

# **WILD AND FREE**

**Fifty Years  
of the  
Dartmoor  
National  
Park**



**A half-century celebration of  
Dartmoor's designation as a  
National Park**

# WILD AND FREE

## Fifty Years of the Dartmoor National Park

**“National Parks are not just a nice but slightly unnecessary and expendable luxury for a fortunate few. They are in fact a vital provision for a very real human need.”**

*Sylvia Sayer, 1970*

2001 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Dartmoor's designation as a National Park, as well as the 50th anniversary of the post-war reformation of the Dartmoor Preservation Association under the chairmanship of Sylvia Sayer. The DPA has produced this little booklet to mark these important occasions, inviting personal views from several contributors who have an interest in Dartmoor. We have also looked back through our own archives to see how the association regarded the creation of the Dartmoor National Park.

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DPA Publication Number 14 ISBN Number 0953 87531 X

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## 50 years of the Dartmoor National Park

*Vicki Elcoate, Director of the Council of National Parks, examines the history of the national park movement and explains why areas like Dartmoor were designated for special conservation status.*

1999 was the 50th anniversary of the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act*, which set up the National Parks, now followed by a year in which we celebrate the designation of the first four National Parks. Dartmoor, Snowdonia, the Lake District and Peak District will be looking at the benefits of designation and what National Park status has to offer for the future. It is a time for reflection but not for complacency: there are many challenges ahead.

Dartmoor is one of the eleven National Parks in England and Wales, which cover 10% of the land area. They are a nationally important recreational resource attracting approximately 100 million visitors a year. They were given this designation because these special areas were felt to be an important part of the nation's heritage, that should be available to everyone to enjoy, and that should be safeguarded for future generations.

Before the Parks were designated, the idea of them was simple: *"there can be few national purposes which, at so modest a cost, offer so large a prospect of health-giving happiness for the people"*, wrote John Dower, one of the founding parents of the National Parks movement in the UK. That essential idea is unchanged. It is still a delight and undoubtedly healthy to stride across Dartmoor, or potter around the fells, valleys, coasts and waterways of other National Parks.

But the challenge of conserving a designated beautiful area for all time did not escape the founding parents either. Many of their concerns seem relevant today:

*"Today four out of every five are living in urban communities, and this has resulted in an almost complete separation of town and country...Yet with the increasing nervous strain of life it makes it all the more necessary that we should be able to enjoy the peace and spiritual refreshment which only contact with nature can give..."* (This from the Minister for Town and Country Planning in 1949).

The National Parks were designated in order to protect these beautiful areas for the benefit of the nation, yet now, as fifty years ago, they continue to be under threat. Indeed, new and subtler problems have been added to those of long-standing concern.

John Dower's 1945 report lists out the pressures then on National Parks: conifer planting, the military ranges and china clay workings on Dartmoor, limestone extraction in the Peak District, ugly pole and pylon lines and so on. Interestingly back then farming was seen as the answer to National Park conservation, rather than the cause of some of their problems, and motoring was regarded as being unlikely to



cause "difference of opinion". Those who have dealt with traffic management on Dartmoor or in any other National Park might find the latter view less than prescient.

But over the years there have been enormous successes in meeting some of these challenges: development which enhances the environment; breathing new life into rural economies and finding new ways for people to enjoy the countryside without harming the natural resource. The Government wants National Parks to be role models for sustainable development. The complexity of managing the Parks is as challenging as ever and the stakes are even higher now than when the Parks were first designated. The night time satellite photo of England which shows the Peak District - hemmed in by half the population - as a dark hole is a testament to the success of the National Park designation in conserving tranquillity, wildness and remoteness.

The Standing Committee on National Parks was set up in 1936 by organizations who wanted National Parks set up - the Council for National Parks emerged from the committee in 1977. It is an umbrella body for 45 other organizations, including the Dartmoor Preservation Association, with an interest in National Parks. CNP has been successful at attracting attention to National Parks and campaigning for their protection, by political lobbying, using the planning system and keeping the media spotlight on important issues.

The mountaineer Sir Chris Bonington was CNP's President during the 50th anniversary of the original legislation. He had three wishes:

**new National Parks in the South Downs and New Forest**  
*(the process of designation is now well under way)*

**a 10 mph speed limit on Lake Windermere**  
*(this is now being introduced)*

and

**no extensions to china clay working on Dartmoor.**

The 50th anniversary of the Dartmoor National Park would be the perfect time for the companies involved in plans to extend china clay working on Dartmoor to give up their plans as a gift to the nation. National Parks were originally seen as a gift to the returning servicemen and women from the Second World War - part of the better world of postwar reconstruction. There could be no better gift to future generations than leaving our National Parks in good heart - as beautiful landscapes where we can wander at will.

## 1951 – a DPA View

*So how did the DPA regard the creation of the Dartmoor National Park in those early days after 1951? Kate Ashbrook sifts through contemporary DPA Newsletters to find out.*

Dartmoor has always had to struggle, despite its national park status. In the second Newsletter (August 1951) of the reborn, post-war DPA, we read of the joy that Dartmoor is to become a National Park, but the concern that its administration could negate the benefit of Park status: 'One most essential point to watch is the status of the new Dartmoor Park Committee of the County Council. It must, to do its work effectively, be a *separate Committee answerable only to the County Council and the National Parks Commission*; it must NOT be a mere Sub-Committee of the County Planning Committee, as the Dartmoor Sub-Committee has been in the past (with occasional unfortunate reversals of its decisions by the County Planning Committee, many of whose members know little about Dartmoor). The whole planning administration of Dartmoor hinges on this point, which is of far more importance than at first sight it may appear to be.'

