



Gloucestershire
Campaign to Protect Rural England

THE FOREST OF DEAN

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty?

You might be surprised to discover it's not...
But **SHOULDN'T IT BE?**



The Forest of Dean

Virtually everyone who visits the Forest of Dean for the first time comes away wondering why they have never been there before. With its superb rural landscapes, plants and animals, unique heritage and culture, its incredible geology and tranquillity, this is one of England's gems, often overlooked because it's off the beaten track.

There is a long history of attempts to gain national recognition for the special character and qualities of much of the Forest of Dean area, and in particular to see more parts designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is exactly what it says it is: an outstanding landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so precious that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them.

They are designated in recognition of their national importance and to ensure that their character and qualities are protected for all to enjoy.

They are living, working landscapes, much loved and valued by all who enjoy them. They are powerful symbols of our national pride: places of motivation, inheritance, excitement, pleasure and profit (National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty).

The concept of AONBs (and National Parks) was enshrined in legislation in the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. From the earliest days the intention was that the Wye Valley and the Forest of Dean should be designated as an AONB but only the Wye Valley was taken forward.

It is now time to secure national recognition of the outstanding landscape and distinctive character of the Forest of Dean area and to encourage the responsible body, now Natural England, to proceed with AONB designation, completing a process begun over 80 years ago when the Forest of Dean was first identified as a worthy candidate.



The heart of the Forest of Dean



What difference would designation make?

AONBs are designated for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of a landscape (which includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries). They are designated to protect permanently against development that would damage their special qualities, conserving a number of the finest landscapes in England for the nation's benefit (Natural England).



The intention is not to preserve an AONB “in aspic”, but to recognise its nationally important environmental quality and to promote its socio-economic development in a sustainable way. The National Planning Policy Framework supports this, saying: *‘Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues’; and that ‘Planning permission should be refused for major developments other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest’.*

There is an emphasis on small-scale development sensitive to its location, meeting the needs of the local community, and there is evidence that designation is good for business.

AONB status would not stop the Local Authority pursuing its policies, but give it more power to ensure the District is planned and managed in a sustainable manner. The Forest of Dean District Council's Local Plan Core Strategy already notes that a new Forest of Dean AONB is a possibility and that there should be no conflict with its policies.

As in the case of the existing Wye Valley and Malvern Hills AONBs, commitments to delivering AONB objectives would be through a partnership of member representatives on an AONB Committee. A statutory AONB Management Plan would be significant because it would set out a shared vision for the area.

Already, the adopted Core Strategy policy is worded around accommodating small-scale sustainable development necessary to support the local economy and local communities in a way that recognises, respects, and is compatible with, the high environmental qualities of the area.

While major industrial development or housing development in excess of local needs would be incompatible with AONB designation, as would new large-scale minerals extraction, designation would not preclude continued small scale quarrying of building stone for local need or freeminers' rights. As part of the heritage and culture of the District both would continue to be respected and encouraged, as would the Dean's other traditions, rights and privileges.

AONB status for the Forest of Dean should bring a range of benefits, including:

- **a better looked after environment;**
- **wider recognition of the special qualities of the area;**
- **A nationally recognised Forest of Dean marketing brand;**
- **longer staying visitors and more tourism;**
- **highly skilled, small businesses encouraged to move to the area by a quality environment, bringing wider employment opportunities;**
- **greater prosperity bringing increased leisure opportunities and more vibrancy;**
- **greater opportunities to tap external funding, for example through the Heritage Lottery Fund.**

So what’s so special about the Forest of Dean area?

In his Foreword to the 1939 Wye Valley and Royal Forest of Dean Official Guide, the Rt Hon. Viscount Bledisloe wrote “Indeed, it may be confidently asserted that there is no locality throughout the whole of the United Kingdom which combines within so small a compass such a variety of scenic charm and archaeological treasure, together with a rich feast for the student of natural history in its various branches. Within the heart of this tourist’s Elysium are to be seen the sylvan glades of the Royal Forest where King John was wont to hunt the stag, the ancient Court of Verderers founded by King Canute the Dane which still sits in the old Court Room at the Speech House, the picturesque Scowles where 1,500 years ago the Roman Invaders worked iron ore for their forest forges and Symonds Yat, the “Pisgah” of the West Country, from which five Counties can be discerned across the numerous windings of Britain’s most lovely river.” These qualities still prevail.

Landscape Character

Of the 526 square kilometre area of Forest of Dean District about one quarter is forested. With the exception of the four market towns and the villages, virtually all the remainder is agricultural land, some arable and horticultural but the majority pasture, farmed as grazing land, interspersed with ancient orchards, and most with traditional or ancient field hedges.

