

AONB – the formative years, 1945 to 1988

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I am asked to describe the formative years of the family of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, from my father's report of 1945 to the confirmation of the North Pennines as an AONB in 1988. It is a story of ideas, of words, and of the evolution of policies – and also, because of the agencies that you represent, of a rising tide of creative action.

I will not look back far beyond 1945. I record simply the rise in the 19th century of awareness of the grandeur and variety of the British landscape; the expression of this by Turner, Constable, Wordsworth, Ruskin and others; their sense of the threats to this landscape; the link between the rising movement to protect landscapes and that to secure access to mountains; and the campaign for National Parks between the two world wars.

The ideas from this background animated the Dower and Hobhouse reports of 1945 and 1947, from which emerged directly the two equally valuable but unequally valued sets of protected landscapes in England and Wales, namely the National Parks and the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and less directly the third such set, the Heritage Coasts.

Dower report 1945. The roots of the inequality that I mention lie in one crucial phrase within my father's definition of a National Park – that it is 'an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country...'. He explained this by saying that '... the concern of National Parks must be broadly confined to relatively wild country, for, generally speaking, it is only in such country that the public at large either desires or can satisfactorily be given a wide measure of public access'. That idea springs from the access to mountains movement. Those who campaigned for National Parks believed that rambling on the high hills was the main recreational need. Looking back 60 years later, with our nationwide pattern of country parks and the recent growth of access to open lands everywhere, we might challenge the idea that it is only in relatively wild country that public access is desired or can be given.

From this starting-point, my father said that relatively wild country comprised about one-fifth of the land area of England and Wales, some 12,000 square miles. Not all of this was, in his view, suitable for national parks. 'A good deal is in isolated patches, such as the Malvern Hills or Cannock Chase, too small for national action though usually of value, and sometimes of critical importance, for local or regional action ...' Other areas were not beautiful enough, such as the industrial Pennines, or were used for quarrying, military use, forestry or 'other purposes which cannot be successfully combined with National Park requirements'. Deducting these, there remained some 8,000 square miles with National Park potential, 'considerably more than is required' for the early set of National Parks.

He proposed that 10 areas, totalling 3,600 square miles, be established as National Parks; and that 'the whole of the remainder should be generally safeguarded by the cooperative action of central and local planning authorities as a *reserve* for future National Parks'. He named 12 areas, totalling the rest of the 8,000 square miles, as these Reserves. He then offered a third

category, with 34 areas, which he called 'Other Amenity Areas NOT suggested as National Parks'. These he defined as 'areas which it will probably be necessary to pass under review when the decisive selections of National Parks are undertaken, but which, in my opinion, are unlikely to be found suitable, although otherwise deserving and requiring the special concern of central and local planning authorities, supported as may be by the National Trust and other voluntary agencies, in order to safeguard their landscape beauty, farming uses and wildlife and to increase appropriately their facilities for open-air recreation'.

The second and third of these lists, the 'Reserves' and the 'Other Amenity Areas', contain almost all the names on our now familiar list of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. One only of his first list of 'Suggested National Parks', namely the Cornish Coast, became instead an AONB. Two from his 'Reserves' list, The Broads and the North York Moors, and two from his 'Other Amenity Areas', the New Forest and the South Downs, are or soon may be National Parks.

Hobhouse report 1947. The Hobhouse Committee built on my father's ideas. They accepted his definition of a National Park, including his emphasis on 'an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country...'. But they referred to 'the richly varied landscapes of our country', including the 'contrast of mountain and wild moorland with the green and pleasant farmlands of the valleys, the cliffs and small sandy coves of the coastline, ... the smooth undulations of the chalk downs, the ordered homeliness of villages and farms ...'. They said that, in view of this diversity, 'it would be wrong to confine the selection of National Parks to the more rugged areas of mountain and moorland, and to exclude other districts which, though of less outstanding grandeur and wildness, have their own distinctive beauty and a high recreational value'.

They recommended 12 National Parks. This included 9 of the 10 areas in my father's first list, omitting the Cornish Coast as being 'too difficult and complicated' in shape to be run as a National Park; plus the North York Moors, the Broads and the South Downs, the last of these on the ground of its 'great natural beauty and much open rambling land', plus 'the importance of including at least one National Park within easy reach of London' – which sounds like the Labour manifesto of 1997 !

