



History of the Countryside Code

What is the Countryside Code?

The Countryside Code offers guidance to both users and custodians of the countryside as to how it can be enjoyed and protected by acting responsibly. It has been with us for over 70 years. Its wording and presentation has changed over time but it remains an important tool to help make rural areas in Wales and England safe for visitors to enjoy, without infringing the rights of those for whom the countryside is both home and a place of work.

1884

MP James Bryce started a campaign for the public to be able to access the countryside. In 1884, he introduced a freedom to roam bill to Parliament. The bill failed, but the campaign for greater access to the countryside began. The bill was reintroduced every year until 1914, failing each time.

EARLY
1900's

During the early 20th Century there was a growing appreciation of the outdoors and an understanding of the health benefits of spending time and taking physical exercise in the countryside. With Saturday afternoons and Sunday's becoming widely accepted as 'the weekend' and a time for recreation, workers from industrial and often polluted towns wanted to walk and access the clean air of the countryside. Most of the land was however in private ownership. Gamekeepers and landowners often denied access or made it difficult for the general public to access their land. With more and more people wanting to escape from towns and cities, conflict with landowners began to grow.

1918

After the First World War, in a speech in Wolverhampton in November 1918, David Lloyd George, the then prime minister, promised that his government would make Britain "a fit country for heroes to live in." Access to the countryside was considered to be part of this vision.

1929

Prime minister Ramsay MacDonald sets up a National Parks Committee to investigate whether national parks would be a good idea.

1931

The committee publishes the Addison Report which recommends the creation of a National Park Authority to designate certain areas as national parks, but the recommendations were not implemented and public discontent grew.

M.P. Charles Trevelyan lends his support to the campaign for ramblers' access to public footpaths. Trevelyan was a keen walker and championed increased public access to the countryside. [An English newsreel from 1931](#) reports on the growing interest in rambling.



1932

In 1932 about 500 people, walked mainly from the Manchester area to Kinder Scout, the highest point in the Peak District. The peak and the surrounding moorland were owned by the Duke of Devonshire and kept for grouse shooting. A mass trespass which defied the law of the time, was organised to protest about the lack of access to the countryside. The walk was led by 21-year-old Benny Rothman, a member of the British Workers' Sports Federation which organised walks and cycling trips for young workers from the mill towns of northern England. The walkers exercised what they saw as their right to walk on open moorland. The aim was for the walkers to meet at Kinder Scout's summit, but they faced opposition from the gamekeepers who were employed by the local landowners. Fighting broke out and five trespassers were imprisoned.

"We ramblers, after a hard week's work, in smoky towns and cities, go out rambling for relaxation and fresh air. And we find the finest rambling country is closed to us... our request, or demand, for access to all peaks and uncultivated moorland is nothing unreasonable."

Benny Rothman, speaking in his defence at the trial at Derby Assizes, 1932.

The Kinder Scout mass trespass raised awareness of the access issue and catalysed the campaign for national parks and access to the countryside.

[The Mass Trespass: Peak District National Park](#)



1934

RIGHT OF WAY ACT

This Act contained powers to provide 'Public Rights of Way' on established paths across private land. It introduced the rule that members of the public could claim a route as a public path if they could prove 20 years' use, without interruption or challenge. Before this there was no simple rule for the time over which a route had to be used before it could be regarded as public. The Act came into effect on the 1st of January 1934 and applied throughout England and Wales. It remains the legal standard today.

[Rural England AKA This Blessed Plot - This Other Eden \(1940-1949\)](#)



1935

The Ramblers Association was formed in 1935 and began to campaign to allow people a 'right to roam' across the countryside. This drew on Lloyd George's promises of creating "a fit country for heroes to live in" but conflicts emerged between landowners and those wanting greater access so at the time progress was slow.



1936

A voluntary Standing Committee was formed to argue the case for national parks and to lobby government. The committee was made up of leisure activity enthusiasts and nature conservationists.

