



The Cockburn Association and the Green Belt: A history and case study of civic action

June 2023 by Margaret Jessop

As an organisation the Cockburn Association works to promote the conservation and enhancement of both Edinburgh's landscape and its historical and architectural heritage. It has a long history of campaigning and intervention when the plans of central and local government and those of private developers threaten the unique character of the city.

Edinburgh's Green Belt is such an issue, and the organisation has consistently monitored its evolution from its implementation in 1957 to the present day. Interventions and constructive comments have inevitably occurred mainly when areas of land designated as Green Belt have been eroded and thereby considerably reduced in size.

What is a Green Belt?

In British town planning the Green Belt is principally a policy for controlling urban growth. In practical terms it is usually a ring of open countryside surrounding an urban area where most forms of development will be resisted for the foreseeable future. In most locations within the Green Belt agriculture, forestry and outdoor leisure uses should prevail. Whilst enjoying widespread popular support this policy is not without its critics who claim that it reduces the amount of land available for urban expansion and is therefore responsible for both constraining the historic growth pattern of cities as well as pushing up the price of already costly housing stock.

Context

The term Green Belt emerged from continental Europe where broad boulevards were increasingly used to separate new developments from the centre of historic towns, most notably the Ringstrasse in Vienna.

In Britain, there was increasing concern in London in the first half of the twentieth century about the rapidly increasing size of the city and its potentially overstretched infrastructure, particularly transport. To alleviate this situation two major plans were introduced which supported the notion of a green belt around the city. Both however took considerable time to be implemented. The first was tabled as early as 1919 and entitled the "Development Plan of Greater London". It proposed a continuous belt of up to two miles wide to prevent urban sprawl beyond which development could take place. It was only finally implemented in 1934 following Herbert Morrison's leadership of the London City Council. The second plan entitled the "Advisory Greater London Plan" containing a 6-mile-wide green belt was prepared by Patrick Abercrombie in 1944. It was however some fourteen years before the various local authorities responsible for the area around London had all defined a Green Belt on their scaled maps with some accuracy. Following on from these plans both the historic Circular 42/55 and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act that followed (with its new

provision for compensation) encouraged local authorities around the country to incorporate green belt proposals in their first development plans alongside a hierarchy of linked countryside designations.

When viewed in a wider planning context, Green Belt designations formed part of a balanced framework of countryside policies which started with the establishment of National Parks. This began in 1949 with the passing of *The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* in England and Wales. Scotland lagged far behind and it wasn't until 2000 that the *National Parks (Scotland) Act* was placed on the statute books. There are currently 15 National Parks in the UK with 10 in England, 3 in Wales and 2 in Scotland.

Secondly, commencing from 1956 onwards in England and Wales, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) were created in areas with distinctive and valuable landscape features. Again, Scotland trailed far behind other parts of the UK, with the creation of National Scenic Areas in 1981, of which there are currently 40. There are only 46 AONB's located across England, Wales and Northern Ireland in total. A distinct difference between the two is that an AONB has an administrative unit built around it to help management issues, whereas a NSA is only a designation with limited statutory protection.

Thirdly, Country Parks were established for specialised areas of high amenity, usually conveniently placed near towns and cities. These followed the Countryside Acts of 1967 (Scotland) and 1968 (England and Wales). (It is noted that there are currently 250 designated Country Parks in England and Wales and 40 in Scotland). The purpose of Country Parks was to encourage recreation and access to the countryside.

Thus, the Green Belt can be seen as forming part of a network of protected land areas. The distinction is that it has no statutory basis itself and forms part of a wider suite of planning policies.

Edinburgh

Historically the land surrounding Edinburgh has long been appreciated by its residents. In the 18th and 19th centuries in particular the public wishing to escape the grime and squalor of the city sought the countryside beyond its boundaries for health and recreational purposes. For the same reason merchants and wealthy landowners (who wanted access to the seat of power) from the 17th century onwards built their country estates there with their designed landscapes and tenanted farms.

