The Origins of the Cambridge Green Belt

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"With the object lesson provided by the City of Oxford before its eyes, the future of Cambridge, the only true ‘university town’ left in England, was now a matter of moment to the nation".

Introduction

Forty-four years ago, an experiment was launched rare in the history of planning. For the purpose of protecting the character of Cambridge as "predominantly a university town", the first county development plan placed severe restrictions on the growth of both the population and the physical extent of the new city and effectively banned the introduction of new industry. That policy eventually led to the formal establishment of a Green Belt drawn tightly around the city's built-up area, a process which began in 1955 and which ended as recently as 1992 when the Cambridge Green Belt Local Plan received ministerial approval.

The future of the Cambridge Green Belt is now in question. The controls over the introduction of new industry and commerce were relaxed in the 1970s. New businesses have been attracted to Cambridge, especially 'high-tech' firms which benefit from a close relationship with the University, and some land was released from the green belt on the northern fringe of the city for their use. The buoyancy of the local economy has led to a rapid increase in the population. With Cambridge unable to expand, newcomers have largely settled in the outlying villages, now effectively detached suburbs. This has generated a large increase in local road traffic. The pressures on Cambridge and its sub-region by these trends call for a review of planning policies, especially if it is decided that provision must also be made to accommodate the forecast growth in households.

The policies which led to the establishment of the Cambridge Green Belt are generally attributed to the work of Professor (later Lord) Holford and his colleague Mr (later Professor) Myles Wright. They were retained by the Cambridgeshire County Council in 1948 to advise the council on a development plan for Cambridge. Their proposals, published in 1950, popularly known as the ‘Holford Report’ or the ‘Holford Plan’, included proposals which would place severe restrictions on the growth of the city.

Recently completed research into the work of the Cambridge Preservation Society ("the Society") shows, however, that the origin of the policy of containment for Cambridge and the establishment of its Green Belt can be traced to the work of the Society.

The Cambridge Preservation Society

The Society was founded in 1928, mainly at the instigation of Henry Castrie Hughes, a local architect (Fig. 1), with the support of the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University and the Mayor of Cambridge and with, it seems, the encouragement of the Ministry of Health, this last in the shape of Mr (later Sir) George Pepler, then the Minister’s Chief Town Planning Inspector. It was founded to

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preservation of the beauties of Cambridge and its neighbourhood, and to co-operate with the County and Local Authorities, and others, for this purpose.

The main preoccupation of the Society was, however, to prevent the indiscriminate spread of Cambridge into the surrounding countryside by way of 'ribbon development' and the introduction of mass production industry to the town, a fate which had befallen Oxford in the shape of the Morris motor works at Cowley.

Land acquisitions and 'sterilisation'
The instigators of the Society had put their faith in 'planning'. Their initial aim was to persuade Cambridge Borough Council to join in the preparation of a joint town planning scheme. However, soon after the Society was formed, it embarked on a programme of purchases of open farmland to the west of Cambridge around the villages of Coton and Madingley, places cherished by the dons as they can be reached easily on foot from the centre of the city. This change of direction was partly a result of the fact that the Borough Council soon resolved to join in the preparation of the joint town planning scheme. The main reasons were, however, the appearance of the first signs near those villages of indiscriminate building development and the encouragement and financial support of Professor G.M. Trevelyan. Grants were also secured from the newly formed Pilgrim Trust, possibly because of close connections between Trevelyan and Stanley Baldwin, who was connected with the trust and by 1937 was the chairman of its Trustees. The Society may also have soon realised that any Town Planning Scheme under the 1925 Act was unlikely to be fully approved and binding for several years, as so it proved, as the scheme did not reach the stage of public inquiry until 1939 (see below).

The Society attempted to arrange for the Cambridge colleges to pool the development values of their extensive land holdings on the outskirts of Cambridge to reduce competition between them to exploit those lands for development. This failed, possibly because a proposed ring road for Cambridge would have opened up those lands for development. It also resorted to selective 'sterilisation' of land close to the town, i.e. the purchase of development rights by way of covenants from landowners not to build on their lands. This was achieved in the case of the Grantchester Meadows, the fields which line the west bank of the River Cam between the town and the village of Grantchester. The extent of these land acquisitions and 'sterilisation' is shown in Fig. 2.

