

**CPRE Kent**  
**Chairman's Report to Annual General Meeting**  
**10<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

**John Wotton**

Thank you, Hilary.

You have, as always, given us a full review of our many achievements over the past year. This is my last chance to speak to you all as Chair of the Branch and I'm torn between reflecting on the past five years and looking to the future. We've achieved a remarkable amount this year, but with a relatively small group of people sharing the overwhelming burden of the work involved. We're not alone among charities in struggling to recruit enough volunteers to do the work, but for us it's vital to have a network of active members covering every town and village in the County, keeping an eye on threats to the countryside, connecting with Parish and District Councils and with local organisations, and making each community in Kent aware of what we can do to protect their countryside. We fall well short of that in too many areas of Kent and we certainly need to get better at making active membership of CPRE Kent seem a more attractive proposition. Several times, in my own Borough, we've aroused an initial interest from someone in a Parish we need to cover, but concern about the amount of time involved has led them to back off.

All of you here today are exceptional people. You care deeply enough about the countryside and the environment to do some of the complex

and detailed work that's necessary to influence the decisions of local government that can have an impact on our countryside. It involves the sacrifice of time that could be spent in the garden, on a country walk, with family or friends, or simply with a good book. It means giving up time enjoying the countryside to help protect the countryside and it's a tough ask. I'm proud of all of you who contribute to CPRE Kent's work in this way.

We also need to get better at attracting donors and sponsors, to help us undertake expensive projects or financially risky legal actions without eating into our reserves, which we depend on for the future security of our operations.

Once again, this year, much of our work has happened behind the scenes, not least the thousands of hours spent by our professional planners and district committees in reviewing and commenting on draft local plans and taking part in seemingly endless hearings during the examination of the plan. This is the best way of influencing the pattern of future development, but remains the hardest in which to engage the local community. It's all very complicated. The extent and impact of the local authority's proposals are hidden in a matrix of lengthy documents with titles that mean little to most of us. As I've said before, the planning system seems to be designed and operated for the benefit of planning professionals, both in the private sector and in planning authorities. One may welcome the present government's intention to simplify the plan-making system, while doubting that it will lead to a great increase in public understanding and engagement,

or to many more local authorities having sound and up-to-date plans in place. What's more, it's difficult to marry quicker and simpler processes with giving local communities a real say in plan-making. The enactment of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill two weeks ago was marked with rhetoric from Michael Gove, the Secretary of State responsible for planning, much of which we'd agree with. For example, he claims that the Act will: "*ensure new development is built more beautifully ...is shaped by local people's democratic wishes, enhances the environment, and creates neighbourhoods where people want to live and work*"; "*put an end to lifeless edge-of-town developments with no community assets and ensure developers deliver the schools, doctors surgeries and public services communities need*"; "*ensure the homes we need are built where they are needed in urban areas rather than concreting over the countryside*"; and "*enhance our national network of beautiful, nature-rich protected landscapes that can be enjoyed right across the country*". These are large claims to make for a measure which doesn't fundamentally alter the incentives of developers, or the powers and resources of local planning authorities (beyond a modicum of extra funding which will be just a drop in the ocean compared with those at the disposal of developers). CPRE conducted a determined campaign to improve this measure, working in a coalition of 34 organisations, known as the Better Planning Coalition. The campaign achieved some successes, notably strengthening the duties on public bodies to protect

AONBs and National Parks, but the final form of the legislation is deeply disappointing.

As we approach what looks like the end of a long period of Conservative government, I fear that there is little to hope for in the immediate future. The Prime Minister's attention, by all accounts, isn't engaged by climate change or threats to biodiversity. Michael Gove, was prepared to brush aside the issue of net nutrient neutrality by deeming new developments not to contribute to the pollution of watercourses, even when the evidence clearly showed that they would do so. Mercifully, the Lords rejected this environmentally irresponsible measure, which was left out of the Levelling-up Bill. The King's Speech on Tuesday contained nothing on the environment or the countryside.

To be fair, Michael Gove has demonstrated his belief in the importance of building more beautifully. We saw this in a decision he took in April, on a called-in application for a residential development at Turnden, near Cranbrook, in the High Weald AONB. We had campaigned against this development from the outset. Gove eventually refused permission, against the advice of the Inspector, chiefly on the ground that he disagreed with the Inspector's view that the design of the development was excellent. He thought it average, at best, and attached no weight to it. The construction industry and their supporters went ballistic and conducted a comprehensive media campaign, in the face of which we found it hard to make our voice heard, though Roger Mortlock did have a letter published in *The*

*Times* about the case (I had tried and failed to do the same). This proved to be only the first of several cases in which Gove has intervened on similar grounds, which shows that he is not easily deterred. In the case of Turnden, his decision has been quashed on a different ground and the process (having started in 2020) continues with further submissions to the Department of Levelling-up, Housing and Communities.

