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LONDON'S GREEN BELT: THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

David Thomas

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Green belts have a long, though intermittent, history. Towns and cities with inviolable rural hinterlands were described in the Old Testament and in works of the classical writers. Later authors, such as Sir Thomas More, Robert Owen, and Ebenezer Howard, contributed to the development of the idea that town and country should be functionally related but physically distinct.¹

London's green belt is not of great antiquity. It is true that a proclamation of Elizabeth I in 1580 established a *cordon sanitaire* 3 miles wide around the city of London. Within this area all new houses were prohibited, except upon sites where, within living memory, there had been a building.² But neither the proclamation, nor the measures which followed it over the next half-century proved effective. The Crown was always short of money and granting of dispensations provided welcome revenue.³ A further attempt to contain London was made by the Commonwealth Parliament in 1657, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that fresh plans for a green belt around London began to emerge.

Early Ideas. The first modern proposals developed the concept of an encircling parkway. During a visit to the United States, Lord Meath was much impressed with the broad boulevards around Chicago, Boston, and other cities. On his return in 1890, he suggested to the Parks and Open Spaces Committee of the London County Council, of which he was first chairman, that suburban parks and open spaces should be linked by «broad sylvan avenues and approaches.»⁴ Eleven years later, William Bull, a Member of Parliament, published proposals for a green girdle around London. His plan was to join existing open spaces by a park belt, half-a-mile wide, running a little beyond what was then the outer edge of built-up London. He envisaged «a circle of green sward and trees» which would remain «permanently

inviolable». Again his models were in the United States; there is no evidence that he was aware of Lord Meath's earlier suggestion.⁵ (The girdles are shown coincident in Figure 1.)

In 1911 George Pepler suggested a similar scheme, though he concentrated more on the ring-road idea in an attempt to improve communications around London. He proposed that a strip of land should be bought one-quarter of a mile wide and further from the centre of London than the earlier green girdles (Fig.1). The parkways proposed at the turn of the century are distant from present thinking about green belts. They were intended not to regulate the growth of London, but to introduce a green ring into that development. More in accord with present, and indeed with Howard's, concepts was that contained in a resolution of the London County Council in 1891, when it referred to Lord Meath's committee the task of deciding the desirability of pressing for statutory control of the growth of London.⁶ This, like the other ideas of the period, was neglected.

The Birth of Regional Planning. In 1927 the Greater London Regional Planning Committee was formed. It was composed of representatives of the local authorities within a radius of about 25 miles of central London and had as its technical adviser Raymond Unwin, who had been responsible, with his partner Barry Parker, for the design of the first garden city at Letchworth in sympathy with Howard's ideas. Among the suggestions made to the committee by Neville Chamberlain, then Minister of Health and responsible for planning, was that it should consider whether an agricultural belt should separate London from satellite developments. In its first report, published two years later, Unwin considered the possibilities and costs of such a scheme.⁷ In the second report, published in 1933, he produced his plan for the development of Greater London which included a green girdle

¹ Osborn, F.J. *Green Belt Cities*. London, 1946, pp. 167-180.

² *Journal of the Town Planning Institute* 1955-6, 42, pp. 68-9.

³ Rasmussen, S.E. *London: The Unique City*. London, 1937, pp. 67-75.

⁴ Meath, Lord, *The Green Girdle Round London*. *The Sphere* 6, 1901, p. 64. The article is reprinted, with some omissions, in *The Garden City* 1906-7, n.s. I, 59-60.

⁵ Bull, W.J., *A Green Girdle Round London*. *The Sphere*, 5, 1901, pp. 128-129.

⁶ London County Council 1891 Minutes (28 July). The resolution is cited in Gibbon, Sir G. and R.W. Bell 1939 *History of the London County Council, 1889-1939*. London, p. 503.

⁷ Greater London Regional Planning Committee, *First Report*, 1929. London, pp. 8-26.