However, the next Newsletter (December 1951) was more hopeful: 'Dartmoor was confirmed a National Park on 30th October ... It does now seem, however, most fortunately for Dartmoor that the new Committee is likely to be given the status of a separate Committee of the County council, and will not be merely a sub-committee of the Planning Committee. If this status is confirmed, it will be due to the strenuous efforts and firm attitude of the National Parks Commission, who, although no more than an advisory body (thanks to Mr Silkin's jealous sabotage of the National Parks Act), have wielded their advice in a manner very just and compelling.'

But by March 1952 (Newsletter no 4) there was concern about the membership of the new committee: 'On 18th January the names of the members of the new Dartmoor National Park Committee were published in the local press. Much has been said in the press and in Parliament as to the manner in which the Minister so strangely (and in direct contravention of his party's declared policy on national parks) permitted the Devon County Council to influence his selection of the six "nationally appointed" members, in addition to its own twelve County Council nominees; and his reply to a question in the House seemed to indicate only too clearly that at present his main objective is not so much the establishment of a genuine Dartmoor National Park as the establishment of harmonious relations between his own department and the County Council. As a result, there are grievous omissions from the membership of the Committee, and some of the most notable and knowledgeable Dartmoor experts have been left out altogether.'



And six months later, we learn from Newsletter no 6:

'On 17th July, the Devon County Council, who at present, most disastrously, control the Dartmoor "National" Park, voted overwhelmingly in favour of giving immediate planning permission to the BBC to site a 750-ft steel mast and buildings on North Hessary Tor... Observers in the gallery at that Council meeting witnessed an extraordinary exhibition. Before there had been any discussion at all there were bawls of "Vote", and when the Clerk rose to read the letter from the National Parks Commission there was a cry of "Cut it short!" Twelve councillors stood out for reason and common sense, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Thus is the Dartmoor National Park administered.'

However, later in the same newsletter there is the comment that this demonstrates what is bound to happen when a local authority is given complete control over a national park, but that at least it now happened in public and the committee meetings are reported in the press. And 'the existence of the National Parks Act means the chance that one day the Act may be amended. Dartmoor is not the only National Park to be struggling along against impossible administrative odds; the Lake District and Snowdonia, and to a lesser degree the Peak, are in the same boat, and many have been the representations to the Minister both in and out of Parliament ... but the Minister is busy building houses, and does not want to "upset" the local authorities - so the farce goes on. In time, however, amendment of the Act will become unavoidable. Then, perhaps Dartmoor will have its own Planning Officer and staff, and its own finances ... and a committee composed *equally* of Dartmoor experts and county councillors - and it will be a National Park in fact as well as in name.'

The DPA showed foresight, although there was a long wait. At last, in 1997, the national park did win its own staff and finances, but sadly the committee is not yet composed as the DPA wished 50 years ago, and wishes now. It is still dominated by local authorities rather than representatives of the national view, to Dartmoor's detriment.



## Dartmoor – an Exile's Tale

*Many people have fallen under the spell of Dartmoor. Some live amidst the moorland hills or nearby in the Westcountry. Others are exiles, living further away. To them a visit to the Moor is a special occasion, undertaken as often as possible and always with a sense of real joy. **Hugh Farrer**, Chairman of the DPA London and South-East Group, is a passionate Dartmoor enthusiast.*

Just last week a friend turned to me and said "Why do you visit Dartmoor and what does it mean to you, when you live so far away in the south east?" Well, I replied that my love for the Moor goes back more than thirty years to my first discovery of Dartmoor. At that time a friend and I used to go away for walking weekends to various scenic areas throughout England. We had been to most of the popular places and wanted to see somewhere new. One of us suggested Dartmoor. Neither of us had been there and when we saw a copy of the old One-Inch to One-Mile Ordnance Survey map, as it was in those days, the area beckoned.

Planning did not take long. We always stayed at youth hostels and were keen walkers. In those days there was a hostel at Tavistock and another at Gidleigh and the Moor lay in between. That was it, then. We would walk across the Moor from Tavistock to Gidleigh and see something new.

Two weeks later we set forth from Tavistock after a hearty breakfast and with a packed lunch and a flask of coffee in our rucksack to sustain us later in the day. We were full of confidence and had a great feeling of well being about our trek. As the day wore on and the sun became more powerful, we began to realize the extent of the distance that we had committed ourselves to. The terrain seemed unyielding and as we continued we became quite tired. When Gidleigh came at last into sight, both of us realized that we had rather overreached ourselves. We ached all over.

At the hostel we enjoyed a satisfying meal and soon afterwards my companion settled into an easy chair. "Come on," I said, "let's have a gentle walk to the pub and a drink to finish the day." (Quite some distance actually, but I did not reveal that!) "Oh no!" was the reply. "No! I can't even lift myself out of this chair. I am exhausted!"

Back home, several days later, I asked what he had thought of the visit now it was all over and he had regained the use of his body without the accompanying and numerous aches and pains. "Would you go again?" I asked. He replied: "No. It was just a barren desolate waste, a wilderness with nothing to see. I really would not wish to go again."

