Hebden Bridge and whether new 'micro-geographies' of rural super-gentrification are emerging within particular rural places, rather than at a wider neighbourhood level as reported in research on urban super-gentrification (see Lees, 2003; Butler and Lees, 2006; Halasz, 2018; Morris, 2019). Nor has much focus been placed on how the supply of housing available to estate agents - shaped by local and regional planning frameworks - also shapes their activities in areas of rural super-gentrification.

Finally, work on rural gentrification in Shoreham-by-Sea, South-East England identified how estate agents promoted the appropriation and commodification of a houseboat lifestyle and notion of 'living-on-the-water' to affluent, middle class individuals (Smith and Holt, 2007). Freeman and Cheyne (2008) have also drawn attention to the critical role that estate agents have played in shaping rural gentrification on the coast of New Zealand, whereby they directed in-migrants/new buyers towards gentrifying areas which encompassed residential properties with sea views. Such research is analogous to the 'sunny-side' arguments espoused by estate agents in Hebden Bridge, UK (Smith, 2002) and gives rise to further questions of relevance to consumption-side theories of rural super-gentrification and the role of estate agents therein that we seek to answer in the following sections.

3. Methods

The research adopted a qualitative research design to explore the ways in which estate agents are shaping the process of rural super-gentrification. In addition, in order to corroborate or challenge the views and perceptions of estate agents, we also engaged with residents who had moved into our case study area relatively recently (i.e. potential 'super-gentrifiers') as well as those who had been in the area for a much longer period of time (defined as 'established residents' - see Table 1). This approach is consistent with recent research on rural gentrification/super-gentrification, and the perceptions and actions of both estate agents and local people (for example, see Phillips et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Smith, 2002).

A case study approach was used to collect data and which focused on the West Midlands, UK. There were several reasons for the selection of this area. First, notwithstanding the fact that rural house prices across the UK are around 20% (c.£44,454) higher than urban areas, such differences are particularly pronounced in the West Midlands where the rural premium stands at £89,272 (47% higher than urban areas; Property Wire, 2017). Furthermore, recent data has highlighted how

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of King's Bromley resident interviewees.

Resident	Age	Gender (Male - M/Female - F)	Ethnicity	Country of Birth	Tenure	Occupation by National Statistics-Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)	Length of Residence in King's Bromley	Place of Previous Residence
1	60–69	F	White British	England	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	32 Years	Lichfield, Stoke-on-Trent
2	60–69	F	White British	UK	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed
3	60–69	F	White British	England	Owned Outright	Retired	30 Years	Hemel Hempstead
4	50–59	M	White British	UK	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	2 Years	Haslemere, Surrey, London-Ealing, Tooting, Battersea
5	50–59	F	White British	England	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed
6	40–49	F	White English	England	Owned-Mortgage	Not Disclosed	14 Years	Armitage
7	40–49	F	White British	England	Owned-Mortgage	Not Disclosed	15 Years	Walton-on-Trent
8	50–59	M	White European	UK	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	22 Years	Henley-on-Thames
9	60–69	M	White British	UK	Owned Outright	Retired	37 Years	Sheffield, Coventry, London, Sutton Coldfield
10	40–49	F	White British	UK	Owned-Mortgage	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	8 Years	Alrewas, Burton-on-Trent
11	70–79	F	White British	England	Owned Outright	Professional Occupations	12 Years	London, Kent, Hampshire, Guernsey
12	60–69	F	White British	Great Britain	Owned Outright	Retired	42 Years	Knowle, Edgbaston
13	50–59	F	White Irish	England	Social Rented	Routine Occupations	5 Years	Sheffield, London
14	60–69	M	White British	UK	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	5 Years	London, Stamford, Birmingham, Cambridge
15	50–59	M	White British	UK	Owned Outright	Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	7 Years	Birmingham

Birmingham - as the UK's second largest city (and located in the West Midlands) - has largely underperformed when compared to its surrounding commuter belt (Express and Star, 2022). Consequently, the research was focused on one particular rural community in Birmingham's commuter belt - that of King's Bromley (see Fig. 1a and b) - and which lies around 30 miles from Birmingham, a 40-min car journey on average.

King's Bromley (population 1012 (Nomis, 2020)) was selected as a suitable location for the research based on the fact that it was identified as having the highest mean property prices for all 'Rural Village and Dispersed' areas within the West Midlands surrounding the 'Major Conurbation' of Birmingham.¹ Thus, property price was used as a proxy for wealth and potential super-gentrification for two key reasons. First, it was not possible to use small scale tract data on family income - as utilised by Lees (2003) on her study of super-gentrification in Brooklyn Heights, New York - as such information is not currently available in the UK. Second, the use of house price data is consistent with Butler and Lees' (2006) approach to researching super-gentrification in an urban context (Barnsbury, London). Hence, this approach was replicated but in a rural context and in lieu of local-level income data. Thus mean property price data by Lower-Layer Super Output Area (LSOA - a standardised geography used for the UK census and consisting of around 1500 people on average) was used as a proxy of wealth, and to explore super-gentrification within a 'Rural Village and Dispersed' area (see Fig. 2 for mean property prices over time in King's Bromley).

