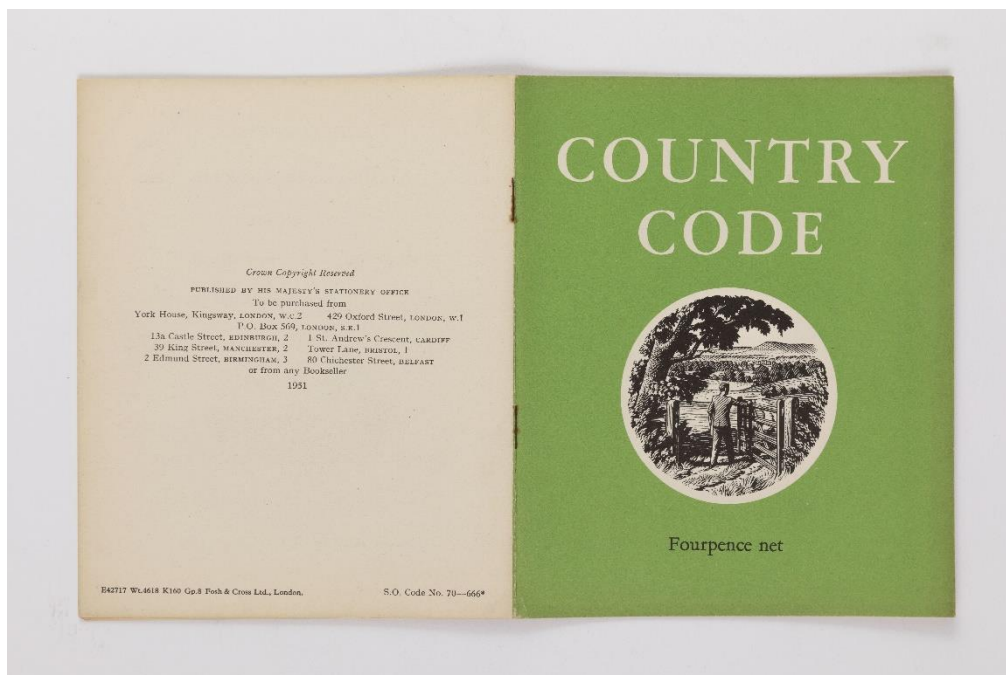


21. Country Code

In this response, Professor Gavin Parker of the University of Reading's Department of Real Estate and Planning, and Chair of the New Forest National Park Authority, discusses the role and changing emphasis of the Country Code. He explores its origins and its forerunners, the mid-century events surrounding its emergence in 1951, and the latest developments and iterations in guidance seeking to shape how we manage behaviour in rural spaces.

National Parks Commission, *The Country Code* (London: HMSO, 1951)



1951 edition of the Country Code booklet in the Open Spaces Society collection (MERL SR OSS ET3/22).

Produced as part of the suite of policy accompanying the creation of National Parks under the 1949 *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act*, the *Country Code* was published in 1951 to help manage visitor behaviour, in anticipation of a wave of new visitors to the countryside. The envisaged opening-up of the countryside for visitors under the so-called ‘right to roam’ didn’t quite happen then; a form of that policy had to wait until fifty years later. But a full history of post-war countryside access is not the purpose here, rather it is to introduce what has now become part of British, certainly English, culture. Heralded by one member of the House of Lords at the time as ‘the best fourpennyworth of common sense he had ever read’ the *Country Code* has become an established tool to manage behaviour in the countryside.

Despite some implication of common sense being enduring, the *Country Code* has had an interesting life, stretching back well before its official birth in May 1951. The genesis of the 1951 Code stretches

from the 1930s and indicates changing views, priorities, and styles of communication. The *Code*, as we might recognise it now, had been in development since 1948, officially prompted by the emerging 1949 legislation but the reasons for it lie back further and indeed it has also been contested and revised and reimagined many times since then. Including just this year. There have also been separate *Codes* produced for England and Wales and the English version has been changed in form and content four times in 1971, 1982, 2001, and 2021 – highlighting perhaps that claims to common sense need a bit of closer scrutiny.



A range of different versions of the *Code* (1951, 1971, and 1982 editions), alongside an International Centre for Conservation Education leaflet (1987) entitled 'Take Care of the Country' (MERL SR OSS ET3/22).

