

100  
YEARS



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England  
Oxfordshire

Spring 2026

# Oxfordshire Voice

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England's green  
and pleasant land  
page 4

Affordable  
rural housing  
pages 7

Our Impact Report  
for 2025-26  
page 8

AGM  
details  
page 12

# Oxfordshire Voice

Spring 2025

## CONTENTS

- 2 Chair's voice
- 3 Hello and goodbye
- 4-5 England's green and pleasant land
- 6 Countryside protection: project updates
- 7 Affordable rural housing
- 8 2025-26 impact report
- 9 Planning update
- 10 Clean water, dirty water
- 11 Hidden treasures
- 12 Future events and AGM

## DIRECTORY

Views expressed in the Voice are not necessarily those of CPRE Oxfordshire, which welcomes independent comment.

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Articles, letters, comments and suggestions for articles are welcome. Please contact the Branch Office below. Published May 2025

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# Chair's voice



Now that the clocks have moved forward, it is truly beginning to feel like winter is over, with the countryside around us now looking beautiful in the spring sunshine, after the seemingly incessant rain earlier in the year.

And welcome to the spring 2026 edition of The Voice! Inside you will find several articles on different aspects of our work at CPRE Oxfordshire. There never seems to be enough time to do everything, and so we do have to prioritise what we focus on – but we will always aim to improve, protect and preserve the landscape of Oxfordshire and its towns and villages for the benefit of everyone.

This year feels exceptionally busy and that prioritisation will be even harder than usual - not least because 2026 marks 100 years of CPRE itself, with events to celebrate this remarkable achievement taking place across the country. You will find some centenary updates later in this issue and we will share more on our own project to connect young people with nature in the next edition.

We are also in the middle of a flurry of planning, with every area in Oxfordshire renewing its own Local Plan in the coming year. CPRE Oxfordshire is both respected and important in this process, as we draw on years of comment and experience and try to ensure all local voices are heard. You can read more about the plans and our responses on the CPRE Oxfordshire website.

Our aim is not to say no to everything, but to get the best balance of all

competing pressures on our land – development in the right places, renewables used wisely, protection of land used for food and yes, preserving valuable rural landscapes against short-sighted developments that will just create more pressures. These priorities feel more significant than ever in the uncertain world climate that surrounds us right now.

CPRE Oxfordshire is also taking a proactive stance wherever possible – for example helping communities adopt solar power on an individualised basis through our 'Rooftop Renewables' partnerships instead of through huge-scale solar farms, and working with our partner organisations in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire on the challenges presented by the Ox-Cam Growth Arc. We're also feeding into national government consultations, for example on the proposed areas for spatial development strategies. We were delighted when our director Lisa was invited to contribute to the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee's enquiry into drought preparedness – all on the back of her comments, in a BBC radio interview, on the need for a well-thought-through land use strategy! Our voice is extending far and wide on the issues that concern us all.

As you will see later in this issue, we welcome back Heneage Legge-Bourke who is returning for another term as trustee, and Susan Ronald who is joining us as a very welcome new trustee.

Sadly, however, we will be losing our director, Lisa Warne, at the beginning of June. Lisa will be moving to pastures new – renewable pastures, in fact, as she continues her work on the benefits of community solar projects. In her tenure at CPRE Oxfordshire Lisa has proved an exceptionally adept leader in the world of countryside campaigning – we will miss her, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank her for her hard work and dedication, for navigating some extremely complex challenges in this large rural county of ours, and for extending our reach in such a positive way.

Enjoy the spring – and thank you, as ever, for your support.

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 @cpreoxfordshire.bsky.social

# Hello and goodbye

While we're sorry to be losing Lisa Warne as our Director, we recently welcomed two new trustees to the board: Heneage Legge-Bourke [right] returns following a two year break, and we're delighted to welcome author and historian, Susan Ronald. We asked Susan to tell us a bit about herself.



## Susan Ronald



Although born in California, I am British and have spent most of my adult life in England – 32 years of which have been in Oxfordshire. My husband and I owned a corporate finance and project finance advisory firm for over twenty years where I specialised in the development or redevelopment of heritage assets from St Pancras in London to Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland. I worked for five British government departments, Historic England and The National Trust as a commercial advisor for twenty years before 'retiring' to become a full-time author.

