Introduction

What is a green belt?

A green belt is an area of land, near to and sometimes surrounding a town, which is kept open by permanent and severe restriction on building. The form it takes depends on the purposes it is intended to serve. If it is wanted to prevent two near-by towns from joining up, all that is necessary is a sufficiently wide belt of open country between them, leaving the towns free to expand in other directions. More often, the purpose is to limit the expansion of a town and a virtually continuous belt all round it will be needed. There are also some groups of towns which are tending to merge into one solid urban mass. In such a case the green belt is partly a series of buffers of open land between the towns and partly a belt around the whole group.

The need for green belts

The idea of a belt of open land around towns goes back to ancient times. Much of this land was used for growing food for the townspeople or pasturing their cattle but some of it provided space for recreation, for fairs and fights, sports and games and public occasions. This open belt served as a barrier against the spread of disease and as an exposed area which an attacking enemy would have to cross to reach the city walls. Modern transport now brings food to the city from far afield and permits the citizen to roam widely for his recreation. Modern medicine and modern housing have taken the terror from infectious diseases and walls have long been useless as defences. Then why should not the city be allowed to grow unchecked?

The answer is that some towns are already far too big for the comfort or the pleasure of the citizens, while others tend to merge with one another and need to be prevented from doing so. Many towns have expanded rapidly during the last hundred years and particularly since the advent of motor traffic. Some have coalesced with others to form huge conurbations where building seems endless and the boundary between different communities has become no more than a line on a map. Main roads have been lined with houses on both sides, to the detriment of traffic, and the distinction between town and country has become blurred. All these are the consequences of sprawl, which it is the primary purpose of a green belt to prevent.

The secondary purpose is perhaps better understood and appreciated. It is to provide the townsman with the opportunity to escape from the noise, congestion and strain of city life and to seek recreation in the countryside. Sometimes he may want to take part in organized games or sports or to pursue some scientific or artistic study or interest. More often he is content just to ramble or ride with no other object than to enjoy the scenery, fresh air and sunshine.

Where is a green belt required?

By no means all towns need a green belt. In many cases there is no good reason to check their expansion or to shape them in any particular fashion. In the normal way, planning authorities have adequate powers to control the growth of towns while maintaining a sharp distinction between town and country.

Mr. Duncan Sandys, who was then the Minister of Housing and Local Government, listed three reasons for the establishment of a green belt when he addressed a circular to local authorities on 3rd August, 1955. These three reasons were:

(*a*) to check the growth of a large built-up area;
(*b*) to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; or
(*c*) to preserve the special character of a town.

His successor, Mr. Henry Brooke, emphasized the permanent nature of green belts and the limited circumstances where they are applicable when, on 5th July, 1960, he said:

'*The right principles are that a green belt should be established only where there is a clear need to contain the growth of a town within limits which can be defined at the time; and the limits of the belt should be carefully drawn so as not to include land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open for the purpose of the green belt*'.

The Origins of Green Belts

The first known attempt in this country to establish a green belt was a royal proclamation of Queen Elizabeth I in 1580, forbidding any new building on a new site within three miles of the city gates of London. The purposes were stated to be to ensure an abundance of cheap food and to mitigate the effects of an outbreak of plague. A similar proclamation was made by James I and in 1657 the Commonwealth Parliament passed an Act to limit the amount of building within ten miles of London by requiring new houses to have at least 4 acres of land.

No more legislative action was taken until the present century, though several suggestions were made for limiting the growth of the metropolis and establishing a belt of open country to be used either for agriculture or recreation.

The Greater London Regional Planning Committee

In the 1920's the need to limit the spread of London became once more the concern of government. Electric power had freed many industries from having to be on the coalfields and they were attracted to the huge consumer market of London which, at the same time, provided skilled and versatile workpeople and a good distribution centre. Unemployment in the industrial north and in South Wales sent many journeying to London to work in the new light industries springing up in and around the capital. The population increased rapidly and the ever-expanding transport services enabled people to live further and further from their place of work. Something had to be done. So in 1927 Mr. Neville Chamberlain, who was then the Minister of Health, set up the Greater London Regional Planning Committee. In addressing the first meeting of the Committee he asked them, amongst other things, to consider whether London should '*be provided with something which might be called an agricultural belt, as has often been suggested, so that it would form a dividing line between Greater London as it is and the satellites or fresh developments that might take place at a greater distance*'.

At an early stage in the Committee's deliberations their technical adviser, Sir Raymond Unwin, impressed on them the urgent need to reserve land for the recreation of Londoners. There were far too few playing fields within reach of the built-up area, suitable land was rapidly being taken for building and the additional population increased the demand. Instead of an agricultural belt, he suggested a girdle of open space to provide a reserve for the deficiency of playing fields near to the centre. He urged that building beyond this girdle should be planned against a background of open space instead of planning open space against a background of unlimited building land, as current legislation compelled (Fig. 1).

The Green Belt Act of 1938

The economic crisis of the late twenties and the early thirties stopped for the moment any effective action to realize London's green belt, but it barely checked the growth of Greater London. In the late thirties the rate of building rose to a peak and 'development' engulfed whole towns and villages. Some of the Home Counties had already acquired land to prevent the spread of building but it was the London County Council who, at the request of the Regional Planning Committee, took the initiative towards realizing Unwin's 'green girdle'. In 1935 they put forward a scheme (which owed much to Lord Morrison of Lambeth) 'to provide a reserve supply of public open spaces and of recreational areas and to establish a green belt or girdle of open space lands, not necessarily continuous, but as readily accessible from the completely urbanized area of London as practicable'. The Council offered grants to the Councils of the Home Counties and other local authorities towards the cost of acquiring or preserving land for inclusion in this green girdle.

Within a few months arrangements had been made to acquire or preserve about 18,000 acres but it was soon found that the existing powers of the authorities concerned had to be supplemented. A Bill was presented to allow land to be acquired by agreement or declared to be part of the green belt, and to provide

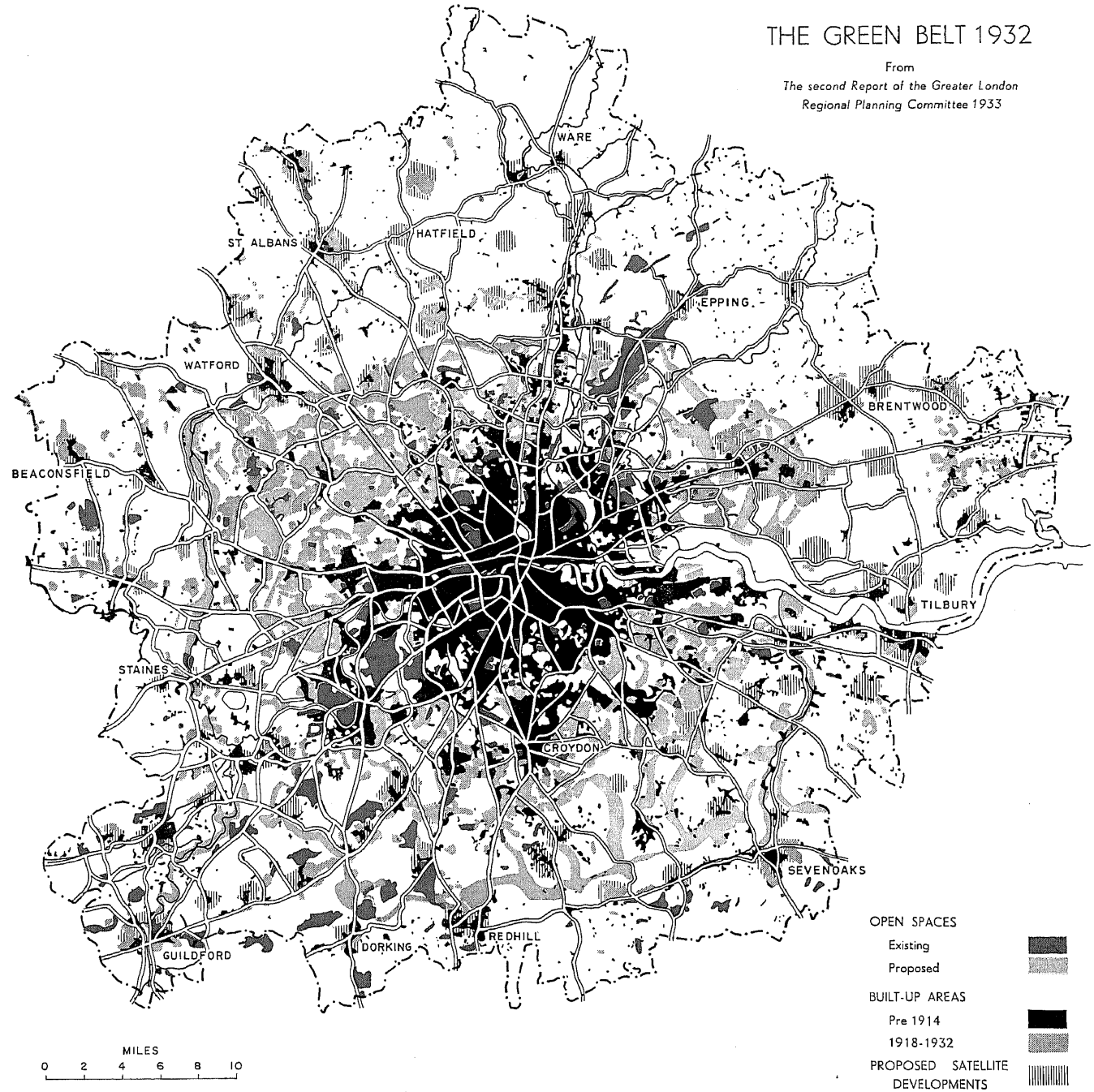


Fig. 1. Sir Raymond Unwin's proposed green girdle

that no such land should be sold or built upon without the consent of the responsible Minister and of the contributing authorities. In due course this Bill became the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act, 1938. Altogether, up to the present, about 35,500 acres have been kept open by means of the London County Council's scheme and the 1938 Act.

The Greater London Plan, 1944

In 1944 Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie completed an advisory plan for Greater London which he had been invited to prepare by the first Minister of Town and Country Planning. Abercrombie discerned in the apparently amorphous sprawl of London faint indications of a structure of concentric rings and upon this he based his plan (Fig. 2). The main problem was the relief of congestion in the crowded 'inner ring' which he proposed should be chiefly met by the building of new towns and the expansion of existing towns in the fourth or 'outer country ring'. Between these lay the 'suburban ring' which was to remain virtually static, and outside it, the 'green belt ring'. This last he described as a 'zone with sufficient openness to have enabled attempts to be made to create a green belt, a zone in which the communities still maintain some semblance of distinct individuality'. Abercrombie proposed that, with certain exceptions for important manufacturing centres and immediate post-war housing, the expansion of existing communities should be strictly limited and no new centres established.

