

BERKSHIRE VOICE

Newsletter of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England
Spring 2025

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How CPRE is celebrating our glorious countryside

What planning reforms and devolution could mean for Berkshire

Why Heathrow expansion is bad news for people and nature

Cover Photo: David Marsh / CPRE



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Berkshire

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Editorial Comment

by Andy Smith

The Government has made clear that it wants to take on the “blockers” and “get Britain building”. In its revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF24) published last December it set out new mandatory housebuilding targets for all local authorities (to support the national goal of building at least 300,000 new homes every year) and downgraded the Green Belt and other planning constraints, inventing the wholly new concept of “Grey Belt”. Then, in its Planning and Infrastructure Bill, presented to Parliament in March by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, the Government followed up NPPF24 by putting forward a strategy to “fast-track” new infrastructure development (including everything from road schemes to windfarms) and give the nation its “biggest building boom in a generation”. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Under NPPF24, the whole of Berkshire must meet a target to build more than 6,800 new homes every year for the next five years. That’s 50% more than the target set by the previous Government. Wokingham sees its target upped by 75% and both West Berkshire and Windsor & Maidenhead have had their previous figure more than doubled. Each of these three authorities must meet a target of more than 1,300 new homes every year.

We must remember that these new targets are mandatory and will have to be followed by the local authorities in all these areas. This means that councils must plan for large-scale housing development in each area, and must grant planning permission for many thousands of new homes. And under the NPPF those Berkshire boroughs that are closer to London and within the Metropolitan Green Belt (Windsor & Maidenhead, Slough, Bracknell Forest, and Wokingham) will have to “review” their Green Belt countryside and redesignate some of it as “Grey Belt” (or “lower performing Green Belt”) in order to allow much of this countryside to be built on.

Democracy under attack

What is all this for? Is the new wave of development that ministers wish to unleash on local communities, including here in Berkshire, really about addressing the shortage of affordable housing, as the Government claims? Or is it purely to meet arbitrary national “economic growth” targets? And if it is about boosting the economy, how do they expect this will work, when the developers themselves have already said they cannot meet the Government’s building targets due to the lack of an appropriately skilled workforce? It seems to us in CPRE that all the mad rush for growth will do is force communities to accept, against their will, the loss of precious green spaces, as planning consents are dished out willy-nilly to meet the new, insanely high, building targets, and enable developers to “land-bank” vast swathes of countryside – earmarked for housing – as investments for the future.

We all agree that we need some new homes built in our towns and villages, particularly social



We must do all we can to protect Berkshire’s countryside.

and affordable housing. But the Government’s proposals will do little to provide this sort of housing, as the basic assumption behind all of these changes to the planning system is that new development will be delivered by the private sector for profit.

We know that this free-market model does not provide the housing that is really needed, in the places where it’s needed. If the Government is serious about meeting genuine housing needs, while at the same time driving sustainable economic growth across the country, it should be empowering local authorities and housing associations to develop community-led housing schemes.

What can we do about this? How can we get ministers to listen to CPRE? Across Berkshire we have councillors and MPs from all three of the main national political parties. This should make it possible to achieve cross-party unity in defence of Berkshire’s countryside and environment, and promote policies that would address the shortage of affordable housing while protecting our Green Belt and AONB at the same time.

CPRE Berkshire believes that our elected representatives should stand together on this. We are urging readers of *Berkshire Voice* to make your views known to MPs and councillors.

Shake-up on the cards for local councils

by Patrick Griffin

In December, the Government published its White Paper on English Devolution. This has potentially significant implications for Berkshire.

The White Paper sets out the Government’s desire to see a new system of local government in England. Under the plan there will be Mayoral Strategic Authorities covering areas with populations of 1.5 million or above. They will be responsible for large-scale transport planning, infrastructure and development.

There will also be Unitary Authorities for areas with populations of around 500,000. These will be responsible for local public services.

The six councils in Berkshire are actively exploring their options in the light of the Devolution White Paper. The county of Berkshire has a population of c. 950,000. Instead of the current six Unitaries, it is likely that an east/west split would work, with two new Unitary Authorities being established in place of the current six councils.