During that time at work, I was keenly impressed with the forward thinking of CPRE and how historically it had contributed to saving so many landscapes across the country. What I hadn't known at the outset is CPRE's tremendous achievement in the creation of the Green Belt not only as a protective barrier against encroaching development but also as the 'green lungs' for towns and cities.

Most of us are unaware just how much our environment is under threat. The threat exists not only from developers but also from government in redefining our Green Belt, demanding 1.5 million new homes without firm guidance on

rooftop solar panels or other ways to future proof our pocketbooks. The government apparently sees nothing wrong about conversion of Best and Most Valuable farmland into large solar farms – all while we have an inadequate grid to take on this new capacity, and less food security than we did in 1940. Something must change.

I find the Oxfordshire countryside a tremendous palliative to working towards this goal. The views from the independent youth hostel on the Ridgeway above Letcombe Regis used to be my 'go to' place for a cuppa and one of the most splendid views of the Thames Valley. The Ridgeway between Childrey and Lambourn has magnificent views to the south and east, providing you don't go down into the Devil's Punchbowl or worse, let your dog go there.

You can read Susan's article on page 4.

## In memory of Brian Wood



Brian Wood, a passionate and dedicated supporter of CPRE—both in Oxfordshire and nationally—passed away in the early hours of Monday 9 March.

Brian became involved with the charity in 1996, campaigning for a sustainable future for the Upper

Heyford site. As is so often the case, one campaign led to many years of service. He was soon co-opted onto the Branch Executive, going on to serve as Vice-Chair (1999–2001 and 2021–2023), Chair (2002–2005 and 2011–2016), and Treasurer (2004–2021). Most recently, he was Vice-President of CPRE Oxfordshire from 2022 until his death.

Brian was a highly effective Chair, guiding the Branch through complex challenges, including HS2. His writing was concise and purposeful, a style reflected in his meetings—well-run, inclusive, and always finishing on time. He gave the staff team both autonomy and steadfast support, and as Treasurer, he placed CPRE Oxfordshire on a strong financial footing.

Beyond the Branch, Brian served as Treasurer of the CPRE South-East Region Group for over 25 years, was a national CPRE Trustee from 2006 to 2010, and received a national CPRE volunteer award in 2020.

A committed champion of the Oxfordshire countryside, Brian's presence will be greatly missed.

## John Alexander

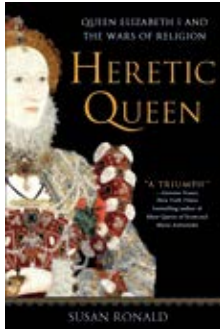
In November 2025 we learnt of the death of John Alexander. John had a long association with CPRE Oxfordshire dating back to the 1980s where he led the successful campaign against the building of a new town, Stone Bassett, in South Oxfordshire, and in 2016 was a founding member of the Haseley Brook Action Group, where a similar new town is proposed. John also had an interest in historic buildings and in the 1980s became a member and then Chair of the CPRE Oxfordshire Buildings Preservation Trust.

# England's green and pleasant land then and now...

By Susan Ronald

Matthew Dixon/iStock

My book, *Heretic Queen: Queen Elizabeth I and the Wars of Religion* begins with the following paragraph:

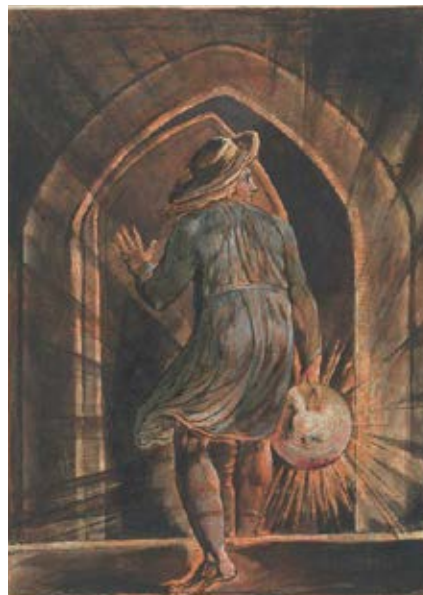


The London of Mary Tudor's reign – like most times past – was truly another country. Rich woodlands and coppice woods of lime, ash, oak, elm, holly, beech, hornbeam and maple carpeted the capital's county of Middlesex, stretching northward nearly twenty miles to the Essex and Hertfordshire borders. Some of these highly prized woods had belonged to the Oxford and Cambridge colleges ever since the universities had been founded hundreds of years earlier. Others, equally well maintained, had been the property of Westminster Abbey or St Paul's cathedral or other church establishments. That is until the time of King Henry VIII. With the dissolution of England's monasteries under Henry beginning in 1536, all the valuable woodland that had once belonged to the Catholic Church reverted to the Crown. Since then, much of England's managed woodland had been passed on to Henry's nobles, in thanks for their help in plundering and destroying papal monetary authority in England.