The hard choices over land use, housing and environmental protection won't get any easier, for this government or the next. It's unfortunate that, in common with so many other areas of public policy, attitudes to housing policy and planning have become so polarised. Even in *The Times*, my newspaper of choice, which carries commendably full and well-informed coverage of environmental issues, editorials and columnists regularly jeer at those who advocate any measures to protect the countryside from harmful housing development. We must remain measured, principled and courageous in deflecting accusations of nimbyism and put forward solutions which balance the vital need for good-quality, affordable, climate- and biodiversity friendly housing and the necessary infrastructure with sustainable food production and protecting the environment. That, in a nutshell, is at the heart of our unique mission.

Moving on, there has been a change of leadership of national CPRE during the year, with Roger Mortlock's appointment as Chief Executive and I'm delighted that Roger, who has already made a considerable impact, has come to speak to us today. I mentioned last

year that a new CPRE Network Assembly has been set up. It has now been enshrined in national CPRE's constitution and we are playing a full part in it. The Assembly, in my view, has been making an important contribution to the cohesion and effectiveness of the CPRE Network, which we are now starting to call the "Movement". The Network Assembly has set up groups to look at four major sets of issues facing us as we try to protect the countryside: Water, Land Classification, Transport and Community Engagement. Hilary has participated in the Water Group, whose work is ongoing, as well as leading on our response to a consultation on water supply strategy in the South East. Graham Horner became a member of the Transport Group, which has worked intensively to produce a new draft Transport Policy for CPRE. This was consulted on recently within the CPRE Network and I trust that it will soon be adopted. I'm grateful to them both for volunteering for these roles.

We could achieve nothing without Hilary and all the team at Charing – David, Julie, Richard and Vicky. I thank them all for their dedicated and professional work not only throughout the past year, but through all the five years I've been Chair of the Kent Branch. Thank you all for your kindness, patience and constant support. I'm also grateful for the support of our Vice Presidents, all of whom, I'm glad to say, are either continuing in office, or re-joining the board of trustees at this meeting. I'm afraid that we can't, as I had hoped, propose a candidate for election to the vacant position of President of the Branch. Our search for a new President continues.

Finally, I'm grateful to all the trustees who have served during the past year. I hope it isn't invidious to single out for praise any one member of a board of trustees, whose combined knowledge and energy make me feel quite humble. However, I should like to offer my special thanks to our long-serving Treasurer, Mike Moore, who carries a unique and heavy responsibility for the affairs and accounts of the branch. He has done so with unfailing diligence and good humour and with the skill of predicting, with uncanny accuracy, the monthly and year-end results of the Branch. This has been an immense reassurance to me and the rest of the board and we thank you, Mike, for all that you do.

As many of you will know, David Morrish, a trustee and chair of our Thanet District Committee sadly died earlier this year and we will all miss him. It was good to see him at this meeting last year. Peter Lorenzo has stepped into both roles and will, I'm sure, carry on David's good work. One other trustee, Peter Blandon, who Chairs the Swale District Committee, comes to the end of his five-year term at this AGM. I'm grateful to Peter for his work as a trustee and for continuing to serve as district committee chair. Richard King, who has been a Vice President for the past year, has kindly agreed to rejoin the Board.

As I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks, I come to the end of my term as Branch Chair at this meeting. After a careful search, we have found an eminently suitable candidate to take over from me, Ben Moorhead. I will say a few words about Ben shortly, when I propose

him for election. We will have a strong and experienced Board of Trustees, under Ben's leadership, for the coming year. It's been a great privilege to chair the Branch for the past five years and I step down confident that the impact of our work will only increase in future years.

Now, before I invite Mike Moore to present the Annual Accounts, I invite you to pose any questions you may have to Hilary or me.

### **Ben Moorhead**

Ben Moorhead is a recently-retired solicitor who lives at Bodsham, near Charing and has long, high-level experience on boards of directors and charity trustees in quite a range of sectors, both in Kent and nationally. He is a committed and hands-on conservationist and also chaired the Wye Futures Group, which campaigned successfully against development plans by Imperial College. He has family connections with CPRE Kent, his late mother Shirley having at one time been active in the Branch.