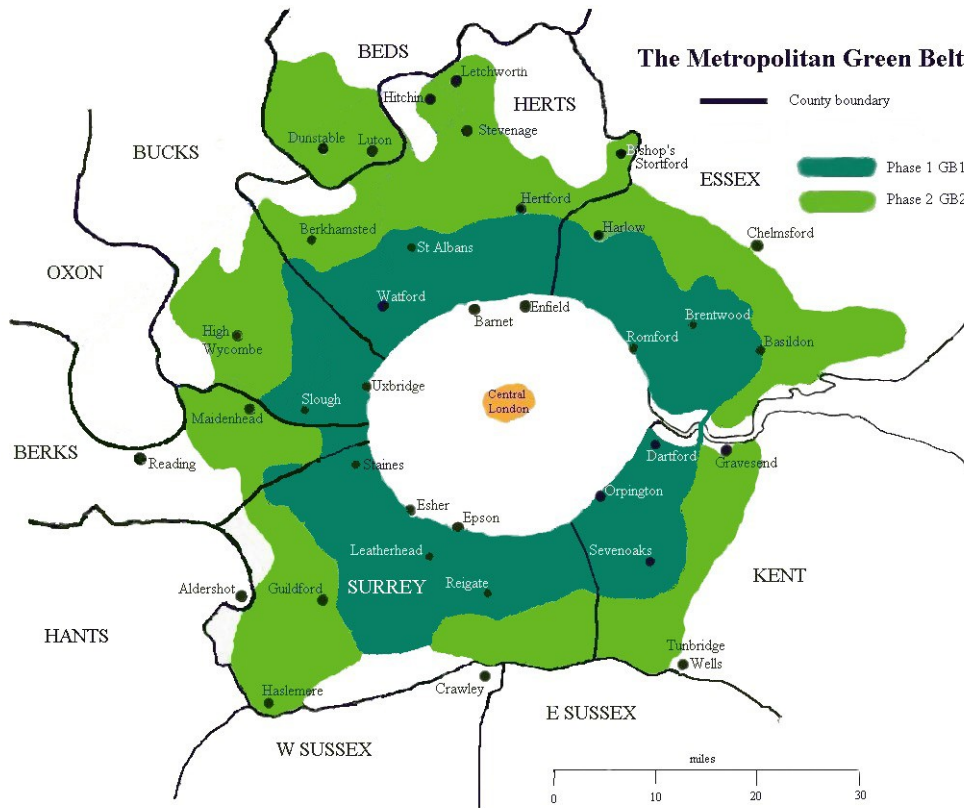


# The London Green Belt Story

## Introduction

The permanence of the London, aka Metropolitan, Green Belt (MGB), which controls development around London, is increasingly called into question, so it is worth looking at how the Green Belt concept developed from as far back as 1580, at first around London, before it was applied to other large urban areas.



## MGB Structure

The MGB was developed in two phases: the first was completed in 1965, with the installation round London of a substantial Green Belt (GB1) 5-10 ml wide, extending to about 25 ml from London centre, with a certain amount of development permitted in specified settlements within the Green Belt. Eight New Towns were established a few miles outside outside GB1.

In 1988 a second phase (GB2) was laid down, so that the Green Belt overall was increased in width by from 5ml to as much as 20 ml in some places, and some sectors, such as at Luton and Stevenage, were extended as far as 40ml from London centre. The reasons for this can only be surmised, but it may have been an attempt to push employment development further from London.

The policy for GB2 was clearly different from that of GB1, as can be seen from the convoluted outer boundary. GB2 was not directly related to London but was made to surround several large urban areas at distances of 30 ml or more from London centre, including the New Towns, well outside the designated Metropolitan area.

## The History

**1580** Queen Elizabeth decreed that no building would be permitted within 3 mile from London city gates; probably intended to keep agricultural production near to the city.

**1657** The Commonwealth Parliament set the minimum size of building plots within 10 mile from London to be not less than 4 acres.

**1919** The past laws were lost with time, and London growth in the 20 years from 1919 to 1939 took half the remaining market-garden land of Middlesex, and thousands of acres of the fertile inner-Essex belt of market gardens that once fed London. It also covered many acres of the Thames valley gravel beds, making them unavailable as a source of construction materials.