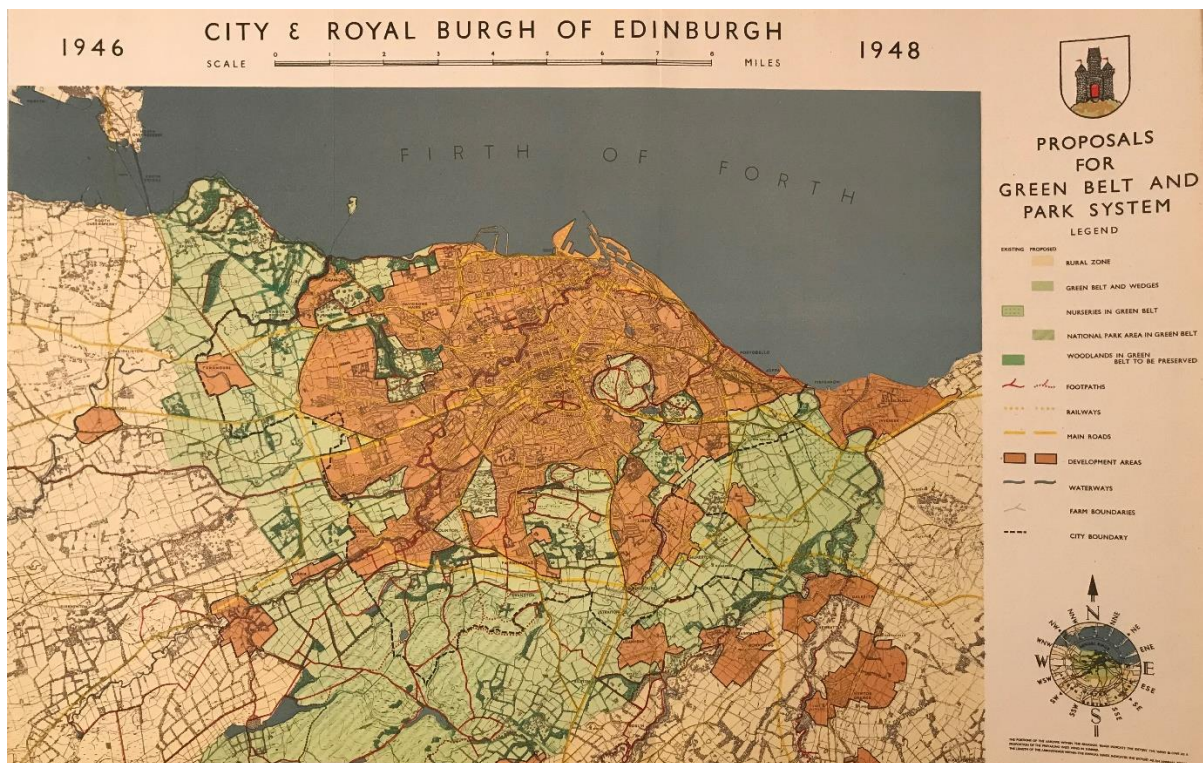
In the last century several golf courses, recreational facilities and footpaths were established around the outskirts of the city which both defined the principal elements in the Green Belt and most importantly served as a further buffer to urban expansion.

The formal designation of Edinburgh's Green Belt dates back to the immediate post-war period and is found in *The Civic Survey and Plan for the Royal Burgh of Edinburgh* prepared for Edinburgh by Patrick Abercrombie and David Plumstead in 1948. The aim of the Green Belt policy was:

- a) to limit the expansion of the city and its neighbouring small towns and villages
- b) to prevent farmland being lost to development
- c) to preserve and improve upon the landscape surrounding the city.

The rationale for the Edinburgh Green Belt was set out very clearly in the Abercrombie Plan. He noted Edinburgh's "spectacular open spaces of world-wide renown" which help to give Edinburgh its unique character. The landscape of Edinburgh contains three central hills of Castle Rock, Calton

Hill, and Arthur's Seat. In addition, there are the Braid, Blackford and Corstorphine Hills, the beautiful coastal scenery of the Firth of Forth and the dramatic Pentland Hills to the south. The protection of these spaces and views of them are important factors that generated widespread political, professional and public support for Green Belt principles.



Source: *A Civic Survey and Plan for the Royal burgh of Edinburgh* by Patrick Abercrombie and Derek Plumstead published by Oliver and Boyd 1949 Map 21.

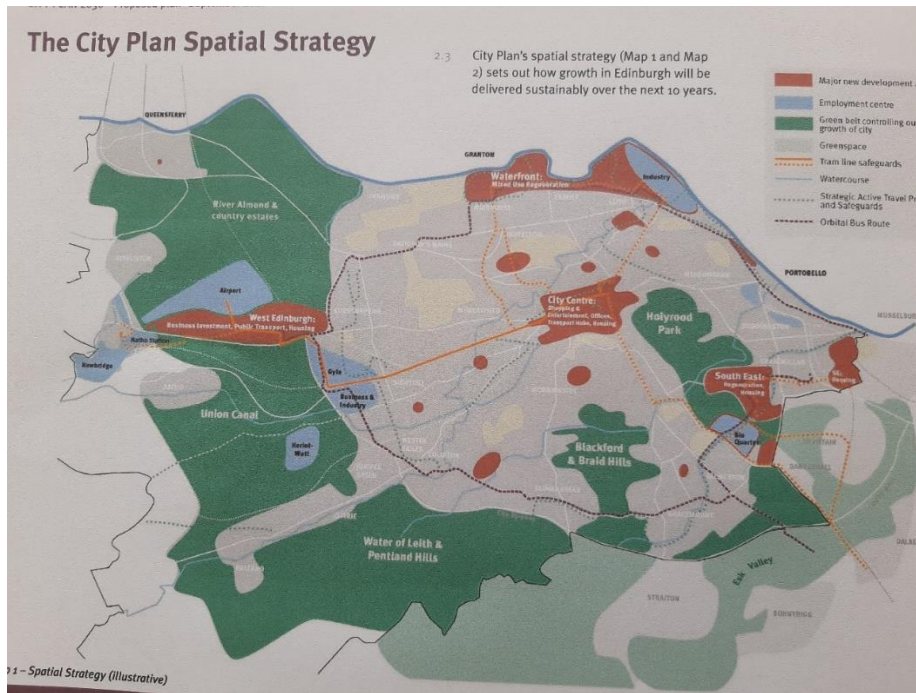
The Civic Survey was first implemented in the 1957 Development Plan which was ultimately assimilated into the 1965 Development Plan. It has to a large extent shaped the development of Edinburgh in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Here, it states, “In this green belt area there will be absolute prohibition of development except such as can be shown to be necessary and any planning consents will contain provisions for the safeguarding of amenity.”

The Edinburgh Green Belt was a key element of control in the rapid expansion in the urban area that took place in successive decades. In particular, the 1965 Plan sought to control development in a form that protected high quality farmland, natural landscape features and recreational facilities using green belt designations as a key, long term strategy.

The latest Green Belt boundaries are defined in the proposed City Plan 2030 which will be the Local Development Plan for Edinburgh for the period 2022-2032. This plan was submitted to the Council for approval in December 2020 and is in the process of being adopted subject to the formal Examination in Public process conducted by the Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA). Aim 2 of the Strategy (p8) states that it will be “**directing new development to, and maximising the use of, brownfield land, rather than greenfield land**, and re-imagining Edinburgh’s neighbourhoods, rebuilding the city from within and delivering new communities in Edinburgh Waterfront, West Edinburgh and on other major development sites across the city”. The Green Belt proposals which define the countryside areas controlling the outward growth of the city are detailed

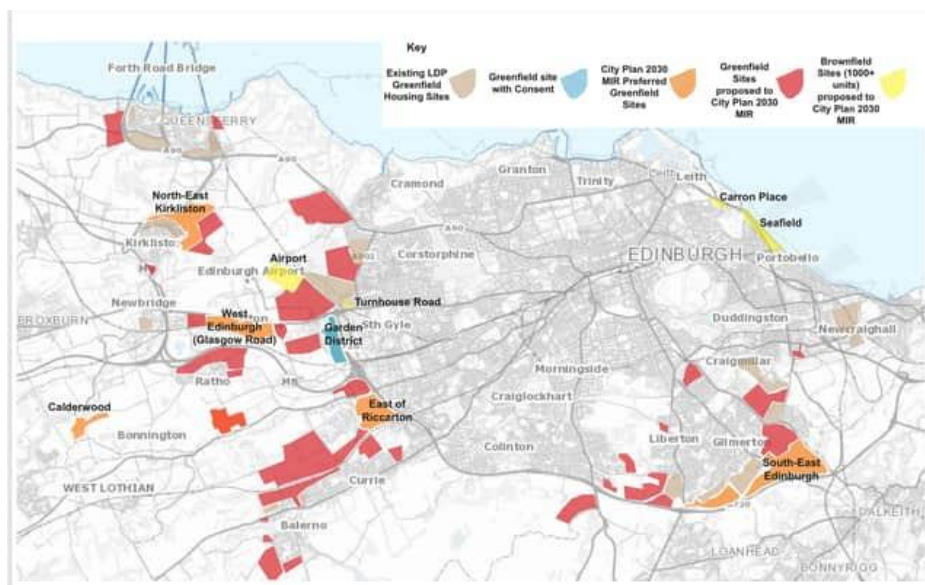
in the City Plan Spatial Strategy (map 1). These 5 areas are (a) River Almond and Country Estates (b) Union Canal (c) Water of Leith and Pentland Hills (d) Blackford, and Braid Hills (e) Holyrood Park. Between these areas growth will be delivered in 5 major development areas including large sections within west Edinburgh and to a lesser extent in south-east Edinburgh which were previously included within the Green Belt.

Map from City Plan 2030



Source: City Plan 2030 (spatial strategy map 1, page 9)

The map reproduced below also summarises in more detail the many changes that are either currently occurring or are proposed to take place in the City Plan 2030. It is clear that some Green Belt land is proposed for development.



Source: Edinburgh Evening News website 20th Sept 2021.

As mentioned above, and as can be seen by areas marked in red on the map, the further erosion of the Green Belt will predominately (although not exclusively) take place in west Edinburgh. These areas include sections of Cammo, West Craigs, Turnhouse and Gogar (alongside Ratho, Balerno and South Queensferry).

Overall, the breaches of the original Green Belt boundaries have led to a modified form and shape of major sections of Edinburgh's Green Belt and allowed far greater access to previously unobtainable land for urban uses.

The physical scale of the overall loss of green belt land from the original Abercrombie designation and as extended in the 1965 Development Plan now amounts to some 4000 acres or 1619 ha, the equivalent to well over 3000 football pitches!

Interventions from the Cockburn Association

Since the establishment of Edinburgh's Green Belt, the Cockburn Association has been a firm supporter and has monitored development proposals and their impact on it. The Association's records show that many interventions and comments have been recorded to date on this critical policy area and that they have been accorded considerable weight in the subsequent decision-making procedures. A snapshot of these is listed below, representing examples from each of the subsequent decades since the original plan was implemented in 1957 up to the year 2000 and beyond.

1. In 1968 at a Public Inquiry, the Cockburn Association submitted objections to several aspects of the (then) Edinburgh Corporation's Review Plan of the Green Belt. There appeared to be a substantial increase in the area of land reserved as Green Belt but this was misleading as the area of Green Belt round the outside of the city had been considerably reduced. This reduction had been hidden by including Corstorphine Hill and Arthur's Seat as Green Belt areas. Major incursions into the Green Belt were proposed at Cammo, Southfield, Baberton, Woodhall and Hunter's Tryst where large areas were to be rezoned for housing.

From the amenity point of view, Woodhall was deemed to be the most serious loss. The proposed site lay on the slopes of Torphin Hill to the south of the Water of Leith opposite Juniper Green and extended over 70 acres (28.3ha). The area is seen from a long stretch of the Lanark Road and the Corporation had acknowledged the beauty of the view by placing seats on a strip of shrubbery on the south side of the Lanark Road. The fear was that once housing was allowed on the south bank of the Water of Leith there would be nothing to prevent it spreading eventually much higher up the hills to the south and also westwards towards the city boundary. The Water of Leith formed a natural limit to the growth of the city, but once this boundary was crossed there would be no other similar boundary to the south or west.

2. In 1975, the Cockburn Association expressed strong reservations about the erosion of planning safeguards in the Community Land Bill, which was before Parliament. It urged that the power to acquire land for development should be dependent on the proposed development conforming to an approved development plan, prior to re-zoning being necessary if it was proposed to use the land for a different purpose. On this occasion the plea was in vain. The Cockburn Association therefore strongly objected to "an appalling case of planning abuse under the Community Land Act" which led to the release of nearly 100 acres (40.5ha) of prime agricultural land in the Green Belt at South Gyle. This was to be zoned for industrial development. The conclusion reached by the Cockburn Association at the time was that whilst no private developer would be allowed to get away with such

a massive Green Belt intrusion, it appeared that the local authority could acquire any land it wanted for whatever purpose with scarce opportunity for public comment within the process.

3. In the Cockburn's newsletter of 1982, many interventions into Green Belt issues were recorded under the heading of "A war of 16 battles". It was noted that the planning vacuum caused by the absence of an approved Structure Plan, and consequently of approved Local plans for the peripheral areas of the city provided speculative builders with an excuse for lodging appeals against refusal of planning permission on some 16 sites on the edge of the city, mainly in the Green Belt. These included land at a) Royal Nurseries (on the north slope up to Craigmillar castle) by Miller's; b) Edmonstone Mains (just beyond Ferniehill) by Barratt's; c) Cammo Estate (on the west side of Maybury Road) by Barratt's; and Swanston Farm (all the land north of the By-pass) by London and Clydeside Estates). Having objected to all 16 of these planning applications, the Cockburn Association was pleased to support the City of Edinburgh District Council who refused consent and appeared at various public inquiries often in conjunction with local objectors.

4. In 1991 the Cockburn Association objected to 4 major development schemes on Green Belt land which included football stadia. These were at a) Newton Farm, Millerhill (Heart of Midlothian 50ha); b) Straiton, south of the city bypass and west of the A701 (Edinburgh Hibernium); c) Hermiston- a very ambitious scheme on the land between the Bypass and Heriot-Watt University (Heart of Midlothian); and d) Ingliston between the showground and the airport (which was ultimately accepted by the Cockburn Association). Two of these sites were given approval, but the football clubs themselves had no interest in either Straiton or Hermiston (financial or otherwise) and did not wish to relocate there. It is noted that at the end of the day none of these stadia were built and that both Hibs and Hearts still remain at their inner-city grounds.

5. In 1992 the Cockburn Association amended its constitution so that "The objects of the Association are to promote and encourage the following objects by charitable means but not otherwise: a) the maintenance and improvement of the amenity of the City of Edinburgh **and its neighbourhood**; and b) the protection and preservation of the City's landscape and historic and architectural heritage. This was to make explicit its interest in the Green Belt. An associate policy statement stated, "Support Lothian Regional Council's policy of protecting the Green Belt within the boundaries established by the 1988 Review. Oppose further boundary changes or development except for agriculture or countryside recreation, or which is essential and cannot go elsewhere. Support physical improvements to the Green Belt, eg by the Edinburgh Green Belt Trust".

