

# 22 IDEAS THAT SAVED THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

It is no accident that we are able to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the English landscape, despite 300 years of sustained development and population growth.

This is the story of the visionary individuals whose ideas did so much to save our countryside. Starting from the birth of England's conservation movement - with the Commons Preservation Society in 1865 - this book explores the evolution of countryside campaigning from the Victorian preservationists of the National Trust to the recent efforts to save our forests.

As an antidote to the 'doom and gloom' of much modern-day environmentalism, this justifiably positive book shows how once-radical ideas such as National Parks, Green Belts and Democratic Planning have not only saved much of our countryside, but also remain hugely relevant solutions to the problems we face today.

The making of the modern concept of the English countryside is examined with pace and insight, illustrated with archive imagery and landscape photography, as well as contributions from today's thinkers, campaigners and high profile supporters, including Julia Bradbury, Tony Robinson, John le Carré, Jo Brand and Simon Jenkins.

At the heart of the story is the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), created in 1926 to co-ordinate the campaigns of twenty-two constituent bodies, including the National Trust, RSPB and the Ramblers. *The Spectator* found a good omen in the number: 'Twenty-two - the length of a chain or cricket pitch, the unit of the square acre - is quite the most English of all the numbers.'



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THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT  
RURAL ENGLAND

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REPUBLISHED BY  
THE ENDLESS BOOKCASE

*Front cover: Heather in bloom on Bamford Edge, Peak  
District National Park, Derbyshire © Tom Mackie*

*Back cover: Evening light in the Cleveland Hills, North  
York Moors National Park © Lizzie Shepherd*

To Juliette and Xanthe  
Simply the best  
P.W.

To Sara  
My inspiration  
O.H.





# Contents

	Foreword	v
	Introduction	1
Idea 1	Discovering the Landscape	6
Idea 2	Preservation	16
Idea 3	The National Trust	26
Idea 4	Creating CPRE	34
Idea 5	Taming the Octopus	42
Idea 6	Keeping Villages Alive	50
Idea 7	Rural Planning	58
Idea 8	Democratic Planning	66
Idea 9	Green Belts	74
Idea 10	National Parks	86
Idea 11	The Sense Sublime	100
Idea 12	The Green and Pleasant Land	110
Idea 13	A Countryside Worth Fighting For	122
Idea 14	Urban Regeneration	134
Idea 15	Going Underground	140
Idea 16	Anti-Litter	146
Idea 17	The Right to Roam	154
Idea 18	Saving Our Forests	164
Idea 19	Nature Reserves	170
Idea 20	Cutting the Clutter	178
Idea 21	The Coast is the Countryside	190
Idea 22	The Country Code	198
	Postscript: Unfinished Business	206
	Index	210
	Picture acknowledgements	219



# Foreword

Andrew Motion

## OPPOSITE

*The iconic barns and dry stone walls of the Yorkshire Dales. Few landscapes give a clearer indication of the positive role people have played in creating the countryside.*

When we talk about saving the countryside we are really talking about defending our national heritage. The English landscape is our great collaborative masterpiece and our greatest gift to the wide world, greater even than Shakespeare. The heroes of this book - from Wordsworth and Ruskin to Octavia Hill and Patrick Abercrombie - instinctively understood that because our greatest achievement is to have made the English landscape, our greatest responsibility is to save it.

And placing great responsibility on great minds can so often produce great ideas. These people challenged received wisdoms and succeeded in imprinting genuinely radical ideas in the collective national psyche. Great practical ideas like Green Belts have physically saved so much of our countryside, while less tangible concepts - like Wordsworth's 'Sense Sublime' - have captured our imaginations and helped create a national connection to the countryside, and a natural urge to defend it. And then there are ideas like the Right to Roam, which have encouraged millions of people to interact with the countryside and feel the sense of ownership that is at the root of any action to save it.

And for all the visionary greatness of those who have the initial ideas, it is the willingness of the rest of us to climb the barricades which guarantees their success. In his 1971 account of *The Survival of the English Countryside*, Victor Bonham-Carter ventured that 'the progress of an idea, its origin as a minority fad, its growth and gradual acceptance by the public' relied on two main forces: 'the foresight, devotion and persistence of a handful of men and women at the head of the movement' and, equally, the efforts of thousands of volunteers to engage with the machinery of government and provide local evidence of the need for change.

