

LANDSCAPES AT RISK?

THE FUTURE FOR AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY



EDWARD HOLDAWAY AND GERALD SMART

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**Edward Holdaway
and
Gerald Smart**



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Colour plates and maps

Colour illustrations appear between
pages 58 and 59, 106 and 107, 154 and 155, and 194 and 195.

Series illustrating examples of:

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The geographical characteristics of AONBs – Plates 6 to 16

Examples of special considerations in AONBs:

The rural economy and agriculture – Plates 17, 18 and 20
Wildlife – Plates 21 to 23
Historic and cultural features – Plates 24 to 26
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Examples of trends affecting AONBs:

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Examples of policy and management needs in AONBs:

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Foreword

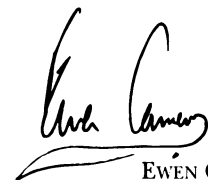
It is not surprising that England and Wales should have a system designed to protect beautiful landscapes. From the rugged Cornish coast to the downlands of the South and East, to the wilder beauty of the northern uplands and the Welsh mountains, a rich scenic variety is one of the defining characteristics of these countries.

Designating the best of these landscapes as either Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Parks has given them vital protection from development. But the AONBs still represent unfinished business and unfulfilled potential. Over the years they have struggled with severely limited resources, a direct consequence of no one having a legal responsibility for their well-being. That requires a management approach which uses robust long-term strategies to stem and then reverse the erosion of these landscapes by agricultural intensification or change, traffic growth and a creeping loss of local character. It also requires a strategic approach to the very large numbers of visitors to AONBs. That recreational demand needs to contribute positively to the success of these areas rather than adding another pressure to them.

Many local authorities make laudable efforts to manage these areas with the help of government agencies like the former Countryside Commission and now the Countryside Agency and the Countryside Council for Wales. Unfortunately those efforts fall well short of what is needed and the position of AONBs is in stark contrast to that of the National Parks. The Parks have become increasingly well provided for over the years, with National Park Authorities in place and performing excellently in managing their recreational use and conservation.

However AONBs are now receiving fresh attention. As evidenced by this new work *Landscapes at Risk*, consideration of how these areas should be viewed and provided for in the future is being guided by an appreciation of AONBs as living landscapes that need to be managed in ways that reflect their individual circumstances and needs. With the right arrangements AONBs have the potential to embrace and exemplify the sustainability agenda of the twenty-first century. But first of all local authorities and their partners need to be given the management powers and resources for the job.

I am grateful to the authors of this work. They have brought together in a truly comprehensive way and for the first time, the history, strengths and weaknesses of the AONB designation. As such their work provides a fascinating, important and accessible reference for policy makers, professional advisors and all those interested in the sustainable management of a vibrant, living countryside. But equally important, it sets out a thoughtful discussion on the purpose, operation and future of the designation. This culminates with the authors' new agenda for AONBs, which I am sure will inform a wider debate on the future of our protected landscapes.



EWEN CAMERON
Chairman, Countryside Agency
Cheltenham

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Abbreviations

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
ASSI	Area of Special Scientific Interest
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
CA	Countryside Agency
CADW	The Welsh equivalent of English Heritage
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CC	Countryside Commission
CCW	Countryside Council for Wales
CIS	Countryside Information System
CS	Countryside Stewardship
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DoE	Department of the Environment
EA	Environment Agency
EH	English Heritage
EN	English Nature
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESA	Environmentally Sensitive Area
FC	Forestry Commission
FRCA	Farming and Rural Conservation Agency
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
GIS	Geographic Information System
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
JAC	Joint Advisory Committee
LBAP	Local Biodiversity Action Plan
LEAP	Local Environment Agency Plan
LFA	Less Favoured Area
LGMB	Local Government Management Board
LTP	Local Transport Plan
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
NA	Natural Area
NNR	National Nature Reserve
PPG	Planning Policy Guidance
RDA	Rural Development Area
RDC	Rural Development Commission
RPG	Regional Planning Guidance
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
cSAC	(candidate) Special Area of Conservation
SAM	Scheduled Ancient Monument
SNH	Scottish Natural Heritage
SPA	Special Protection Area
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
STAR	Strategic Traffic Action in Rural Areas
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
TPP	Transport Policy and Programme