**1927** Neville Chamberlain as Minister of Health, in addressing the first meeting of the Greater London Regional Planning Cttee, said: 'London should be provided with an agricultural belt to form a dividing line between London as it is, and the satellites or new developments that might take place at a greater distance'.

**1935** The London County Council (LCC) Green Belt scheme was instituted. Some Home Counties had acquired open land for greenbelt purposes, and now the LCC at the request of the Greater London Regional Planning Cttee proposed to establish a girdle or Green Belt of open space around London, not necessarily continuous, to be readily accessible from the urban districts of London. 15,000 acres were acquired or preserved. This was found to be insufficient, and led to the passing of the **Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938**.

**1938** This Green Belt Act allowed Local Authorities in the Greater London area to acquire or declare land as Green Belt around major settlements, where development would need to obtain Ministerial consent; 35,000 acres were now brought into Green Belt status by means of these powers.

**1943** Sir Patrick Abercrombie, a Past President of the Town Planning Institute, a member of the Institute of Landscape Architects, and a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, was invited by the Minister of Town and Country Planning to develop a plan to deal with the problems of London growth after the war. Abercrombie began with the statement that 'Adequate open space for both recreation and rest is a vital factor in maintaining and improving the health of the people'. This led on not only to his adoption of the Green Belt concept, but also to his scheme for the provision of adequate open space within urban areas.

The **1943 Abercrombie Plan** defined the Greater London area in terms of four concentric areas, each with a characteristic housing density:

- |                           |                                  |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Inner urban area       | 10ml outer radius                |
| 2. Suburban belt          | 15ml outer radius                |
| 3. Green Belt             | 20ml outer radius                |
| 4. Outer countryside belt | Possibly up to 30ml outer radius |

(The radii are my estimates, measured from a London centre at Westminster)

The Abercrombie concept of a Green Belt was a 5 mile wide belt of open space around an urban/suburban area of approx 15 mile radius. The suburban belt, of low residential density inside the Green Belt, was also to be about 5 mile in width. The Green Belt was intended for recreation, the countryside belt for agriculture. No new development was to be permitted in these two Belts.

The open space aspect of the Plan required four acres of open space per 1000 population; the implication then is that the population enclosed by the Green Belt would be stabilised at a corresponding value. Development was to be moved further afield, to new towns situated beyond the outer countryside belt.

The proposed dimensions of the Green Belt can be seen against the means available to people for moving about at that time, which was mainly by foot, cycle, or bus. This probably accounted for the 5 mile module evident in Abercrombie's analysis, 5 mile being the maximum distance that was conveniently travelled, at any one time, by the means usually available then.

**1947 The Town & Country Planning Act** was passed which decreed that Local Authorities nationally should prepare development plans for their areas for a period of 20 years ahead – to be known as Structure or Local Plans. This allowed Local Authorities in the Home Counties to schedule areas as Green Belt without the need to purchase them. The Central Government was prepared to pay compensation where necessary, and subsequently £millions were paid out.

**1952 The Town Development Act** paved the way for the construction of New Towns to accommodate London 'overspill'. Eight towns such as Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage, Harlow, Bracknell, Crawley were developed around small existing settlements, and known as 'satellite towns'. They were from 25 to 30 mile from London centre, ie about 10 mile outside the London Green Belt GB2.

**1955** Duncan Sandys, Minister of Housing & Local Government at that time, stated that there was 'a clear duty to prevent further unrestricted sprawl of the great cities', and he took steps to apply the lessons of London to the other major conurbations in the country, by instructing all Local Authorities in 1956 to establish Green Belts where appropriate around major urban areas.

**1962** The London Green Belt, now termed the MGB, became 7 - 10 mile deep and extended to approx 20ml from London centre, as far as Kings Langley, Amersham, Beaconsfield, etc. The various sectors were defined in the Development Plans prepared by the Home Counties, to be reviewed every 5 years.

**1965** The first review of the **Herts County Development Plan**, defined the Herts sector of the MGB. It stated the two now standard Green Belt policies: restriction of urban sprawl and coalescence, and provision for recreation and enjoyment.

