

The Cotswolds: A new National Park?





Could the Cotswolds be a new National Park for the UK?

Two hundred million years ago, when the supercontinent of Pangaea was breaking up and the Gulf of Mexico was forming, nature was quietly doing something just as extraordinary in the area we now know as the Cotswolds. In a shallow sea – inhabited by huge dolphin-like creatures – fragments of shell and grains of sand were being swirled, layer upon layer, until they reached the size of a pinhead. These were the ancestral particles of oolitic limestone – ‘oid’ or egg-like in structure; a limestone ribbon that binds the Channel coast to the North Sea.

The most magnificent of this limestone underlies and defines the Cotswolds AONB. This is the stone farmers unearthed to build mile upon mile of drystone wall, shielding their extravagant-fleece sheep and mahogany cattle. This is the stone that built honeyed cottages and awe-inspiring wool churches; that was used by Sir Christopher Wren for his masterpiece, St Paul’s. It’s the stone that the weather eroded to create a rolling landscape of secret valleys – so isolated, the people there kept their own accents deep into the 20th century – and view-stealing hills.

The industrial revolution so passed the Cotswolds by that, even today, it represents quintessential England, sealed in a vernacular for residents and visitors alike.

We don't have another 200 million years to create another Cotswolds

This opportunity, for a new National Park, is as golden as Cotswold stone itself. The Cotswolds' rolling landscape is every bit as stunning – equally as precious – as other British gems holding National Park status. What's more, it's unique; there is nowhere else on Earth like it.

That beauty is not simply characterised by the 'warm and luminous' (as JB Priestley put it) thatched cottages, with apricot cupped-roses wrapped round their doors, clustered beside a village green. Nor the acres of flower-rich grassland, grazed by free-roaming cattle, spotted with wild orchids (bee, frog, early purple, pyramidal) and dotted by rare Duke of Burgundy, Chalkhill Blue and dark-green Fritillary butterflies. It's not the show-off (but spectacularly picturesque) ancient manors, built by prosperous medieval merchants who waxed fat on the Cotswolds' famous sheep; nor the purling rivers or clear trout streams that cascade down hillsides, once to power the mills. It's not the age-old beech and oak woods that, each spring, saturate the air with wild garlic and shade the ground with the densest of bluebell-blue.

It's not even the mile upon mile of winding lane – so narrow even the odd passing tractor seems to breathe in – where you can meander for hours without seeing a house or another passing soul.


No. It's all of these things combined – villages, market towns, remote slopes and giddy peaks – alongside the people: the very real people who make their home in, work in, love and care for the Cotswolds as a true living landscape.

If the above sounds too Edward Thomas, too Laurie Lee, there are reasons for that. Firstly, if you've ever been to mellow Broadway, or overlooked a steep-sided Lypiatt valley (perfect for the old Cotswold pastime of pichy powlin), or flown a kite high among the dilly dumps of Minchinhampton






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The advantages would be manifold for the Cotswolds, for England, and for the many millions who continue to enjoy one of the most beautiful, distinct, idiosyncratic and desirable parts of the globe.



Common, you'll understand that the Cotswolds genuinely does inspire poetry. It prompts gasps of pleasure at the view around a bucolic corner; at a broad expanse of terraced houses where the stones look as if they've captured the very sunlight within their crevices; at a Neolithic barrow dominating an almost-empty plain. There aren't too many places left that do that nowadays.

But don't think that beauty protects the Cotswolds from 21st century threats.

To take one iconic example: the Slad Valley in Stroud – made famous by Cider With Rosie – most recently came under threat from a speculative developer. That literary heritage cut no ice with the applicants. As the planner in charge explained, the would-be builders' first question was to ask (with knowing irony) where Laurie Lee's name appeared on the local plan.

In other words, Lee's 'tangled woods and sprawling fields' might inspire overwhelming emotion, but no amount of emotion will protect them in the long run.

And the demands are present and clear:

- Housing: in 2017, CPRE's review of housing in England's ANOBs identified the Cotswolds as one of the most pressurised protected landscapes;
- Infrastructure: in the form of Highways England's A417 Missing Link and Network Rail's Great Western line electrification;
- Population and visitors: 150,000 residents and 23 million day-visits a year.