In order to ascertain the ways in which estate agents act as agents of rural super-gentrification we developed a two-pronged research sampling framework. First, following full ethical approval from our research institution we targeted the key estate agents/agencies who were

marketing property in the case study area (King's Bromley) through a purposive sampling approach. In total, we found four estate agents who were prominent in this respect (see Table 2). The estate agents/agencies differed in terms of the size of their business (from one branch operating in Staffordshire to another having 600 offices operating worldwide) and in terms of the recency of their operations. Nevertheless, each of the four estate agents had a diverse portfolio of rural residential property, agricultural and equestrian property, farms and estates and were actively promoting the sale of property in King's Bromley. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently held with each of the four estate agents local/regional branch office managers on-line and which lasted about one hour in total. The interviews focused on their perceptions and views of King's Bromley as a 'rural community'; how it was changing; the characteristics of prospective/actual purchasers of property in King's Bromley; their perceptions on the property needs of prospective purchasers; the strategies that they had employed/were employing in order 'sell' Kings' Bromley as a place to live; and the extent to which they were 'steering' individuals towards particular types of properties in the village. Three planners were also interviewed - this included one senior planning officer representing the local district council and two members of the district council's planning committee. Interviews focused on the English planning system and the ways in which planning policy and legalisation had impacted on housing development and availability in King's Bromley (Table 3). Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and the results of the research were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (through NVivo).

Second, we supplemented this approach with 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with local residents. Once again a purposive sampling approach was used in order to focus on those who had arrived in the village within the last seven to eight years - and which was a cut-off point defined by the responses of estate agents when discussing 'recent arrivals' (and defined as 'recent in-migrants') as well as those who had been in the village for a much longer period of time, and which for some was over 40+ years ('established residents') (see Table 1).

¹ Following use of the UK Rural-Urban Classification (2011) and use of Land Registry data on mean property prices by Lower-Layer Super Output Area (2019).

