The National Trust was founded in 1895 by three extraordinary leaders. Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley were united by a belief that beautiful, natural and historic places were worth protecting for future generations.

They were responding to a rising tide of industrialisation which threatened to sweep away a way of life where people were connected to the natural world, leaving them residents of smog-ridden cities. Nature and culture risked becoming afterthoughts in the drive for progress. A whole generation was growing up in a world where open space was under threat.

Fast-forward 125 years and we are grappling with similar challenges. Nature is being driven into crisis and green space could be a distant prospect for the next generation. The vision that our founders had seems particularly prescient now.

They could not have known the scale of what their ambition would achieve, with more than 500 historic places and 250,000 hectares (617,763 acres) of amazing countryside now in Trust care. I think they would be proud of how far we have come, yet ambitious about how much further we could go.

We’ve never wavered from our founders’ core mission to protect places for everyone, for ever – not just the places history tells us are important, but the places people tell us are important too. Octavia Hill argued: ‘We want some beautiful things for our daily enjoyment, and near us. Not on rare holidays, not for those who have money, but day by day as their surroundings.’ That mission has never been more relevant than it is today.

As the Trust celebrates 125 years of looking after beautiful, natural and historic places for the nation, Director-General Hilary McGrady introduces the three remarkable people who made it happen, and their biographers share details about their lives.

Adapted from The Three Founders of the National Trust. Illustrations by Quentin Blake.
Octavia Hill was an extraordinary person. She laid down markers for so many life-changing initiatives that we take for granted nowadays – social work and housing, the idea of art and beauty for everyone, the protection of green spaces in cities.

She was born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, in 1838, part of an extended family. Her parents James and Caroline Hill were followers of Robert Owen, a founder of utopian socialism, and Octavia spent her life trying to show that their vision of a better world where everybody co-operated could be realised.

When she was 14, Octavia was put in charge of the workroom at the Ladies Guild, a Christian socialist co-operative in London managed by her mother, where the Ragged School girls made toys and dolls’ house furniture. Seeing the reality of the poverty of those girls was life-changing for Octavia. She organised a midday meal for her workers, visited them when they were sick and took them on nature study walks around the London commons and open spaces. One account tells of Octavia emerging from the countryside ‘followed by a troop of ragged toy-makers, happy and flushed, each with an armful of bluebells’.

She met artistic and social thinker John Ruskin while working there, and her direct experience made her Ruskin’s chief reporter on the miseries of London life. When Ruskin inherited an income of £4,000 a year in 1864 and asked Octavia what she would do with the money, she said she would provide better homes for the poor. Ruskin bought three houses in London’s Paradise Place, a street full of overcrowded housing known as ‘Little Hell’, and handed management to Octavia.

She developed a progressive and friendly style of management, personally visiting her tenants weekly to collect rent and ensuring the buildings were kept in good repair. She was keen to profile her work as a business rather than charity, persuading the wealthy to accept a lower five per cent return on their investment rather than the 12 per cent achievable through overcrowding. She then ploughed the money back into the community, in consultation with the tenants. By 1874 Octavia and a team of volunteers managed over 3,000 tenancies around London.

She believed that outdoor space, fresh air and the joy of plants were vital in everyone’s life, not a luxury only for the rich, and she worked to provide gardens for the homes. At her second property, Freshwater Place, she cleared a rubbish-strewn courtyard to make a playground with trees. In 1877 she and her sister Miranda formed the Kyrle Society, with the aim of bringing beauty, nature, art and music to the people.

As London’s growth continued unchecked, engulfing fields and recreational urban space, Octavia’s attention turned to saving London’s green spaces. Her first campaign to save Swiss Cottage Fields in 1875 failed, but it brought her into contact with Robert Hunter, solicitor for the Commons Preservation Society.

Although their later campaigns successfully saved Parliament Hill Fields, Vauxhall Park and Hilly Fields, Octavia and Robert were both very aware that their long-term future was not secure. Forming the National Trust in 1895 was the logical extension of the work they were doing, and changed that for good.

During her campaign for Swiss Cottage Fields, Octavia had referred to a ‘green belt’ – one of the first recorded uses of the term. Even into her final years she was campaigning to secure the land and footpaths around her adopted home of Kent. Octavia died in 1912 but her legacy lives on in her enduring impact on social housing and work, not just in the UK but around the world, the remarkable range of green spaces Londoners are able to enjoy and, of course, the National Trust itself. I don’t think Octavia would be at all surprised to see how the Trust has grown today. She knew it had a major life force behind it.