The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) commissioned a six-minute English medium film to be shown in cinemas - 'Rural England: The Case for the Defence' which argues the case for national parks and urges the government to act.

[Rural England: The Case for the Defence](#)



Early countryside codes

In the 1930's and 40's, voluntary groups started to devise codes of behaviour. The Ramblers Association developed a 7 point Ramblers Code 'The Countryside Code - Ramblers', that was sent to members. The Council for the Preservation of Rural England also introduced a 'Code of Courtesy' in conjunction with the Scout and Guide movement, and The Open Spaces Society also produced a 'Country Code'.

1939-1945

The Second World War halted progress on any further Code development.

1945

A White Paper (policy document produced by the Government that sets out their proposals for future legislation) on national parks was written as part of the post-war reconstruction efforts. A committee was established under Sir Arthur Hobhouse to prepare legislation to create national parks.

Landowners and those who lived and worked in the countryside continued to be concerned about the impact that large numbers of visitors could have on the countryside. A national Countryside Code was proposed to help manage the potential problems by advising visitors on how to behave responsibly.

"Much of the ill feeling which has existed in the past has been due to ignorance or thoughtless behaviour on the part of some townsmen. This we believe could be considerably reduced by persistent educational efforts. We accordingly recommend that a simple Country Code be prepared and issued. Its object should be to evoke a better all round standard of responsible behaviour in the countryside and to instill a greater appreciation of the ways and needs of rural life, and the inter-dependence of town and country."

Extract from the Hobhouse Report (Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 1947, p.44)



1949

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act was passed for England and Wales.

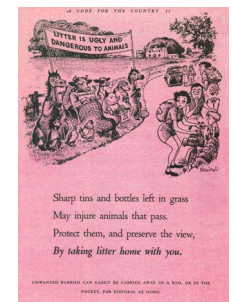
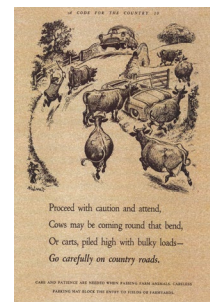
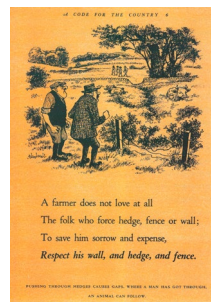
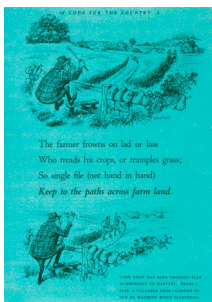
It created a National Parks Commission to oversee the establishment of national parks, to conserve and enhance their natural beauty and provide recreational opportunities for the public. The legislation also enabled Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and nature reserves to be set up. County Councils were tasked with recording and mapping rights of public access.

The first national park created was the Peak District National Park in 1951, followed by the creation of the Lake District, Dartmoor and Snowdonia National Park, now known as Eryri, later that year. By the end of the decade six more national parks had been established: Pembrokeshire Coast, North York Moors, Exmoor, Yorkshire Dales, Northumberland and the Brecon Beacons, now known as Bannau Brycheiniog.

The creation of a national Countryside Code was an integral part of the National Park Commission's initial work, aiming to reduce potential conflicts between landowners and rural communities and the 'townsfolk' who they feared were invading and damaging the countryside.

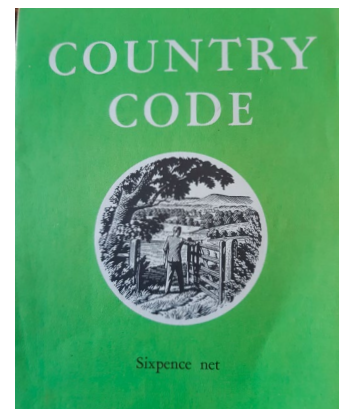
1951

Formally launched on 11 May 1951, the ten-point Country Code booklet was published, costing four old pence (less than two pence in today's money). Its aim was to help manage visitor behaviour by encouraging positive behaviour. To accompany the Code a series of posters illustrated by Norman Thelwell were created to promote a different Code message through rhyming poems. British Rail advertised it on trains, Butlins Holiday Camps promoted it and factories put up posters in their canteens. Later on, TV commercials and public information films were produced.