West Berkshire District Council is in discussion with Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District

Council with a view to merging these three districts into one Unitary Authority, possibly called The Ridgeway Council. This would be an interesting development as it would reunite West Berkshire District with areas that were originally part of the historic County of Berkshire and were transferred to Oxfordshire in 1974, including the iconic White Horse hill at Uffington.

To form a Mayoral Strategic Authority, the whole of Berkshire (pop. 950,000) and Oxfordshire (750,000) could be combined into a Thames Valley Strategic Authority, with a population of over 1.5m.

The populations of the current Berkshire districts and boroughs are as follows:

Bracknell Forest.....	125,200
Reading.....	173,200
Wokingham.....	178,200
West Berkshire.....	161,900
Windsor & Maidenhead.....	153,900
Slough.....	158,900

The Vale of White Horse (which was part of Berkshire pre-1974 and is currently in Oxfordshire) has a population of 139,000. CPRE Berkshire will be watching the devolution and local government reorganisation process with great interest.

Let's have eco-friendly, affordable homes

by Andy Smith

CPRE Berkshire believes that any new housing development that's permitted in the Green Belt should comprise affordable or social rented homes, should be environmentally sustainable and carbon-neutral, and should bring measurable improvements to biodiversity, local nature recovery and conservation. This is especially important in the case of the proposed development of Maidenhead Golf Course, following the recent decision by the planning committee of the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead (RBWM) to grant outline permission to Cala Homes to build hundreds of new homes on this Green Belt site.

Under the Cala Homes plan, an area totalling 132 acres of the golf course, which is owned by RBWM, has been earmarked for housebuilding. Around 40% of the golf course is woodland, including five acres of ancient woodland at Rushington Copse. This woodland provides important habitat for protected wildlife species. The land has not yet been sold to Cala Homes and there is concern that other options have not been fully explored. The golf course was only recently declared an Asset of Community Value (ACLV) meaning that the land should not be sold without first giving the local community the option to buy it. CPRE Berkshire supported the Maidenhead Great Park campaign group of local residents who helped to secure the ACV designation for the golf course.

Due to the ACV accreditation, which was granted last November, it was expected that there would be opportunities for local community groups to bid for the land and to put forward their own proposals. However, the Cala Homes scheme approved in February is for a substantial development of 1,500 houses, in effect a New Town, covering much of the current golf course.

In CPRE's view, any development of the land at Maidenhead golf course should be on an appropriate scale and should be designed to fit the character of the local area. New homes should meet Windsor and Maidenhead's Net Zero targets by incorporating rooftop solar panels making them energy self-sufficient, and the development should retain plenty of green space for the sake of wildlife conservation and for people's health and wellbeing.

We are always deeply reluctant to see Green Belt land released for housing, but in situations where local authorities agree to such developments it is essential that any new housing scheme should be as environmentally sustainable and socially valuable as possible, to make the sacrifice of green space worthwhile. ●



We need to keep plenty of green space for nature and our health and wellbeing.

Rural life is under threat

The Government has announced that it is closing down the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), the scheme which pays farmers in England to manage land to protect soil, restore hedgerows and boost nature recovery. SFI was a key part of the post-Brexit payment scheme that replaced EU subsidies. It has been closed with no replacement being announced. Given that climate change is an increasingly pressing problem, this is a severe blow to the countryside and farming. It will undoubtedly mean that many small farms will disappear.

Meanwhile, the Government wants to double the number of new houses required to be built in West Berkshire in the next few years. Since West Berkshire, the most rural part of our county, is 75% covered by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, it means that the pressure on our countryside and green spaces is set to intensify. Taken together with the prospect of West Berkshire Council merging with the neighbouring South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils, we will have greatly reduced elected representation, as the number of councillors for our area will be reduced by around two thirds if this merger goes ahead. (The proposal arises from central government requiring a reorganisation of local government, under which councils should serve around 500,000



residents or more, and this is why West Berkshire District Council – which covers around 170,000 people – needs to merge with neighbouring authorities to form a new Unitary Council.)

So, our representation is set to be reduced, hard-won attempts to protect nature are under substantial threat, small farms are set to disappear, and housebuilding targets for rural areas are set to dramatically increase. As a positive, not all of this has happened yet! So we may have a chance to change some of what is being proposed. Your voice counts, so make it heard! Please get involved. Don't just let this all happen to our farms and countryside without making your views known.

The above article was submitted by David, a CPRE supporter in West Berkshire.