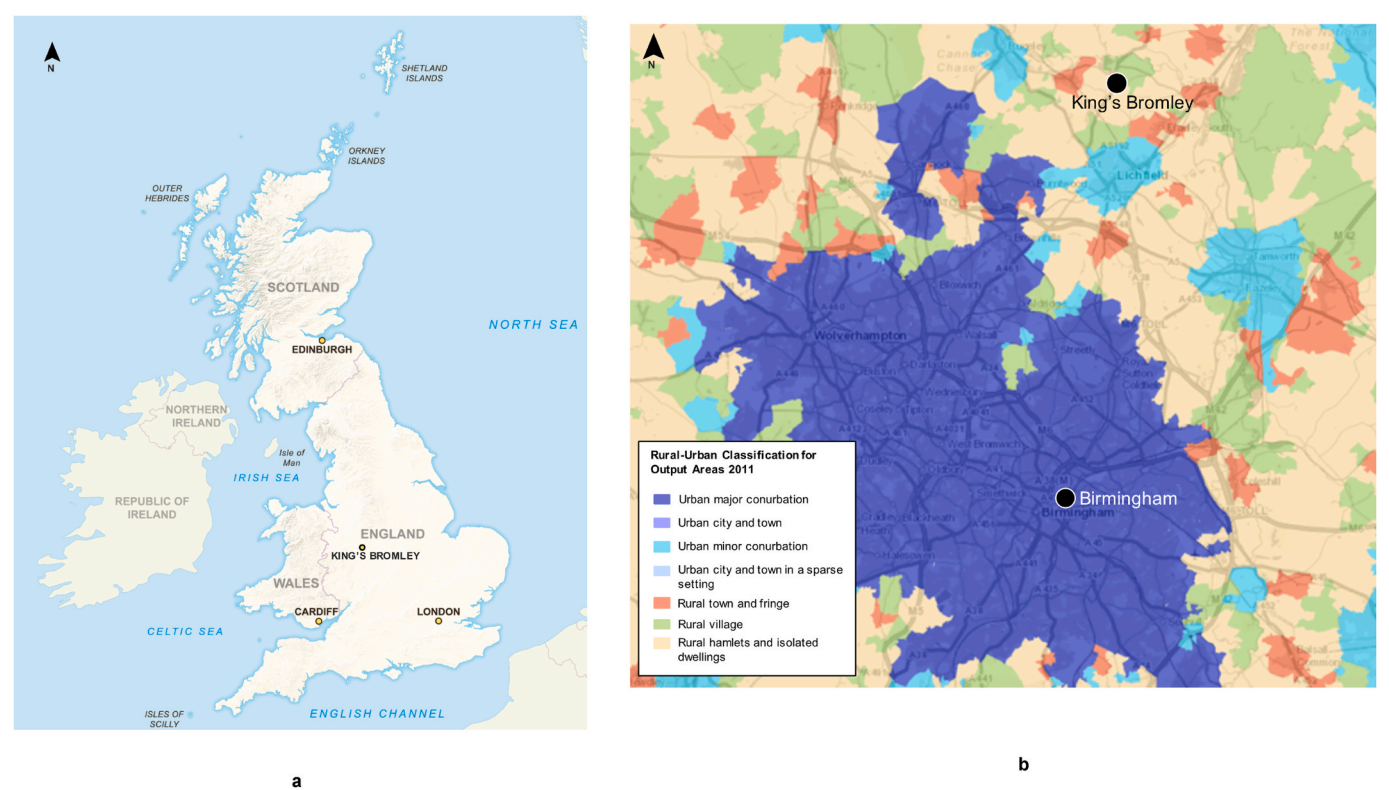


Fig. 1. a Location map of King's Bromley in the UK (Source: Digimap, 2022). b Location map of King's Bromley in the West Midlands (UK) and in relation to the city of Birmingham by Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2011 Rural Urban Classification (Source: Office for National Statistics, 2021).

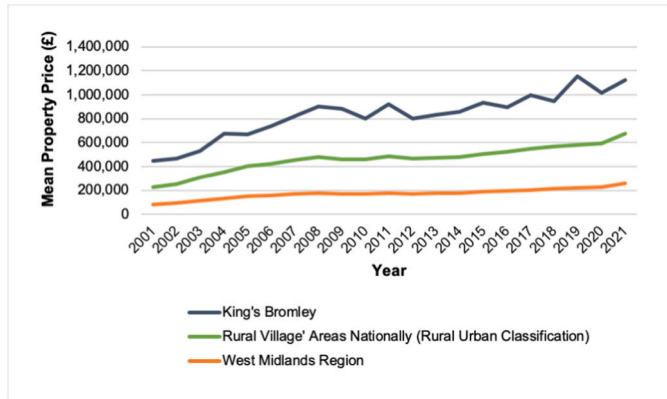


Fig. 2. Graph showing changes in mean property prices for King's Bromley compared with 'Rural Village' areas in the UK (classified by Rural Urban Classification) and West Midlands Region, over a 20 year Period (Data Source: Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Roughly equal numbers of each group participated in the survey. Most of the participants were aged 40+, born in the UK and were either employed in professional occupations or were retired. Slightly more females participated in the research than males. A snowball sampling approach was used for the recruitment of both groups of residents. This is a useful tool for identifying more hidden populations (Eland-Gossens et al., 1997) and was of relevance in this instance given that relatively wealthy neighbourhoods can be exclusive and encompass a 'hard to reach' population.

For those who had recently moved into the village, the interviews focused on their motivations for moving in and the role that estate agents had played therein. For those who had resided in King's Bromley for a longer period of time, the emphasis was on capturing displacement

Table 2
Estate agent participants.

Estate Agent	Size of Business (Number of Branches/ Offices)	Year Founded	Geographical Focus	Remit
1	1 Branch		Staffordshire, UK	Rural, agricultural and equestrian property.
2	10 Branches	1840	West Midlands, UK	Country living, urban living, equestrian property and land.
3	2 Branches	2010	Staffordshire and Derbyshire, UK	Residential properties in rural village locations.
4	600 Offices	1855	International	Residential properties both in rural and urban locations, farms, offices, estates, land and equestrian property.

Table 3
Planning interviewee participants.

Planning Interviewee	Position
1	Senior Planning Officer
2	Planning Committee Member (Chair)
3	Planning Committee Member (Local Ward Representative)

pressures, how the area was changing in terms of the characteristics of its residents (for example, their wealth, age, occupation etc.) and perceptions on newcomers' demands for a particular type of rural living.

That said, both ‘recent in-migrants’ and ‘established residents’ were asked questions regarding the affordability and availability of housing, plus drivers of change in respect of the local housing market. Once again, the interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and the results analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

4. Results and analysis

In this section we present the results from the research undertaken in King’s Bromley and also discuss and draw out the wider implications of the research for consumption-side theories of rural super-gentrification. We begin by considering how planners and the rural planning system provide an important context for shaping the actions of estate agents in terms of how they perceive (and subsequently promote) the exclusivity of rural areas such as King’s Bromley. In turn, we consider the importance of the economic and cultural capital (or ‘habitus’) of incomers and their desires for particular ways of rural living, as well as how this informs the perceptions of estate agents and their subsequent promotional and steering strategies. The impact of such strategies on the emergence of new micro-geographies of rural super-gentrification are subsequently considered.

