

Countryside Voices: Centenary Issue Spring 2026

100 YEARS

OF STANDING UP FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE

100
YEARS



Campaign
to Protect
Rural England



Cover: Vale of Pewsey in Wiltshire by Daniel Wretham

Celebration and inspiration

It's a huge privilege to be in this role for such a milestone year for CPRE as we celebrate our centenary. And although the weight of hope and expectation can be heavy on these occasions, it's very much a time of inspiration and acknowledgement of all that CPRE has achieved. Our President Mary-Ann Ochota and I discuss this on pages 14-15, and much of this issue celebrates those 100 years.

At the same time, we consider the future – both

in our discussion and through CPRE's first RHS Chelsea garden theme (pages 8-9). And, of course, the news pages detail our current campaigns, nationally and locally.

As we look ahead, we know the next chapter for the countryside will be written by all of us. That's why we've launched an open letter – a way for people to stand up for the countryside and show how much they value it (see right for link to letter). I hope you'll take a moment to add your voice. And do sign up to our monthly online updates to find out how else you can support our work.

The back page lists some of this year's events – I hope to meet some of you at them, and to have the opportunity to thank you for being part of CPRE.

Roger Mortlock
Chief Executive

Poll shows the countryside remains a priority for people

The importance of the countryside continues to unite the public, a new poll for CPRE has found, 100 years on from the charity's first incarnation. The survey was carried out by polling organisation More in Common who surveyed more than 2000 people and ran focus groups to get an understanding of how people view the countryside today.

The survey found that more than nine in ten think the countryside is something that is special about our country, nearly 90% support Green Belt and 75% of young people (18-24 year olds) want more countryside protected. The research also found that there is a strong public appetite for solutions that work for people, nature and the nation collectively.

And when looking for somewhere to live, nearly three-quarters prioritise being close to countryside. More than eight in ten (84%) are confident that it's possible to build the homes the UK needs while safeguarding the countryside for future generations.

Roger Mortlock, chief executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, said: 'In the 100 years since CPRE was founded there has been one constant: the British

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100
YEARS



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Ruth Davey

public treasures the countryside and wants to see it better protected for future generations. The fact that three-quarters of young people want more land protected shows this isn't nostalgia – it's about securing a sustainable future for us all.

'The public has decisively rejected the false choice between building homes and protecting the countryside. With enough brownfield land in England alone for 1.4 million homes, we can meet housing needs while strengthening protections for the landscapes people value so highly.'

'At a time where politics is increasingly divided, protecting the countryside is a cross-generational, cross-party priority.' More in Common research manager Sophie Stowers added. 'What's clear is that the public want the government to go further in protecting Britain's green spaces.'

The poll's findings in full are at cpre.org.uk/resources. To show your support for the countryside, sign our open letter on cpre.org.uk/letter-to-england. See page 5 for more on brownfield.



In numbers: Grey Belt

13

developments of at least 10 homes approved for 'grey belt' land in Green Belt

88%

of homes in these developments on greenfield sites

57

houses on some of the country's best-quality farmland in Kent

47

houses granted planning permission on a Local Wildlife Site in Essex

Recent research from CPRE reveals that the government's 'grey belt' policy is paving the way for large-scale development on England's unspoilt rural landscapes – not, as ministers promised, unused car parks and derelict petrol stations. When the policy was introduced in December 2024, the government gave 'disused petrol stations' and 'abandoned car parks' as examples of Green Belt sites that could be 'grey belt'.

CPRE is calling on the government to amend its 'grey belt' definition and ensure developments occur only on previously developed land; protect high-quality farmland and important wildlife habitats from development; set ambitious and legally binding targets for genuinely affordable and socially rented homes in all new developments, with developers held to account if they are not.

Land use tools

In 'Delivering better integrated land use decision-making: evidence review', CPRE set out the case for a holistic and integrated approach to land use. We have now followed up with a report to understand how land use decision-making could be better joined up at a regional level.

With the help of case studies, the report compares the use of six different tools to make decisions: spatial development strategies, regional land use frameworks, local nature recovery strategies, integrated water management plans, regional energy strategic plans and climate adaptation reporting.

The report also makes several recommendations on how government can improve decisions on land use, including measures in the English Devolution Bill to mandate strategic authorities to delivery nature, clean air and climate targets; create a national spatial framework, and that the environment should be recognised as first infrastructure and embedded in national and local strategies.

Plan refreshed

CPRE has welcomed the government's publication of the refreshed 25 Year Environment Plan, which retains the hedgerow target to create or restore 72,500km of hedgerows by 2050 and included a new commitment on access to the countryside. CEO Roger Mortlock added: 'We also welcome the £500 million landscape recovery fund and ambitious habitat restoration targets.' But he warned that there are still critical gaps in the plan, 'not least the monitoring and regulation of light pollution where evidence is growing about its negative impact on both species and human health'.

Sarah Jameson

Environment concerns

CPRE is concerned about the government's weakening of protection for nature as the Planning and Infrastructure Act becomes law and the Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce publishes its final report.

The Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce recommends allowing new nuclear to opt out of the Habitats Directive and calls for the scrapping of the duty on public bodies to further the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes.

At the same time, CPRE is concerned that the new Planning and Infrastructure Act's Environmental Delivery Plans will encourage developers to damage the environment locally and simply 'make up for it' miles away. In effect, this could displace habitats and people's access to nature. CPRE remains hopeful that the new spatial development strategies will improve how housing is delivered in the countryside but the removal of the 'brownfield first' amendments we had supported has also made it more likely that developers will put in proposals for greenfield sites.