Walkers enjoy the unspoilt AONB countryside in West Berkshire.

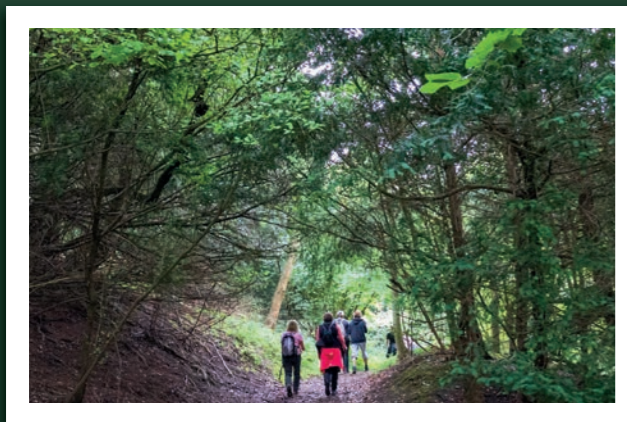
Celebrating “Countryside Day” in the Thames Valley

CPRE Berkshire and CPRE Oxfordshire marked “Countryside Day” last September with a joint Countryside Day event on the county boundary, with activities spread between the twin villages of Goring (Oxfordshire) and Streatley (Berkshire) which face each other across the River Thames.

Based at Goring Village Hall, which hosted an exhibition of the two CPRE branches’ work, the day included a gentle ramble along the riverside, a chance to explore the two Thames-side villages, and a longer walk for the more adventurous participants. This took in the wonderful landscape of Streatley Hill, Lardon Chase and Holies Down in the North Wessex Downs. The walks were followed by a sumptuous afternoon tea for all participants, with the extremely welcome sight of table upon table laden down with cakes and pastries greeting the ramblers on their return to the village hall!

Countryside Day 2024 proved a great opportunity for members of the public to learn more about the glories of the English countryside and our rural traditions, and for CPRE’s Berkshire and Oxfordshire branches to promote the CPRE cause of promoting, protecting and enhancing the Thames Valley’s beautiful rural areas and green spaces. A great time was had by all, with everyone agreeing that the joint Berks/Oxon Countryside Day was the perfect way to celebrate and learn more about this corner of rural England.

Plans are being formulated for Countryside Day 2025 which will also be based around the River Thames and will be held jointly with CPRE Surrey branch on the Berkshire/Surrey border in the Windsor/Runnymede area.



Some photos from Countryside Day in Goring and Streatley.
(Credit: David Marsh/CPRE Oxon and Andy Smith/CPRE Berkshire)

Berkshire's heritage in the spotlight

Members of CPRE Berkshire met in the clubhouse at Goring and Streatley Golf Club, Streatley-on-Thames, in November for their annual "Historical Luncheon" to hear guest speaker Dr Christina Hill Williams DL, Vice-President of the branch, give a fascinating lecture on the history of the office of High Sheriff.

Dr Hill Williams explained that while the Lord Lieutenant is the King's personal representative in the county, the High Sheriff is the King's "Law and Order" representative. She traced the history of the "Shrievalty" to Anglo-Saxon England, when the role was created to uphold the laws of the land and to raise taxes and troops for the Crown. The post of High Sheriff is the oldest secular office in the land, after the Crown itself. The word Sheriff, she explained, comes from "Shire Reeve" or, in Old English, "Scir Gerefā", and the first recorded High Sheriff of Berkshire, Godric, was killed at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, fighting to protect the Anglo-Saxon king Harold Godwinson.

The role of the High Sheriff has evolved over the centuries and is now mainly ceremonial. It is an unpaid role, and the post is held for just one year. There is a High Sheriff in each English and Welsh county. The work of the Shrievalty includes such activities as organising the ceremonial service for the Opening of the Judicial Year, hosting Royal and State visits, making Royal Proclamations, performing Citizenship Ceremonies for new UK citizens, acting as Returning Officer at elections, and maintaining connections with the Armed Forces within the county.

Dr Hill Williams, who served as High Sheriff of the Royal County of Berkshire in 2009/10, illustrated her lecture with a series of photographs, maps and documents. The highlights of her year as High Sheriff included officiating at the mock trials held at Reading Crown Court, visiting the Headquarters of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Maidenhead, and organising the very first county-wide "Beating the Bounds".