I pondered his comments carefully and thought to myself, no, that is not the case, that land was unique. I had never seen anything like it before. As we traversed the Moor I saw piles of stones on the riverbanks and wondered how they had come into being. I noticed the rugged rock formations on the summits of the hills and was impressed by the virgin beauty of the river valleys. Beyond anything else I sensed an atmosphere, the strange alluring atmosphere of a place with a deep sense of history. I



did not know it at the time but I had been hooked, and Dartmoor was calling me to return.

Convinced that there was very much more to see and learn I returned as soon as possible. This time I followed the East Dart north from Postbridge. Hartland Tor rose to the east and where the river suddenly turns to the west I found myself looking at what the Ordnance Survey map called a Beehive Hut. It is in fact a tinner's cache, a store for tools and ore, but I did not know that at the time. Continuing north and following the Lade Hill Brook, the Grey Wethers stone circles were reached. I was profoundly impressed with the sight before me and stood amazed to see stones that had first been erected in the Bronze Age, perhaps 4000 years before. The stones were predominant in a vast plane. Sittaford Tor was to the west and Fernworthy to the east. As I remained there I could sense the moving atmosphere of the circles' vicinity and wondered at the purpose of this very special place.

I returned that evening to my accommodation convinced that I had found a landscape that required much more exploration and study. I began to purchase books on the history and topography of Dartmoor and once I started reading these I was captured by the magic of the area, becoming committed to regular visits of investigation and research. Thus began an interest in which I am very active to this day.

Over the years I read the classic works on Dartmoor by Crossing, Worth, Hemery etc., and armed with much new information I would set off across the Moor to visit the areas and objects that I had read about. I learnt that Fox Tor Mire was the inspiration for Grimpen Mire in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. On my way there I stopped to admire the medieval Nun's Cross, erected so many centuries before. Nearby, I found the remains of the 19th century Whiteworks Mine with its associated industrial archaeology. A very good example of a whim platform with its pivot stone still in situ and a tramway embankment survives. Not far away is the site of the large water wheel once used to power the ore stamping machine at the mine. Soon after I was told of the novels of Eden Phillpotts which have so many moorland settings and I eagerly collected these from second hand bookshops on my now frequent visits.

Since the long ago days of my first journey to Dartmoor, I have continued to explore every quarter. I very quickly realized that the more discoveries you make, the more there is to be learned. If you study Dartmoor for a lifetime you are only just scratching the surface of its long history.

As I said to my friend the other week, you can only really learn about Dartmoor, its history and people, by making frequent visits to the place. He said he was interested and I agreed to make the arrangements, though I think we will start with something a little less ambitious than a trek from Tavistock to Gidleigh. But I will show him something of the best of the scenery and archaeology of wonderful Dartmoor.

## The Status of Dartmoor as a National Park

*John Weir is a longstanding member of the DPA executive committee and a Dartmoor resident. He has a considerable interest in the philosophy behind Dartmoor's National Park status.*

It is easy to be immersed in Dartmoor – its moorland grasses and heather, rolling hills, rocky slopes, waters, rain, mist, woods, wildlife, culture and people. Equally, it is easy for Dartmoor to become immersed in our lives, not only for its thirty three thousand residents, including a thousand plus farmers, not only for others who work here, but also for visitors. Even if we take the minimum estimate of visitor numbers, in just the last ten years some 33 million visits have been made (although likely to be significantly greater than this figure); that alone is some 33 million individual experiences, responses and memories.

My twenty-four years (so far) on Dartmoor: without thinking too hard, what comes to mind? My first encounter of a pony drift, my first walk down the road in Chagford passing Endecott House; cloud shifts, and the whale-backs of Cosdon and Great Nodden; my repeated sightings of the ring ouzel which follows and talks to me as I venture down Steeperton Gorge; midnight lambing; the archaeological revealing of a Walkham Valley tin mill; parish council meetings; Peter Hamilton-Leggett's personal realisation of *The Dartmoor Bibliography*, Peter Randall-Page's sculpture in Whiddon Deer Park; severe storm damage in Halstock Woods; encounters with brown trout in the West Dart River; otters in the Teign valley; Wandsworth eleven year olds running over Haytor Down; coppicing in Whiddon Scrubbs, Chris Chapman's photography; the Guild of St Lawrence and the Dartmoor Museum Association and their commitment to properties and collections in their care; the buzzard I saw this morning... These are much more than memories. They are also more than pieces of Dartmoor and its life; whilst each is distinct they collectively add to a whole.

Dartmoor, and its mosaic of uses, interests and diversity, constantly adds to our quality of life but what do we add in return, not just as individuals but as society as a whole? Dartmoor lies in a new century, a new millennium. 2001 is the fiftieth anniversary of Dartmoor as a National Park - Dartmoor in modern times, in a modern world, evolving and adapting whilst retaining its special qualities. Sounds fine, but certainly not easy to achieve. The last 50 years have been no easy ride. Who would have predicted, in 1951, that people today could talk on the following lines:

*"I can traverse the northern foothills of Dartmoor in the comfort of a car at 60mph. Now that's an amazing road, split level in places, extensive views, helps to avoid the town and those traffic jams."*

(Okehampton bypass 1988: permanent)

*"An incongruous sheet of water in the moorland landscape, and the concrete dam doesn't inspire...."*

(Avon Dam Reservoir completed 1957; and Meldon Reservoir completed 1972: permanent)



*"On some days you can walk across this area to the sources of many of Devon's rivers but not today, or the next ... A two hundred year history is likely to continue for a long while yet."*

