

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

Park Life

At first sight awarding National Park status to the Cotswolds seems like a no-brainer. But all is not as simple as it seems. Katie Jarvis reports

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 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.

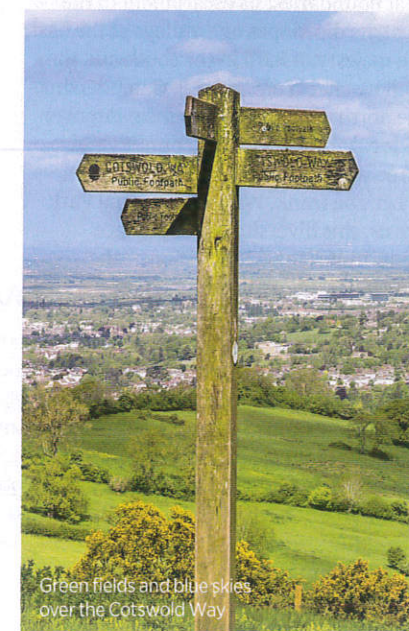
And the demands are present and clear:

- **Housing:** in 2017, CPRE's review of housing in England's AONBs 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.

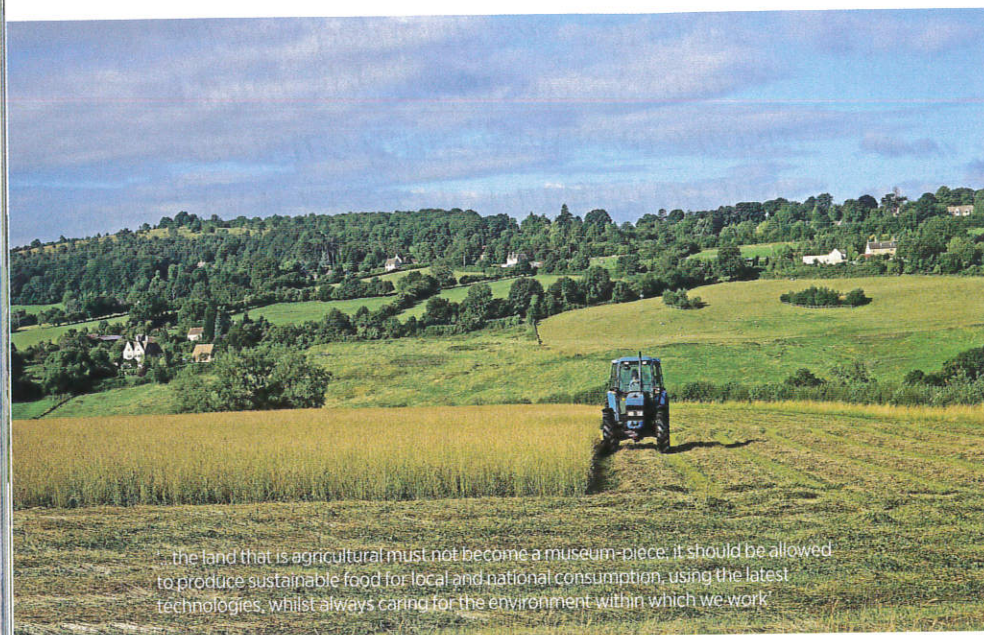
People love the Cotswolds. City-escapees – more and more of them, as pollution increases – are attracted by the region's accessibility and communication networks. Visitors, from home and away, flock in upward numbers.

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

Gently rolling patchwork farmland in the Cotswolds



Green fields and blue skies over the Cotswold Way



the land that is agricultural must not become a museum-piece. It should be allowed to produce sustainable food for local and national consumption, using the latest technologies, whilst always caring for the environment within which we work

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.

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 woolsack 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. ♦

Think big... or be cautious?



RICHARD LLOYD
on behalf
of CPRE

We welcome the chance to debate how best to retain the special character of the Cotswolds for future generations

of visitors and for the communities which live there. This unique harmony of historic towns and villages and the surrounding landscape, both shaped by golden limestone, is under threat as never before. The Cotswolds is becoming an area where those who work there cannot afford to live there. It is now a commuter haven fuelled by the profits developers can make from selling premium properties and by excessive central government housing targets. In Cotswold District, for example, 50% of working-age people commute out of the area, while 50% of the local jobs are filled by in-commuters – it was 20% only 15 years ago.