The forested land is a mixture of forest and “forest waste”. It contains more than 20 million trees, 4 million of them, oaks. It includes one of England’s few remaining ancient royal forests, of which over 110 square kilometres is woodland managed by the Forestry Commission, much of it ancient woodland.

The woodland cover is almost equally broadleaf and conifer, but over time the aim is a majority of broadleaf.

The landscape of the District is diverse and high quality. This has been confirmed in two reports by Landscape Design Associates - Forest of Dean District Landscape Character Assessment, 2002: and Forest of Dean District Landscape Strategy, 2004.

The 2002 report identified 15 types of landscape containing within them 42 distinct landscape areas, the key characteristics of each being described together with how they related to the overall landscape and how it had evolved.

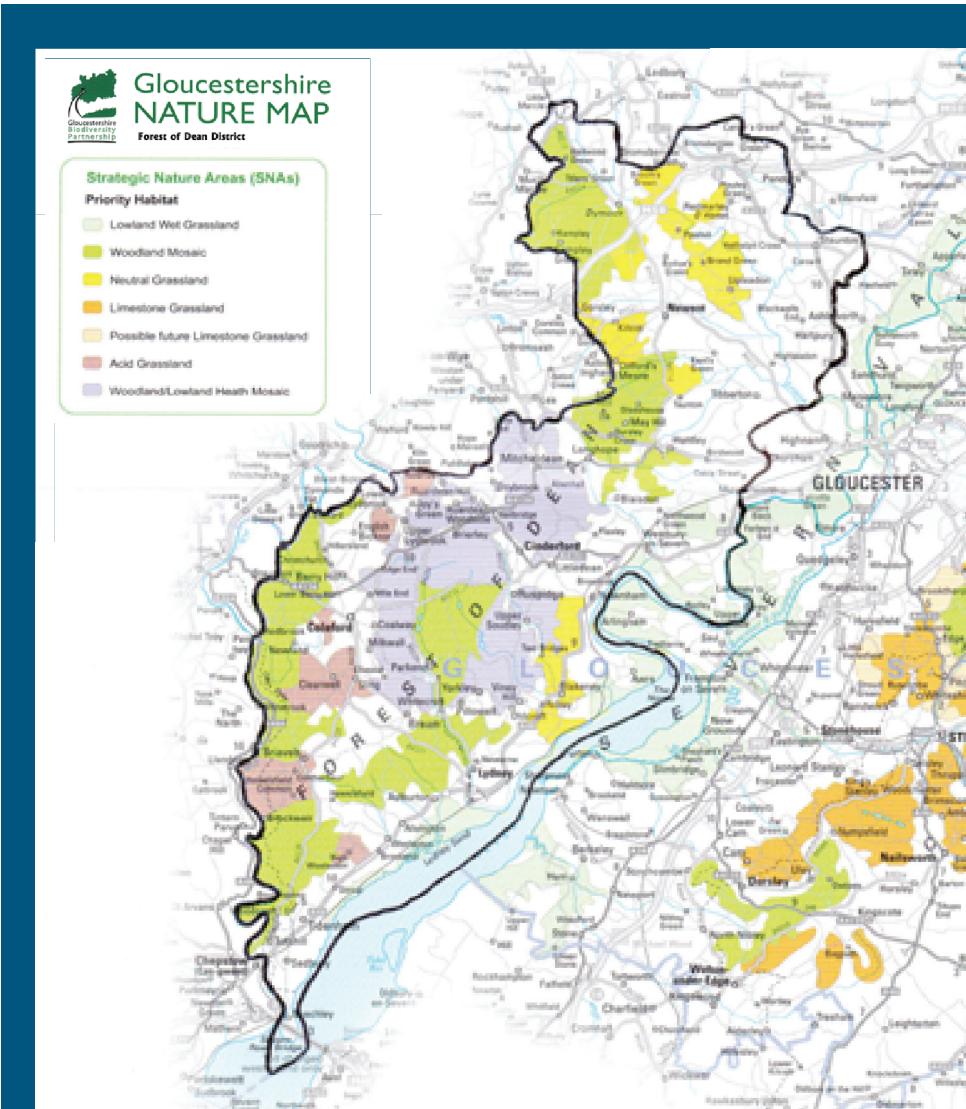
It also took account of the way people have written about, painted and experienced the landscape and set out to show how and where its special qualities and distinctive features occur.

Based upon the 2002 report, the 2004 Landscape Strategy invited the reader to consider ways in which the information might be used. Important to the AONB debate, the landscape strategy provided an overview of the forces for change affecting the landscape and the implications of those changes on the existing landscape character.

