CPRE Herefordshire
Campaign to Protect Rural England

A NEW AONB IN THE MARCHES?

Exploring the case for more Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Herefordshire



Herefordshire is one of the most beautiful and tranquil counties in England and much of its countryside deserves special protection. There is a system for protecting landscapes of national importance as National Parks or as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Yet very little of Herefordshire is protected in this way. The reason is buried in a story of past failures, but the effects are still with us, threatening Herefordshire's best countryside as the pressures on it grow.

The purpose of this short report is to stimulate consideration of further AONB designation in Herefordshire. It has been produced with public and voluntary conservation bodies in mind, but it should be of interest to anyone concerned about Herefordshire's countryside.

The report does not aim to create a definitive case for new AONB designation. It is certainly not a comprehensive analysis of a potential new AONB, let alone its exact extent and boundaries: much more detailed work, led by Natural England, will be needed before this point can be reached. The report does aim to set a debate in motion by summarising the historical and policy background and outlining where matters stand now.

The report focuses on the uplands of West Herefordshire where CPRE believes that the case for further designation is strongest and longest standing. At the heart of the report are maps of this area identifying many of the features and qualities that will be relevant to such designation.

Some history

The identification and protection of nationally important landscapes was established by the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. It introduced National Parks (NPs) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and gave the task of designating them to a new National Parks Commission, a predecessor of today's Natural England. (NPs are intended to protect wilder areas and to promote outdoor recreation associated with them, but NPs and AONBs are equal in their importance and protection.) The task of designating all the deserving areas was bound to take years, so the first action of the Commission in 1950 was to issue maps showing the areas earmarked for future designation, backed by Government Circular 84/50 requiring local planning authorities to give these areas interim protection until they were designated.

Most of the NPs and AONBs now in existence were designated in a rolling programme over the following twenty years or so, and occasional additions or extensions have continued to be made ever since. Sixty years later the pattern of designation remains remarkably close to the pattern of the original 1950 maps, perhaps showing the thoroughness of the originators and the long-term public support for the concept of 'natural beauty' that they were seeking out. But there are still gaps in the pattern - and West Herefordshire is one of them.

In Herefordshire the Commission earmarked the Malvern Hills and the lower Wye Valley - which were duly designated as AONBs in 1959 and 1971. But these AONBs straddled several counties and encompassed only small areas at the eastern and southern edges of Herefordshire. Most of the beautiful upland areas of Herefordshire lay to the west. Here the Commission identified two more areas for designation: to the south-west the Black Mountains, Golden Valley, and part of the Monnow Valley were earmarked for inclusion in a new cross-border Brecon Beacons NP; to the north-west the hills roughly from Hergest Ridge to Ludlow were earmarked as part of a cross-border Radnor and Clun Forests AONB.

Yet these two areas have never been designated and most of Herefordshire's countryside remains unprotected despite its great beauty. A long bureaucratic story lies behind this, but the main strand running through it is the difficulty of trying to designate areas that cross the Wales-England border.

In 1957 the Commission created the Brecon Beacons NP, but omitted the Herefordshire Black Mountains from it because of the 'administrative complications' of including parts of a fourth, English, county as well as three Welsh ones. In 1969 Herefordshire County Council suggested creating a separate Black Mountains AONB instead. The Countryside Commission (as it was by then called) said it would still be preferable to include the area in the Brecon Beacons NP and decided to look at the idea as part of a review of all NP boundaries. With exquisite bureaucratic irony the Commission then placed the idea at the bottom of its list because it felt a cross-border designation would be problematic, and the review was eventually abandoned without even considering it. In 2009 Herefordshire Council revived the idea by approving a proposal that it should be given the power, as a Sustainable Communities Act initiative, to designate a Black Mountains AONB itself. Natural England (which had now taken the place of the Countryside Commission) said it could not devolve the power, but would be

willing to consider any proposal put to it. And there it rests.