She believed that outdoor space, fresh air and the joy of plants were vital in everyone’s life.

EXPLORE MORE

WALK
Enjoy a walk around one of the many open spaces Octavia loved in Kent. Married to VH, Toys Hill and Hill were all secured through the Trust largely thanks to her efforts. To find out more, visit the National Trust's website and search ‘Toys Hill’ for details.

STAY
The Octavia Hill Bunkhouse in Westerham, Kent, is set in a former farm building. It’s perfect for family groups looking to explore Octavia’s much-loved corner of Kent.

Previous page
Quentin Blake’s view of one of the three founders (from left) Harriet Chalmers Ranstead, Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter.

Above left
A painting of Octavia Hill by Reginald Grenville Eves, copied from John Singer Sargent’s 1899 portrait.

Above
Parliament Hill Fields, London, was saved from development by a successful campaign in 1888 by Octavia.

Right
Octavia intends to provide better homes for the poor than slums like this – Market Cross, near Kensington High Street, London.

1884
The idea of the National Trust is formed by Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter, but it will be over 10 years until it becomes a reality.

1895
The National Trust is officially formed. We are given our first donation – the gorge-covered clifftop at Dinas Oleu, Gwynedd, by Fanny Talbot.

1896
We rescue our first building: The 16th-century Allston Clergy House in East Sussex, described as ‘tiny but beautiful’ by Octavia Hill, it is bought for £80.

1899
Two acres of Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire become the Trust’s first nature reserve.

1902
Supporters help save the Trust’s first piece of Lake District land – Brandelhow, by Derwent Water.

1907
The National Trust Act establishes the Trust’s role to protect special places in our own Act of Parliament.

1923
The Lake District mountain of Great Gable is one of 12 peaks gifted by the Fell and Rock Climbing Club as a memorial to those killed in the Great War.

Peter Clayton is the Chairman of the Octavia Hill Birthplace Museum Trust in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire.
In 1882 Robert was made solicitor to the General Post Office, a role he held for the last 30 years of his life. He spent his weekends continuing to work for the Commons Preservation Society and advising people like Octavia Hill on their work in the protection of open spaces. His and Octavia’s conversations about how to protect endangered places gave Robert the idea to set up the National Trust. In doing so, he created an organisation that could own places on behalf of the nation – a power other conservation organisations lacked. Once designated in Trust care, these places could not be mortgaged or sold.

Although the Trust was incredibly small, with just a scattering of properties and a few staff, Robert had big ambitions for what it could achieve. That the Trust is now one of the largest landowners in the country is down to his foresight in those early days.

The story goes that Octavia wrote to Robert proposing the name ‘The Commons and Gardens Trust’ and Robert replied to her suggesting the words ‘National Trust’. I think he knew it wouldn’t just be about commons and nice gardens, but could encompass all sorts of places. That’s why he ensured that the Trust’s purpose was written very broadly, to give the powers known whatever sort of places its trustees felt were of ‘Historic Interest or Natural Beauty’.

His vision became a reality in 1895 when he, Octavia and Hardwicke formally established the Trust. As its first Chair, Robert was the legal force behind the National Trust Act of 1907 that put its constitution into an Act of Parliament. Although the Act has been amended at various points over time, its essence has never changed. The essential powers of the Trust to own places in an inalienable sense, for ever and for everyone, remain exactly as they were when he set it up. Sadly, after a life dedicated to work, Robert died just a few months after leaving the Post Office and never enjoyed a lengthy retirement walking the hills of his native Surrey.

I’m sure he would be amazed to see how the Trust has evolved. I think he’d have been particularly proud of way it has preserved so many areas of common land and open spaces, free for anyone to access, which was his enduring passion.

Sir Robert Hunter 1844–1913

Where his co-founders provided much of the fire and passion that drove the movement in its earliest years, lawyer and solicitor Robert turned that energy into legal reality.

Robert had the foresight to set something up that he knew would be needed by the nation.