He saw it in much the same light as did the Scott Committee on Land Utilization in Rural Areas which reported in 1942, that is to say as a belt of open land girdling the built-up area in which in the main the normal rural and other activities appropriate to the district would continue undisturbed. Abercrombie proposed a belt of country about 5 miles deep with some wedges of open space penetrating the built-up area. Much of this land was privately owned and used for farming but most of that which had been bought under the 1938 Act and other publicly owned open spaces were included.

The specific proposals for this green belt were set out on the maps attached to Abercrombie's plan. They were considered in detail by all the authorities concerned and after amendment were embodied in the development plans of the local planning authorities. In the process the belt was widened to between 6 and 10 miles.

The Town and Country Planning Act, 1947

London was not the only city in the country to consider the provision of a green belt. Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield had before the war acquired large areas of land for the purpose or had agreed with the owners that their land should be kept open. But these methods were expensive and it was not until the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 came into force that the establishment of green belts around the major cities was really possible.

Under this Act any development of land required permission; so local planning authorities no longer needed to buy land to keep it open, they could simply refuse permission for it to be developed. Any resulting compensation was payable by the Government, so green belts could be established without fear of heavy compensation falling on local funds. Although the financial basis of the Act has since been amended these principles have been maintained. Millions of pounds have been spent by the Government on compensation and large areas around London and other great conurbations, which by now would otherwise have been swallowed up, have been kept as open country.

Green belts in the provinces

Until the middle 1950's the only formal proposal for an encircling green belt was that for London. On 26th April, 1955, the then Minister of Housing and Local Government, Mr. Duncan Sandys, said in the House of Commons:

'*I am convinced that, for the well-being of our people and for the preservation of the countryside, we have a clear duty to do all we can to prevent the further unrestricted sprawl of the great cities*'.

He asked all local authorities concerned to consider the establishment of clearly defined green belts where that was desirable. Since then, a good many proposals have been submitted for green belts in England and Wales. Some have been rejected as inappropriate, some have been approved in principle but not in detail, some have been fully worked out and put to the test of a public local inquiry. Those that have received at least approval in principle are briefly described on pages 22–24 and shown diagrammatically in Fig. 3.

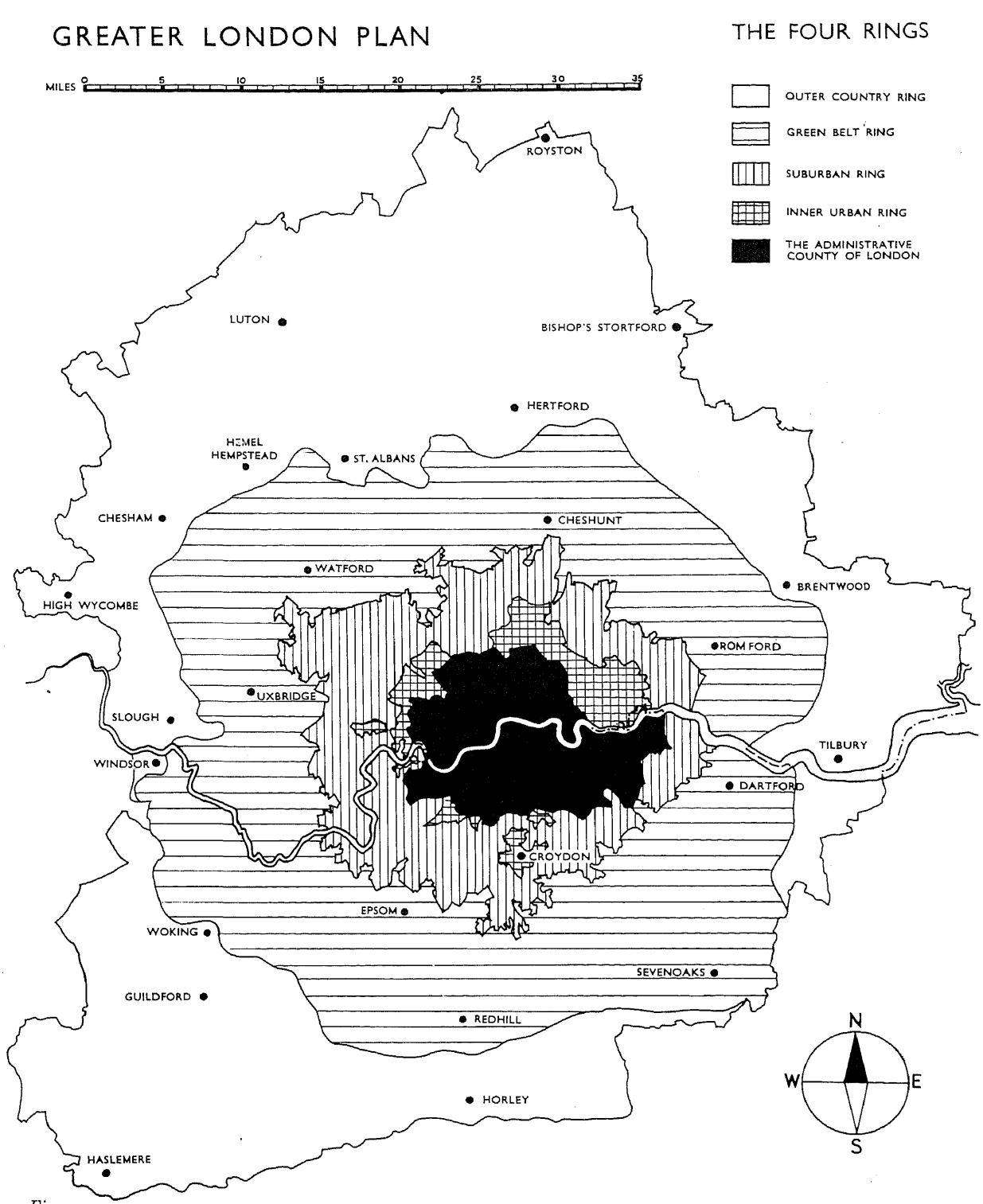


Fig. 2

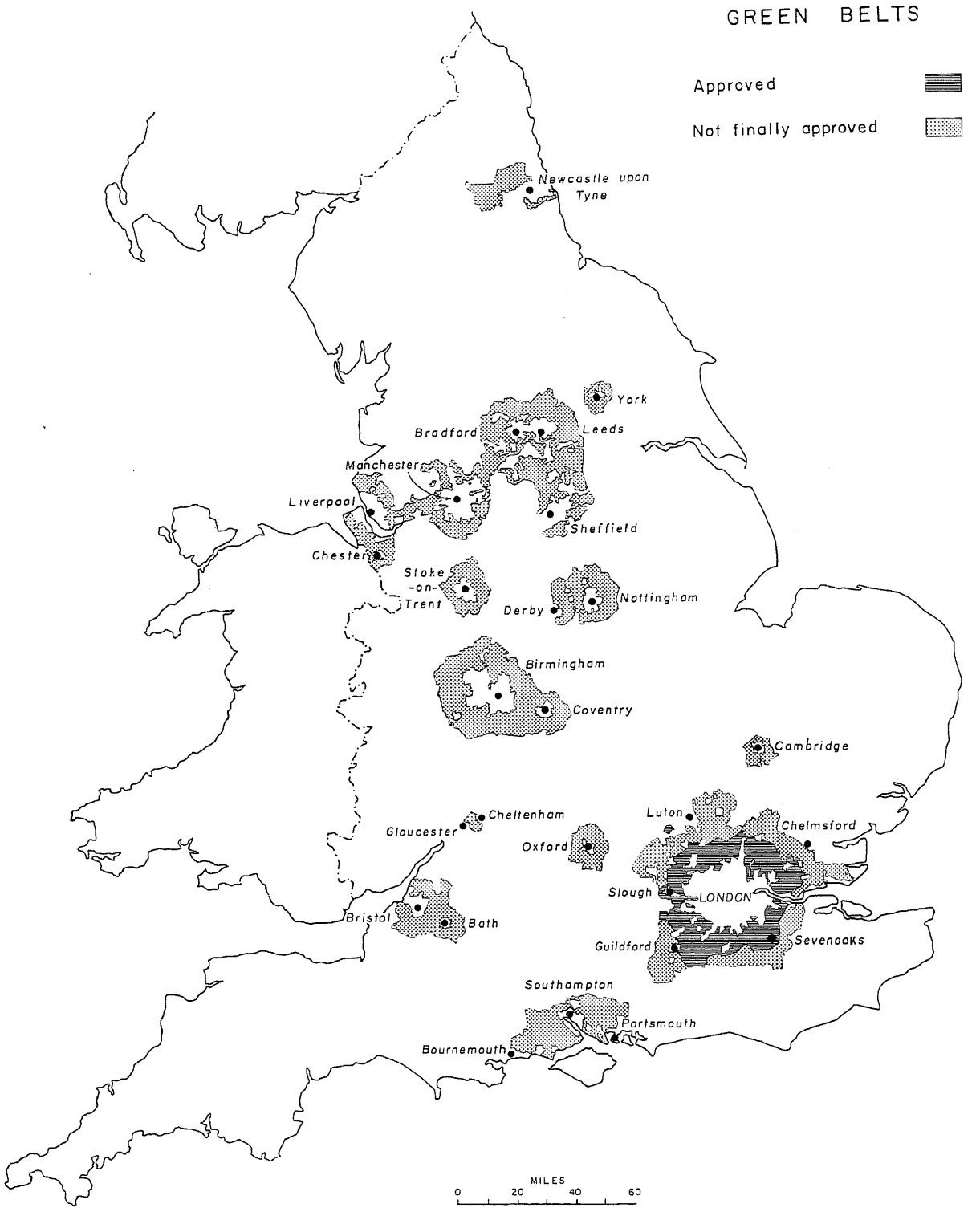


Fig. 3. Green Belts in England and Wales as at 1 May, 1962. Proposals which have not been finally approved are subject to modification (see page 10).

Restrictions on Building in a Green Belt

The object of including land in a green belt is to keep it permanently open. Consequently there is a clear presumption against any new building and against any new employment which might create a demand for more building.