The original *Country Code* may be seen as a product of changing rural politics and reflected a period of challenge to dominant interests which is ongoing. The *Code* is part of the story of claims for a more accessible countryside, and the campaign led by the Ramblers to introduce a 'right to roam', an aim that drew heavily on moral argument and promises of a 'land fit for heroes'. The campaign manifested itself famously in the mass trespasses, notably at Kinder Scout in the Peak district in 1932—an event so famous that it is now the subject of a tea towel and a calendar for radicals! In this backdrop codes of conduct may be viewed as intermediaries, part of a wider morality of soft regulation. The *Code* was formed to deal with tensions between parties, and set out expectations. It is clear that the *Code* was intended to variously educate and placate.

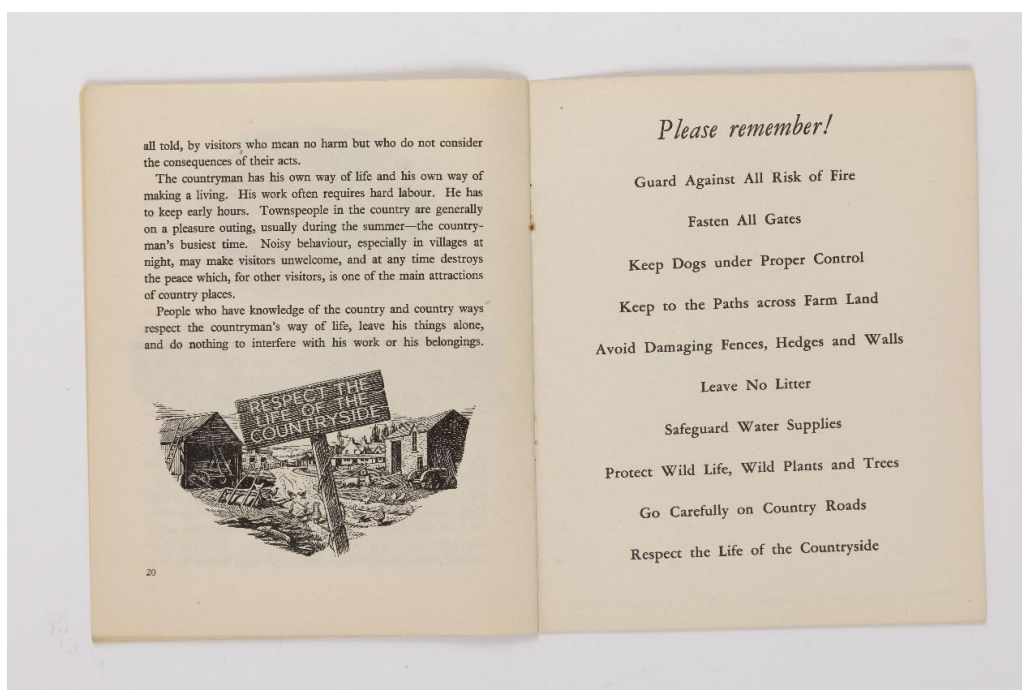
A flurry of governmental activity both sides of the Second World War ushered in National Parks and a tentative expansion of countryside access, with notably the 1945 Dower Report proposing National Parks and the 1947 Hobhouse Report, which had specifically looked at National Parks and access

arrangements, recommending that a code of conduct be produced to encourage 'responsible behaviour' in the countryside. Hobhouse argued that:

'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 instil a greater appreciation of the ways and needs of rural life, and the inter-dependence of town and country.' (Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 1947, p.44)

Formally launched on 11 May 1951 the Country Code featured 10 key messages:

1. Guard against all risk of fire
2. Fasten all gates
3. Keep dogs under proper control
4. Keep to the paths across farm land
5. Avoid damaging fences, hedges and walls
6. Leave no litter
7. Safeguard water supplies
8. Protect wild life, wild plants and trees
9. Go carefully on country roads
10. Respect the life of the countryside



The 10 key messages were detailed throughout the 1951 booklet and then listed again in summary at the end (MERL SR OSS ET3/22).

