Ninety Years of Standing Up for Hertfordshire's Countryside: the History of CPRE Hertfordshire

3. The quest to protect the countryside – early days

Until the 17th century much of the countryside was not regarded as somewhere to admire or escape to. For the majority of the rural population it was the grim reality of their everyday lives. Travel was in any case slow and often difficult.

From the 17th century painters and poets began to depict and describe real countryside – and the threats brought about by the industrial revolution. In the Netherlands the artist Rembrandt painted a landscape – *The Mill* – in around 1645. Not known primarily as a landscape painter, Rembrandt was however a celebrated figure, so much so that when *The* Mill was exhibited in London in 1793 it was also widely disseminated as a print. The painting was said to inspire British artists such as Turner and Constable, as well as Gainsborough. He (Gainsborough) started to paint what were then called 'landskips' in 1774, a year after the first coach service ran to the Lake District for tourists.

In 1814 Wordsworth, in his poem The Excursion, wrote (thought to be about Manchester):

> *From the germ*
> *Of some poor hamlet, rapidly produced*
> *Here a huge town, continuous and compact,*
> *Hiding the face of the earth for leagues*

In 1865 the Commons Preservation Society was formed (now the Open Spaces Society), regarded as England's first environmental campaign body. Its lawyer was Robert Hunter, later one of the founders of the National Trust. In London in 1866 attempts to prevent remaining common areas from being built on led to the Metropolitan Commons Act, which prevented the enclosure of commons within 15 miles of London. In the same year, with help from the Commons Preservation Society, fences erected by Lord Brownlow of Ashridge to enclose part of Berkhamsted Common were destroyed: the common remains and is part of one of the largest areas of common land in Hertfordshire and the Chilterns (see photo above).

Octavia Hill (see photo right) was another campaigner calling for the protection of open land in London, which she called 'outdoor sitting rooms', and in 1875 she used the term 'green belt' to refer to the protection of land around London.

In 1895 Robert Hunter (now knighted) and Octavia Hill were joined by Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley to form the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty in England and Wales. Their earliest concerns were for open spaces; houses followed later. The Trust started slowly and in 1900 there was concern that the annual income was only £330.

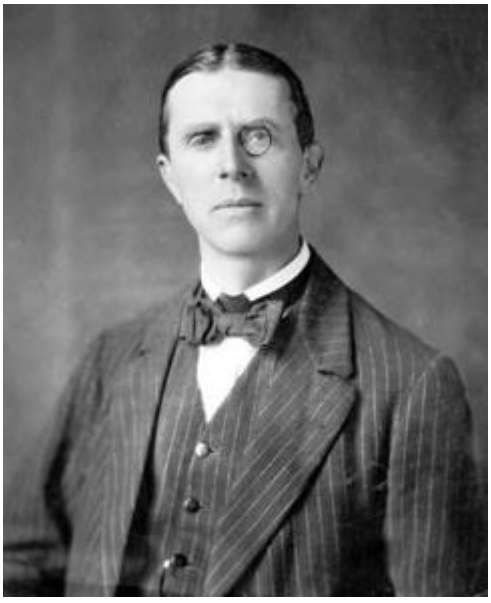
An early acquisition was part of Wicken Fen, a remnant of the great area of Cambridgeshire fenland which had all but disappeared: this effectively was England's first nature reserve. Later the last surviving fenland windpump was restored and moved there by the Cambridgeshire branch of CPRE (see photo right).

In 1907 the National Trust Act gave the new body powers of alienation and parliamentary authority. In 1923 a group of Lake District fells donated to the Trust by the Lake District Fell and Rock Climbing Club, in memory of their members killed in the First World War, was called 'the nucleus of a great national park'. In 1902 the Trust's first major appeal had raised the sum to acquire the 100-acre Brandlehow Park Estate on Derwentwater. A Sheffield factory worker who donated a small sum sent with it a note: 'All my life I have longed to see the Lakes. I shall never see them now, but I should like to help keep them for others'.

By the 1920s it was becoming increasingly apparent that the National Trust would not have the resources to protect much of the countryside most at risk from development. By the 1920s the issues were the quality of the buildings as well as the rapidly-growing suburbs. Post 1918 the concern for the countryside had changed: there was a heightened nostalgia for a rural golden age, and many returning servicemen were alarmed to see the country so many had fought and died for being engulfed by unsightly development.