I think of Robert Hunter as the inventor of the National Trust. He may have lacked the poetic words of Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley or the campaigning zeal of Octavia Hill, but he had the foresight to set something up that he knew would be needed by the nation, which until then nobody else had dreamed up. Without Robert, there wouldn’t have been a National Trust in the same way.

Despite this, Robert’s contribution is largely under-recognised. He was a different character from Octavia and Hardwicke, who were both very public figures. He was a modest man who didn’t seek the limelight, but he felt very passionately about heritage and open spaces.

Robert was born in London in 1844 and grew up a studious and serious young man. After university he became a lawyer and was quickly taken on by the newly formed Commons Preservation Society as their solicitor. He soon became the country’s expert on law relating to commons and open spaces, which were under real threat in the second half of the 19th century.

1929 Loyal Trust supporter Beatrice Potter buys the 1,619-hectare (4,000-acre) Monk Coniston Estate, which later came to the Trust.
1934 The first village to come into Trust care is West Wycombe in Buckinghamshire.
1937 The Country Houses Scheme enables the Trust to accept historic mansions in lieu of Government death duties.
1939 Quarry Bank Mill and Styal village in Cheshire are given to the Trust – rare survivors of the Industrial Revolution.
1945 On our 50th birthday the Trust has 45,526 sites, 132,000 acres of land, 93 historic buildings, and fewer than 8,000 members.
1946 The Trust takes on the palatial Knole in Kent, once owned by Henry VIII.
1962 We open Giant’s Causeway, County Antrim, to visitors. In 1986 it is designated a World Heritage Site.
1965 Enterprise Neptune is launched to save coastline from development. In 2020, with the help of thousands of supporters, we care for 780 miles of coast.
Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley was always involved in everything. If there was a fight, he was opening it. If there was a committee, he was on it. If there was an election, he was in it. If he was on a committee, he was in it. He was a true champion of the Trust and the Lake District. He understood the importance of protecting the Lake District for the future generations to enjoy.

In 1878 Hardwicke took up the vicarage of the tiny parish of Wray on the shores of Windermere in the Lake District. He became increasingly concerned about industrialisation in the Lake District, particularly the building of railways and roads and the creation of reservoirs in the valleys, and he was determined to protect its beauty for the whole nation. This was his inspiration, I think.

When he read about a proposed railway from Honister to Braithwaite, he leapt into action, writing letters to influential people, organising meetings and forming committees. Within eight weeks the storm of protest contributed to the Bill being withdrawn, and Hardwicke became a local and national hero almost overnight. However, he knew that this wouldn’t be the last of the threats to the Lake District’s beauty, so in 1883 he set up the Lake District Defence Society.

Despite its good work, the question remained what to do to protect the Lake District’s land long term. It was answered in 1895, when Hardwicke, Robert and Octavia held the first public meeting of the National Trust, with Hardwicke as honorary secretary.

Hardwicke enthusiastically spearheaded many fundraising campaigns for Lake District places during the Trust’s early years, including Brandebush, its first Lake District acquisition. His contribution was such that when Hardwicke was seriously considering taking the bishopric of Madagascar in 1898, Octavia begged him to stay for the sake of the Trust.

His enduring friendship with Beatrix Potter left another great legacy for the Trust. They both felt it was their job to preserve the Lake District, and that they could do that together in a very effective way. When Beatrix became a landowner, Hardwicke often advised her on which farms to buy to make access impossible for developers. When she died in 1943 she left 14 farms and 1,619 hectares (4,000 acres) of protected land in the Lake District to the Trust.

Hardwicke’s belief in living simply and close to nature kept him in the Lakes for the rest of his life, despite frequent railway trips to the Trust’s office in London. After suffering a major heart attack in spring 1920, he spent his final few months watching the wildlife from his bed at Allan Bank, his Grasmere home after the death of his wife Edith, which he left to the Trust.

It is in the Lake District that Hardwicke’s legacy can be most strongly felt today. In his centenary year, we remember how his tireless campaigning began the ongoing work of protecting this special landscape for future generations to enjoy.

We have five copies of The Three Founders of the National Trust by Peter Clayton, Ben Cowell and Vivian Griffiths to give away. To enter, answer this question: in what year was the Trust founded?

We launch ‘50 things to do before you’re 11’ or 70, a list of outdoor activities to help children connect with nature. This year we launched ‘50 things to do before you’re 11’.

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