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Beet harvest rich with sweet ironies

Nature watch

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The sugar beet harvest is the great midwinter drama in agricultural East Anglia. For a month or two the countryside seems in a state of occupation by some alien power. The harvesters, as big as houses, lumber on into the dusk, and the racks of headlights shining through the mist turn the fields into something resembling the final scenes of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. By day vast lorries crawl in convoys along the lanes, ferrying the roots from stacks so huge they seem more like fortifications than vegetables. It is, depending on your point of view, thrilling, theatrical or tiresome.

Perhaps, at least, it's progress. My old friend Ronald Blythe remembers the time when sugar beet was hacked from the frozen ground by hand, and the pickers wore sacking cowls, like hunched monks.

But in moments of sober reflection you have to ask what it is all for. This, one of arable England's most important and heavily subsidised crops, is also officially recognised as our most noxious foodstuff. Diabetes and childhood hyperactivity are rampant. Half the population is paying taxes to underwrite sugar production with one hand and the expensive costs of sugar-free diet products with the other. The whole history of the stuff is a terrible parable of the conflict between industrial agriculture and human need.

Sugar, of course, was unknown in Britain 1,000 years ago. There were sweetish things — blackberries, cream, a few roots — but honey, always in limited supply, was the only truly sugary substance. Sugar cane came to Europe in the eighth century. It probably originated in Indochina (though no one has ever found a wild specimen) and was carried west and north by the Arabs.

At first it was regarded purely as a medication, and then as a titillating luxury. But by the 15th century the demand for this semi-addictive product was enough to encourage entrepreneurs into the market. The plantation system the Portuguese imposed on their colony of Madeira between 1450 and 1470 was probably the world's first monoculture.

They deforested what had been a timber island to fuel the sugar mills. They undermined the local agriculture and social structure, but the plantation model — the suppression of indigenous techniques, the seizing and amalgamation of land, the reliance on fast-growing cash crops and a cowed labour force — was exported all over the world.

It was inevitable that a home-grown substitute for sugar cane should be sought, and sugar beet began to be developed in the mid-18th century. Its real advance in Britain, though, came about in the 1920s, when the government encouraged it (and sugar consumption) as a palliative to the great agricultural depression of the interwar years, an early example of the warping effects of feather-bedding. Which brings us back full circle to the subsidised deserts of East Anglia and the obesity clinics.