

William from lectern [10 mins]

I am delighted to be here in the heart of London, a stone's throw from Westminster Abbey and a couple of hundred yards from the Palace of Westminster. It was there in Parliament that the National Trust Act was passed 100 years ago, so expertly drafted by Sir Robert Hunter, one of our founders.

SLIDE Robert Hunter

This Act established the principle of inalienability, which is the bed rock of our core purpose of looking after special places for ever, for everyone.

SLIDE Parliamentary event

This summer, at a reception in the Palace of Westminster we were able to celebrate the remarkable achievements of the National Trust over the last 100 years. The original Act was put on display, encased in glass, for our guests to look at and appreciate.

The concept of inalienability which allows us to hold land in perpetuity is a vital safeguard for our properties but it comes at a price - the daunting responsibility of looking after our properties for ever. It makes the Trust the unique organisation that it is – a charity with eternity built into its DNA.

So how are we doing?

Well, I am pleased to report that things are looking pretty good. This summer we celebrated our 3 and a half millionth member – a number that exceeds 6 per cent of the entire national population.

From Dunster to Dunham Massey, Castle Drogo to Knole, craftsmen and women working for the National Trust are repairing and restoring more than ever as we keep conservation at the heart of our activities. We are not just looking after country houses we are repairing footpaths and stone walls, caring for fragile habitats, looking after precious collections,

SLIDE Berrington Hall

and publishing scholarly books.

Even after what has been the wettest summer in living memory, our figures are good. The Trust's accounts are probably healthier now than they have been for as long as most of us can remember.

Morale is high too. Fiona will speak shortly about our strategy for engaging more closely with our visitors and supporters. Our Trustees are now well settled into their new role.

But where do we go from here? We have recently had an intense debate about future acquisitions and how we can best reflect the needs of an ever more critical and demanding public – how in the 21st Century should we reflect our Founders' intention that what we acquire should be for 'the benefit of the nation'?

We intend to continue this debate over the coming months and years. Not surprisingly we have not yet reached any firm conclusions – though I can assure you there is no shortage of ideas, ranging from allotments to the green belt, inner city properties to the coastline.

One concept is however agreed by all of us and that is that we must surely concentrate on those special places – both buildings and landscape – whose 'irrevocable' loss would be intolerable for the nation.

If you agree with that proposition then where does our responsibility lead us? In an attempt to answer that question, I have been reading again of the early days of the Trust and the insights our founders had about the spiritually uplifting value of beauty and its power to liberate an increasingly urban society – weighed down by the stress and ugliness of daily life. This is surely no less true today than it was one hundred years ago.

What our founders also concluded was that the loss of open spaces was one of the greatest threats to our national life. Indeed, the Trust was in part inspired by Robert Hunter's Commons' Preservation Society and Octavia Hill's bitter and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to save the fields around Swiss Cottage as a public amenity.

Today, we are often labelled as being 'all about country houses'. But, though we have enormous pride in the tremendous work we have done to save the nation's built heritage, our roots are also buried in the land, in the very soil of our country and the struggle to protect it.

We, better than most, know the vital public benefit that our green spaces deliver – beauty, fresh air, oxygen for the soul – and now, with climate change, the growing understanding of the countryside's vital role to our very survival – and in providing vital space for flood water storage.

Yet what is happening to the countryside? Inch by inch, year by year its redeeming, restorative qualities are being eroded. Bypasses spawn developments filling in the ground between road and town; motorways suck vast shed-filled industrial estates in their wake.

We have abandoned our country lanes to the motor car. When I was a boy my brother and I used to cycle on our own for miles around our home. For us it combined a taste of freedom with good exercise. Most parents would not even contemplate letting their children do this today. Half of England is now disturbed by urban intrusion, noise and light pollution.

The statistics are terrifying. 40% of our landscapes are changing for the worse. It is estimated over 10,000 acres of Green Belt is at risk from development in regional plans. Indeed, since 1995 more than 3 square miles of Green Belt has been lost to development each year.

The Government is contemplating vast numbers of new houses – we are now told that even 3 million homes is too few. Now contrary to what you might have read in today's Times, we do recognise the need for some development and we are doing our bit to encourage new housing developments that can be done in an environmentally sensitive way such as here at Stamford Brook, part of the National Trust's Dunham Massey estate in Cheshire.

SLIDE Stamford Brook housing development.

There is also scope to make better use of brownfield sites to help bring our towns and cities back to life – and the opportunity of the Thames Gateway to the east of London to pioneer a new way of living is plain to see.

We are blessed in this country with some of the finest landscapes in the world, a huge variety in a tiny country. I know because as Chairman of the Trust, I have been lucky enough to see so much of it. This is what makes this country such a wonderful place to live in, It defines our nation as much as the Tower of London.

We are not against progress nor do we hark back to some mythical golden past. We support the needs of all citizens for decent places to live and we know that some development must happen.

But the sheer scale of what is being contemplated now goes way beyond this. To protect the Green Belt and open space requires more than a conventional defence – we need to develop new arguments that define the benefits that Green Belt land and open space bring to us all.

As we look forward the Trust knows that the value of open space and countryside is not just about having space to breathe. It also provides both the sponge that will reduce flooding and the carbon store that will help tackle climate change.

In today's pressured times, how and where new development should take place are critical questions that deserve the attention of the whole nation.

An example to me of this is the often bitter debate about the location of wind turbines.

SLIDE wind turbines

The decision where these should be located is too much of a top down planning process driven by macro scale targets and pays too little attention to alternative ways of meeting our energy needs and the value of our landscapes.

The great debate about climate change is only just beginning. We will all need to rethink how we live our lives. Our growth model based solely on financial performance looks increasingly flawed and yet the Government and its obsession with economic growth has not yet adapted to the change. We must think locally and prioritise local needs, not look for sweeping national solutions that ride roughshod over the character of places that have been loved and cherished for generations.

Nowhere is this truer than in the current plans for airport expansion which threaten Trust properties as diverse as Hatfield Forest, Osterley Park and Speke Hall.

As an organisation uniquely placed to take the 'long view', we fear the consequences of the irrevocable destruction that is already underway. Surely this is a debate that we have to enter, as our founders and generations of supporters would wish us to do – to protect the beauty and integrity of our green spaces for all of us.

It is not just the great landscapes of the national parks that need defending. It is also the cherished local oases of green tranquillity so important to the quality of local life.

As our population grows relentlessly, our green spaces become an ever more finite and precious resource.

Armed with the National Trust Act and a great tradition that stretches way back beyond Octavia Hill and John Ruskin, to Wordsworth and Coleridge, we must surely give serious consideration to what we can do to help this situation.

It may surprise you that somebody such as myself, closely identified with the conservation of the built heritage and country houses should highlight this as the greatest risk of our age. But you have only to look around you to see the pace at which our precious countryside is being gobbled up to see that this has to be a top priority.

I do not believe that we can dismiss everyone concerned by this destruction as mere selfish NIMBYS. A passionate concern for the local environment is surely every citizen's right and their views can often be right. Too many genuinely public-spirited citizens are being unjustly tarred with the NIMBY brush.

What we can do to help with this situation will be the subject of intensive debate within and outside the Trust.

There are no easy answers but the Government – any government regardless of political colour – is now at least forewarned. We are watching. And we are watching with the interests of future unborn generations in mind.

Over the coming months we intend to widen this debate and would like to hear your views on this vital topic. You can e-mail us at this address or write to us with your views:

SLIDE join in

I would like to finish by expressing my thanks to all of you who have supported the Trust over the last year. Members, staff and the thousands of volunteers without whom we could not do our work.