In reality there had been codes of conduct in circulation well before 1951, with the Ramblers Association sending its membership a 'Ramblers code' since the 1930s, and the CPRE introducing a 'code of courtesy' many years prior to the Hobhouse report making its recommendations. A profusion of Codes remain today in fact, with many individual organisations and areas maintaining their own versions; for example, the *Forest Code* produced via Forestry England bears some similarity to its 'parent':

- Protect and respect wildlife, plants and trees
- Guard against all risks of fire
- Keep dogs under control
- Take your litter home
- Make no unnecessary noise
- Take only memories away
- The forest is for everyone. Please be aware of other visitors

Ultimately the public are confronted still with a mix of different messages about what to do, what not to do, where and how to do it! Bringing us up-to-date the 2021 *Countryside Code* is a much changed document compared to 1951. Its key messages, although altered since the previous 2004 version, have been directed at land managers as well as visitors. The new *Code* for visitors carries the following advice, set across the three principles of 'respect, protect, enjoy':

Respect everyone

- be considerate to those living in, working in and enjoying the countryside
- leave gates and property as you find them
- do not block access to gateways or driveways when parking
- be nice, say hello, share the space
- follow local signs and keep to marked paths unless wider access is available

Protect the environment

- take your litter home – leave no trace of your visit
- do not light fires and only have BBQs where signs say you can • always keep dogs under control and in sight
- dog poo – bag it and bin it – any public waste bin will do
- care for nature – do not cause damage or disturbance

Enjoy the outdoors

- check your route and local conditions
- plan your adventure – know what to expect and what you can do
- enjoy your visit, have fun, make a memory

While the *Code for Land Managers* is structured across three headings of:

Know your rights, responsibilities and liabilities

Make it easy for visitors to act responsibly

Identify possible threats to visitors' safety



One of a series of posters illustrated by Norman Thelwell that promoted a different iteration of the Code, a set of which is held at The MERL (MERL 2011/30/1-12).

There are further parallels to the 1951 period and to the topic in the here and now. If the nub of the *Code* for visitors is still discernible, much has altered and not only the text of the *Code*. The governmental body forged around the same time as the first *Country Code* was the *National Parks Commission* and although this body has been variously restructured, rebadged (it became the *Countryside Commission* in 1968), and in England merged with the *Rural Development Agency* in 1999 to form the *Countryside Agency* and for a while a merger with *English Nature* in 2006 sustained the role and since that organisation's abolition in 2011 the *Code* has been overseen by *Natural England*. There

are moves to bring about a new *National Landscapes Service* following on from the 2019 Glover report looking at the role, performance, and governance of our cherished landscapes. This new body would be created recognising the value and potential of both recreation in the countryside for health and wellbeing but also for nature. This is notwithstanding the agricultural functions that were to be guarded through the *Code* back in 1951, and which have prompted new attempts at directing us to self-regulate; now for the sake of the environment as much as the rural economy.

So, taking the Hobhouse quote above as our prompt, the motives underlying the *Code* appear still fresh and attempts to regulate behaviour clearly has parallels to our own time – not only through a new version of the *Country Code* and its intent. It highlights how government have and are using informal tools—soft regulation—widely to signal good behaviour in society. COVID-19 signage and messaging act to highlight this broader point about the ubiquity of soft regulation and debates over its effectiveness.

As such, despite the claims over time about the *Code* being common sense, what we realise now is that accepted wisdoms can be flawed, subject to change, and that the *Country Code(s)* and its analysis is no less than a window onto a changing countryside. It also tells us something perhaps about tensions between interests and between government and its people more widely. Given that it has lasted in various formulations for 70 years, it will be interesting to see how the *Code* flexes into the future.

Further Information (online):

For more information about the *Country Code* booklets in the *Open Spaces Society* collection see: [MERL SR OSS ET3/22](#)

For more about *Open Spaces Society* holdings see: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/open-spaces-society/>

Forestry England, *The Forest Code* (<https://www.forestryengland.uk/the-forest-code>)

Glover, J. (2019) *The Landscapes review*. Final report, September 2019. Defra, London. See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

UK Government, *The Countryside Code* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>)

UK Government, *Countryside Code Advice for Land Managers*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code/the-countryside-code-advice-for-land-managers>

Further Reading (not freely accessible online):

Cherry, G. (1977) *History of Environmental Planning (Vol. II): National Parks and Access to the Countryside*. (HMSO, London)

Ministry of Town and Country Planning (1947) *Report of the special committee on footpaths and access to the countryside [The Hobhouse report]*, Cmd. 7207. (HMSO, London)

Parker, G. (2006) 'The Country Code and the ordering of countryside citizenship', *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 22(1): 1-16.