4.1. The role of planners and the planning system in restricting housing development

Our research highlighted how planners facilitate rural super-gentrification through planning regimes which serve to restrict development and the supply of housing. Indeed, interviews with planning officers and planning committee representatives highlighted how King’s Bromley was not defined as a ‘sustainable settlement’ within local planning policy given the limited local facilities and services available (Lichfield District Council, 2018): “*I suppose planning is stopping large scale development here [...] King’s Bromley isn’t identified as a sustainable settlement within the Local Plan and as such has seen limited housing growth*” (Planning Officer, Lichfield District Council). In addition, a planning committee member commented on the lack of services in restricting growth: “*It doesn’t do particularly well for services-it’s got a pub and a shop, and a church, and a village hall and a primary school and that’s about all its got*” (Planning Committee member 1). Therefore, the way in which local authorities in England categorise rural settlements into ‘sustainable’ (and therefore suitable for new housing development) or ‘unsustainable’ (effectively red-lined) on the basis of simple checklists contributes to urban containment and with planning acting as an agent of rural gentrification (also see Shucksmith 2011, p.608).

Restrictions on growth were also evident in relation to the local authority Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (Lichfield District Council, 2019) and which identifies land with the potential for housing development up until 2029. In this document, it is noted how land within King’s Bromley isn’t developable for four key reasons: (i) King’s Bromley isn’t considered to be a sustainable settlement; (ii) any suitable land for development is located outside of the village boundary; (iii) any land for development is either within or adjacent to a designated conservation area; and, (iv) natural/environmental factors. The significance of the village boundary in restricting development was noted by another Planning Committee representative who stated “*there’s little development land left within the village boundary, so unless they extend the village boundaryit’s a job to see where other houses are coming from*” (Planning Committee member 2). As such, the planning system has led to severe restrictions on further development given King’s Bromley definition as ‘unsustainable’ and the presence of a village boundary which has left little developable land within the village. There are thus parallels between King’s Bromley and work conducted in Hebden Bridge by Smith (2002) in terms of preservationist ideologies of the local authority constricting development and the supply of physical housing stock. Accordingly, this is serving to create an ‘exclusive’ rural locality which has informed the actions of estate agents in terms of their

promotional work.

4.2. The role of estate agents and the perceived economic capital of incomers in shaping promotional strategies

Beyond the role of planners in restricting housing supply, the importance of the perceived economic capital of incomers by estate agents - and how this shaped their promotional strategies - was a further key factor contributing to consumption-led processes of rural super-gentrification. As such, estate agents highlighted how incomers into King’s Bromley were often relatively young (30–40) and employed in professional occupations. This was confirmed - to a significant degree - through occupational data which identified that the two most important sectors were *Managers, Directors and Senior Officials*’ (20.6%) and *Professional Occupations*’ (19.4%) (Casweb, 2020). In addition, our own sample of interviewees were dominated by ‘Directors’, ‘Executives’ and ‘Managers’ (Table 1). Notwithstanding the fact that “*some people choose an area they are going to live in before they go to estate agents*” (Resident interviewee 7) - and based on local knowledge and family connections - the perceived economic capital of incomers therefore served to shape estate agents’ perceptions of the types of property they wished to purchase, as well as where this was located. In this respect, a number of resident interviewees revealed the importance of ‘snob value’, and which involved being in close proximity to the nearby city of Birmingham - but far enough away to not have the local accent: “*we decided we wanted to move into the country, we wanted to get away from a densely populated area and move to somewhere quieter where we could bring up our children without them having the local accent*” (Resident interviewee 12).

Thus estate agents and local residents spoke of a desire by ‘super-gentrifiers’ for larger detached properties in Kings Bromley on the basis of their economic capital. One estate agent advocated how “*King’s Bromley is sought after nowyou know, to sell something for two million that shows youbefore you would have been looking elsewhere for those big prices*” (Estate Agent 2). Nevertheless, interviewees also highlighted the actions of estate agents in over-valuing property - based around the perceived economic capital of incomers - as a factor contributing to the process of rural super-gentrification. As expressed by one resident: “*we had our house on the market a couple of years back now and you have estate agents come round to view it and you know you do get varied valuations. We have in our knowledge what’s it’s worth and the estate agents tend to come in much higher*” (Resident interviewee 6). This was confirmed through an interview with an estate agent who proclaimed “*we can go out and value something but I can guarantee another estate agent is going to have valued it much higher. There is overvaluing in King’s Bromley*” (Estate Agent 2). Nevertheless, such overvaluing of property isn’t uncommon: Ayuso and Restoy (2006) suggest that over-valuation in the UK is around the 30% mark on average and Besbris and Faber (2017, p.869) identified how upselling is associated with processes of gentrification in New York. Furthermore, it was claimed that the overvaluing of property within King’s Bromley was also being shaped by vendors and consequently “*some estate agents will over value a property because the vendor is telling them they want to go on the vendors price, and then they play the game in waiting and dropping the price down.*” (Estate Agent 2). Hence over-valuing involves complex interactions between vendors, purchasers and estate agents - although it was claimed that it was more pronounced in areas of rural super-gentrification given that the wealthy may seek to further exploit the needs and tastes of the super-wealthy.