CPRE is formed

In December 1925 Guy Dawber, the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, wrote to The Times to complain about the countryside littered with architectural eyesores, and protests but no action, and called on the Ministry of Health (which had responsibility for housing) to take action. In 1926 he decided to do something himself, writing to 15 organisations with an interest in the countryside, calling for steps to 'prevent the further destruction and disfigurement of Rural England'. He wanted the protection of beautiful countryside and its towns and villages, and the right type of development. The Minister of Health Neville Chamberlain wished him success.



A month later the president of the Town Planning Institute, Patrick Abercrombie (see left), an architect and town planner, published a pamphlet called *The Preservation of Rural England,* promoting development and economic prosperity without destroying valued countryside, which he called 'the most essential thing which is England'. He also called upon Dawber to form a 'National League for the Preservation of Rural England'. The two men met throughout 1926, and persuaded Lord Crawford, who had turned down a ministerial post and the chairmanship of the BBC, to be president of a new council, to be called the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. The new body met for the first time on 7th December 1926.

Initially CPRE comprised 22 organisations concerned with countryside protection, including the National Trust, the WI, the Commons Preservation Society and SCAPA: the Society for the Control of Abuses in Public Advertising. CPRE's aims were to secure the protection of rural scenery and act as an advisory body to arouse, form and educate public opinion. This was welcomed by The Times, which said the new body will be able to take 'quicker and more powerful action'. It went on to say that England must grow and houses must increase, but not just anyhow and anywhere. During the 1929 general election campaign the three party leaders, Baldwin, MacDonald and Lloyd George, took time out to endorse a CPRE appeal for funds and advocate CPRE's aims.

Photo right – the new CPRE's logo.

Why did CPRE succeed? Before this time 'preservation' was not a popular concept, seen as a longing for a return to a non-existent rural utopia. CPRE was different and immediately set about to campaign for development which did not have to be destructive and preservation which was not a barrier to progress. It also succeeded, says Christopher Hall, writing in 1976 while he was CPRE's Director, because it was 'respectable'. Other bodies, he said, started life with a revolutionary programme and gradually gained respectability. CPRE on the other hand already had effective influence with people in the highest places. Hall also points out that the generality of the threat to the countryside which emerged in the 1920s gave CPRE its impetus.

Universal town and country planning

It is difficult in today's England, in which the concept of land use planning is firmly embedded, to imagine a time before that was the case. From early in the 20th century there was a limited amount of planning applicable to towns, but no control of development in the countryside, mainly because until electricity, to a lesser extent mains water, and car ownership made it possible, few people could live outside towns and villages.

The Housing, Town Planning Act of 1909 was the first piece of parliamentary legislation to address the issue of land-use planning, enabling but not requiring local authorities to make town planning schemes. These schemes were intended to improve sanitary conditions, introduce density standards for housing, create open spaces and parks, and separate residential areas from polluting industrial activities. Further similar legislation followed in 1919. Schemes were effectively zoning plans and only non-conforming uses were likely to be refused planning permission. By reducing housing densities to improve sanitary conditions, the schemes encouraged housing to sprawl further out into the countryside.

From its formation CPRE campaigned for the approach to planning applied to towns to cover the countryside too, but faced a tough task in persuading public opinion to protect the countryside by taking away private rights, which universal planning control would entail. In 1930 the Rural Amenities Bill proposed to give County Councils planning control over development in rural areas for the first time, together with the power to buy threatened land if required. This failed when the Labour Government fell and was replaced by the National Government, but the Bill's provisions were retained in a new Town and Country Planning Bill.