Introduction: The challenges for protected landscapes

Do the titles National Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Scenic Area, Heritage Coast, conjure up visions of magnificent places: Snowdonia, the South Downs, Loch Lomond, Flamborough Head, for example? Perhaps, but do they suggest that these wonderful landscapes have very different attributes and ways of meeting people's needs? Not so to everybody. Hardly 'terms of art', they are part of the official vocabulary of countryside planning, implying a selective approach to the conservation and enjoyment of a rich landscape heritage, distinctions that are not widely understood. They can be likened to members of a great family of protected landscapes, each of which has the family traits but displays individual characteristics and potential. This book focuses on one of them, the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which contain some of the most attractive landscapes in Britain. It is about their place in the family, their qualities, the challenges that they face, the steps being taken to look after them in the public interest, and how these steps might be guided in the future, in the interest of protected landscapes generally.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty include spacious downs and wolds steeped in early history, bird-rich estuaries and marshes, colourful heaths, deep woodland and valleys, dramatic cliffs, sandy bays and sheltered creeks, and wild uplands. 'AONBs', to use the shortened form of their time-honoured but clumsy title, are widely distributed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Along with the National Parks of England and Wales and the National Scenic Areas of Scotland, their landscapes are recognised as being of the very highest quality, requiring special protection under British town and country planning legislation. They also fall within a world-wide category of Protected Areas, known as Protected Landscapes, devised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).¹ These relate to areas of land or sea, which require special measures for protection and management on account of the national or international significance of their scenic, wildlife and

heritage values. While the means may vary from country to country, the aims and scope of protection are readily justified by the great educational, cultural, recreational and spiritual benefits.

The need for this book

We have chosen to focus on AONBs in England and Wales for a number of reasons. Not least, it is over fifty years since the legislation that brought them into being was passed and, compared with National Parks, very little has been written about them. Furthermore their future is under scrutiny by government. While the timing may well be appropriate, there is a more compelling reason for looking at them in some depth. At the turn of the new century the world in which the protected landscapes in the UK find themselves is very different from the one in which they were conceived, and it will continue to present new challenges for them.

Like all countryside in these densely populated islands, AONBs have been influenced by man for centuries. Even the wildest can show traces of past occupation, and the more liveable areas have been shaped through the ages by farming, forestry, village settlement and rural industries. The pace of change has accelerated in the last 250 years: enclosures, new agricultural methods, improved communications, and the drift of population away to industrial cities. It is only from the late eighteenth century onwards, however, that their cultural value has become widely recognised in literature and the arts, and during the twentieth century that many of them have become popular residential areas and have attracted large numbers of visitors for open-air recreation.

These areas are essentially 'living and working landscapes', and as such they have undergone radical change. Post-war farming practices have removed familiar pastoral features, dense afforestation has intruded into open moorland, and there have been huge reductions in traditional rural jobs which, in turn, have seriously affected local economies and community structures. Furthermore there has been considerable development, such as housing, industry, roads and other infrastructure, as well as growth in recreation and traffic pressures in most AONBs in the last 50 years.

Meanwhile, although the establishment of the English and Welsh National Parks and the subsequent improvement of their administration and funding have been undoubted successes, AONBs have been left behind, relegated to a far lower priority with no stated responsibility for their management. Indeed, though covering rather more land than National Parks, they have come to be regarded as 'Cinderellas' in the whole family of protected landscapes. As will be shown in later

chapters, much of the constructive thinking about them in the post-war reports^{2,3} that led to the 1949 *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* was whittled away in practice. More recently, too, there has been a notable shift of policy in the UK towards the needs of the whole countryside and an integrated approach to rural issues, in harmony with the world-wide movements towards sustainable development and the maintenance of biodiversity. In some respects this trend spells a further reduction in priority for protected landscapes, but there is no doubt that they are highly relevant to the needs of society, and will remain so. The question that is at the heart of the book is whether the management arrangements of the largest group of protected landscapes, the AONBs, are sufficiently robust to respond in a positive fashion to current trends and future challenges, including those outlined above.

The challenge of 'living landscapes'

Before embarking on this in-depth examination of AONBs, it is important to explore briefly just what those challenges really are. Even without national and international influences the basic approach to protected landscapes in the UK is in itself a challenge. Rather than being set aside for landscape conservation and protected against human interference, the protected areas are multi-purpose; they are landscapes with communities where people live and work, and which are enjoyed by countless numbers of people. While they are protected through the application of strict planning policies, they are not 'no-go' areas so far as development is concerned. Their protection also depends on influencing the management of the land, most of which is in private ownership, and the activities that take place within them. It is a major challenge to ensure that the means of conserving and enhancing these areas is organised and funded in a way that recognises their national and international importance, on the one hand, as well as the interests and roles of the many stakeholders and local communities involved.

