

Chairman's report

Our major difficulty in this branch is with the dearth of volunteer activists. The lack of personnel means that we do not have the human resources to campaign on as many issues as we would like. I try to watch planning issues in the three northern districts of the county, together with Dudley, but I have only intervened in Dudley occasionally. I have other constraints on my time and can only give a limited amount of time to CPRE work. Frank Hill as vice-chairman does sterling work on planning in Malvern Hills. He also managing the Best Kept Churchyards and School Gardens competitions.

Personnel

Frank sometimes planning addresses issued in the southwest of Wychavon, but we have no one regularly monitoring planning in most of Wychavon district, so that we are not even identifying which planning proposals in most of that district are potentially damaging to Rural England, let alone campaigning against them. We desperately need to find more active volunteers:

- Trustees, including someone willing to succeed me as chairman in due course.
- Planning Assistants: people willing occasionally to drive over to look at the site of a planning application and express an opinion on it. This will enable someone else to draft an objection and discuss the draft with the reporter. This may well only involve one request for action every few months. No specialist knowledge of planning is needed.
- Frank Hill wishes to hand the biennial Churchyards Competition on to someone else having done this for several years.
- Perhaps a newsletter editor: we need to talk to our members more often.
- CPRE campaigns nationally on other issues, including food and farming; transport; litter; and dark skies; but we are able to do nothing about this locally, because we have no personnel.

This Branch of CPRE has recently been the beneficiary of a large legacy from Raymond Homer of Hagley, most of which was received this year, following the sale of his house. This puts the branch on a sound footing financially. I hope that we can spend some small part of this on advertising with a view to filling some of the gaps. We also have a fairly healthy membership, but could always do with more. This year we have seen more deaths than new members.

Our branch administrator Mark House has found he is also over-committed, as a result of having a day job, including weekend commitments, and has tendered his resignation. We are actively looking for a replacement and hope this will be someone who can take a more proactive role in taking the branch forward.

Regional group

As chairman, I also participate in regional and national meetings. At a regional level, we are very concerned about development pressure generated from Birmingham and the Black Country. Peter Langley (of CPRE Warwickshire) arranged on behalf of the West Midlands group for a report from Alan Wenban-Smith on housing targets in the Birmingham region.

The last Regional Group meeting was also attended by representatives of the East Midlands region, who are concerned over transport developments, some of which straddle the regional boundary.

As CPRE is organised by pre-1974 counties, CPRE has no single branch equipped to address issues in the West Midlands Conurbation. Warwickshire deals with Birmingham, Solihull and Coventry. I am (on behalf of Worcestershire) seeking to deal with Dudley (of which I have said more elsewhere). I hope that CPRE Staffordshire is addressing issues for Wolverhampton and Walsall, but I am not sure that any one is watching Sandwell. CPRE originally created regional groups to address regional planning issues, related to Regional Spatial Strategies. With the abolition of these together with regional government structures after 2010, the role of regional groups is less obvious. The need remains however for the three branches adjoining the conurbation to work together to address planning and development issues there.

As I write, Andy Street has just been elected mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, with powers related to transport and strategic planning. The primary boundaries of WMCA are those of the old West Midlands County, but various neighbouring districts, including Redditch have become non-voting members. Quite what this will mean in practice is difficult to know. Of the candidates of the major parties, I suspect he is the most sympathetic to the preservation of the Green Belt. His transport agenda includes an expansion of rail transport, though mostly in more distant parts of the conurbation. However his proposals include exploring the restoration of passenger traffic on the Stourbridge to Walsall line, where passenger traffic was abolished by Beeching, but the line retained for goods traffic to places such as the (now long-closed) Round Oak Steel Works. This is an issue which I, as a resident of Hagley and user of Stourbridge Junction Station, have periodically included in objections to strategic plans. His manifesto also includes policies on air pollution, youth unemployment, mental health and other matters. He plans to appoint task forces to address particular issues. This provides an opportunity for CPRE to be involved.

National issues

As chairman of a CPRE Branch, I am a voting member of the CPRE national charity (at general meetings) and I attend various other events at a national level. This included attending the AGM last summer and the open meeting of the Policy Committee last autumn, both in London. I also attend the County Branch Forum, but I missed the meeting last autumn when it was at short notice moved from Stratford to London; and I missed the March meeting, because I had arranged a foreign holiday that clashed with the meeting.

I participated in the preparation of CPRE's response to the Housing White Paper consultation. This took place in three stages. The first was for branches to send their responses to National Office. Then there was a meeting in London to discuss draft responses, prepared by the National Office planning team. Finally there was an on-line discussion forum, where I was in fact one of the few people to post comments on the draft response. The final CPRE national response reflected a lot of input from branches, including this one.

As I write, we have a change of era. Shaun Spiers has been Chief Executive of CPRE for the last 13 years, but has now decided to move on to head up the Green Alliance, a coalition of environmental charities. He is being replaced by Crispin Truman, OBE, who has been the Chief Executive of the Churches Conservation Trust, since 2003. This takes him from protecting historic (often rural) churches to work on rural England as a whole

A personal note

As indicated, I do not wish to remain branch chairman for ever. If there was someone suitable to replace me, I would happily hand the baton on and drop back to being a vice-chairman. I might like to spend more time on CPRE work, but my time has become

overcommitted. I am also a trustee of several other small charities, and vice-chairman of my parish council.

In addition, I am an academic historian, writing about the history of the iron industry. Over many years I have been working on a *Gazetteer of the British iron industry*, which may well be a work of 500,000 words. Apart from my Christian faith, this history is my first love. I have an enormous amount of detailed information on the subject, which needs to be published. To go with this, but to follow it, I want to publish a more discursive book on the iron industry to supersede reference books that are now 25, 40, and even 60 years old. Work on this is inevitably time-consuming and I am now employing a part-time secretary to undertake some of the more clerical tasks that I have been doing, such as administering a small missionary charity.