(Live firing, Okehampton, Merrivale and Willsworthy Range Danger Areas: on-going)

*"This was a farm until very recently; it is now sold, the family gone, but still, it is a great place to live for someone."*

(Declining farm incomes: on-going)

*"A good place to swing a golf club over to the eighteenth."*

(Golf course, on former farmland, Teign valley: permanent)

*"National Park Rangers removed almost 600 bags of litter and 30 trailer loads of fly-tipped rubbish in the last year".*

(Litter problems; on-going)

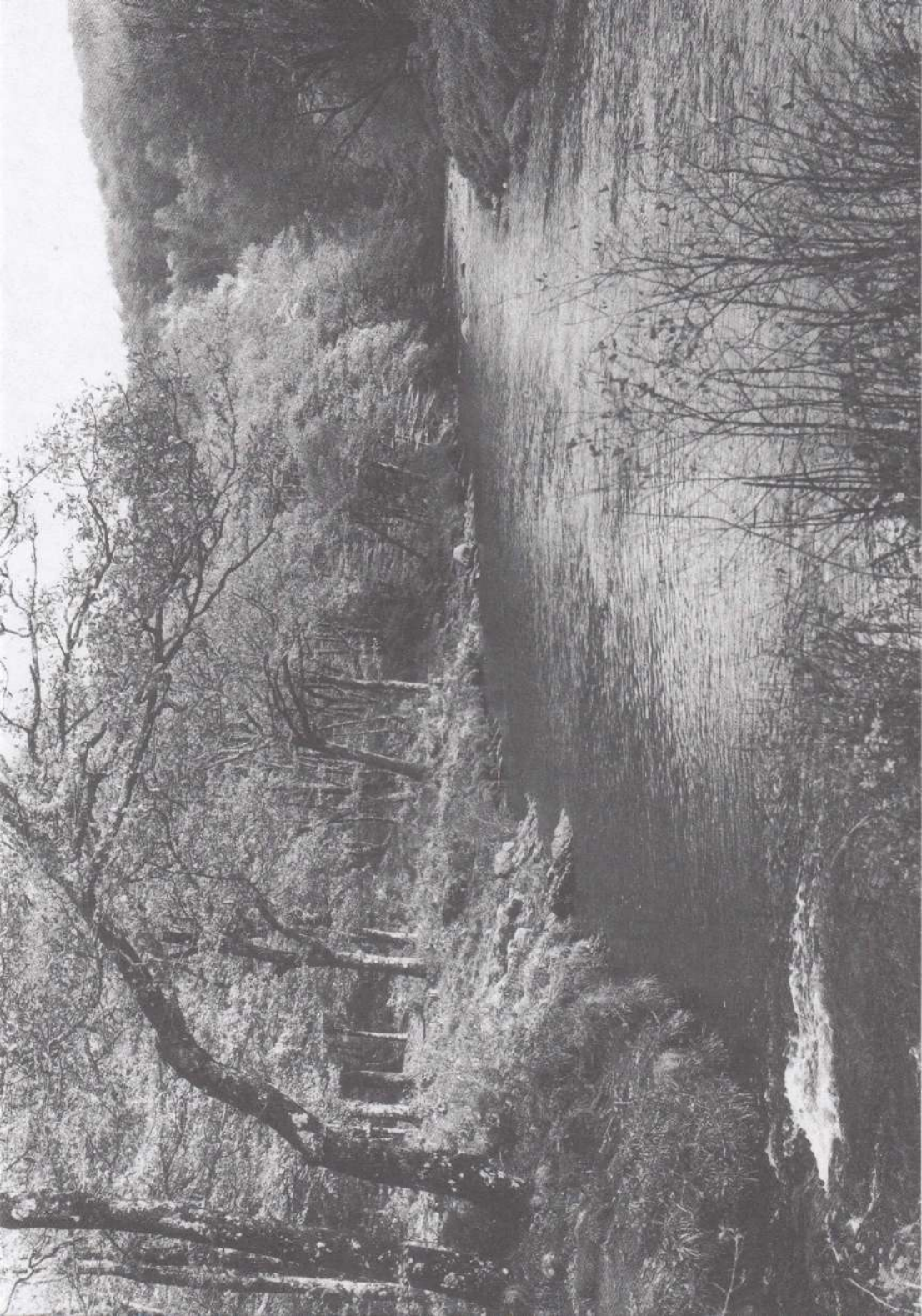
These things have taken place even though National Park status existed. So, can we imagine what Dartmoor might look like today, or indeed in the future, without National Park designation? It is looking elsewhere, and sometimes not that far from the National Park boundary, that we can see clearer. I can think of many areas of the United Kingdom that have suffered and are suffering from the long attrition of damaging and insensitive development and mismanagement and where single-purpose activities detrimentally dominate.

We live at a time of competing and often entrenched demands and priorities. We see more people pressure (mid 1999 estimates – 49,752,900 in England of which 4,935,700 live in the South West) and more car pressure than fifty years ago, and we continue to see growing demand on finite resources.

In 1936 the Dartmoor Preservation Association confirmed its belief in National Park status for Dartmoor, even if at that time it was unclear what that would mean in reality; it has recently re-affirmed that belief.

