

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. The aim of this paper is to situate public support for Green Belt within a history of common rights and access campaigns and a specific cultural landscape of outdoor recreation. This paper contends that Green Belt in England carries notions of common rights established in struggles against the 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 expressed through practices of 'commoning' or the performance of claimed common rights of property. Drawing on field research with a 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 collective resource 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 symbolic 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 primary objective of Green Belt in England since 1955 has been to contain urban sprawl and coalescence (MHCLG 2018; 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). Any enquiry into public support for Green Belt might usefully consider why land that is neither entirely green nor wholly accessible should be so widely perceived as recreational countryside.

The contribution of this paper is to situate public support for Green Belt within a cultural landscape of outdoor recreation and a specific 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 global 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 (TCPA, 2018). 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). This public claim on Green Belt as a common resource was an integral, though contested element in the foundation of the concept, and one that has been inscribed into the shape of the landscape. The public perception of Green Belt as cultural heritage is not a misunderstanding of policy, nor is it nostalgia for a mythic rurality. 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. This Green Belt can be better understood as Green Belts, that is as identifiable sites with individual histories, narratives and social attachments. The largest area of Green Belt outside London is in the North West, between Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Yorkshire (House of Commons Library, 2017). The paper draws 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, from 59,000 to 54,000 hectares, 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.

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 along the Pennine 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; they were as a network of groups ethnically diverse and their membership spanned the social classes. The paper builds on research with members of this federation, Save Greater Manchester Green Belt, carried out through group discussions with seven of its affiliated local campaigns across the conurbation, with in total 24 members of the organising committees, and through a qualitative questionnaire which drew narrative responses from 236 participants from all 40 groups around the region affiliated in the federation. 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 widely 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 interweaves its exploration of contemporary support for Green Belt with a brief historical review to provide context and explore resonances. It begins by evidencing the landscape memory of a history of protest over the enclosure of common land, knowingly referenced by Green Belt supporters in North West England, and the retelling of this history as challenge to the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and its plans for Green Belt reduction. The following section explores the identification among protesters of Green Belt as accessible countryside shaped by the achievements of the Open Spaces Movement (Millner 2016; Taylor 1997). In the claim to recreational access to the Green Belt advanced by the campaigners the paper then posits the practices of commoning, or the expectation and claim of common rights based on and exercised through patterns of local use. The argument made here is that public support for Green Belt can be better understood as the invocation of common rights and as a legacy of commons preservation and access struggles. 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 the policy, and on broader questions of land use, ownership and public good.

Performing a history of commons in contemporary Green Belt

The march to the top of Tandle Hill in January 2017 was one of many outdoor mass assemblies 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 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 near to the mills and factories 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 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 presented 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.

Green belt, the outdoors movement and the commons

The campaign groups marching up Tandle Hill were not the only ones in the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt alliance to reference a history of trespass against enclosure that had its origins on the Pennine fringe. 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). 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, of 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). The first footpath preservation societies were founded in Manchester and in other industrial Pennine towns to counter the obstruction of traditional rights of access to open countryside on the urban edge. Their sustained campaigns to reassert common rights of access won the support of a broad alliance and popularised rambling in the great outdoors as mass popular recreation across the north (Walton, 2013).

An early precedent for the legal protection of public rights of ways was established through mass trespass in Bury, in the north of Greater Manchester where, in 1904, local farmers pulled down a barrier across the footpath blocked by the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company at Elton Reservoir. In 2017, with Green Belt land around Elton Reservoir allocated for housebuilding in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, protestors in the local campaign group, called Bury Folk Keep It Green, reprised this trespass action. They organised a mass procession on the same day as the Tandle Hill march, walking across the Green Belt along the traditional rights of way at Elton reservoir, referencing a history of the commons and the defence of open spaces on the urban fringe in their protest.