The story of the north-west Herefordshire hills is similar, if shorter: when a Shropshire Hills AONB was created in 1958, the Clun Forest was included in this instead of in a cross-border Radnor and Clun Forests AONB - presumably because, again, it was seen as less complicated administratively. The proposal for a truncated Radnor Forest AONB staggered on until it was quietly shelved by the Countryside Commission in 1982 because of opposition from Welsh local authorities. With it went the idea of a central Marches AONB within which the north-west Herefordshire hills could have sat.

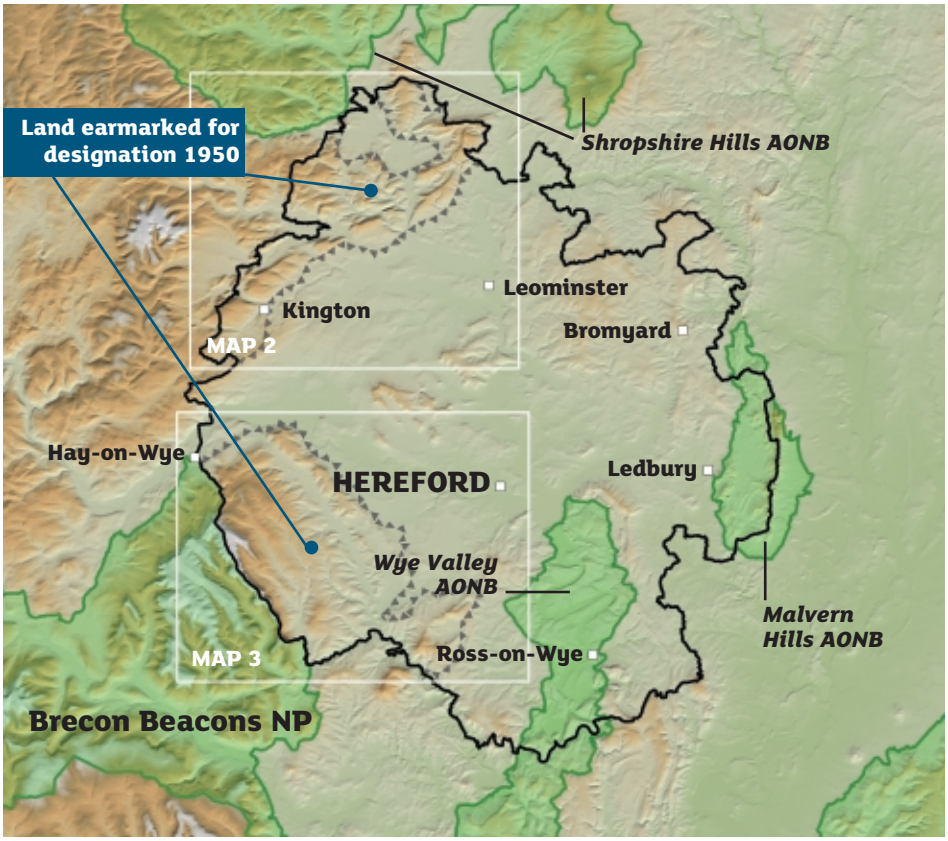
CPRE believes the time has come to sort out what a recent study called "Unfinished Business in Herefordshire".

Mapping West Herefordshire

Map 1 shows the location of Herefordshire in relation to existing NP and AONB designations. On this map high land is indicated by relief shading: the uplands of West Herefordshire are a notable feature.

West Herefordshire is divided by the Wye Valley into two ranges which are shown in more detail on Map 2 and Map 3. The south-west range stretches almost from Monmouth to Hay and on these maps and henceforth in this report is described as 'the Black Mountains' (although strictly speaking the area encompasses more than these). The north-west range stretches from near Hay-on-Wye to Ludlow and is henceforth described as 'the Mortimer Country' which has become a popular name for much of this part of the county in recent years. Together, the two ranges are described in this report as West Herefordshire.