The challenge of international influences

International influences are having an increasingly important part to play in rural affairs in the UK. The environmental impact of the Common Agricultural Policy, with its overall priority for production is well known. However, there is a much wider range of global and European influences that have implications for the long-term future of AONBs. Some of these are bound up in international conventions

and treaties and others in less formal, but none the less important initiatives.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching is the *Convention on Biological Diversity*,⁴ one of several major initiatives from the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Signatories agreed that each nation should develop a strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. The UK response is set out in *Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan*, published in 1994. This has achieved a very high standing in government priorities and does, of course, embrace the whole countryside rather than just the protected landscapes. Indeed there seems to be very little recognition of the role that protected landscapes such as AONBs can play in implementing the UK strategy.

While this Convention is essentially strategic in its approach, a number of others were much more specific. The most significant are the *Ramsar Convention*,⁵ the *EC Birds Directive*⁶ and the *EC Habitats Directive*.⁷ They are aimed at the conservation of species and habitats rather than the wider landscape. For those AONBs with significant parts designated under these measures, there is a major challenge to protect internationally important sites, especially to ensure that their management is well related to a wider geographical context.

On a less formal basis, over the last century or more, there has been a world-wide movement towards the establishment of national systems of protected areas. Of particular importance is the programme developed by IUCN – *Parks for Life*⁸ – following their World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas held in Caracas in 1992. The key message from the congress was that although protected areas alone cannot achieve a nation's sustainability and biodiversity objectives, they can play a significant part. They should not be considered in isolation from broader social and economic policies. New partnerships are needed, involving local communities. Above all, the isolationist view of protected areas, seeing them capable of surviving as oases, should be dropped. Instead they should be regarded as 'jewels in the crown', where the jewels and their setting are mutually supportive.

One of the main recommendations of the European Parks for Life programme was for the Council of Europe to implement a convention on landscape protection. For this it is pursuing a *European Landscape Convention*,⁹ due to start in 2000. Its aim is to obtain Europe-wide recognition of the importance of landscape as an integral part of life and a crucial element in progress towards sustainability. Although this should be a matter of principle when considering, for example, the Common Agricultural Policy, public works, transport, forestry and tourism, there does not seem to be any move to establish regulatory measures or financial support. It is nevertheless part of a world-wide movement to raise the profile of landscape issues and set standards to be aimed at by every nation. The chal-

lenge for the management of AONBs will be to ensure that they meet such standards and, from their long experience, to act as exemplars of how to protect 'living landscapes'.

The challenge of the wider approach to countryside policy in the UK

Traditionally, landscape and wildlife conservation has focused on special areas. This is changing, with the view being taken, quite correctly, that the countryside must be looked at as a whole. It has been manifest in several ways, particularly by the creation in England, in 1999, of the Countryside Agency, embracing landscape, recreation and socio-economic matters; the description of the whole English landscape in programmes of Countryside Character and Natural Areas, developed by the former Countryside Commission and English Nature; the recent unsuccessful calls for a Ministry to cover all rural affairs; and the publication for the first time (in 1995 and 1996) of Rural White Papers for England and Wales.^{10, 11}

This holistic approach should in theory raise no special problems for protected landscapes such as AONBs. In practice, however, there has been a tendency for it either to ignore them, or to give them lower priority than before. Such apparent silence is worrying. The two White Papers did in fact go some way to provide the context for protected landscapes. They stressed that designated areas should no longer be viewed in isolation from the rest of the countryside, and that new ways should be sought to enrich the quality of the countryside generally without weakening the protection of designated areas. Nevertheless the holistic approach presents a challenge to those responsible for protected landscapes to recognise the need to promote their interests strongly and to create a framework within which the multi-purpose nature of these areas can flourish.

The effective protection of countryside is indeed one of the objectives set out in *A Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK*.¹² Special landscape designations such as National Parks and AONBs are at the heart of the Government's approach. However, in placing them in this position the Government has emphasised that conservation of the natural heritage must be integrated with local economic and social development, thus making sure that sustainability principles are fully accounted for in these areas. Turning this seemingly neat theory into practice is a complex task, a challenge to those responsible for their planning and management; it is not a fixed state of harmony, so much as a process of change. There needs to be a very clear understanding of the role of these most important landscapes as part of the nation's environmental capital, and of their capacity for change.

The challenge of long-term trends

The challenges for protected landscapes do not come solely from policy and from administrative circumstances. There are much broader trends with which AONBs have to contend in the future. As is more fully described in Chapter 3, *Climatic change* could have a direct physical impact on landscape character, quality and biodiversity. *Changes in life-style*, too, will cause continued pressure for development in villages and the countryside, and have for long been increasing leisure demands. *Changes in major land uses*, such as agriculture and forestry, could also have far-reaching effects on protected landscapes, although their future, like all the long-term trends referred to, is uncertain to say the least, extending to their nature, overall effects and timing. Although these trends and the way in which they materialise are likely to affect the countryside generally, their impacts could be more pronounced in protected areas because of the high quality of their landscape, wildlife and cultural resources.