Many better writers and poets than I have extolled the virtues of the English landscape from Shakespeare to William Blake and

beyond. In fact, Blake's epic poems *Milton, A Poem* was the origin of our beloved hymn, *Jerusalem*, set to music by Sir Hubert Parry in 1916 and orchestrated by Sir Edgar Elgar. What is so fascinating about the poem was that Blake was highly critical of the king while Napoleon was rampaging through Europe and particularly mindful that the industrial revolution was destroying our 'green and pleasant land.' On 11 January 1804, the same year as *Jerusalem* was written, Blake returned from London to Sussex to answer an indictment in Chichester Guildhall for sedition against king and country as well as assault against one of the king's soldiers. Fortunately for Blake and us, he was acquitted and returned to poetry.

The lyric beginning of *Jerusalem*: 'And did those feet in ancient time' also appeared in the preface of *Milton*. The illuminated book *Jerusalem* with 100 plates and a vast cast of characters, published in 1820



portrays human history as a struggle and desire for fulfilment. Blake thought it best (probably in light of his sedition trial) to present his work as his vision of a new consciousness directed to a different public and religious readership. It is also a mythical work and concludes with his vision of a free consciousness empowered in a post-apocalyptic world. At the heart of the poem is defence of nature before it becomes impossible to walk upon England's mountains green, lamenting its loss to these dark satanic mills and a call to arms with arrows of desire and chariot of fire and 'unsleeping' sword to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

Nowadays, many of us have been sleeping – some more peacefully than others – while the government destroys our countryside. The new NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) which closes its consultation on 10 March 2026 has redefined and decimated something most of us understand and cherish: The Green Belt. Not anymore. It's been divided between Green Belt and 'Grey Belt'.

'Grey Belt' should have been 'brownfield land' as in Annex 2 of the December 2024 NPPF as Previously Developed Land (the term the NPPF uses, with brownfield land simply cross-referenced to it). Brownfield is 'land which has been lawfully developed and is or was occupied by a permanent structure and any fixed surface structure with it, including the curtilage of the development land (although it should not be assumed that the whole of the curtilage should be developed).' This government didn't



Pok Rie/pexels

like ‘brownfield land’ (which I think we also understood) as a definition and threw it away. (In the green bin I trust.)

Now, Green Belt has been seamlessly redefined alongside a newfangled idea ‘Grey Belt’. This is one of the most significant shifts in planning policy for a generation and affects everyone. The new NPPF says: ‘For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, the NPPF defines the Grey Belt as ‘land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case does not strongly contribute to any purposes (a), (b) or (d) in paragraph 143. Green Belt itself is redefined as:

- (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- (c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- (e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Point (e) is the killer clause for me. Let’s say that there is a disused barn or group of barns on land or a vacant farmhouse in the Green Belt. Point (e) allows this and all the land surrounding it to be ‘recycled’ into Grey Belt.

But even Green Belt is being developed. Oxford County Council’s proposed lease of Green Belt known as The Triangle in Kidlington to Oxford United football club is the

last piece of land that prevents the town of Kidlington from merging into Oxford. Oxford County Council, which purchased The Triangle to prevent Oxford’s northerly expansion to merge with Kidlington, is behind the deal.

Moving on... specifically ‘protected’ as Green Belt are:

- Habitats sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
- Land designated as Green Belt, Local Green Space, a National Landscape, a National Park (or within the Broads Authority) or defined as Heritage Coast
- Irreplaceable habitats
- Designated heritage assets (and other heritage assets of archaeological interest)
- Areas at risk of flooding or coastal change

A few miles from me there is a planning application to quarry a designated ancient woodland and its irreplaceable habitat – of the type I wrote about in Heretic Queen which seems to have passed the first stages of approval. The Environment Agency has mentioned ‘mitigation’ in its response. Since mitigation is intended as a replacement of ‘almost like’ for ‘like’ in the landscape, I fail to understand how an ancient medieval woodland and its habitat can be replaced by mitigation. I could go on and on...