4.3. The importance of cultural capital in shaping the promotional strategies of estate agents

The perceived social and cultural capital of incomers - including their social connections and their embodied characteristics, dispositions and desires for particular ‘ways of (rural) living’ - or ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1986) were also of importance in shaping the promotional strategies of estate agents. In this respect, interviews with research participants

revealed the importance of different forms of cultural capital in shaping their promotional strategies, notably objectified cultural capital (relating to incomers demands for purchasing particular types of property as a status symbol and consumption of particular forms of rurality) and institutional cultural capital (reflected in incomers desires for specific ‘circuits of education’). Both are elaborated below in terms of their distinctiveness in contexts of consumption-led rural super-gentrification.

With reference to the former, in contrast to [Smith’s \(2002\)](#) work on the emergence of a place specific rural discourse concerned with ‘Penine’ rurality - and which was espoused by Estate Agents to attract incomers - our research in King’s Bromley identified the importance of more ‘piecemeal’ discourses of rurality in shaping the promotional strategies of estate agents in attracting super-wealthy individuals. These focused on i) demands by newcomers for a rural village location and associated amenities; and ii) rural ‘community’ and a ‘slower pace of life’. In respect of the rural village location, it was evident that estate agents were promoting a discourse of the traditional rural ‘English’ village in order to attract new super-wealthy incomers based on their perceived desires. For example, the website of one estate agency identified how *“the beautiful village of King’s Bromley lies just five miles north of Lichfield on the River Trent. It effortlessly mixes picturesque thatched cottages, rustic tiled dwellings and modern housing needs around a well-preserved church and good pub”* ([Parker Hall Estate Agencies, 2020](#)). Indeed, a number of incomers who had moved to the village more recently referred to the importance of the local village pub and shop: *“It’s got a shopand it’s got a fully functioning pub, which is critical”* (Resident interviewee 4). Another resident noted how *“A lot of people who live here use the pub”* (Resident interviewee 15) and illustrating how a new ‘super-gentry’ - akin to the ‘new squirearchy’ noted by [Heley \(2010\)](#) - were using the pub as a place of rural consumption and performance.

With reference to rural community and perceived demands for a slower pace of life, longer-established residents noted how King’s Bromley was attractive to the super-wealthy *“as its a nice atmosphere, nice village with a community spirit”* (Resident interviewee 7). In addition, those more recent arrived pointed out how *“there’s a good community spirit, and small village feel”* (Resident interviewee 2) and *“you do know a lot of your neighbours”* (Resident interviewee 15). Thus rural community was a prominent discourse that estate agents were using in their promotional strategies for King’s Bromley. Notions around a ‘slower pace of life’ were also prominent in responses of newcomers and were being picked up by estate agents in respect of promoting and marketing the area: *“people move here because its quieter, and it haserma slower pace of life than other places”* (Resident interviewee 15). Nevertheless, a sense of dissonance was evident in that other participants in the research - and who had lived in the area for a long time - suggested that ‘sense of community’ was actually being eroded with the super-wealthy arriving: *“people who have come in don’t take part in village life, they aren’t interested in the village at all, they are as far as villagers are concerned would have been better if they’d stayed in the towns that they came from. These people treat it as a dormitory and don’t take part in village life at all.”* (Resident interviewee 12). This point connects with another raised by estate agents - a desire by newcomers, and reflecting their perceived economic and social capital, for large properties set in extensive plots as a status symbol, and which offer proximity to nature and countryside plus privacy and seclusion. This will be discussed further in section 4.4.

A second aspect of objectified cultural capital of relevance to the promotional strategies of estate agents - and distinctive in the context of rural super-gentrification - related to demands by incomers for urban proximity and connectivity. As already highlighted, it was apparent from our research that the super-wealthy that had moved into King’s Bromley were often employed in professional and managerial occupations. This - in turn - meant that there was a strong demand for proximity to i) nearby urban locations for employment (for example, the city of Birmingham, UK); and ii) proximity to transport infrastructure (e.g.

motorways and mainline railway stations) for individuals to commute to work elsewhere in the country allowing such individuals to maintain and generate economic capital. As such, those that had moved in noted how they had found King’s Bromley to be a relatively accessible rural location and with the ability to commute to urban areas for work - specifically Birmingham and London. Once again, this subsequently served to shape the promotional activities of Estate Agents. One estate agent proclaimed that *“the kind of people who can afford to live there (in King’s Bromley) have got to be a commuter really, with a higher end job elsewhere in the country. The prices there are the kind of prices whereby really the vast majority of people living there are going to be commuters.”* (Estate Agent 1). Similarly, another estate agent who was interviewed set out how *“we get people moving to King’s Bromley from London - and who work in London - but they catch the train to London every day because they want to live in a rural area”* (Estate Agent 2). Such demands by incomers for urban proximity and connectivity was also evident within estate agents promotional material; for example: *“Two rail stations in Lichfield provide direct links to Birmingham and London (in 80 min) and the village is well places for commuters, with the A38, A515 and M6 Toll all within easy reach and Birmingham International and East Midlands Airport both being within a 40 min drive”* ([Parker Hall Estate Agent, 2022a](#)).