The challenge to AONBs is twofold. First, research into environmental futures will continue to have messages of the utmost importance for these areas, and their managers must maintain a constant watch on its implications. Second, sustainability, that is, ensuring that meeting social and economic needs does not irreversibly damage the environment, and flexibility will continue to grow in importance as criteria for all policy decisions. To this end, the need for up-to-date systematic knowledge of the natural and community resources of each area becomes all the more important.

The nature of the challenges described above may make stark reading to those who manage these areas. On the one hand, there is a marked emphasis on wildlife conservation driven by international and European commitments, with an ill-defined role for AONBs. As yet, however, there are no such drivers for landscape. Equally, with the increasing emphasis on an integrated approach to the countryside, AONBs are in danger of being sidelined in processes that take an holistic outlook. Pressures such as those outlined in the previous paragraph are increasingly affecting their character. AONBs are potentially at risk. Since they contain large tracts of living and working countryside of the highest quality, they should be put in a position where not only are they adequately protected and managed in terms of their landscape, but become leading examples of biodiversity and sustainability, in conjunction with local interests, for the national benefit.

The scope of the book

How then, in the light of these challenges, does one approach the detailed examination of AONBs?

The first part of the book sets the scene, with Chapter 1 describing the scope of protected landscapes in the UK and the link with the wider family of protected areas. Chapter 2 explores in greater detail the geography of AONBs and explains why they are so important nationally. Chapter 3 then looks at the changes that have taken place in the fabric of AONBs, the pressures that are perceived to be affecting them now and the longer-term trends that are likely to affect them.

The second part of the book, under the heading 'Recurrent themes', looks at the development of policies for AONBs in Chapter 4 and their management in Chapter 5, with a view to establishing an understanding of the many factors that have been at play in their evolution in the last 50 years.

The third part examines how the many issues that are currently affecting the whole countryside interact with the conservation of the fine landscapes that AONBs contain, and how those responsible for AONBs have begun to tackle them. Chapter 6 explores the varied land management issues posed by agriculture and forestry, wildlife recreation and tourism and traffic and transport, whilst Chapter 7 examines the vexed questions of rural development, planning and sustainability.

Having considered the way in which the AONB concept has evolved in some depth in the first three parts, the fourth and final part looks to the future. Chapter 8 considers whether AONBs are fit for the challenges of the new millennium, and the final Chapter 9 sets out the Agenda for AONBs and what needs to be done to achieve it, seeking to draw out some broad principles that will contribute to the continuing debate about the future of AONBs in the UK and abroad.

In Appendix 2 there is a series of case studies of particular AONBs that demonstrate many of the points made in the main text. The book is also illustrated by maps and extensive sections of colour photographs of AONBs throughout England and Wales, which include their geographical characteristics, examples of special considerations in AONBs, of trends affecting them and of their policy and management needs.

- ¹ See Appendix 3 for details of IUCN categories and definition of the term 'Protected Landscape'.
- ² Ministry of Town and Country Planning, *National Parks in England and Wales*, Report by John Dower, Cmd 6628, HMSO, London, 1945.
- ³ Ministry of Town and Country Planning, *Report of the National Parks Committee* (England and Wales), Cmd 7121, HMSO, London, 1947.
- ⁴ *Convention on Biological Diversity* was one of several major initiatives stemming from the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

References

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- ⁵ *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as a Waterfowl Habitat*, Ramsar, 1971.
- ⁶ *Council Directive 79/409/EEC* on the conservation of wild birds.
- ⁷ *Council Directive 92/43/EEC* on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.
- ⁸ IUCN, *Parks for Life: Report of the IVth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, Caracas, 1992*, Gland, Switzerland, 1993 and IUCN, *Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe*, Gland, Switzerland & Cambridge, UK, 1994.
- ⁹ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, *Recommendation 40* (1998) on the draft European Landscape Convention.
- ¹⁰ Department of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Rural England: A Nation Committed to a Living Countryside*, Cm 3016, HMSO, London, 1995.
- ¹¹ Welsh Office, *A Working Countryside for Wales*, Cm 3180, HMSO, London, 1996.
- ¹² Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *A Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom*, Cm 4345, HMSO, London, 1999.

