

Public support for Green Belt: common rights in countryside access and recreation

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Abstract

Public support for Green Belt in England is legendary but is often dismissed as sentimental attachment to a rural idyll. The aim of this paper is to situate public support for Green Belt within a specific cultural landscape of outdoor recreation and a particular history of common rights and access campaigns. This paper contends that Green Belt in England carries notions of common rights established in struggles against the physical enclosure and privatisation of open spaces from the early 19th Century and predicated on an understanding that the policy conveys a communal interest in land and landscape. It argues that contemporary public affection for Green Belts is generated and expressed through practices of 'commoning' or the performance of claimed common rights of property. Drawing on extensive field research with a mass popular campaign in North West England, the paper evidences the deployment of a history of access struggles to preserve Green Belt as recreational amenity and accessible countryside. In the perception of Green Belt as a common resource and in its performance as social 'nature' the paper posits the continuing relevance of common rights to planning policy. It concludes that a clearer understanding of popular support for Green Belt may provide planning scholarship with new perspectives on notions of public good and the use rights of property.

Key words

Green Belt, open spaces, public access, countryside

Introduction

On 2 January 2017 four thousand people marched to the top of Tandle Hill, a conical viewpoint on the edge of urban sprawl in northern England, in protest against plans by Greater Manchester Combined Authority to allocate Green Belt land for development. In the choice of Tandle Hill as location, the protestors purposely referenced its association with a long history of resistance to the enclosure of common land and to campaigns to secure public access to the countryside. The march, bringing together walkers, cyclists, horse riders, bird watchers and families with children, affirmed the place of Green Belt in a northern cultural heritage of struggle for the preservation of recreational amenity and for rights of access to countryside.

Public support for Green Belt is legendary. It is unquestionably the most popular planning policy, and perhaps the only one that is readily recognised and fiercely defended (CPRE & Natural England, 2010). This passionate support is often dismissed as sentiment (Gallent, Andersonn, & Bianconi, 2006), attributed to a mythic rural ideal (Amati & Taylor 2010), and somehow conflated with what it means to be English (Matless 1998). The contribution of this paper is to locate public support for Green Belt with much greater specificity; to situate it within a cultural landscape of outdoor recreation and within a particular history of common rights and access campaigns. This paper contends that Green Belt in England carries notions of common use and common rights that were established through struggles against the physical enclosure and privatisation of open spaces from the early 19th Century. The argument put forward here is that contemporary public affection for Green Belts is generated, expressed and maintained through practices of 'commoning' or the performance of claimed common rights of property (Kirwan, Dawney & Bridgstocke, 2016: 15). Commoning is defined as a claim to common right 'based upon and enacted through sustained patterns of local use' (Bromley, 2008: 320). In the case of Green Belts this claim to common right is expressed in the assumption of a legitimate property interest in the status of Green Belt land and in its future uses

(Ravenscroft, 1998). Commoning is performed through routine interaction with the Green Belt as a recreational amenity and as accessible countryside in a popular definition of use that exists in creative tension with the formal objectives of Green Belt policy and the property rights of private ownership.

The concept of the commons has seen much of a resurgence in social policy studies and, alongside its binary twin enclosure, has been applied as a critical tool of engagement with the incursions of liberal economic theory and its practices of privatisation and outsourcing. The rolling back of state intervention has been interpreted as a new wave of enclosure (De Angelis, 2004), referencing the physical denial of access to land enjoyed under common right in an earlier period of capital expansion (Hodkinson, 2012). The enclosure of land in the rural South continues to generate a dispossessed proletariat while in the global North capital expands the commodity form into new territories, incorporating 'resources, people, activities and lands that hitherto were managed, organised and produced under social relations of mutual responsibility' (Kirwan, Dawney & Bridgstocke 2016: 2). As a reference to an earlier period of laissez faire economics, enclosure can convey something of the impact of free market thinking on the post-war social settlement. It neatly encapsulates the effect of decades of deregulation and liberalisation on an interventionist town and country planning system in which the notion of public good has shifted inexorably towards private gain. As an analytical approach it has its pitfalls, since commons and enclosure do not align with public and private ownership but imply different approaches to the rights of property. Green Belt, as the policy most emblematic of post-war interventionist planning, has been under pressure almost since its inception. Criticised as 'a blanket policy with roots in a by-gone era of modernist planning' (Amati & Taylor, 2010: 143), it is seen as in need of radical reform, and, ironically, of modernisation, in order that the planning system can more efficiently support economic development and accommodate housing growth (Prior & Raemaekers, 2007). Criticisms of the impact of Green Belt policy on housing supply, land prices and sustainability cannot be summarily dismissed under the catch-all of enclosure but must be evaluated on their own merits. It is not the purpose of this paper to engage with these questions; what is discussed here is the