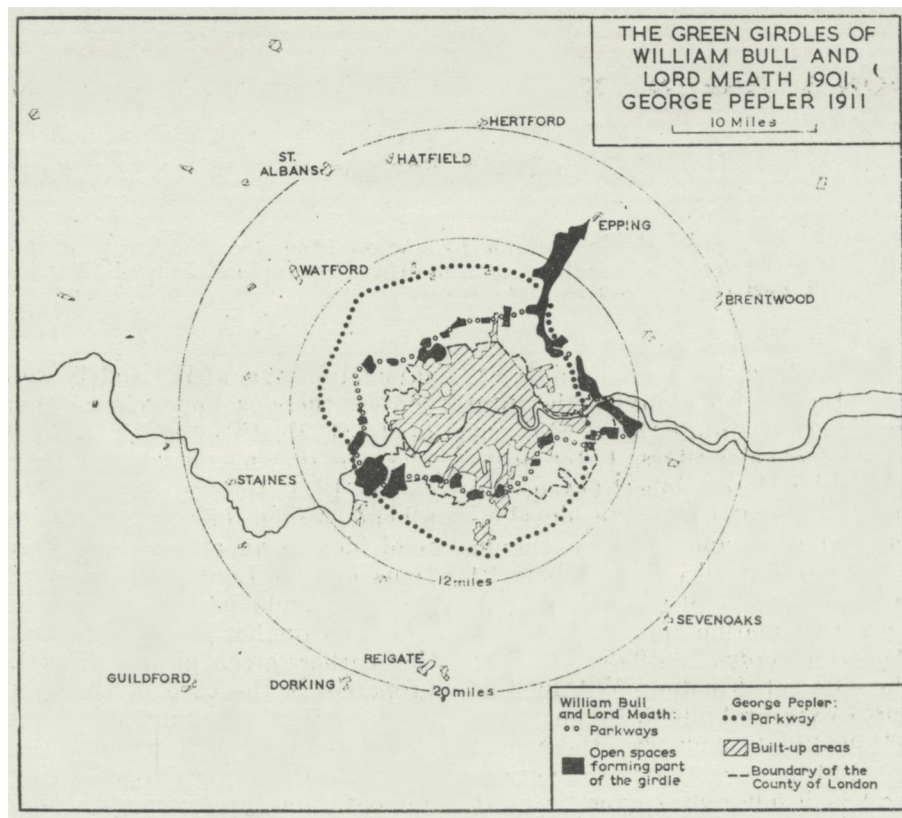


Fig. 1. The green girdles of William Bull, Lord Meath and George Pepler, 1901–11. (Source: *The Sphere* (1901), *Garden Cities and Town Planning* (1911))

as one of its major proposals (Fig. 2). Unwin's girdle was not what today is envisaged as a green belt. It was not continuous, though he attempted to make it as nearly so as possible, and it was clearly intended eventually as a park belt, rather than as a rural or agricultural belt in which the activities of the countryside could function normally. On the other hand, the belt was much wider than any suggested earlier—there were sometimes as many as 6 miles between the inner and outer sections—and it was meant to secure «a break in the outward sporadic spreading of London.»⁸ Unwin's plan was never formally adopted but his green belt ideas soon became part of the London County Council programme.

The Initiative of the London County Council. In 1935 the London County Council green belt scheme was launched. The objects of the scheme were «to provide a reserve supply of open spaces and of recreational areas and to establish a green belt or girdle of open lands, not necessarily continuous, but as readily accessible from the completely urbanised area of London as practicable». The London County Council offered to

make grants to neighbouring county authorities to enable them to acquire open space and farm land, and secure it against harmful development. The Council agreed to pay up to half the cost of an approved acquisition and was prepared to spend as much as £2,000,000 over three years. The response was immediate. Within fourteen months the purchase of 18,300 acres had been provisionally approved and grants totalling £713,000 promised. Doubts arose about the powers of local authorities to undertake jointly such a plan. The London County Council therefore introduced a bill into Parliament to ensure that the acquired land was permanently and legally preserved. The Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act was passed in 1938 (Fig.3).

