

# BERKSHIRE VOICE

Newsletter of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England

December 2023

*Environment Minister Lord Benyon  
speaking at the CPRE Berkshire  
AGM (photo: Nigel Keene)*



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The countryside charity  
Berkshire

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# Environment Minister's call to “re-connect people with nature”

Protecting the countryside can go hand in hand with unleashing rural opportunities and re-connecting people. That was the message from Environment Minister Lord Benyon to the annual meeting of CPRE Berkshire.

Building affordable homes that people need, speeding up broadband connectivity, improving local transport services, diversifying rural businesses and giving new life to redundant buildings can all play their part in strengthening countryside communities, the minister told CPRE Berkshire members at their AGM held in the Long Gallery at Englefield House.

Lord Benyon's speech included a plea to promote responsible enjoyment of the countryside. “As a nation we need to ‘re-connect’ people with their local countryside – and especially our children. Nature heals, it offers innate joy, a sense of wellbeing. Perhaps we need to start measuring happiness in the same way we measure GDP.”

The former MP for Newbury thanked CPRE Berkshire for its work in protecting the Green Belt and rural landscapes, and urged CPRE members to “continue celebrating our countryside and green spaces.” He also highlighted the importance of farming and countryside management to the wider economy. In particular, he said, the security of the nation's food supplies is vital. “In this country we currently produce 62% of what we eat, but we *can* produce 75% or more. We have to think 20, 30 or 50 years ahead and look at ways to improve national resilience.”

He added that the Government is concerned to strengthen the rural economy and “encourage the next generation of people from farming families to stay in the family business and allow them to embrace the new world of agriculture.” Meeting local housing needs will also be crucial to rural communities, and this requires cooperation between parishes and local builders with a commitment to building in the local vernacular so that new homes look right in their rural settings.

On environmental issues, as with most political hot topics, “most people are in the middle ground. They want dialogue rather than confrontation.” Access to the countryside is an example of this, with a small group demanding an automatic ‘right to roam’ anywhere and everywhere and with a few landowners trying to block public access to their land, but “the great majority of us are in the middle,” understanding farmers’ concerns and recognising the need to open up the countryside more. But there is a balance to be struck between the two.

This message was echoed by CPRE Berkshire Chairman Greg Wilkinson who said that CPRE was keen to cooperate with as wide a range of environmental and community groups as possible, and that CPRE Berkshire's focus in its new Strategic Plan is on creating alliances and partnerships across the county. In particular, CPRE is looking forward to its centenary in 2026 and is working on a special project looking at how Berkshire's countryside has changed in the past 100 years and how it might look in another 100 years' time.

Greg thanked James Puxley, His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant for Berkshire, for serving as President of CPRE Berkshire during his Lieutenancy of the Royal County.



*Pictured (left to right) at our AGM: CPRE Berkshire Chairman Greg Wilkinson, Branch Secretary Gloria Keene MBE, Environment Minister Lord Benyon, Branch Vice-President Dr Christina Hill Williams DL, and Branch President, James Puxley CVO, Lord Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire. [Photo: Nigel Keene]*

## Why we need darker skies

CPRE Berkshire is calling for the Environment Agency to be given wider powers and more resources to monitor river pollution and to prevent the water companies from releasing raw sewage into our rivers and streams. As we all know, water pollution is an increasing problem throughout England, caused both by sewage discharges into rivers and by chemical run-off from agricultural land, but with high profile cases of sickness being reported by people who have swum in local rivers such as the Kennet it is becoming a bigger and bigger concern here in Berkshire. The people and wildlife of the Royal County are increasingly at risk and it is that clear that this due to the repeated failures of the water industry to keep the rivers clean.

In recent months there have been numerous documented examples of pollution getting into the River Kennet, the River Pang and the Foudry Brook, among others. Chalk streams like the River Pang and the River Kennet are extremely important in terms of biodiversity, and the water in these rivers should be clear as chalk streams contain very little sediment. In fact there are only 210 chalk streams in the entire world, the majority of which are here in England – which makes it all the more crucial that we protect the water quality in the Kennet and the Pang. But the Pang was recently downgraded to ‘poor’ ecological status by the Environment Agency due to repeated sewage discharges into the river. Just a

few years ago it was still classified as ‘good’, then demoted to ‘moderate’ and is now classed as ‘poor’.