It is very difficult to get permission to build in a green belt. Anyone who wants to do so must be prepared to show either that the building is required for purposes appropriate to a green belt (e.g. for agriculture) or that there is some special reason why it should be allowed, despite the general presumption to the contrary. A cottage which simply fills a gap in an established village may well be permissible but it is not to be assumed that further houses will be allowed on land adjoining any that already exist. Nor is it enough to show that the building will be inconspicuous or will do no harm on the particular site, though these arguments can reinforce a case which has other merits. The green belt conception implies no further building except where there is a positive argument for allowing it.

Development which does not interfere with the open character of the land may be permissible. Buildings for sport or recreation, hospitals and similar institutions standing in extensive grounds, cemeteries and mineral working may be allowed. In such cases the decision is likely to turn on the need for the proposal as against any damage it will do to the rural appearance of the land.

As it is the intention that a green belt shall have a rural character, restrictions on building are somewhat similar to those applying to the ordinary countryside which lies beyond*. The main difference is that in the rural areas beyond the green belt it may be necessary at some time to allocate areas for building which may be quite extensive. Within the green belt the presumption is against any new building at any time, subject only to such limited exceptions as are stated in the development plan, or as may be specially approved in accordance with the preceding paragraphs.

The Use of Land in a Green Belt

The inclusion of land in a green belt does not give the public any rights of access which they would not otherwise enjoy. Most green belts include woods and forests, downs and commons, lakes and rivers, which attract people in large numbers and are maintained wholly or partly for public enjoyment. Though these are often extensive areas, they are a small part of the green belt as a whole, most of which remains privately owned and is predominantly farmland. Even though the townsman has no right of entry to such land, it is none the less precious to him for its natural beauty and quiet, which can be enjoyed from country lanes and public footpaths†.

Some green belts contain many fine country

* The policy which the Minister advises for rural areas is set out in a pamphlet 'New Houses in the Country' obtainable free from the local authority.

† County Councils were required by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949, to carry out a survey of public rights-of-way. Future editions of Ordnance Survey Maps on a scale of 1 inch to 1 mile and 1/25,000 will show these rights-of-way wherever the information is available for the whole sheet.

estates and mansions. Some of these are still private houses while others are used for schools, research institutions, staff colleges, field study centres and the like. Several of them are examples of great architecture and are popular places for a week-end visit. Planning authorities have powers to prevent the demolition of buildings of architectural or historic value but those powers do not help against dry rot and decay. The real problem of the preservation of these buildings is to find an economic use for them and that as often as not includes the use of the park, which may have been laid out in the first place by one of the great landscape architects of the 18th century.

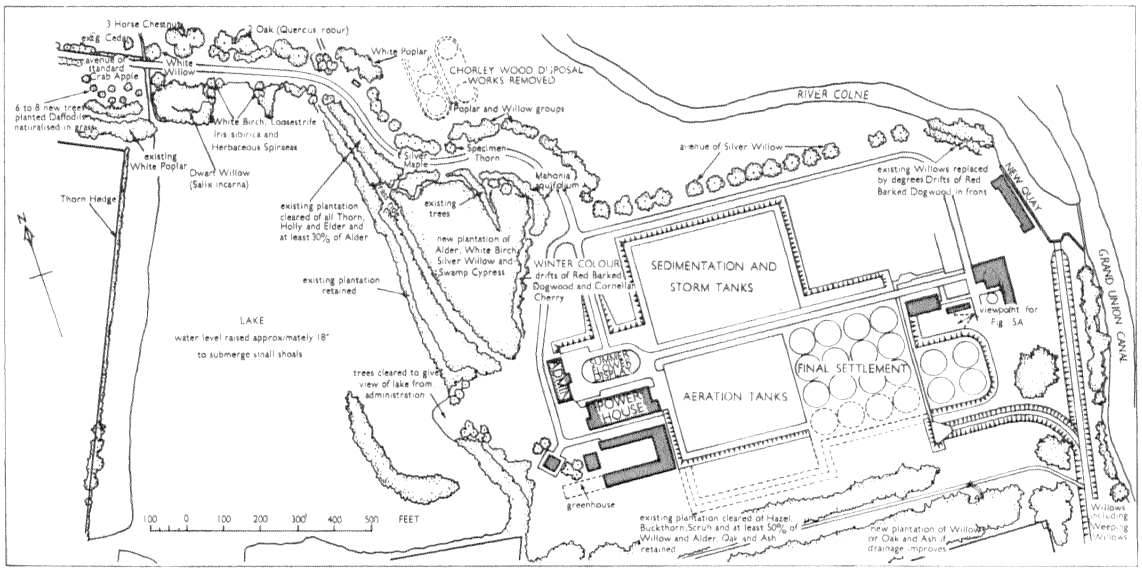
There are, however, some activities which must take place in the green belt and are unsightly, at least for the time being. The working of minerals is an example. Chalk, gravel and clay are needed to make the cement, concrete and bricks of new roads and buildings and they can only be quarried where they occur in nature. The actual operation is temporary, though it may be noisy and intrusive, but the main problem arises after the minerals have been extracted. Worked-out gravel pits in the river valleys become flooded and are sometimes too remote for economic filling with rubble from the town. Some of them remain deserted for many years and often acquire a scientific value from the rare plants that grow there and the birds that make them their home. Some have been adapted for sailing, fishing and water sports of all kinds, for which there is an increasing demand (Fig. 4). Others have been planted with trees and stocked with wild fowl. Dry pits have sometimes been levelled and cultivated or they have been filled with rubbish and then farmed or used for playing fields.

There are also semi-urban uses of land, such as those concerned with public health, which are necessary to a city and have to be provided in the immediately surrounding countryside. Although their presence in the green belt is not ideal from the point of view of its recreational value they need not be unsightly. Reservoirs, indeed, can be an asset to the landscape and even a sewage disposal works can be assimilated by skilful planting and land formation (Figs. 5A and 5B).

Fig. 4. Sailing in a flooded gravel pit at Wraysbury, Buckinghamshire

Fig. 5A. Tree planting and surface modelling in 1960 *at Maple Lodge Sewage Disposal Works, Rickmansworth*
Sheila M. Haywood, A.R.I.B.A., F.I.L.A., Landscape Architect

Fig. 5B.



Defining and Safeguarding a Green Belt

The sketch plan

The first steps in defining a green belt are for the local planning authority to prepare a sketch plan showing the broad nature of the proposal and to submit it to the Minister for approval. If the belt is intended to limit the expansion of a town, or group of towns, the question that will arise is where is the building to take place which would otherwise encroach on the green belt. In a few cases sufficient land can be set aside within or adjoining the built-up area, perhaps by reclaiming derelict land. But as there is an increasing demand for more space for all kinds of urban purposes, it will usually be necessary to provide for building to take place beyond the green belt. The width of the belt has, therefore, to be considered. If it is too narrow, building may just leap the gap and make it no more than an interruption in the urban sprawl. If it is too wide, the alternative locations for building may not be sufficiently attractive and pressure on the green belt may become severe.

The outer boundary of a green belt may with advantage coincide with some easily recognizable topographical feature, such as the crest of a line of hills, a river valley or a main road. A boundary which is so defined finds more ready acceptance from the public than one which relies on a map for its identification.

Procedure after the approval of a sketch plan

When the sketch plan is approved by the Minister, the local planning authority must define the boundaries of the green belt precisely. The proposal is then put forward as a formal amendment to the development plan. At this stage it is open to public criticism and objection, and a public local inquiry is normally held. If, as a result, the Minister intends to modify the proposals, his amendments are also open to public criticism and inquiry. All this takes time and there may be more than one local planning authority concerned, so several years may pass between the approval of a sketch plan and the final establishment of a green belt through its incorporation in the relevant development plan or plans. To safeguard the proposal during this interval, the Minister has asked local planning authorities to apply a restrictive policy to building in the areas shown as green belt on the sketch plan. The rights of the individual are left to the Minister's protection where any particular issue is brought before him on appeal.

The definition of a green belt in detail will raise some difficult questions, particularly concerning land near the edge of a built-up area or on the fringes of villages within the belt. Broadly, if the local planning authority intend that the land shall remain permanently open, it will be included in the green belt. If not, it will be excluded. But they may not have been able to work out in detail their plan for the development of a small town lying within the green belt and may for the moment have contented themselves with indicating that a Town Map* will be submitted later. Until this map is approved by the Minister some uncertainty will persist about the exact boundaries of the green belt round the town. Also, the local planning authority may not have thought it necessary or desirable to define any precise limits to the development of some villages lying within the green belt, though they would be ready to agree to a small amount of building. Some authorities have met this situation by showing on the map that these villages are included in the green belt but explaining in the Written Statement of the development plan the policy they will adopt when applications are made for permission to build.

Keeping a green belt open

When a green belt has been incorporated in the development plan of a local planning authority, it is their duty to carry out the policy prescribed in the

* A 'Town Map' is part of a development plan. It is drawn to a scale of 6″ to 1 mile and shows what land is allocated for building and for different uses.

plan. Development plans are firm in general principle but flexible in detail; moreover they have to be reviewed (though not necessarily amended) at least once every five years. Planning authorities are bound to have regard to their development plans when they make a decision on an application for permission to build. If in so doing they intend to depart from the plan to a substantial extent, they must first notify the Minister, who has the power to intervene if he thinks fit. These are necessary measures to preserve flexibility in detail and to provide for public debate on any substantial amendment to a development plan. They do not imply any wavering on the principle of maintaining a green belt as open country, a principle which has been firmly upheld by local planning authorities and successive Ministers.

London's Green Belt

Its establishment

The approval in 1959 of the last of the development plans of the Home Counties made it possible to speak of London's green belt as a reality and no longer as an elusive ideal. It was the first to reach that stage and it is the largest, so it merits a full description. Its establishment had been urged for many years and it had been given form in the Greater London Plan of 1944. But there was always the danger that it would give way to the pressure for building. That danger would remain to-day but for the transfer of the liability for compensation from the local planning authorities to the Government. Also the building of new towns and the expansion of existing towns beyond the green belt has eased the pressure for the outward expansion of London. It is these things which make the green belt a reality. No physical changes nor further public ownership of the land are necessarily implied.

Proposed extensions

Since the green belt was established in 1959 proposals for substantial extensions have been put forward, either in the form of sketch plans or as amendments to development plans. At the time of writing, none of these have been finally approved, except for a small area round Ascot, though the Minister has announced his intention to approve an extension of the belt in Buckinghamshire. This and other proposals are shown on the map at the end of the book.