The history of access struggles provides a 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 the legal action that followed, led to the formation of the first organised footpath lobby (Taylor, 1997). When Green Belt land at Flixton, near Trafford, was allocated for development in the

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework in 2017, those campaigning to preserve it 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 return the fields to common ownership. Their actions referenced the pioneering work of the Commons Preservation Society established in 1865 (later to become the Open Spaces Society) in finding new forms of public ownership to safeguard common land (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 (Cowell, 2002). While common rights were progressively privatised by enclosure, the idea of the commons became increasingly elided with concepts of collective heritage and gave shape to the idea of public good in land use planning (Rodgers, Straughton, Winchester & Pieraccini, 2011). In positioning their defence of open land within this history, campaigners in Greater Manchester performed the Green Belt as common heritage and referenced a legacy of struggle for common rights and public access. This was most ardently expressed in the identification of Green Belt as accessible countryside explored in the next section.

Recreation in the Green Belt as a practice of commoning

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). In the participants' narratives the depiction of Green Belt as accessible countryside was dependent on following a familiar and well-trodden network of paths and bridleways that brought a 'feeling of being in the countryside' (R43, R75) to people that felt otherwise 'restricted' (G2) and 'encircled by development' (G3).

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).

This is not a declaration of the right to roam; the path to the Green Belt is near at hand; it is an accessible escape from the working week. 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).

The relationship of campaigners with Green Belt land was active and physical and experienced through footpaths and bridleways. Walking is a territorialising practice and in following paths the walker treads familiarity into the landscape (Waitt, Gill & Head, 2009). The first action of the campaign group hoping to secure common ownership of the Green Belt land in Flixton, Trafford, was to organise guided walks across the threatened site. Establishing footpaths and making tracks was seen as an act of collective claim-making.

Now they can walk on it. It's theirs, and there's a new dimension to it and that, I think, is developing more and more. Having been on it quite a few times quite recently, I noticed that there's paths on it now, so it's changing; it's got its own life now (G1).

The organised protest walks of the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt campaign and the history of mass trespass they emulated, resonate with the traditional rural custom of 'walking the bounds' through which common land was symbolically claimed (Navikas, 2009). Most of the Green Belt sites assigned for development in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework were well served by protected rights of way so, for the campaigners, public access was not in issue. What was at stake was the open and unenclosed aspect of the land they had rights to access. Discussing what the Green Belt would look like if development went ahead, participants in campaign groups anticipated these public 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).

Public rights of way were secured by the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The protection and mapping of public rights of access under the 1949 Act was one of the achievements of the Outdoors Movement and the Open Spaces Society, and of the long campaign against the enclosure of common land and footpaths. The first Green Belt plans emerged from within the Outdoors movement and public recreation and amenity were central to the original purpose. In his 1898 vision for Garden Cities Ebenezer Howard envisaged a Green Belt owned by the community and maintained for their common benefit (Howard, 1965). The first green belt plans devised for London in the early 1900s preserved amenity and recreational land through public acquisition (Amati & Yokohari, 2004, 2006; Freestone 2002; 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). The

Greater London Plan 1944 deeded Green Belt with an iconic status alongside the post-war principles of collective insurance and mutual ownership while Patrick Abercrombie's role as author of the plan, chair of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and head of the Standing Committee on National Parks affirmed the connection between Green Belt and the provision of open spaces for public access and recreation (Hall, 2014). But the issue of public access to the countryside for outdoor recreation was one of the most contentious and difficult of early planning policy (Sheail, 2010). In 1962, 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, although it conceded that: 'The function of the Green Belt as a place for recreation and enjoyment of the townsman is well understood' (MHLG 1962: 30). The Ministry circular, issued in 1955, explicitly excluded any purpose connected to recreation or public access from the objectives of Green Belts. Public recreation and amenity were squeezed out of the policy definition of Green Belt by the private rights of property, as the next section explores.

Claiming common rights in the Green Belt

The representation of exclusive land ownership as countryside conservation was intrinsic to the designation of Green Belt. Concerns over the rights of property and private land were persistent areas of conflict between the preservationist, or conservationist strand of the Open Spaces and Parks movements and the Outdoors Movement demand for public access (Anderson, 2011; Kirwan, 2016). 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). 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 triumph of conservation over recreation in the origins of Green Belt reflected the commanding role of landowners and their enduring ability to frame the powers of exclusion and enclosure as the responsibilities of stewardship.