Thames Water has insisted that tackling the problem of discharges “will take time and investment”, but CPRE Berkshire believes the situation is urgent and there should be no more delays before action is taken. We are facing a water quality emergency which requires immediate action to clean up our rivers and a long-term strategy to keep them clean. We have had too many excuses from Thames Water. Our view is that the Government should step in and give the Environment Agency the powers and resources it needs to ensure that the water companies clean up our rivers and are no longer allowed to release sewage and other pollutants into the water.

In England and Wales as a whole, four out of every five rivers have failed to achieve a ‘good’ ecological status in the last year, and that more than half of these are being polluted by sewage and waste water. Earlier this year, we issued our “Manifesto for Berkshire’s Countryside”, to guide council candidates in the local council elections, and we highlighted the problem of water pollution in that manifesto, calling on elected councillors to make the cleaning up of our rivers and waterways a major priority. We have already had a lot of media coverage locally on this issue. We are starting work on a new manifesto now, to guide candidates and parties contesting next year’s General Election. Those vying for the chance to represent Berkshire constituencies in Parliament after 2024 need to understand how seriously CPRE takes the issue of river pollutions.

## Awards for CPRE volunteers

Two of our Branch volunteers, Sheila Atack and Penny Desmond, have been awarded The CPRE Special Contribution Award by the national charity. Sheila won her award for giving over 10 years of voluntary service with CPRE Berkshire as Honorary Treasurer. The citation records that she “demonstrated due precision and accuracy through periods of significant change”. Penny Desmond has been a CPRE Berkshire volunteer for over 20 years and during that time she “consistently demonstrated a flexible and friendly approach administering the main fundraising programme.”



*Pictured: CPRE Berkshire Chairman Greg Wilkinson presents Sheila and Penny with their CPRE Special Contribution Awards.*

# Edward Golton – A Tribute

*We are sad to report the passing of longtime CPRE member and Trustee of the Berkshire, Edward Golton, of Bradfield, who died in October. Here, CPRE Berkshire Vice-President Dr Christina Hill Williams DL pays tribute to this longstanding and tireless CPRE campaigner.*



When I left Sussex and came to Berkshire in 1988, I continued my membership of CPRE, which dated from the mid-1980s. In 2002 I joined the Executive Committee in Berkshire and became a Trustee of the Berkshire branch. Edward was already a Trustee and Committee member, and I soon came to appreciate and admire the depth of his Planning knowledge and his understanding of the countryside generally and how to protect it. He was very involved in the various campaigns and initiatives which Berkshire CPRE became involved in, whether Quiet Lanes, Dark Skies or the Litter and Waste Management initiative which CPRE nationally implemented in 2008.

Edward served with successive Chairmen of the Branch, including Elizabeth Still (a former County Councillor) and Mike Spence. He always identified the crux of an issue in Committee meetings, went straight to the point and in his quiet and sometimes low-key way, he always had something relevant and important to say. I was myself Chairman from 2006 to 2009, and valued greatly the contribution that Edward made. I once attended, with Edward, a Planning Committee meeting of the local council (which in those days was Newbury District Council and later became West Berkshire Council). His knowledge of the planning system was second to none: he was able to table his arguments and points with great skill and determination, and it is thanks to him that so many battles in the area were won, not just in the Bradfield area sub-committee, which he chaired and led, but right across the county.

His greatest individual achievement was probably the foundation of the Trust which purchased a portion of mixed woodland, Emery Down Wood, which lay in his own village and was saved by his efforts and those of others from becoming an infill development site. The campaign involved raising the money to purchase the site, organising the setting up of the trust and the work necessary to maintain it. Edward was also an active member of Berkshire Gardens Trust and told me all about the fauna and flora which he saw and enjoyed in his own garden. This included slow worms and adders as well as rhododendrons which normally do not do well in the clay and flint which are standard in this part of the North Wessex Downs.