In respect of institutionalised cultural capital, a further influence shaping the promotional strategies of estate agents in facilitating rural super-gentrification related to the importance of institutional capital and educational ‘circuits’. In previous work, [Butler and Lees \(2006\)](#) have noted how super-gentrifiers may hold institutional cultural capital as a result of being drawn from elite parts of the British education system. However, our research offered a different perspective in that institutional cultural capital was generated through super-gentrifiers ‘buying’ into particular circuits of education in the King’s Bromley area. Indeed, longer-established residents in King’s Bromley argued that many super-wealthy newcomers to King’s Bromley who had families were seeking to access educational opportunities for their children at both primary and secondary school level. This is consistent with the work of [Smith and Higley \(2012\)](#) who identified how in-migrants in parts of rural Kent (England) paid high property prices in order to buy into rural schools; this was also evident in King’s Bromley: *“I think a lot of people move here because the schools are good and the little village school that is in the countryside”* (Resident interviewee 1).

Furthermore, and analogous to [Smith and Higley’s \(2012\)](#) discernment of circuits of education (i.e. parental choice and education strategies developed by middle-class families in rural places), two prominent circuits of education were identified within our research. The first circuit of education involved the local primary school which in recent times had received an Ofsted (UK educational body) rating of ‘outstanding’ ([Ofsted, 2011](#)). Such a rating - it was claimed - had subsequently encouraged the in-migration of the super-wealthy in order for their children to attend this school. Indeed, a resident interviewee spoke of the importance of the school’s outstanding rating as a reason to move in: *“our decision was based predominately on the school actually. The fact that the school is outstandingI guess that is important certainly in comparison with other similar villages which have the same amenities perhaps but (their) schools were not rated as outstanding so that had a very significant impact on our choice.”* (Resident interviewee 4). Hence, such demands were recognised by estate agents and had also been used as part of their promotional strategies targeted towards wealthy incomers.

The second ‘circuit of education’ related to King’s Bromley now being located within the rural catchment area for a high performing secondary school ([Staffordshire County Council, 2020](#)). As such, the relocation of King’s Bromley into the catchment area for this school was noted as a key driver shaping the demand by incomers for housing in the area: *“10 years ago the school changed its catchment area, it was previously in the Fair Oak catchment [...] I would be fairly certain that the change of catchment area has had an impact on (demand and) house prices”* (Interviewee resident 14). Correspondingly, Estate Agent 2 noted how *“the biggest influence (on demand for housing) has been the secondary school*

catchment, and it's also easy enough to get (from King's Bromley) to the private schools." In turn, they also stated that wealthy incomers "can live in a small village, a little bit more exclusive, but get their children into the right schools". Hence the significance of King's Bromley being in the rural catchment area for the secondary school (and surrounding private schools) parallels Smith and Higley's (2012) findings on affluent in-migrant families buying into school catchment areas, but with our research also showing how such demands were being recognised and used by estate agents as part of their promotional discourses: "the (primary and secondary) schools in the area maintain an Ofsted 'Outstanding' rating, and there are a superb range of private schools within close reach" (Parker Hall Estate Agent, 2022b).

4.4. Implications for the steering strategies of estate agents and the emergence of new micro-geographies of rural super-gentrification

The promotional strategies of estate agents are also critical in shaping their local steering strategies. This, in turn, can contribute to new micro-geographies of rural super-gentrification *within* rural communities, rather than at the level of the neighbourhood itself - and which has been reported in studies of urban super-gentrification (see Butler and Lees, 2006; Halasz, 2018; Morris, 2019).

Indeed, resident interviewees noted how wealthy incomers were being directed by estate agents towards more secluded properties in King's Bromley in private streets based on individuals' perceived desires for privacy, seclusion and property reflective of their objectified cultural capital. They also noted how such individuals - in due course - may seek planning permission to demolish and rebuild or alternatively extend their existing property within extensive plots of land. In the context of the case study area, many residents thus noted how the Manor Park and Manor Road areas located in the North West of King's Bromley (see Fig. 3) were renowned as offering privacy and seclusion given the nature of property evident - larger detached properties with larger plots and set within private roads. In the words of one respondent: "(residents) reserve

their privacy very strictlypeople used to be able to walk through that area and enjoy it but now it is frowned upon" (Resident interviewee 12). Such desires for privacy were also reflected in estate agents' accounts concerning demand in this area in contrast to the rest of the village: "The Manor Road side that's where the big million pound houses are. I sold one on Manor Road for one and a half (million pounds)then we sold three properties in Manor Park and they sold for around a million each. There's another priced at a million and there's four viewings waiting for that" (Estate Agent 3). The promotional material of estate agents also draws attention to the opportunities for privacy, seclusion and proximity to nature in this part of King's Bromley: For example, the Fisher German estate agency note how "the beautifully maintained (Manor Park) area provides a private estate feelboasting approximately 1.15 acres of secluded gardens" (Fisher German, 2022), whilst the Parker Hall estate agency state that "the 'regal Manor Park (area) offers a highly desirable private community home to a collection of prestigious and individual countryside residences" (Parker Hall, 2022a).