The original Cambridge – Oxford – London ‘Golden Triangle’ for life sciences and technology development is its own healthy ‘ecosystem’ enshrined in grand projects. In 2025, science-related

real estate across the Golden Triangle totalled 1.35 million sq ft, a 42% increase on 2024. Oxford alone saw take-up increase by 61%, largely driven by the Ellison Institute of Technology taking 450,000 sq ft at the Oxford Science Park.

But that ecosystem is dwarfed when compared to the proposed 1.5 million ‘new homes’ (and required infrastructure) without strict guidelines for rooftop solar panels and other energy efficient ways to make the most of our pocketbooks and land use. The number of government instigated projects for ‘growth’ is staggering. Discussions are taking place around how developments can preserve the countryside’s distinctive natural and landscape qualities, as well as plans for a national forest in the Growth Corridor.

Conservationists across from Cambridgeshire to Oxfordshire and Bedfordshire are rightly concerned that the combination of mandatory housing targets under the new NPPF, new Grey Belt provisions, and the Growth Corridor’s enormous scale amounts to the most significant threat to the rural landscape of central and southeast England in living memory.

Let’s not talk about conversion of (BMV) Best and Most Valuable farmland into solar farms. There is no mention in the NPPF regarding the uses of land for food security.

William Blake image: William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 1, Frontispiece, 1804 to 1820. Bentley Copy E © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



# Countryside protection: project updates

Supreme Single winner, Kai Meredith from Chifferts Society 'Rough around the Hedges' hedgelaying group

## Hedgerow Heroes

Thanks to our delivery partners Wild Oxfordshire, Hedgerow Heroes was bigger than ever this year. A whopping 800 people of all ages gave up their free time to plant, mulch, lay and coppice, collectively achieving 4778.50m of hedgerow planting and rejuvenation across Oxfordshire – nearly 500m over our target!

We worked closely with 43 different school groups, organisations, businesses and charities at 26 sites in the county and delivered nine hedge

workshops which increased hedge surveying and hedge management knowledge and expertise for 70 people.

We hosted our first ever Novice Hedge Laying Competition in partnership with the University of Oxford Botanic Garden at Harcourt Arboretum which captivated around 1300 spectators and featured on the BBC South Today evening news. The competition welcomed 36 hedge layers to refine their skills all whilst rejuvenating 180m of hedgerow so that it thrives for years to come.

## Countryside Next Door

To celebrate CPRE's centenary we are launching a new project which turns celebration into action, reviving neglected meadows in Oxford's Green Belt, safeguarding endangered grasslands, and inspiring communities to reconnect with and love the countryside on their doorstep.

We will be taking part in the Big Give's Earth Raise at the end of April, a seven-day online match funding campaign, where up to £5k will be match funded to finance the project.

## Rooftop Renewables

Following a successful match-funding campaign with the Big Give last year, we launched our pilot project in Sonning Common in January 2026, aiming to break down the barriers to adopting rooftop solar. The programme began with a screening of the Power Station documentary, followed by two in-person workshops at Sonning Common Village Hall. These sessions covered a wide range of topics, including technical setup, funding and finance options, and guidance on how to find a reliable installer.

Working in partnership with EcoSoco, Sonning Common Parish Council, R-Eco Coop, Cosy Homes Oxfordshire, and Oxfordshire County



Council, we engaged with over 30 residents, all of whom showed strong interest in the project.

Funding from Vale of White Horse

District Council has now been secured to expand the initiative into the Vale of White Horse later in 2026, with a particular focus on supporting community buildings.

# Affordable rural housing

We asked Charlie Maynard MP to set out his concerns about the Government's revised National Planning Policy Framework and what it could mean for Oxfordshire. With housebuilding targets set to rise sharply, he argues that the pace and scale of development must be matched by investment in infrastructure, environmental protection, and meaningful engagement with local communities.

The Government's revised National Planning Policy Framework sets a requirement for Oxfordshire to increase house building targets by a further 60%.

To meet this demand, each district will have to dramatically increase current building rates.

I'm extremely concerned about what such a huge increase will mean for our communities. I'm also completely clear that we should not be building large numbers of new homes unless there is proper infrastructure in place first, and that development must not ride roughshod over the wishes of local residents.

First and foremost, I'm worried that our infrastructure – from transport, to sewage – is already at breaking point. Adding in tens of thousands more homes, people, and cars on our roads – without putting in new provision first – is a recipe for chaos.