Abercrombie and After. In 1944, at the request of the Minister of Town and Country Planning, Patrick Abercrombie produced his plan for Greater London.⁹

It contained proposals for a green belt up to 10 miles wide (Fig. 4), which represented physically an extension of Unwin's girdle, and in concept a broadening of view. Abercrombie's green belt

⁸ Greater London Regional Planning Committee, *Second Report* 1933, London, pp. 78–83.

⁹ Abercrombie, P. *Greater London Plan* 1944, London 1945.

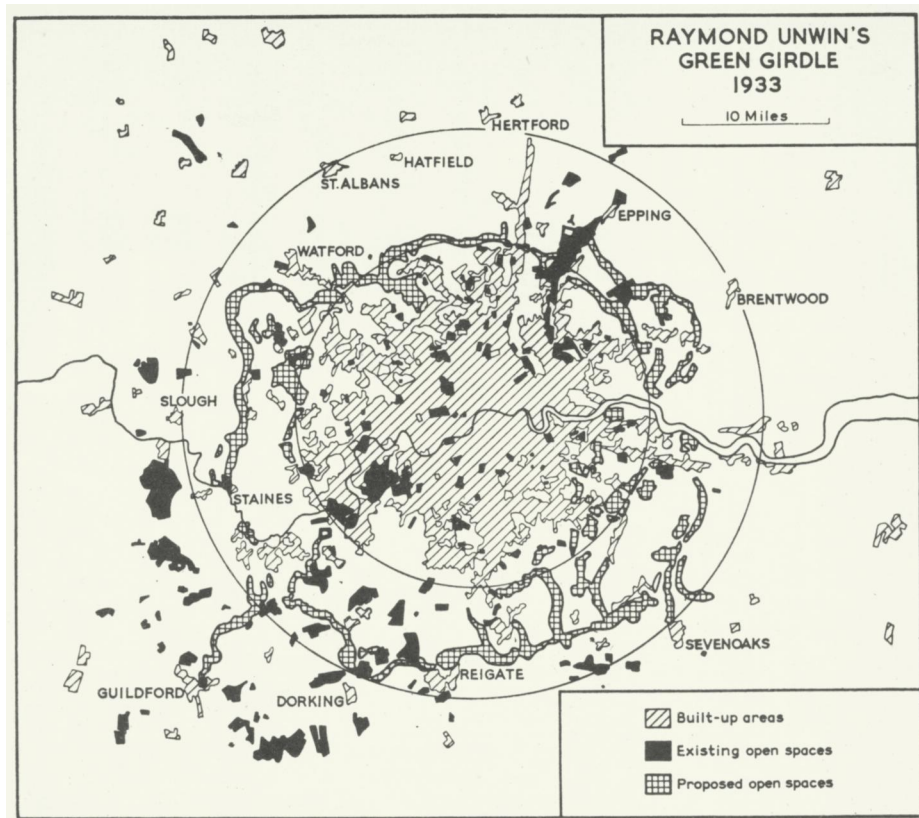


Fig. 2. Raymond Unwin's green girdle proposed in 1933. (Source: 'Greater London Regional Planning Committee, Second Report,' (1933))

was much more than a ring of parkland. His aims, like those of Howard, were to restrict urban growth (London's overspill population was to be channelled into eight new towns and into a number of expanded towns) and, at the same time, actively encourage agriculture, create recreational facilities and enhance the natural beauty of the area. This was to be achieved not by buying land as under the Green Belt Act of 1938, though he hoped that acquisitions under the scheme would continue where land suitable for playing fields or of high amenity value existed, but by controlling the actions of owners and leaseholders. The plan was imaginative and, in March 1946, the green belt proposals were accepted in principle by the Minister; the first government recognition of the need for a continuous green belt around London. The decision was confirmed in the following year by a Ministry memorandum, and legislation was passed which enabled Abercrombie's ideas to be implemented.