meaning of public support for Green Belt not its effectiveness as policy. Commons in this paper does not signify anti-capitalist forms of social organisation, nor is it intended to convey a romantic rural idyll. It means an understanding that property rights are not exclusive to ownership but may bestow benefits or forms of use that are shared with a wider collective. This paper maintains that popular support for Green Belts is predicated on an understanding that the policy conveys a communal interest in land and landscape, that can be earned or claimed, and that exists as ‘a public corollary to private property’ (Millner 2016: 69). The ‘commoning’ of the Green Belt is an everyday practice through which the meaning of public good, public access and public ownership is performed and negotiated.

Research strategy and outline of the paper

Around 13 per cent of the land of England is Green Belt. The largest area outside London is in the North West, between Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Yorkshire (House of Commons Library, 2017). The paper understands Green Belt as green belts, that is, as identifiable sites with individual histories, narratives and social attachments. It develops its argument by drawing on research into the popular response to plans published in late 2016 by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to reduce the Green Belt by eight per cent of its total land area in order to accommodate the region’s expectations of economic growth. During the short consultation period on these proposals in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, nearly 28,000 objections were submitted by people of Greater Manchester protesting against the loss of Green Belt. Over 40 campaign groups were set up across the conurbation, and in April 2017 a federation of local groups was established in Save Greater Manchester Green Belt and was successful in persuading politicians, especially the new Greater Manchester Mayor, to significantly revise the plans. The paper builds on research with members of this federation carried out through seven area group discussions with in total 24 members of campaign committees and through a qualitative questionnaire which drew narrative responses from 236 participants from 40 groups around the region. The moderation of the seven group discussions was carried out to encourage discussion, disagreement and

deliberation, with the researcher limiting questions and prompts to those required when the two hour discussions appeared to have reached some conclusion. The intention in adopting this practice was to enable the participants to direct the conversation so that it served as a more informal and discursive extension of the organisation's own deliberations (Wilkinson, 1999). The questions for the group discussions and the questionnaire were designed to explore emotional responses to Green Belt, active relationships to it, and knowledge of its purpose and effectiveness in planning policy. Responses were analysed thematically, alongside a desk-top review of campaign materials, consultation responses, websites and social media posts, including videos, images and informal comments. Excerpts from the research data reproduced in this paper were selected to vividly evidence views that were strongly represented across the sample. Data from the group discussions introduced in the text is indicated by G followed by the number of the group while material from the questionnaire is marked R followed by a respondent number.

The paper begins with a brief historical review to provide the context for its exploration of contemporary support for Green Belt. It situates the origins of Green Belt in popular concern and protest over the enclosure of common land and the emergence of a broad-front of social movements, called variously the Outdoors Movement, or the Open Spaces Movement, that campaigned for public access and recreation (Millner 2016; Taylor 1997). The paper then evidences awareness of the continuity of this history among Green Belt supporters in North West England as they challenged the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework. It explores the uses of Green Belts narrated by participants in the campaign groups, and in their identification of Green Belt as recreational amenity and accessible countryside it posits the practices of commoning, or the expectation and claim of common rights based on and exercised through patterns of local use. The paper concludes that a clearer understanding of popular support for Green Belt, and a sharper appreciation of the political context for that support, can provide planning policy with a new perspective on questions of land use, ownership and public good.

