Chapter 1
A lost Arcadia: the historical emergence of Green Belt thinking in the UK

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The idealisation of the countryside and the evils of the city

Throughout history the relationship between the city and its countryside has exposed tensions. As far back as the first century BC, Cicero praised the virtues of ‘civitas’ while Horace expressed nostalgia for the countryside: *Omitte mirari baetae fumum et opes strepitumque Romae* (‘do not admire the smoke and riches and din of blessed Rome’).¹

In the Renaissance the ideal of Arcadia was portrayed in art as the beautiful, secluded area where its inhabitants led simple, unsophisticated yet happy lives – in apparent contrast to the bustle and vice of the city. In the 18th century this ideal began to filter into England. An early idealisation of nature occurred in the great age of 18th-century landscape gardening. Following William Kent, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown (1715–83) perfected a form of ‘gardenless’ landscape, complete with undulating topography, lakes and clumps of trees, that was in stark contrast to the formal garden compositions of the 17th century. This may have been a form of English Arcadia, but it was essentially an imposition of a ‘created’ natural landscape. Such designs began to go out of fashion as the burgeoning Romantic movement sought the dramatic power of untamed nature.

The vision of the countryside as a form of Eden – a natural habitat for humankind to live in innocent harmony with nature – gained credence in the English Romantic movement. One of the main themes of Wordsworth
and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) was a return to the original state of nature, building on Rousseau’s philosophy that humanity was essentially good but had been corrupted by the influence of society. This thinking occurred at a time of unprecedented change in English society. Between 1604 and 1914, 5,200 Enclosure Acts were passed and 6.8 million acres of common or ‘waste’ land were removed from public access and use. Paradise, or at least Arcadia, was in decline. The Agricultural Revolution and the Enclosure Acts fundamentally altered the face of the countryside. They caused a drift to the cities and fuelled the beginnings of industrialisation.

Wordsworth and Coleridge were inspired by the Lake District, a seemingly wild natural landscape, and their ideas were in marked contrast to the ideals of control, rationality and order that underpinned the Enlightenment. This chimed with an erosion of traditional religious belief that relocated the notion of the divine into nature – later defined by T.E. Hulme as ‘spilt religion’.²

The growth and rapid industrialisation of cities in the first part of the 19th century posed problems concerning the physical and moral health of these new ‘citizens’ and around governance (or at least the containment of potentially dangerous concentrations of poor people). The idea of a *cordon sanitaire* around cities was not new, however. As early as 1580 a proclamation of Elizabeth I (incorporated into an Act of Parliament in 1592) forbade the construction of ‘any new buildings of any house or tenement within 3 miles from any of the gates of the said city of London’.³ The proclamation was a response to the capital’s growth, its increasingly unsanitary conditions and the need to provide food for a burgeoning urban population. In reality the motivation was principally a response to the influx into the city of labour that threatened to weaken the monopoly of the guilds. Although the result was the designation of a broad agricultural belt around the city walls, it was never systematically enforced. As with subsequent measures to protect the countryside and limit urban growth, it was not without a political agenda from powerful sectors of society.

What is perhaps noteworthy about Elizabeth I’s proclamation was the fact that a form of urban sprawl was considered a significant enough problem to warrant legislation. In stark contrast to most other European cities, where warfare was still a constant threat, London was able to disregard the limits of a set of defensive walls and to grow outwards. In the 17th and 18th centuries the capital was on the cusp of rapid growth that saw it expand in a series of ‘suburbs’ – the Great Estates. New districts such as Mayfair and Belgravia were at the limits of horse and foot travel,
but the advent of the railways enabled London to sprawl almost without limit. In contrast many other European cities still retained their defensive walls; these defined a border with the open countryside that lasted, in many cases, until the middle of the 19th century. The European city was more enclosed and compact, while London had already embarked on its journey towards suburbanisation.

London’s new ‘suburbs’ became mainly the preserve of the fashionable and wealthy, with the poor largely confined to older inner areas and those surrounding the docks and industry of east London. The reaction against the problems of 19th-century urban life was understandable. Living conditions for the urban poor were often appalling, and many of the new industrial cities lacked any form of governance. Manchester, for example, was only incorporated as an administrative district in 1838, by which time its population exceeded 150,000. Edwin Chadwick’s report in 1842 highlighted shocking statistics in Manchester, including a mortality rate of 57 per cent in children below the age of five and an average life expectancy of around 37 years of age. Chadwick argued that it would cost less to provide decent housing than to support destitute families.

The condition of the 19th-century English city is well documented by writers such as Charles Dickens, reformers such as Charles Booth and commentators such as Friedrich Engels. In 1865 John Ruskin described London as ‘that great foul city of London – rattling, growling, smoking, stinking – a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore’. Dickens’ description of ‘Coketown’ (believed to be a fictitious version of Preston) both taps into a nostalgia for a more ‘innocent’ period and sums up contemporary perception of the 19th-century city:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it … tall chimneys out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down…

The cholera epidemics of the 19th century (attributed by Dr John Snow in 1854 to a contaminated water supply) finally initiated the movements for urban reform and the birth of the modern town planning system. Exacerbating these problems in the growing metropolis was the impact of alcohol. The 18th-century gin craze had prompted John Wesley's
proclamation against alcohol and the rise of teetotalism as a movement in the 1820s. But alcohol was seen as only one of the symptoms of a dissolute and potentially dangerous urban proletariat, the lower echelons of which were described in Booth’s London poverty maps as ‘the vicious and semi criminal classes’. The stage was set for new models of living and these were provided by reformers such as the Quaker John Cadbury and the Congregationalist Titus Salt. Their model settlements were well planned, sanitary and based around the ideals of hard work, self-improvement and teetotalism.

Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) set out a ‘manifesto’ for the Gothic Revival arguing that innovations, particularly from the Industrial Revolution, had subsumed the spiritual content and vitality of architecture. Underpinning his proposals were the ideals of craftsmanship, honesty in the use of materials, cultural memory and beauty inspired by nature. Influenced by Archibald Alison, his thinking portrayed the countryside, rather than the city, as the ‘natural’ abode of humanity. In *Modern Painters* (1843–60) Ruskin references Wordsworth and his celebration of nature; similar ideas emerge again in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), which contrasts the dense urban form of medieval Venice with the wild nature of the lagoon, its boundary. His thinking influenced William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as a generation of social reformers.

The 19th century was an era of reform and philanthropy. The problems arising from poor urban living conditions, particularly their impact on public health, led to the Artisan Dwellings Act of 1875. This set basic standards for the design and spacing of new housing and empowered local authorities to clear slums and construct social housing. Octavia Hill, a friend of Ruskin, campaigned for improved housing conditions for the urban poor. She also recognised the importance of open spaces that were easily accessible to the urban population: ‘the life-enhancing virtues of pure earth, clean air and blue sky’. In 1883 she wrote:

There is perhaps no need of the poor of London which more prominently forces itself on the notice of anyone working among them than that of space. ... How can it best be given? And what is it precisely which should be given? I think we want four things. Places to sit in, places to play in, places to stroll in, and places to spend a day in.