The present (2024/25) High Sheriff of Berkshire is Alexander Barfield, who is the youngest High Sheriff in all of England. To find out more about the High Sheriffs of Berkshire, please visit the website www.berkshirehighsheriff.com.



Dr Christina Hill Williams at our Historical Luncheon.

BUSY, BUSY BEES



For this year's Historical Luncheon we will be returning to Goring and Streatley Golf Club to hear a talk on "The History and Importance of Beekeeping". This will take place on Tuesday 4 November; further details will be in the next edition of *Berkshire Voice*.

Beekeeping is very topical: there is a great tradition of beekeeping and local honey production in Berkshire, but bees are under threat in the 21st century. With the shrinking of our countryside and loss of habitat to development, bees, foraging for flowers and nectar, are fighting for survival as much as any wildlife species, yet they are absolutely crucial to the entire eco-system so we should do all we can to **Save Our Bees!**

A Third Runway at Heathrow – CPRE Berkshire's View

by Andy Smith

We are deeply dismayed by the Government's declaration of support for construction of a Third Runway at Heathrow Airport. In CPRE Berkshire's view, Heathrow Airport's plan to build a new runway, expand airport facilities and increase flights to and from Heathrow is an environmentally unsustainable scheme which poses a serious threat to many local communities in West London, Berkshire and Surrey, and will be devastating in terms of environmental impact, noise, air quality, and climate change.

At the end of January, Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves signalled her support for a Third Runway despite the fact that it is not yet established that such an expansion of Heathrow would meet any of the Government's own tests of sustainability. Everyone who cares about nature and about people's quality of life should be deeply dismayed by the Chancellor's announcement, especially as this comes from a government that still claims to be in favour of a cleaner, greener environment for all. What they are proposing to do by backing the Third Runway is to blow a gaping hole in their own climate change targets.

The risk to our natural environment is enormous. There's no doubt Heathrow expansion will have a huge negative impact on local biodiversity. Under the Airport's plan, the course of no fewer than five rivers will have to be diverted to make way for this Third Runway. This will be disastrous for wildlife and will severely compromise the ancient link between the network of chalk streams to the north of the airport and the River Thames to the south. Once these important wildlife habitats are lost, they cannot be restored.

We are also very concerned about the impact on local people, particularly in the east of Berkshire. Building a Third Runway and increasing flights to and from Heathrow will be a massive blight on local communities for decades to come. And for what? Merely on the pretext that expansion will boost the Government's ambition to drive up "economic growth". But there is no compelling economic case for airport expansion, either at Heathrow or anywhere in the South-East of England.

There are already seven runways dotted around London – at Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Luton – and there is absolutely no reason to build yet more. All the expansion of Heathrow will achieve is a further serious depletion of our environment. In CPRE's view, it would be far better to spread air travel around the UK's various regional airports, rather than concentrating everything in an already overcrowded and congested South-East.

www.no3rdrunwaycampaign.co.uk



Campaigners against Heathrow expansion. (photo: No 3rd Runway Campaign)

BOOK REVIEW:

Geology and Archaeology of Berkshire (for people who aren't geologists or archaeologists)

By John Firth

Published by Baffin Books

Paperback / £9.99

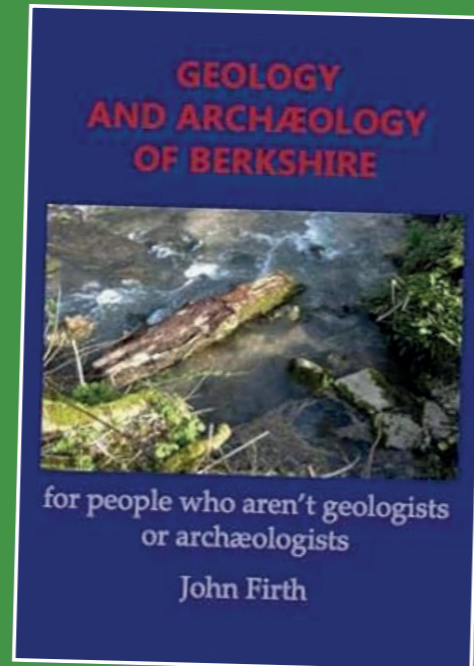
As the sub-title of this volume makes clear, John Firth's fascinating book is a guide for the general reader rather than the specialist, and offers a highly accessible history and prehistory of Berkshire's landscape, showing how our county was formed both by nature and by man. Rocks, fossils, Roman remains and mediaeval castles are all here – and their role in Berkshire's long story is explained in clear, plain language.