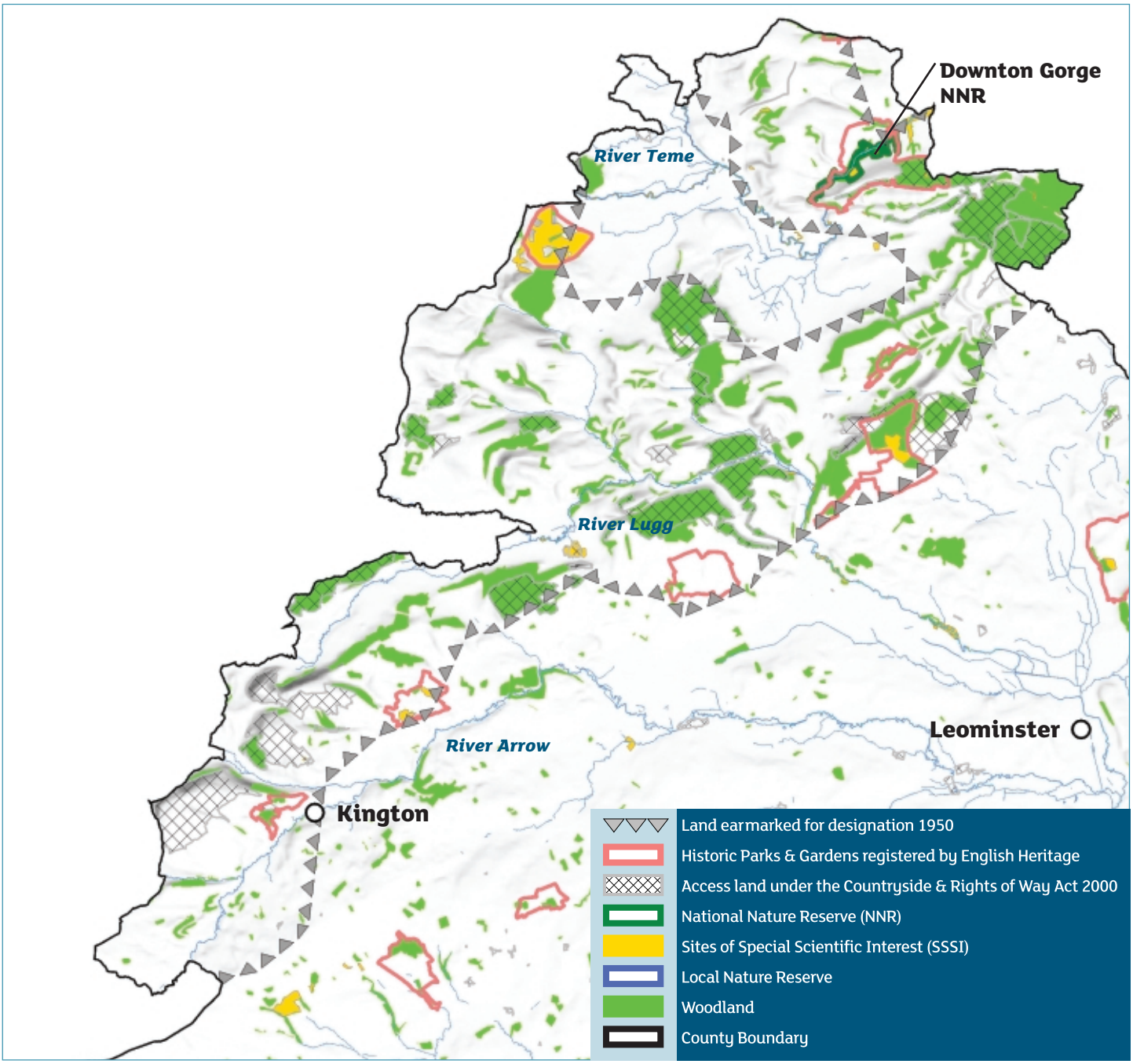
- The maps show the boundaries of land in West Herefordshire earmarked in 1950 but never subsequently designated. We include these not because we think new designations in Herefordshire should follow precisely these boundaries, but because they provide a good starting point for debate. The fact is that nationally the 1950 exercise has proved remarkably robust and popular. Also it is notable how closely the 1950 boundaries in West Herefordshire conform to the upland contours, perhaps not surprising since the idea of natural beauty is closely related to the variety of views and sense of awe that hills inspire.