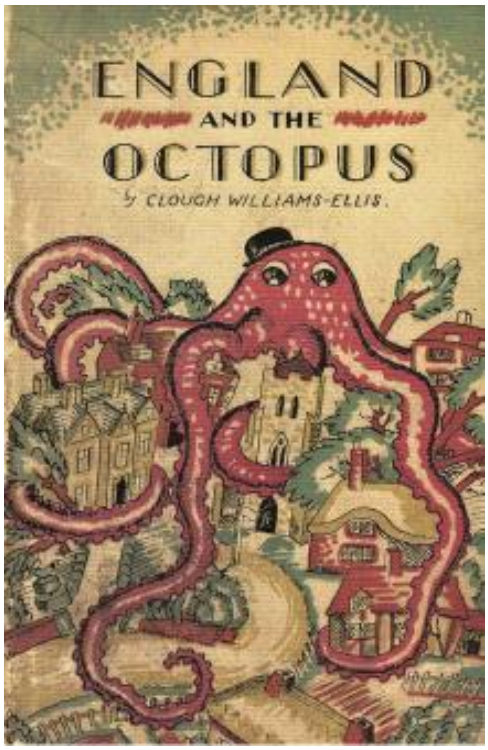
Eventually passed as the Town and Country Planning Act in 1932, a group of landowning interests succeeded in watering-down the provisions of the Act so that they did not apply to areas ‘unlikely to be developed’ or of little ‘natural interest or beauty’. The Act required local authorities to compensate owners who suffered financial losses if they were refused permission to develop, which hampered the effectiveness of its provisions. CPRE published a pamphlet urging local authorities to wield their new powers, and by 1936 it was felt that there had been a stemming of sporadic and unregulated development.

Between the wars 700,000 houses were constructed in London’s outer suburbs, three quarters of them built by private speculators and housing a total of 1.4 million people. One feature of much of the housing was that it was remarkably cheap and so affordable by many. As the outward spread of London appeared to be unstoppable, there were renewed calls to protect a ‘green belt’ of undeveloped land around the capital. In 1935 the London County Council’s leader, Herbert Morrison, announced that the Council would pay half the cost of any land acquired by local authorities in the counties bordering London to acquire and reserve open space. It did not have to be continuous, but was to be as accessible as possible from the completely urbanised area of London. Sadly many landowners held out for the full building development value as compensation, so that only a few isolated patches of land were acquired. It was the Second World War which eventually put an end to the outward spread of London.

There was one issue on which CPRE’s campaigning achieved an early success, and that was ribbon development. By the 1920s the spread of unplanned development along roads radiating out from towns and cities, and railway stations, had become a national scandal, and was one of the catalysts leading to CPRE’s formation. Caused by ‘new motor-omnibus services and the use of private motor cars’ as Patrick Abercrombie told Neville Chamberlain in 1925, ribbon development also made very extravagant use of public services.

Many such developments were of poor quality, as remarked upon by the Labour MP Richard Wallhead in a Commons debate in 1929: ‘I have not lived in Hertfordshire long. When I went there first it was a pleasant ride from my home to St Albans. Now it has become a nightmare and an atrocity. The whole place is built up from end to end with nothing but a string of unaesthetic little bungalows, which are a positive eyesore’.

Examples of land before and after ribbon development (right) are from St Albans (top) and Essex (below).



'England and the Octopus' commissioned by CPRE and written by Clough Williams-Ellis in 1928, had effectively highlighted the problem of 'disfiguring little buildings'. The octopus was pictured on the front cover spreading its tentacles (of ribbon development) across the country. The 1935 Restriction of Ribbon Development Act allowed highway authorities to control all development within 220 feet of a main road. Although it took a little time to be put into effect, by 1939 ribbon development was a thing of the past, and CPRE in achieving this had shown that it could build widespread public and political support for its aims.

Then the war intervened, and it is still a surprise to me that, in the midst of the war, able minds were at work thinking about post-war reconstruction and changes, not just in health and welfare, but in planning, and landscape and nature conservation too.

What of Hertfordshire?

In 1926 a group of Hertfordshire landowners convened by Hertford solicitor Elton Longmore had agreed among themselves not to sell land for housing, so disturbed were they by the impact on Hertfordshire of ribbon development.

Legislation in 1925 promoted the concept of regional planning, allowing local authorities to form committees to advise on (but not control) development in a 'region': in Hertfordshire this was the county area. Hertfordshire was the first entire county to produce a regional planning report (published in 1927), which it admitted 'has no power to compel development of any kind'.


HERTFORDSHIRE
REGIONAL PLANNING
REPORT
1927
W. R. DAVIDGE
Town Planning Consultant
5, Victoria Street, Westminster, S.W.1

The 1927 regional planning report describes Hertfordshire at the cusp of change. Agriculture, including market gardening, was still the largest employer in the county, but at the same time it said that there were more men employed in building in the county than in the whole of London. The report anticipated that electricity would soon be available everywhere except in the county's remotest districts (which it didn't reach until after the Second World War). Further urban growth was inevitable, the report acknowledged, and needed to be properly planned.

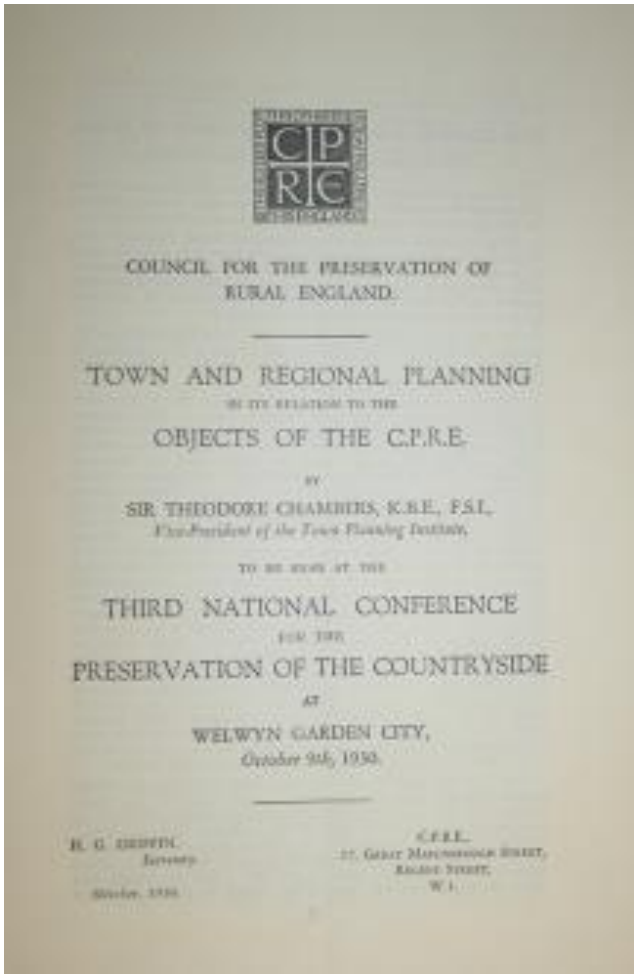
The report considered that satellite towns (an early descriptor for what became new towns) should be encouraged and revealed that there had been surveys of possible sites centred on Bayford, south of Hertford, and at Aldbury near Tring, both close to railway stations. These ‘should be properly planned and not allowed to grow as outer London has’.

The growth in road traffic was also causing many concerns. The county had more through roads than any other English county and between 1923 and 1925 commercial traffic on the county’s main roads doubled. Many roads occupied narrow streets through towns and villages. To cope with this huge surge in traffic the report contained a long list of proposed road improvements. By modern standards the contemporary photos of town centres look remarkably traffic free: for example those of Royston (below left) and St Albans (below right).

The 1927 report also advocated the establishment of a green belt to ensure the permanent preservation of a belt of open country which would define a limit to continuous urban growth.

A conference to debate this report was held in November 1928, convened by the Hertfordshire Rural Community Council. Here it was decided that a rural preservation committee should be formed for the county. At its inaugural meeting this committee agreed to become the Hertfordshire branch of CPRE. Sir Theodore Chambers, Chairman of the Welwyn Garden City Company, was the first chairman and administration was handled by the Rural Community Council.

The formation of the Hertfordshire Branch is reported in the national CPRE Annual Report for 1929: the same report shows that other counties had also formed branches.



COUNCIL FOR THE PRESERVATION OF RURAL ENGLAND

TOWN AND REGIONAL PLANNING

IN ITS RELATION TO THE

OBJECTS OF THE C.P.R.E.

BY

SIR THEODORE CHAMBERS, K.B.E., F.S.I.,

Vice-President of the Town Planning Institute,

TO BE READ AT THE

THIRD NATIONAL CONFERENCE

FOR THE

PRESERVATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

AT

WELWYN GARDEN CITY,

October 9th, 1930.

H. G. GRIFFIN, Ltd., Printers, Aylesbury. October, 1930.

C.P.R.E., 17, Great Marlborough Street, Regent Street, W.1.

Theodore Chambers reiterated the need for a green belt around London at a national CPRE conference held in Welwyn Garden City in 1930 (see left), and achieving this aim was a key element of CPRE's campaigning thereafter. He also advocated a ring of satellite towns to combine with the proposed green belt around London.

CPRE Hertfordshire
Campaign to Protect Rural England

1928 2018
DEFENDING THE GREEN BELT
HERTFORDSHIRE'S COUNTRYSIDE
YEARS