1968

The Countryside Commission for England and Wales was established, replacing the National Parks Commission. Its powers extended to the countryside as a whole, not just protected landscapes like National Parks and AONBs (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). The Countryside Commission took on responsibility for the Countryside Code.





1971

Cartoon couple 'Joe and Petunia' appeared in a number of public information films to increase awareness of the Countryside Code and the importance of preserving Britain's natural beauty. Released in 1971 a range of English medium films were produced:

[Joe and Petunia 1971 Acceptance of The Countryside Code](#)



1973

The Nature Conservancy Council was created and was made responsible for designating and managing National Nature Reserves and other nature conservation areas in Great Britain. This became the Government's first conservation agency.

1981

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 strengthened provision made in earlier legislation to protect wildlife, providing additional provision for species and countryside protection. It remains the primary law in Great Britain (Northern Ireland has its own version) for the protection of flora, fauna and the countryside.

The three main areas of law covered by the Act are:

1. Wildlife protection
2. Nature conservation
3. Public Rights of Way



Enjoy the countryside and respect its life and work.



Guard against all risk of fire.



Fasten all gates.



Keep your dogs under close control.



Keep to public paths across farmland.



Use gates and stiles to cross fences, hedges and walls.

1990

The Countryside Council for Wales was formed on the 5th November 1990 to protect, conserve and enhance the natural environment of Wales whilst encouraging recreation and enjoyment of the Welsh countryside. The body took over responsibilities for advising the Government on all matters relating to countryside and nature conservation issues in Wales. Similarly, the Countryside Agency was formed in England in 1999.



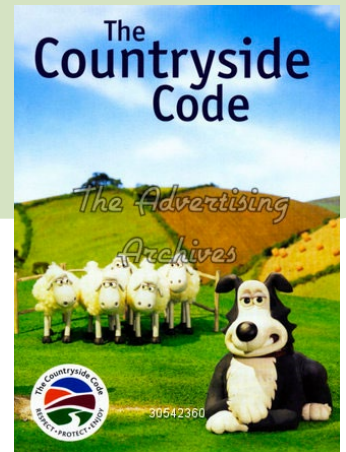
2000

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW Act) was passed on the 30th November 2000. This act gave an increased public right of access to the countryside in England and Wales. It provided for a new right of access on foot to areas mapped as open country comprising mountain, moor, heath and downland and registered common land. The CRoW Act included a statutory duty for the Countryside Council for Wales and the Countryside Agency in England to issue a code of conduct for people using the new right of access.

2004

A revised Countryside Code was introduced which included the promotion of the new access rights (under CRoW). A Welsh language version of the code 'Y Cod Cefn Gwlad' was produced for the first time. It was designed to reassure land managers and make the public aware of their rights and responsibilities. A high profile campaign with Aardman Animation illustrations promoted the revised Code and explained the new open access rights.

The Countryside Council for Wales began developing a 'Family of Codes' to compliment the original Countryside Code. These covered: Dog Walking, Trail Users, Waterside, Canoeing, Angling and Wild Swimming codes.



2006

Natural England was established. This new body replaced parts of former bodies including the Countryside Agency, English Nature and part of the Rural Development Service in England.

2013

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) was formed, replacing the Countryside Council for Wales, Forestry Commission Wales and Environment Agency Wales. Work on the 'Family of Codes' continued to be developed under NRW.





2019

NRW launched a suite of animations to promote the Countryside Code family online.