We will be working locally to ensure that they and the environmental plans work in favour of protecting countryside as well as ensuring the housing we need is built. CPRE will also join with the Campaign for National Parks, the National Landscapes and other environmental charities to defend the duty to enhance the purposes of protected landscapes – ensuring we continue to improve our natural environment, wildlife and heritage.



New towns warning

CPRE has welcomed the focus on brownfield land use in several new towns but has written to housing secretary Steve Reed with concerns about the proposal for Adlington in Cheshire.

CEO Roger Mortlock noted that CPRE has welcomed the proposals for new towns on previously developed land. But he wrote that one of the proposals CPRE is most concerned about is in Adlington. 'We believe that the loss of 1,000 hectares of Cheshire's Green Belt including a significant amount of farmland, the damage to the natural environment and the lack of suitable infrastructure to support the proposed 20,000 homes means that the problems with this site outweigh the potential benefits.'

WHAT TO DO THIS SPRING



WIN RHS CHELSEA TICKETS!

We're offering one CPRE member the chance to win a pair of tickets to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show (19-23 May). You'll be able to visit our centenary garden and help us celebrate 100 years of standing up for the countryside.

Enter by completing the form at cpre.org.uk/chelsea-member-prizedraw by 23:59 on 19 April.

100 YEARS OF CPRE

Until 24 May you can delve into our history at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, holder of the CPRE archives, with the 'Voices of the Countryside' exhibition. It includes how CPRE's campaigns influenced the creation of England's national parks, the introduction of the Green Belt, and anti-litter campaigns on a national scale. Check visiting details on the MERL website.

USE YOUR COUNTRYSIDE CARD

The 2026 Members' Guide is out now! New this year is Ventnor Botanic Garden, a little known gem on the Isle of Wight covering 22 acres, and Talliston House and Gardens in Essex – an extraordinary house which has been transformed into a series of rooms designed to reflect a different time and place. And, if you are in and around the capital, we now include venues in Buckinghamshire and London, so do check these out.

To take advantage of these offers, present your CPRE Countryside Card on arrival at the venue. Your Countryside Card is attached to the top of your annual renewal letter.

You can view the Members' Guide online by visiting cpre.org.uk/resources/cpre-members-guide. Or to request a printed copy, please contact our Supporter Care team by email at supportercare@cpre.org.uk or call 0207 981 2870.



Response to draft NPPF

As *Countryside Voices* went to press, CPRE was finalising its response to the revised draft of the planning rules (NPPF) as the consultation finished on 10 March. Many CPRE supporters also sent in their own responses to support our campaigning on this.

There was lots to welcome, particularly a focus on urban densification, a recognition of the importance of rural affordable housing, and targets to encourage more SME builders.

However, the lack of brownfield targets remains a concern given our latest research (see below) and the draft does little to deter the rise of speculative development in the countryside, especially in rural local authorities that have seen a massive increase in their housing targets. Every year since 2019, the UK has already lost an average of 3,800 acres of countryside – equivalent to the footprint of a small city.

We are wary of any automatic green light for development in the countryside, including in the Green Belt where the government's 'grey belt' policy isn't working (see page 3).

A countryside for us all. Forever.



Join others like you and write your will for free in as little as 30 minutes, with our trusted partner, Farewill.

This is your chance to set out your wishes, look after your loved ones, and shape a greener, more resilient countryside. You can visit a solicitor, or take advantage of the simple and free Farewill process. By leaving a gift to CPRE, you can let your love of the countryside live on.

100
YEARS



Campaign
to Protect
Rural England

REGISTER HERE AND GET STARTED TODAY
www.cpre.org.uk/farewill

IN FOCUS

Brownfield revisited

CPRE is reiterating its call for a comprehensive 'brownfield first' policy in the NPPF after its annual analysis of previously developed land that is available and suitable for new development. We also want incentives created by focusing the New Towns Programme and Homes England support on brownfield use.

Our 2025 calculation shows that there is enough brownfield land to

build well over a million homes in England, based on data from councils' brownfield land registers up to 2024. More than half (55%) of these sites already have some form of planning permission, meaning 770,000 new homes could be built rapidly.

'These numbers should be regarded as the baseline for what could be built as we think there are likely to be many more suitable sites than local authorities have identified so far,' said CPRE planning policy officer Shan Lim. 'Also, brownfield land is a constantly renewing resource as more sites are identified.'



Brownfield land availability has increased steadily over the past few years. In 2018, there was enough for at least 1.05 million new homes but by 2024 that figure had risen to 1.4 million on 27,200 sites (a 50% rise on site numbers in the same period).

Roanhead dunes and beach

Local Voices

NEWS AND CAMPAIGNS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Claire Gould

Raising solar exhibition

NORFOLK

CPRE Norfolk's Getting Solar OFF the Land exhibition drew large crowds in November, uniting residents, councillors, farmers, planners, students and campaigners in a day of constructive discussion on renewable energy and landscape protection. Visitors viewed new cumulative-impact mapping of mega solar proposals across Norfolk, which revealed the large scale of the damage that these schemes would cause. Also on show was research from SolarQ, displays covering food security, wildlife, landscape character, and alternative options such as rooftop and brownfield solar. A particular pleasure was the arrival of environmental science students from Easton College (above right), whose enthusiasm and questions helped shape a hopeful cross-generational dialogue.

