The Commons

For centuries communities have cared for “the commons”. Commons are things and places that are shared – and for centuries “commoning” meant sharing use of the local landscape, the plants and animals, woodland and water – eg to gather firewood and for building materials, to graze animals like pigs, to collect medicinal plants.

But sharing came with a community responsibility – for example if too many animals grazed shared land it was degraded. So the right to use the shared resource was combined with responsibility to look after the resource so it could be handed down to the next generations without damage.

“The forest was no primitive wilderness. It had been carefully developed over generations, maintained in common, its riches available to all, and preserved for future generations – practices found today primarily in traditional societies that are under threat throughout the world.” (Noam Chomsky)

The Charter of the Forest imposed limits to 'privatisation' but the increase in trade as well as rise of the money lenders and merchants changed the situation

Knocking down acorns to feed swine 14th century – Queen Mary Psalter
The Enclosures

However use of land was always subject to political power and struggle.

Over the centuries ordinary people had to fight for their rights to use the local land. Powerful people often claimed they had a better use for the land and used their 'well connectedness' and lobbying with the national government to pass laws that took the shared land for themselves.

*They hang the man and flog the woman,*  
*Who steals the goose from off the common,*  
*Yet let the greater villain loose,*  
*That steals the common from the goose.*  
— *17th Century Folk Song*

"England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons..."  
*Gerard Winstanley, 1649*

17th century picture showing eviction of commoners off their land and burning their houses

Whether the land was 'better used' as claimed can be debated by historians – but it was usually better for those who took it....
Planning and Environmental Protection

Those who lost access to the commons had to go looking for employment – on terms dictated by their new employers. The new owners of land did not always seek to protect the long term use of the resource. They typically created landscapes that specialised in a few crops. Or they turned over the land to polluting industrial uses with housing for their workers nearby. Private ownership was “responsibility lite”.

Eventually it was understood, even by governments sympathetic to landowners, that some restraints on land use was in the interests of everyone. This led to the introduction of land planning – under the control of local authorities. Other agencies were set up to take responsibility for environmental protection.

However, as before, if you are rich and well connected with people in government you can always lobby for your use of the land...and of the water and of the atmosphere.... and get priority...

“....ugliness, ugliness, ugliness. Meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly cloth, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship between workers and employers” D H Lawrence Nottingham and the Mining Countryside 1929
The decision to promote fracking is a bit like enclosure all over again. One interest group gets their priority over everyone else, including over the people who already live and work there. With government backing the landscape is covered with well pads, pipeline corridors, access roads, compressor stations, flares and other infrastructure plus the activity associated with them – changing the water table underneath and contaminating the atmosphere with “gas field haze”.

Simplified 'web of influence' diagram – from the early days when fracking was getting started under Cameron’s government – it shows how lobbying and “well connectedness” works. In particular, Lord Browne, former CEO of BP, got to appoint many civil service “advisers”...

Diagram by Paul Mobbs – a larger Frackogram is available for 2015
Planning and Regulation that does not keep people and places safe revives the need for 'commoning' – people protecting OUR shared spaces

Assumptions of the Phoney Regulation Regime

1. People and companies will stick to the rules and equipment will work properly – experience have proved otherwise.
2. The main issues will be sorted out at the permitting and planning permission application phase – thereafter for most purposes there is "self regulation". If problems are identified by local people they have to fight to get action.
3. Local Planners are required to assume that the Environment Agency and Health and Safety Executive will make the operation safe when experience has often shown this to be untrue.
4. Salami Slicing of issues – not possible to regulate at relevant scale – only at individual well/well pad or installation level
5. Local concerns considered in planning “trumped” by alleged national benefits – “great weight” must be given alleged benefits of shale gas development
6. Definitions (eg of fracking itself) are manipulative and deceptive