People love the Cotswolds. City-escapees – more and more of them, as pollution increases – are attracted by the region's accessibility and communication networks. Visitors, from home and away, flock to enjoy the open views, fresh air, and breathing space here.

Who can blame them? But, as a counter-balance, there needs to be an overview; a way of pulling together the current fragmentary decision-making process; a means of analysing Cotswold attributes and formulating a consistent and knowledgeable way of taking them forward. A fair method, in other words, of protecting the interests of residents, of visitors, of incomers; and of the hills and valleys, the flora and fauna, the mellow streets and the babbling streams, while allowing the future a pathway.

Let's look at a few more salient facts

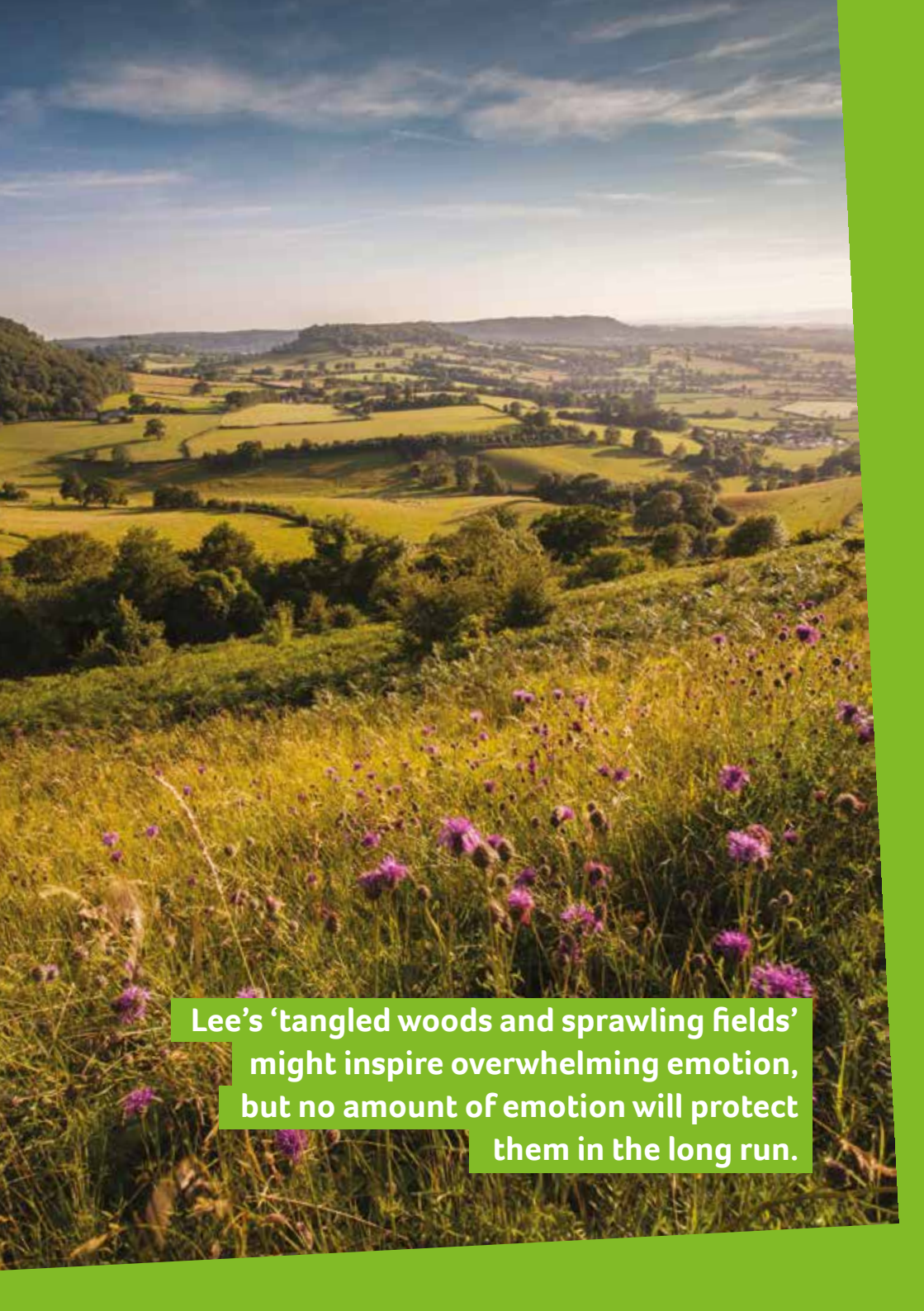
In 1966, the uniqueness of the Cotswolds' long-acknowledged beauty was formally recognised by its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB): at 790 sq miles, it is the largest of the AONBs and the third largest Protected Landscape in England after the Lakes and Dales National Parks.