Biodiversity

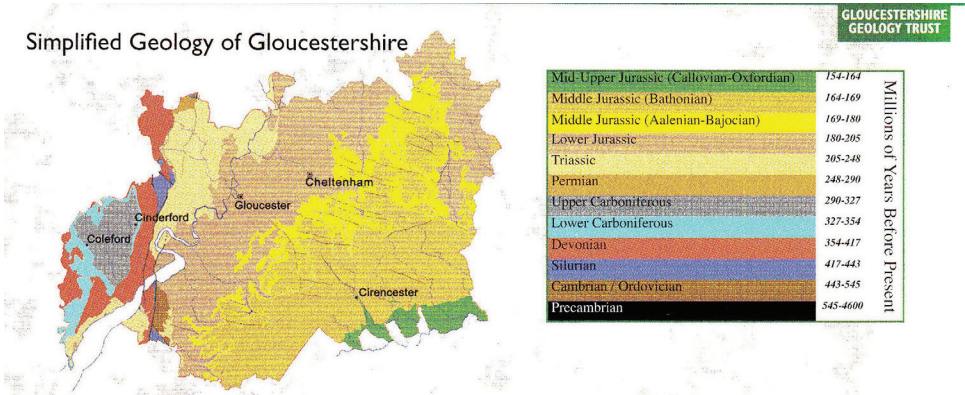
The 2008 Gloucestershire Nature Map (right) illustrates the biodiversity richness of the Forest of Dean District. Over two thirds of the District has been identified as Priority Habitat Strategic Nature Areas, extending well beyond the forested areas of the Dean. Nearly a third of Gloucestershire’s biodiversity Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are in the Forest of Dean District, including a number of areas of European significance: the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Bat Sites SAC, Walmore Common SPA, the Severn Estuary SPA and the Wye Valley Woodlands SAC. Walmore Common and the Severn Estuary SPA are also RAMSAR sites.

Many SSSIs are designated for their geological or earth heritage interest. They include natural outcrops, quarries and underground features, which support both fauna and flora: including populations of Horseshoe Bats and other bat species which use the Forest of Dean’s mine workings and caves as winter hibernation sites, and maternity roost sites. Many of these SSSIs now form part of the Lower Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Bat SAC.



Geodiversity

Simplified Geology of Gloucestershire



Reproduced with acknowledgements to Gloucestershire Geology Trust

Visible in the District is the oldest and youngest geology in Gloucestershire and in most of England. Examples are Pre-Cambrian and Lower Palaeozoic rocks, Cambrian shales, Ordovician dolerite intrusions and Silurian limestones and shales. Also present are Permo-Triassic rocks and towards the Severn fossil-rich Jurassic rocks are visible overlaid with Cretaceous rocks, and more recent Quaternary sediments. In the wetland Walmore Common area there is the lowest lying land in Gloucestershire, which contains the largest quantity of peat in the County, and in places its lay down is on-going.

This varied geology has greatly influenced the landscape, history, culture and economy of the area. There is a long history of quarrying and mining for limestone, coal and iron ore.

Defining a boundary

Precise boundaries can only be determined through discussion between Natural England, the District Council and other interested parties, after the principle of designation has been agreed. CPRE, working alongside Friends of the Forest and Friends of the Earth, has already submitted a draft outline map of possible boundaries for a new Forest of Dean AONB. This map shows the four Forest of Dean market towns excluded from the proposed designated area. This is intentional and would allow a continuing focus on development in these areas in accordance with the Forest of Dean Core Strategy and enable the towns to act as ‘gateways’ to the AONB; in the same way that the Cotswolds AONB excludes Stroud, Cirencester and Dursley, and the Wye Valley AONB excludes Monmouth.



In preparing this outline map, there has been full consideration of the extent of the Statutory Forest, the Hundred of St Briavels, land use change since the Hobhouse Report, and the relationship with the Wye Valley AONB.

The Statutory Forest is simply an area within the boundary of the Forest of Dean defined by a perambulation in 1834 as a consequence of the 1831 Dean Forest Commission Act. It contains trees and “forest waste”. Most of the Statutory Forest is under the control of the Forestry Commission, but there is also private and District Council owned land within the area. It does not encompass the contiguous and other forested land within the District, nor is it an identified landscape character type. It should not therefore be considered as a potential boundary.

The history so far

The Forest of Dean area and the Wye Valley have long been recognised for high quality landscapes, wildlife richness and unique cultural heritage. Writers and artists have celebrated these qualities since the eighteenth century, and official concerns about the area’s future well-being were expressed at some length in the 1920s.