But, there are those who would argue that the idea of designating and labelling such places is unnecessary; all, at least most, areas have enough identity, are unique, have their own special values, and in a fast changing world, on a crowded island, are worthy of wise decision making that will affect their present and future appearance, use, utility, value, quality. In an ideal world perhaps, but this is far from an ideal world and it isn't hard to recognize that there are some places that cannot be left to present-day vagaries and vicissitudes of short term thinking, economic gain and fly-by-night policy and decision making. There are some places too important, too valuable, to be left until such a time when our attitude to the environment as a whole would ensure that their special qualities, including biodiversity and cultural heritage, were not diminished during that period of waiting.

Some may view our National Parks system as an anachronism, as a legacy of, and embedded in, pre- and post-World War II thinking. However, since the 1949 *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* there have been a number of independent appraisals, and there have been several fundamental reviews by agencies of government and Parliament itself culminating in the 1995 Environment







Act. This Act not only revised the purposes of National Parks, but also redefined the way in which they operate.

Our National Parks are also part of an international network of a diverse range of protected areas. This family and mosaic of designations are necessary at a period in our history when other environmental approaches alone are not enough to ensure environmental safeguarding of critical assets (the protected area concept is currently and urgently being explored for parts of our oceans at a time when most other conservation measures have and are failing). Many environmental issues, and indeed the importance of Dartmoor, are now seen in their broad geographical contexts – locally and nationally, European-wide and globally. Not only has the landscape evolved, but so too environmental thinking and the conceptual framework of our National Parks and the National Park Authorities themselves; and they continue to do so. Through these things I believe that Dartmoor has been and will be better served and better treated.

The National Parks system for the United Kingdom is also to be extended; an action not taken lightly or without widespread consultation. It is an action that reflects the importance of the National Parks mechanism as a contributory, but not the only, means of delivering local, regional, national and international obligations to conserve biodiversity and cultural heritage. On 29th September 1999 John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister, announced at its Party conference that the Labour Government would begin the process to create new National Parks in England - in the South Downs and the New Forest. In addition, Scotland, which has had no national parks, has begun the process of National Park designation after intense campaigning and lobbying. Much of the Scottish conservation movement had seen a history of wasteful and damaging conflicts resulting from *'government equivocation on policy, the lack of appropriate national standards, a reliance on the voluntary principle and a failure to co-ordinate the powers and resources of relevant agencies and authorities.'*

Would Dartmoor have suffered similarly in the past fifty years without National Park status? The arguments for a better system of protection in Scotland were well shared and options explored. The national park idea has engendered strong public support. On 5 July 2000 Scotland's Parliament unanimously passed the *National Parks (Scotland) Bill* and on 9th August it received Royal Assent, providing the Parliament with the ability to create National Parks in Scotland in any location deemed to be appropriate following appropriate consultations. The first National Park, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, is expected to be operational in April 2002, with the Cairngorms following soon after. The aims and purposes for these new National Parks will be, in the main, similar to those of our existing National Parks.

The 'health' of Dartmoor could be *partly* measured in terms of a host of specific indicators such as length of stone walls repaired, percentage of the public rights of way network open to the public, percentage of moorland, blanket bog, species-rich hedgerows and grassland, wetlands and ancient semi-natural woodland in favourable management, area of new native woodland created, percentage of Dartmoor rivers achieving Environment Agency River Ecosystem Class 1 water



quality, number of historic buildings on an 'At Risk Register', annual number of visitors to the information network, number of families with unmet local housing need, unemployment rate, etc. These are not indicators of how well the Dartmoor National Park Authority is performing or otherwise, but more about how Dartmoor is faring. Much is delivered, often in partnership, through a range of other agencies, mechanisms and individual effort. However, an important outcome and a little difficult to measure, is the success of an integrated rather than sectoral approach to safeguarding Dartmoor's special qualities, its life and work. Immeasurable is the increasing spiritual value of Dartmoor.

I believe that National Park status for Dartmoor brings a range of benefits. For example -

It enables and facilitates a *long-term* commitment to the management of Dartmoor's special qualities for an area where there are many different types of land management activities.

The principle of safeguarding the area is enshrined in legislation; Dartmoor is playing its part in protected area systems to conserve global biodiversity and cultural heritage.

It attracts extra resources from Government and elsewhere to safeguard the natural and cultural heritage, and for socio-economic well-being purposes.

It provides enhanced opportunities for local involvement and partnerships through consultative groups, joint-funded projects, community liaison, direct assistance with work on the ground, and by providing a valuable potential first point of contact in a plethora of public bodies, agencies and organizations.

It offers an overall co-ordination of the planning process for an area that involves forty-nine parish councils, several town councils, four District Councils, one County Council and a neighbouring Unitary Authority, and an opportunity for all to be involved – whether at the local, regional and national level - in developing policies and proposals for the area, particularly through the National Park Management Plan and Development Plan processes. Dependent upon consistent action by many different organizations and individuals, these processes attempt to achieve consensus upon clear objectives, policies and programmes of action for the conservation and sustainable use and development of the area (the idea of preparing UK National Park (Management) Plans has been in existence since the mid 1970s and the somewhat pioneering philosophy behind them has since been applied to other areas of our countryside).

Support is offered for land managers and occupiers of historic buildings through advice, and financial and in kind assistance.

Improved access opportunities and recreation guidance for residents and visitors exist (some people might argue that designation itself has brought about major visitor pressure to Dartmoor. However, I believe that it is the place, its reputation, its special qualities, and the nature of its accessibility and the growth of specific forms of recreation that does this. This pressure requires a recreation/tourism management framework with or without National Park status).

Better information, interpretation and education services are provided for its many users to enable not only enhanced enjoyment and understanding but also to help ensure that the area's special qualities are not diminished.