Three years later, in 1950, the Ministry prepared a green belt map based upon that of Abercrombie, for the guidance of local planning authorities. When submitting their development plans for the approval of the Minister, county

planning departments in the London area included this green belt, though small alterations were often made to the boundaries. Between 1954 and 1958 the development plans for the counties around London were approved, and the green belt which they contained, with minor changes, became part of statutory documents (Fig. 5). The differences between the Abercrombie and the development plan green belts are a result of the modifications to boundaries at the Ministry and in the county planning departments.

Extensions Since 1955. Meanwhile, the Minister of Housing and Local Government (now the Minister responsible for planning) was concerned that no other large town or city in England and Wales had proposed a green belt. Some local planning authorities were attempting to restrict urban development with the normal planning controls, but there was little uniformity among different areas. Consequently, in April 1955, in a policy statement to the House of Commons, he asked all planning authorities to consider the formal designation of green belts where appropriate.¹⁰ The statement was followed

¹⁰ Ministry of Housing and Local Government. *Green Belts*. (H.M.S.O. 42/55).

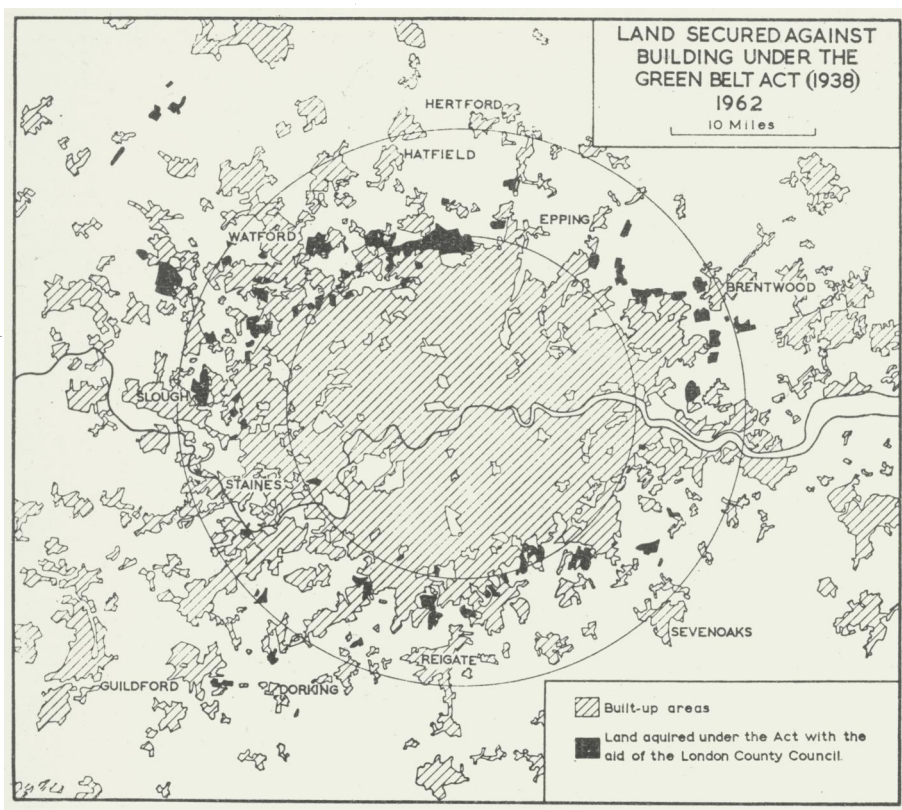


Fig. 3. Land bought under the Green Belt Act (1938) with the aid of the London County Council, 1962. (Source: London County Council)



Fig. 4. Patrick Abercrombie's green belt, London plan 1944' (1945), Crown copyright