They then offered a list of 52 areas proposed as 'Conservation Areas'. This was explained thus : 'As the National Parks scheme cannot include all areas requiring special conservation treatment, it is an important corollary to our main proposals that special measures should be applied to safeguard natural beauty and to encourage its enjoyment in all those other areas which, though they satisfy the essential requirements of a National Park in scenic quality, are not included in our selection. While in the main they do not call for the degree of positive management required in National Parks, ... their contribution to the wider enjoyment of the countryside is so important that special measures should be taken to preserve their natural beauty and interest'.

The Conservation Areas would be designated by the Minister. Local authorities would be responsible for the planning and administration of these areas, with access to expert advice and occasional grants from the National Parks Commission. Each Conservation Area should be 'comprehensively treated as a single unit' : to this end, the Minister, when designating an area, should make an order requiring the local planning authority to set up an Advisory Committee or (where more than one authority is involved) a Joint Advisory Committee. These Committees

and planning authorities should apply special standards of development control as in the National Parks. Local authorities, or voluntary associations or private bodies, should undertake positive management, including the ‘development of suitable facilities for popular open-air enjoyment’.

As to the delineation of the Conservation Areas, the Hobhouse Committee suggested – with charming optimism – that ‘local planning authorities should be charged to submit, with the assistance of the National Parks Commission, within twelve months of the passage of the necessary legislation, detailed boundaries for the approval of the Minister’, whereupon the Minister would formally designate each Conservation Area. The National Parks Commission would then assess the relative requirements of each Area, as the basis for creating a ‘programme of work and expenditure, to be undertaken with the financial and technical assistance of the Commission’.

The Committee devoted a whole chapter to the Coast, emphasising the ‘infinite attraction in the varied beauty and changing moods of coastal scenery’. This ‘wealth of beauty and variety’ had led them to ‘include considerable stretches of coastline in seven of the twelve selected National Parks’. Moreover, they said, ‘By including nearly all the Cornish, Devon and Dorset Coasts, together with 14 other coastal areas, in our list of Conservation Areas, we emphasise the importance of the Conservation Area scheme – a scheme of combined local and national action which seems to us eminently suited to the treatment of a long strip of fine and unspoilt coastline, inseparable for purposes of planning and management from its hinterland’.

National Parks Act 1949. So, the crucial ideas in 1947 were ... Conservation Areas, which ‘satisfy the essential requirements of a National Park in scenic quality’ but are not recommended for National Park status; which include great lengths of unspoilt coastline; which ‘in the main .. do not call for the degree of positive management required in National Parks’, but which require ‘special measures to preserve their natural beauty and interest’ in view of ‘their contribution to the wider enjoyment of the countryside’; which should be run by local authorities, with help of Advisory Committees, so that each Area is ‘comprehensively treated as a single unit’, and with technical and financial support from the National Parks Commission; and which merit special standards of development control, plus positive management by local authorities or others. The Hobhouse Committee said that ‘We regard our proposals for these areas as an essential corollary to our National Park scheme’.

I do not know what forces created the changes, between 1947 and 1949, of name and emphasis from ‘Conservation Areas’ to ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty’, and from ‘an essential corollary to our national park scheme’ to a mere two-clause element in the ‘General, Financial and Supplementary’ part of the National Parks Act – sections 87 and 88, compared to sections 5 to 14 which dealt with National Parks. One may guess that the growing strength of local authorities, exercising their powers under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, tempered the rather centrist element in the Dower and Hobhouse reports. Certainly the desire of local authorities to run their own show has figured large in the story of both national parks and AONBs, and continues to do so, witness the struggles over the South Downs National Park. But that does not explain why the AONBs gained so low a profile, starting with the three-sentence introduction that Lewis Silkin gave at the Second Reading of the Bill, when he simply said that

these were areas which needed protection but which, because of their size or other factors, did not merit National Park status.