The stretch of the A40 that links my Witney constituency to Oxford, is regularly in gridlock. We need an alternative if West Oxfordshire is going to cope with the 18,000 new homes slated for this district alone (compared to around 48,000 today). This number of new homes is likely to equate to around 25,000 new cars on local roads.

For the last five years I've been leading a campaign to rebuild the railway which used to link

Kerry Harrison



Carterton, Witney and Eynsham to Oxford. This would deliver a reliable, sustainable mass transit solution to this issue - and I'm working closely with colleagues on the District and County Councils to explore how we can deliver this.

Flooding and the capacity on our sewage treatment network is no less of a worry. Sewage treatment works at Cassington, Carterton, Bampton, Standlake, Shrivenham and many more are in desperate need of upgrades already. Until this is addressed, adding more homes will push the network to breaking point. It is also essential we put robust planning conditions in place to make sure Thames Water and the Environment Agency have enough sewage treatment capacity in place, before sites are developed.

The presence – or lack - of local infrastructure must also guide where new homes in rural communities are delivered. While it is likely that all areas will see new homes built, there is no logic in adding huge numbers in small rural villages where there is little in the way of transport links or public service provision. Any development must be delivered in step with, and reflect the needs of, the existing community.



Turning to the sustainability of developments: the 'infrastructure first' approach to development that the Liberal Democrats have advocated must include green infrastructure too – from tree planting to natural flood management. Steps like this may go a small way towards helping mitigate risks from these developments, while also maintaining and safeguarding the rural character and natural environment of our county.

I don't dispute the need for new affordable homes. Oxfordshire's house prices are already high and continuing to rise. This is an issue for families, as younger generations are pushed out of the communities where they grew up. It is also a huge challenge to businesses which are the heart of rural communities – from farms to pubs and local restaurants. They all depend on a local workforce but, with the costs of doing business shooting up, wages in these sectors often cannot keep pace with rents and the workers they rely on are priced out.

For Oxfordshire and other rural communities across the country to thrive, it is essential that we make them places where young people entering the workforce and starting their families can afford to live and work. That all starts with building the housing we need – but only if upgraded infrastructure comes first. Otherwise the whole community, and both long-term and new residents will all pay the price.

# 2025-26 Impact Report

## Protecting, restoring and championing Oxfordshire's countryside

### Countryside improvement

#### Hedgerow Heroes

**A record-breaking year for hands-on conservation:**

- 800 volunteers mobilised
- 4,778.5m of hedgerow planted and restored (exceeding target by 500m)
- 43 schools, charities and community groups engaged across 26 sites
- 9 training workshops delivered to 70 participants
- Hosted novice hedge laying competition



### Countryside Next Door

**Launched as part of CPRE's centenary, this ambitious project will:**

- Restore neglected meadows in Oxford's Green Belt
- Protect endangered grasslands
- Reconnect local communities with nature on their doorstep

We're set to take part in the Big Give Earth Raise, unlocking up to £10,000 in match funding to accelerate this work.

65 planning applications reviewed

Over one-third challenged through formal objections...

...for others we called for conditions to improve areas such as biodiversity, light pollution, access and traffic

### Climate action

#### Rooftop Renewables

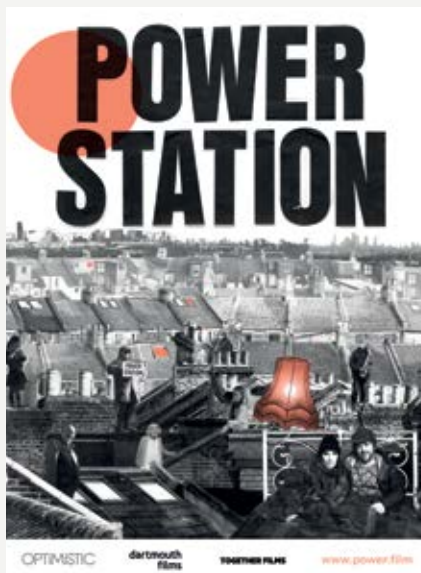
**We launched a pilot to make rooftop solar more accessible in Sonning Common:**

- Community screening of *Power Station* documentary
- Two practical workshops at the Village Hall
- 3 events, 30 residents engaged

Working in partnership with EcoSoco, Sonning Common Parish Council, R-Eco Co-op, Cosy Homes Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire County Council.