Map 1 *Herefordshire and existing landscape designations*

- Natural England has recently adopted an 'integrated strategy' for deploying its various powers to designate land - which in practice means that it will give priority to new AONB designations that also help promote biodiversity policies and protect important flora and fauna. In particular it wants to promote 'connectivity' between habitats: the recent Lawton Report identified this as a critical task facing wildlife conservation. To help judge the overlap between landscape and wildlife conservation in West Herefordshire, the detailed Maps 2 and 3 plot key biodiversity sites: Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National and Local Nature Reserves. These Maps also draw on the county's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) to plot the priority woodland habitats, including all ancient and unclassified woodlands, which are widespread in this area and which, as 'highways' for so many species, are especially important to connectivity. The extensive chains of woodland, in both the Black Mountains and the Mortimer Country, are striking. There is also a wealth of other tree cover, such as ancient hedgerows with veteran trees (e.g., the Olchon Valley [front cover photograph]): this cannot be shown on such small-scale maps but it further strengthens the habitat connectivity of the area.

- There are other BAP priority habitats in West Herefordshire – upland heathland, lowland meadows, and acid grassland – but we understand that more groundwork is needed before these can be confidently plotted and we have not attempted to include them in the Maps. However, there is little doubt that once such work is done,



Map 2 *The Mortimer Country*

the richness and variety of habitats in the West Herefordshire uplands will be even more apparent.

- Natural England has a number of grant schemes at its disposal to help farmers manage their land in an environmentally friendly way. The key one is the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. It is not shown on the Maps, but the Black Mountains is already a HLS Target Area (corresponding quite closely to the 1950 earmarked area). The Mortimer Country is not yet a Target Area, but one might expect it to be added if it became part of an AONB. Both areas are in Priority Catchment Areas, for the Rivers Wye and Lugg respectively, and capital grants to help improve water quality are available.

- When AONBs were first introduced natural beauty was the only criterion for designation. The cultural or historic importance of landscape was not acknowledged. Now it is recognised as an aspect of our appreciation of natural beauty and is accepted as a relevant factor in AONB designation. Parks and gardens are among the historic features most intimately connected with the landscape. The relationship is peculiarly important in West Herefordshire because it was here that landowners, such as Richard Payne Knight of Downton, took inspiration from the beauty of the local landscape to design parks that incorporated its views and features, rather than impose some abstract order upon it. It was an important

stage in the development of the 'Picturesque' movement which led directly to today's idea of natural beauty, embodied in the AONB concept. English Heritage now registers historically important parks and gardens: Maps 2 and 3 plot those in West Herefordshire. The overlap between these and nature conservation sites is striking. There are many other locally important parks and gardens not registered or shown here. There are also other sorts of historic features linked to the landscape, most notably on this ancient military border, hillforts and castles which for obvious reasons can only be fully appreciated in relation to their surrounding landscape. Most are protected by English Heritage as Ancient Monuments, but are too numerous to show on these maps.

- Public access to AONBs is important in its own right and for the benefit of tourism. Maps 2 and 3 show that there is a substantial amount of public access land in West Herefordshire. There is also, although not practical to show on these maps, a rich network of public footpaths and bridleways, including the Herefordshire Trail. The Offa's Dyke National Trail weaves north-south along the West Herefordshire border.

What difference will AONB designation make?

Planning

AONB designation does not create a new planning regime. Herefordshire Council would remain the planning authority for a new AONB, as it would for any other part of the county. Its planning policies would cover the AONB and it would remain responsible for deciding planning applications inside the AONB. The law simply requires the Council to "have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty" of the AONB when drawing up its policies or deciding applications, or indeed when carrying out any other functions in the area. (The same would apply to other public bodies, including town or parish councils preparing 'neighbourhood plans'.) The Government's new National Planning Policy Framework says that "great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty" in AONBs.