The Davidge Report of 1934
The Society did not, however, neglect planning. It was represented on the Joint Town Planning Committee and, as such, played an active part in the preparation of
Fig. 2 The Cambridge Preservation Society's land acquisitions, etc. by 1932.
Source: CPS 1932 Annual Report.
the Cambridgeshire Regional Planning Report of 1934, usually called the 'Davidge Report' after Mr W.R. Davidge, FRIBA, its author, the pioneer town planner who had been invited by the county Joint Town Planning Committee in 1928 to act as its consultant and to write the report.

The Davidge Report was a 'Regional Plan', distinct from the Joint Town Planning Scheme referred to above. As such, it reported on the state of the county and made various recommendations to its constituent local authorities. Although the report covered the whole county, this area was relatively small. Until 1964, when it was combined with the county to the north then known as the Isle of Ely, the county was dominated by Cambridge, its only town. It consisted of Cambridge, the present District of South Cambridgeshire and the southern half of the present District of East Cambridgeshire.

The report proposed "a chain of reservations ... which, in effect, keep a generally open belt of country encircling Cambridge". The report listed the sites to be included in those reservations and, in so doing, demonstrated the influence of the Society on the report. Madingley Hill, to the west of Cambridge, and the Grantchester Meadows were mentioned, coupled with a description of the Society's work to preserve them. Of later significance, the Gog Magog Hills, to the south east of Cambridge, are also included. All of the main features of the landscape in the immediate vicinity of Cambridge were included (Fig. 3).

Although Davidge was known to favour open or green belts, his report contains unmistakable evidence of the influence of the Society on his recommendations. Moreover, just under a third of the full Joint Town Planning Committee which commissioned the report was connected with the Society. The Society also paid for the printing and publication of the report.

The 'Save the Gogs!' Campaign
By the mid 1930s, the Society was coming round to the idea that Cambridge should be protected by a formal green belt, a planning concept which had recently emerged from the activities of the London County Council. At that time, the Society launched a campaign to 'Save the Gogs', the Gog Magog Hills just south east of Cambridge, which arguably constitute the best landscape in the immediate vicinity of the city. Its intention was to raise sufficient funds to enable the Gogs to be 'sterilised', thus preventing their being built upon. This campaign was pursued up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and included public meetings and a fundraising London dinner presided over by the Duke of Gloucester, a brother of the King. Although only a fraction of the estimated amount needed to 'sterilise' the Gogs was raised, it seems that the campaign inhibited at least one would-be developer from building in the area. The fund raised was eventually used by the Society in 1954 to purchase the Wandlebury Estate on the summit of the Gogs, which is now managed by the Society as a nature reserve to which the public has access for quiet enjoyment.

The Cambridge and District Town Planning Scheme, 1936-39
The Society was consulted at every stage in the preparation of the Cambridge and District Town Planning Scheme, a formal and consensual land zoning exercise limited to the fringe of undeveloped land around Cambridge. This was because the scheme originated in 1928, when such schemes were normally confined to land "in course of development or likely to be developed". Although, by virtue of Section 21 of the Housing Act 1923 or by the Town and Country Planning Act 1932, it could have embraced the built-up area, the planners apparently decided that it should not do so.

The authors of the Town Planning Scheme clearly intended that the spread of Cambridge should be restricted. They did not, however, have the power to stipulate a green belt for this purpose. They resorted instead to zoning the open country within the proposed ring road as residential but at artificially low densities, typically four houses to the acre. The concept of the 'Rural Zone' was, however, proposed not long before the public inquiry into the scheme, which was held in March 1939. The Society was quick to suggest that use should be made of this
new category of zone instead of low-density residential zoning or by marking outlying land as ‘Undetermined’. Although the Second World War broke out before the Minister’s inspector could report on the scheme, his draft report, written after consultation with the Society, shows that he was minded to propose the widespread use of Rural Zones around Cambridge.

The pre-Second World War Town Planning Scheme, although never formally approved, was treated as having been approved as modified as the result of the public inquiry. This led many to believe that Cambridge enjoyed a green belt long before any plan provided for one.  

Dykes Bower and his ‘Review’ of Cambridge
In 1943, during the Second World War, the newly-formed Ministry of Town and Country Planning established a regional office in Trinity College, Cambridge. It was to this office that the church architect, Stephen Dykes Bower, FRIBA, was sent. Although he seems to have had no planning experience, Dykes Bower was given the job of ‘reviewing’ the planning of Cambridge. It appears that the object of this task was to persuade a reluctant Borough Council, as it then was, to produce a town planning scheme for the town itself.