Hill’s legacy remains today in the form of Wimbledon Common, Hampstead Heath and Parliament Hill. Along with J.S. Mill, Canon
Rawnsley and William Morris, she was an early member of the Commons Preservation Society, whose actions in 1866 saw the removal of railings around Berkhamsted Common – an early example of direct action. The Society went on to merge with the National Footpath Society in 1899 and remains active today as the Open Spaces Society.

The National Trust, founded in 1895 and given statutory powers in 1907, was established with the express purpose of preserving important tracts of countryside and buildings through acquisition (either by gift or public subscription) and with the explicit objective of allowing public access. The Trust is now one of the largest private landowners in the country, responsible for 610,000 acres. Other areas of open land were also being safeguarded. Epping Forest, for example, was purchased with the stated aim that it ‘shall at all times keep Epping Forest unenclosed and unbuilt on as an open space for the recreation and enjoyment of the people’. On the occasion of a royal visit in 1882, Queen Victoria declared ‘It gives me the greatest satisfaction to dedicate this beautiful forest to the use and enjoyment of my people for all time’.

These late 19th-century reform movements should be seen as part of a societal response to the problems of the city and the conditions of its inhabitants. Local government was in its infancy and the Victorian state was nothing like as extensive in scope as its modern counterpart. The reform movements were closely linked to acts of philanthropy that grew out of Non-conformism. The ideals of social justice were powerful drivers behind this movement and access to the benefits of the countryside were one aspect of this. This was entirely different from the idea of the countryside being protected in order to limit urban growth. The countryside surrounding cities was now seen as a resource for the enjoyment of urban populations, a belief that was to be the main driver behind the early attempts to create ‘Green Belts’. Fears about the consequences of urban sprawl were at that time separate concerns.

The growth of the railways in the second half of the 19th century gave rise to the modern low-density suburb, where clean air and access to nature could be combined with access to work and entertainment in the city. New typologies of low-density housing led to the city’s rapid outward spread. Although suburbs might overcome many of the perceived evils of the 19th-century city, they also gave rise to fears of the loss of countryside through urban sprawl. Indeed Ruskin raged against the impact of urbanisation when it reached Croxteth Lane in Dulwich. However, the new and powerful institutions of local government were able to deliver improved housing, libraries, schools and municipal parks, and there was new interest in town planning, a profession separate from architecture.
and embedded in urban improvement. Social campaigners and thinkers sought new forms of settlements, places that espoused the social ideals of the family, hard work, proximity to nature and, of course, temperance.

The spirit of these new urban forms was famously set out by Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928). An enduring vision for ‘utopian’ living is epitomised in his ‘Three Magnets’ diagram that depicted pull factors from both towns and rural settlements leading to the creation of a vision of ‘Garden Cities’. These would-be settlements provided space where the benefits of town and countryside might co-exist. The ‘ideal’ city that Howard proposed would possess the following physical characteristics:

- Beauty of nature, social opportunity
- Fields and parks of easy access
- Low rents, high wages
- Low rates, plenty to do
- Low prices, no sweating
- Field for enterprise, flow of capital
- Pure air and water, good drainage
- Bright homes and gardens, no smoke, no slums

These characteristics suggested a clear physical division between industrial areas and residential districts, as demonstrated in the eventual construction of Letchworth. Howard’s work, a radical response to the 19th-century city, was underpinned by the social ideals of ‘freedom’ and ‘cooperation’. But it was different to the work of the social reformers who were concentrating on alleviating the conditions of the poor and destitute within the confines of the city. Howard seemed to accept that the Garden City was a utopian experiment when he suggested that his vision was only realisable by a pool of talented professionals with stakeholder interests in the built environment – architects, artists, medical men, experts in sanitation, landscape gardeners and so on. The Garden Cities movement resulted in a series of experimental suburbs including Bedford Park, Hampstead and Ealing Garden suburb. As London’s population continued to grow, imitations emerged such as Merton Park in South London and Gidea Park in East London – both built during the first part of the 20th century. The good life that involved access to nature was reserved for the few, not the many.

There is no doubt that Howard’s work was important. It was an innovative response to the prevailing urban conditions. The key reasoning behind his approach was decentralisation and polycentricity in order to alleviate traffic congestion and reduce journey times to city centres.
He proposed a radial distribution of small cities around a larger central city, with each city separated by a form of proto-Green Belt. His concept is represented by the ‘City Cluster’ diagram (Fig. 1.1). Similar experiments occurred in Germany during the early 20th century with the establishment of Garden Cities separated by forests and open land. Later in the UK Barry Parker experimented with Howard’s concept when he created Wythenshawe, formerly in Cheshire and now in the City of Manchester. This Garden City was surrounded by a 415-hectare Green Belt, at the low density of housing then associated with a higher quality of life.

**Fig. 1.1** Ebenezer Howard’s ‘City Cluster’ diagram, 1902.

*Source: Howard, Ebenezer. To-Morrow: A peaceful path to real reform (1898) and Garden Cities of Tomorrow (1902).* London: S. Sonnenschein.
However, it is difficult to understand the enduring appeal of Howard’s work today – well over a century later – when the urban condition is so different. The renewal programmes of the 20th century dealt with the deep-seated urban problems of the preceding century and gave urban populations access to open space for play and recreation. While decent housing and access to open space are still important, other issues such as social inequality, the exclusion of sectors of society from the opportunities of their neighbours, poor employment prospects, poor quality housing, disparities in health and life expectancy, obesity, air quality and sustainability are the new ‘wicked issues’ facing urban policy makers. These structural issues are centred in urban living and require urban-based solutions. In addition the UK is multicultural, at least in its urban centres. The idea of a small group of well-meaning individuals defining a general societal need and imposing a utopian rural/suburban solution on broad groups of society would seem ridiculous today. Or would it?

Apparently not. In 2014 the Wolfson Economics Prize was awarded for the design of a new Garden City and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced that the government would invest £300 million in ‘the first proper’ Garden City in Ebbsfleet, Kent. In June 2019 Lord Matthew Taylor told a conference on ‘Building Sustainable Communities’ that if each of England’s rural local authorities built one new 5,000-home ‘garden village’ during the next decade it would deliver an additional one million desperately needed new homes. He suggested that this would answer the concerns of most residents as development would no longer be ‘forced into their back yards’.19 Perhaps this strange obsession with Garden Cities and the uncritical assumption that suburban living is a utopia may be explained by the power of branding. Garden Cities do have a resonance that New Towns lack. Furthermore, in the spirit of Thatcherism, their occupants would be mainly nuclear families and home owners.

The first Green Belts – for the urban or rural population?