The Dartmoor National Park Authority plays an important role as co-ordinator, facilitator, enabler and grant-aider. It can act as a forum to tackle local issues. It is empowered to enter into partnerships, conduct surveys, commission and support research, provide advice and training, disseminate information, and demonstrate good practice.

National Parks status can engender an understanding and a trust between national and local interests in the delivery of conservation obligations and aspirations, public enjoyment and socio-economic well being.

Dartmoor does not stand-alone. Its historical and contemporary links with surrounding areas are important and National Park status does not set it apart as if it were an island. Indeed, National Park status is helping Dartmoor to achieve coherence with, and sets it in, the broader conservation and development of the surrounding area. The policies of the National Park Authority itself are set into the context of the wider planning and development framework and much of its work is integrated into the work programmes of other agencies. Section 62 of the 1995 *Environment Act* specifically places a general duty upon any 'relevant authority' (public bodies, Ministers, statutory undertakers etc.) to have regard to the purposes of National Parks. The aim is to ensure that such bodies take account of National Park purposes when coming to decisions or carrying out their activities relating to or affecting land within the National Parks – relevant authorities are 'expected to be able to demonstrate that they have fulfilled this duty'. We therefore see Dartmoor being better integrated, not isolated from, its local, regional, and national settings.

Places, peopled and non-peopled, do change and so too do our attitudes to the way we use them. As elsewhere in the world, Dartmoor as a National Park will only survive and flourish if it is supported. The United Kingdom's National Park system is not a final prescription, nor is it perfect (can anything be in the minds of everyone?). However, through informed and pertinent debate and wise decision making it can be enhanced. It takes much more than a designation to safeguard an



area and its special qualities – it takes an attitude, a commitment, a heart-felt commitment, research, knowledge, understanding, expertise, creativity and new ways of thinking, delivery, shared ways in doing and finding solutions.

We have a choice to build on Dartmoor's status as a National Park. It represents 0.74% of England's surface area and an inestimable size in our hearts and minds. Our collective commitment to this place will be judged by present and future generations. The alternative will probably be a sorry tale told in the next fifty years, with some battles lost within the next twenty-five, unless critical decisions and actions are made in the next decade. Hopefully the ironic words of the late Edward Abbey will not be echoed in a Dartmoor context:

“Ranger, where is Arches National Monument?”

“I don't know, mister. But I can tell you where it was.”

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## A Guardian's View

*Dr Nick Atkinson is the current Chief Executive (National Park Officer) of the Dartmoor National Park Authority.*

I was eight years old when I first visited Dartmoor, and the National Park was four. I was crying in the back of my parents' car as we travelled on an August day out from our Teignmouth holiday. I had wanted to stay on the beach!

I have a photograph of my mother and myself leaning on a gate beside Widcombe Hill looking down into the valley beside one of those old 'steep hill' road traffic signs with a red triangle on top. No one else is about and the walls look in great shape. It is the sort of scene that inspires a sense of order, beauty and tranquillity that we hope Dartmoor will always have. But now I wonder how prosperous the farmers were, and whether the locals objected to the road sign when it first appeared? And who picked up the litter before there were Rangers, and did the church need money for restoration, and what future did the Commoners think there was for their ponies?

The first meeting of the Dartmoor National Park Committee, including one "Mrs S. Sayer", took place in February 1952. The business included items and discussions concerning representations and attendance at meetings, delegation of highway matters, water resources, services training requirements, telecommunication masts, mineral working. Oh, and three development control applications in Moretonhampstead! Not a lot changes, and not a lot of the passion about these issues changes, which illustrates to me the strength of emotion that Dartmoor stirs, and that despite all of the pressures, exploitations, and troubles of the last half of the 20th century Dartmoor retains its beauty, and remains worth fighting for.

I am sure that in later years there were other day trips from Teignmouth and from Dawlish, and Looe (I doubt that holidaymakers change much either nowadays), but my next recollection is from my Air Cadet Corps days "arduous training on Dartmoor" for a week in August. The image put dread in the heart of the beefiest rugby player, and the reality at that time was none-too appealing, I recollect. But I smile in recollection whenever I'm out on what I now call a really good walk, with compass skill satisfaction perhaps, and with ever dampening boots as weary feet become less choosy in their tread. Remote and wildest Dartmoor has always been my favoured place, and wild woodlands are as much a part of that as are the depths of Gallaven Mire. Where else in this crowded country can you be alone on the highest hill on a midsummer Sunday afternoon? Where else is the night sky so dark in England? And, if only there was wider recognition that native oak woodlands are every part the match of the tropical rain forest!



I have worked for the National Park Authority in a variety of guises for 26 years, more than half Dartmoor's time as a National Park. Just before I arrived, on a visit to my new in-laws' farm at Bratton Clovelly, my wife and I went to Meldon; attracted no doubt by the reservoir, and innocent of the battleground the valley had been. I know now how desolate I would be if another such battle was waged and lost today. You can stand on South Down above Meldon and in the scene before you, you can witness four of the great dramas, the historic flashpoints contemporary with the evolution of the National Park: army training; a vast quarry; a reservoir; and a dual carriageway. Each is a desperate intrusion, and masks unquantifiable loss of the myriad archaeological and ecological detail that characterizes Dartmoor.