Set up by the first Labour government, the Addison Committee looked at the feasibility of creating National Parks in Britain with a view “to the preservation of natural characteristics, including flora and fauna, and for the improvement of recreational facilities for the people.” Addison duly recommended the creation of National Parks in his 1931 report and commented favourably on making the Dean and Wye Valley area a National Park.

References were made to the Wye Valley Regional Planning Scheme then in preparation and to the Forestry Commission’s management of the Forest, but no National Parks were created at that time due to the economic climate. However, the Forest of Dean’s attributes were formally recognised in 1938 when 10,700 ha controlled by the Forestry Commission were established as the first National Forest Park in England

“in the belief that where fine areas of mountain and other open country had been acquired in connection with the planting of new forests, the whole (including areas for grazing) should be open for public enjoyment.”

Called the Dean Forest and Wye Valley Forest Park, most of the designated Dean Forest area was within the 1830s markers of the Statutory Forest, but it also included Tidenham Chase, High Meadow, Tintern Forest and other neighbouring woodlands together with all common grazings.

While the Hundred of St Briavels might be considered as a possible starting point for an AONB boundary, it is simply a mediaeval title to an area of land within the District, substantially larger than the Statutory Forest, that was an administrative sub-division of the shire.

The first map for a Forest of Dean AONB was drawn-up when large-scale coal mining and other heavy industries were still operating in the area. The heavy industry has largely gone and in many ways elements of the landscape are now in better heart. Also, at that time little attention was given to the merits of the estuarine strip.

More recent landscape studies have demonstrated the high landscape qualities of these lands, from Purton to the Forest of Dean District boundary north of Westbury-on-Severn.

Finally, there is the issue of whether it would be better to consider an extended Wye Valley AONB or a new Forest of Dean AONB. There could be significant complications in a larger Wye Valley AONB, not least the involvement of the Welsh government. Conversely, a new Forest of Dean AONB would be wholly within one District Council area suggesting that designation under this arrangement would be more easily achieved, and would be a more satisfactory and cost effective approach.

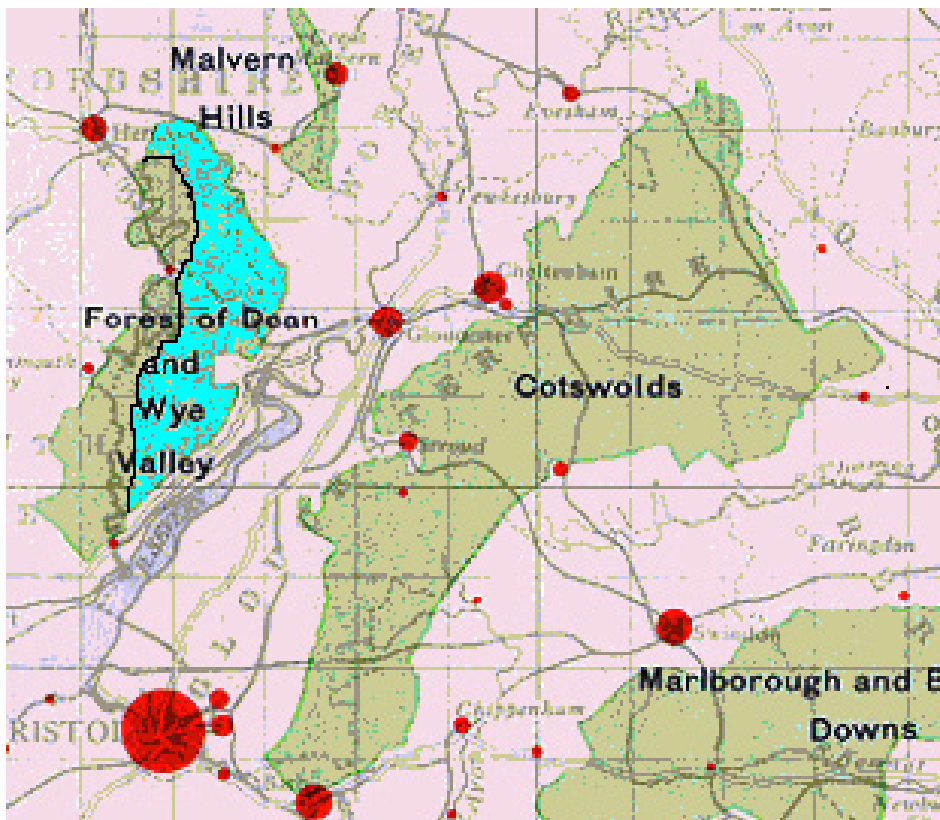


May Hill: an iconic Gloucestershire landmark

Thought was given to looking after England’s finest countryside immediately after the second world war when a series of reports led to legislation in 1949 in the form of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and powers to designate National Parks and AONBs.