Dykes Bower produced his ‘review’ of
Cambridge by early 1944. It contains far-reaching and detailed proposals, but never reached the light of day, being treated as 'secret'. This may have been a result of the manner in which Dykes Bower set about his task and, in particular, the way in which he was briefed by his superior, Mr K.S. Dodd, the Ministry inspector who had presided over the 1939 public inquiry. That inquiry had been marked by bitter antagonism between the Borough Council and Cambridge University, the former asserting the right to control university development whilst the latter wanted a free hand. As a result, Dykes Bower was very selective in those whom he consulted, avoiding contacts which he considered might be 'impolitic'. Thus he consulted none of the college bursars, the very people who usually had the final say in the development of any college land.

Dykes Bower did, however, establish a close relationship with the Society. He may have been encouraged to do this by Dodd. In any case, as a 'Tory' and a convinced traditionalist, he would have had a close affinity with Trevelyan, by then Master of Trinity College, and Alan Ramsay, the Chairman of the Society and Master of Magdalene College. Two architects in the Society, Henry Hughes and Mr J. Macgregor, of the University School of Architecture, were apparently closely consulted. It seems that the Society was regarded as an impartial body with a foot in both camps, that of the borough council and that of the University. The Ministry, possibly on Dykes Bower's advice, chose the Society as its instrument by which it would seek to persuade all sides in the town to accept its proposals. The 'review' contains an eloquent plea for 'co-operation in planning', addressed principally to the colleges and the University, which is followed by a section in which the Society is singled out for praise and which recommended that the Society should be fully consulted in the planning process.

In the event, this scheme failed. This may have been due to conflicts of interest. Trevelyan was deputed by the Society to call the parties together, but he would have tended to put the interests of his college and those of the university first at meetings with the borough council. With the connivance of the Ministry the Society planned to publish the 'review', but this was deferred, probably on the advice of Trevelyan who, by then, was involved in the first attempts at planning University development.

The 'review' did, however, receive wide circulation within the Ministry of Town and Country Planning where, it seems, it was highly regarded. However, the Ministry's copies seem to have been lost through enemy action, and no copy survives in the Public Record Office. At least two copies have survived; one in the hands of the Society and the other in the hands of Dykes Bower's Trustees.

The Holford Report
There is a striking similarity between Dykes Bower's 'review' of 1943 and the Holford Report, published seven years later in 1950. In view of the proposals of the Holford Report for the containment of Cambridge, it is instructive to compare them with those of Dykes Bower's 'review'. Both Dykes Bower's 'review' and the Holford Report tried to dispose of the idea that Cambridge was "the only true 'university town' left in England", pointing out that commerce and industry had already taken the lead in expanding employment in the town, the Holford Report also pointing out the growth in jobs in central and local government. However, both recognised a unique character in Cambridge and recommended that the interests of the university should be pre-eminent.

Both the Dykes Bower 'review' and the Holford Report identified uncontrolled growth as the main threat to the character of Cambridge. On population, the Dykes Bower 'review' pointed out that the population of the town at the time was about 80,000 and that, taking in the neighbouring settlements, this could expand to 100,000. It weighed the pros and cons of allowing the population of Cambridge to exceed that total, and concluded that "it would not be desirable that the total population of Cambridge, including the satellite villages, should exceed 100,000". The Holford Report recommended:

"that the [Town and Country Planning]
Committee should try to reduce the rate at which Cambridge is growing and to reach a stable population at some level not much in excess of the present figures. We suggest 100,000 as the ultimate ceiling for the Borough - to be reached as slowly as possible - and 120,000 or 125,000 for the larger area of Urban Cambridge. We believe that if this could be done the present character and fine qualities of Cambridge could be retained ..."

The Dykes Bower 'review' addressed the need, described as "one of the main planning aims of Cambridge", for "abstention from building" to preserve the "close approach of the country" on the west side of the town, precisely the area of most concern to the Society. The 'review' recommended that the urbanised villages close to Cambridge should be brought into the borough and developed as satellite communities, properly provided with shops and other facilities. This would, according to the 'review', have drawn off housing development; and if "the open country which at present separates [those villages], though only just separates them from Cambridge" was preserved "before it is too late", a "form of green belt" would have been created round Cambridge. The 'review' also recommended against the building of the western section of the proposed ring road, again a matter of primary concern to the Society.