The online version of the exhibition is now live on CPRE Norfolk's website.



Lisa Ashbury



Green not grey

OXFORDSHIRE

Alongside other campaigners, CPRE Oxfordshire have successfully fought to protect over 100 acres of Green Belt land, dismissing a major proposal to build a vast Science and Technology Park. CPRE Oxfordshire is particularly pleased that the ruling clarified that the site is Green Belt, rather than 'grey belt', and so entitled to the full protection that Green Belt status gives. The decision ends nearly a year of uncertainty for the people of Waterstock and neighbouring villages, many of whom had objected to the plan on the grounds of the lack of public transport connections to the site and the harm to important listed buildings nearby including Waterstock Mill which is also the focus of a designated wildlife site.

CPRE Oxfordshire is now pressing for another proposed development in Green Belt to be refused: the 'Land behind the Moors' site near Kidlington.





Lakes landscapes protected

CUMBRIA

The Friends of the Lake District, the group that represents CPRE in Cumbria, is celebrating two recent planning refusals as a proposal for a leisure development at Roanhead on the Furness peninsula has been refused, as has a 150-space car park at Ullock Moss near Catbells. In both cases, the Friends joined with similarly concerned groups worried about the impact on the landscape, with the Roanhead plan being a serious threat to the Morecambe Bay and Duddon Estuary protected sites and the National Nature Reserve at Sandscale Haws. The Ullock Moss proposal would have set a harmful precedent for car parks in the open countryside when both the local planning authority and national government are trying to reduce reliance on private vehicles. Lorayne Wall, head of planning and policy at Friends of the Lake District, added: 'A new car park in this location would have not only damaged the landscape but set back plans for sustainable travel and a low-carbon Lake District before they even started.'

Making clean-up connections

SOMERSET

CPRE Somerset is celebrating their strong links with local SEND schools this year, with many students completing their volunteering for their Duke of Edinburgh Award with them. The connections have been due to CPRE Somerset's litter picking project, which has sent 350 litter picking kits to volunteers of all ages across Somerset since 2020. Penstone Farm is one of the schools in Cheddar for children who don't suit mainstream schooling. Their students go out in the local area, using the litter picking kits that CPRE Somerset were able to provide. Cambian Lufton College, Yeovil, is a specialist college for young adults with autism and learning difficulties. Using the kits provided by CPRE Somerset, they litter pick twice a week and record the worst polluting items that they find.



Penstone Learning Centre

The great hedge

HAMPSHIRE

'Hedgefest' came to Hampshire in February to celebrate the completion of CPRE Hampshire's ambitious hedge planting scheme to plant and restore over 15km of hedgerow, as part of CPRE's Hedgerow Heroes project. The Hampshire hedge creates vital wildlife corridors that link fragmented habitats and support biodiversity across the county – connecting Shawford and Compton in the South Downs with Copythorne on the edge of the New Forest. Despite reaching this milestone, the Hampshire Hedge project will continue to engage local communities through volunteer action days, more planting, hedgelaying courses and community events, helping to keep traditional countryside management alive for future generations.



Toby Cowell



East Midlands partners

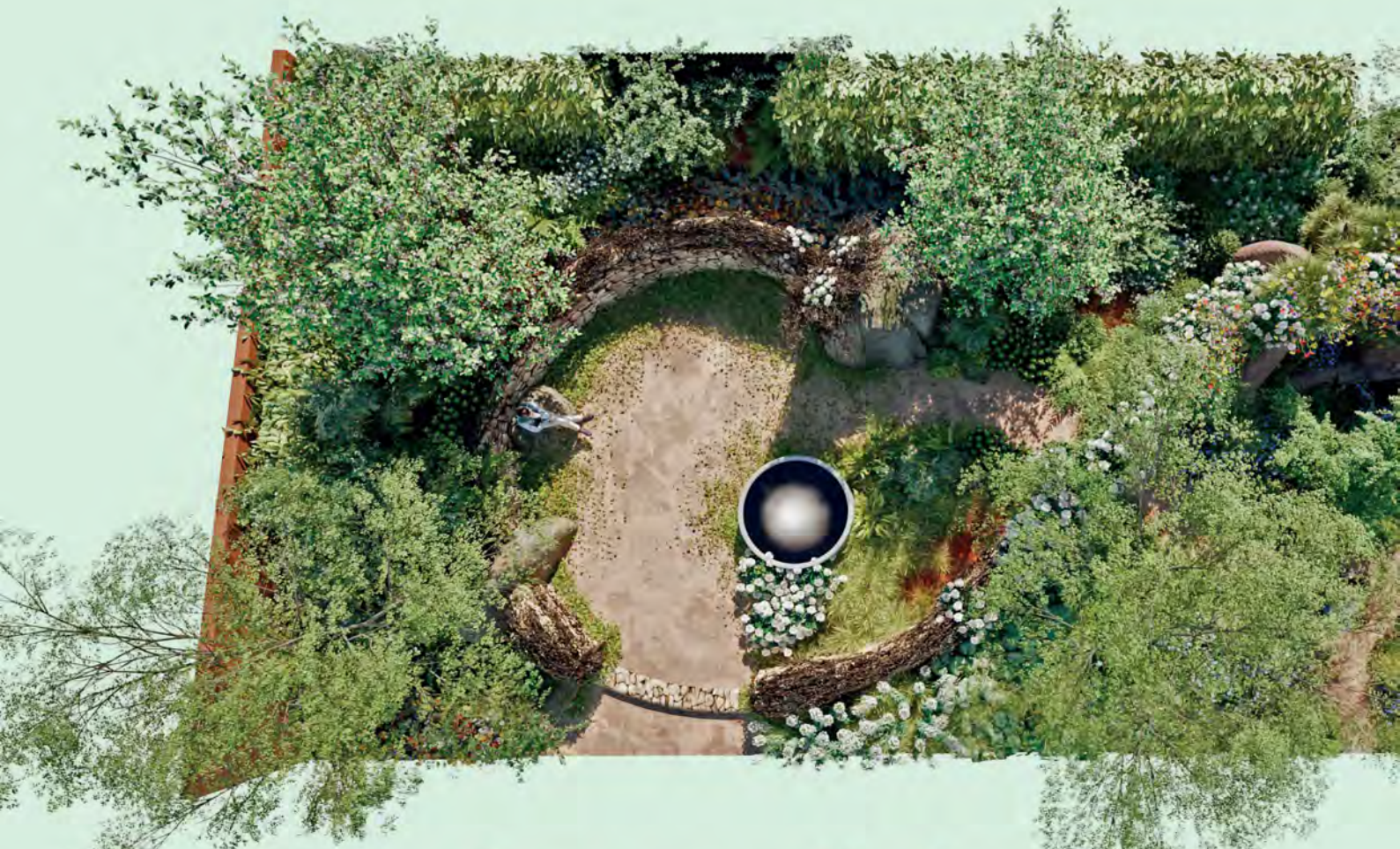
DERBYSHIRE AND NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