#### What's next?

Funding secured from Vale of White Horse District Council means expansion is coming in 2026.



We played a key role in influencing 4 Local Plans

### Campaigning wins & action

- Defended the countryside in the High Court on the Abingdon reservoir case
- Challenged Botley West solar farm at examination stage
- Stopped development at Waterstock, saving 100 acres of Green Belt
- Protected Land Behind the Moors from 340-home proposal

We also:

- Advocated for strong rural planning principles
- Engaged MPs at Westminster and locally on climate and countryside protection

### Raising our voice

Our work reached national and regional audiences, with coverage in: Oxford Mail, BBC, Financial Times, The Guardian, Planning Magazine ...alongside local press, radio and TV.

#### National & Strategic Input

**We also responded to major proposals and consultations, including:**

- Abingdon reservoir
- Botley West solar farm
- Oxford street lighting
- Land use framework
- North Wessex Downs Management Plan
- Local government reorganisation

## Supporting networks

We expanded and strengthened partnerships with:

- Wild Oxfordshire
- Oxford Friends of the Earth
- Greener Henley
- RHS in Bloom (centenary award launch for 2026)
- Local campaign groups including GARD, Stop Botley West, and Land Behind the Moors

## Community Engagement

Connecting people with the countryside through:

- FarmED visit
- Oxford Green Fair
- Two **Power Station** screenings
- AGM walk at Long Mead
- Campaigning workshop with Oxford Friends of the Earth
- Three dark skies talks
- Launch of the Oxford Green Belt Way Challenge



Claudia Lusardi

### Thank you

None of this would be possible without your support. Together, we're protecting and enhancing Oxfordshire's countryside for generations to come.

## Another NPPF consultation and Local Plan updates

A revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was issued for consultation on 16 December 2025, with responses submitted by 10 March 2026. Alongside contributing to CPRE's national response, CPRE Oxfordshire highlighted several key concerns for our county.

- The concept and definition of "Greybelt". While originally intended to enable development on poor-quality or previously developed Green Belt land, such as outbuildings, we are increasingly seeing it used by developers to justify building on open countryside—an interpretation we strongly oppose.
- The lack of emphasis on infrastructure. The NPPF assumes that planning decisions can be made on land use alone, with other regulatory systems functioning effectively. In Oxfordshire, this has proved problematic: thousands of approved homes—over 11,000 in Cherwell alone—have stalled due to insufficient water and wastewater capacity, largely linked to Thames Water constraints. National policy must ensure that development cannot proceed without essential infrastructure in place.
- Concerns about a default "yes" approach to development around rail stations, which risks overlooking local context, including Green Belt protections and environmental constraints.
- Higher targets for genuinely affordable homes in rural areas.

## Local Plans progress

**Oxford City:** We have responded to the City's Local Plan Regulation 19 consultation. At this stage we can comment only on the soundness and legality of the Policies and sites presented and request representation at

the Inspectors hearings which we expect later in the year. Key issues include enabling brownfield employment sites to transition to housing, stronger infrastructure requirements—especially for water and sewerage—better connectivity of green infrastructure, climate resilience, and protection of community green spaces.

**Cherwell:** Initial Local Plan hearings began in February, covering transitional arrangements, Oxford's unmet housing need (currently 4,400 homes), and cross-boundary cooperation. Further information has been submitted, and we await the next stage. We support the Plan's progression, as it is vital for establishing a five-year housing supply and reducing speculative development, which we are seeing a lot of.

Recent success includes refusal of a proposed development at "Land behind the Moors" in Kidlington, which we argued was not suitable for "Greybelt" classification, due to it being an open countryside site, rich in wildlife and with well used public footpaths running through it.

**South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse:** The Joint Local Plan is back under review following earlier concerns about the Duty to Cooperate. Inspectors are now progressing the Plan, pending an updated Sustainability Appraisal.

We remain supportive, particularly as it avoids new Green Belt development, though speculative applications remain a concern, along with the potential for 'Grey Belt' development.

**West Oxfordshire:** We responded to the Local Plan 2041 Reg 18 Spatial Strategies consultation, emphasising protection of countryside, infrastructure-first development, improved sewage capacity, higher-density housing, and better transport provision.

Public feedback has broadly supported these views, and we await the next consultation stage later this year.