Green belt, the outdoors movement and the commons

The primary objective of Green Belt in England since 1955 has been to contain urban sprawl and coalescence (DCLG 2012; MHLG 1955). Most Green Belt land is privately owned for agricultural use yet Green Belts are valued popularly as 'places to enjoy quiet recreation' (CPRE & Natural England, 2010: 7). The English Green Belt was vested with notions of public recreational access through long popular struggle by an outdoors movement that was often at odds with the exclusive rights of property. The first Green Belt plans emerged from a culture of concern over the loss of the commons and the continuing encroachment of enclosures on open land. While common rights were progressively privatised by enclosure, the idea of the commons became increasingly public and issues of access and common rights were elided in the Green Belt with concepts of collective heritage and public good (Rodgers, Straughton, Winchester & Pieraccini, 2011).

Common land was privately owned but commoners had use rights established through custom and statute, including rights of grazing animals, collecting wood and cutting peat for fuel. The enclosure of common land allowed landowners to enforce exclusive claim to its use and deprived commoners, and many others who exercised the practices of commoning, their rights of access and their means of subsistence. As an adjunct to the process of enclosing land with hedges and ditches, landowners also blocked traditional rights of way, leaving the privatised turnpike toll roads the only authorised access (Navickas, 2009). At the beginning of the 19th Century popular resistance to enclosures focused on the remaining common land at the edge of cities and the footpaths and local routes that made them accessible (Taylor 1997). The first footpath preservation societies were founded in the northern industrial city of Manchester and in other Pennine towns to counter the obstruction of traditional rights of access to open countryside on the urban edge. They achieved notable victories over landowners and their sustained campaigns to reassert common rights of access won the support of a broad alliance and popularised rambling in the outdoors as mass popular entertainment across the north (Walton, 2013). Legislative attempts to ensure that continuing enclosures did not deprive large towns of all

open space received a receptive hearing from the early 1830s and these parliamentary debates spurred on the philanthropic Commons Preservation Society established in 1865 as the first national amenity body (later to become the Open Spaces Society). The key battlegrounds for the Society were common land on the edge of London and it fought a series of battles to maintain public access, combining legal process with direct action to save most notably, Hampstead Heath, Wimbledon Common and Epping Forest for public recreational use (Curry 1994). In its speeches and writings, the Commons Preservation Society articulated the commons into a much wider property relationship than one between a private owner and specific individuals who possessed residential rights of access and use. The Society effectively rewrote what was essentially a local right of land use into a moral right of public access to open land. It advocated recreational rights of access to open spaces, portraying common land as a collective heritage and giving shape to the idea of public good in land use planning (Cowell 2002). In subsequent legislation, it articulated common rights into new forms of collective ownership that formed the foundations for the legal architecture of public ownership developed more fully in the post-war settlement (Millner 2016).

The preservationist, or conservationist strand of this work existed in some tension with the demand for public access and recreation, and concerns over the rights of property and the requisite behaviour and conduct on private land were persistent areas of conflict between rambling and hiking groups, and more particularly for the Open Spaces and Parks movements (Anderson 2011; Kirwan 2016). By the late 1880s county councils began to buy scenic landscapes to preserve them and the National Trust, established in 1895 from the work of the Commons Preservation Society, stressed the importance of restricting access in order to conserve the common natural heritage (Curry 1994). As the outdoor recreation movement focused its campaign on designating wild upland spaces as national parks through a long parliamentary campaign to secure public access to moorland and mountain, the preservation lobby was able to stake a claim on the countryside at the rural-urban fringe (Taylor 1997). The relegation of recreation and access from the rationale for Green Belt has its roots in this conflict between access and conservation and the

regulation of public use to accommodate the rights of exclusive property ownership (Ravenscroft 1998). The triumph of conservation over recreation reflected the commanding role of landowners and their continuing ability to frame the powers of exclusion and enclosure as the responsibilities of preservation and stewardship in the emergence of the town and country planning system.