"The aim is that community and business life should carry on, change, and grow, within the context of protecting a beautiful landscape and habitat.

In practice, this means that a planning application for new development in an AONB should show that it is, so far as possible, in harmony with its surroundings by way of location, design and materials. The Council would have considerable discretion in judging this and balancing it with other factors such as economic and social needs. Only development that would be unavoidably intrusive, such as large-scale industrial or residential development, is likely to be rejected outright. The aim is that community and business life should carry on, change, and grow, within the context of protecting a beautiful landscape and habitat.

Inside an AONB the 'permitted development rights' for houses are slightly reduced: the position of extensions and of flues or satellite dishes that can be built without planning permission is more limited, as are the type and position of various outbuildings and structures. Cladding also needs planning permission. The size of extensions to industrial buildings and warehouses that can be built without planning permission is also slightly reduced. There is no reduction in permitted development rights for farming or forestry.

Land management

AONB designation does not add any compulsory constraints on farming and land management. Rather, farmers and landowners are encouraged to manage land in a wildlife- and landscape-friendly way, with grants and advice available to help with this. Each AONB has a small staff and a 'management plan' to work with the local community and target such resources effectively. Designation should attract more resources to the area, especially the relatively neglected Mortimer Country.

Tourism & economic development

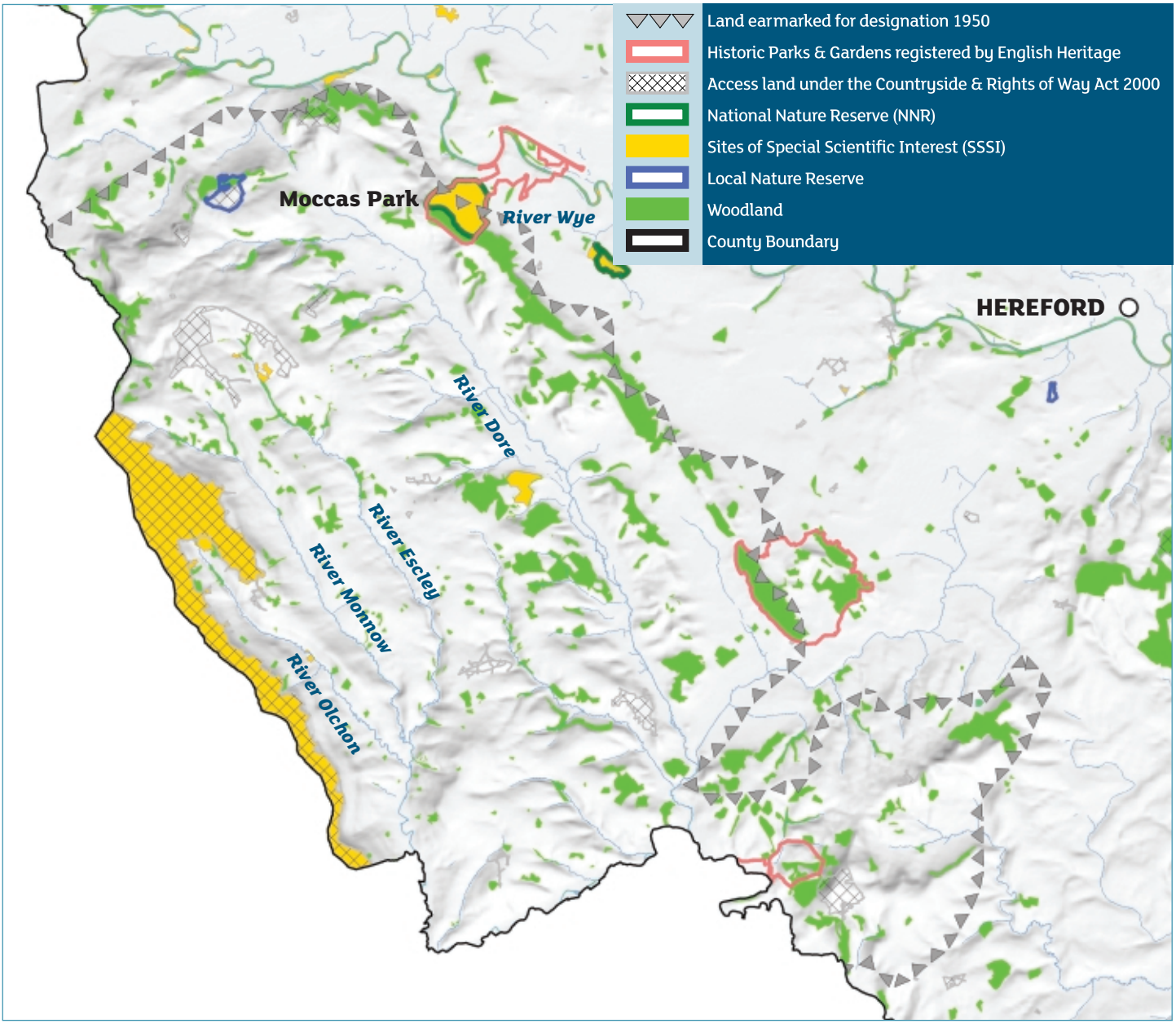
AONB designation can positively stimulate appropriate economic activity, especially tourism, a critical industry for rural Herefordshire. AONB status carries prestige: it is a message to potential visitors that here is an exceptionally attractive area. And not just to visitors: it tells incoming businesses that their employees, investors and customers will have a beautiful area close at hand to relax in, even to live in, and that the Council intends to keep it that way. The economic expansion of Hereford, especially the Enterprise Zone at Rotherwas, would be complemented by the designation of West Herefordshire as an AONB. In addition AONBs currently have a discretionary 'sustainable development fund' to assist local communities and businesses that help to effect the AONB management plan.

