

DESIGNATION HISTORY OF THE NORFOLK COAST AONB

(derived from Designation History Series - The Norfolk Coast AONB, Ray Woolmore)

Work leading to the establishment of National Parks in England and Wales started in the late 1930s. The North Norfolk Coast was listed as one of 52 'conservation areas' of high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value in Appendix C of a report in 1947 by the National Parks Committee, chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse, to the Government (the 'Hobhouse Report'). Although not recommended as prospective national parks, these areas were seen as meriting some form of national protection in the future.

The North Norfolk Coast conservation area covered 44 square miles (114 square kilometres), stretching from Holme-next-the-Sea as far as Mundesley. The nature conservation and geomorphological interest of this stretch of the North Norfolk coastline had long been acknowledged as being of national, if not of European, significance. From Holme-next-the-Sea to Weybourne it included a coastal strip taking in marshland, saltings, mud-flats, extensive sand and shingle ridges, sand dunes, and villages and small ports (like Wells-next-the-Sea), bounded inland by the main road linking the coastal settlements. East of Weybourne the area was based on the chalk and boulder clay of a 300ft (91m) high ridge, mainly in woodland and farmland, but also taking in the 100ft (30m) high rapidly eroding cliffs around Trimmingham, and the holiday resorts of Sheringham, Cromer and Mundesley.

The first priority of the National Parks Commission (the NPC), established under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, was to designate the National Parks. By 1954 that programme was so well advanced that the NPC could start to consider the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), candidates for which were largely (though not entirely) based on

the list of conservation areas in Appendix C of the Hobhouse Report. The first AONB (Gower) was confirmed in 1956, and others followed. The North Norfolk Coast was not given priority in the programme until July 1960, the NPC finally agreeing to move towards designation of the North Norfolk Coast as an AONB in June 1961.

Following preparation of a draft map and informal consultation including a meeting with Mr Maxwell, the County Planning Officer, a survey party visited the area in May 1962. This visit by an NPC party was the first of many, always including Professor Steers, an eminent Coastal Geomorphologist at Cambridge University, which would follow over the next few years.

The NPC agreed the draft boundary proposed by the survey party and decided that before proceeding further NPC officers should discuss with Norfolk County Council officers the steps that should be taken to enhance and preserve natural beauty once the area was designated. Accordingly, Mr Maxwell wrote to the NPC in August 1962 setting out a comprehensive programme of works and actions which would follow from the designation of the North Norfolk Coast as an AONB. He also added that he wanted the whole of the Norfolk coastline, less the southern shores of the Wash west of King's Lynn and the Sandringham Estate (because he was uncertain of whether the Sovereign's private estate could be legally included in an AONB) designated as an AONB.

The NPC considered Mr Maxwell's views and proposals at their October 1962 meeting and decided to make another inspection of the coastline in March 1963, with Lord Strang (the NPC Chairman) and Professor Steers joining Mr Maxwell. Although at its meeting in March 1963 the NPC did not feel disposed to accept the major eastward extension of the AONB

between Mundesley and the Broads put forward by Mr Maxwell, they accepted that the question of enlarging the designation, both eastward and westwards, could be reconsidered if the programme of works for the amelioration of the landscape impact of unsightly beach developments and coastal defence works was satisfactory and agreed in principle by the County Council. The subtle name change recorded in the NPC minutes from the previous "North Norfolk Coast AONB" to "Norfolk Coast AONB", suggest that Mr Maxwell's views on the inclusion of a much wider coastline in the AONB had, at least in part, won the day.

In January 1964 the NPC accepted a comprehensive 20 year improvement programme of works prepared by Mr Maxwell for the removal of defence works, and for the removal or regrouping of caravan camps, chalets and beach huts, together with a revised boundary including an eastern extension from Mundesley to Happisburgh and a western outlier based on the Sandringham Estate and the adjacent section of the Wash, having established with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government that Sandringham Estate could be included in the proposed AONB and that Her Majesty the Queen had no objection to this.

However, the Ministry also raised doubts about the quality of the landscape elsewhere in the proposed area of designation. Over the next two years, further consultations and visits by survey parties took place. These resulted in amendments to the proposed area comprising omission of sections of the coast from Paston to Sea Palling and from Holme-next-the-Sea to Boathouse Creek (Wolferton Creek), and addition of inland areas around Aylmerton, near Holt, and east and south of Heacham.

