



PRESERVATION OF RURAL BEAUTY

Herefordshire & Gloucestershire

PROPOSAL FROM PRUB* THAT THE WYE VALLEY AONB BE EXTENDED TO INCLUDE THE EASTERN RIDGE FORMING THE WATERSHED BETWEEN THE RIVER WYE AND RIVER SEVERN FROM WOOLHOPE TO THE FOREST OF DEAN

This is an appeal to extend the Wye Valley AONB eastern boundary to include the eastern ridge from Woolhope down through south eastern Herefordshire into North Gloucestershire, Kempley, Dymock, to Newent and south to the Forest of Dean. We leave the precise boundary to be determined officially.

We understand that this area was, at least in part, included in the Countryside Commission's original recommendation for the Wye Valley AONB. We believe this area was eventually excluded due to pressure from the farming lobby concerned that visitor numbers would impact the animal husbandry of sheep and cattle in this then largely pasture based agricultural economy. Of course that visitor impact did not materialise in the Wye Valley itself and decades of experience now point to there being little interference from visitors in day to day farming activities of the AONB.

We believe that this proposed extension would add to the existing Wye Valley designated area by providing complimentary context for the Valley floor itself by adding its eastern watershed and catchment, that is, the ridge defining the Wye Valley and dividing it from the River Severn. This ridge has a distinctive landscape of narrow often incised lanes inherited from medieval times, as are the field patterns which retain ancient hedgerows so providing a distinctive landscape dotted with surviving medieval farmsteads and old Courts or manors.

This area sits in the south eastern corner of Herefordshire and northern area of Gloucestershire being therefore on the boundary between the West Midlands Region and the South West Region for Government purposes, an in-between area often on the fringes of consideration when policies are being developed. In local County terms too, the area misses out sitting between the protected areas of the Cotswolds, Malvern Hills, and the Forest of Dean. But this eastern ridge is no less valuable, if always forgotten by the specialists concentrating on the more famous nearby locations.

The landscape of the Wye Valley has undergone considerable change since the creation of the AONB with the advent of intensive horticultural development and polytunnel use making some tracts of the valley floor distinctly unattractive in landscape terms. By contrast the agrarian landscape on the eastern ridge has largely escaped intensive agricultural development. Although there has been loss of old traditional orchards and some hedgerows, the narrow lanes, ancient woodlands, traditional field patterns and the many listed buildings remain. These are often not grand houses but the more modest working buildings of distinctive still intact, even if converted, large barns in their farming context.

The geomorphology of this area is such that there are many small valleys running from the ridge to the Wye and east to the Leadon eventually into the Severn. Therefore this ridge forms the watershed between the Wye and Severn Rivers being an important geomorphological feature of the Ice Ages shaping the Wye Valley and its landscape that became the first ever tourist area valued for its natural beauty.

This area in more modern times has been famous for its wild daffodils which became a tourist destination in its own right – The Golden Triangle, and today those wild daffodils form the largest remaining area of wild daffodils in the country. However, there is no protection for these sites of

daffodils and the species is not itself protected either. But daffodils alone are not this area's only interest beyond the sheer beauty of the landscape. The area is home to a wide range of birds of prey. The wide range of species in this group demonstrates that as creatures at the top of the food chain pyramid, there is currently a diverse and plentiful range of species and habitat supporting this raptor population. The ridge is rich in diverse habitat, and species range from wild orchid and other protected wild flower populations through a very diverse range of insects, including listed butterflies and beetles, nearly all the amphibian and aquatic species, as well as most common and threatened British mammals e.g. hedgehog, hare, and a range of protected mammals, otters, dormice, horseshoe bats (in fact most British bat species). There is a diverse range of bird species too such as nightingale, snipe, as well as birds of prey.

The habitats associated with these species provide a vibrant natural environment that adds to the Wye Valley AONB interest for tourism and public enjoyment. Yet relatively speaking this area has few SSSIs or Local Nature Reserves which means development on this ridge is protected only by Neighbourhood Development Plans as pressure builds from developers.

It is little wonder that this pressure is building because with the M50 motorway linking the area with Cardiff and Birmingham it is becoming a desirable area for tourists and developers alike. There is a thriving local tourist industry largely based on B&B as a part of agricultural diversification, and the area is now a key day trip location for walkers, photographers and those with environmental interests. However, it is also becoming a desirable location for second home ownership being described by estate agents as 'the new Cotswolds' – we would argue it is better than the Cotswolds in landscape beauty and diversity of environment.

Therefore the area needs protection from the wrong kind of development – speculative large properties which fetch high prices providing excellent returns for developers so pricing local people out of the housing market. Current planning regulations coupled with the area having lost out to the protection afforded to the adjoining AONB areas, means this area is a target for developers. This is now even more pressured due to the recent pressure to limit housing development in the Wye and Lugg Valleys. This will inevitably lead to added pressure on the Herefordshire part of this proposed addition to the AONB. At the same time the transport links of the M50, M5, Severn Bridge / M4 motorways make the area a target for those seeking to relocate to the countryside post pandemic from further afield from the urban centres of Birmingham, Bristol and Cardiff, even London. This landscape is special and distinct and its value and beauty needs to be recognised.

The area is visually very beautiful, at least as desirable as the Wye Valley and Malvern Hills, yet different in scale and type of landscape. It has historical interest from Roman settlements and remains, medieval land use patterns and many listed buildings of different kinds, churches, farmsteads, manor houses and castles. The area has direct ancient links to the Bishopric of Hereford – for example, Upton Bishop derives its name from the Churches ownership of lands in the parish. The area is largely within the Domesday Book's Grey Tree Hundred and the Forest of Dean St Briavels Hundred. It has different kinds of natural interest, native woodlands, old orchards and pastures, diverse wildlife, interesting geological features, streams and valleys with excellent views from the ridge and hill tops. There are many bridleways and public footpaths suitable for both long, middle and shorter distance walks across the ridge, its small valleys and woodlands, beside its lakes and orchards.

In summary this area meets all the criteria of 'exceptional landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest for nature, people, business and culture'. It also provides context for the creation of the Wye Valley thereby bringing something new of added value to the existing AONB.



There will be many who are unfamiliar with this eastern ridge and therefore we present in the accompanying photo annex a series of photos demonstrating the landscape, the economic activity, tourist interest, and wildlife and its habitats on which so much depends. Yet all is outside the Wye Valley AONB and is mostly simply open countryside without any special status or protection. We urge you to recognise how special it is and to add the area to the Wye Valley AONB.

Liz O'Sullivan
Chairman PRuB
12.10.2021

*PRUB – Preservation of Rural Beauty is a private residents group that straddles the south east Herefordshire/Gloucestershire border. We originally formed some twelve years ago to stop a major mobile home development in Upton Bishop but soon became involved in defending this beautiful area from other development either of an unsuitable or unacceptable scale. We monitor planning applications across the area from Lyne Down in the north of our patch to Lea in the south and from Kempley in the east to Phocle Green in the west down to Ross on Wye. We also respond to County consultation documents on Planning and Transportation policy and County Plans, as well as respond to national consultations on Planning and related special provisions. We have some two hundred members from across the area but we also find ourselves being consulted from further afield, for example in Hampshire and Powys when our profile becomes raised through our responses to consultations.