In *Geology and Archaeology of Berkshire* we explore the contrasting landscape types – the rolling chalk downland of the west and the clays and sandy soils of the Thames Valley and the London Basin in the east. John Firth's book helps us to understand not just the geological foundations of Berkshire but how different waves of human habitation have interacted with their natural environment, and how centuries of human settlement, agriculture and industry have shaped the land we live in today.

Here you can learn about the flints and sarsen stones that were so important to our ancient ancestors thousands of years ago, the long significance of The Ridgeway to travellers and traders down the centuries, and how to identify the contours of once-impregnable Iron Age hillforts. Did you know that Thatcham is believed to be the oldest continuously occupied settlement in all of Britain, or that the Anglo-Saxons saw off Viking invaders at Reading, Englefield, and Ashdown? As well as being packed with facts, *Geology and Archaeology of Berkshire* is profusely illustrated, with no fewer than 38 colour photographs, 11 colour maps and 18 geological diagrams.

Having told the story of Berkshire through its ever-changing landscape, the book includes a series of helpful suggestions for places to visit – ranging from West Berkshire Museum in Newbury and the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading to Walbury Camp and Combe Gibbet near Inkpen. The author recommends some self-guided walking routes, both on and off the beaten track, with useful advice on the type of terrain you will encounter as you roam Berkshire's countryside, and what to prepare for in different weather conditions. If you are interested in Berkshire's past and how the landscape was formed, and would like to be inspired and informed on how to make the most of your interest by exploring the county further, this is the book for you.

Reviewed by Andy Smith



Thames and Chilterns in Bloom

Towns and villages throughout the Thames Valley and Chilterns region have been invited to submit nominations for the regional heat of the Royal Horticultural Society's popular "Britain in Bloom" competition.

This year, for the first time, CPRE's branches in the region – Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire – are partnering with the competition organisers, and there will be a new CPRE-sponsored Environment Award. This award recognises efforts in the creation and maintenance of diverse habitats within local communities, public spaces, and parks.

"Re-wilding", planting trees and hedges, alongside the restoration of vibrant meadow habitats, can play a vital role in nurturing the natural landscapes that surround us. These green initiatives contribute significantly to the health and vitality of our ecosystems, fostering environments capable of sustaining a wide variety of native species. By actively engaging in the care and development of these precious green spaces, we not only enhance the beauty of our surroundings but also help maintain the delicate balance of nature for generations to come.

Together, we can cultivate a lasting and positive impact on our environment by championing a thriving and sustainable ecosystem, where both flora and fauna can prosper in harmony. Let us celebrate these efforts and encourage even more communities to join in creating a richer, more diverse world. Invitations are being sent out during the spring across the entire region, with entries being judged in July.



THAMES & CHILTERN



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Berkshire Voice is the bulletin of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

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To contribute to future issues of this bulletin, please email Andy at CPREBerkshireMedia@gmail.com.

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Planning Workshop

CPRE Berkshire's next Planning Workshop for parish and town councillors and other community representatives will be held at:

Pangbourne Village Hall

on Thursday 10 April 2025 from 1.00pm to 4.00pm.

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Our top-level panel of speakers will include Elizabeth Bundred Woodward, Planning Policy Manager of National CPRE; Richard Knox-Johnston, Chairman of the London Green Belt Council; and Jerry Unsworth, Planning Adviser to the Colne Valley Regional Park. Speakers will explain how the new National Planning Policy Framework and the Planning & Infrastructure Bill could affect communities and the environment of Berkshire, and lead a discussion on how we should respond to these major changes to the planning system so that we can protect our countryside and green spaces.

* * * * *

To book your place at the workshop, please contact **Gloria Keene MBE**, Secretary, CPRE Berkshire, email: cpreberkshire@btopenworld.com, tel: **0118 930 6756**.

For those who cannot make this date, there will be another workshop later in the year.



The CPRE Berkshire Planning Workshop held at Pangbourne Village Hall in June 2024.