Yet the grandeur and splendour of Dartmoor transcends these despoiling intrusions and will always be greater than humankind's worst assaults on its integrity. Which is not to excuse these developments or entertain weakness in the face of any future proposals, but to recognize that awe is a rare emotion and that Dartmoor demands spiritual, practical and moral respect in return.

I know that Dartmoor is a better place for its National Park status, that successive dedicated and skilled staff have achieved much that is positive, resisted much that was negative, and helped many to a greater enjoyment and understanding of its features. Dartmoor's worth as an economic asset to the nation and the region is increasingly appreciated, and that worth must be translated into the well being of Dartmoor's work force and communities. And National Park values ensure that Britain plays its part to the full on the global protected area conservation scheme. Some major losses, despite every endeavour of the National Park, the Dartmoor Preservation Association and other champions of the Moor, have undoubtedly occurred since 1951. But as Dartmoor enters its second fifty years as a National Park, there is growing confidence in a richer future. Richer in wildlife, richer in archaeological understanding, richer in the built environment and the landscape, and richer in every sense for those who live and work on Dartmoor or visit for recreation.

Dartmoor has been my love, my health, my career and my fortune. It has seen my happiest days and greatest challenges, physical and mental. It is a demanding mistress, with a clamouring public entertaining every range of emotion, ambition and perception, and is exacting in failure. And I wouldn't have been anywhere else these past 26 years!



## Answering the Cry of the Moor

*Kate Ashbrook is a former secretary of the DPA and now the Association's President. One of Britain's leading environmentalists and access campaigners, Kate is general secretary of the Open Spaces Society – Britain's oldest conservation body.*

I think I can pinpoint the moment when I truly fell in love with Dartmoor. It was early evening on 26th August 1971 and I had ridden right across Dartmoor from Hillbridge Farm near Peter Tavy. We had ridden along the Lich Way over Conies Down, across the Cowsic and West Dart, past Bellever, Cator Common and Challacombe. We came over the broad back of Hameldown to Grimspound in the glorious evening light. Looking west I could see the long ridges of the moor over which we had come. It was then I knew that I must fight to save this magical place.

Later that evening we went to a packed hall in Princetown, to a public meeting about reservoirs, and that was the first time I saw Lady Sayer, then chairman of the DPA. She faced a barrage of furious farmers, all trumpeting 'go back to Swincombe' - for the Swincombe scheme, which had been thrown out by Parliament the previous year, was already back in the frame. How I, a mere teenager, admired the calm way she stood up to those ranting philistines, all the more poignant with the memory of the lovely moor that day fresh in my mind.

And that day probably determined the rest of my life. I arranged to meet Sylvia Sayer at her home, Cator, the following spring. She didn't then think that I was *really* dedicated to the battle, but she soon discovered I was when I came to Exeter University largely to be near the moor. She was so generous, fetching me for visits and having me to stay, and I spent my spare time writing letters to anyone who threatened Dartmoor, learning from her how it was all done. That was the start of a deep friendship, which lasted until she died last year. I owe my campaigning ability, and much, much more, to Syl.

Every national park has its devotees, and of course, I am just one of thousands of people for whom Dartmoor is particularly special. It is those long ridges ('Dartmoor's long calm lines' as Syl wrote in her first letter to me), the deep rushing river valleys, the tors and cluttered slopes on which our history is written in the wonderful prehistoric remains, and above all the timelessness. It is a calm and tranquil place, where you have the space to think out problems and feel at peace.

As this is a fiftieth anniversary celebration, I looked up what the government's National Parks ('Hobhouse') Committee said about Dartmoor in its 1947 report, which paved the way to its designation in 1951. Hobhouse places Dartmoor in the first instalment for designation (this included the Lake District, North Wales and the Peak District), stating 'the order in which these areas are arranged does not imply



any attempted assessment of their relative beauty and recreational value, but takes account of geographical distribution and the need for protection'.

The need for protection was great - as of course it still is. Hobhouse records as 'problems' the military training, china clay workings, several large reservoirs, and 'a heavy growth of gorse and bracken which smothers much of the moorland in summer and autumn and makes walking almost impossible' - even then.

It is wonderful that those post-war visionaries saw how much Dartmoor needed the protection of national park status. They hoped this would save it from further incursion. Unfortunately, however, this was not so. In particular, Hobhouse's recommendation of separate planning authorities for the parks, with the need to ensure 'that national parks are in a true sense national' was not followed. For years, Dartmoor was under the thumb of Devon County Council and dominated by parochial interests.

For instance, we still suffer terribly from the military and china clay, identified by Hobhouse as major problems. Indeed, they are set to expand unless the DPA and others can stop them.

But at least there is now a much greater understanding of what national parks offer and, at last, an independent authority to administer it. That authority must be prepared to be tough and, if necessary, locally unpopular in upholding national park purposes.

The value of Dartmoor's wilderness cannot be calculated - the refreshment and recreation of the spirit for those who visit it, the knowledge that it is there for those who cannot. Now I live 200 miles away from the moor, but it is crucial for me to know that it is waiting, unchanging, misty ridge beyond misty ridge. Unchanging since my precious moment on Grimspound; unchanged for centuries.