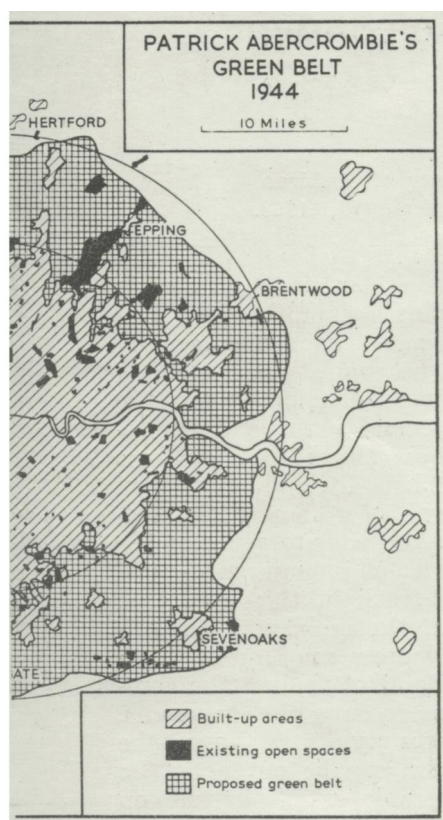
in August by the well-known circular on green belts, which defines, more clearly than any other document, the official view of their purpose and nature. A green belt was recommended under three circumstances. It could be used to check the growth of a large built-up area, it could prevent the merging of two neighbouring towns, or it could preserve the special character of a town. If possible, the green belt was to be of sufficient width to ensure that a substantial rural zone would be preserved. Except in very special circumstances no new buildings, or change in the use of existing buildings, were to be allowed other than for agriculture, sport, cemeteries, institutions standing in extensive grounds or other uses appropriate to a rural area. There is no mention in the circular of amenity and no proposal to encourage agriculture or recreational facilities, except by restricting urban growth, though this, in itself, allows a wide range of activities to exist on urban fringes.¹¹ In 1959 the present Chief Technical Planner at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, in an address to a national conference sponsored by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, stated, «May I say at once that the designation of the green belt is not a measure for the protection of the countryside».

A second circular, in September 1957, described how a formal proposal for the alteration of a development plan to include a green belt was to be made.¹² Local planning authorities round London took advantage of these instructions and since 1955 many extensions of the development plan green belt have been proposed. A revised version of the Buckinghamshire extension has been formally approved, but none has yet become part of an approved development plan. Their effect has been to widen greatly the belt. It has grown well beyond the zone, from between 12 and 20 miles from the centre of London, in which most of the earlier proposed green belts were located. To the north of London, for example, the combined approved and provisional belt is now over 30 miles wide.

The land which the present green belt subsumes is by no means all green. Together with the officially approved land uses there are many diverse activities which persist from before the time when planning permission was necessary and

¹¹ Lovett, W.F.B. Leisure and Land Use in the Metropolitan Green Belt. *J. Lond. Soc.* 348, 1962, 1-16, EKISTICS 14:85, pp. 256-258.

¹² Ministry of Housing and Local Government. *Green Belts.* (H.M.S.O. 50/57).



proposed in 1944. (Source: 'Greater reserved')

the green belt established. Local planning authorities have no powers except those of compulsory purchase which are used sparingly, to change the use of the land; controls operate only when owners or leaseholders wish to make a change. (Fig. 6).

The principle of green belts is now well established, though not unchallenged, in England and Wales. Ultimate success depends upon more than the designation and proper control of a green belt. It depends upon the success with which alternative sites for overspill population and industry can be found, and also upon the success with which the intense competition for land on urban fringes, even between the limited range of activities acceptable in green belts, can be resolved harmoniously.