The Act provides that ‘the National Parks Commission may, by order made as respects any area in England and Wales, not being a National Park, which appears to them to be of such outstanding natural beauty that it is desirable that the provisions of this Act relating to such areas should apply thereto, designate the area for the purposes of this Act as an area of outstanding natural beauty’. There is then provision for public consultation by the Commission before they submit this order to the Minister; and for him to consult with local authorities before deciding whether to confirm the order. The criterion for choice of the areas was solely their outstanding natural beauty : no mention was made of either scientific interest or recreational value, which both Dower and Hobhouse had suggested as further criteria.

It is noticeable, in the Act, that ‘National Parks’ always appear in capitals, whereas the words ‘a.. o.. n.. b..’ are in lower case. This difference is symbolic of what has been called the ‘Cinderella’ status of the AsONB. Their very name does not have the iconic ring of National Parks. Nevertheless, the name is better than Reserve Areas, or Other Amenity Areas, or Conservation Areas. These truly are, as the pictures showed, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, ranking in that respect with the national parks.

One has to read the Act very carefully to find out what powers or duties it confers on the local authorities, the National Parks Commission and the Minister related to the planning and management of AsONB. The essence of the matter is that ‘local planning authorities have powers to take all such action as appears to them expedient for the purpose of preserving and enhancing natural beauty’ but not also (as in National Parks) for the purpose of ‘promoting their enjoyment by the public’. An exception to this is that, as anywhere in the country, they may make access agreements and orders and may appoint wardens. They must consult the National Parks Commission in preparing development plans, and in making access agreements or orders. They are eligible for government grants of up to 75% towards land acquisition, compensation for discontinuance of land use, warden services and some other actions. The Act makes no mention of Advisory Committees, which the Hobhouse Committee regarded as essential.

National Parks Commission. The priority given to the National Parks appears in the very first report of the new National Parks Commission. Hugh Dalton, in his Ministerial foreword, notes that the Commission has a very wide charter and ‘will need to be extremely selective in going outside the National Parks if their energies are not to be dissipated’. The Commission took this hint, and decided to focus mainly on creating the Parks, starting with the Peak, the Lakes and Snowdonia, followed in 1951 by Dartmoor, Pembrokeshire and the North York Moors. I recall from that time how short-staffed the Commission was, to the extent that much of the fieldwork to define the boundaries of the Parks was done by my mother and other Commissioners.

However, the Commission was very aware of the other areas which would figure on their future agenda. The reports of their first five years record their active intervention in issues affecting areas which were on the Hobhouse list, for example :

- extension of a quarry near Tintern in the Wye Valley (an echo of Wordsworth’s poem about that place)

- proposed electricity lines over the saddle of the Malvern hills; near Abbeystead in the Trough of Bowland; at Beacon Hill, West Sussex; and through the Cotswolds (the Commission commented that ‘we believe that both in National Parks and elsewhere in the countryside there are areas of exceptional beauty where it will be essential for lines to be laid underground if serious disfigurement is to be avoided’)
- an experimental torpedo dropping zone of the Helford estuary in Cornwall
- chalk quarrying at Kensworth in the Chilterns.

In the Gower, the Commission persuaded the Ministry of Supply not to re-open the war-time ammunition proofing range at Penclawdd; and supported the Gower Society in pressing successfully for woodlands at Oxwich Bay to be included in a Tree Preservation Order.

1954 brought the first indication of AONB as an alternative designation to National Park. Devon and Somerset County Councils ‘most strongly objected’ to the designation of Exmoor as a National Park, and said that the Commission should have considered making it an AONB instead as ‘an alternative and much cheaper method of achieving almost the same objects and involving no administrative change’. The Commission decided to press ahead with designation, but omitted the Quantocks in order to meet part of the opposition, bearing in mind that it might later become an AONB.

Creating the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The process of creating the AONBs started in 1955. The Commission’s report records that ‘early in the year we made a selection of those which seemed to merit early consideration for designation’ : these were the Gower Peninsular, the Quantocks, the Surrey hills, the Lleyn – and, a little later, the coasts of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. Of the Gower, the Commission said, ‘This very fine area is of particular importance because of its proximity to densely populated areas in South Wales, for whose people (it) has long been a popular place of resort. Its landscape has... been exposed to a number of threats from undesirable or doubtful development.’