Its topography

London's green belt is by no means a topographic entity and derives its unity solely from the metropolis which it surrounds. It can, however, be considered in seven sectors, each of which has some coherence and its own character and scenery.

The south-eastern sector has the Darenth Valley from Sevenoaks to Dartford as its spine (Fig. 6). It is mainly chalk country with some charming villages and magnificent beech woods. Kent County Council acquired Lullingstone Castle and neighbouring land near Eynsford under the London County Council's 1935 scheme (see page 2), while the National Trust owns the historic Knole House (Fig. 7) south-east of Sevenoaks. Lord Stanhope has recently bequeathed to the nation his house and park at Chevening north-west of the town.

The southern sector is based on the scarp of the North Downs which stretches from Sevenoaks to Guildford with the ancient trackway known as the Pilgrim's Way clinging to its face (Fig. 8). Both the Downs and the greensand hills to the south afford magnificent views over the Weald, while the occasional white scar of a chalk quarry gives a dramatic quality to the view of the Downs themselves when seen from below. The scarp in Surrey and the Leith Hill area to the south-west of Dorking (Fig. 9) has been declared to be an 'area of outstanding natural beauty' by the National Parks Commission. Much of it is publicly owned and visited by many thousands of Londoners on a fine week-end. North of the scarp

Fig. 6. The Darenth Valley, Kent

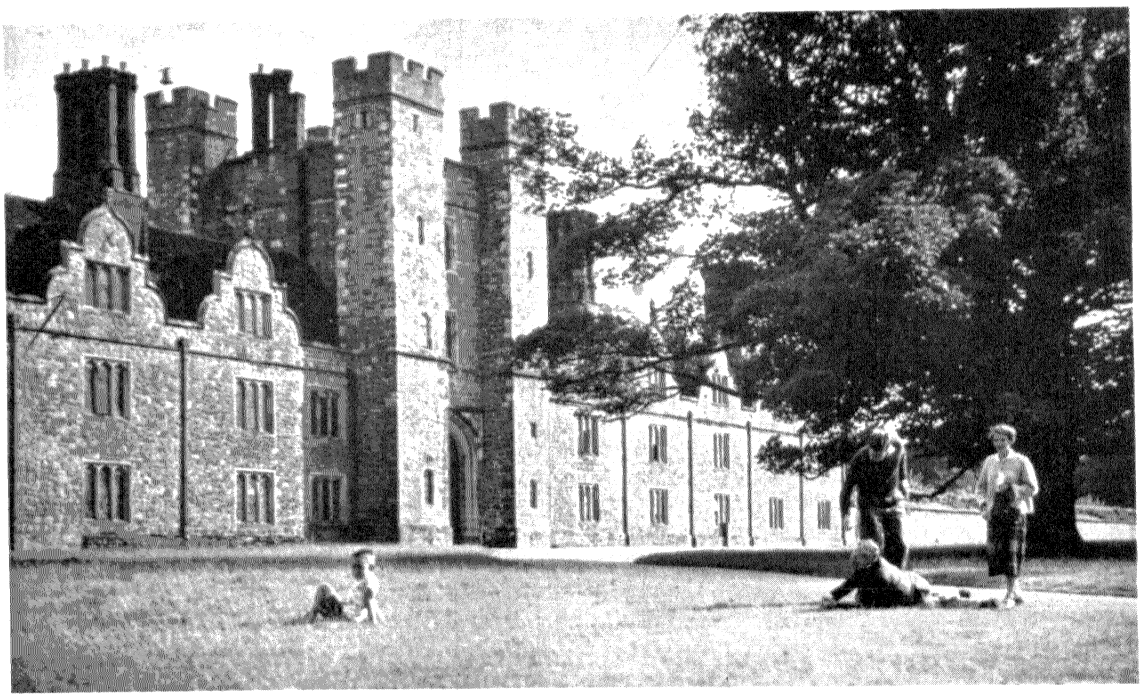


Fig. 7. Knole, an historic mansion near Sevenoaks, Kent. Part of the park belongs to the National Trust

Fig. 8. The Buckland Hills near Reigate, Surrey, part of the scarp of the North Downs

Kenneth Scowen

Fig. 9. Leith Hill, the centre of a favourite recreational area in Surrey owned by the National Trust

there is a substantial area of open country, mostly in Kent, which is well-wooded, relatively remote and inaccessible. To the west of this land building has spread out further and the green areas are fragmented, though what is left sometimes affords fine views to the north over London, notably from Banstead and Epsom Downs. The gap cut in the chalk by the River Mole north of Dorking is particularly attractive and of special interest to geographers. It provides the setting for one of the most beautiful stretches of modern road in the country (Fig. 10).

The south-western sector from Leatherhead and Guildford northwards to the Thames and to Sunningdale has no unifying topographical feature. It is relatively flat land drained by the rivers Wey and Mole which in their meanderings towards the Thames afford many opportunities for canoeing, fishing and other water sports. It contains a number of well-known and much frequented commons, such as Bookham, Wisley (Fig. 11), Ockham, Esher and Chobham, as well as Horsell Common, which H. G. Wells chose as the place where the Martians landed in 'The War of the Worlds'. There are several country houses and parks associated with famous people either as occupants or architects and landscape architects, including Claremont, Esher, designed by 'Capability' Brown for Lord Clive (Fig. 12), and Painshill, one of the earliest of the great 18th-century landscape gardens. Valuable green wedges thrust inwards to the Thames west of Molesey and to the Kingston by-pass at Hook. On the other hand the sector is almost severed by a succession of towns along the main railway line to Woking.

The western sector from Sunningdale to Gerrards Cross is the most seriously fragmented of all. Much of it lies in the flood plain of the Thames where the competition for land is intense and where the green belt serves mainly to prevent the coalescence of

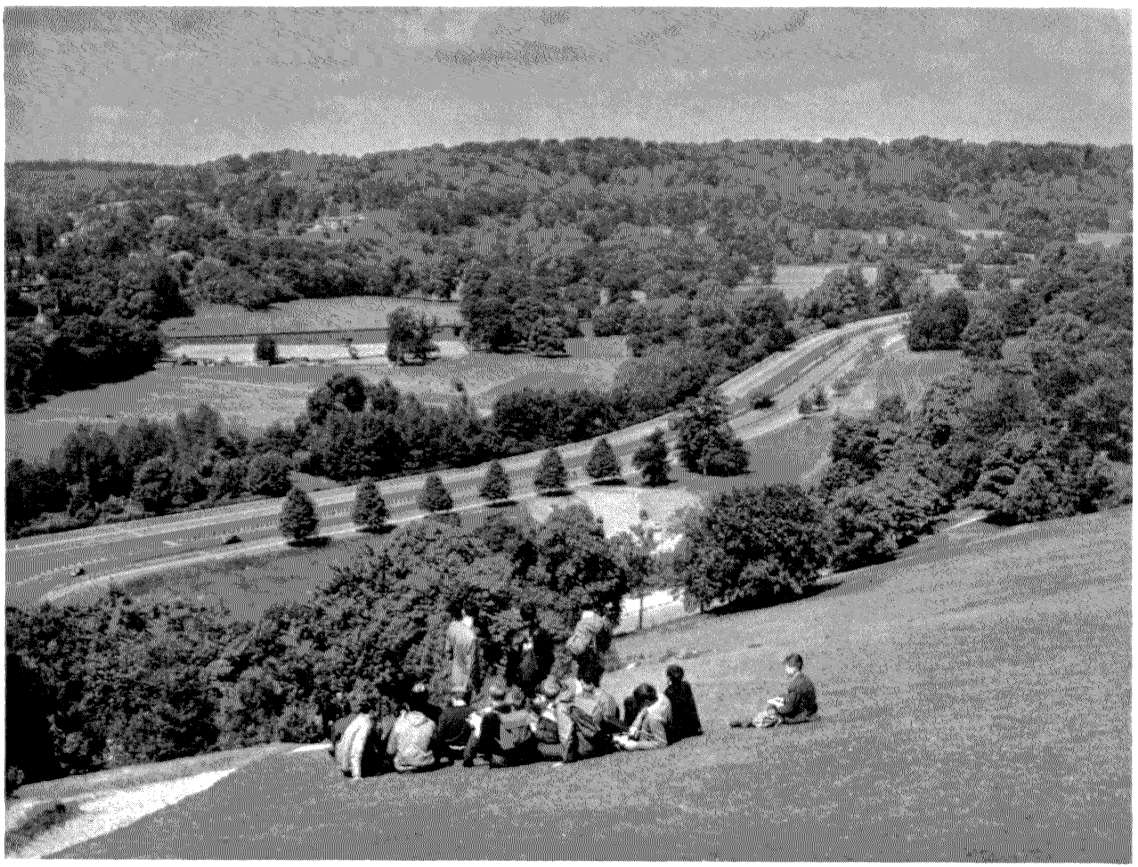


Fig. 10. The Dorking-Leatherhead road from Box Hill. A nature study group in the foreground

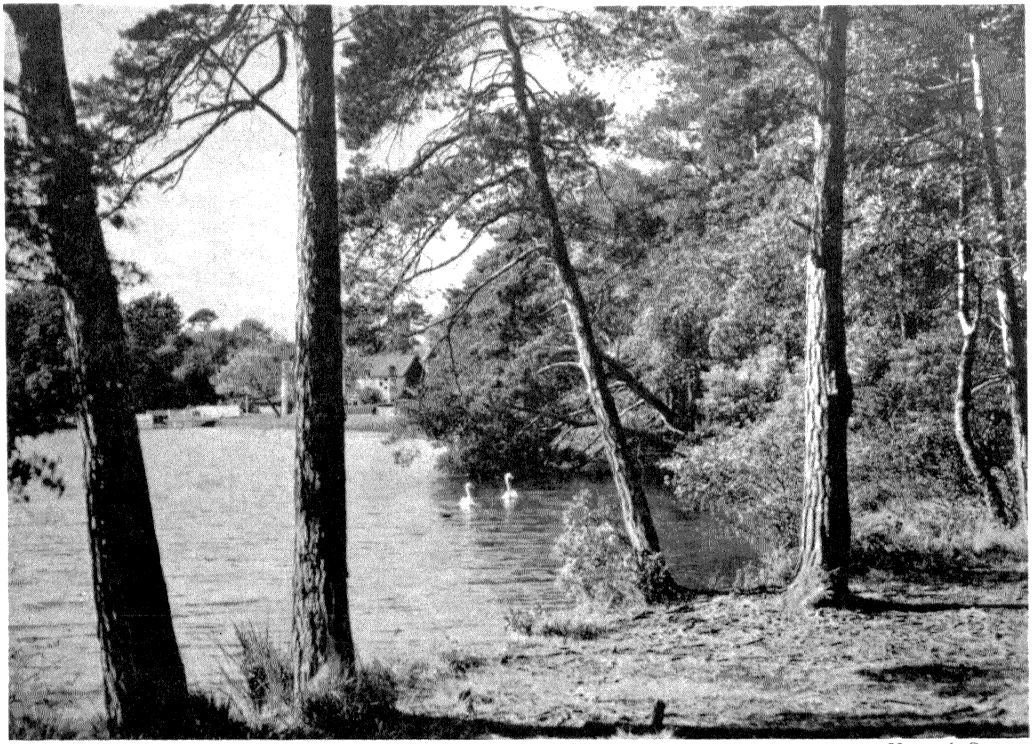


Fig. 11. Wisley Common, Surrey. A favourite picnic place adjoining the Portsmouth Road