[Watch the Countryside Code Family animations on YouTube](#)

APRIL
2021

The Countryside Code was re-launched to mark its 70th anniversary following a wide consultation. The code focused on three themes:

Respect everyone

Protect the environment

Enjoy the outdoors

It had a refreshed tone of voice, creating a guide for the public rather than a list of rules, and recognised the significant health and well-being benefits of spending time in nature.

Changes included new advice on creating a welcoming environment, for example by saying hello to fellow visitors, and clearer guidance to underline the importance of clearing away dog poo, staying on footpaths, and not feeding livestock. It also provided advice on how to seek permission for activities such as wild swimming.

[A short film 'This is our code' was produced to promote the refreshed Code.](#)

[A short film was also created to mark the 70 year history of the code and restate its importance.](#)

2022

A code for land managers was created, giving advice and guidance on how to support and help visitors to follow the Countryside Code. It also explained their legal rights and responsibilities.

[Countryside Code: advice for land managers](#)

2023

Aardman Animations was commissioned to produce some [new animations to promote the Code](#). Shaun the Sheep became a Countryside Code champion.





Additional data and statistics

This information should be used to support activity 6 in [Activity plan - Understanding the Countryside Code](#)

UK population

Year	Population
1921	43,904,100
1941	44,870,400
1961	52,807,400
1981	56,357,500
2001	59,113,000
2021	67,081,000

Source OBR - Office for Budget Responsibility

Average earnings

1953	The average wage was £10 per week, which was approximately £5,200 per year.
2023	The average wage was £635 per week which was approximately £33,000 per year.

Source - Forbes

Annual leave

Over time there has been an increase in the amount of paid annual leave per year that a working person is entitled to.

1871

The Bank Holiday Act was established, banks could then close on certain days, some businesses and schools also began to close.

1938

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted the Holidays with Pay Convention which recommended an annual holiday with pay of at least 6 working days after one year of continuous service. However, it wasn't really until after the second world war that more workers were entitled to or began to expect annual paid leave.

1998

Working Time Regulations agreed the right to 4 weeks paid leave each holiday year.

2024

Working Time Regulations updated on January 1st state that almost all workers are entitled to 5.6 weeks paid holiday a year, also known as statutory leave entitlement or annual leave.

Bank holidays do not have to be given as paid leave; this is at the discretion of the employer. In 2024 England and Wales had 8 public holidays, Scotland nine and Northern Ireland had ten.

Source - History Extra, BBC History Magazine & Gov.UK



Other factors to help understand why people's use of the countryside has changed over time

The average family size has decreased over time. Women are having fewer children by the age of 30 compared to previous generations.

Families possibly have more money to spend on each individual child and can spend more money on leisure activities.

1900



3.5 children

2000

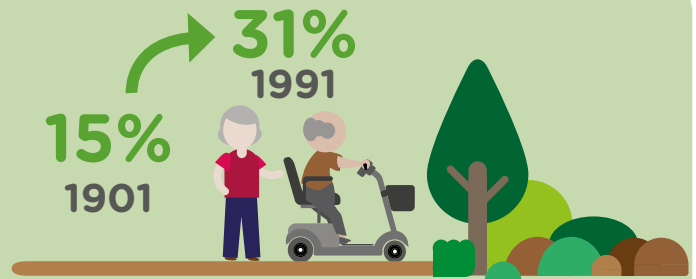


1.7 children

Between 1911 and 1915, 63% of people died before the age of 60.

In the 21st Century, only 12% die before they reach 60 years old.

The population is growing older – the amount of over 50-year-olds in 1901 was 15% and by 1991 this had risen to 31%.



Source ONS-Office for National Statistics

Countryside Code resources

Websites

[The Countryside Code Family - NRW website](#)

[The Countryside Code campaign website](#)

[History of the Countryside Code - National Trails](#)

Leaflets and posters

[Summary leaflet](#)

[Summary poster](#)

[Waymarker symbols poster](#)

Videos

[YouTube playlist](#)

Toolkit

Images, videos and information for people to download and use in their communications:

[Countryside Code toolkit \(Wales\)](#)

For further information

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