Part One

Setting the Scene

The introduction briefly described the place of AONBs in the family of Britain's best landscapes and in the international categories of protected areas. Part One comprises three chapters which set the scene for the entire book: the genesis of protected landscape policy in the UK as a whole, the important resources of AONBs that require such protection, and the pressures exerted on them now and in the future.

The family of protected landscapes in the UK

1

This first chapter traces the evolution of the AONB concept through a sequence of official reports, legislation and subsequent designation of individual areas, a train of events that was dominated by the need for early action to establish National Parks. In England and Wales the process was primarily concerned with landscape protection, and the chapter completes the story by referring briefly to the parallel establishment of measures for wildlife conservation, and for landscape protection in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The post-war reports

The move towards protection of the best countryside began to attract government attention in real earnest in the 1940s, continuing the work of the pre-war National Park Committee, chaired by Sir Christopher Addison,¹ that reported in 1931. At that time, the rash of urban growth on the one hand, and various attempts to promote legislation on access to upland and mountainous areas, on the other, had provoked a number of responses. One was Addison's proposal to protect the best countryside by means of national and regional 'Reserves', which were two types of designated area that can, with hindsight, be seen as implying, officially, that National Parks should not stand alone. War intervened, but even at the height of hostilities fears about the longer-term future of the countryside led to the appointment in 1942 of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas, chaired by Lord Justice Scott.² Scott was more positive than Addison about the purpose of National Parks and made very optimistic assumptions about the role of farming in maintaining traditional landscapes. National Parks should be primarily for public access, rather than treated as 'reserves', and they were long overdue. From then on, National Parks became a priority for government and, so far as England and Wales were concerned, led to the publication in 1945 of John Dower's seminal report, *National Parks in England and Wales*.³

Dower, a civil servant in the former Ministry of Works and Planning

who had been influential in the publicity campaigns of the Standing Committee on National Parks, proposed 10 such Parks. These were to contain 'relatively wild country' in which there could be wide public access for recreation, and he set out ideas for their administration, including the establishment of a powerful National Parks Commission. He went on to list 12 areas that should be safeguarded as possible future parks, and 33 'Other Amenity Areas', of critical importance for preservation and recreation. The latter two groups contain well-known countryside such as the South Downs and Cotswolds, and other attractive landscapes of national or, in some cases, regional importance. His brief being primarily concerned with National Parks, however, Dower saw them as a second priority and made no proposals for their establishment and administration.

The National Parks Committee (England and Wales), chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse,⁴ took Dower's vision further. Reporting in 1947, Hobhouse accepted Dower's main concepts, including the two aims for National Parks (to protect their countryside and ways of life, and to give opportunities for outdoor recreation), and made proposals for twelve Parks (see the map in Plate 1). He recommended that they should be administered by local *ad hoc* executive bodies on behalf of the National Parks Commission and the local authorities, and funded by the Exchequer. He also proposed 52 'Conservation Areas' (see Plate 3): tracts of countryside with scenic quality comparable to that of the parks, the character of which should be preserved, but where potential for recreation was less. His Committee worked closely with the Wildlife Conservation Special Committee, chaired by Sir Julian Huxley,⁵ whose strategic recommendations underlie much of the present system of protected areas for nature conservation. This liaison influenced the actual choice of Conservation Areas, produced a new emphasis on their scientific value, and gave recreation a relatively low priority except in areas near to population centres. Hobhouse recommended that local government, using planning powers, should be responsible for the administration of Conservation Areas through Advisory Committees. These would include members nominated by the proposed National Parks Commission, and should be consulted on planning proposals of importance to the area, bringing in the Minister of Town and Country Planning when there was a dispute. There should be Exchequer grants for Conservation Areas, at about one-third of the rate for National Parks. A high standard of planning decisions would be the main public responsibility; it was assumed, following Scott, that landowners and farmers would be in a position to maintain landscape quality through traditional day-to-day management.

Dower's Amenity Areas and Hobhouse's Conservation Areas foreshadowed most of the current list of English and Welsh AONBs. Indeed, the areas chosen for designation largely followed Hobhouse's

These criteria, in order of importance, were:

1. Quality of landscape, natural beauty, unspoilt or special quality (e.g., remoteness), of national significance;
2. Extent in terms of both total area and continuity, a smaller area being more acceptable for extensions than for new designations;
3. Unusual character in the sense of having unique characteristics or being of a landscape type under-represented among existing designated areas and Heritage Coasts, e.g., lowland valley landscapes, sandstone ridges, islands, estuaries.