While the utopian response sought a solution outside the realities of the city, a group of urban planners including Patrick Geddes combined urban geography, sociology and anthropology to analyse the urban condition. Their work focused on finding sensitive solutions through ‘constructive surgery’ rather than wholesale change through heroic deeds. Instead of trying to fit people into a theoretical model of a perfect society, Geddes
placed the individual, and his or her needs, at the centre of his urban philosophy.

By the early 20th century London’s expansion was causing increasing alarm. The growth of railway and road corridors presented a real possibility of conurbations merging along chains of linear development. Geddes combined his ideas of urban renewal with an interest in ecology and nature conservation, proposing ‘Green Belts’ to separate urban settlements. These ideas influenced Raymond Unwin’s work in the 1930s, resulting in the establishment of London’s first Green Belt. Howard had presented a simpler case for Green Belts as agricultural buffer zones around his Garden Cities. In his vision the surrounding countryside was largely functional; it would contain uses such as allotments, large farms and light industry, comprising a soft transition zone between urban land uses. Geddes saw the countryside in a broader context, a place for agriculture, certainly, but also a place for nature. This represents a significantly different approach to the conundrum of the city and its hinterland. Arguably it is his work that forms the foundation of more complex thinking about the city and its ecological region, ideas that are now being developed in the field of landscape urbanism (see chapter 4). Instead of considering open countryside as a barrier to urban growth, the interrelationship of city and countryside offers complex synergies. This relationship requires radically different approaches, particularly in the face of rapid and irreversible climate change.

The idea of enclosing urban areas with designated (and protected) countryside that was specifically for the enjoyment of their residents was not a new one – the earliest planned example is probably the Adelaide Park Lands of 1837. These Park Lands encompass both banks of the River Torrens and separate the City of Adelaide from Greater Metropolitan Adelaide, the capital of the state of South Australia. In continental Europe the issues associated with rapid urbanisation, slums, polluting industry, public health and transportation were common to most cities and urban planners were beginning to employ landscape strategies as a foil to the city. Broad boulevards were being used for urban renewal, from Haussmann’s remodelling of Paris in the 1850s to the Ringstrasse in Vienna. The Ringstrasse, built between the 1860s and 1890s, was effectively a ring road, lined with grand buildings around the old city. Its form was determined by the path of the city walls that it replaced and its width imparted the dimensions of an urban park, separating the city centre from its suburbs. Beyond the Ringstrasse the city was free to expand (Fig. 1.2). In London, from 1890 onwards, various proposals had been put forward for some form of Green Belt around the city. One of the earliest came from
Lord Meath (1841–1929), a Conservative politician who, together with his wife, was active in many charitable initiatives. He had been impressed by the broad boulevards of American cities such as Chicago and proposed a series of ‘broad sylvan avenues’ to connect open spaces in London. At the same time Meath also published proposals emphasising the amenity benefits of a ‘Green Girdle’ of variable size and depth. In 1901 William Bull MP published proposals for a half-mile wide ‘Green Girdle’ around London. In 1911 George Pepler proposed a strip of land around London that would also contain an orbital transport corridor at a cost of around £4.8 million – a huge sum for the time (Fig. 1.3).

These ideas were far from the concept of a Green Belt. They were driven partly by transport requirements and partly by the idea of introducing a green ring for amenity use and allotments into the fabric of the

![Map of Vienna from A Handbook for Travellers (1858).](image)

city. As such, they were heavily influenced by Howard’s models of Garden Cities. Attractive as they might have seemed, the ideas were devoid of any mechanism – political, administrative or financial – for implementation. This was partly rectified by the Housing and Town Planning Act 1909, which empowered local authorities to draw up land use plans. Dreams could now be legislated for, but without any form of metropolitan government they would remain dreams.

The idea of a Green Belt as it is meant today was proposed in 1919 by the London Society in its ‘Development Plan of Greater London’. Together with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), it proposed a continuous belt (of up to 2 miles wide) to prevent urban sprawl. Beyond this new development could occur. These proposals predated the modern town planning system which controls

Fig. 1.3 Plan showing the ‘Green Girdles’ of William Bull and Lord Meath and of George Pepler, published in The Sphere (1901) and Garden Cities and Town Planning (1911).

development through granting planning permission. Therefore the outward development of London was still effectively unregulated. Without any means of preventing development, the proposed solution was the public purchase of land.

The London Society saw the Green Belt as a largely agricultural zone. It proposed that land could be acquired and safeguarded using funding from agricultural rents. While this would bring land into public ownership, it did not address the growing issue of public access. Urban populations with spare income and leisure time were often prevented from accessing the open countryside by landowners. The mass trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932 illustrates this conflict. Around 700 ramblers walked by prearrangement onto this privately controlled moorland; in subsequent skirmishes with gamekeepers, six of them were arrested and jailed. The harshness of the sentences they received was widely condemned and a subsequent protest at Winnats Pass attracted around 10,000 people. Such conflicts highlighted the mounting problems of access to open space for urban populations.21

The relationship of the city to its countryside was stimulating debate across Europe. In 1913 the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning, founded by Ebenezer Howard, started to draw together standards of international best practice. In 1926 the International City Planning Conference considered ideas about regional decentralisation and the construction of satellite towns (with green space in between them). The London conference in 1935, attended by Raymond Unwin in his capacity as London County Council chief planner, discussed 'planned rural development and the preservation of the countryside'.22 Some papers urged the preservation of the open countryside for recreation and food production in the face of advancing suburbanisation. German delegates presented alternatives to the centralised city in the form of agricultural settlements; these were based on the concept of Heimat, closely aligned to Nazi philosophy. They argued that this paradigm of rural life would alleviate overcrowded cities, provide employment and increase food production. In contrast the Italian architect Luigi Piccinato proposed to eliminate the distinction between urban and rural planning. He argued that planners should consider the town and the countryside as a single whole.23

The first Green Belt for London was formally proposed by the Greater London Regional Planning Committee (GLRPC) in 1935. The proposal stemmed from the work of Raymond Unwin, one of the instigators of Letchworth Garden City. In 1927 the GLRPC had been established with Unwin as its first technical adviser. Significantly the
GLRPC included the representatives from the London County Council (LCC) and authorities within a 25-mile radius of London. Although it had no statutory powers, there was for the first time a forum for strategic planning at a regional level. Unwin’s first report (1929) proposed an agricultural buffer around London. By his second report (1933), Unwin’s thinking had evolved to suggest a wider, although not continuous, belt of recreational and amenity land. This was influenced by a survey in 1933 revealing that in the absence of government powers or funding there had been an alarming loss of recreational land to development (8,500 acres) around London.

The 1932 Town and Country Planning Act had introduced some controls over the development of land. However, these were weak and did not provide a basis for the restriction of development through blanket zoning policies. In the absence of effective planning powers, the implementation of the Green Belt was down to purchasing land or using covenants that would restrict its development. The LCC Green Belt loan scheme was introduced in 1935. It allowed the LCC to provide loans to surrounding district councils to acquire land or negotiate covenants.