As to the coasts of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, the Commission made a comment which foreshadowed the coastal review of 10 years later, ‘It may be that the provisions of the Act in regard to AONBs are inadequate for the protection of those more vulnerable coastal areas which do not fall within National Parks. The experience gained from designating them as AONBs should show us whether legislative provision should be made to give them further means of protection.’

In similar vein, but relating to all AONBs, the Commission noted that ‘in contrast with the position in National Parks, no special arrangements for administration are laid down’. Thus ‘unless the county council or county councils concerned decide otherwise, such as a special sub-committee with co-opted outside members, they will be administered under the ordinary planning machinery operating in the county’.

From 1956, the pace of survey, consultation and designation of AONBs really hotted up. The designation order for the Gower, submitted in May that year by the Commission, was confirmed by the Minister in December. For the next 16 years, a flow of designations were made by the Commission or its successor, at an average rate of 2 per year; and Ministerial approval came

within an average of 8 months, the shortest gap being 2 months for the Northumberland coast, the longest being 19 months for Dorset and the Chilterns.

The 1956 report includes a revealing passage, 'The South Downs, recommended for designation as a National Park by the Hobhouse Committee, has been engaging our attention for some time. The recreational value of the South Downs as a potential National Park has been considerably reduced by the extensive cultivation of the downland ... we came to the conclusion that the designation as a Park would not be appropriate. At the same time, the region has great natural beauty, and its ready accessibility to London makes it especially vulnerable to development. We are accordingly proposing to consider its designation as an AONB'. This led to survey work on two separate AONBs, for the Sussex and the Hampshire Downs; and three years later to the Commission reporting 'unprecedented public interest in the designation of the Sussex Downs'.

In the late 1950's, the local authorities responsible for AONBs began the challenging work of protecting and managing them. In 1960, the Commission was 'glad to report that a number of local planning authorities have taken advantage of the special powers provided by the Act for action aimed at preserving or enhancing the natural beauty their areas', for example :

- the removal of derelict wartime buildings on Gower (I recall with pleasure that I helped to organise that)
- discontinuance of industrial use of buildings in the Surrey Hills
- creation of a warden service for Cannock Chase
- tree planting and preservation in Dorset
- the first AONB Advisory Committee, set up by the Malvern Hills Conservators.

At this point in the story, I break from strict chronology and describe four strands of thinking and action which ran parallel to, or intertwined with, each other over the following 25 years. They relate to the coastal heritage; the wider countryside; countryside management; and governance, plus growth in the AONB 'family'.

The coastal heritage. In 1963 a process started which was to lead to the creation of Heritage Coasts as a third designation – alongside National Parks and AONB - for protected landscapes. In a Circular on 'Coastal Preservation', Ministers asked local authorities with coastal boundaries to give increasing attention to control of coastal development. The National Parks Commission pointed out that 9% of the coastline of England and Wales was already within National Parks, and over 23% within the AONBs already designated; that they were working on a further substantial extension of coastal AONBs; and that local planning authorities were able to seek up to 75% Exchequer grant for positive works in these coastal areas.

In 1965 came the launch of Operation Neptune by the National Trust, cheered on by the Commission. A few months earlier, Reg Hookway had arrived at the National Parks Commission as Principal Planning Officer. One of his earliest initiatives was to set in hand a 'comprehensive and coordinated appreciation of present development and planning policies in the coastal areas'. By 1966 this study was well advanced, and the Commission was planning a series of 9 regional conferences with maritime planning authorities in order to 'produce a firm foundation for long-term policies for safeguarding the natural beauty of the coast as a whole and promoting its enjoyment by the public'. By 1967, these Conferences had been completed and

the Commission was summing up the results of this activity and of reports on the coast by the British Tourist Authority, the Sports Council and the Nature Conservancy, with view to making recommendations for future policy.

Before this work was completed, the Commission was transformed into the Countryside Commission – a story that I will tell later. In 1970, that Commission published two reports – ‘Planning of the Coastline’ and ‘Coastal Heritage’ – which drew heavily on the great survey of the undeveloped coastline prepared during World War II by Professor J.A. Steers. These offered recommendations to Ministers which ‘we hope will lay the foundation for long-term policy for the coastline ... capable of accommodating the predicted pressures in the right places and of conserving the undeveloped character of the best stretches of our coastal heritage’. The Commission advocated ‘stringent protection of the finest coastal scenery’ and identified 34 areas ‘which we strongly recommend should be designated as Heritage Coasts’.