# Clean water dirty water – crisis in Oxfordshire

Prof Richard Harding



© Earthwatch

There is clearly something very wrong with the management of water in England. From repeated failures of water supply in Kent, through the pollution of our South Coast beaches to the continuous discharges of sewage into our rivers, we see evidence of poor management and a lack of investment across the country. As I write this, five treatment works in Oxfordshire are discharging raw sewage into our rivers and streams and an additional four have discharged in the last 48 hours (see e.g. <https://oxforddrivers.ceh.ac.uk/portal>).

The recent Channel 4 docudrama ‘Dirty Business’ starkly laid out many of these problems, alongside the failures of private water companies and regulators. The programme acknowledges the heroic, dedicated work of Oxfordshire citizens Peter Hammond and Ash Smith from Windrush Against Sewerage Pollution (<https://www.windrushwasp.org/>) uncovering some of the worst scandals.

We have underinvested in our water supply and sewerage systems for

many decades. Privatisation in the 1980s was supposed to provide the funds and efficiencies to bring our water systems up to 21st century standards. It turned out, however, that the publicly-owned water authorities were already efficiently run. In contrast, lax regulation from the Environment Agency (EA) and OFWAT allowed the new water companies to neglect urgently needed long-term investment, whilst extracting huge profits. Privatisation and regulation were supposed to separate the poachers from the gamekeepers. But, (as Dirty Business illustrates) a cosy relationship developed between water companies and the under-funded regulators, with funding of the regulator by the water companies, and a ‘revolving door’ as top management flipped between working for regulator or water company (in one case holding a Water Industry position at the same time as running the EA). Ultimately, the water industry was left alone, to self-regulate, with disastrous consequences.

So what does this mean for Oxfordshire, a county following the

lines of the Upper Thames and its tributaries? We know raw sewage is being poured into the Thames. We have new developments where sewage is being extracted by tankers because of a lack of infrastructure; and proposed developments (eg Bayswater Brook, feeding into the Oxford Sewage Treatment Works, STW) where we know the existing STWs are already overloaded, and even operating illegally. We also have a proposed reservoir next to Abingdon, which will take up many square miles of prime countryside.

Again, we are seeing profit put first; above the environment..

The Abingdon reservoir is a very interesting case study. Thames Water has been allowed to spend hundreds of millions of pounds of customers’ money to justify it. Yet our colleagues at GARD (Group Against Reservoir Development), with a small fraction of this resource, have repeatedly demolished Thames Water’s analysis, pointing to cheaper and more resilient solutions for our future water supply (<https://groupagainstreservoirdevelopment.org/>). Thames Water will borrow over £7.5 billion to build the reservoir. This is great news for them: their capital value will rise while we, the customers, will pay the interest on the borrowed money. Again, we are seeing profit put first; above the environment and above value to customers; and again we’re seeing weak and opaque oversight by the regulator.

The provision of clean water and healthy rivers is a human right. Water has been the basis of all the major civilisations: Egyptian, Chinese, Roman... through to Victorian Britain. We have taken our eye off the ball and allowed our water systems to be run for the benefit of investors (often from overseas). We probably need to pay more for our water, to fix our outdated and creaking infrastructure, but it is difficult to justify higher bills when we know our water systems are being run for private profit and vested interests.

# Hidden treasures

**Steeple Barton is set back from the traffic on the Banbury-Oxford road but contains hidden treasures you can discover at any time of year.**

Barton Abbey is a private manor house but you can have a peek at its grounds on the footpath. From the churchyard at the end of a secluded lane walk downhill through some woodland and there, in front of you, is a large lake and the sweeping lawns of the house on the other side. It comes as a complete surprise. Parts of the house date from the sixteenth century but Steeple Barton has a much older history. There were two deserted medieval villages here. Now only a few cottages remain. However, there is a story which goes back even further.

Steeple Barton was the site of a Saxon farm which supplied the royal manor of Woodstock down Dornford Lane. You can find the lane from the lake, passing an ancient burial mound or hoar stone. It runs in a straight line through thick hedgerows, one of the forgotten green lanes for cattle and carts which run everywhere in Oxfordshire. Unfortunately this one is the subject of unwelcome attention from developers. It will run right through the massive Botley West solar farm. There is another deserted village along its route. Will this heritage site and the wildlife habitat survive intact? The great pleasure of walking in Oxfordshire is not only the peace of the countryside but also discovering its hidden past.

by **Terence Cudbird**

**Do you have a favourite Oxfordshire walk?**

Email your suggestions to [comms@cpreatoxon.org.uk](mailto:comms@cpreatoxon.org.uk) and perhaps we can feature it in a future edition of *The Voice*!