The issue of public access and outdoor recreation was one of the most contentious and difficult of early planning policy (Sheail 2010). It was a conflict resolved by Ebenezer Howard in his 1898 vision for Garden Cities through the common ownership of land and a Green Belt maintained for the common benefit as agricultural garden and rural buffer between settlements. Howard (1965: 140) wrote: 'There are few objects which the people so jealously guard as their parks and open spaces, and we may, I think, feel confident that the people of Garden City will not for a moment permit the beauty of their city to be destroyed by the process of growth'. The first green belt plans devised for London in the early 1900s were based entirely on the need to preserve public amenity and recreational land and were drawn from the planning concepts of parklands, parkways and park systems (Freestone 2002). Raymond Unwin's reports to the Greater London Regional Planning Committee in 1929 and 1933 argued for a green girdle around the capital to provide space for recreation and called for the public acquisition of land to ensure access (Hall 2014; Munton, 1983). The London County Council Green Belt scheme launched in 1935 resulted in the public ownership of open spaces around the capital, and by 1944, 41 per cent of this land was open to public access (Thomas 1970). Beyond this narrow and discontinuous Green Belt, Unwin conjectured a background of open countryside within which development would be strictly regulated and from which further land could be allocated for recreational amenity. From the preservationist perspective the best protection for this landscape was the continuation of normal land management practices within an exclusive system of private ownership. The maintenance of this agricultural Green Belt became one of the principles of the town planning system for Patrick Abercrombie, chair of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), set up in 1926 to promote a conservation agenda (Matless, 1998). As a policy of conservation the Green Belt

reified 'nature' as a category outside of politics and outside of the institutional reach of planning. Green Belt preserved a 'nature' that was opposed to the social world and the role of private landowners was to keep humanity out, contained within their threatening cities (Latour, 2004). Government support was conferred on Green Belt in this role of urban containment with the preservation of farmland by traditional property rights serving this purpose. The Ministry of Health stated in its 1929-30 annual report that it was not desirable for Green Belt to be used as public open space; 'all that is required is that it should be preserved as open country' (quoted in Cherry 1975: 10).

This support for exclusive property interests was retrospectively justified by the need to increase agricultural production following the outbreak of war in 1939, and when the Scott report on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas set out the framework of post-war country planning in 1942 it affirmed the role of farmers and landowners in conserving the countryside. The Green Belt was defined by Scott primarily as 'a tract of ordinary country, of varying width, round a town, and as a tract where the normal occupations of farming or forestry should be continued so that here, as elsewhere in rural land, the farmer is the normal custodian of the land' (quoted in Cherry 1975: 36). Abercrombie's Greater London Plan 1944 followed the Scott Report recommendations in establishing the primary aims of the Green Belt as restricting urban growth and preventing coalescence. A recreational role was recognised but this was largely restricted to existing common land, or where poorer quality land justified conversion to amenity use (Munton 1983; Thomas 1970).

The representation of Green Belt as private countryside conserved by exclusive land ownership was intrinsic to the approach to property adopted in the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act. This legislation relinquished control over agriculture and forestry operations, content to leave them largely exempt from planning controls (Blunden & Curry 1990). Once in government, the Labour Party abandoned its commitment to land nationalisation in favour of the nationalisation of development rights and the regulation of development distanced planning from any political questions of intervention in property ownership (Tichelar, 2003). The planning

system recognised land use as the privilege of exclusive ownership (Blomley 2017). The existence of rights of property beyond the private entitlements of economic liberalism was implicitly admitted in the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act with its protection of public rights of way. These were common rights that had traditionally co-existed with other uses of land and that could not be alienated, exchanged or extinguished by the rights of ownership. The Town & Country Planning Act, in contrast, conflated use rights with exchange rights and withdrew recognition from other rights to use or benefit from land that were not formally documented and that were not bound up in ownership. The new planning system made common rights invisible (Porter 2011).

The expectation of the recreational and public amenity value of Green Belt was fundamental to its existence but these uses were never admitted into its purpose. The popularisation of Green Belt in Abercrombie's Greater London Plan coincided with the Beveridge report and the publication of the post-war welfare settlement and Peter Hall (2014) suggests this timing helped to associate Green Belt with the iconic post-war principles of collective insurance and mutual ownership. Abercrombie's role as CPRE chair at the head of the Standing Committee on National Parks also suggested a connection between Green Belt and the provision of open spaces for public access and recreation, conflating the preservation of rural landscapes with the conservation of a common inheritance. Planning scholars argue that the formal objectives for Green Belt policy were sufficiently ambiguous to allow it to be 'all things to all people' (Freestone 2002: 97; Munton 1983). The Ministry circular issued in 1955 was explicit in stating the objectives of Green Belts, and it excluded any purpose connected to recreation or public access. In 1962, however, the Ministry booklet *The Green Belts* was constrained to warn its readers that the inclusion of land in a Green Belt does not give the public any right of access. It concluded that: 'The function of the Green Belt as a place for 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' (MHLG 1962: 30).

The continuance of a perceived recreational purpose and of assumed rights of access in Green Belt positions the policy as the vindication of the work of Outdoors movement, of the struggle to preserve the commons and public rights of way, and of the narrative construction of open spaces as common heritage. The next section draws on research with Green Belt campaign groups in Greater Manchester to explore the continuing expression of this history of public access struggles in popular support for Green Belt.

Performing a history of commons in contemporary Green Belt

The Green Belt around Greater Manchester stretches from the Peak District in the east, to the Pennine moors in the north, and south to the Cheshire plain. In the north east, around the industrial towns of Rochdale and Oldham, the Green Belt is a discontinuous swathe of upland pasture and woodland in the Pennine foothills. This Pennine rural-urban fringe, with its brooding moors above, provided outdoors recreation for the workers of Manchester's industrial revolution and was the birthplace of rambling and cycling as working class pursuits (Walton 2013). The politics of popular rambling were often radical and frequently socialist. Prominent landmarks provided iconic locations for illicit assemblies of religious and political dissidents and Tandle Hill, near Middleton, and a host of other local rural prominences, were meeting places for political reformers from 1800 onwards, as well as the popular destinations for village wakes and rush-bearing processions (Navickas 2009).

The march to the top of Tandle Hill in January 2017 was one of many outdoor mass protests that brought local campaign groups together to launch their region-wide protests against the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's plans to allocate development on Green Belt land. The video of the Tandle Hill march, posted on a local campaign website, purposely referenced the location's traditional role as assembly point for Luddites and Chartists, and its association with the infamous Peterloo Massacre (Save Royton's Greenbelt 2017). It included a close-up of the

Peterloo plaque that commemorates the march for political suffrage from Tandle Hill to St Peter's Fields in August 1819. The video also included images of a monument in nearby Middleton that celebrates Samuel Bamford, the English radical writer who led the local contingent on the march to Peterloo. In his work, *Passages in the life of a Radical*, Bamford (1843) described the illicit assemblies at Tandle Hill, conveying vividly the significance of the countryside on the urban fringe to the making of the northern working class.

'When dusk came, and we could no longer see to work, we jumped from our looms and rushed to the sweet cool air of the fields, or the waste lands, or the green lane sides... or, in the grey of a fine Sunday morn, we would saunter through the mists, fragrant with the night odour of flowers and new hay, and, ascending Tandle Hill, salute the broad sun, as he climbed from behind the high moors of Saddleworth'

Some of this same keen appreciation of countryside access is evident in the discussions of the contemporary Green Belt campaigners. One of the participants on the 2017 Tandle Hill march recalled how just a week before he had stopped people enjoying this same view to tell them about the threat to the Green Belt:

Well, on Boxing Day, I went out with my bike and I went up Tandle Hill way and I was just stopping people going out for a walk. It was a lovely sunny day, but cold weather still. And no one, not a single...and I stopped lots of people up at Tandle Hill and all around there. No one knew about it. And everyone was enjoying the view; I said this is all going to go if they get their way (G2).

'Can anyone imagine who visits Tandle Hill's Country Park, looking out from this historic monument onto thousands of houses and industrial buildings instead of beautiful rolling hills with an abundance of wildlife?' the campaign website asks provocatively (Save Royton's Greenbelt 2017). The soundtrack to the video of the 2017 Tandle Hill march posted on the site was provided by folk singer Ewen McColl's song *Dirty Old Town*. McColl, the Manchester Rambler, was one of the participants

on the Kinder Scout mass trespass in 1932 and, in the use of this song, the Green Belt protest at Tandle Hill made knowing reference to this famous access struggle (Harker 2005). Walton (2013: 264), historian of the Northern outdoors movement noted: 'Like Peterloo at the beginning of the long period surveyed here, the mass trespass was to accumulate great symbolic importance, as a reservoir of anger and injustice, which could be tapped for future campaigns'. In citing both events, the Green Belt campaign staked its claim to be part of a northern history of access struggles, and a social movement for the defence of open spaces.

The campaign groups around Tandle Hill were not the only ones in the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt alliance to reference a history of trespass against enclosure. In Bury, to the north, a local campaign group, called Bury Folk Keep it Green, set up to challenge the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, organised a mass procession on the same day as the Tandle Hill march, walking across Green Belt land to Elton reservoir, a site of a previous trespass action. The organiser explained the significance of this site:

Elton Reservoir – have you ever heard of the Trespass case, well that was there. The landowner blocked the lane, and basically they, fascinating story, they said no this is a pathway (G6).

In 1904 the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company blocked the footpath on their land at Elton Reservoir. Local farmers served notice on the company that they planned to take direct action and pull down the barrier across the footpath. These people were arrested and charged and their case went to the High Court in 1906. The judge dismissed the case with costs, setting an early precedent for the legal protection of public rights of ways.

When Green Belt land at Flixton, near Trafford, was included for development in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, the local campaign group began to research their local history. The land was publicly owned and had been run as a municipal golf course, and a local campaigner explained its historical significance:

The land has always been important for Flixton. It was bought by Urmston Borough Council with a loan from the Health Service. Part of that deal was that the land was for the use of the community, for their health and wellbeing, for all time. That was in the 1930s. But over time it's become an important part of the green identity of Flixton. So it's more than just that piece of land. It belongs to Flixton. It belongs to the community (G1).

In its attempt to preserve the public open space, the group explored plans for a community asset transfer, or similar proposal, to put ownership of the fields in trust as a public resource. Their actions referenced the pioneering work of the Open Spaces movement in finding new forms of public ownership to safeguard common land. The history of access struggles provides the rich cultural legacy of resistance that those championing open spaces today can make claims on. The earliest footpath preservation society in Manchester was formed after the landowner in Flixton, near Trafford, ploughed up rights of way running across the estate in 1826. Neighbouring farmers cleared the obstructions on the route and in the legal action that followed, and that lasted till 1827, the trespassers appealed for financial aid from sympathisers in Manchester, leading to the formation of the first organised footpath lobby (Taylor 1997). In positioning Green Belt within this history, campaigners in Greater Manchester reclaimed its purpose as recreational public open space and advanced a claim to common rights of use that is explored in the next section.

Recreation in the Green Belt as a practice of commoning

The omission of any recreational purpose from the formal objectives of Green Belt policy has left it vulnerable to criticism over the quality and public benefits of the land it preserves in its containment of urban growth (Amati & Yokohari 2006). The preservationist argument was that rural land management practices left untouched would act to conserve the countryside. Landowners could be left to their own devices and the open aspect of their land use would provide a stopper on

development. Only eight years after the first Green Belts circular, local authorities were asked to review the inclusion of sites of low amenity value in the Green Belt to free up land for housing around London. The message from government was that Green Belt land should be of use in itself, and not merely serve a containment purpose (Thomas 1970). The costs in land constraint were measured unfavourably against the benefits of conserving often degraded land, where there was limited biodiversity and few social benefits in terms of access and recreation (Amati & Taylor 2010). New approaches to green space containment drawing on the park systems approach were proposed with the most recent offering, green infrastructure, conforming to liberal economic theory in its insistence that Green Belt should 'earn its keep' by contributing quantifiable assets of environmental or recreational value to ease the path of sustainable development (Thomas & Littlewood, 2010: 211).