Table 1.1 shows the LCC contributions to such purchases between 1935 and 1961. The concept of government loans had already been established.24 Between 1930 and 1934 the Ministry of Health had given loans to councils to purchase 1,455 acres of land. Some areas of Crown land, although restricted in theory to achieving ‘best consideration’, had also been designated as Green Belt, sometimes through a degree of subterfuge by civil servants who were sympathetic to the objectives of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). Some used creative arguments

<table>
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<th>Area</th>
<th>LCC Contributions</th>
<th>Area safeguarded (acres)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buckinghamshire</td>
<td>£101,849</td>
<td>5,059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>£119,950</td>
<td>4,471</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hertfordshire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>£66,309</td>
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<td>Middlesex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
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<td>3,754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croydon</td>
<td>£36,019</td>
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</tr>
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to allocate land for military purposes or aerodromes, effectively preserving its open nature. For example, the 380 acres of Fairlop Plain in north-east London was secured through designation as an aerodrome.

The stated purpose of the LCC-sponsored Act of 1935 was ‘to provide a reserve supply of open spaces, not necessarily continuous, but as readily accessible from the completely urbanised area of London as possible’. The underlying objective was reformist and radical – to provide access to the countryside for the urban population. This is important and will be examined later in this chapter. The first Green Belt was seen as an integral part of London, providing space for the enjoyment of the population rather than a barrier to growth. The LCC offered to make grants available to purchase open land and pledged £2 million over the next three years for this purpose. Within 14 months some 18,300 acres had been purchased at a cost of £713,000. By 1938 a remarkable 68,000 acres of open countryside and agricultural land had been safeguarded. The Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938 enabled the LCC to consolidate its work on establishing the Green Belt. The Act severely restricted the erection of buildings on the Green Belt except where they were ancillary to the use of the land. It also required local authorities on London’s extremities to define Green Belt areas on scaled maps and enabled local authorities to make bye-laws for the management of the land.

In the absence of any formal means of granting or refusing development, the only way of preserving it from development was to have a controlling interest. The Act granted powers for public bodies to take ownership of Green Belt land. This was cumbersome and expensive, but it did link the specific designation of Green Belt with beneficial use (agriculture) and public access (leisure and nature conservation). It should also be noted that in the post-Depression period land was relatively cheap. In 1926 the average price per acre was £30, but this price dropped further through the 1930s. Today average prices range from £8,000 to £20,000 per acre. At the same time inheritance tax, first introduced at 15 per cent in 1894, rose to 40 per cent in 1919, 50 per cent in 1930 and 60 per cent in 1939. In such circumstances agreements to transfer land through bequests to public bodies were increasingly plausible. Finally, purchasing land for the enjoyment of all in perpetuity was very much in the spirit of the age, complementing the work of institutions such as the National Trust and moves to open up access to the countryside through footpaths and rights of way. Municipal authorities such as the LCC were powerful and interventionist. The idea of acquiring land for recreation was as much a part of urban planning programmes as buying land for new housing or roads.
Section 3 of the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938 allowed local authorities and parish councils to acquire land by agreement, through compulsory purchase, as bequests or through entering into restrictive covenants with landowners. One of the stated uses of Green Belt land was camping – an activity that epitomised the spirit of opening up recreational use of the countryside. Land purchase continued through and after the Second World War. By 1944, in addition to land safeguarded through agreement and covenant, 25,000 acres had been purchased, with a further 1,126 acres bought by 1961 (Fig. 1.4). There was public access to 41 per cent of this land, the remainder being agricultural.

The policy of land purchase was remarkably successful. It was also politically popular. The needs of access to open countryside for

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**Fig. 1.4** Diagram showing land purchased by the London County Council under the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938.

recreation might have been one of the driving factors, but it was the shires and district authorities that had to implement it. Their motivation was strong since their own populations comprised significant numbers of middle-class people who had opted to move out of London. They valued access to the countryside and the preservation of its open and rural character. By 1938 Essex, Middlesex and Surrey had safeguarded 42,200 acres of Green Belt.\(^{27}\)

Local government was remarkably creative in securing land for Green Belt. As well as the outright purchase of land, the agreement of restrictive covenants and bequests, the weak planning powers from the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act were used creatively by some districts to trade development consents for areas of land that might be purchased at discounted rates or protected by covenant. This was an early example of ‘planning gain’.\(^{28}\) Another method was to threaten the compulsory purchase of land and then settle out of court. These trade-offs included agreements to ‘sterilise’ land from future development as well as covenants that allowed occupiers to enjoy the land during their lifetimes but to pass it to the district council thereafter. Some Crown land was designated for military uses, effectively preserving its open nature. Other districts acquired manorial rights dating back to the Norman Conquest. These were rights to use land without actually owning it, for activities such as hunting or grazing. Such manorial rights secured Upminster and Epsom Commons as Green Belt.\(^{29}\)

The 1930s saw remarkable progress in securing a Green Belt based on preserving the countryside and enabling public access. There seems little doubt that this was a broadly popular movement driven by creative government for the public good. There was both a degree of altruism from some landowners in agreeing restrictive covenants due to a genuine desire to preserve the heritage of the countryside and a recognition that ultimately their own properties and estates would benefit if the rural setting could be preserved. Landowners might relinquish ownership, but not the control of amenity.

**Limits to growth – post-war reconstruction**

In the inter-war period the London conurbation grew rapidly. Sir Patrick Abercrombie’s London Plan sought to address this by containing London’s sprawl within a literal ‘Green Belt’ of undeveloped land. The first recognisable version of London’s Green Belt appears in the County of London Plan (1943) that addressed five particular urban ‘defects’:
• Traffic congestion
• Depressed housing
• Inadequacy and the poor distribution of open space
• The mix of housing with industry
• Urban sprawl and suburbanisation

The ideas were developed further in Abercrombie’s Greater London Plan of 1944 (Fig. 1.5), where four roughly concentric rings around London based on residential density and land use were proposed. The dense urban inner ring was surrounded by a lower density residential ring, surrounded in turn by a Green Belt. Beyond this was a fourth ring that contained agriculture and a series of New Towns. The Green Belt was to be anything from 1 mile to 6 miles wide (although Duncan Sandys MP argued that it should be up to 10 miles wide). The Green Belt was defined as ‘a buffer between the expansion of London on the one hand and the regional communities along with farming on the other’. Furthermore, the Green Belt was seen as both an agricultural zone and a continuation and completion of the urban park system. As such it was intended to meet both the agrarian and recreational needs of the London region.

The Plan envisaged that the Green Belt would be connected by ‘green wedges and parkways’ to the central areas of London. It also stated that ‘a good deal of this land which immediately adjoins the towns should be in full recreational use’, although it went on to concede that the picturesque element of villages surrounded by productive agricultural land was, in itself, a pleasing element. The emergence of agricultural land as a key component of the Green Belt reflected the wartime traumas that forced the cultivation of all available land to feed the population under the ‘Dig for Victory’ programme.