Kenneth Scowen

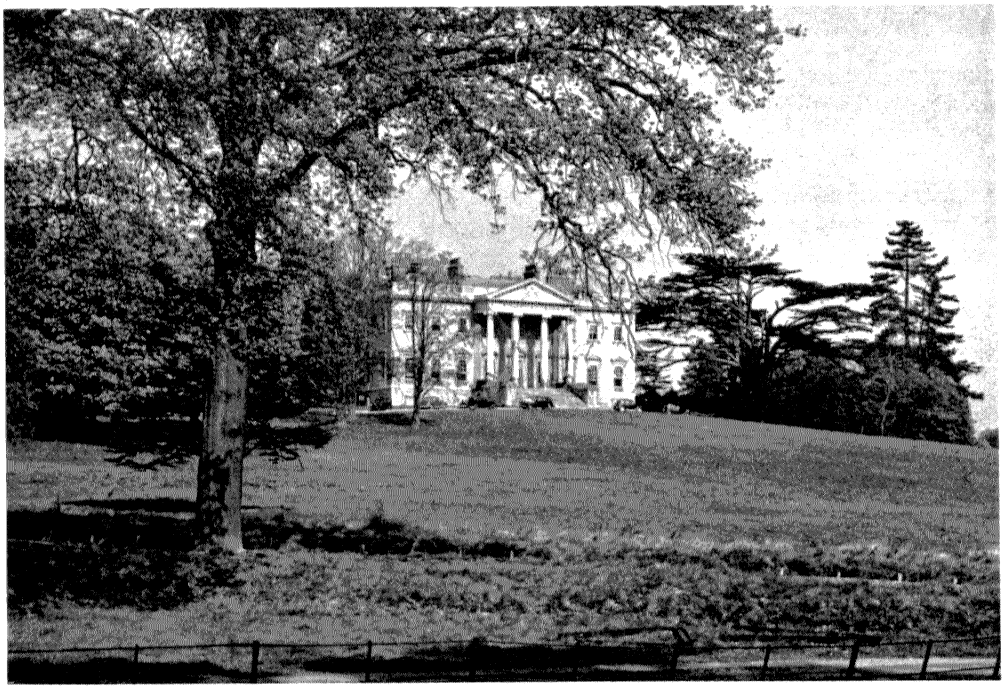


Fig. 12. Claremont, Esher. An historic house, once owned by Queen Victoria and now a girls' school

Fig. 13. Runnymede and West Middlesex from the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial at Cooper's Hill

neighbouring communities or to protect high quality farmland and rich gravel reserves. Major sources of employment on the western outskirts of London, including Slough and London Airport, have created demands for housing and for residential caravan sites, while large areas are taken up by gravel pits and the reservoirs of the Metropolitan Water Board. On the right bank of the Thames near Runnymede the land rises and the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial at Cooper's Hill affords a fine panorama reaching from Windsor Castle to the centre of London (Fig. 13). Immediately to the west, Windsor Great Park provides an effective reinforcement to a rather thin sector of the green belt. North of Slough on a series of gravel terraces lying in a bite out of the Chiltern chalk there is some well-wooded country, much of it secured by acquisition for public enjoyment, including Burnham Beeches and Black Park. Here also is Stoke Poges.

The spine of the north-western sector is the valley of the River Colne, flowing from Watford to Uxbridge on its way to join the Thames. The land beyond is for the most part Chiltern chalk downland, intersected by the valleys of the Misbourne, Chess (Fig. 14) and Gade (Fig. 15). There are few good roads between these valleys and the narrow tortuous lanes and occasional steep gradients help to maintain the remoteness of the area. A tongue of development along the railway from Rickmansworth to Amersham interrupts the continuity of the green belt but not so badly as the almost continuous ribbon of building along the Gade Valley from Watford to Hemel Hempstead. A substantial part of this sector lies within the curve of the Colne Valley, mainly in Middlesex around Harefield and Ruislip. Here is some of the land bought by the County Council under the 1938 Act and earlier, as well as Moor Park, in Hertfordshire (Fig. 16).

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Fig. 14. Latimer, in the Chess Valley, Buckinghamshire

E. W. Tattersall

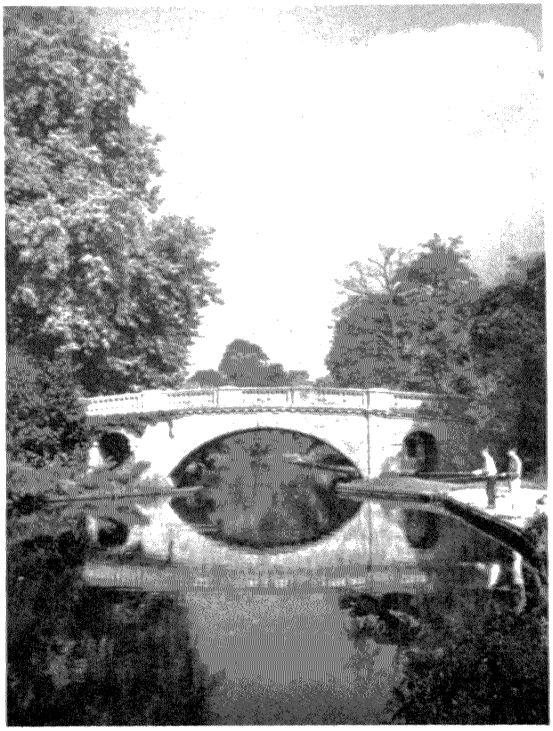

Fig. 15. The Grand Union Canal in the Gade Valley near Watford

The northern sector from Watford to Hoddesdon is for the most part gently rolling land on the London clay. A large proportion has been protected from building by acquisition or by the payment of compensation under the 1947 Act. The inner boundary is prominently marked by the Elstree ridge and, north of Barnet, Dyrham Park and Wrotham Park maintain a sharp distinction between town and country. Further east, Hadley Common, Enfield Chase and Trent Park (Fig. 17) interpose a firm barrier against the outward spread of London. Near Hatfield the green belt comes up to the Lea Valley and includes Hatfield Park, with its historic mansion. Immediately to the east of the Park there is a pleasant rural area around Essendon and Bayford, which extends through Broxbourne Woods (Fig. 18) as far as the valley of the Lea where it flows southward to join the Thames.

The north-east sector comprises the remainder of the green belt from the Lea Valley to the lower Thames. Perhaps its most prominent feature is Epping Forest (Fig. 19), more than 5,000 acres of woodland vested in the City of London Corporation in 1878 after a long struggle against its enclosure. Between the Forest on its ridge and the Lea Valley

Fig. 16. Moor Park, Hertfordshire, now a golf club house

there is a fine wedge of open country stretching from Harlow nearly to Chingford and including land once the manor of King Harold, who is said to have been buried at Waltham Abbey (Fig. 20). This land, as well as that on the western bank, is important for market gardening and glasshouse cultivation. To the east of Epping Forest there is a tongue of building stretching out along the extended Central Line as far as Epping but beyond this lies the Roding Valley, a deep wedge of open country penetrating to Chigwell and through Hainault Forest to Barkingside. Building has extended outwards almost continuously

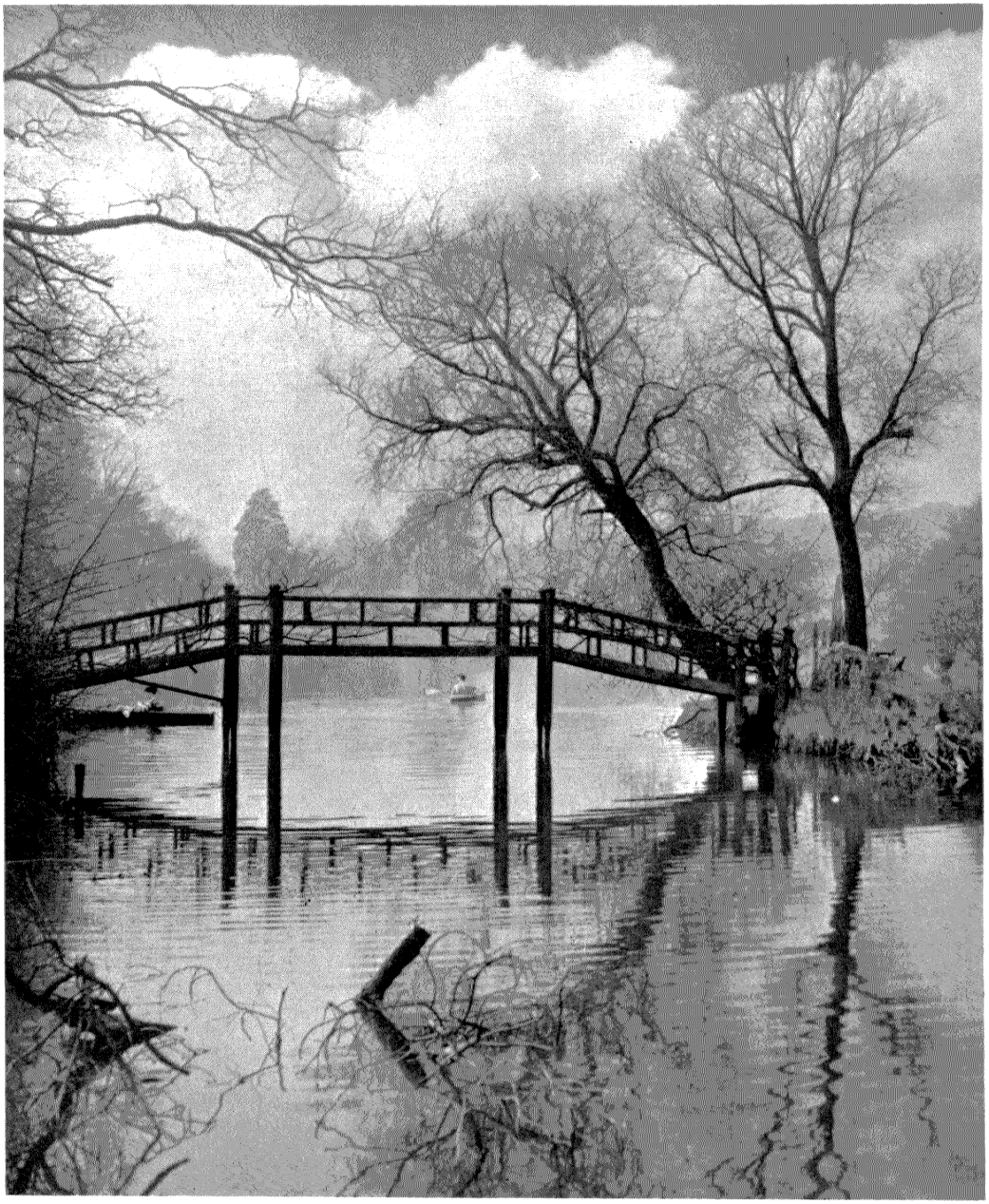

Fig. 17. The lake at Trent Park, Middlesex, part of the grounds of a teachers' training college.