The status of an AONB has proved inadequate against these pressures, while the fragmented approach to governance across a multiplicity of organisations and local government areas means opportunities to greatly enhance the environment at a landscape scale are being missed. The simplest way to take the area forward is for it to become a National Park focused on meeting the area's environmental and community needs, rather than the very different trade-offs individual local planning authorities have to make between development and protecting the landscape. If a National Park is not to be, then it is essential that the powers and resources of the Cotswolds Conservation Board are greatly increased so it has a real say in formulating policy and in initiating large-scale long-term environmental projects.

DANIEL SZOR
founder and
CEO of the
Cotswolds
Distillery;
member of
the Cotswolds
Conservation
Board:



From a personal point of view, I couldn't be more in favour [of National Park status]; you're talking to somebody who has set up a business for the sole reason of being able to be in the Cotswolds.

Over the past year of being a Secretary of State-appointed member of the Cotswolds Conservation Board, however, I've become familiar with just how little money there is to continue to make the Cotswolds what it is; to protect, nourish and improve it. There's so little money. The ability to go out there and enjoy our area – which has a cost to it in terms of maintenance – is borne quite a bit right now by volunteers. Whether you're talking about taking kids out into the open air; or building a drystone wall; or working on forestry: to quote a famous author, they currently survive on the kindness of strangers; they survive on grants. We know National Parks get a more significant allocation, so why would I not be in favour!

From a business perspective, I have made the Cotswolds my brand. But when you talk about brands, you talk about brand recognition; the brand recognition of the word 'AONB' is very low. A National Park is a brand that's understood worldwide: the highest authority in the land has considered these areas worthy of protection.

My message to the Cotswolds is: Think big! You're worth it. You should be a National Park.

JAMES COX
Kingscote
farmer and
deputy chair of
Gloucestershire
NFU



Farmers are extremely proud of the contribution

they make to the picturesque landscape of the Cotswolds AONB and their role is a significant one, as more than 85% of the land within the AONB is agricultural. That landscape has developed and adapted over the generations as the requirement to produce food, whilst maintaining and enhancing the environment, has evolved. As pressure from different legislative, environmental and consumer demands falls on agriculture, farming businesses need to be ever more nimble, and be able to adapt, invest and diversify to provide a vibrant industry for the next generation. It has been extremely difficult to find any farmers within existing National Parks who would say their job has been made easier by being within a National Park. Our greatest concern would be that, if the Cotswolds AONB were to be designated a National Park, innovation and investment in agriculture could be stifled by restrictions, particularly in planning regulations. Farming would struggle to support that change of status unless there were considerable changes to how the rules were implemented in comparison to current National Parks. The Cotswolds contains some stunningly beautiful towns and villages within its landscape, but the land that is agricultural must not become a museum-piece; it should be allowed to produce sustainable food for local and national consumption, using the latest technologies, whilst always caring for the environment within which we work.

From a democratic planning perspective:

It is difficult at this stage accurately to assess the impact of a Cotswold National Park designation on Cotswold District Council and its planning service. However, as approximately 80% of Cotswold District falls within the Cotswolds AONB, any review of the future direction for protected landscapes is likely to impact directly on the

council and its communities and businesses.

Officers are evaluating the potential benefits/disadvantages of National Park designation, so that the council is best placed to respond, with evidence, to any formal consultation process.

In AONBs, the planning function (development management and strategic

planning) currently sits with the district and county councils; but in National Parks, it falls within the remit of the National Park Authorities. However, National Park Authorities can delegate the planning function back to local authorities – which does occur in some places. This model may or may not continue after the Glover Review.

At present, the council does not have a formal view on designation. However, there are real concerns about potential implications (eg increased bureaucracy; inappropriate tourism pressures; democratic deficit; planning policy), which need to be fully investigated and balanced against the potential benefits.