The policy of containment was recommended by the Holford Report in language which recalls that of Dykes Bower's earlier 'review'. The report set a boundary to building development, closely drawn around the built-up area, shown in Figure 4. It did not, however, recommend a green belt for Cambridge as such, neither did it set an outer boundary to the area in which further building was to be restricted. It is possible that its authors assumed that the boundary of 'Urban Cambridge' would be the outer boundary, but they did not say so.

The Holford Report was restricted to 'Urban Cambridge', possibly because the original intention was to produce a development plan for Cambridge only.

However, when the draft Development Plan was published in 1952, it covered the whole (ie original) county. It aimed to preserve Cambridge as "predominantly a university town" and its population was to be stabilised once it reached 100,000. This was to be achieved by specifying low densities of population, strict controls on the introduction of new industry and the development of the nearby villages. The principle of Holford's boundary to building development was adopted as all land specifically zoned was largely kept within it, on the basis that the existing uses of undesignated land were "intended to remain for the most part undisturbed". The draft plan, however, deferred any decision on the belt of land around Cambridge and the villages within it; villages which were to become known as the "necklace villages".

The public inquiry into the draft development plan was held late in 1952 and lasted over six weeks. It was marked by much rancour, mainly between counsel for the University and the County Council respectively. Attention was focused on Holford's proposals for roads and additional shopping facilities in the centre of Cambridge, all of which were opposed by the University. As a result, the proposals for the containment of the city slipped through without adequate discussion.

The draft development plan was not approved by the full County Council, which had simply resolved to forward it to the Minister. Only the Council's Town and Country Planning Committee had approved the draft, but appropriate power had been delegated to it by the Council. This was reported to the public inquiry. The City Council later, and unsuccessfully, applied to the High Court under Section 11 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 for the development plan to be quashed on the grounds that the County Council had not approved it. About one-third of the members of the Town and Country Planning Committee were active members of the Society, including its chairman and the chairman and vice-chairman of the council itself.
Fig. 4 The containment of Cambridge, 1950-55
Source: the Holford Report and first Cambridgeshire Development Plan
The establishment of the Green Belt
The 'necklace villages' were dealt with by Town Map No. 2 of the County Development Plan, approved in 1957. This set the final seal on the proposals first put forward by the Dykes Bower 'review'. It made clear that the intention was that:

"the villages shall remain physically separate communities (except where they have already coalesced) and therefore development outside the areas proposed will be strictly limited".

The recommendations of the Davidge Report were also finally approved by designating many of the areas it had identified as "areas of great landscape value", including the Gog Magog Hills, the line of the River Cam and the area around the village of Madingley.

Official encouragement of green belts in 1955 gave the county council the chance to designate a formal green belt for Cambridge. To preserve the 'special character' of Cambridge as a 'University City', all undesignated land forming parts of Town Maps Nos 1 (Cambridge) and 2 (the 'necklace villages') were designated at the first quinquennial review of the development plan as a green belt. In doing so, the County Council paid particular tribute to the work of the Society. The rectilinear area so designated, shown in Figure 3, although approximating to Holford's 'Urban Cambridge', was clearly not satisfactory, as the outer boundary followed no natural or local authority boundaries. After at least two further attempts, the Cambridge Green Belt was finally designated in the Cambridge Green Belt Local Plan, approved in 1992.

Conclusions
Thus a green belt was established for Cambridge. A study of the history of the planning of the city since the 1920s shows that this was largely a result of the persistence of the Cambridge Preservation Society. Although it was dedicated to "the preservation of the beauties of Cambridge and its neighbourhood" ('beauties' was later changed to 'amenities' when a formal constitution was adopted), and worked to protect the surrounding countryside and its villages from indiscriminate housing development, it came to see the establishment of a green belt as a means to this end. The efforts of the Society, outlined above, were decisive in achieving this; even though, of course, the green belt was eventually established to preserve the 'special character' of Cambridge rather than the countryside which surrounds the city. That countryside is preserved simply as the setting for the city, considered essential to maintain that 'character'. Whilst the fate of Oxford, with a large automotive plant established on its doorstep, haunted most people in Cambridge, only the Society seems to have campaigned to preserve the countryside as such.