Fig. 18. In Broxbourne Woods, Hertfordshire

as far as Brentwood along the main line and road to Chelmsford, but south of the town the land is fairly open and a large part is low-lying, drained to the Thames by the Mar Dyke. The green belt stops short of the riverside and the chalk quarries which are associated with the manufacture of cement (Fig. 21).

To sum up, London's green belt is an irregular and broken ring of open country around the great city, the use of which contributes in one form or another to the well-being of Londoners. It is as necessary to-day, but for different reasons, as in the days when London was dependent on the agriculture of the surrounding countryside. Increased leisure, higher standards of living, the greater strain of urban life and a growing desire for knowledge and understanding of the arts and sciences combine to invite Londoners to appreciate more and more the value of their green belt.

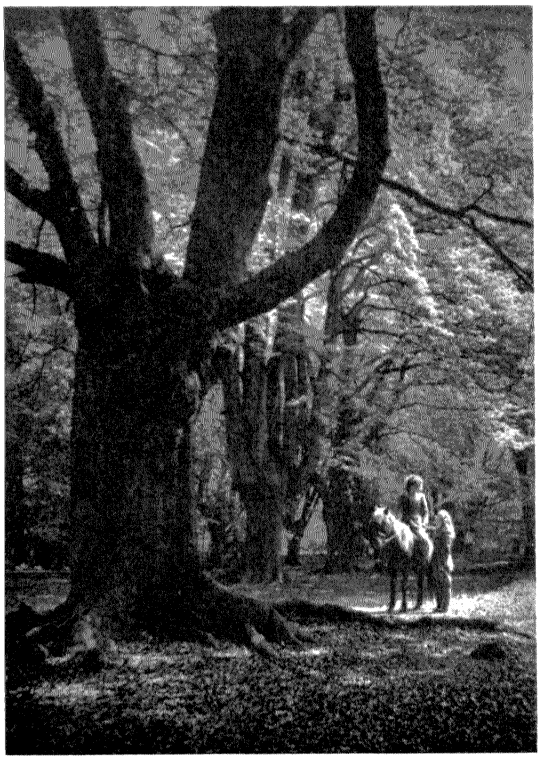

Fig. 19. In Monk Wood, Epping Forest *J. A. Brimble*

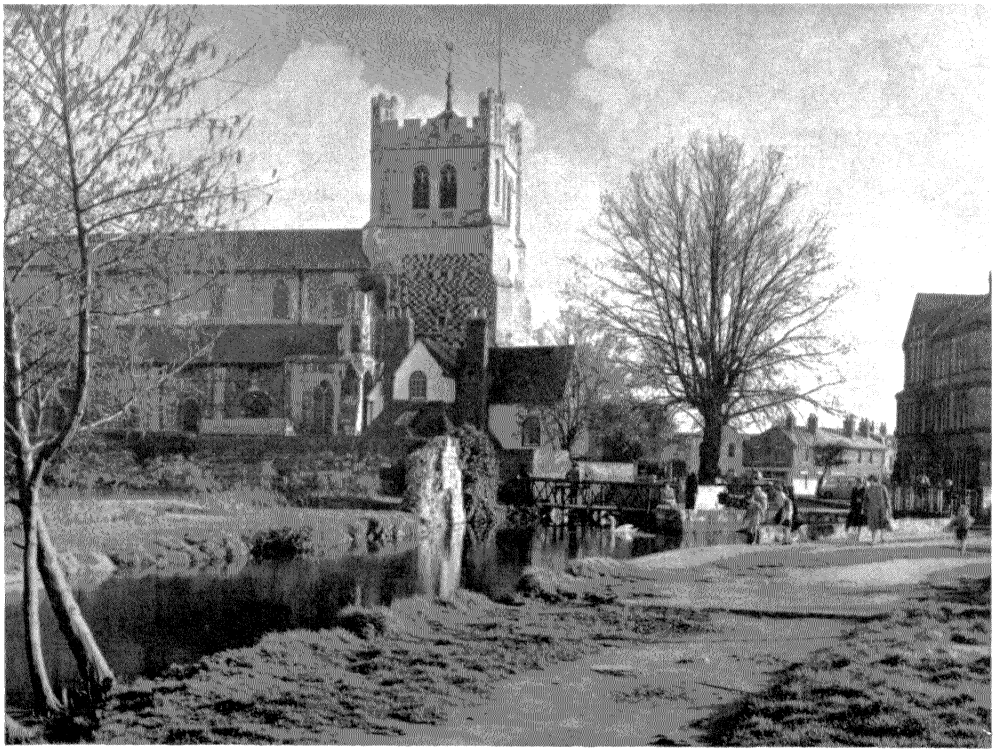

Fig. 20. Waltham Abbey, Essex, founded in the 11th century

Fig. 21. Near Grays, Essex. In the distance the chimneys of the cement works

Provincial Green Belts

The provincial green belts are at various stages in the procedure for their establishment. In some cases, different parts of the same green belt are at different stages because more than one local planning authority is concerned. Those that have received at least approval in principle are briefly described below and shown diagrammatically in Fig. 3.

Tyneside. This is not a continuous green belt around the Tyneside conurbation. In Northumberland it consists of a substantial area to the west and north of Newcastle which embraces attractive country on both banks of the Tyne as far up as Hexham (Fig. 22). The Minister has announced his intention to approve this proposal. In Durham a green belt to separate Tyneside from Wearside has been approved in principle.

York. A green belt encircling York has been approved in principle. The purpose is to safeguard the special character of the city, which might be endangered by unrestricted expansion. The bulk of the land in the green belt is good and pleasant farmland.

West Riding conurbation. The purposes of this green belt are first to prevent the various cities and towns from coalescing, and secondly to girdle the conurbation as a whole. Much of the undeveloped land between the towns has been marred and fragmented by scattered housing, industry and mineral working, as well as by disused pit heaps and derelict industrial sites. Much of the countryside surrounding the conurbation is, by contrast, attractive and even magnificent, particularly to the west and north.

Sheffield-Rotherham. This green belt is intended to prevent the merging of Sheffield and Rotherham with Barnsley in the north, and with Chesterfield in the south, as well as to resist the spread of building into the open countryside east of the River Rother. Sheffield was one of the first cities to consider the provision of a green belt but the need to expand has eaten into some of the land which was provisionally selected in 1938. There is now much need of redevelopment, resulting in pressure for peripheral expansion, mainly to the south-east towards and into Derbyshire.

Merseyside-Manchester. A green belt around Liverpool is proposed from the coast near Southport to the north bank of the Mersey. It is 6 to 8 miles wide except where it adjoins the Liverpool – St. Helens road. Another part continues eastwards around Widnes and Warrington towards Manchester. The main purpose is to shape the expansion of Liverpool and other towns in this area and to maintain open breaks between those which are tending to coalesce. North, east and west of Manchester the green belt is severely fragmented and is not generally attractive landscape. Much of it is low quality grassland but there is almost every other type of land use which can be found on the fringes of a large town. Some of it also is derelict. The eastern boundary joins the Peak District National Park. South of Manchester the green belt is quite different; it is continuous and part of the Cheshire Plain, which is pleasant scenery and mostly good quality farmland, with large areas of parkland and several golf courses.

Wirral - Chester. The green belt extends down the centre and west of the Wirral peninsula as far as Ellesmere Port and continues around Chester to the Welsh border. Sketch plan proposals have been submitted, though they have not yet been approved, for its completion in Flintshire. The purpose is to shape the expansion of the Merseyside towns and to avoid prejudice to the character of Chester which might follow from its fusion with neighbouring urban areas. The scenery is attractive and there are magnificent views across the estuary of the Dee to the Welsh hills beyond.