A campaign to protect Matlock Forest, a community wildlife haven, sustainable glamping and a beautiful photo of Stanage Edge at sunset were among the winners of CPRE Derbyshire Living Countryside Awards (presentation above), which achieved a record number of nominations from those eager to share their passion for Derbyshire's countryside.

Last year also saw CPRE Derbyshire complete a Community Energy Visioning project in the parish of Crich, helping the community decide on the renewable energy they would like to see in their area. The active participation and insights of the Transition Crich community group and other local residents will continue to guide the vision in 2026 and beyond.

CPRE Derbyshire and CPRE Nottinghamshire have now decided to merge the two county groups into a single charity to double their impact.





Everyday wildness

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show may not be where you'd expect to find a countryside charity. But this year CPRE will be represented by a garden that highlights the value of the nature most people encounter in their daily lives – the edgelands of our towns and cities

I'm a country girl at heart, says Sarah Eberle – which makes her the perfect candidate to design CPRE's centenary garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in May – a first for CPRE. The garden she is creating, 'On the Edge', sets out to highlight the often overlooked countryside at the edge of our towns and cities. These are frequently people's daily experience of nature and yet they are on the edge of survival, undervalued as habitats and under threat from careless development and climate breakdown.

To mark CPRE's centenary year, the garden reflects a renewed focus on helping more people recognise, value and stand up for the countryside closest to where they live. The type

of landscape that inspires the garden is similar to that around many urban areas and CPRE wants to highlight the importance of this countryside, often Green Belt, which we know provides the nearest countryside for 30 million people. Yet one of the themes CPRE has returned to so often in recent years of campaigning is the need to protect and value that land.

CPRE wants visitors to shift their perspective on what countryside is and where they can find it, says CEO Roger Mortlock. 'We worked with Sarah to create a garden that brings attention to the nature that lives, often against the odds, on the edges of urban areas. The garden will bring these overlooked spaces to life and, we hope, will help visitors to see their

value and feel inspired to play a part, alongside others, in helping them thrive.'

Finding sanctuary

Sarah's vision of the countryside remains rooted in her childhood growing up on the edge of Dartmouth, and then in Dartmoor. Walking its shady lanes informed her subsequent career in landscape design: 'I remember distinctly walking in the country lanes and loving the shadows that you get in hedgerows,' she says today. 'But it's not what I picture [when I think of the English countryside] but what I feel... it's the feeling of what being in nature gives.' That feeling helped imbue her with a deep understanding of the importance of nature for all of us: 'the ecological balance needed between



**WIN
RHS
CHELSEA
TICKETS!**
See page 4

CPRE's Centenary RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden design

the needs of people and nature' and the sanctuary nature provides.

To help visualise that sense of balance, 'On the Edge' uses both planting, water and sculpture. A carving of Mother Nature will have her hand touching water from a shallow pool, while her willow hair flows to form the top of a dry-stone wall that snakes through the garden. The plants themselves will be native trees and shrubs with flowering plants; the garden's backstory is that the site has been used as a tipping point for garden waste. 'So it's not a site that has magically erupted on its own but has had human interaction... some of the best landscapes are where we coexist with some harmony.'

Alongside climate breakdown, a loss of any understanding of the relationship between people and nature is one of the biggest threats to the wider countryside, Sarah believes. 'There's a loss of connection between urban living and rural areas [and] understanding we're just part of a whole system of nature – that [we need] coexistence to thrive. It's about mutual respect... without nature we don't exist.'

Spreading the message

The garden is designed to be accessible and also take its message beyond Chelsea as after the show it will be leaving London for Sheffield – the landscape that Sarah sees her garden at home in and the city whose Green Belt was one of the first in the country, thanks to the efforts led by Ethel Haythornthwaite, an early CPRE campaigner.