Green infrastructure was applied as a key structuring device in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework. It served as the environmental component of an economic growth strategy with its main function being to provide high-quality public realm 'to attract high-calibre innovators and businesses' (TEP 2010: 4). In contrast to the valuable assets of green infrastructure Green Belt was characterised in the Spatial Framework chiefly by the absence of benefits; its retention in the strategic plan was commensurate with its provision of green infrastructure services, such as improved public access and habitat restoration (GMCA 2017). In challenging this assessment, participants in Green Belt campaign groups stressed the accessibility of Green Belt land, framing it as 'countryside on the doorstep' (R152). Popular support for Green Belt is often portrayed as the self-interested defence of a residential asset by more affluent occupants of suburbia. In the context of Greater Manchester, where residential developments ribbon the valleys, paralleled by river, road and rail, open land is not always located in the suburbs, but is found on the hills above dense terraces of housing. Residential proximity to Green Belt cannot be mapped onto socio-economic status so simply and participants in the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt alliance worked in manufacturing and retail sectors as well as health and education professions and spanned the social classes.

Like much of England's Green Belt, the land on Manchester's urban fringe is well served with footpaths and bridleways, a testament to the success of early access struggles in preserving a historic network of rights of way linking villages and farms to local markets (CPRE & Natural England, 2010). The relationship of campaigners with green belt land was active and physical and experienced through the everyday routine of walking in the outdoors.

It is across the road. It is down a lane. I don't have to travel far to immerse myself in it for an hour or so after work (R43).

In this participant's narrative the depiction of Green Belt as accessible countryside is made dependent on a familiar and well-trodden network of paths and bridleways that when followed, brought a 'feeling of being in the countryside' (R43, R75) to people that felt otherwise 'restricted' (G2) and 'encircled by development' (G3). This is not a declaration of the right to roam; the path to the Green Belt is an everyday journey that provides release from the working day. Almost all respondents in this research experienced the Green Belt through the everyday recreational activity of walking, often walking with dogs.

To me, it's my sanctuary, I get my dogs, get my muddy boots on, and go out and within minutes you're out there. I don't mind building houses but why take the land out of Green Belt because it opens it up to a different aspect. It's my piece of mind, that (G6).

Walking is a territorialising practice and in following paths the walker treads a pre-reflective order and meaning into the landscape (Waite, Gill & Head, 2009). The organised protest walks of the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt campaign and the history of mass trespass of the access movement they emulated resonate with the traditional rural custom of 'walking the bounds' through which common land was symbolically claimed (Navikas 2009).

All the campaign groups participating in this research identified the containment function of Green Belt and commented on its benefits in retaining the character of individual settlements and preventing the increasing agglomeration of the Greater Manchester conurbation. The most common expression for this containment role was 'breathing space'. This phrase conveyed not only the act of separation but spoke also of the physicality of the experience of Green Belt, its association with exercise and fresh air, with relaxation or 'taking a breather' (R74) and with the mindfulness of breathing associated with meditative states. Participants spoke often of the sense of calmness they experienced walking; they described it in terms of respite; 'it empties your head' (G2); 'I solve all my problems in the Green Belt' (G2).

It gives me a place to de-stress, find head space, and get away from the noise and pollution. It's where I can take my kids, my dog, my bike, my running shoes and remember what is important. I have shown my kids the beauty and startling joy in nature, picnics, mud, sky and space to run and breathe (R39).

This sensual knowledge gained through walking in the Green Belt was perceived as helping to make sense of the human relationship with natural places. Following footpaths through the Green Belt performs an agricultural landscape as social 'nature'. It enables an experiential understanding of the place of people among non-human actors and positions people as observers and participants in biodiversity.

We walk and enjoy it with our children and dogs. Our insects, animals, amphibians, butterflies, bees and birds share it. We breathe it (R70).

This everyday encounter with a nature that conveys 'infinitely more than the ontological quality of "naturalness"' (Latour 2004: 29) is a form of land use that reaps benefits. Those who walk in Green Belt extract a sense of wellbeing from their use of land for the right to quiet enjoyment.