Stoke-on-Trent. This is a continuous green belt around Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme designed to limit the spread of the urban area and to prevent coalescence with nearby places such as Stone, Congleton and Leek. It consists mainly of farmland and is attractive scenery. The north-eastern boundary is only separated from the Peak District National

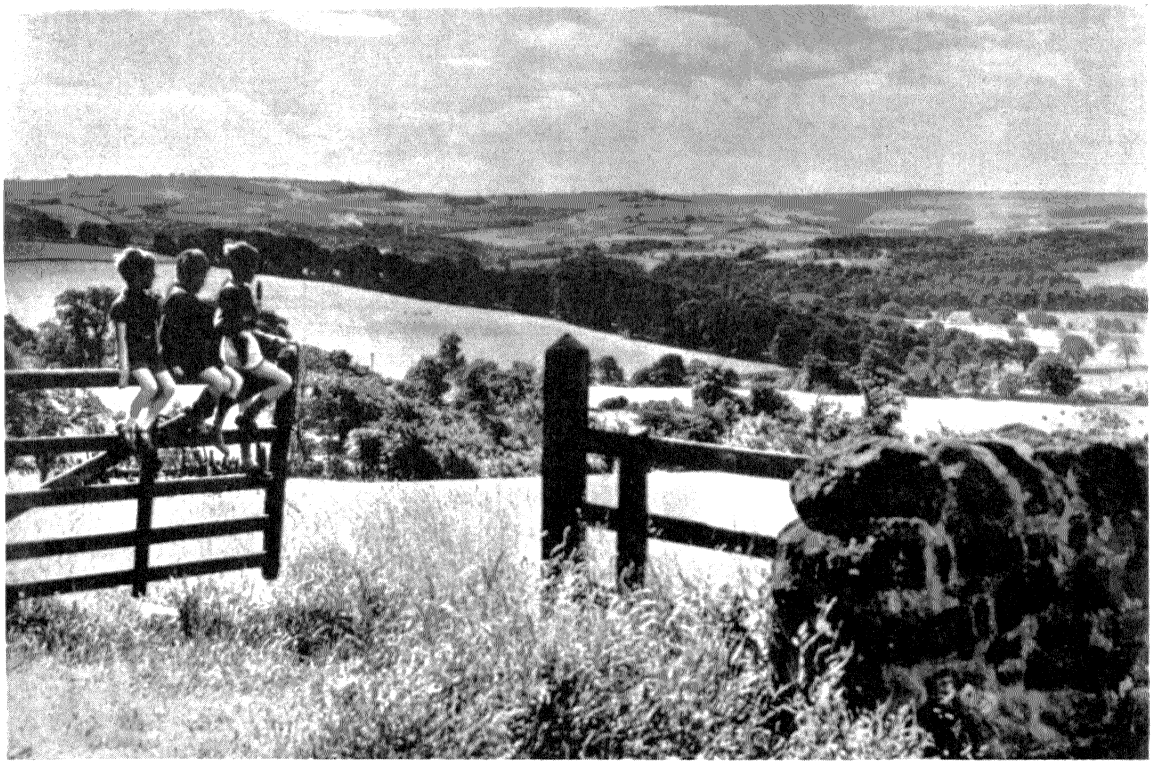

Fig. 22. Near Bywell, Northumberland. Looking south over the valley of the River Tyne in the Tyneside green belt

Park by a strip of land which is rated as being of high landscape value.

Nottingham and Derby. A gap of only two or three miles of open land separates Nottingham from Derby and the primary purpose of this green belt is to keep this land open. But whilst the Derby part is mainly confined to this purpose, the Nottingham part entirely surrounds the city, separating it also from Mansfield and from many of the scattered colliery villages. Much of the landscape north of the Trent is marred by collieries and sporadic development and open-cast mining has greatly affected the appearance of the Derbyshire part. The land south of the Trent, on the other hand, is mainly pleasant to see and good for farming.

Birmingham and Coventry. This green belt fulfils two principal purposes; first, to restrain the outward growth of the main built-up areas and, secondly, to keep them apart. It separates towns such as Redditch, Bromsgrove, Kidderminster and Stafford from the West Midlands conurbation and helps to maintain the separate identity of Nuneaton and Bedworth. The land is almost all agricultural and its scenery is pleasant in varying degree. In the northern tip is Cannock Chase, which has been declared by the National Parks Commission to be an 'area of outstanding natural beauty'; that is to say that, while not having the outstanding scenic qualities of a National Park, the landscape is of more than local value and significance.

Gloucester and Cheltenham. The purpose of this green belt is to separate these two towns which are tending to coalesce. The land is almost all pleasant agricultural land at the foot of the Cotswold escarpment.

Bristol and Bath. All the three reasons for the establishment of a green belt apply in this case. The purposes are to restrict the outward expansion of Bristol, to separate Bristol from Bath and to protect the special character of the latter city. The landscape in the southern part of the green belt is very fine and the escarpment north of Bristol overlooking the River Severn is also attractive. The remainder is mainly pleasant farmland.

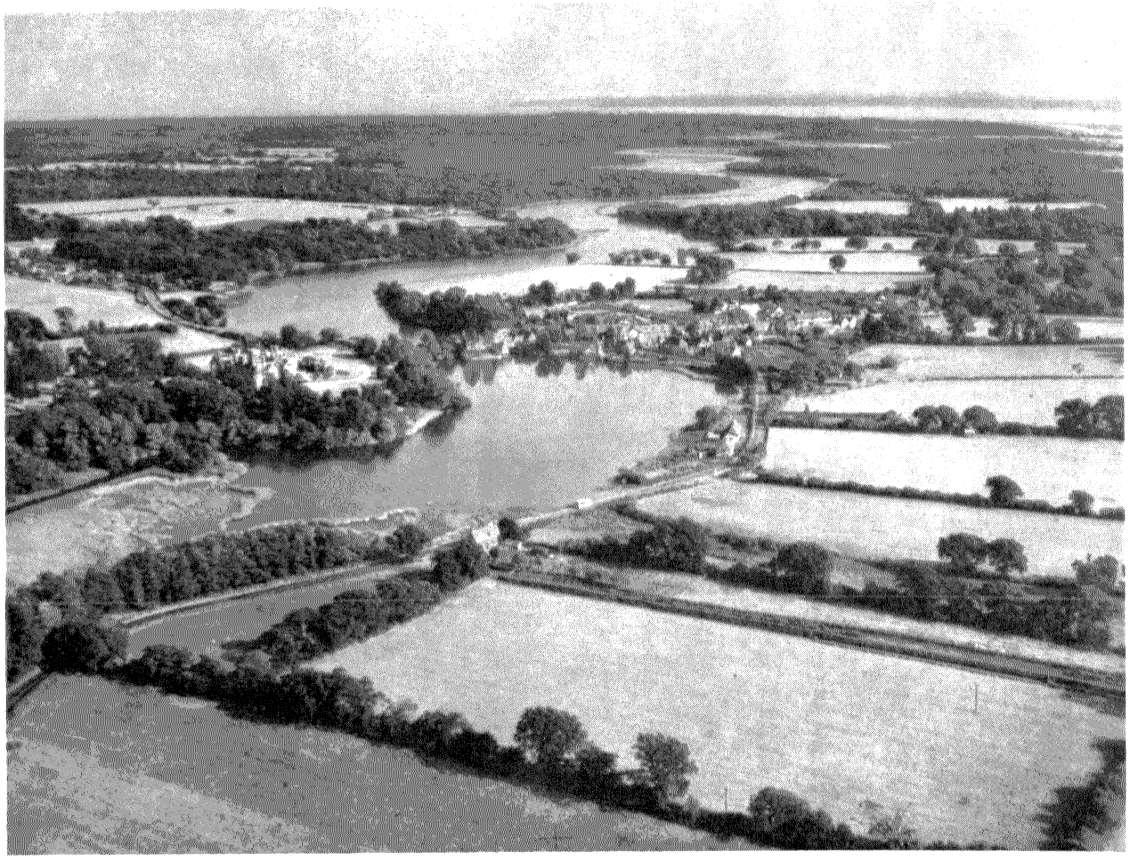

Fig. 23. Beaulieu and the Beaulieu River in the Hampshire Coast green belt

Oxford. Oxford has become well known as a city with a dual personality. It is famous both as a university town and as a prosperous manufacturing centre. Its character and setting have been impaired by its phenomenal growth during the last forty years and the green belt seeks to prevent it from growing any bigger. The landscape is not oustandingly attractive but it is intimate in scale and gentle in character. Most of it is average to good land used for mixed farming.

Cambridge. Cambridge has also suffered from being both a university and a manufacturing town, though to a lesser extent than Oxford. There is a settled policy to limit its size, together with that of the surrounding villages, to 125,000 population. The green belt is one of the tools used to implement that policy and so help to preserve the city's character. The land is used for arable farming and is mainly flat but some higher ground to the west and the Gog Magog Hills to the south are also included.

Hampshire Coast. The Minister has announced his intention to approve this green belt, though with modifications to the original submission. Its purpose is to keep apart the three main urban areas centred on Bournemouth, Southampton and Portsmouth. It is generally attractive country which includes the New Forest, the north shore of the Solent lying to the west of Southampton Water (Fig. 23) and the popular yachting centre on the Hamble River. The north-eastern tip joins the declared 'area of outstanding natural beauty' which continues over the South Downs as far as Eastbourne.

The Implications of a Green Belt

The pressure on green belts

There is a strong demand for more space for urban living. One of the many reasons is that despite pre-war forecasts of an eventual decline, the population of the country is still increasing. The number of separate families is growing even faster. There is plenty of work and greater prosperity, so that more people can afford separate and better homes. More land is required for new schools, hospitals and other public purposes, as well as for new roads and car parks to cope with the increasing traffic. If this need for more urban land encounters the restrictions implicit in a green belt, there are bound to be sharp increases in the value of building land and pressure to encroach on the green belts. Planning authorities and successive Ministers alike have resisted this pressure, have from time to time reiterated their intention to maintain the green belts and have supported their words by day to day decisions. They have done so while fully realizing that land must be provided elsewhere to meet those needs which are not to be allowed in the green belt.

The allocation of building land

The land that is at any time available for development is defined on the relevant development plans which local planning authorities (county councils and county borough councils) were required to prepare by the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. Sufficient building land was allocated in these plans to meet estimated needs for twenty years ahead but in some places this land has been used up quicker than was anticipated. Pressure to build on land that was not allocated has mounted and land values have increased sharply wherever permission to build could be got. This has led to many requests for more land to be made available, often at the expense of a green belt.

Review of development plans

Development plans have to be reviewed at least once in every five years after their initial approval. Such a review provides an opportunity to allocate more land for building if there is not enough already. In 1960 the Minister thought it advisable to issue a circular to local planning authorities on the subject. He said that he was anxious to see more land provided for development (where that did not conflict with important planning objectives) and to encourage fuller use of land within towns. Where a town was encircled by a green belt, adequate land should be selected beyond it, both for house building and for factories and offices. In this way employment as well as people would be encouraged to move out.

The journey to work

Fears have been expressed that the effect of a green belt will be to make people travel longer distances in their daily journey to work. This will, indeed, be so if the outward movement of people in search of homes is not accompanied by a similar outward movement of employment. There are people who, though working in London or some other great city, choose to live at a distance and are prepared for the inconvenience and expense of a long daily journey. But most prefer work near their home if it can be got and the aim of policy is to bring about this freedom of choice.

Decentralization

The problem is to reduce employment in the heart of the conurbation and to encourage its growth in towns which, though partly dependent on the great city, are independent to the extent of providing sufficient local employment for the people who live there (Fig. 24), as well as shops and opportunities for entertainment and recreation. Looked at in this way, a green belt is seen as a means of shaping the expansion of a city on a regional scale and not just an attempt to combat the forces making for growth. The maintenance of the green belt is therefore closely linked with decentralization, which was the kernel of the Greater London Plan and is still Government planning policy for London and other great cities.

