



ALAMY, GEOFFREY ROBINSON/REX

On the royal road to Transylvania

Could an idyllic corner of Europe offer lessons for Britain's future? The Prince of Wales and his supporters think so, says **Anna Tyzack**

I was in a wild-flower meadow in Transylvania that the Prince of Wales was first introduced to his favoured botanist John Akeroyd. "He turned to me and said, 'This is wonderful. It's just like the picture books of childhood,'" Akeroyd says. "And, of course, he's right. It's straight out of Brothers Grimm."

The Prince, who owns a farm and guesthouse in Transylvania, is part of a group of nature enthusiasts who believe they've found, in this corner of Europe, a rural idyll long lost in Britain. Writers William Blacker and the late Patrick Leigh Fermor and the landscape painter Tim Scott Bolton have each depicted this romantic landscape, where the hay is still swept into stooks and the ploughs are driven by horses.

But according to the conservationist Nat Page, whose charity Fundatia Adept protects Transylvania's landscape, this part of Romania is much more than a nostalgic refuge for bourgeois bohemians. "It's cutting edge; it's the reason that the EU has decided small-scale farming landscapes are

worth supporting," says Page, who is hosting the inaugural Transylvania Festival in London next week.

While in Britain more than 95 per cent of species-rich wild-flower grasslands have disappeared since the Second World War, in Romania it is possible to walk through broad expanses of luscious meadowland. Akeroyd often accompanies the Prince, who discovered this part of the world 15 years ago, as he strolls through the meadows surrounding his farm near the Saxon village of Viscri. "It's a mosaic of woodland, pasture hay meadow and arable strips, just like the England of the 19th century," says Akeroyd.

"The Prince, as a countryman, farmer and jolly good botanist, identifies with the fact that we can learn something from it."

At next week's festival, which will

Online

- Plant your own wild-flower meadow: telegraph.co.uk/gardening
- Buy a stake in Dracula's castle: telegraph.co.uk/property

be attended by the Prince, the biographer Artemis Cooper will describe the sedate pace of life, simple food and rustic guesthouses Patrick Leigh Fermor encountered in Transylvania while travelling there as an 18-year-old in the Thirties, a journey he documented in his book *Between the Woods and the Water*. Since then the landscape has changed little, as can be seen in the exhibition of landscape paintings by British artists that forms part of the festival.

Page, however, is keen that the festival also reveals how relevant modern Transylvania is to farmers, naturalists and conservationists across Europe. Akeroyd will discuss the relationship between farming and the fauna and flora of Transylvania. "People focus too much on nostalgia, but those that know Transylvania understand that there is no use throwing away good systems," says Page.

Unlike in Britain and France, where farms are getting larger, Transylvania comprises hundreds of

Field of dreams: meadowland near the Romanian village of Viscri, where the Prince of Wales, left, owns a farm

tiny landholdings that have been managed by local people for thousands of years. "Of the 12 million farms in Europe, four million are in Romania," says Page. As Count Kálnoky, who organises the rental of the Prince of Wales's farmhouse at Viscri, observes:

"There is harmony between people, their lifestyle, and the environment."

The meadows, hedgerows and streams brim with species largely unseen across the rest of Europe. "The landscape mops up the water – it's a blotting paper effect and assures nothing like the Somerset Levels disaster happens," says Page. "The only reason we get flooding in Britain is because we've simplified the landscape."

Can we really turn back the clock and apply these principles in Britain? The Prince of Wales has created a small Transylvanian wild-flower meadow in the car park at Highgrove and is eager to expand it. Akeroyd, however, has urged caution. "He mustn't let the seed get out to the wider countryside as the plants are genetically different and they will hybridise with the local plants." Page agrees that meadows such as this will only ever be a demonstration; we've moved on from horse-drawn ploughs and scythes, he says, but we can look to Transylvania as an example of how small is beautiful. "Farmers in Britain believe they have to increase their herd size and farms to make money, but size does not always equal profit," he says.

Fundatia Adept aims to safeguard Transylvania's wild-flower meadows at a time when young people are moving to the cities and investors are queuing to buy their farmland for a pittance.

"It's in danger of becoming like northern France, just boring fields," says Tim Scott Bolton, who was part of a group of painters, supported by the Prince of Wales, who travelled to Romania in September to paint a way of life that had been lost elsewhere in Europe.

Before setting up Adept, Page's aim was to protect the area's Saxon villages, but after witnessing the threat to farming he decided to focus on landscape. "Who cares if the locals put in satellite dishes? Why should they be deprived of the internet, cars and tractors? It's more important to keep the landscape thriving," he says.

The charity helps farmers to claim EU grants to support their sustainable farming methods and has established milk collection points in the villages to enable them to compete in the commercial market. "Every 200 cows amount to 200 hectares [500 acres] of protected meadows," says Akeroyd.

According to William Blacker, who in his book *Along the Enchanted Way* describes living as part of a Romanian community, it's only in this part of Europe that you get a proper idea of what Britain lost to modernity. Is there a danger, though, that by introducing modern technology Transylvania will lose something of its rural charm?

Blacker is convinced that the greatest threat to the landscape is not broadband but the local people moving away, to be replaced by second homers in search of a lost idyll. "The locals keep communities going and give the villages their character," he says. "These are properly functioning communities, which we threw away long ago."

● For more information, see transylvaniasfestival.co.uk and transylvaniascastle.com