There, Sarah hopes the local community will take ownership themselves – and she's happy to see where that takes the garden. 'If you can get a community to love it, to own it, it will develop in the right way for them. I just hope it gives them a place that they can get some reward from... and gives them some sense of sanctuary. And that sense of sanctuary helps to build a relationship with nature and understand how it is important to us as humans.'

CPRE wants the resilience of the garden's plants to also carry a message of hope for the countryside at a time when it is under threat. 'By celebrating overlooked spaces on the edge of our towns and cities, we want our garden to be an injection of hope that helps people reimagine the countryside on their doorstep,' says Roger. 'At Chelsea, we'll also be inviting people to add their voice to that vision – calling for every town and city to be surrounded by protected green space. These places are some of the most contested land in the country but also the most meaningful for many people. Protecting these special, tranquil spaces means acting together – as a movement – not alone.' ■

'I remember distinctly walking in the country lanes and loving the shadows that you get in hedgerows'



Sarah Eberle, garden designer

THE DESIGN TEAM

Sarah will be leading a team from The Outdoor Room to create the garden, with sculptor Chris Wood responsible for the carving of Mother Nature, and the water feature developed with Bamber Wallis and the planting team. The project is funded by grant-giving charity Project Giving Back. givingback.org.uk

100 YEARS

A century of achievements

▶ THE EARLY CAMPAIGNS PROTECTION FROM INDUSTRIALISATION

In the 1920s, architects, planners and local campaigners warned repeatedly that unregulated development – driven by new roads, cars and buses – was rapidly scarring the countryside. These concerns and subsequent campaigns led to the founding of CPRE as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, bringing together groups with similar ambitions.

From the outset, CPRE worked to show that protecting the countryside required clear standards and enforcement, including:

- tackling litter
- challenging unsightly advertising and intrusive roadside development
- promoting higher standards of design in rural areas



Campaigner Ethel Haythornthwaite



▶ POST-WAR YEARS TURNING AMBITION INTO LAW

In the aftermath of the Second World War, decades of CPRE campaigning saw long-held ambitions for protecting the countryside begin to take shape in legislation with:

- the Town and Country Planning Act (1947)
- the creation of National Parks and public access to open landscapes
- the Green Belt becoming government policy

At local and national level, CPRE local groups' and supporters' longstanding work against littering helped trigger the government's Keep Britain Tidy campaign. For the 1953 coronation, we launched the Village Greens campaign – later evolving to the Best Kept Village competition.

▶ 1960s-1980s CONSERVATION AND REDUCING INFRASTRUCTURE IMPACT

As the modern world of motorways and plastic reached into the countryside, we influenced the Countryside Act of 1968 to focus on conservation. We also:

- voiced concerns about the increasing production of indestructible plastics (6 billion bottles in 1969) and the move to non-returnable bottles
- campaigned for hedgerow protection when research showed 10,000 miles a year of hedges were being lost
- challenged proposals for new building in the Essex Green Belt in 1986, helping reduce the likelihood of similar developments
- influenced the Channel Tunnel Rail Link route to reduce its impact on the countryside



Ten decades has given CPRE some big wins: the results of which many now take for granted. From the start, CPRE's work has been shaped by thousands of people – volunteers, members and supporters – acting locally and nationally to protect the countryside. Here we recall a few of the highlights and the route to our current campaigns

Abigail Oliver



1990s

FROM HEDGEROWS TO URBAN RENAISSANCE

CPRE led the UK environmental NGOs lobbying ahead of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to promote efficient land use and sustainable development, while the Environment Act 1995 secured legal protection for hedgerows at last – and greater independence for National Parks. We also:

- highlighted the vital links between town and country and how both benefited from good urban regeneration (Urban Footprints campaign in 1994)
- made a substantial input into the Urban Task Force's influential report that set the scene for urban renaissance
- helped prioritise brownfield in planning policy

2000-2010

LOCAL FOOD, DARK SKIES AND LITTER

The noughties saw three new areas develop for CPRE:

- the value of local food for consumers, farmers and, by reducing food miles, the environment
- mapping: the publication of our first light pollution maps and the first 'tranquillity maps' to highlight how development had eroded rural peace
- 2008's Stop the Drop campaign and subsequent work on litter and recycling led to the government's 2018 commitment to introduce a deposit return system



For more on CPRE's history see our website. And look out for the launch of our new book, the *History of CPRE*, to be published in July.



RossHelen editorial/Alamy

2010-TODAY

BETTER PLANNING, HEDGEROWS AND CLIMATE

- Using land efficiently has remained central to CPRE's work, including major efforts to influence the NPPF and protect brownfield land, social housing and the Green Belt. In 2014 our Waste of Space campaign showed brownfield land could provide at least one million homes, leading to brownfield registers being reintroduced in the Housing and Planning Act 2016.
- We returned to hedgerows and, alongside campaigning, set an ambition to plant or restore 100 miles of hedgerows by the end of 2026.
- We helped retain and then reinstate the fracking ban, and have campaigned for rooftop solar as a way to tackle climate breakdown – the biggest 21st century threat to the countryside.