In many ways Abercrombie’s proposals for the Green Belt should be seen as a strategic concept rather than a specific set of proposals. There was no political entity beyond the LCC boundary (corresponding to today’s central London boroughs) and therefore no authority with the remit or powers to implement it. The Plan also contained proposals for new orbital and radial roads and the Green Belt was one of the mechanisms to prevent the coalescence of settlements along transport corridors. Within London, the Plan proposed that all existing open spaces should be protected from development, that a variety of open spaces be established and that a series of parkways should be created to allow residents to walk between the major open spaces, unimpeded by traffic. The Lea Valley would become a regional park and other new parks would be created in areas of open space deficiency – generally the poorer
neighbourhoods. These included Mile End Park in Tower Hamlets and Burgess Park in Southwark.

The Abercrombie Plan was light on implementation. This is not surprising at a time when the UK was on a war footing, with its economy centrally planned and largely controlled by the state. Abercrombie looked forward to post-war reconstruction where the state would be the major player in providing housing, infrastructure, schools and open space.
Although compared to today the state continued to be a major agent behind housing and social programmes, the weaknesses of the UK economy from the end of the 1940s until the 1970s meant that there were never sufficient resources available for planning on the scale that Abercrombie envisaged.

The introduction of the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1947 fundamentally changed the ways in which the Green Belt could be established and, consequently, the way in which it functions. That legacy, both good and bad, is with us today. Effectively the Town and Country Planning Acts removed unrestricted development rights from landowners. This form of confiscation or nationalisation was in keeping with the radical policies of the Attlee government that nationalised coal, steel and railways and set up a universal health and social welfare system. The right to enjoy one’s property is, however, deeply embedded in the British psyche: it has been hard fought for and defended. Control over development rights was a radical but essential response to the complexities of economic life in the post-war period.

The Town and Country Planning Act 1947 required local authorities to produce development plans, a process that allowed open space – whether parks or open countryside – to be formally protected. It brought the obvious advantage that land purchase agreements were no longer required to safeguard land. This was particularly important in the post-war period when public funds were severely constrained and prioritised for reconstruction and the creation of the Welfare State. The downside, however, was that one of the key purposes of Green Belt, that of public access and enjoyment (proactive policy), became secondary to restrictions on development (restrictive policy). In other words, the Green Belt ceased to be seen as a resource for the active enjoyment of urban populations. Instead it became a zone that restricted development, arguably for the benefit of those who lived in it. This policy shift was significant but has largely been overlooked. It is revisited in chapter 3 which examines policy responses to the ongoing problems of urban growth.

The Green Belt enshrined

The consolidation of Green Belt policy that largely remains today was enshrined in Circular 42/55. Underlying the Circular was ‘the importance of checking the unrestricted sprawl of urban areas, and of safeguarding the surrounding countryside against further encroachment’. The Circular did not supersede the Green Belts Act 1938, but it did
acknowledge the difficulties that local authorities faced when purchasing land for the Green Belt. Establishing control over development enabled authorities to take a completely different approach to the Green Belt – one that was considerably less costly and time consuming to implement. The Circular urged local authorities (wherever it is desirable) ‘to check further growth of a large built-up area; prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another and preserve the special character of a town’. It stipulated that Green Belts should be several miles wide in order to ensure ‘an appreciable rural zone around all built-up areas’. It accepted a ‘strictly limited amount of infilling or rounding off’ of existing towns or villages, but specifically stated that in urban areas:

> every effort should be made to prevent further building for commercial purposes; since this, if allowed, would lead to the demand for more labour, which in turn would create the need for the development of additional land for housing. (!)\(^{35}\)

The emphasis was clear. The outward growth of London and other cities was to be constrained. The Green Belt had become a spatial buffer zone. Open land was valued regardless of its value for public access or environmental issues. Residents of the rural areas affected quickly rallied to the cause. These rural hinterlands were mainly wealthy, Conservative-voting heartlands and were not to be touched. The justification was both a fear of the outward growth of the city and the pervasiveness of the paradigm of the English countryside. The desire to protect rural property values from erosion by an influx of the urban poor was rarely acknowledged, but is clearly in the shadows of this legislation. The urban poor were to be rehoused beyond the Green Belt in a series of New Towns. The basis of Circular 42/55 is essentially anti-urban. The evils of the city were to be contained, and planning policy allowed this to happen.

Contextually this policy needs to be seen against the specific needs of the period. Post-war reconstruction meant that new housing was required on an unprecedented scale and new light manufacturing industries needed efficient road networks and a skilled labour force. The ideals of planners such as Abercrombie were based on rational, modernist principles of the separation of land uses, zoning and efficient transport. The need to combat the ills of the pre-war period were evident in Abercrombie’s enlightened thinking on open space, parks, schooling, health and lower density housing. The idea of rebuilding inner urban areas at the old densities was unthinkable. The model was for lower density suburbs – as characterised, for instance, by the rebuilding of
Canning Town’s Keir Hardie Estate. The New Towns helped to reduce densities in central London and allowed for re-planning and renewal to provide much needed parks, school, roads and welfare facilities. All of these required additional open land either within an extended Green Belt (that was being designated at the same time) or beyond it. The ability to plan new settlements at the same time as creating a much larger Green Belt is a brief example in the UK of integrated spatial planning on a regional scale. In some ways this spatial dispersion of the city was the realisation of the ideas of Howard, rather than Geddes.

The regulation of urban sprawl was, of course, a welcome result of the Town and Country Planning Acts and the creation of Green Belts. The outbreak of the Second World War had largely halted suburban house building, freezing the urban edge. The subsequent designation of Green Belts – often very tightly drawn around the edge of existing settlements – did not result in a rational urban edge to cities such as London. Maps of the edge of London today show this clearly: streets enter the countryside like tendrils, only to be frozen in time. Suburban growth had never been planned to end as an incomplete project. Chapter 3 considers the implications of this in more detail.

Until the mid-1980s London’s population was in decline, with growth occurring in the surrounding counties. The implication of London’s population decline was that any pressures for expansion into the Green Belt had been relieved. At the same time, between 1947 and the mid-1980s, the Green Belt around London expanded significantly and there is no doubt that the policy was popular. Attitudes towards the perceived failings of the early New Towns and overspill estates fuelled a move against further New Towns and urbanisation in general. The policy was reappraised in the Clawson study of Green Belt restrictions in 1973. Its main conclusions were:

- Containment. The amount of land converted from rural to urban uses has been minimised and also compacted
- Suburbanisation. A growing spatial separation of the new residential areas from the main employment centres
- The inflation of land and property values

This study demonstrated that the Green Belt might be working effectively according to the objectives of the 1955 Circular, inasmuch as it had contained sprawl, but that there were downsides as well. ‘Suburbanisation’ was occurring, with residential areas becoming separated from areas of work, particularly industry. This was significant since lower density
suburban areas were likely to be more reliant on the private car. The construction of the M25 motorway, completed in 1986, was a response to this; it became almost immediately one of the busiest orbital roads in Europe, with some sections handling nearly 220,000 vehicle movements a day.\footnote{39} The second issue was the inflation of land values. The population of Greater London might be declining, but that of the South East was not. Encroachment on Green Belt land and greenfield sites was inevitable.