A consideration of such arguments in relation to the perceived importance of privacy are - on the one hand - consistent with a number of (relatively limited) studies of rural super-gentrification that have been undertaken to date, but which are less 'agent' centred. For example, Smith et al.'s (2019, p.142) work in Tewin Wood in Hertfordshire identified the "unique setting of detached housing in large plots in woodland". However, our findings contrast significantly with studies of super-gentrification in urban spaces whereby the focus has been on how the super-wealthy have been displacing the wealthy in areas where luxury apartments or housing are in relatively close proximity (emphasis added - see Lees, 2003; Rofo, 2004; Butler and Lees, 2006; Zhong et al., 2017; Halasz, 2018; Morris, 2019).

Thus given the demand for privacy and seclusion - and associated property prices therein - the common view amongst participants was that super-gentrification was particularly evident within the Manor Park and Manor Road areas of King's Bromley. As such, Manor Park and Manor Road were concomitantly acclaimed as expensive and exclusive

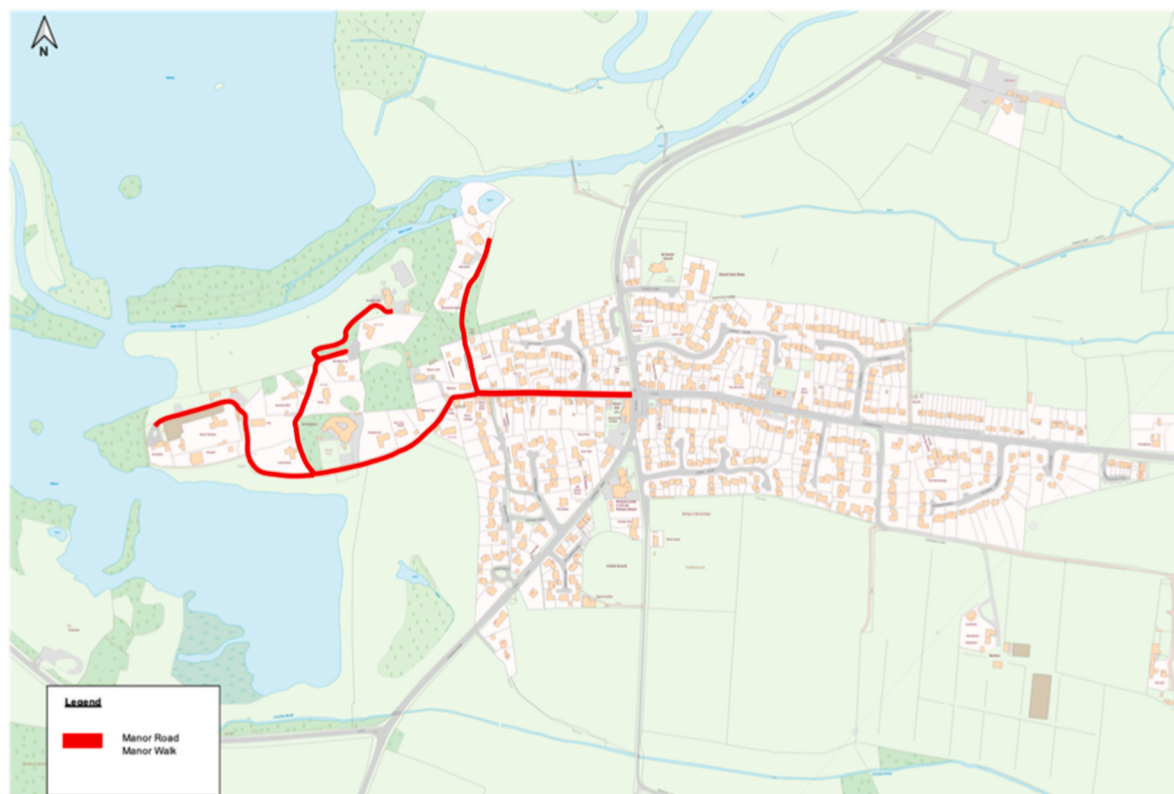


Fig. 3. Map illustrating the Manor Park area in the context of King's Bromley (Authors, 2022; Data Source: Digimap, 2022).

enclaves: “.....what we call the posh end of the village, there’s Manor Park which is for millionaires only” (Resident interviewee 12). Similarly, another resident noted how Manor Park and Manor Road are “*probably seen as the most affluent part of the village*” (Resident interviewee 2). Additionally, Estate Agent 3 proclaimed how living in Manor Park and Manor Road was “*a bit of a status symbolpeople like to be known to live on a certain side of the road (in the Manor Park area)*” (Estate Agent 3).

In contrast to Manor Park and Manor Road, it was claimed that other areas within King’s Bromley were not encountering the process of rural super-gentrification to the same degree. Whilst property prices in Manor Park and Manor Road exceeded £1 million according to Land Registry data (His Majesty’s Land Registry, 2020), such prices were not as evident in other locations. These findings are consistent with Burrows’ (2017) and Burrows and Knowles’ (2019) notion of the ‘haves and have yachts’ in areas of rural super-gentrification. This dichotomy was additionally delineated by Resident interviewee 9: “*on our side of the A515 (in King’s Bromley) it is more expensive mainly, compared with the Alrewas side of the A515*”.