Bill Waters



Why CPRE is so important

Long-term and recent members and volunteers talk about why the countryside and CPRE's work is important to them

SUSIE WHITE

A life member and Guardian Country Diarist who writes regularly for CPRE

'CPRE brings together so many different countryside issues, but not just countryside, also towns. I don't see it just as a countryside charity, I see it as a charity for the whole landscape really, including urban areas, and small pockets of nature that are within urban areas. And innovative ideas, such as putting solar panels on rooftops in new buildings.'



countryside. It's an authoritative voice and what I read I can trust to be accurate, which is really important.

'I appreciate CPRE's efforts to find solutions. It's vital that we stand firm on the things we believe in. I'm a campaigner, I don't give in. CPRE must stand absolutely firm because quite often there's nobody else doing it. We rely on CPRE to fight our corner.'

TONY STOTT

Longtime CPRE member and ex-chair of CPRE Leicestershire

'The way CPRE works fits my sort of instinct, in terms of the way of campaigning on these issues. Trying to be positive and more solutions focused. ... It may not set the world on fire but it's making a positive difference. ... We need people to face up to the challenges and tell those that are in power that they need to think about the wider issues of climate and of nature, particularly of nature.'



[And] we need to have more emphasis on the use of our land and how we use it.'

WILLIAM FULLERTON

Member since 1969

'Ideally, we need to have a country which preserves a countryside that people can enjoy and benefit from and is also compatible with agricultural needs, and make sure that where we do need extra houses or buildings they go in the best possible place, taking everything into account. And the best place for the people who are going to be in them to enjoy life... This is not always easy. The countryside is always at risk in some way or other. And one cannot just not have any progress or industrialisation... but I would like to hope that we do proceed carefully with building estates and industrialisation, and keep a balance wherever possible, to preserve what we can of the countryside and all of its beauty.'

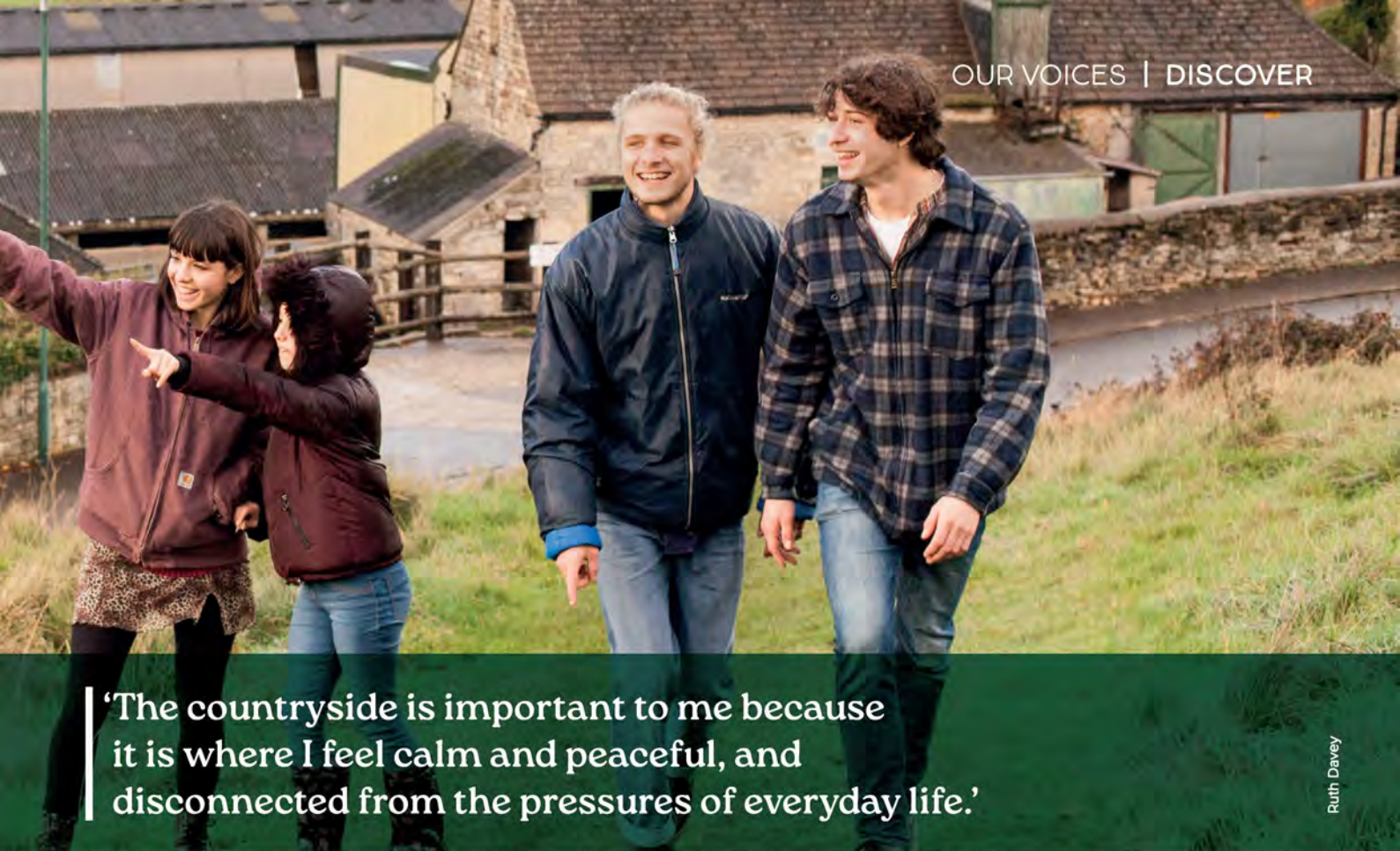


KATE ASHBROOK

A life member since 1976, general secretary of the Open Spaces Society, and a former chair of the Ramblers and Campaign for National Parks

'I'm particularly interested in protecting and expanding people's access to and enjoyment of the countryside... I think that [CPRE does] a brilliant job protecting the





Ruth Davey

'The countryside is important to me because it is where I feel calm and peaceful, and disconnected from the pressures of everyday life.'