Source:

Countryside Commission, *Review of Proposed AONBs*, Paper 73/21, Cheltenham, 1973

BOX 1.1

AONB designation criteria, 1971/2

selection, a few being added or excluded in the light of new information. Interestingly, it was only in 1971/2 (see Box 1.1) that the Countryside Commission (successor to the National Parks Commission) undertook a qualitative assessment of large numbers of potential AONBs. In this it applied a more systematic approach than in the past, when areas had been considered individually.⁶ Some Hobhouse areas, including the Denbigh Moors in North Wales, parts of the Pennines, Charnwood Forest in Leicestershire, Clipsham in Lincolnshire, and Dungeness have not materialised. Charnwood Forest, for example, was divided by the M1 Motorway, and Denbigh Moors were thought to contain only limited tracts of high quality landscape.⁷ Some, for a variety of reasons, have been recognised by other area titles such as Heritage Coast (Cardigan, Glamorgan and Flamborough Coasts), Environmentally Sensitive Areas (Breckland), or Forest Parks (Delamere in Cheshire, and the Forest of Dean). On the other hand, the current list of AONBs includes the South Downs, which had been proposed by Hobhouse for a National Park but, until recently, were ruled out as being too intensively farmed. The list also includes areas of first-rate countryside that did not figure in these reports at all but were put forward as a result of local consultation: Chichester Harbour, Dedham Vale, the Lincolnshire Wolds, Solway Coast, Tamar Valley, and much of the Weald.

On the whole, the proposals for Conservation Areas were uncontroversial, both in the Hobhouse Committee and in written evidence to it. The same could be said of provision for them in the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* of 1949, where debate in the run-up

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949

BOX 1.2

***National Parks
and Access to the
Countryside Act,
1949***

The Commission may, by order made as respects any areas in England and Wales not being a National Park, which appear 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...

(extract from Section 87 (1))

to legislation and in Parliament itself had centred on the controversial issues to be solved in creating the National Parks Commission, and in administering the National Parks themselves. Should the Commission's role be executive, as proposed by Hobhouse, or advisory, and should the local responsibilities be exercised by the special bodies he had recommended, or primarily by the new local planning authorities, the County Councils?⁸ As a result of pressure within Whitehall and through Parliament, the Commission was formed as an advisory body with grant-giving powers and a number of responsibilities, especially towards National Parks, including their designation. The management of the Parks, in terms of planning, conservation, provision for recreation and encouragement of economic development, was assigned to Joint Boards with executive powers and the ability to levy, or exceptionally to special County Council Committees. Each of the latter was to consist of a majority of local authority members, and of others nominated by the Commission. In the event, only two Boards were created but, as will be explained later, the alternative arrangements did not stand the test of time, and major changes have had to be made, and funding increased. The lessons learned may have implications for other protected areas.

The overwhelming priority given to National Parks in the legislative process was probably the main reason why Hobhouse's Conservation Areas emerged from Parliament in a rather emasculated form (see Box 1.2). Somewhere along the line⁹ the title was changed to Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, this being seen as the sole criterion for designation, emphasising landscape importance rather than the wider combination of aesthetic and scientific value implied by the expression Conservation Area. Exchequer grants were to be available for a range of environmental and access improvements, but other main recommendations, such as the requirement to set up Advisory Committees, were omitted, and there was no specific duty for the Commission to initiate AONB designation, nor, at the time, any criteria for their selection. These limitations have been attributed to several factors: the difficult economic situation and the heavy work-load in Parliament of post-war legislation; the basic assumptions made by

Scott that farming would maintain traditional landscapes; the priority given to National Parks; the feeling that normal planning controls were adequate to prevent major development and the gradual loss of architectural character, and that recreation was not a venture to be promoted actively in AONBs. Thus local government should be allowed to get on with the job, using the new planning powers.¹⁰

With hindsight it can be seen that this paring down of Hobhouse's concept contributed to the lack of effective response to the pressures on AONBs briefly mentioned earlier. Critically, it was not seen that conservation of landscape and other natural resources in AONBs would require positive management in addition to planning control, and that a co-ordinated approach was essential to achieve it, involving public agencies, landowners and the voluntary sector, as well as the local planning authorities. A clear lead should have been given on organisation for this, but it was not done.