## Wild and Free for Ever

*John Bainbridge is the Honorary Secretary, and Chief Executive, of the Dartmoor Preservation Association.*

I well remember one cold Dartmoor dawn when I was seventeen. I had spent the night in the long and flat niche high on the summit rocks of Great Links Tor, in a sleeping bag that offered little warmth. We lived for Dartmoor at that time, camping for great periods of time in remote places or travelling light and bivouacking amongst rocky clitters, or in places like the cave of Pixies Holt, or in the hollow under Cuckoo Rock, or the Deancombe potato caves, and a hundred other such shelters. You never sleep much when you bivvy and I hadn't that night, continually popping to the top of the tor to watch the distant lights of villages far below to the west and the deep moorland Dartmoor darkness on the other three sides.

The wildness of Dartmoor had always appealed to me, but I think it was that night that I realized just how small and vulnerable Dartmoor was. By my late teens I had walked the Moor from end to end, explored its ancient trackways, followed its rivers and found the way to the very heart of many a mire and blanket bog. I had devoured the classic works by Crossing, Worth, Rowe and Page (and how cheaply they could be bought in those days). I had many walking friends and had started leading others in group walks across the wilderness. My teenage conscience suggested it was time to put something back. What had seemed a vast wilderness had suddenly become compact and under threat.

This was, of course, the time of some of the greatest Dartmoor battles. The fight over Swincombe and Meldon raged, there were already mutterings over a bypass for Okehampton. I hated the presence of the army on the northern moor and on Rippon Tor. I had camped outside the range boundaries when the artillery was night firing, the shells rushing through the blackness like out-of-control locomotives. It all seemed an abuse of the basic ethos of this area of land, given as a prize of peace to the people of Britain by a post-war-time government.

Not that Dartmoor exactly needed *me* amongst the ranks of its defenders. The newspapers were filled with the deeds of the indomitable Sylvia Sayer. I read of others who shared that great fight, people like John Foot, John Somers Cocks, Ted Birkett Dixon, Ron Vinnicombe, Barbara MacDonald, Harry Davies, Brian Le Messurier and a host of others who I came to know well. Happily, some of those great campaigners are still with us. Others are gone, though I like to think that there is a Dartmoor Valhalla where the departed warriors muse over moorland battles won and lost.

People often ask me if running the DPA is different now to what it was then. And, of course it is different. Very different. We now live in such an environmentally-conscious age. It is rare to be criticized these days for standing up



for Dartmoor and it is hard to believe the overwhelming public vitriol and sheer hatred aimed at Dartmoor campaigners just thirty years ago. I have a very easy ride by comparison, for those pioneer campaigners cleared the ground over which I now fight on behalf of the DPA.

I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that the task would be a great deal harder if Dartmoor had not been created a National Park in 1951. This is not to say that the present Dartmoor National Park Authority is perfect, and probably no one criticizes that authority more than me in the course of an average year. But I am only critical because I care. The English countryside is under siege and greedy developers long to destroy it for profit. They may put forward all sorts of nonsense about improving the economy and jobs and all the rest of it, but we all know in our hearts that that is a bluff to persuade seemingly brain-dead planners and politicians that they are doing the right thing.

It is pleasing to note that the Dartmoor National Park Authority succumbs less to these blandishments than most, and that the officers of the Park are streetwise to the posturing of developers in a way that other local authorities are not. Sure, the park authority makes mistakes and when they do, the DPA clobbers them. But just look at the mistakes made elsewhere!

The human race needs places like Dartmoor, areas of wild country in which to escape the bustle and turmoil of the modern world. And National Park status *is* the best way to protect Dartmoor. (If you don't believe me go and look at the despoliation of wild country in parts of Bodmin Moor, or Heathfield, or the lowland heaths of Dorset, or Great and Little Haldon - and those spoiled areas are just West Country examples).

Some argue that National Park status sets Dartmoor apart from the rest of the landscape. Well of course it does - that is the point! Dartmoor is a self-contained and special landscape, scenically, ecologically and as an archaeological palimpsest, materially different from much of the rest of Devon. That is why, in 1882, all those Victorian conservationists got together to form a DPA to protect it. That is why its qualities led to its designation in the first batch of National Parks.

We have a long way to go yet. We still have to persuade some local politicians to adopt a pro-National Park view and to look a little further than the immediate surroundings of the parish pump. But we are getting there. There have been losses as well as victories, it hasn't all been rosy, but Dartmoor survives more or less intact, cherished by millions of people across the world. Though the National Park dream may not have been entirely fulfilled, the vision has never been betrayed. That is why we are here. And if you are ever jaded by these seemingly endless environmental battles, if you are ever inclined to take the line of least resistance and sell out to the exploiters, then go and wander up to Great Links Tor, or Ryder's Hill, or Cranmere, and let Dartmoor tell you different.

## WILD AND FREE - Fifty Years of the Dartmoor National Park

**"National Parks are not just a nice but slightly unnecessary and expendable luxury for a fortunate few. They are in fact a vital provision for a very real human need."**

*Sylvia Sayer, 1970*

2001 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Dartmoor's designation as a National Park, as well as the 50th anniversary of the post-war reformation of the Dartmoor Preservation Association under the chairmanship of Sylvia Sayer.

The DPA has produced this little booklet to mark these important occasions, inviting personal views from several contributors who have an interest in Dartmoor. We have also looked back through our own archives to see how the Association regarded the creation of the Dartmoor National Park.

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DPA Publication Number 14

ISBN 0953 87531 X

Printed on china-clay-free paper. Price £5

The Dartmoor Preservation Association, Old Duchy Hotel,  
Princetown, PL20 6QF.

Telephone (01822) 890646

Printed in the UK. High View for design, print & photography: [highviewpictures.co.uk](http://highviewpictures.co.uk)