MARIELLA FROSTRUP

President of CPRE Somerset

'When I was first asked if I'd be interested in being involved with CPRE Somerset, I feared... by accepting I'd find myself on a fast track to a headscarf, a sherry habit, a gentle ride out on a Saturday morning and a steadfast determination that my local village should remain locked in time... What I actually discovered was the untapped dynamism of local people who still firmly believe in the power of democracy, the importance of individual voices, the responsibility of being custodians of a landscape that we are only temporary dwellers on and the imperative nature of maintaining a sustainable green and pleasant land as a legacy for future generations.'



later moved out to Hertfordshire to get back to the countryside. 'That's why the Green Belt is so important', he explains. 'You've got the benefit of being close to London, but you can also live in the actual countryside. Being able to walk from the train station back home through fields and trees is a real privilege.' Now he says, 'I'm proud to be part of a dedicated team working tirelessly to protect and promote the Hertfordshire countryside.'

FRAN HUGHES

Social media and website volunteer with CPRE Northamptonshire since 2024

'The countryside is important to me because it is where I feel calm and peaceful, and disconnected from the pressures of everyday life.' Fran plays a key role in representing the charity, engaging followers on social media and the website with current campaigns and events.



'What I enjoy most... is feeling more connected to things happening in my local area. I have met a lot of new people through volunteering with CPRE, from a range of backgrounds and life experiences.'

VENUS CHENG

Admin volunteer with CPRE London since May 2024

After growing up in Hong Kong, Venus appreciates the variety of green spaces that London offers, which create a valuable place for connection. 'No matter which corner I turn, after you walk a few steps there will always be something green and a space you can use as a common area'. For her, these urban green spaces, 'serve more than just an environmental purpose – it's also for creating that communal space, and to me community space is really important. I think that's how society is held together because that's how you create a sense of belonging and create shared memories. So that's why I particularly enjoy those kinds of spaces – it has a therapeutic power.'



ADAM HOPWOOD

CPRE Hertfordshire trustee since November 2023

Having grown up in Yorkshire for much of his childhood, the Dales and the Peak District were never too far from Adam's doorstep when he was young. After living in London for work, he



VOLUNTEERING FOR THE CPRE

If you would like to get involved in the work of your local CPRE, or view our other countryside volunteering opportunities, take a look at our volunteering pages on our website and current opportunities.



New horizons

CPRE was set up as a council – a coalition of organisations that had a shared vision of the countryside they loved. Do we share that vision today – and how does CPRE see it changing over the next century? Chief executive Roger Mortlock and president Mary-Ann Ochota reflect on past, present and future

Q Abercrombie's wish list included national parks, Green Belt and planning regulation – what's on yours?

Mary-Ann: It was a good list – the founding members were focused on securing long-term benefit for the nation. Our values haven't changed, it's still about ensuring we have the policy, funding and support for sustainable rural communities. Now, in the 21st century we also need to think about

connection and inclusion. Everything from fast broadband to rural public transport, to clean, affordable energy, quality homes and better public countryside access. I want pride in our countryside to be something that brings the nation together, and reinforces our shared values as fair, tolerant and progressive people.

Roger: I still find Abercrombie's optimism inspiring, but today we are facing a crisis in how we use land. Too many demands and not enough joined up thinking, especially in relation to the countryside. We have to embrace the fact that the countryside is – and always is – changing, but some things endure and are still loved by the public. Finding space for nature to recover, for landscapes to inspire us, and for regenerative farming should be where we start.

Q Is people's development truly compatible with that of the countryside?

Roger: Yes, if done well. Land is a finite resource, so the solutions for a healthy countryside are also about what we're doing in towns and cities. We can be innovative, and we need to stop thinking in silos – we can farm in a way that supports nature to thrive, manage water naturally to manage flooding, build new homes that also support

nature – there are so many examples of smarter land use. How we use land is in our DNA as an organisation and I am hopeful that CPRE has an important role to play in a new approach to land. Many farmers and landowners I speak to want to contribute positively but need a framework to work within. Preferably one they are involved in shaping.

Mary-Ann: Without doubt, new infrastructure needs to be managed carefully. There will be new pylons, roads and rail lines, wind turbines, buildings. We need to make sure they have the greatest positive impacts, are carefully placed and are done in collaboration with local communities so people understand and agree to the trade-offs. It's not about saying no to everything, it's about saying, 'all things considered, what solution works best for people, nature, climate and the economy, in this particular place, for now and for the future?'

Q CPRE sees climate breakdown as the biggest threat to the countryside. What else is high on your list of concerns?

Mary-Ann: Some of our political and business leaders think that the countryside is a blank space waiting to be used, or a quaint hinterland that's there to serve urban centres.



Mary-Ann Ochota

'What solution works best for people, nature, climate and the economy, in this particular place, for now and for the future?'

trusts, community solar and the new generation of farmers. I'm also hopeful in talking to young people about the countryside and tapping into their sense of urgency for change. We need their energy at CPRE. We recruited 300 online campaign activists in just the first year but there's more to do.