Conservation

As this report reveals, West Herefordshire already has a wealth of important and interconnected habitats, although much remains to be done to assess them fully and close the gaps. AONB designation would be a valuable opportunity to consolidate and target resources more effectively on such tasks.

Strategically, designation of West Herefordshire would also enable the development of habitat connectivity on a much larger scale, by physically linking the existing designated areas along the Welsh borders: from the Wye Valley AONB in the south, to the Brecon Beacons NP to the west, and the Shropshire Hills AONB to the north (*see Map 1*).

Designation would also help protect and enhance the wider setting of the historic parks, gardens, and ancient monuments in the area.



Map 3 *The Black Mountains*

What shape will a new AONB take?

Given the position of West Herefordshire in relation to existing designated areas, there are several options for designating it, whether by one or more new AONBs or by extensions of the existing areas. CPRE is not at this stage proposing any particular solution.

That said, any solution entailing a cross-border England-Wales entity must be questionable, given how its perceived complications have stymied the designation of West Herefordshire in the past – and that was before the creation of the Welsh Assembly, with its separate, and increasingly divergent, planning and local government structures – which would make the establishment, and subsequent management of a new entity ever more complicated. For this reason, the extension of the Brecon Beacons NP to the Black Mountains is probably unrealistic. Moreover, a National Park, unlike an AONB, would take over the planning powers of Herefordshire Council.

“Designation of West Herefordshire would also enable the development of habitat connectivity on a much larger scale, by physically linking the existing designated areas.

Without crossing the Welsh border it would be possible to create a new Herefordshire-only AONB for the Black Mountains and/or the Mortimer Country; or extend the existing Wye

Valley AONB to encompass the Black Mountains, and the Shropshire Hills AONB to encompass the Mortimer Country; or even extend the Shropshire Hills AONB to include both the Black Mountains and the Mortimer Country in what would become a Marches AONB. In view of the increasingly close cooperation between Herefordshire and Shropshire since the abolition of the West Midlands Regional Assembly, this last option might be the most imaginative long-term solution of all.