In recent years, Edward had suffered poor health and it was clearly a struggle for him to maintain his momentum. I went to visit him in hospital the day before his death. It was an opportunity for me to thank him for his dedication, service and hard work over many years. Without him, the environment in the Bradfield area, in the villages and on the downland which he loved so much, in West Berkshire and across the county generally, would be in a far worse state than it is. It will be hard to replace him and to find another with such dedication, determination and passion for the English countryside. My thanks go to Edward for his work and service, and may his legacy live on.

# Can you help us in Wokingham?

The Borough of Wokingham has only a small area of protected Green Belt countryside and is extremely vulnerable to development pressures, especially from commercial housebuilders looking to exploit the borough's rail links and close proximity to Greater London. That's why we are looking to recruit volunteers who can help us to preserve Wokingham's open spaces, woodland and farmland. This need to find some volunteers for our Wokingham CPRE group is made all the more urgent as the longstanding chairman of this group, Dr Peter Wilford, has retired from this role after 31 years of active campaigning for CPRE in Wokingham.

Peter has been a terrific standard-bearer for CPRE and the leading champion of countryside protection in Wokingham for more than three decades. But developers are currently looking to build thousands of new houses in Wokingham and we are concerned to ensure that any new development provides the right housing in the right places, with a focus on affordable and social housing for key workers in the existing urban areas, not just thousands more premium-priced executive homes in the Green Belt and countryside. As stated elsewhere in this newsletter, we are also very concerned about development of large areas of solar panels and wind turbines. There is no need to use up precious Green Belt and agricultural land with these so-called solar farms and wind farms when we could be meeting the requirement for renewable energy by putting photovoltaic panels on roofs, especially on top of large building such as schools, hospitals, factories and warehouses. We shouldn't be building on our countryside when we need farmland to grow our food and open spaces for public health and recreation.

So, if you live in the Wokingham area, and can spare some time as a CPRE volunteer, please lend your support to the local group as they will be working hard in the months ahead to support the countryside for future generations and to promote the well-being of all those who live in the borough. If you think you might be able to help, please contact the CPRE Berkshire Branch office on 0118 930 6756.



*Pictured: CPRE Berkshire Vice-President Dr Christina Hill Williams DL presents Peter and Barbara Wilford with a certificate in recognition of Peter's long service to CPRE, in particular his chairmanship of our local group in Wokingham.*

# Conservation Awards 2024 launched

Schools across Berkshire are being invited to take part in the next round of CPRE's award scheme for environmental conservation projects. Held every two years, the Dorothy Morley Conservation Awards reflect the aspirations of a dedicated conservationist, Dorothy Morley, who died in 1995. Dorothy was a strong campaigner on rural issues, was chairman of Newbury & Hungerford District CPRE and served on the West Berkshire committee of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). The biennial award scheme was created by CPRE Berkshire Branch in Dorothy's memory, and was made possible by the generosity of her family. Branch Chairman Greg Wilkinson explains: "Dorothy Morley believed in protecting the living environment as a means of improving the quality of life for all, not only as key elements for a sustainable future but also building a strong sense of community and partnership in both towns and villages. CPRE Berkshire is proud to promote these awards."

School projects entered for the Dorothy Morley Conservation Awards should ideally involve the widest participation of pupils, teachers and parents. The only constraint is that the project must address environmental conservation. The size of the project is unimportant. There are many different types of environmental conservation project that can be entered for this award. CPRE Berkshire is offering some suggestions of the types of projects that would qualify and these include the following examples:

- Sustainable living, e.g. waste recycling, litter projects, tree planting.
- Surveys, studies and other projects that promote environmental conservation.
- Partnership projects bringing together town and country.
- Promoting organic and local food, fruit and vegetables.
- Creating or developing school gardens.
- Creating or maintaining sustainable accessible environments for wildlife or wild flowers, which can be enjoyed by the community.

This list is not exhaustive and we are open to all suggestions! Contact the Branch Office for more information.

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## Council needs to rethink its energy policy

We have serious concerns about West Berkshire Council's policy on renewable energy. The council is aiming to construct a solar energy development on 30.5 hectares of agricultural land at Bloomfield Hatch Farm at Grazeley, which we believe to be a completely unnecessary industrialisation of our countryside. Even more worryingly, the council is actively looking for more farmland onto which to put solar panels. CPRE's view is that renewable energy can best be generated by installing photovoltaic panels on rooftops, and leaving the countryside for agriculture and nature.

"There are ways to meet 'net zero' without erecting massive wind turbines on our hills or smothering farmland with solar panels," says CPRE Berkshire Chairman Greg Wilkinson. "By far the most sensible, practical and environmentally-friendly way to regenerate renewable energy is by putting photovoltaic panels on roofs, and especially by making use of large areas of roofing such as on factories, warehouses, office blocks, schools and hospitals.

There is also a vast and currently untapped resource in the form of car parks which can easily and inexpensively be ‘roofed’ with solar panels.”

In fact, West Berkshire Council itself owns a number of buildings in the district where solar panels could be installed, including council offices and schools. “The potential of existing buildings to generate renewable energy is being dramatically underutilised at present,” explains Greg. “The council should start with the buildings it owns and then go on to providing incentives to the owners of other large buildings to install solar panels. There are also many opportunities for solar to be included in all plans for new buildings. In CPRE’s view, West Berkshire Council should not be granting permission for any new builds of any kind in the district unless rooftop solar energy is incorporated.”

Large ‘arrays’ of round-mounted solar panels not only disfigure the landscape but there is evidence that ‘temporary’ solar farms can do lasting damage to the soil quality and biodiversity of the countryside around them, preventing the land from being used in future for grazing farm animals and harming the local wildlife too. We are very fearful of the permanent damage that can be done to farmland. Over the border in South Oxfordshire a solar farm at Chalgrove has recently had its planning permission extended to 2054 – meaning another three decades of environmental harm on that farmland. CPRE Berkshire is all for renewable energy but not the sort of schemes that industrialize our rural landscapes and do more harm than good. Rooftop solar panels are the best way to generate renewable energy as they can be implemented on a large scale without affecting the appearance or tranquillity of the countryside. CPRE Berkshire is calling on WBC to drop its plan for the Grazeley solar farm and instead focus on rooftop renewables.

Meanwhile, despite strong opposition from CPRE and local residents, Windsor & Maidenhead Borough Council recently approved an application for a solar farm on Green Belt land at the edge of Shurlock Row, Maidenhead. Supporters of the scheme claimed that opponents were “standing in the way of progress” but opponents pointed out that there are greener alternatives to solar farms. Parish councillor Sarah Goodchild spoke for many when she said that “meeting our energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location – and this includes the use of farming land within the Green Belt.” And borough councillor Leo Walters warned: “We won’t have any Green Belt left if we go on like this.”

Do you know of a successful rooftop solar installation near you? If so, let the CPRE Branch office know. We are monitoring bad solar developments but would also like to highlight and promote good examples of renewable energy, i.e. where panels are being put in the right places!

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## Housing policy changes

Amid all the political uncertainties of present times, there have been some reassuring comments from the Prime Minister and the Housing Secretary that the nation’s housing needs can be met by recycling existing buildings and by regenerating previously developed (brownfield) sites, not by building on the Green Belt, farmland and green spaces. Both Rishi Sunak and Michael Gove are still saying there will be “a million new homes” built in England by the end of this Parliament but they have pledged that this housebuilding target can be achieved without concreting over the countryside. However, as this newsletter



goes to press, the long-awaited “New NPPF” (National Planning Policy Framework) has still not been issued, so the detail of the Government’s approach is still rather lacking.

In the meantime, however, the Government has said it intends to restore the previous policy of “Brownfield First” and to focus as much new housebuilding as possible in the big cities, while protecting the Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other open land. This is extremely important to us here in Berkshire, where our countryside has in recent years come under intense pressure from developers. So it is reassuring that Ministers seem to have recognised at last that housing needs can best be met by breathing new life into major towns and cities, rather than building in the rural areas or through urban sprawl in the suburbs. What’s more, there seems to be a recognition in the new housing policy that the countryside is vital for nature, farming and food production, recreation, health and wellbeing, and, critically at this time, tackling climate change. Of course new homes are needed, but they must be the right homes in the right places. There will inevitably be a requirement to build some new homes in rural areas, to meet genuine local needs, but this should be affordable and social housing, especially for key workers and starter homes for young people. Furthermore, new development should be community-led not imposed on local people.

Less encouraging is the current policy of the opposition Labour Party, which could well form the next UK government in a year’s time. While Labour’s position is not yet fully worked out, indications from Sir Keir Starmer and his Shadow ministers are that Green Belt land could be divided up into ‘good’ and ‘poor’ categories, with the latter being opened up for development. This attitude shows an ignorance of the original purposes of the Green Belt, i.e. to keep land permanently open, to prevent urban sprawl, to boost urban regeneration and to stop settlements merging. As for countryside beyond the Green Belt, other than assurances about AONBs, Labour have not yet spelt out whether this countryside would be left undeveloped, and Sir Keir talked in his party conference speech recently about building a whole series of “New Towns”, suggesting these could mostly be in the south of England. We will need to watch out very carefully for the Government’s New NPPF and for any updates to Labour policy on housing and planning.

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## Golf club plans withdrawn

CPRE Berkshire has welcomed the withdrawal of the planning application for development at Calcot Park Golf Club near Tilehurst, which would have meant the loss of a precious local green space, mature trees and wildlife habitats. We wrote to West Berkshire Council back in the summer urging them to reject the application on the basis of harm to the countryside and local biodiversity, pointing out that the district’s Principal Ecologist had warned of the negative impact on wildlife habitats if the development were allowed to go ahead. So it is a relief that the scheme has been withdrawn – although we don’t yet know if an alternative development proposal is going to come forward for the site.

We are supporting the recommendation for all the land at Calcot Park to be designated as a “Local Green Space” within the Tilehurst Parish Neighbourhood Plan, so that it can be protected from future development. We are pleased that the latest planning application has been withdrawn but we are concerned that unless Calcot Park is properly protected we might have to face another development scheme in the near future. These sorts of

schemes come up all too often, and we must be on our guard. Green spaces such as Calcot Park deserve long-term protection. We have already lost too much of our countryside to inappropriate development in recent years. It is vital that we rally round to defend what's left.

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## Pig farm causes concern

CPRE Berkshire wrote to West Berkshire Council recently to object to plans for factory farming of pigs at Foxglove Farm, Great Common, Inkpen. A planning application has been submitted to create an intensive pig farm at this location, which is within North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and adjacent to a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In our letter to the council we pointed out that while we want to see a vibrant and successful farming community in West Berkshire we have significant concerns about the application at Foxglove Farm on grounds of scale, intensity and environmental impact.

In our view, there are three interlinked problems with the proposed development – pollution risks to soil and water quality in this environmentally sensitive location; the fact that intensive pig farming invariably produces ammonia and nitrates which are then deposited on the land, not only reducing soil quality but also harming wildlife habitats (in this case affecting the North Wessex Downs); and that the fact this type of ‘factory farming’ is a serious animal welfare issue, and in CPRE’s view the welfare of farm animals in West Berkshire should be a much higher priority for the council, both for the sake of the animals themselves and for the quality of meat produced. As a matter of policy, CPRE believes that low-intensity farming is demonstrably better for the health and welfare of farm animals, and for the health of the environment, than intensive factory farming of the sort proposed in this planning application.

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## Plea to save precious landscape

CPRE Berkshire is opposing development schemes on both side of the Berkshire/Hampshire border, including a recent planning application to West Berkshire Council by Donnington New Homes for 360 houses at New Warren Farm south of Newbury and a proposal submitted to Basingstoke & Deane Council in Hampshire for a large-scale solar energy development close to the sensitive landscape of Watership Down, made famous by local author Richard Adams.

We believe that the combination of housing developments already approved in this environmentally sensitive area, together with these new schemes for housing and energy infrastructure, will bring about an unacceptable urbanisation and industrialisation of an important rural landscape, with far-reaching consequences for local wildlife and for the quality of life of local communities. We have therefore written to the head of planning at WBC stating our view that the scale of development now proposed for the area is excessive and will do irreparable harm to the local environment. In our letter of objection to the application by Donnington New Homes, we address the problems of development encroachment on this peaceful rural area and the impact on ancient woodlands and important local wildlife habitats, and we highlight the problem of increased traffic and pollution, and the negative impact on views to and from the North Wessex Downs.

The celebrated writer and defender of the countryside, Richard Adams, author of the novel *Watership Down*, expressly opposed housing development on this site, known as Sandleford Park, shortly before his death in 2016, and that in his 1972 novel it was Sandleford Warren that was threatened with destruction by developers in the opening chapter, providing a key storyline for the book and subsequent (1978 and 2018) films. Approval of this planning application would be an example of fiction becoming reality. There have been several planning applications to WBC and Basingstoke & Deane in recent years for a total of more than a thousand new homes on adjoining areas of countryside in the vicinity of Watership Down. “Together with this latest application for houses, and the proposal that has been put forward to Basingstoke and Deane for a major ‘solar farm’, we are facing a perfect storm of countryside-wrecking development,” says CPRE Berkshire Branch Chairman Greg Wilkinson.

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## AONBs become National Landscapes

From November onwards all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are officially designated as ‘National Landscapes’. This includes our ‘local’ AONB, North Wessex Downs, covering parts of Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. The new name



**North Wessex  
Downs  
National  
Landscape**

reflects the national importance of these rural landscapes, and the vital contribution they make to protecting the nation from the threats of climate change and nature depletion as well as their role in promoting public health and wellbeing. North Wessex Downs also has a new logo which depicts the Uffington White Horse. More information: [www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk).

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## What is the Berkshire LNRS?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) are spatial strategies to recover nature across England. They were set up as a result of the Government’s Environment Act 2021. The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead is the lead authority for the whole of Berkshire, working with Bracknell Forest, Reading, Slough, West Berkshire and Wokingham councils and the Government body Natural England.

The goal is for each LNRS to map areas of current particular importance for biodiversity, and work with partners from many groups, from landowners to businesses, charities (such as CPRE) and the public. Priorities for nature recovery will be agreed and these will be used to create a local habitat map.

CPRE Berkshire has been invited to be involved with the development of the LNRS and will be represented on some of the sub-groups that are being set up to work on the strategy. There will also be a separate but linked LNRS for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, which covers part of Berkshire. We will update CPRE Berkshire members on progress in future issues of this newsletter.

# Historical Luncheon

Thank-you to everyone involved in making our 2023 Historical Luncheon such a success, especially Branch Secretary Gloria Keene and the CPRE Berkshire Office team. This year's event was held at Goring & Streatley Golf Club in Streatley-on-Thames, with local historian and author Clive Williams OBE giving a fascinating talk on the dramatic rise and fall of the Craven family, at one time the greatest landowners in Berkshire and among the wealthiest peers in the realm.

## Setting out our stall



CPRE Berkshire's campaign team has been "out and about" in recent months, promoting the Branch with an information stall and conducting a survey of public attitudes to the countryside, at various local events ranging from the "Wild about Datchet" environmental evening to the Reading University Freshers' Fair and various local farmers' markets. We plan more activities of this kind in the months ahead. The Branch is also in the process of recruiting more volunteers, specifically to assist us in our work monitoring planning applications.



The countryside charity  
**Berkshire**

*Berkshire Voice* is the bulletin of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

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CPRE Berkshire is a Registered Charity, no. 210734.



## WHAT IS LANDSCAPE?

Share your favourite landscapes and discuss the personal meanings landscape has for many of us with leading experts.

**Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> Dec, 11am – 4pm**  
Tickets from £10. Booking required.

For details and to book  
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