Mary-Ann: We have to remember that some amazing things are already under way. We're already past the tipping point in transitioning away from coal and gas and towards renewable energy. We've already reduced our national carbon emissions by more than half since 1990 and are on track to reduce them by 81% by 2035.

That's incredible progress. There are nationwide commitments to regreen our towns and cities, restore peat bogs and river catchments, and put solar on new houses. There is a lot to do and the future can often feel bleak. But we have to look over our shoulder, see what progress we've made, then crack on to secure the positive future we need and deserve.

Q So can CPRE remain relevant in its second century?

Mary-Ann: What I love about CPRE is that we look at issues in the round, and where different issues join up. That's really clear when you read the collection of essays in the book, *Future Rural*. We're not scared of tackling the tricky issues and shouting loud for the countryside. So yes, we'll always be relevant – because we're smart, brave and committed to long-term positive change.

Roger: I agree with Tristram Hunt's view [from 80th anniversary leaflet 'Making our mark'] that CPRE 'has remained true to many of its founding ideals: a belief in the ecological and social importance of proper planning; an understanding of the vital inter-relationship between urban and rural; and a commitment to preserving the beauty, tranquillity and psychologically nourishing qualities of the English countryside for future generations.'

There will still be a need for us to

stand up for the countryside – but we are at our strongest when we advocate for solutions at the same time. Abercrombie advocated for National Parks and Green Belts. Today we promote brownfield land, solar on rooftops and community energy – all solutions with massive public support... And as an organisation we can do stuff that shows people what good looks like on the ground. To bring us full circle, we very much still have a convening role – the Better Planning Coalition being a good example – bringing individuals and organisations together, especially in such a divided world. ■

Matt Gibson/Alamy

That's short-sighted and ill-informed. Business as usual is failing us... we can't do growth at all costs, it has to be sustainable growth, and that requires a mindset shift. We can't afford to waste our resources – whether that's water, food, raw materials, land – or build badly. And we have to remember that the economy is entirely reliant on healthy nature. We've lived for the past 100 years drawing down from the planet's bank account and now we're in the red. We need to start paying in, and fast, at individual, national and global scales.

Roger: Releasing the market to do what it wants and voluntarily regulate itself has always had poor outcomes for the countryside. I think Abercrombie would be surprised at the current polarisation in how people regard the countryside and what it's for. He wouldn't be a fan of the builders and blockers language we've heard recently. Our public polling has shown that people value the countryside as much now as they did in 1926. The way we affect change now is very different – but growing public support for what we do is critical.

Q And what gives you hope that the future will be positive?

Roger: Innovation from people working together locally – community land



Roger Mortlock

FUTURE RURAL

CPRE's '*Future Rural*' book will be launched in April. The book looks ahead with a collection of essays by farmers, activists, ecologists and thinkers, reimagining how land, food, nature and community could evolve over the next century. Get your copy from littletoller.co.uk or scan the QR code below:



100
YEARS

Your CPRE centenary diary

One hundred years of CPRE deserves celebration. We're marking the occasion with events that celebrate our history and help grow the movement for the future.

The year has already begun with new polling on what people want for

the countryside and a national Letter to England calling for action to stop its loss, improve its quality for future generations and inspire more people to care for it.

Below are some of the next moments in our centenary year – look out for further details on the CPRE website.

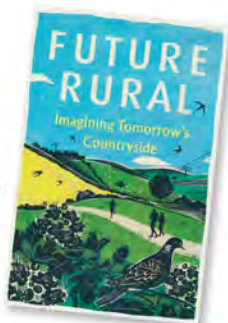
▶ 14 FEBRUARY-25 MAY

Visit the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, home to the CPRE archive, to see the exhibition showcasing 10 decades of CPRE campaigning. Check the MERL website (merl.reading.ac.uk) for details of visiting times.



▶ 29 APRIL

Launch of *Future Rural* book. We're looking ahead with a collection of essays by farmers, activists, ecologists and thinkers, reimagining how land, food, nature and community could evolve over the next century. Get your copy from littletoller.co.uk or scan the QR code below.



▶ EARLY MAY

National Awards Nominations open. We'll be putting out a call for nominations celebrating the people and projects shaping the countryside's future – so put your thinking caps on now...

▶ 19-23 MAY

CPRE's On the Edge garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. (See pages 8-9 for more on the garden's creation).

▶ MAY

Launch of CPRE's On the Edge campaign. This will be a national campaign building on the message of the garden at the Chelsea Flower Show: that every town and city should be surrounded by protected countryside – for nature, climate and wellbeing. Keep an eye on our website for how you can get involved.

▶ JULY

Launch of the *History of CPRE* book. We've only had room for a little of what CPRE has been up to since 1926 in this issue of Countryside Voices. Check out our new book on our history for more on our campaigns and impact. (See the website for discount details).

▶ SEPTEMBER

Love your countryside. A month-long inviting people to connect with the countryside and take part in local action.

▶ OCTOBER

National Awards ceremony recognising outstanding work from across the country and launch of CPRE's new strategy setting out how CPRE will focus its efforts over the next three years.

▶ DECEMBER

100 miles of Hedgerow celebration. We'll be celebrating our Hedgerow Heroes and the communities who have helped create and restore hedgerows over the past five years.

To buy *Future Rural*
scan the QR code:

