



Viewpoint

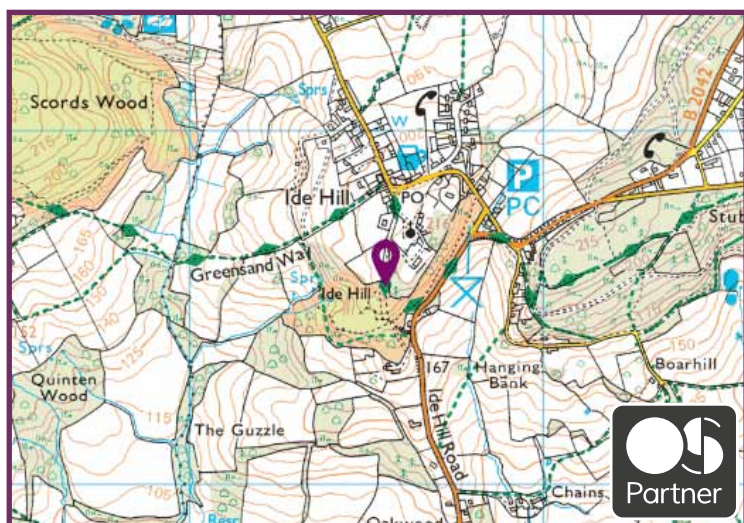
Tightening the belt



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Ide Hill, near Sevenoaks, Kent

Grid reference: TQ 48552 51560

Getting there: From Ide Hill village green take the signposted footpath past the church and a field of donkeys to enter woodland. Follow the signs marked 'Octavia Hill centenary trail' to find a concrete bench in the woods.

Keep an eye out for: Carpets of bluebells through the woodlands in spring

This stone bench commemorates Octavia Hill, a social reformer and one of the founders of the National Trust. Her campaigning work protected the surrounding woods and this view from development.

Hill believed that green spaces should be available to everyone, particularly the urban poor. She was the first person to coin the term 'green belt', which describes areas of open space left undeveloped to protect the countryside from the pressures of expansion.

But today, with population growth increasing pressure on land, the green belt has become a controversial issue.

How has the green belt protected the countryside and what is its future?



We're on the highest point of the Greensand Ridge, a sandstone escarpment running across Kent and Surrey which offers extensive views over the Weald of Kent. Not far from this spot, artist Samuel Palmer painted a similar view across the Weald, depicting this area as an "earthly paradise".

This scene of quintessentially English lowland landscape isn't much different today: hedged fields, pockets of woodland, scatterings of farm buildings and the distinctive cone-shaped white chimneys of Kentish oasthouses (buildings for drying hops).

One reason the view is largely unchanged is the Metropolitan Green Belt. This ring of countryside around London controls growth, prevents urban sprawl and keeps a clear distinction between the town and the countryside.

There are 14 green belts around the country, circling urban areas including Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle. Between them they cover just over a tenth of England. Besides providing 'breathing space' for millions of people, they are important for food production, preventing floods, climate change and tourism, and biodiversity.

But with Britain facing a housing crisis, many people argue that building on green belt land is the most obvious solution. In the south east alone, London's population is set to increase by 2 million in the next fifteen years, putting increasing pressure on the Metropolitan Green Belt.

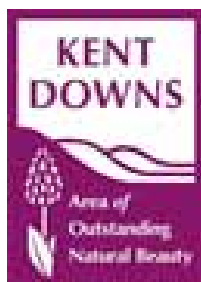
The Campaign to Protect Rural England argues that there are enough 'brownfield sites' (damaged and derelict land) that can be built on. They call for tighter controls and enforcement to protect the erosion of the green belt.

On the other hand, a report published by the London School of Economics argues that some green belt isn't environmentally valuable and proposes 'corridors' of development with 'green wedges' either side.

The issue is certainly contentious. What might Octavia Hill have made of it? Her views were instrumental in setting up today's green belts. Yet as a nineteenth-century social reformer working in London's East End, her mission was to improve working class housing, addressing issues of overcrowding and unstable tenancies.

With many families today still crowded into unsuitably small homes, with little opportunity to experience the countryside, would loosening the green belt offer them a better future? Or with limited opportunities for inner city families to experience the countryside, is the green belt a vital breathing space for the city?

Can we find a middle ground, so that we protect valuable countryside while finding space for affordable homes? Perhaps we need an Octavia Hill for the twenty-first century?



This viewpoint is one of 12 created in partnership with
Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)
to celebrate their 50 year anniversary in 2018.

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