As President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England - an organisation which relies on its extraordinary local volunteers - I've seen at first hand that people are as passionate about the countryside as ever. But with the current preoccupation with economic growth at all costs, it is no exaggeration to say that our countryside is in greater danger than it has even been. That is why we must reassert the relevance and importance of the time-honoured ideas that have saved it, and can continue to keep it safe.

These 22 Ideas are part of what makes us who we are; national icons as much as the NHS. They are among the things that make England, and Britain, great. They should not be abandoned without a fight.



# Introduction

## OPPOSITE

*Devon's peaceful pastures and bustling hedgerows retain their bucolic charm despite centuries of urbanisation in England*

A book celebrating the ideas that saved the English countryside must take the rather optimistic viewpoint that the countryside has, to some meaningful extent, been saved. Before we can assess whether we really have saved the countryside, we must consider how much countryside we still have, and how much has been lost. The archaeologist Francis Pryor wrote, in *The Making of the British Landscape*, that 'even though nearly everyone lives or works in a town or city, somehow Britain has managed to retain its uncluttered rural areas. We take these things for granted, but I consider them a huge achievement.'

England is still predominantly rural and - as politicians and developers are always happy to point out - only around 5 per cent of England's surface area is built on. Government statistics classify 18.5 per cent of England's land as 'Urban or other (non-agricultural)', although this includes 'non-agricultural semi-natural areas such as grouse moors, sand dunes and grass land'. The official estimate for the area of truly urban land use in England is around 11 per cent, although this percentage does not include open space in urban areas, such as parks and gardens - hence the fact that only 5 per cent of the country is actually covered by concrete, brick or tarmac.

Harry Mount, in *How England Made the English*, wrote that 'to an astonishing degree, much of the countryside retains its pre-war look, despite England being one of the most densely populated countries in Europe'. Recent reports suggested that England is, in fact, the most crowded major country in Europe. As a famously 'small island' - and the world's trailblazing industrial nation - England's landscape has had to accommodate rapid growth in its cities and in the industry and infrastructure that sustain them. It is truly remarkable that we can still talk of England as a 'green and pleasant' land without a hint of sarcasm. With over 400 people per square kilometre, it is around twice as crowded as Germany and Italy, four times as crowded as France, and six times more densely populated than our neighbours in Scotland. And yet, when we look out of an aeroplane window, or hover over satellite images, an unmistakably rural scene confronts us.

Of course, statistics never tell the whole story. Part of the surprise people feel when learning how much countryside we have left is caused by their perception of England as highly urbanised. Eighty per cent of us live in towns and cities, and many of those who do not still have to commute to conurbations. Our daily lives are defined and confined by concrete, steel and glass; most of our journeys are along roads and

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railways, where development is most likely to be concentrated. Busy lifestyles allow for only fleeting visits to real countryside; and we very rarely find ourselves in genuine wildernesses, away from any of the sights and sounds of urbanisation.

We are an urban society, occupying a miraculously rural country. But, in a way, our perceptions are right - we are not quite as rural as we think we are. We would not call an urban back garden 'countryside'; no matter how peaceful and full of wildlife they can be, gardens are bound by fences and houses. In the same way, our great urban parks can be a wonderful escape, but they are unmistakably urban - often surrounded by railings, roads and skyscrapers. While almost 90 per cent of the country is undeveloped, the urbanised percentage is spread across the whole country, not just as cities, towns and villages, but also as roads, railways, powerlines and quarries. These urbanising elements take up a relatively small amount of land, but by criss-crossing the country they 'intrude' on our perception of rural.

Tranquillity is a huge part of what constitutes our idea of the countryside as an escape route from the sights and sounds of human society; these interventions make it almost impossible to find not just silence, but solace, in natural sounds like running water and birdsong. So while the vast majority of England might be considered rural, research by CPRE found that over 50 per cent of the country suffers from this intrusion.

*England from above is still a blanket of green, with its cities --even London --- merely grey specs in comparison to the sprawl of concrete visible on the continent.*

*Energy infrastructure— like these pylons and wind turbines in East Sussex - has a relatively small footprint, but its visual intrusion has changed the face of much of the countryside.*

While acknowledging that we have saved less countryside than we would have wished for, this is not a pessimistic book. There is plenty to celebrate, and in a densely populated country, the control of the growth of the biggest threat to the countryside - our towns and cities - is a huge achievement. England's transition from a rural to urban society was astonishingly rapid. In 1750, aside from London there were only six towns that would have been considered 'urban' by the latest Government definition (over 10,000 in population). Seventy-five per cent of the population lived in rural areas – in hamlets, villages and small market towns - but just a century later the majority of people lived in urban areas.



‘...much of the countryside retains its pre-war look, despite England being one of the most densely populated countries in Europe.’

Around a million people lived in towns and cities in 1750; by 1901, this had risen to over 23 million, with the biggest engine of growth, London, having grown to occupy over 120 square miles.

Remarkably, after two centuries of fairly organic growth in its physical size, London began to sprawl rapidly without a commensurate growth in population. In the fifty years after 1901, the area of land covered by the capital more than quadrupled to around 500 square miles despite its population only growing by around 30 per cent (peaking at just over 8 million). In 1951, the population of Outer London outnumbered Inner London for the first time. This unprecedented spread of the city was the result of a number of factors: the desire to improve urban living conditions through the kind of low-density suburban development popularised by the first Garden Cities; the building of 1 million council houses between the wars (and a further 2 million by speculative builders with Government subsidies); and the rise of transport options - the car, commuter train and the Underground - which made it possible to chase the dream of working in the city while living near the country.

But the main reason for the explosion of growth in London and England's other towns and cities, was simply because they could. There was no effective barrier against urban sprawl until the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 and the national introduction of a Green Belt policy in 1955. Thanks to these controls, since 1951 the outward growth of London has returned to a pre-1900 rate, reaching 600 square miles by 2011. Though London's Green Belt has been nibbled at over the years, its actual area continues to increase - at 2,000 square miles, it covers almost 4 per cent of England's total land area - and the runaway physical growth of the capital has been slowed. And this has clearly not been to the detriment of economic and cultural success; London's importance as a global centre has soared since 1951, culminating in the 2012 Olympics.

The Games, on a former industrial site in Stratford, also illustrated how as a nation we have embraced urban regeneration as an alternative to building on green fields. Constraining the outward growth of urban areas has helped to incentivise the re-use of derelict land within cities and to avoid the 'donut effect' seen in Detroit and many other American towns and cities. In fact, a cursory investigation of urbanisation in the States is a glimpse of what might have been in this country. It is estimated that if London had been allowed to grow at the same rate and density as Los Angeles since the Metropolitan Green Belt was created in 1938, it would now be within touching distance of Brighton and Cambridge.

So we can confidently say that much countryside has been saved for future generations by the pioneering thinkers and campaigners who originated the ideas explored in this book and made them work in reality. We will explore how their once radical ideas were developed, popularised and ingrained in our collective national psyche.

The ideas that shaped the history of countryside conservation in England came in response to the Industrial Revolution, during a ninety-year period of campaigning, beginning in 1865 with the formation of England's first conservation body and ending when Green Belts became national Government policy in 1955. But the scope of this book is much wider than those ninety years. We will look at the inspiration behind those pioneering campaigners, and discover just why they gained such influence in the first half of the twentieth century.

We will see that, though many battles were won, the fight for the countryside continues to this day, and we will show how the modern 'environment' movement evolved through the last fifty years.

Cultural phenomena such as primogeniture and enclosure have undoubtedly shaped the English countryside - together with great physical operations like the excavation of the Norfolk

Broads by centuries of peat-diggers, and the draining of the Fens by the great Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden. Though the unforeseen consequences of these actions may well have helped save - and even create - a great deal of rural England we restrict ourselves to the discussion of the ideas that were promoted specifically to protect the countryside; new ways of thinking, which challenged prevailing attitudes and became popular causes within a generation.

Our countryside is a lasting legacy, which could so easily have been lost if not for the visionary ideas of the pioneers celebrated in these pages. England has been uniquely blessed, not just with the ideal location, climate, geology and geography to produce perhaps the greenest and most engaging landscape in the world, but with three successive generations of men and women uniquely endowed with the qualities to save it - campaigners who seemed born to their task, capable of presenting their arguments with prose that was almost poetry.

*Salisbury Cathedral from the same spot in the 1920s and 2000s; suburbia claimed huge quantities of countryside before the introduction of Green Belts and a Democratic Planning system. But the losses have slowed dramatically: between 1927 and 1939, 60,000 acres were built on each year, by 2013-14 that had fallen to 7,500 acres.*

