

# 'Our time has come again'

The MP and new Countryside Alliance chairman on defending a cherished way of life

THE Countryside Alliance (CA) has become, of necessity, a different beast, far wider ranging than in the early 1990s, when Nick Herbert was a young director of political affairs at its former incarnation, the British Field Sports Society. Now, the Conservative MP for Arundel and South Downs is the CA's brand new chairman.

'I do feel to some extent that I've come home,' he says. 'I was, with the late, great Michael Sissons, one of the architects of the Countryside Movement, wanting an organisation to speak for the countryside as a whole way of life that needs protecting and cherishing.'

Having been at the forefront of the fight to protect fieldsports' freedoms until a mighty Labour majority got its way with the Hunting Act (2004), Mr Herbert feels that countryside pursuits are on the threshold of a similar moment.

'The threat has never been greater than it was in 1997, when Labour came to power,' he warns, 'but now there's something more pernicious, which is an extremist animal-rights agenda, magnified by social media, and that's impacting more broadly than on only fieldsports: it's on farming, racing, our relationship with the natural world and so on.'

'It's manifested itself very clearly in the way Labour has become anti-shooting and must send serious alarm bells that, once again, we face hostility. The time of the Countryside Alliance has come again and we need to wake up.'

Despite suggestions last year that Labour should tone down its rhetoric to woo the rural vote, the party's animal-welfare manifesto includes ideas about strengthening the Hunting Act, including removing the 'research and observation' exemption, and reviewing driven grouse shooting.

Mr Herbert describes this as 'chilling reading'. 'It's not based on evidence, but on an animal-rights

agenda and hostility. Labour needs to work out whether it's going to write the countryside off. People there shouldn't have to base their voting on single issues. We have some very big issues to face in this country and shouldn't be spending hours on single issues as Tony Blair's government did.'

**'There's no difference between regulated fieldsports and animal welfare'**

The best riposte, Mr Herbert feels, is to emphasise both the science that affirms the necessity of culling and predator control and the good conduct of the CA's 105,000 members. 'Our agenda needs to focus on science and standards,' he says. 'We have nothing to fear from a green agenda because we are the original greens, investing millions of pounds in conservation work. We have everything to gain from sound science.'

'I want to draw a very clear distinction between animal welfare and animal rights, and conservation and extremism, but we also have

to uphold standards and I think it's becoming increasingly understood by shooters that their activities are in the public eye and their conduct is under scrutiny. We mustn't allow our activities to be misrepresented and that's going to be part of the message—that there's no difference between properly regulated fieldsports and animal welfare.'

'And,' he adds, 'there needs to be more respect for tradition and for a way of life. In France, for instance, where there is less of a town-country divide, they're very clear about that and we mustn't give up on it here.'

In his Westminster office, a Frank Newbould poster of a tranquil South Downs farming landscape is emblazoned with 'Your Britain—Fight for it Now'. 'That epitomises it,' says Mr Herbert. 'Visitors understand Britain through the prism of our countryside and, in a crowded island, these places are our jewels.'

His constituency is, he says, 'the best of our country and a great privilege'. He likes the fact that it's got three packs of hounds and a wetland reserve (he's a species champion for the lapwing). It also reflects many of the CA's wider concerns about local services and businesses, broadband and rural crime, and has anomalies in protection as it straddles the border of a national park.

'There's great pressure, where people really mind about development and the erosion of services. I only have villages in my constituency, and the glue in them is extremely strong, but there's still a divide between the people who live in them and work in London and the agricultural bits.'

Mr Herbert's eclectic political interests are rooted in equality and fairness, from global TB and lung disease to LGBT rights and equal marriage, and he chairs the think tank The Project for Modern Democracy.

His majority, now nearly 24,000, has increased in comfort—and no wonder, for you couldn't find a more friendly, energetic and empathetic MP—but he's not taking it for granted. Brexit split the constituency evenly—he campaigned for Remain, but has accepted the result and voted with the Government ever since; he receives equal earache from both sides and is visibly saddened by recent events.

Like his predecessor at the CA, Tory MP Simon Hart (*Interview, October 26, 2016*), Mr Herbert has hunted hounds. 'Handing over my pack of beagles was one of the saddest days of my life, but, eventually, I couldn't keep up with them. You never lose your enthusiasm for these sports and I know how loved they are in the countryside and how passionate people are about keeping them going, protecting them from malevolent attack and adapting them to the modern world.'

He greatly misses having animals, but, as both he and partner Jason Eades, a manager at a global charity, work in London, 'we can't even have a budgie, let alone a dog'. Recently, primary-school children asked him what he'd have done if he wasn't an MP. 'I said I'd be a hill farmer and have dogs. They all wrote to me afterwards saying they hoped I'd fulfil my ambition! But if I won the lottery, that's what I'd do.'

Kate Green

## On the record

To join the CA, visit [www.countryside-alliance.org](http://www.countryside-alliance.org) or telephone 020-7840 9300

**Where is your favourite place in Britain?** The top of Arundel Park, looking south to the sea and north to the Arun valley

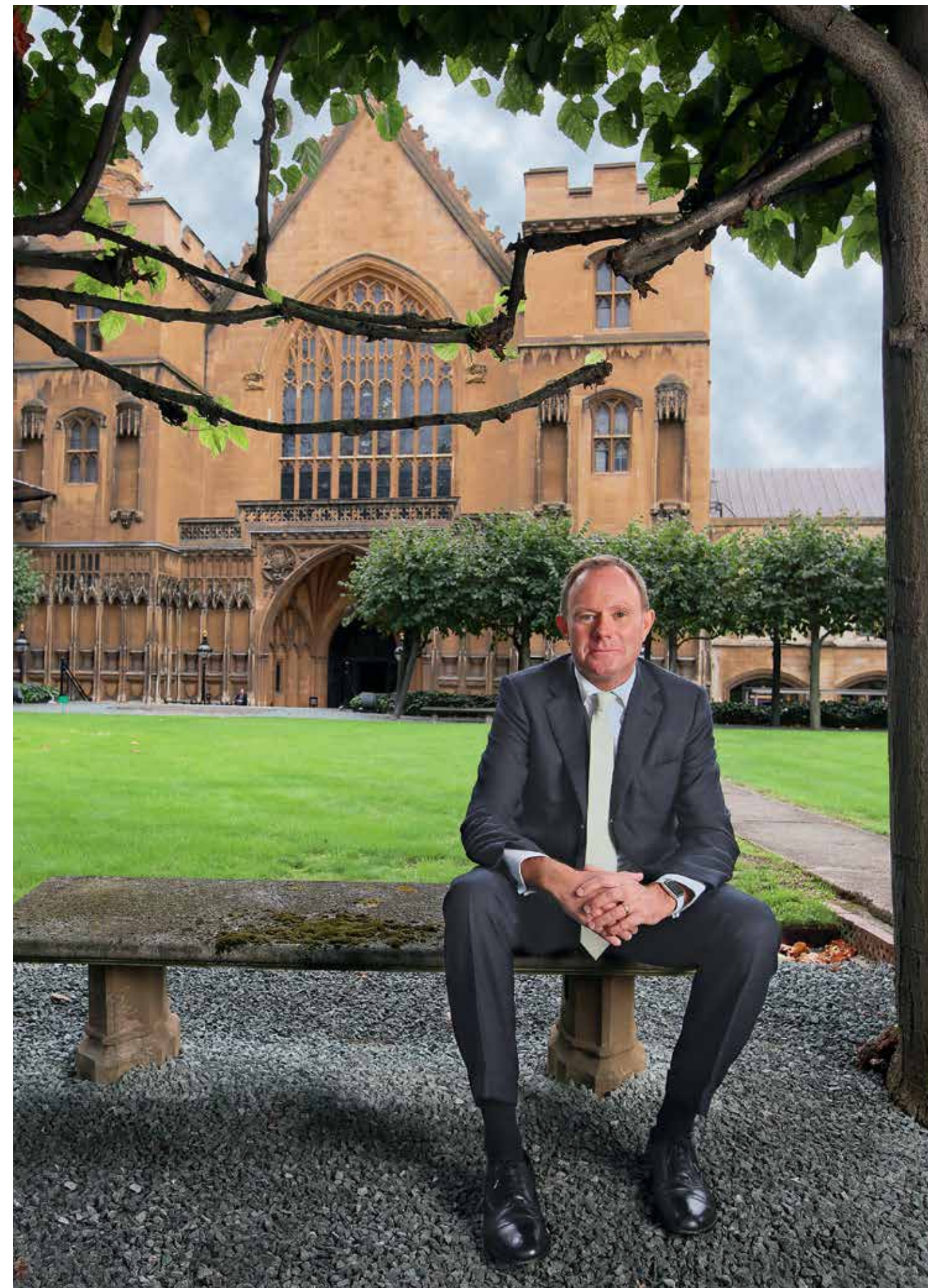
**What is your favourite building?** Grand Central Station, New York

**Book?** I constantly re-read Patrick O'Brien

**Music?** *Fidelio*, Beethoven's opera, about which he said: 'This is the best of me.' It's about freedom and is incredibly moving

**Day off?** I either take myself to an art gallery and the theatre or I like to be somewhere remote where I don't need to talk to a soul

**Dinner guest?** Theodore Roosevelt. He was a huge conservationist, he was all about fairness with his Square Deal, he created national parks and was a fieldsports enthusiast



Photograph by Clara Molden