This proposal was accepted by the Government in early 1972, and the Commission then invited maritime planning authorities to examine the 34 candidate areas. The first Heritage Coasts were defined in 1973, and within a further year 18 had been defined and work had started on production of Heritage Coast plans. The Commission offered grant-aid to local authorities for the effective management of the defined coasts. Techniques of management were pioneered in three pilot exercises, on the Heritage Coasts of Glamorgan, Purbeck and Suffolk. Operation Neptune was re-launched in 1974, and led to a rapid expansion of coastal land owned by or covenanted to the National Trust, much of it within AONBs. Local authorities not only applied strong standards of development control, but also active measures of management, including purchase of lands for public access and introduction of wardens. This powerfully reinforced the protection of the relevant AONBs; and in places produced clear benefits inland, for example through the decision by East Sussex County Council in 1985 to extend the successful heritage coast project into a countryside management service for the whole of the AONB within the county. There was much exchange of ideas between Heritage Coast managers, a first national conference was held in 1982, and in 1988 came the formation of the Heritage Coast Forum.

The wider countryside. 1963, the year of the Circular on Coastal Preservation, was also the year of the first Countryside in 1970 Conference. Inspired by Max Nicholson, this great event was triggered by rising concern about the impact of agriculture, industry and urban development on the wildlife and the landscape of the countryside; and also by a sense of rising public demand for outdoor recreation which, if not carefully provided for, could overwhelm the protected areas including the AONBs. The National Parks Commission was active in the process. It began to speak of a widening of its own functions into the broad countryside, and of the need to create recreation areas outside the protected landscapes in order to relieve potential pressures on those landscapes.

The impetus towards a broader view was increased by the second Countryside in 1970 Conference, in 1965. The sequel was the White Paper of February 1966, ‘Leisure in the Countryside’, which (in the Commission’s words) ‘offered a draft policy designed to enable a new and more mobile population to enjoy increasing leisure time in the countryside without harm to those who live and work there and without spoiling what they go the countryside to seek’.

This reflected recommendations by the Commission, and also foreshadowed its transformation into a wider body.

In its last report, to February 1968, the National Parks Commission looked ahead to its new life as the Countryside Commission, and said ‘Of one thing we can be certain. In the new picture the National Parks will remain the central feature. No administrative change can alter the fact that the Parks comprise the most beautiful scenery in our country, the conservation of whose unique character must always be a first priority...’. Reassuring to National Parks, but not to AONBs !

The new Commission, however, vigorously continued the process of designating AONBs. It was actively involved in trying to get the right line for the M40 through the scarp of the Chilterns, and used this major case to argue that it should have the status of early consultee on major road proposals, especially in National Parks and AONBs, parallel to the role it already had with the CEGB over power lines. Meanwhile it actively promoted the provision in the Countryside Act for creation by local authorities and others of Country Parks and picnic sites. This programme gained rapid response, with Exchequer grants flowing into the improvement of existing, or the creation of new, places for public outdoor recreation, sometimes outside and sometimes within National Parks and AONBs. My own small contribution was the creation in 1970 of the Morwellham Quay open air museum, in the Tamar Valley (private picnic site number 1 on the Commission’s list), 20 years before the Tamar and Tavy became an AONB, and now a focal point for the ambitious Heritage project in those valleys.

In addition to this nationwide pattern of recreation sites, the new focus on the whole countryside gave impetus to local authorities to set up warden services or countryside management services for the whole of their territories. Thus many AONBs, particularly those that are small or within single counties, benefited not only from the planning systems but also the management systems of the wider area in which they were set. They benefited also, along with the rest of the lowland countryside, from the evolution of thinking and action in the fields of agricultural landscapes, and the need to achieve (in the Commission’s words) ‘interdependence and harmony .. between conservation and recreation on the one hand and social and economic issues on the other’.