The Dower Report of 1945 sketched out the concept of National Parks and AONBs, and the Hobhouse Committee Report of 1947 fleshed out the topic. Both identified the Forest of Dean as an area meriting protection, and the Hobhouse Committee report mapped a 232 square mile (601 sq kilometre) area of the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley as of national significance,

A case for National Park designation was first made in 1930 in evidence to the Addison Committee.



Area of Forest of Dean recommended for AONB designation but not included in the Wye Valley AONB. Hobhouse Committee 1947

In 1959 the National Parks Commission started its consideration of a possible Forest of Dean and Wye Valley AONB based on the Hobhouse recommendations, although it was not until nearly ten years later that the Commission and the then local authorities drew up boundaries. The timing closely followed the cessation of National Coal Board mining in the Dean, so it seems for socio-political reasons the local authorities' preferred boundary excluded the Forest of Dean and only the Wye Valley part was designated.

The only official reason given at the time for not designating the Forest of Dean part was that the local authorities had concluded that the Forest of Dean formed a distinct landscape separate from the Wye Valley. More significantly, it was claimed that AONB designation was not necessary because the Forestry Commission would have adequate powers for meeting amenity and recreation needs under the impending Countryside Act of 1968. This reason was short-sighted. It lacked credibility, because much of the area in the Forest of Dean identified by the Hobhouse Committee was farmland and not under the Forestry Commission's management.

Since then, many have continued to argue that the Forest of Dean area should be designated formally to recognise its national landscape significance and provide safeguards against inappropriate development. Matters came to a head in 1996 when the draft Minerals Plan for Gloucestershire included parts of the Forest as potential major new quarrying areas and there were concerns about the possible return of large scale opencast mining. 10,000 people signed a petition against these moves and during the 1997 general election campaign, the Labour Party stated it would "offer the Forest of Dean a new 'custom-built' status appropriate to its unique history".

In 1998 the new Labour Government asked the Countryside Commission to make recommendations as to how this was to be achieved. A report for the Countryside Commission *Forest of Dean - Review of Special Status* confirmed in 1999 that the Forest of Dean District fully met the criteria for AONB designation. It recommended "an enhanced AONB", to meet the social and economic needs of the area, and the Forest of Dean District Council gave their full support to the recommendation. By 1999 the Countryside Agency had replaced the Countryside Commission, and in response to the threat of major new quarrying, the Agency advised Gloucestershire County Council to regard the Forest of Dean as if it were an AONB for the purpose of the County's Minerals Local Plan Inquiry.

But in 2000, the Countryside Agency deferred a decision on designation in favour of a time limited Integrated Rural Development programme of small scale projects.

That same year the status of AONBs was enhanced by provisions in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and it became clear that designation of the Forest of Dean area as an AONB should now be able to provide all that the 'custom built' status promised by the Labour Party in 1997 could have achieved.

Deferring a decision on designation was greeted with dismay in the local community and in 2003 a petition of 7000 signatures in support of a Forest of Dean AONB was handed to the Chairman of the Countryside Agency.

There was ministerial support for early action and in 2005 the Minister with responsibility for AONBs, the Rt Hon Alun Michael MP, wrote to the Countryside Agency saying "The question of AONB designation does not need to be linked to the outcome of the Integrated Rural Development programme so I feel that the possible designation of the Forest should now be considered without delay."

In 2007 Forest of Dean District Council looked again at AONB designation for its area. It consulted widely and reported favourably on designation; and in 2008, for the second time, Forest of Dean District Council gave their support to AONB designation.

Responsibility for designation now rests with Natural England, which has been reviewing its strategy on designations. Natural England has developed strict criteria for considering boundary changes to National Parks and AONBs and for any new designations. Its designation strategy was published in July 2012, and the Forest of Dean remains on a long list of areas for possible future designation.

Now it is the time to act

What happens next?

CPRE Gloucestershire has prepared this leaflet in order that the community can understand and get involved with the campaign to achieve AONB status for the Forest of Dean. Please visit our website: www.cpreglos.org.uk for more information and help us succeed in this campaign.



Gloucestershire
Campaign to Protect Rural England

Standing up for your countryside.
We campaign for a beautiful and living
countryside. We work to protect, promote and
enhance our towns and countryside to make
them better places to live, work and enjoy,
and to ensure the countryside is protected for
now and future generations.

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