Photos: Terence Cudbird



## Leave a gift in your will

Your gift can ensure that the countryside is rich in nature, accessible for all and protected for the future. A future where local communities get a say on what gets built where they live, brownfield sites are recycled, valuable Green Belt is saved, farmland protected, and dark skies are enjoyed by all.

Our promises to you:

- We'll always treat you and your wishes with respect and confidentiality.
- Your legacy will be in capable hands. We've been successfully enhancing, promoting and protecting our beautiful Oxfordshire countryside since 1931. We'll continue to work in your name for many more generations.
- We appreciate will gifts of any size, and we'll ensure your legacy will make a lasting impact.
- If you choose to let us know about your gift we can stay in touch and keep you informed of our plans, events and the work we do.

If you have any queries about leaving a gift in your will to CPRE, we are always available to answer your questions honestly and openly.

If you would like to leave a gift to CPRE Oxfordshire, here is the essential information you will need for your solicitor:

Name: Campaign to Protect Rural England, Oxfordshire  
Address: CPRE Oxfordshire, First Floor, 20 High Street, Watlington, Oxfordshire. Charity Number: 1093081

# Upcoming events

To book a place or find out more details contact [administrator@cpreoxon.org.uk](mailto:administrator@cpreoxon.org.uk) or call 01491612079

## Looking Out for Nature – Citizen Science Workshop

**Saturday 16 May, Banbury Museum/ Spiceball Park. 10am – 2pm**

A day of learning, exploration, and practical action, this friendly event is designed for anyone who cares about the plants and wildlife around them and wants to make a real difference. We'll cover the basics of nature recording, explain how it can help to protect the spaces around you and introduce you to the world of citizen science. Led by Lisa Phipps and Dr Julian Parfitt, with support from CAG Oxfordshire and TVERC.

£5 or free for members



Nemone Caldwell

## Wild Oakingham Guided Walk

**Friday 26 June 2026, Stoke Row, RG9 5TF. 10:30am – 1:30pm**

Would you like to know more about rewilding? If so, join us for a guided walk at Wild Oakingham, a 80ha former stud farm, which is now part of the Rewilding Britain initiative. In the 4 years since managing the land for nature, the area has seen an explosion of food and habitat for birds and wildlife, resulting in greater abundance and increased biodiversity.

The tour will be led by site owner, Jane Ibrahim, and Alistair Driver, Director of Rewilding Britain and Senior Advisor to the Global Rewilding Alliance, and will be followed by a light picnic lunch.

Tickets £8, or £5 for members



Nemone Caldwell

Jane Ibrahim leads a group around Wild Oakingham.

CPRE Oxfordshire Branch  
AGM & Celebration of 100  
years of CPRE

**Wednesday 3 June, Thame Barns  
Centre, OX9 3AJ. 6pm – 8pm**

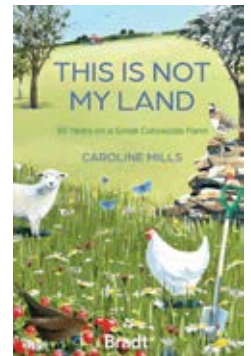
Join us for a special Annual General Meeting at Thame Barns Centre, a converted barn in Thame with beautiful gardens, for 3rd June from 6 pm. This year, we have decided to trial an evening AGM which will also celebrate CPRE's centenary.

Our speaker for the event will be the award-winning freelance travel writer, author and CPRE member, Caroline Mills. Caroline will be speaking

about her new book, *This Is Not My Land*

– a personal and powerful memoir of owning and managing a 65-acre farm on the edge of the north Cotswolds

with her husband. The book also highlights the work of CPRE, making it especially relevant to our audience.



The AGM will finish at 7:15pm after which you are invited to join us for celebratory refreshments in the beautiful gardens of the venue.

## Centenary update

### CPRE Centenary Biodiversity Award

Along with Berkshire and Buckinghamshire branches, we've joined forces with Thames and Chilterns in Bloom to create a major new award highlighting the importance of wildlife habitat creation and biodiversity in gardens, green spaces and community amenities.

We will be announcing the winner later in the year.

### Oxfordshire Voice

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