Government support was conferred on Green Belt in the 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). The role of private landowners was to keep humanity out, contained within their threatening cities (Latour, 2004). Abercrombie's Greater London Plan 1944 followed the recommendations of the Scott Report on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas in establishing the primary aims of the Green Belt as restricting urban growth and preventing coalescence. The maintenance of this agricultural Green Belt became one of the principles of the town planning system, affirming the role of private landowners in conserving the countryside from the public (Munton 1983; Thomas, 1970).

All the campaign groups participating in the research for this paper 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 (R58). 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 the more-than-human. Following footpaths through the Green Belt performs an agricultural landscape as '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. 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. Public support for Green Belt suggests the enduring attraction of property rights that acknowledge a more collective relationship to land than the private entitlements of economic liberalism, as the next section maintains.

Common rights in Green Belt planning

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 signifies a different interpretation of the rights of property, where ownership does not equate to exclusion and benefits can 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. 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. Property rights are divisible, 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, for instance, claims to water rights.

The existence of rights of property beyond the private entitlements of ownership was implicitly admitted in the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. Public rights of way were common rights of access to privately-owned land, that co-existed with, but could not be alienated, exchanged or extinguished by, the rights of ownership. A different approach to property, and especially to the question of access and use rights was adopted in the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, which recognised land use as the privilege of exclusive ownership (Blomley, 2017). By nationalising development rights, the 1947 Act distanced planning from controversial political questions of intervention in property ownership or the nationalisation of land (Tichelar, 2003). It conflated use rights with exchange rights and withdrew recognition from other rights to use or benefit from land that were not formally documented and were not bound up in ownership. The nationalisation of development without the public ownership of land enabled Abercrombie’s Greater London Plan to enact a Green Belt that was privately owned but maintained as open countryside. When the 1955 Ministerial Circular defined the objectives of Green Belt to the exclusion of recreation and amenity, it denied the legacy of the ‘commoning’ of land on the rural-urban fringe and the inclusive approach to property rights offered by the commons. The new planning system made common rights invisible (Porter, 2011).

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 is used to signify these less-defined use rights, but it provides little sense of the material interest and practical

benefits entailed in the definition of common rights (Porter, 2011). Green Belt policy from 1955 regulated land 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 (MHLG 1962: 7): who has a right to what in the Green Belt?

Public support for Green Belt, evidenced in the Save Greater Manchester Green Belt campaign, extends a claim to land and property rights that extends far beyond the nebulous concept of public good. It claims the right to access and extract benefits from the use of the land as 'nature', as a source of quiet enjoyment, peace of mind and sense of wellbeing. The purposeful referencing of a tradition of access campaigns and the preservation of the commons, and the staging of organised protest walks as one of the principle tactics adopted by campaign groups in Save Greater Manchester Green Belt, appears in this perspective as an invocation of commoning, and an alternative rendering of Green Belt as common rights: the right to enjoy the land use benefits of open countryside.

Conclusion

The popular perception of Green Belt as countryside on the doorstep, as the Greater Manchester campaigners called it, is characterised by planning scholars and practitioners as a misunderstanding of the formal objectives of Green Belt policy (Mace, 2018). Yet 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 private property. The history of Green Belt is inextricably entwined with the commons and with the struggle for recreational access to open spaces and this social movement legacy is knowingly

referenced in the case study presented here in Greater Manchester, where specific incidents of trespass have written themselves into landscape memory.

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. 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 of landowners in confining urban growth and popular recreation. The planning tradition recognises property as either public or private, and the amenity resources of Green Belt are made intelligible only through appeal to the ambiguous concept of public good. But the passion aroused by Green Belt and the physicality of popular engagement in its land use and benefits is not adequately conveyed by something so nebulous.

Popular support for Green Belt is founded on an understanding of these open spaces as common heritage, an associative meaning embedded in the policy 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 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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