Despite the change in the rationale for Green Belt from recreational use to urban containment, a review of the London Plan in 1960 noted that while over 500 acres of new public open space had been created in the 16 boroughs under the LCC, in order to comply with the policy of 2.5 acres per thousand population, a further 2,258 acres were still required.\footnote{40} The Review reaffirmed the importance of the Green Belt noting that:

> the green belt scheme initiated by the Council in 1935 was... still very much alive. Planning powers alone do not secure public open space or extensive public access, and it is for these purposes that contributions have been made by the Council since 1947.

The 1960 Review contained no proposals to change Green Belt policy. The area remained very much the same as in previous plans (Fig. 1.6) and was still substantially outside the control of the LCC.

The London Government Act (1963) reformed London government, amalgamated smaller councils into larger units and created the Greater London Council (GLC). This new body covered all of the London metropolitan area, rather than just the inner conurbation, reflecting the realities and complexities of urban governance in the second half of the 20th century. For the first time a region that could be administered and planned as a single unit incorporated the inner fringes of the Green Belt. The boundaries of the GLC remain the same in the Greater London Authority (GLA) as reconstituted in 2000.

‘Tomorrow’s London’ – a background document to the Greater London Development Plan (1969) – restated the importance of the Green Belt:\footnote{41}

> A little peripheral building, a belt a mile wide all the way around London ... would give us enough housing. This argument fails to realise the cost to all of us ... the main effect would be to choke our lines of communication ... not only would travel to work become more difficult ... but it would become equally more difficult for those living in the city to get out at weekends or holiday times.
In accepting the status quo, however irrational, the document rejected alternatives such as ‘green wedges’ or ‘green setting’. In order to protect the concept of the Green Belt in its entirety more public access was proposed, as was the tidying up of derelict or waste land.

The Greater London Development Plan (GLDP) was published by the GLC in 1976. The Plan set out policies to retain the Green Belt as a mechanism to limit urban sprawl and as a place for recreation and agriculture. It also introduced a new category of Metropolitan Open Land (MOL). Metropolitan Open Land developed Abercrombie’s policies for the protection of existing open spaces in London and provided:

- attractive breaks in the built-up area, relieving monotony of an otherwise continuous urban development … (these areas) are not appropriately situated for incorporation in the green belt, often

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**Fig. 1.6** Map of London’s Green Belt from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, April 1962.

forming islands embedded in the urban fabric ... They nevertheless need to be safeguarded just as much as green belt.

MOL was defined, as were appropriate uses:

- Public and private open space and playing fields
- Agriculture, woodland and orchards
- Golf courses
- Allotments and nursery gardens
- Cemeteries and crematoria

This move was important. In effect it introduced Green Belt policy restrictions to open land within the city itself. Over time the policy approaches to Green Belt and MOL became indistinguishable, the implications of which are considered in chapter 3. The GLDP was finally adopted in 1976. It expected local plans to define both Green Belt and MOL through zoning and policy restrictions, although the compulsory purchase of housing for urban parks continued into the 1980s before resources finally dried up.\(^4\)

Notwithstanding the definitions in the GLDP (that only covered the GLC area) by the 1980s the Green Belt had become firmly established along the lines set out in Circular 42/55,\(^4\) as a measure for the containment of urban growth. Circular 14/84 reaffirmed this:

The Government continues to attach great importance to green belts which have a positive planning role in checking the unrestricted sprawl of urban areas, safeguarding the surrounding countryside from further encroachment and assisting in urban regeneration. \(^4\)

In other words, the city was a threat to the countryside and its needs were subservient. However, the Circular does contain a subtle shift of emphasis on the debate with the first mention of the Green Belt having the effect of ‘recycling derelict land for urban renewal’. Restrictions to outward growth had the advantage of concentrating investment back into existing urban areas. This was significant since London and other major cities in England were then emerging from a period of dramatic economic restructuring, leaving large swathes of derelict and contaminated land. These included the London docklands. In 1981 the government set up the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) to tackle urban renewal in the east of London. Thus the Green Belt, somewhat accidently, became part of the broader urban policy objectives – a key
By the 1990s Green Belts were beginning to present problems in relation to the population growth of major cities, most notably London. Policy makers therefore deemed it necessary to update the definition of Green Belt and to redefine how best it should function. Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 (PPG 2, 1995), an update of Circular 14/84 (consolidated in PPG 2, 1988), referred to the earlier Circular 42/55 as ‘historic’, but completely omitted any reference to land purchase or greater public access to the countryside. The five purposes of Green Belt were defined as:

- Checking unrestricted sprawl
- Preventing neighbouring towns from merging
- Safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- Preserving the setting of historic towns
- Assisting in the recycling of derelict urban land

This was a far more limited definition of the Green Belt than the aspirations of the 1920s and 1930s. The primary vehicle for controlling Green Belt was through designation in local plans. There were no proactive government programmes to facilitate opening up public access and, in a period of constraint on public expenditure, local authorities were certainly not awash with funds. At this point the original purposes of the Green Belt – a progressive policy to open up public access to the countryside for urban populations – had become a regressive policy to restrict the growth of cities and preserve the amenity of the more prosperous communities living on the urban periphery and in the countryside. No wonder that it was popular with a particular segment of the electorate.

A revised Planning Policy Guidance – PPG 2 – did, however, reflect a more complex agenda than that of the 1980s. The environmental movement had received considerable impetus by the Rio Summit and the importance of the countryside for biodiversity was included in the objectives of the Green Belt:

a) to provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population
b) to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas
c) to retain attractive landscapes, and enhance landscapes, near to where people live
d) to improve damaged and derelict land around towns

e) to secure nature conservation interest

f) to retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses

In 2012 PPG 2 was superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). 48 Broadly the objectives of the Green Belt remained the same as in PPG 2, with development being acceptable only in ‘very special circumstances’. The NPPF did allow appropriate buildings for agriculture and recreation, as well as minor extensions to existing buildings and accepted limited infilling in villages, plus limited affordable housing for local community needs. This reflected new concerns around the Green Belt, particularly the desire by government to allow more house building on greenfield sites. The implications of this are considered further in chapter 3.