Based upon these research findings we therefore argue that there is a micro-geography to the process of rural super-gentrification - shaped - to a significant degree by the steering strategies of estate agents, but also bound up in planning regulations and the economic and cultural capital of incomers, and in particular, their demands for privacy and seclusion. Therefore, in rural communities there appears to be a much more localised geography of super-gentrification - a micro-geography - emerging. This contrasts with both the emergence of neighbourhood-scale super-gentrification in urban areas (Lees, 2003; Butler and Lees, 2006; Halasz, 2018; Morris, 2019) and existing understandings of rural gentrification which have been reported over wider territorial scales (see Smith and Phillips, 2001; Smith, 2002).

Finally, one further point which emerges from the research relates to the segmentation of housing markets. Whilst our research findings have some parallel with Smith’s (2002) work in Hebden Bridge where the housing market was segmented in socio-spatial terms by estate agents based upon their interpretation of individuals’ economic and cultural capital - our findings also differ in that steering took a different form. As such, the perceived desires for privacy and seclusion by super-gentrifiers did not necessarily take the form of socio-spatial isolation from the rest of the village: ‘steering’ involved a much more localised approach towards properties which were relatively isolated ‘within the plot’ but *within* the village (of King’s Bromley) itself. Indeed, the website of one particular estate agency selling a property in this area of the village identified how it was “*a superb site, offering excellent scope for development and formed by a detached character ‘farmhouse’ and a range of outbuildings*” (Parker Hall, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the role of planners and estate agents in shaping processes of rural super-gentrification. In so doing, it has offered new insights in relation to the explanatory power of consumption-side theories for understanding processes of gentrification and rural super-gentrification more specifically. Furthermore, it also raises a number of further implications for research on rural super-gentrification moving forward.

First, the paper initially illustrated how restrictive planning regimes, including constraints on higher plot densities, shape feelings and perceptions of ‘rural exclusivity’. In so doing, this can serve to attract the super-wealthy given their economic and cultural capital. Consequently, the role of planners and the planning system needs to be explored further in other contexts as it may shape the nature and number of properties available in different rural communities - as well as associated notions of ‘exclusivity’ - and either attract or deter super-gentrifiers from moving in.

Second, the paper identified the importance of the perceived economic capital of incomers in shaping the promotional strategies of estate

agents and how this served to shape estate agents’ perceptions of the types of property they wished to purchase (specifically larger detached properties), as well as where these were located. Over-valuing - by estate agents and vendors - was also evident based upon the perceived economic capital of incomers and their perceived desires to acquire particular types of property. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that not all potential buyers will adhere to such strategies. This means that further work is required on the influences shaping estate agents steering strategies in other areas experiencing rural super-gentrification as well as the degree to which ‘tactics of resistance’ to estate agents may emerge in respect of individuals moving to and within such places.

Third, the paper illustrated how the perceived cultural capital of incomers (especially objectified cultural capital) informed desires for i) a “rural idyll” (based on a rural village location with basic amenities and notions of ‘rural community’); ii) demands for nature, privacy and seclusion; and iii) accessibility to urban places for work. All of these factors shaped the promotional strategies of estate agents. Furthermore, in contrast to existing studies of rural super-gentrification that highlight how super-gentrifiers may hold institutional cultural capital as a result of being drawn from elite parts of the British education system (Butler and Lees, 2006), our study offered a new perspective in that institutional cultural capital was generated through super-gentrifiers ‘buying’ into particular circuits of education in the King’s Bromley area and with estate agents promoting the quality of local education provision to attract incomers. Once again, such issues deserve examination in other rural contexts in order to consider the relative importance of different dimensions of local education provision and their implications for super-gentrification processes.

Finally, we have illustrated how the subsequent steering strategies of estate agents can lead to new micro-geographies of rural super-gentrification. As such, incomers can be directed and steered by estate agents to certain types of properties (for example, secluded and private locations) based on individuals perceived habitus/cultural capital. Nevertheless, questions remain over the extent to which micro-geographies of super-gentrification are a distinctive phenomenon of rural places and spaces *vis a vis* neighbourhood-level super-gentrification processes that have been reported in urban areas to date. Furthermore, more research in different rural and urban places is required on the importance of privacy and seclusion of property in shaping super-gentrification and the differential ways in which super-gentrifiers wish to consume rural places. This is a critical point on which to finish: from a theoretical perspective, the paper has provided new insights into consumption-side processes associated with rural super-gentrification. However, an alternative perspective may emerge whereby demands for privacy by incomers may impact on other aspects of rural life which individuals wish to consume (e.g. rural ‘community’ and amenities), to the point that i) the popularity of such areas begins to wane; ii) disinvestment begins to take place; and iii) there is a subsequent revalorisation of using production-side theories to explore rural super-gentrification.

Author statement

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