Land can have a variety of uses, and the custom and rights of the commons retain appeal because of the example they provide of privately owned land with multiple

users and beneficiaries. The very existence of common land signified a different interpretation of the rights of property, where ownership did not equate to exclusion and benefits could be shared through practices of commoning to bring about a regulated agreement of public good (Rodgers, Straughton, Winchester & Pieraccini, 2011). In the rationale of economic liberalism, property is a relationship between a person (or a corporation) and a thing, in this case land. Property rights are divisible, however, and rights to minerals, or to access, can be detached from the rights of occupation, ownership and exchange and can be subject to multiple public, corporate and individual claims. In his paper 'The Difficult Character of Property', Krueckeberg (1995) argued that property is not just an object in isolation but a set of relationships between the owner and everyone else that uses or has claims on that land, for instance a claim to water rights. Most planning disputes are about property and the rights to determine who can do what where. Planning is an activity concerned with regulating the use rights of a formally identified landowner against the more nebulous use rights of others who do not own the land. The ambiguous concept of public good provides little sense of the material use and practical benefits entailed in common rights (Porter 2011).

Green Belt policy from 1955 regulated the use of land in accordance with a set of objectives by delineating uses that were in keeping with an open aspect. The expectation, largely fulfilled, was that this would preserve what were primarily agricultural and forestry land uses and provide a protected belt of 'countryside'. The question of who owns what in the Green Belt was answered by the Scott Report of 1942 when it legitimised the rights of landowners as the normal custodians of the land (Cherry 1975: 36). The Ministry of Housing and Local Government Green Belts booklet in 1962 posited another question that was only partly answered: who has a right to what in the Green Belt? 'Even though the townsman has no right to 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' (MHLG 1962: 7).

The Outdoors movement achieved some sort of victory in its campaign for public access when the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act authorised

the disclosure of public rights of way and the protection of rights to use private land for walking or riding (Ravenscroft 1998). For the campaigners in Save Greater Manchester Green Belt public access to land was not in issue since most of the Green Belt sites assigned for development in the Spatial Framework were well served by rights of way. Discussing what the landscape would look like if development went ahead, participants in campaign groups anticipated these rights of way still snaking through a landscape that was changed utterly, yet continued to be rendered accessible:

Everybody will be going on a path through a housing estate or an industrial estate (G7).

What was at stake for those who routinely used these rights of way to access Green Belt were the benefits extracted from their use of the land as 'nature' and the source of their wellbeing. The quiet enjoyment of walking in the Green Belt, the peace of mind earned by that routine activity, and the performance of 'nature' undertaken, can be understood as land use benefits allied to the property right of access, and associated in the history of Green Belt with the commons and with countryside as a common heritage. The action of walking through the Green Belt is an everyday claim to the use and benefits of property. The staging of organised walks as one of the principle tactics adopted by campaign groups in Save Greater Manchester Green Belt appears in this perspective as the performance of traditional rights of access and as an invocation of commoning: the right to enjoy the land use benefits of open countryside.

Conclusion

This paper has located popular support for Green Belt in the everyday practices of commoning; that is, in sustained patterns of recreational land use that performatively enact a claim to common right. The history of Green Belt is inextricably entwined with the commons and with the struggle for rights of recreational access to open spaces and this social movement legacy is knowingly

referenced in the case study presented here of Greater Manchester, where specific incidents of trespass have written themselves into landscape memory. Viewing the popularity of public recreation in the Green Belt through this legacy highlights the failure of the English town and country planning system to incorporate an understanding of shared or common use rights in its approach to property. The containment role of Green Belt rests on an acknowledgement of the exclusive rights of ownership and the stewardship role of landowners in maintaining nature as a category distinct from the social. The planning tradition recognises property as either public or private, and the amenity resources of Green Belt are made intelligible through legal rights of access or voluntary agreement. But the passion aroused by Green Belt is difficult to adequately comprehend through the concepts of amenity or public good. Popular support for Green Belt is based on an interpretation of this preserved countryside as common heritage, an associative meaning embedded in the concept at its inception. Practices of commoning in Green Belt manifest as practical, embodied engagement, often through recreational walking, that is routinely enacted and that shapes land as 'nature' with the expectation of human benefits from enhanced wellbeing. The shared use of private property by people who are not the owners has a long pedigree in the history of the planning policy. The idea that use rights to Green Belt can be claimed in practice, independent of formal ownership or contract or policy objective, provides an unsettling perspective on planning and its relationship to property. It suggests that in recreational access to Green Belt the concept of public good may be more intelligibly read as common right.

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