The policy was defined in the strongest terms as: 'The growth of existing settlements [in the Green Belt] will be **severely restricted** and new building will be permitted outside such settlements only in the most exceptional circumstances unless required for agricultural or allied purposes'.

But it also specified 20 '**Excluded**', and 28 '**Listed**' villages where development would not be so severely restricted. The existence of settlements, large or small, was not envisaged in the Abercrombie plan, and it marks the beginning of the decay of the London Green Belt.

The **Excluded Villages** were the larger settlements, no longer exclusively rural in character, to be excluded from the Green Belt policy, but with a perimeter line defined to closely encircle the existing limits of development. Among these, in the Chilterns area, were the villages of:

Kings Langley, Ickleford, Abbots Langley, Redbourn

The **Listed Villages** were smaller villages, in which a small amount of "infilling" would be approved within the areas defined for each village, as shown in a specific Schedule of the County Development Statement. In the Chilterns area these included:

Bovingdon, Chipperfield, Flamstead, Markyate, Potten End, Whitwell, Pirton, Bedmond, Sarratt, Woolmer Green

**1968** The MGB seems no longer to be regarded as a belt, but more as a cloak which could be dragged around to control development in any desired area. It was now proposed to extend it in some sectors as far as 40 ml from London centre, enclosing Stevenage and beyond, also Luton and other towns around London including the New Towns.

There was some natural logic to this as the mobility of London urban residents was becoming much increased by the use of the car, so that 20 mile was no more of an obstacle than 5 mile, and a 5 mile Green Belt could easily be leapfrogged by commuting workers.

**1988** The proposed extensions of the MGB had been implemented. Clearly it was assumed that all future population growth could be contained within the urban areas now enclosed by Green Belt. That assumption has now come into question.

In the PPG 2 of 1988 (and still to be found in the modern version) a prescient civil servant had placed this warning: 'It is necessary to establish boundaries [of the Green Belt] that will last, and not to include land which it is unnecessary to keep open. Otherwise there is a risk that encroachment on the Green Belt will have to be allowed to accommodate future development.' This, as we know, is now happening: plans have been made to exclude land from the Green Belt round Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead, Luton and other towns to allow expansion to take place.

**2010** The consequence of the second phase enlargement of the Green Belt is that the MGB is no longer related to one urban centre but to several, so that the principle of position (ie restraining urban growth) is weakened and has become secondary to the principle of area (ie conserving open space). This is often used as an addition to the statutory defence of 'exceptional circumstances'. An example can be found related to Stevenage, where areas have been added to the Green Belt elsewhere, to compensate for Green Belt taken for development.

### **Green Belt in the future**

Some of the confusion about the nature of the London Green Belt arises because it is not realised that it originated as a part of Abercrombie's Open Space Plan for Greater London.

The Abercrombie Green Belt was to be an area of agricultural or recreational activities; then immediately within the Green Belt area there was to be a suburban area with substantial amount of green space in the form of parks, parkways and green wedges. Both areas were to be restricted to a stable population of zero growth and would enclose the urban area of the inner city, with a higher population density. The inner city population was to be reduced, and presumably stabilised at some level, by moving some of that population into the eight New Towns to be built just outside the Green Belt.

It is evident that the basis of the Plan rested on Greater London and its Green Belt becoming an area of zero population growth. This presumption failed from the start, when towns such as Watford had to be included in the initial Green Belt GB1, and was then further compromised when the second phase GB2 was defined and included most of the New Towns.

The zero growth policy implied by the Abercrombie Plan lasted for a while, but was finally overtaken in 1988 by Government economic policy which saw London and the South East area as the 'engine of economic growth', with the concomitant of continuing growth of population and employment. Local Authorities have the power to include or exclude land from Green Belt status, and the continuing population pressure and need for development has led to them making successive exclusions over a period of 50 years or so, causing a gradual erosion of the MGB.

The Green Belt policy is not strong enough to stop this, nor is it any help in the development of the growing urban areas - it is more likely to cause excessive infilling. A new policy is required which will balance the space requirements of urban against rural areas. The whole Abercrombie Open Space concept needs to be considered, not just the Green Belt aspect.

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