The Commission saw ‘the need in the 1980s for more support for programmes designed to blend environmental and socio-economic benefits... One of the main thrusts of our new policy for AONBs is to take full account of the need to safeguard agriculture, forestry, other rural industries and the social and economic interest of local communities Properly prepared and agreed management plans will provide a firm basis for progress on all sides.’ When the Commission became in 1981 a grant-in-aid body under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, it focused on the theme of reconciliation between conservation and farming interests, and pledged itself to ‘promote management agreements and if possible to increase the total given in grants to these agreements, especially in the AONBs’.

Countryside management. I referred earlier to the emphasis in the Dower and Hobhouse reports on ‘positive action’ to enhance natural beauty and to provide for recreation, and to the welcome that the National Parks Commission gave to the early work of AONBs in this field. It was recognised that planning powers alone could not achieve all that was needed, and that planning must be complemented by a whole new area of work which we have come to know as

‘countryside management’. Leadership in this field was given by Reg Hookway at the National Parks Commission. In 1966, he worked with the Nature Conservancy Council and Gerald Smart, County Planning Officer of Hampshire, to launch a pilot investigation of a new technique for rural planning in East Hampshire AONB.

This experimental approach became a key tool of the Countryside Commission, when it started work in 1968. Within a year, that new Commission had set in hand, in the Lake District and Snowdonia, experimental projects designed to ‘find better methods of upland recreation management and to interest upland farmers and farming organisations in the possibilities of the recreational uses of land’. In subsequent years, this experimental approach was applied to countryside management in the urban fringe and in the Heritage Coasts. In advice to the National Parks, the Commission advocated the preparation of management plans for the whole of each Park, and these became an established part of the National Park system in 1975.

This thinking, although developed mainly outside the AONBs, then became increasingly applied within them. There had been a marked growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s in positive action by AONB authorities, for example in :

- provision of public access, as at Butser Hill in Hampshire, Puttenham Common in the Surrey Hills, Beacon Fell in the Forest of Bowland, and elsewhere
- land purchase, as at Happersnapper Hanger in Hampshire
- setting up of warden services for the Cotswolds, the Solway Coast, the Shropshire Hills and other areas
- a major Conference on the future of beech woodlands in the Chilterns, aimed at achieving effective management of these woodlands by cooperation and agreement.

However, in 1975 the Commission commented that ‘it is noticeable that local planning authorities (in AONBs) rely on planning policies and development control to conserve the landscape. Although statutory planning is an important safeguard ... there is a pressing need for a more direct approach to land management. We are therefore emphasising the need to prepare management plans for each AONB as a whole.’ Local authorities responded to this idea, and in 1984 the Commission ‘noted with satisfaction the progress in preparing management plans, including one for Arnside/Silverdale (one of the smallest AONBs) ‘with excellent local support’.

Governance and growth. I noted earlier that the National Parks Commission reported with regret that ‘in contrast with the position in National Parks, no special arrangements for administration are laid down’ for AONBs. The Commission encouraged the creation of Advisory Committees, particularly where the AONB lay across county boundaries. Early achievements were the creation of Joint Advisory Committees for the South Downs and the Cotswolds; and of the Chilterns Standing Conference, which set in hand the production of a plan for conservation of the AONB. Local government reorganisation in 1974, with a split in planning powers between county and district councils, led the Countryside Commission to press again for coordinating machinery in AONBs. They also urged the appointment of project officers to lead the countryside management activity to which I earlier referred.

The governance and staffing of AONBs did become stronger through these years, but after 1973 no new AONBs were designated, apart for the Isles of Scilly. In 1972, the Commission stated

that it had no proposals to designate further areas, beyond the ones that were then in process. It commented that 'It has been suggested that the need no longer exists, in view of the new development plan system ... and because the Countryside Act has extended to the countryside as a whole most of the powers hitherto confined to the National Parks and AONBs – but ... we have been asked by several planning authorities and by amenity societies to extend existing designations and to establish new AONBs. There may be a case for a further limited programme of designation.'

The following year, the Commission recorded, 'It is clear that the AONB concept is widely supported by local planning authorities, as well as by amenity interests throughout the country'. It had therefore conducted - with help from L J Watson, who had been the main field officer of the National Parks Commission during its work in designating the National Parks - a review of the 32 areas suggested by the Hobhouse Committee or others but not yet designated; and had decided to go ahead with designating up to 15 of them, stating that the other 17 were not worthy of designation. This process was put in hand, but slowly, and the first new designations did not come through until 1983.