The Green Belt has been successful in relation to urban containment in the post-war period, but in the process has reduced the supply of developable land. This has redirected development to brownfield sites that might otherwise have remained derelict. Circular 14/84 had advocated higher density developments within the city as part of a strategy to regenerate depressed areas and bring social and economic benefits. Economic benefits include:

- Minimised costs for the provision of road and services (electrical, water, etc.) infrastructure
- Increasing the viability of transportation systems and related infrastructure

The Urban Task Force under Richard Rogers developed these ideas further. 50 The Task Force looked towards the European model of the compact city rather than a model of dispersed development. The report advocated the importance of public (especially civic) space, walking, cycling and public transport, as well as mixed use development. It endorsed restrictions on the outward sprawl of cities and the reuse of brownfield land. The rationale did not arise from a fear of urban growth, nor from a misplaced nostalgia for a rural idyll. The fundamental vision of the Task Force was the *renaissance* of the city – a renaissance that would be jeopardised by outward growth that left inner areas derelict and poor. Reusing infrastructure within the city was seen as an absolute necessity, as was environmental sustainability. A compact city could intensify its use of infrastructure, minimise car use and preserve open space, both within the city and beyond, for agriculture, recreation and ecology.
In 2000 Richard Rogers was appointed as the adviser on architecture and urbanism by Ken Livingstone, the first Mayor of London under the reconstituted GLA. Thus the ideas of the Urban Task Force were fed directly into the first London Plan, 2004.

The London Plan (revised and amended in 2008, 2011 and 2016) still endorses the concept of a Green Belt. The Mayor ‘strongly supports the current extent of the London green belt, its extension in appropriate circumstances and its protection from inappropriate development’. Over the life of the GLA this policy approach has remained consistent, but it has been integrated into a broader and more complex policy framework around green infrastructure (Fig. 1.7). The East London Green Grid was produced in 2006 by Design for London as a concept to improve and upgrade urban open spaces for nature conservation and recreation and connect them together. It has since been extended.

Fig. 1.7  Map of London’s Strategic Open Space Network. Source: The London Plan, 2016 (GLA).
to cover all of London. London Plan policies recognise the importance of biodiversity, natural drainage, rivers, culture, food production and historic landscapes. Critically the Plan now links all of these to strategies to address climate change and promote health and wellbeing.

**Green Belt – a neutral or political policy?**

It is tempting to try to interpret Green Belt policy in party political terms. The concept of a Green Belt for London, focused as it then was on public access, came from the LCC under the Labour politician Herbert Morrison. He was later to serve in the Attlee government (1945–51) and oversaw much of the nationalisation programme. However, a look at the voting characteristics of urban areas, as opposed to the suburbs and the near-urban countryside, shows a clear political and social class divide. It might be an exaggeration to describe Conservative politicians as being anti-urban, but they do reflect the perspectives of their constituencies who often view the city with suspicion – a place to be contained in case it devours their Arcadian idyll or, worse, swamps them with a dangerous and undesirable urban underclass. The attitudes of Howard are still evident in these political groupings, which perceive the countryside as both the ideal abode and a place to be enjoyed by a privileged few.

By 1995 there were 1,556,000 acres of Green Belt in England, covering almost 12 per cent of the country. While comparison of designated Green Belt with the political control of parliamentary constituencies (Figs 1.8 and 1.9) is inevitably a crude comparison, there is a correlation. This is reflected in the attitudes of the Conservative Party in upholding the integrity of the Green Belt, despite lobbying from the housebuilding industry.

The Conservative government between 1979 and 1997 reflected the perspective of the countryside in many of its policies. The abolition of the GLC in 1986 deprived London of metropolitan administration. Infrastructure projects such as the M25 linked peripheral settlements around London and there was a general policy shift in favour of the private car. The growth of out-of-town shopping looked more to the North American model of land use planning than the European. However, there were exceptions. The inner-city riots in Brixton and Toxteth in 1981 made a stark impression on Michael Heseltine (Secretary of State for the Environment, 1979–83), who recognised that the decline of inner urban areas could not be ignored. Heseltine appreciated that a policy of managed decline of inner-city areas was not a sustainable option and set up Enterprise
Areas and Development Corporations in Merseyside and East London. The addition to Circular 14/84 of a new function for Green Belts in ‘assisting in the recycling of derelict urban land’ reflects this shift in policy.

The election of the Labour Party to power in 1997 signalled a clear shift of emphasis back towards addressing the needs of the city. The Urban Task Force’s radical rethink of urban policy was part of the agenda of the newly elected Labour government. The new policy emphasis is summed up in 1999 by John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, in his preface to the report:

Over the past few decades many of our urban areas have suffered neglect and decline with an exodus from the inner cities, driven by a lack of confidence in schools, fear of crime, an unhealthy environment and poor housing. This is bad for our people, bad for quality of life, bad for our economy and bad for our society.\(^54\)
The Labour government did not propose scrapping Green Belts, but did review the policy in the Town and Country Planning (Green Belt) Direction, 2005. While endorsing the general principle, and certainly not reverting back to the earlier policy of land purchase for recreation and amenity, it did propose a relaxation of policies concerning development on the Green Belt, stating that a local authority should decide whether ‘the development would significantly impact on the openness of the green belt’. It proposed that small-scale developments of under 1,000 square metres might be acceptable in certain locations.

Fig. 1.9 Map showing Green Belt and major urban areas in England from a report by Natural England and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, 2010.

The Green Belt today

The 2018 updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) offer practical guidance with regards to development in the Green Belt. The mandate for Green Belts has remained largely unchanged, however, since the introduction of the NPPF in 2012. More recent updates to the NPPF in 2019 largely concern oil, gas and coal exploration and extraction. Key issues have been sidestepped, most notably those concerning the escalating housing crisis – the limited supply of affordable new homes. Yet shifts in emphasis starting to take place within government demonstrate concern over the constraints that Green Belt designation places on development, house building in particular. The growing housing supply crisis in the UK is placing new demands for the release of land for development.

While in theory there is still sufficient brownfield land to accommodate the requirements for new housing, there is also a growing lobby, particularly from the volume house builders, for the release of greenfield sites. Such sites are perceived to be cheaper and less risky to develop, and there is certainly a demand for the lower density family housing that could be accommodated on them. The Conservative government is being lobbied from its electoral heartlands to resist development and from the housebuilders (many of whom were major donors to party funds) to allow it. This conundrum is explored further in chapter 3.

The impact of present Green Belt policy is being felt in London. The rapid population growth (from less than 7 million in 1983 to 9.18 million in 2019) is resulting in a shortage of land for housing. The first London Plan of 2004 identified opportunity areas that correlated roughly to the largest brownfield sites and were reflected in the housing quotas set for the boroughs. But the policy of not encroaching on the Green Belt has pushed up average new development densities to levels not seen before in the capital. Table 1.2 shows the steady increase in residential densities under successive London Plans, and a large increase in high-rise developments. In 2014 the London Skyline Campaign launched to ‘stop the devastation of London’ counted 242 high-rise buildings (over 20 storeys) within London. The Campaign raised concerns on their impact on the historic character of the area and the Thames.

The relationship between the increase in residential densities in London, the construction of tall buildings and the preservation of the Green Belt (regardless of the intrinsic quality of parts of it) should be clear. If London cannot expand outwards it will become denser and, since density
caps have largely been discarded by the London Plan, buildings will become taller. The policy of restricting the outward growth of London in order to concentrate development activity into brownfield land is, of course, still valid. However, it is now almost 40 years since it was introduced and as brownfield land is developed urban densities will continue to rise.