Formal consultation on this draft map with the eleven local authorities affected by the proposed designation, together with informal consultations with other bodies, commenced in November 1966. However, the designation

process for the AONB was complicated towards the end of 1966 when the Gas Council and Shell submitted a planning application of national importance to develop a terminal for North Sea Gas near Bacton, intruding into the eastern edge of the main section of the proposed AONB. The NPC and the County Council opposed the application formally at the public inquiry in 1967. The inquiry considered a number of alternative inland sites for the terminal but eventually decided that the terminal should be permitted on the original cliff top site chosen by the developers.

Consultation on the AONB boundary had continued meanwhile, and following the inquiry decision the NPC considered the results of the formal consultations on the proposed AONB boundary. Of the eleven local authorities consulted, nine either approved the proposals or made no comment. Of the two making representations, Sheringham UDC wanted the inclusion of Sheringham Golf Links in the AONB, while Freebridge Lynn RDC objected to the inclusion of its area in the AONB on the grounds that the Royal Estate of Sandringham was unlikely to be subject to any undesirable development; the coastal part of the District (part of the Wash) was not considered to be of outstanding natural beauty; the Castle Rising and South Wootton areas were already adequately looked after by the local planning authorities; and finally, because the Council considered that making the area an AONB would merely be the first step in making the area a National Park. Freebridge Lynn RDC later withdrew their objections on the understanding that, in conjunction with the County Council, they retained no less control over the areas concerned than they exercised at the time.

In their informal comments the CEGB referred to the possibility of developing a power station (perhaps a nuclear one) on the site of an old military camp at Weybourne plus, if

this materialised, two 400KV transmission lines crossing the AONB to the west. The CEGB hoped that these possible developments could be considered on their merits by the NPC. The National Trust supported Sheringham UDC in wanting to include Sheringham Golf Links in the AONB. The CLA, Norfolk Branch, repeated the County Council's original views seeking designation of the whole of the Norfolk coastline, especially seeking the inclusion of Horsey Mere and Hickling Broad in the AONB.

The NPC decided to exclude the Bacton Gas Terminal site from the AONB; to include Sheringham Golf Links in the AONB; to retain the Freebridge Lynn RDC areas of the proposed AONB and (rejecting the CEGB concerns) the old military camp at Weybourne within the designation; and finally to consider adding Horsey Mere and Hickling Broad to the eastern outlier of the AONB. (In fact, as the NPC decided much earlier not to include those areas in the AONB, but to consider them as part of a Broads National Park, no further action was taken on the Horsey Mere and Hickling Broad suggestion.)

The NPC published notice in October 1967 that they proposed to make the Norfolk Coast AONB Designation Order, and invited representations. At their meeting in November 1967 the NPC considered three such representations. The Nature Conservancy called attention to the fact that while the proposed designation included all the major coastal sites of conservation interest in Norfolk, they were concerned that the southern half of the Winterton Great Valley SSSI had been excluded from the eastern outlier of the AONB. The Crown Estate Commissioners made no objection as such, but merely observed that a considerable part of the western outlier of the AONB covered the Wash, which was part of the Crown Estate, and thus needed the latter's agreement to any actions undertaken under Section 87 of the 1949 Act. Messrs Luard and Company objected on behalf of their clients,

the East Anglian Real Property Company Ltd, requesting the exclusion of land at Paston Hall Farm (adjacent to the approved Gas Terminal site) to allow for future gas related developments.

The NPC rejected the Nature Conservancy's representation because the area's landscape quality was not of high enough standard, and rejected Messrs Luard and Company's representation on the grounds that the boundary had already been amended to exclude the approved site for the Bacton Gas Terminal, and because they were satisfied that the landscape quality of the additional land at Paston Hall Farm was of AONB standard.

The Order for Designation was officially signed and sealed on 28 November 1967, and was confirmed, without modification, by the Minister of Housing and Local Government on 8 April 1968.

The final area confirmed, (174 square miles, but re-measured in the 1990s as 451 square kilometres) included the greater part of the remaining unspoiled coastal areas between the Wash and Great Yarmouth. The western outlier, coming within two miles of King's Lynn, took in part of Sandringham Estate including Sandringham House, and also about six miles of the south-eastern corner of the Wash. The holiday resort of Hunstanton, and the coast immediately to the south of it, was not included, but from nearby Holme-next-the-Sea a continuous coastal strip, varying in depth between three to five miles, extended eastwards to a point near Bacton, excluding the built-up areas of the resorts of Sheringham, Cromer and Mundesley. The eastern outlier stretched from Sea Palling to Winterton, including the magnificent dune system of Winterton Dunes.

A full description of the landscape of the Norfolk Coast is contained in the Countryside Commission's Landscape Assessment (CCP 486), *The Norfolk Coast Landscape*, published in 1995.