This 'early history' is only part of the story, however. Later chapters will show that many factors in the subsequent train of events had an influence on the inability of AONBs to withstand adverse changes, despite the enthusiasm of local councillors and staff in some areas. The actual timing of designation, without which strongly protective policies were difficult to apply in the national interest, was one of these. Urgent efforts were made to establish the National Parks. Despite some controversy over administrative arrangements, ten (Brecon Beacons, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Lake District, Northumberland, North York Moors, Peak District, Pembrokeshire Coast, Snowdonia, and Yorkshire Dales) were set up by 1957, within eight years of the Act (see Box 1.3). The Broads Authority was established under special

National Parks are designated under the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* 1949 on account of their natural beauty, the opportunities they offer for outdoor recreation and their proximity to centres of population. Their aims, as amended by the *Environment Act*, 1995, are to conserve their beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage, to promote their understanding and enjoyment by the public, and to foster the well-being of their local communities. There are eleven National Parks and equivalent areas, ranging in size from 300 sq km (The Broads, designated under special legislation) to over 2000 sq km (Lake District), mainly in upland areas of England and Wales. They cover about 10% of the two countries. Each park is administered by a National Park Authority, consisting of members appointed by local authorities in the area and by central government, with powers for management and town and country planning in the park. Central government provides 75% and the local authorities 25% of a Park's approved expenditure.

BOX 1.3

National Parks in England and Wales

BOX 1.4

**Areas of
Outstanding
Natural Beauty
in England and
Wales**

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales are designated under the 1949 Act, solely on account of their natural beauty, with the aim of conserving and enhancing it. In size, AONBs range from 16 sq km (Isles of Scilly) to over 2000 sq km (Cotswolds), and although several of them cover important upland areas, most are located more on farmland, predominantly in the southern half of England, and in coastal areas, than is the case with National Parks. AONBs cover about 13.5% of England and Wales. Most AONBs have non-statutory advisory committees, led by local authorities but including representatives of interested organisations, to co-ordinate their conservation. They are financed by local authorities and to a limited extent by government agencies.

legislation many years later. This urgency may have caused AONBs to be thought of as second best to the high profile of National Parks, although they are officially recognised as being equal to the National Parks in terms of landscape quality and the planning protection that they ought to be given – a misconception – that has taken a long time to rectify. Indeed the first AONB designation, Gower, only took place in 1956, and progress towards the present English and Welsh total of 41 was made for a long time at the rate of two or three a year (see Box 1.4). A related factor has been the comparatively low level and uncertainty of funding and, as a result, AONBs have become the ‘poor relations’ to National Parks in the family of protected landscapes. Plate 2 illustrates the location of National Parks and AONBs.

**The 1960s
and beyond: the
debate widens**

Another factor was the surge of interest during the 1960s in the role of the wider countryside. Hitherto National Parks and AONBs in England and Wales had commanded most of the National Park Commission’s attention. The wider countryside had not generally been thought to require positive attention beyond special protection from development in green belts, on good agricultural land, and in sites of scientific importance. Rural areas nevertheless were beginning to experience a different kind of pressure that could seriously threaten key resources. This was the huge increase in countryside recreation. Alerted by environmental groups, the Government responded in the 1966 White Paper ‘Leisure in the Countryside’. It also set up a review of the English and Welsh coastline, at the time when the National Trust’s ‘Enterprise Neptune’ had already begun to buy

threatened sites. A new era began, in which legislation in the *Countryside Act*, 1968, replaced the National Parks Commission with a more widely cast Countryside Commission (hereafter abbreviated to CC), and did much to encourage provision for recreation in rural areas generally. The new measures – country parks, picnic areas and other access improvements – were soon taken up by forward-looking local authorities and landowners. Strangely AONBs were not directly affected by the Act, but these, and the additional finance made available for the management of ‘Heritage Coasts’ within them, offered them some relief. Equally, the broadening approach meant that the Commission’s slender resources would be further stretched, and that local authorities might divert their own priorities more to the ‘ordinary’ countryside.

In the 1970s, however, events took a further new turn. Reports such as those of the ‘Countryside in 1970’ conferences¹¹ and the Countryside Review Committee (an inter-departmental group of government officials),¹² showed unease about lack of co-ordination in rural policy, including the relationship between agriculture and the environment. Even the very existence of single-purpose designations such as AONBs was questioned. Interestingly, the Countryside Review Committee proposed a two-tier system, in which there would be no distinction between National Parks and AONBs. A small top tier would be selected from each for rigorous conservation, and a second tier made up of the remainder of each, with important landscape and recreational value. Perhaps these ideas were too radical, at the time, to be taken further by politicians.

At the same time, more immediate concerns were being expressed about shortcomings in the National Park system and about its future administration within the new local government structure, for which preparations began in 1972. The 1974 Review of National Park Policies, chaired by Lord Sandford,¹³ and the subsequent government response, established an important principle that when the two purposes of National Parks are in conflict, the first (conservation) must prevail. Simultaneously, government funding for the Parks was substantially increased, and each Park was required to have a single Board or Committee and its own officer, and to prepare a management plan. Further new impetus was given by the creation in 1989 of the National Parks Review Panel, chaired by Professor Ron Edwards, whose report in 1991¹⁴ resulted in further modernisation of the administrative arrangements for National Parks under the *Environment Act*, 1995. This provided revised purposes for National Parks to embrace wildlife and cultural matters; and for new free-standing Boards to protect and manage each Park, including a new duty, in pursuing the primary purpose of designation, to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities.

It is likely that the whole sequence of events from the 1960s, especially the widely welcomed new arrangements for National Parks contributed to the growing concern of CC about policy for AONBs. This concern soon became shared by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) which was set up in 1990 to take over the responsibilities of CC and the former Nature Conservancy Council in that country. As will be shown in later chapters, both CC and CCW have now conducted what amounts to a major review of AONBs and proposals for their future are now being considered at government level. Meanwhile, a new countryside organisation, the Countryside Agency (CA), has been formed by merging CC with the former Rural Development Commission. CA has given these proposals its full support.

One further development of importance relating to the wider countryside was the joint work by CC and English Nature on the landscape character and wildlife resource of English rural areas as a whole. This resulted in the publication by English Nature and CC in 1996 of the 'Character of England',¹⁵ a map and descriptive summary which identifies broad areas with distinctive landscape and wildlife features, as a guide to sustainable change. The aim has been to increase understanding of scenic and ecological qualities, rather than act as an additional layer of countryside designation (the implications of this for designated areas are considered later). A few planning authorities had already been using much the same approach on a county or district scale as a basis for rural policies.

Scotland

Although this book is primarily concerned with the AONBs of England and Wales, reference needs to be made to protected areas in Scotland and Northern Ireland, since experience of their status and conservation arrangements has relevance to the future of AONBs and other protected areas. As with England and Wales the establishment of protected landscapes in Scotland's superb countryside also has a long and complicated history. In 1945, the Report on National Parks and the Conservation of Nature in Scotland (the Ramsay Committee, the Scottish equivalent of Hobhouse)¹⁶ had recommended five areas for designation as National Parks. These included Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, Ben Nevis and Glencoe, and the Cairngorms, and were to become publicly owned. Ramsay's proposals were rejected on account of opposition from landowners and because of fears that they would prejudice efforts to revitalise the Highland economy. However, some vestige of national interest in these areas was retained by giving them added planning control in order to prevent unsuitable development.

Debate on the need for national parks continued, however. The Countryside Commission for Scotland, formed in 1967, published a

report in 1974¹⁷ recommending a park system which was designed to meet strategic objectives of countryside recreation and conservation in a way better suited to the form of government and land ownership in Scotland. This, having been accepted by government, needed to be followed up by the selection of areas with special landscape conservation requirements, and in 1978 the Commission completed a study which listed forty areas of outstanding scenic interest as part of the country's national heritage. These were widely distributed in the Highlands and Islands, and south to the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, and the majority were not under severe recreational pressure. They included Ramsay's five priority and three reserve locations. All 40 were subsequently designated by the Secretary of State for Scotland, under the *Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act, 1972*, as National Scenic Areas (NSAs), which gave them special planning protection but did not make any positive provision for conservation or recreation, nor for the co-ordination of management, nor for their administration. These vary in size from 9 sq km (St Kilda, a World Heritage Site) to nearly 1500 sq km (Wester Ross), and they cover about 12 per cent of the land and water area of Scotland. They are shown on the map in Plate 2.

It is clear that the controversies over Scotland's protected areas have resulted in a weak conservation regime. Scottish Natural Heritage, set up in 1992 to combine the roles of the Scottish Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council in Scotland, is now taking steps to strengthen it. These are contained in two advice papers on National Parks and NSAs submitted to government in 1999 following extensive consultation.¹⁸ These envisage modest strengthening of the NSA designation, with an enhanced role and responsibilities for local authorities to manage them, and the establishment of National Parks, initially in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and in the Cairngorms. Each National Park would have an independent National Park body, with a majority of local representation, to enhance the natural and cultural heritage and provide for their enjoyment, while meeting the social and economic development aspirations of local communities. It is not intended that they should take extensive powers from existing bodies, including the local planning authorities. As is shown in Chapter 4, these proposals have a bearing on the future range of responsibilities for management and the form of organisation in other protected landscapes.

There are no national parks, as such, in Northern Ireland; the concept aroused too much opposition. It has, however, been a comparatively straight forward move to designate protected landscapes in the

Northern Ireland