6. From 1993 onwards, the Cockburn Association voiced its grave concerns that the local authorities given the responsibility of protecting the Green Belt around Edinburgh were proposing massive releases of land for development purposes. The greatest institutional attack came from Lothian Regional Council who planned in their 1993 Structure Plan Review to release two substantial areas of Green Belt, one at Currie and the other at Craigmillar/Danderhall, known as the South-East Wedge. With the latter, it was proposed that up to 5000 houses should be built, together with a new hospital, a medical business park and other business uses. The Cockburn Association's newsletter (no.38 – February 1994) stated "the inconsistency that this demonstrates between supporting the adopted Green Belt policy and treating the land as a resource worries the Association very much indeed". The content of the finalised 1997 Lothian Region Structure Plan was therefore greeted with great dismay where Policy ENV8 stated "In preparing the development strategy, the Council has concluded that, in order to meet strategic development requirements, some currently designated Green Belt land should be released". This was the "South-East Wedge" concept and once put in place, resulted in a massive Green Belt breach on land around Danderhall and Millerhill for example, much of it now known as "Shawfair".



Above – South-East wedge looking north to Arthur’s Seat with Craigmillar tower blocks and Royal Infirmary just visible on horizon.

7. The Cockburn Association noted in 2001 that open space, including the Green Belt, was becoming an important issue at both local and national level. The Scottish Government prepared a Planning Advice Note 65: Planning and Open Space provides advice on the role of the planning system in protecting and enhancing existing open spaces and providing high quality new spaces. At the same time, the City of Edinburgh Council was working on a new Open Space Strategy (Edinburgh Public Parks and Gardens Strategy, March 2006), its last publication on this issue being formulated in 1969. Both were in response to increased development pressure on open space. The Cockburn Association formed dedicated working group to produce a discussion document highlighting this issue and to help develop policies both at local and national. This document was entitled “A Greater Green Edinburgh” and highlighted the need to protect the Green Belt.

8. In 2003 the Cockburn Association noted that the increasing pressure to develop green space, especially the Green Belt. In this context, the Association helped to launch the Edinburgh Greenbelt Network which aimed to provide co-ordination between groups and individuals across the city and stretching into East, Mid and West Lothian. It would also provide a platform from which to reassess the role of Edinburgh’s Green Belt.

Present Day

Currently Edinburgh’s Green Belt is coming under renewed development pressure. In the Maybury area alone 665 homes are being built by Cala at Cammo Meadows and at West Craigs/Turnhouse some 1,650 houses are being constructed, together with related commercial premises and a primary school.

The following 2 photographs show current building on the Green Belt at Cammo:



(Photos courtesy of I. Jessop)

Furthermore, Murray Estates owns 675 acres (273 ha) on the western boundary of the city between Hermiston to the east, Juniper Green to the south and Gogar to the north. Planning permission has been granted for the construction of up to 9000 homes designed as 5 “communities” (or villages) and is referred to as the “Edinburgh Garden District”.

In February 2023, the Scottish Parliament approved the National Planning Framework 4 which includes revised National Planning Policies which included Green Belts. It sets down strategic housing targets for housebuilding for each local authority and for the Edinburgh City Region (which is expected to accommodate around half of the Scottish demand) to be implemented by 2023. The housing target for Edinburgh is 36,750, for East Lothian 6,500 and Midlothian 8,850 all of whom have areas of land in the Green Belt. As stated earlier whilst the City of Edinburgh Council has approved a “brownfield first” strategy its City Plan 2030 (which is not expected to be formally adopted until late 2023/early 2024), the housebuilding lobby have suggested that further Green Belt releases will be needed to meet demand.

As such further Green Belt battles can be expected.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the review of the history of the Edinburgh Green Belt has identified an ever-present threat of major breaches of its defined boundaries. Currently, given the number of powerful development groups making significant, renewed attacks on the established boundaries of the Green Belt, it is more important than ever that the Cockburn Association responds timeously to each and every new challenge.