The Government makes no distinction in the quality of beauty required of an AONB and a National Park; to put it another way, the Cotswolds – with its stunning market towns, breath-taking villages, and still-tangible remoteness of settlements – is as much a beating heart of Englishness as any of its more closely-protected cousins.

The problem is, the Cotswolds has no neat boundaries; its escarpment to the west, its dip-slopes and valleys of the east; the majesty of Bath in the south and the mellow charm of Chipping Campden in the north: these treasures meander over 15 local authorities, five counties and three regions.

Let's be frank. Without National Park status, this diversity of governance undermines the whole vision of the Cotswolds' original, enlightened designation as a highly-valued landscape.





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With National Park status, on the other hand, the Cotswolds would see:

- A more coordinated, consistent, sustainable and dynamic approach to management, putting conservation, beauty, understanding and enjoyment at the heart of decision-making;
- A better focus on existing and pressing needs, such as affordable housing, local employment, sustainable farming, tourism, forestry, and the well-being of communities;
- Enhanced public understanding and engagement: we know for a fact that people all over the world more readily understand and appreciate the title 'National Park'.

Nobody wants to stifle the Cotswolds. In fact, most people want the opposite. For despite its traditions – the Cotswold Olimpick Games with its shin-kicking and torchlight procession; the insanity of cheese-rolling; the huffing, puffing woosack races – there's plenty of innovation going on. A recent non-profit organisation is Rock the Cotswolds, set up to show off the 'cool' side of the region. There are the diversifying farmers producing world-standard cheese, drink and cured meat (among other produce). Giffords Circus has breathed new life into village greens with its internationally-revered touring shows. And don't forget the industrial heritage and current cutting-edge factories: the jet engine was invented here; companies such as GE Aviation are continuing to lead the market.

This application – this plea – to consider the case for National Park status looks in three directions at once. It looks to honour the past; it looks to acknowledge the needs of the present; and it pledges its troth to the future, just as the current Government has vowed. This Government wants to be the first to leave the environment in an improved state for the next generation. There can be no better start than with the Cotswolds.

Now for the very good news. This new National Park would have a head start.

The current Cotswolds Conservation Board – whose members work to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB; to increase the understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities; and to foster the socio-economic well-being of its communities – is already modelled on a National Park Authority. It would be a small step to adapt to National Park status.

A small step – but a giant leap for the Cotswolds

Think of it: one body, delivering a sustainable, joined-up, environmental, ecological and economic plan; gathering together the current fragmentation to lead, advise and invest, as one, in all the elements that help the Cotswold countryside and its associated settlements to thrive. A National Park leading the way in sustainable rural development, championing rural skills, welcoming and educating visitors; and, above all, protecting through expert and appropriate development design, the landscape, biodiversity and vernacular of the region for all time.

The advantages would be manifold for the Cotswolds, for England, and for the many millions who continue to enjoy one of the most beautiful, distinct, idiosyncratic and desirable parts of the globe.

One grain of sand was all it took to begin to build the Cotswolds.

One courageous decision is all it would take to mark the start of a whole new future.

Other National Parks in England & Wales



The Cotswolds AONB and surrounding area



The Cotswolds is accessible for many of its neighbouring towns and cities.



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What do you think?

Share your thoughts at

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