The green belt and the Greater London Plan

London provides the greatest test of the success of

Norman Smith

Fig. 24. Offices in the Town Square at Stevenage, Hertfordshire

this policy. Abercrombie's plan, simply stated, was to reconstruct the crowded inner areas of London in phase with a move of people and industrial employment to new towns and other places beyond the green belt. The plan had to be based on a number of assumptions, which seemed reasonable enough at the time when they were made. One of these was that no new industry would be admitted to London and the Home Counties except in special cases; another was that in consequence, and according with national trends, the population of the region would not increase. It followed that the problem as Abercrombie saw it was to redistribute, mostly within the region, the existing number of people and jobs.

He could not have foreseen the great increase in office employment in London. Rising international trade, the need to be near overseas banks, shippers and underwriters, the greater complexity of business and the larger units in which it is concentrated, have all made their contribution. Many offices were destroyed during the war and it was some time before scarce resources could be spared for new office building. When that time came, there was not only the destruction to be replaced and fifteen years of inactivity to be made good but also this extra demand to be met. The result was an office building boom.

Planning authorities and successive Ministers have tried hard to restrain it and but for their efforts employment in London would have increased even faster than it has. The Government have set an example; many civil servants in headquarters offices have been accommodated in various places outside London, including some of the northern towns. But the public authorities need the co-operation of firms now carrying out work in London which could be done outside. Quite recently, the difficulty of recruiting staff, the high rents of office space in central London and the wear and tear of peak-hour travel have led to some decentralization. The movement is gathering momentum, as can be seen from the property advertisements page of daily newspapers.

Nor could Abercrombie have foreseen that national population trends would change after the war and that there would be a steady increase, of which the London region would have more than its share. In the event, the population of the region increased by nearly 350,000 between 1952 and 1960, and in this period there has been a steady outward movement of population both within the region and across its boundaries. The number of people living in the County of London has declined at an average rate of about 20,000 a year for some time past; and there are fewer people living in the other inner areas.

In the face of the increase of employment in the centre of London and the outward movement of population, there may be some temptation to say that the Greater London Plan has failed and to give up the struggle. Nothing could do more injustice to the very real achievements of the last fifteen years. Migration to London from the west and north, which was such a feature of the pre-war years, has been reduced to a mere fraction of what it was. Eight new towns with their own factories, shops and offices, have been established beyond London's green belt and some of them are nearing completion. Existing small towns have been and are being expanded under the Town Development Act, 1952, by arrangement between the London authorities, primarily the London County Council, and the local authorities concerned.

These achievements, however far they fall short of hopes or expectations, have made possible the definition of the green belt and its successful defence against numerous attempts at encroachment. To sacrifice it and revert to peripheral expansion would mean the loss of much of London's precious recreation space and the open country being pushed further away from those who live in the centre. London would become larger and more suburban; more roads and railways would have to be built and more time would be spent in travelling between home, work-place, shops and places of recreation.

The Maintenance and Improvement of a Green Belt

The appearance of a green belt

Once a green belt is defined the aim will usually be to maintain its rural appearance. Any buildings which are built there should be in keeping with the character of the area and this applies not only in the green belt itself but in any villages which lie within it, even though they may be formally excluded.

The powers of planning authorities to ensure that new building is in keeping with the rural appearance of the green belt are limited. They can say what shall not be done but they cannot say what shall be done, except as a condition of permission for some development or if they acquire the land themselves. Their principal weapon, the control of development, is essentially negative and however well it may be administered it is no substitute for good design in the first place. Planning authorities can control the external appearance of buildings and most of them take great care and trouble in doing so, but no statutory power can elicit a good design from a bad designer. Those who build have the responsibility of ensuring that what they build will be good to look at and nowhere is this more important than in green belt villages. But this does not mean that design of novel character is necessarily out of place. Authorities in deciding what to allow and what to reject have to distinguish between what is indifferent or illiterate and what is merely unusual. Designs which appear to conflict with what is there already often arouse indignation. This is quite understandable for few people welcome change, particularly in such an evocative setting as a village and a green belt village at that. But most villages and small towns contain buildings of all ages, which differ very much in character from one another but enrich each other by their contrasting styles and materials (Fig. 25). So the modern building, if it is honestly designed, will in its turn enrich the village and should be welcomed. Attempts to maintain harmony by copying the styles of the past are seldom successful.

Minor structures, such as buildings incidental to the enjoyment of a dwelling house, and most agricultural buildings, are ordinarily exempt from planning control and the Minister is generally reluctant to withdraw these exemptions. Those who construct such buildings are relied upon to use care in their setting and design, so that they do not intrude on landscape or village. Nowhere is this more important than in a green belt. Nor is it only private developers who need to exercise care. Public authorities responsible for providing water, power, sewerage and roads carry their own responsibilities. They can do much by attention to detail and by the employment of skilled designers to lessen the impact of their works on the countryside. The rural appearance of a green belt is easily destroyed by man-made objects used for public works, some of which might be appropriate enough in a nearby suburb. Concrete kerbs, lamp posts and fences, tangles of overhead wires, standard traffic bollards and the treatment of an open space as though it were a town park are some examples.

Public authorities of one kind or another can do a lot to maintain and improve the appearance of a green belt and its usefulness for recreation. They can acquire land for public enjoyment, construct car parks, plant trees and open up views over the countryside from some favoured vantage point. They can remove disused buildings and reclaim derelict land. They can fill worked-out mineral pits with refuse and restore the land to use. They can improve and maintain footpaths and bridle ways and provide sign-posts for those that have been determined as public rights of way.

The role of the individual

The appearance of the green belt depends also on the activities of numberless individuals. The planning authority can prevent buildings being erected but they cannot ensure that land is used for agriculture; they can stop trees being felled or fine buildings from being demolished, but they cannot ensure the proper maintenance of woodlands or the repair of a building which is not a public danger. The residents and landowners in the green belt can contribute substantially to its maintenance or destruction, but

Fig. 25. Contrasts in scale and architecture at Farnham, Surrey

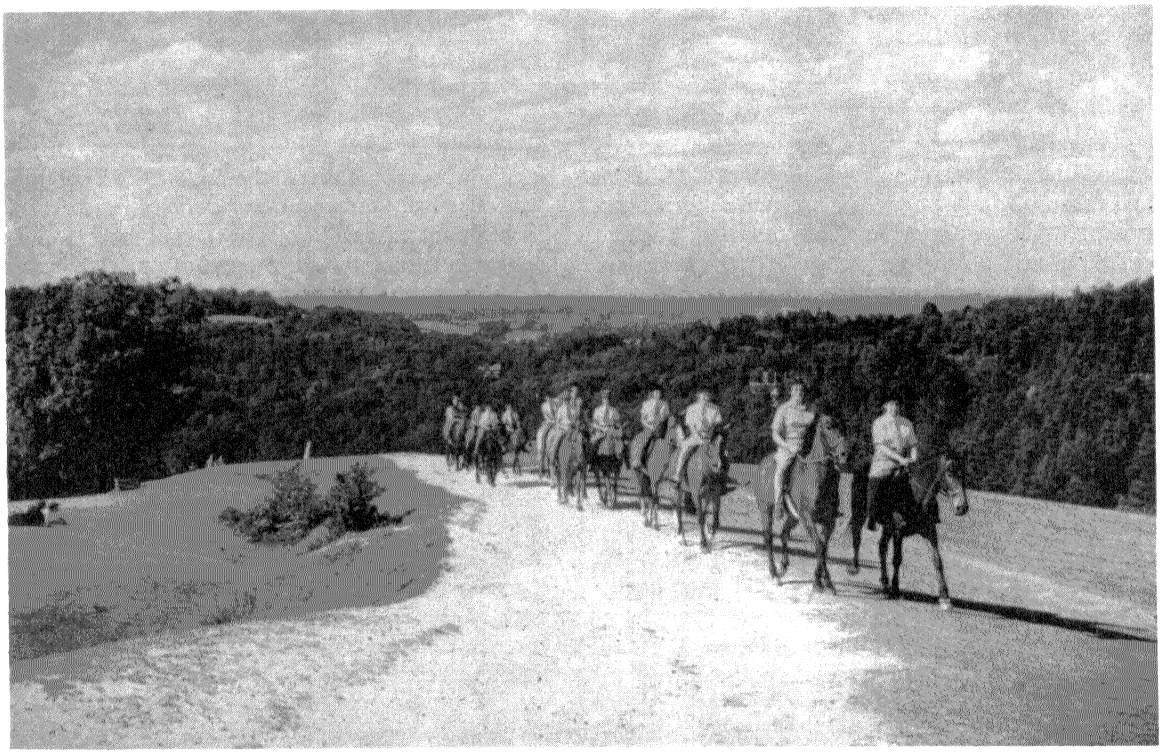

Fig. 26. Riders at Box Hill, Surrey

Fig. 27. The River Thames at Laleham. An everyday scene in summer

its appearance depends to an even greater extent on the relations between those who live and work there and those who use it for their recreation, for riding, cycling, walking, motoring, fishing, sailing, boating, shooting or hunting (Figs. 26 & 27). Many of these activities imply some conflict with agriculture. The very presence of large numbers of town dwellers, even if they scrupulously follow the Country Code*, means some disturbance. If there is trespass or pilfering, the farmer will be antagonized. Furthermore, the townsman requires some concessions from the farmer for his satisfaction in the beauty of the landscape, such as care in the siting and design of farm buildings and the preservation of trees. So the maintenance of the green belt is not only a matter of control by the planning authority but also a question of how it is used by the townsman in his search for recreation and of how the land is managed by public and private landowners.

The public are entitled to expect that, once a green belt is established, the authorities concerned will effectively carry out any policies necessary to its maintenance as a belt of open country and to the enhancement of its rural appearance. But public authorities in a democratic country cannot for long pursue a policy which does not have public support. So the future of a green belt depends in the end on public opinion. This requires understanding of the issues involved. The function of a green belt as a place for the recreation and enjoyment of the townsman is well understood. It differs from, though it does not conflict with, its function as a means of shaping the expansion of a town or group of towns. The former may have more appeal but the latter is the primary purpose of a green belt. The aim of this book has been to explain why this is so and thus to contribute to that informed public opinion on which the future depends.

* Country Code for Visitors to the Countryside, 1951. H.M. Stationery Office. Price 6d.

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