In 1978 the Countryside Commission recognised that 'The National Park authorities are now generously endowed with staff and funds for conservation and recreation work in comparison with the designated AONBs. Yet these cover some of our most loved and most beautiful countryside.' The Commission therefore decided to initiate 'a major reappraisal of the purpose and effectiveness' of AONBs. Kenneth Himsworth, National Park Officer of the Lake District, was commissioned to undertake an analysis. His rather low-key report noted that nothing had been done in an AONB that could not have been done under normal planning powers. However, 'Designation has resulted in some recognisable, if uneven, effect on landscape protection ... achieved at a modest price and well justified in the public interest'. He noted specific successes such as the laying of underground electricity lines in the Wye valley and the North Wessex Downs, re-routing of major roads in Suffolk and at Arnside and Silverdale, and the bringing to an end of quarrying in the Malvern Hills.

A published discussion paper attracted response from 247 organisations or individuals, showing widespread support for the AONB idea. A major conference on the future of AONBs was held in November 1978. The Commission reported that 'the weight of opinion supports retaining the statutory designation process, but also giving greater attention to recreation when consistent with the overriding aim of conservation. Agricultural, forestry and socio-economic interests will also need to be taken into account.'

After a pause, in January 1981, the Commission published a Policy Statement on AONBs. This proposed that recreation should become a recognised objective for designation; advocated more coordinated management on the part of local authorities, landowners and land managers; recommended ways to strengthen the planning, management, administration and funding of AONBs, with a focus on Joint Advisory Committees in all multi-county AONBs; and listed 12 areas where designation had still to be completed. In July 1982, the Secretary of State replied to the Policy Statement, broadly endorsing the policies though refusing to add recreation as an objective of designation or to extend to AONBs the scheme for notifying agricultural operations

then operating in National Parks. The Commission then published its revised policy statement and pressed on with the final designations of AONBs.

The North Pennines. Included in the list of 15 possible new AONBs of 1973 was ‘part of the North Pennines’. The story of its designation is significant for two main reasons – it highlighted the tension between conservation and economic regeneration, and it revealed the fragility of our understanding of natural beauty.

In 1975, the Commission invited the local planning authorities to submit ideas for a boundary. These were received in 1976, and the Commissioners made a visit and gained support in principle from the local authorities. In 1978, they recorded that Durham and Northumberland County Councils continued to support the proposed AONB, but Cumbria and its four district councils were now opposed. However, most of those who responded to a public survey were in favour, so the Commission decided to proceed with a designation map. Further consultation produced objections from the Cumbrian authorities and from farming, landowning and local bodies. But the Commission said that ‘The criterion for designating an AONB is that the landscape of the area is of such quality that it justifies national recognition. As most of the objections were not directly related to this criterion, we decided to approve the ... Order.’ This was submitted to the Secretary of State in early 1979.

Ministers replied that they did not propose to confirm the Order when so many questions posed in the general reappraisal of the AONBs were still to be resolved. The Commission’s response was that the only valid reason for the Secretary of State to reject a designation would be that he thought the area was not of outstanding natural beauty. They suggested that the Order should ‘lie on the table’ until he was ready to consider the proposal on its merits. Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State, accepted this argument, but took no immediate action. Meanwhile, a project was launched in part of the area - East Fellside and Alston Moor – with the aim ‘to arrest social, economic and environmental decline by improving take-up of existing grant-aid and identifying new projects and enterprises which will improve local employment and the economy of the area’. This project was co-funded by the Commission, the Development Commission and the English Tourist Board.

Three years later the Commission was still awaiting a decision on The North Pennines, and indeed also of the High Weald and the Camel Estuary submitted in 1982. It commented, ‘These delays, which are without precedent or explanation, have caused embarrassment and disappointment’. In September 1983, the Secretary of State wrote to say that he wished to defer a decision in view of the size of the area, the strongly-divided nature of the representations that he had received, and the passage of time since the Order. He asked the Commission to look again at the proposed boundaries, to see if the area might be reduced without compromising the integrity of the designation. The Commission bit its tongue, looked again at the boundary, and pulled it in at some points, mainly on the east side.