Each AONB must have a small staff and a management plan (currently funded 75:25 by Government and the local authority), so there could be some advantage in spreading these costs by extending existing AONBs rather than by creating new separate structures. However, much of this cost is not fixed but related to the size of the AONB, so any financial saving would be small. In any event, even if a separate new AONB were created, there would be no bar to sharing staff and management with existing AONBs if this were considered advantageous. In practice the solution will probably be determined by whatever best achieves the conservation goals of designation over the widest area rather than by questions of cost.

What next?

Natural England is the body responsible for designating or extending AONBs, subject only to final Government approval. The Black Mountains are already on its informal list of nearly forty suggestions for new or extended AONBs in England. The organisation is about to embark on another strategic review of future AONB designations, not due to be finished until 2014, and it is unlikely to initiate any AONB proposal itself before then. However, it has said it would respond to any formal proposal from outside.



Town and Parish Councils too have an increasing role to play in landscape protection. Their views will carry weight in the question of AONB or county designations.

English Heritage is already involved in landscape protection through its register of historic parks and gardens. The special relationship between the 'Picturesque' parks and gardens of West Herefordshire and the landscape that inspired them arguably gives English Heritage an exceptional interest in AONB designation as a means of protecting their wider setting. Similar considerations apply to some other heritage sites, such as the many hillforts and castles and their defensive settings.

Herefordshire Council has already implied interest in designating the Black Mountains as an AONB by approving the recent Sustainable Communities Act initiative, but it has yet to consider the idea formally, or even to review its landscape policies generally. In any event, it must soon face a decision about what landscape policies to include in its new Local Development Framework. This will shortly replace the current Unitary Development Plan (UDP) which unfortunately provides little protection for the best landscapes. At least under the old District Plans (which were superseded by the UDP in 2007), much of the county, including West Herefordshire, was protected by local designation as 'Areas of Great Landscape Value'. However, under pressure from central government policy at the time, the UDP abolished local designation, leaving the whole county without any landscape designation apart from the small areas covered by the existing Malvern Hills and Wye Valley AONBs. And so it remains. The re-introduction of local designation, or other area-based policies with similar effect, could be an interim solution for West Herefordshire, pending AONB designation, and possibly a long-term solution for other Herefordshire landscapes.

Town and Parish Councils too have an increasing role to play in landscape protection. Their views will carry weight in the question of AONB or county designations; and if they choose to use their new powers under the Localism Act to create neighbourhood plans, they will, like Herefordshire Council, face a decision about what if any policies they should introduce to protect landscapes within their areas. They have a close knowledge of their local environments, and of what their residents value most, so are well placed to develop more detailed and targeted policies at parish level to complement broader national or county designations.

The Herefordshire 'Local Nature Partnership' is a new and valuable forum for promoting nature policies inside the county. It includes key bodies such as the Herefordshire Nature Trust. Landscape protection falls within its remit, all the more so now that Natural England is integrating nature and landscape designation strategy, so further AONB designation could be an early item for its agenda. ■

Notes

Campaign to Protect Rural England
Standing up for your countryside

CPRE fights for a better future for England's unique, essential and precious countryside. From giving parish councils expert advice on planning issues, to influencing national and European policies, we work to protect and enhance the countryside. We believe a beautiful, thriving countryside is important for everyone, no matter where they live. Nationally, we don't own land or represent any special interests. Our members are united in their love for England's landscapes and rural communities, and stand up for the countryside, so it can continue to sustain, enchant and inspire future generations.

For more information, contact us at **admin@cpreherefordshire.org.uk** or visit our website at **cpreherefordshire.org.uk**

Text Ian Jardin | **Maps** David Lovelace | © MMXI1 CPRE Herefordshire. The contents of this publication are subject to copyright protection and reproduction in whole or in part, whether mechanical or electronic, is expressly forbidden without the prior consent of CPRE. All details were correct at the time of going to press but may change at the publisher's discretion.