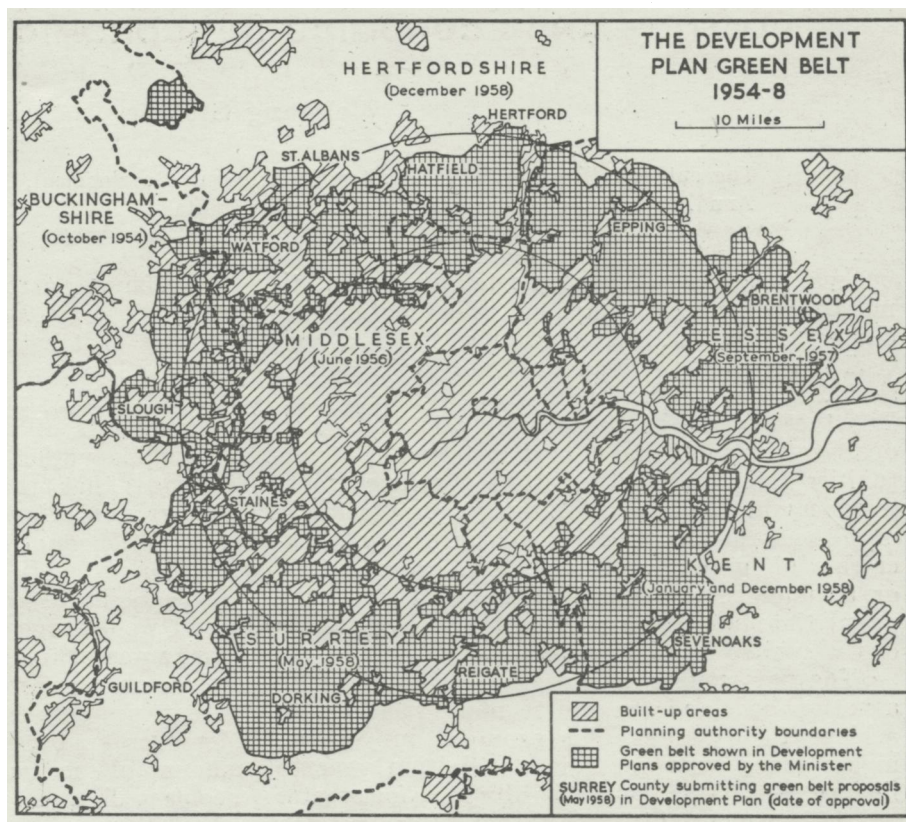


Fig. 5. The development plan Green Belt, finally approved between 1954 and 1958. (Source: Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Crown copyright reserved)

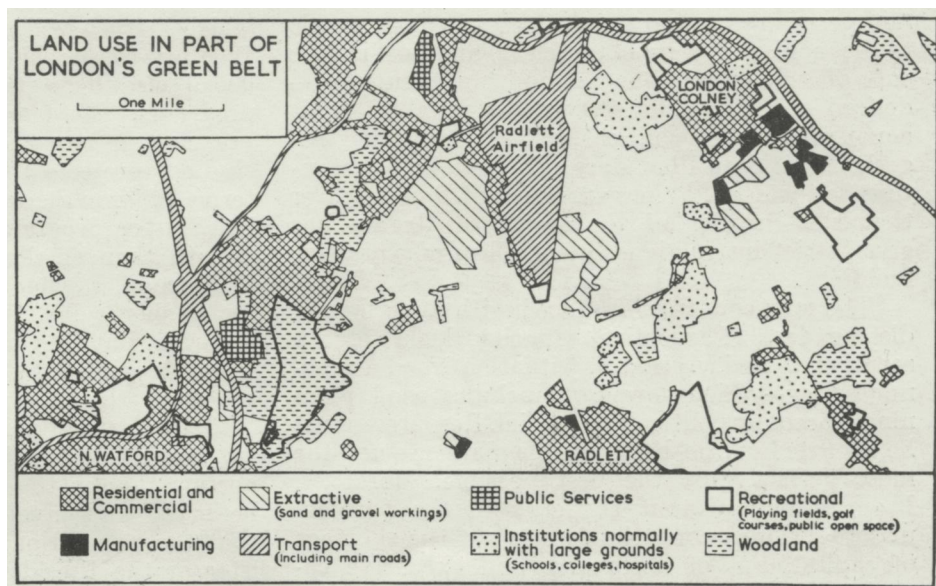


Fig. 6. Some components of London's green belt: the non-agricultural activities in an area of development plan green belt to the south of St. Albans. (Source: Air photo survey, 1961, Ministry of Housing and Local Government)