Many factors – income levels, demographics and design – allow high-density developments to work effectively, but there do have to be limits and some areas of London, often the poorer areas, are approaching them. Two further changes are also impacting on the ability of London to contain its growth within its urban boundaries. The first is the dismantling of the government agencies charged with regional development. Limiting urban growth might help to concentrate investment back into inner urban areas, but a lot of brownfield land suffered from levels of contamination and poor access that mitigated against its development. The Regional Development Agencies (and before this English Partnerships) were able to intervene to remediate land for development, but these were abolished by the Conservative government in 2011. Second, affordable housing was grant-subsidised by the Homes and Communities Agency. From the late 1990s the level of subsidy was reduced by the Labour government; it has now been removed completely. In the absence of any assistance to improve the provision of affordable housing on tough, inner-city brownfield sites, the solution has been to pile on the density. HTA architects advise against schemes at densities greater than 350 homes per hectare, which they categorise as ‘hyperdensity’. However, the London Plan (2016) suggests that densities of 650–1100 hrh in central London might be acceptable – well over three times the HTA recommendation.

### Table 1.2 Increase in London residential densities (1966–2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>London 1996/99</th>
<th>00/03</th>
<th>04/08</th>
<th>08/09</th>
<th>09/11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average residential density dwellings per ha</td>
<td>over previous</td>
<td>over previous</td>
<td>over previous</td>
<td>over previous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>+36%</td>
<td>+34%</td>
<td>+33%</td>
<td>+144%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is now a squeeze in London to accommodate excessive densities on sites that are difficult and costly to develop. Amid the housing crisis, calls for ‘relaxing’ Green Belt policy are growing. A trickle of proposals for new homes on London’s Green Belt have been submitted and in many cases approved. Planning applications for the construction of 35,000 additional homes on the UK’s Green Belts were submitted in 2018. Over 24,000 new homes have been constructed on Green Belt land over the past nine years; construction on Green Belt land effectively doubled in 2017. As Urbanist Architecture reported in 2019, ‘getting planning permission to build on the Green Belt may be tricky [sic] but it’s certainly not impossible’.57

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the evolution of the Green Belt as a planning concept and the implications of the policy for London. In many ways the Green Belt is one of the great achievements of post-war planning. It has prevented urban sprawl and ribbon development and is undoubtedly popular with the public. There is a general concern about the loss of countryside to development, particularly as environmental sustainability rises up the public agenda.

Wikipedia sums up the popular definition of the purpose of Green Belt:

In British town planning, the green belt is a policy for controlling urban growth. The idea is for a ring of countryside where urbanisation will be resisted for the foreseeable future, maintaining an area where agriculture, forestry and outdoor leisure can be expected to prevail.

This demonstrates a significant move away from the original purpose of Green Belt. It is also an extremely narrow definition to limit the function of Green Belt to urban containment. It ignores the far wider agenda of the relationship of the city to its hinterland in terms of ecology, resource management and resilience. Indeed, the whole environmental debate concerning the value and use of ‘countryside’, and the relative prioritisation of the social needs of rural against urban populations, is conveniently ignored in such a narrow definition.

The Green Belt is both a response to unregulated urban expansion and a resource to compensate for the perceived disadvantages of urban
living. These two functions came to the fore at the turn of the 20th century with Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City. His idealised new settlements were divided by green land, not only to create a physical boundary to regulate the urban population, but also to provide space for agriculture.

Many of Howard’s concepts have been carried over into the UK planning system and remain remarkably constant to the present day. The unchanged nature of both policy and attitudes to Green Belts raise serious questions about their function in the light of London’s housing crisis. Indeed, some academics and industry experts suggest that they are a major contributor to the housing crisis.

The arguments for Green Belt to control urban sprawl are clear, and this has been a major success of the policy. Sprawl and ribbon development have been largely avoided and individual settlements around the periphery of London have retained their character and identity. The control of urban sprawl by Green Belts has generated higher development densities through the promotion of infill developments; it has also assisted in the recycling of brownfield land and the optimisation of existing transport infrastructure and utilities. Theoretically, shorter commuting times are not only more sustainable but also increase social cohesion. Very significant costs have been avoided through the use of existing roads and rail infrastructure. Congestion, one of the concerns of the Abercrombie Plan, has been partly mitigated.

There are clear environmental benefits in retaining Green Belts, particularly the proximity of agriculture to the urban population, water management, mitigation of the urban heat island effect and biodiversity. The preservation of open countryside does not guarantee public access or biodiversity, and there are large areas of Green Belt that are deficient in both of these. The use of agricultural land, for food production or nature conservation, is becoming important in light of sustainable food production in post-Brexit Britain.

The future of Green Belts from a policy perspective is far from secure. The political mood is swinging against the enlightened ideals that saw the creation of the Green Belt, with the countryside being viewed by some as a ‘yet to be developed’ void around the city and as a ‘commodity’ that could be developed for housing. Over the last 25 years successive governments have weakened the legislation that underpins the Green Belt. Has this great experiment in enlightened planning policy outlived its usefulness? Or are there new purposes for open land around our cities?

Alternative models for Green Belt policy have been developed around the world resulting from very different planning approaches,
urban forms and mechanisms; these are explored in chapter 2. Chapter 3 considers how the Green Belt is becoming a political battleground and ways in which policy might develop in response. Climate change is raising serious issues concerning the resilience of cities to both extreme weather events and the impact of rising global temperatures. The relationship of the city with its hinterland is likely to change as radically in the next 50 years as when city walls were dismantled at the end of the 18th century. The changing relationship of cities with their hinterlands is explored in chapter 4.

It is clear that the relationship of the city to its regional hinterland has become a lot more complicated since the 19th century.

Notes

5. Engels 1850.
7. Dickens 1854.
9. Alison 1825.
11. Hill 1883.
15. McInnes 2011.
17. Howard 1902.
21. This led to subsequent legislation to establish National Parks (1949) and the Countryside and Right to Roam Act (2000).
22. IFHTP 1935; Pepler 1935; Riboldazzi, 2010; cited in Geertse, 2015.
27. LCC archives.
28. Today’s Community Infrastructure Levy or Section 106 agreements.
30. Abercrombie 1944.
31. Abercrombie 1944.
32. Abercrombie 1944.
33. Campaign from the Ministry of Food in 1941 to encourage individuals to grow their own food in response to wartime food shortages.
34. MHLG 1955.
35. MHLG 1955.
42. For example, Mile End Park in Tower Hamlets, Burgess Park in Southwark and Barnard Park in Islington.
43. MHLG 1955.
47. UNCED 1992.
51. GLA 2016.
52. Despite the tenure of three different Mayors: Ken Livingstone (Labour) 2000–8; Boris Johnson (Conservative) 2008–16; Sadiq Khan (Labour) 2016–present.
53. GLA 2006.
55. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019.
56. HTA 2015.

References


Horace, Odes III 29.11.