Over a year later, in March 1985, the Secretary of State decided to call a public inquiry into the designation of the North Pennines. The Commission noted that this would be ‘the first of its kind, but there are special circumstances – if confirmed, the area would be the largest AONB; local opinion has been strongly divided; and the designation order was made over six years ago’.

The Inquiry, starting in October 1985, lasted for 6 weeks and cost the Commission well over £100,000. The Commission's report records that 'Appearing in support ... were all three county councils, one of the three district councils in favour of designation, Wear Valley and District Trades Union Council and a number of conservation and recreation organisations. Although the inquiry's terms of reference were concerned with the landscape merits of the area, most of the objectors, including three district councils, several parish councils, the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association, and mining, quarrying and forestry interest, introduced economic and development arguments against conservation. We argued that AONB designation was not intended as an economic measure, but that there was no evidence that designation in other parts of the country had adversely affected economic and social life. Indeed, new recreation initiatives might be encouraged. Our own investment in the area would increase, and we undertook to double our spending in the North Pennines if the areas was designated.' The Commission suggested to the Inspector that it was desirable to develop a programme of conservation, rural development and tourism in the North Pennines.

But the Commission did not have an easy ride. Having insisted (and gained the Inspector's acceptance) that the key criterion was the quality of the landscape, Adrian Phillips, as the Commission's spokesman, found himself having to defend their view that the area was indeed of outstanding natural beauty. He found that he was ill-armed for this, for lack of detailed analysis of the landscape character, which varied through the area and included sections which had been much changed from any 'natural' state by lead mining and other activity. Looking back on the experience, he realised that the Commission needed a much stronger base of evidence on which not only to argue for designations but also to illuminate the aims and methods of safeguarding and enhancing landscapes. From that realisation sprang much of the Commission's subsequent work in landscape assessment, including the series of AONB Landscape studies and the programme (starting in South West England) which became the nationwide analysis of the Character of England – which in turn did much to inspire the European Landscape Convention, which the UK has this year signed.

The following year, the Secretary of State said he would confirm the designation. The Inspector's report had concluded that about 85% of the area proposed for designation merited AONB status. He agreed with the Commission's proposal for a programme of conservation, rural development and tourism. So, the Commission entered into discussion with the local authorities to agree the precise line of the boundary; and agreed with the Development Commission on a jointly sponsored programme of environmental and socio-economic development. In this sense, the AONB took on – from its inception – something of the character of a French regional park, which has the twin aim of conservation and socio-economic development. When the boundary was agreed, and the Order re-submitted, the Secretary of State confirmed the Order in June 1988, just 13 years after the process had started.

Conclusion. I close my story by saying that in June 1988 there were 38 AONBs, covering between them 19,287 square kilometres, which is 12.8% of the total area of England and Wales (as compared with the 9% of that area which lay within the then 10 National Parks). 16 of these AONBs were multi-county, and 8 of these had Joint Advisory Committees or equivalent, as had 5 of the single-county AONBs. There were management plans for 10 AONBs, and at least 14 had

a warden or ranger service. A total of 1,344 kilometres in length of Heritage Coast had been defined either completely or laterally, of which by far the larger part lay also within National Parks or AONBs and thus served to reinforce the conservation of natural beauty in these areas. Large lengths of coast, and many inland estates, were already in the hands of the National Trust or other conservation bodies, thus enjoying further protection. Local authorities themselves owned, or in other ways directly managed, many key sites within the AONBs. A growing volume of positive work was being undertaken. AONBs were increasingly seen as ranking with National Parks as areas to be protected from major damaging developments. They were becoming recognised, alongside the National Parks, as models of integrated management, within the 'Protected Landscapes' Category of the IUCN. But they were still, in general, far more weakly resourced than the National Parks. They remained, when set alongside the National Parks, equally valuable but unequally valued.

Note

For help in preparing this paper, I am grateful to Ray Woolmore, indefatigable historian of protected areas; and Adrian Phillips, my predecessor as Director General of the Countryside Commission. The quotations are taken from annual reports of the National Parks Commission or the Countryside Commission, except where otherwise stated.

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