

# The Designation History of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB

## Introduction

The foundation of the Natural Beauty and Special Qualities document for the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB is the:

[Guidance for assessing landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England](#)

And it is this approach which underpins the contents of The Natural Beauty and Special Qualities document, as set out in:

[https://www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/V1.8\\_Natural-Beauty-and-Special-Qualities-of-the-Suffolk-Coast-and-Heath....pdf](https://www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/V1.8_Natural-Beauty-and-Special-Qualities-of-the-Suffolk-Coast-and-Heath....pdf)

The origins rational and approach to this work is set out in the introduction to that document, which includes the following:

*“This document was developed by EDF Energy, as part of their preparatory work for the proposed Sizewell project in consultation and agreement with the AONB Partnership, Suffolk Coastal District Council and Suffolk County Council. It follows a rigorous criteria-based approach, building on the existing Natural England process for the designation of protected landscapes. It forms an important part of the baseline to help inform the design of the proposed development and against which to judge the effects of the proposed development on the protected landscape and its special qualities, but clearly will be of significant wider benefit to the AONB Partnership in **articulating what is characteristic and special about this nationally important landscape including its relationship to adjacent offshore areas.**”*

In addition, the development of the Natural Beauty and Special Qualities document included a review of exiting published material. The history of the designation of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB is summarised in a short paper, forming part of a ‘Designation History Series<sup>1</sup>’ published by the Countryside Commission in 1999. That document, and this summary of it, was originally gathered and prepared as a background papers for the development of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Special Qualities document.

That is presented here to provide some additional background context and supporting information for the discussion and consideration of the impacts of the applicant’s proposals on the AONB, particularly on the AONB special qualities and the reasons for designation.

However, as noted elsewhere, the Council defers to Natural England the Government’s advisor on nationally designated landscapes, on these matters.

## Suffolk Coast and Heaths Designation History

During World War II, John Dower was requested by Government to study the problems relating to the establishment of National Parks in England. His report (May 1945) included the Suffolk Coast and Heaths in the ‘Division C’ list of ‘Other Amenity Areas’ not suggested for National Parks but as areas of landscape beauty which merited some form of protection in the future.

Many of these ‘Other Amenity Areas’ became the basis of the 52 conservation areas of high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value listed in the July 1947 report of the National Parks Committee, that was established by Government following the Dower Report and

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A - Ray Woolmore (1999) Designation History Series Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, Countryside Commission

chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse. An area of 332 km<sup>2</sup> called the Suffolk Coast and Heaths was included in the Hobhouse list of conservation areas.

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths conservation area lay along the Suffolk coast from Kessingland to the Deben Estuary, and inland to the border between the mainly sandy heathland and woodlands of the Suffolk Sandlings and the inland boulder clay country (Map 1 – Woolmer 1999 Appendix A). With the exception of Southwold, all of the small and attractive settlements on the coast were included in the Hobhouse conservation area. It also included Forestry Commission plantations and the two wartime airfields of Bentwaters and Woodbridge.

After the completion of its National Parks programme in 1957 The National Parks Commission began to designate AONBs using the Hobhouse conservation areas for its list of proposals. During its initial review, the Suffolk Coast and Heaths was given a low priority for designation. However, the emergence of a proposal for a nuclear power station on the Suffolk coast in early 1958 bought forward the plans to designate the Suffolk Coast and Heaths as an AONB. By July 1958 the Commission had approved a draft boundary to submit informally to East Suffolk County Council in advance of formal consultations to designate the AONB.

The area for formal consultation broadly followed that of the Hobhouse conservation area, but with several additions, including land fronting the Orwell Estuary. It also excluded the Tunstall and Rendlesham Forest areas and the airfields at Bentwaters and Woodbridge.

The National Parks Commission consulted formally on the designation and considered the findings of two expert reports on the geography and geology of the proposed AONB prepared by Professor Steers, a National Parks Commissioner, and an eminent coastal geomorphologist. The report by professor Steers considered the inner boundary of the AONB and advocated the use of a line broadly following the geological boundary between the boulder clay interior of Suffolk and the crags, gravels and sands which gave the coastal heaths their particular character. Professor Steers noted that “neither forests nor aerodromes are everlasting!”, and that despite a good deal of afforestation and the Woodbridge aerodrome, the areas affected still retained a distinct heathland character.

In 1967 the National Parks Commission agreed that action should be directed towards the designation of several areas, including the Suffolk Coast and Heaths. A period of further consultation followed the responses to which were coordinated by East Suffolk County Council.

Several proposed amendments to the boundary proposed by the County Council were reviewed by the Commissions Field Advisor, L J Watson. These included the inclusion of an area with “Constablesque” character on the northern bank of the Stour Estuary and a large area of heathland and forest – Sutton Common, Rendlesham Forest and Tunstall Forest including airfields at Brentwaters and Woodbridge. Whilst these areas had been excluded from the earlier 1959/60 designation their inclusion reflected the views of Professor Steers.

The proposal to extend the AONB to include the Trimley Estate and land on the south bank of the Deben estuary were considered at the National Parks Commissions 1969 May meeting. At this same meeting, the Commission authorised formal advertisement of the designation order.

At the Commission’s October 1969 meeting further small boundary alignments were accepted. At the same meeting, the Commission authorised the making of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB (Designation) Order, 1969. The Order was confirmed by the Secretary of State for the Environment on 4 March 1970. The designation covered 403 km<sup>2</sup>, significantly larger than the original Hobhouse conservation area of 332 km<sup>2</sup> – mainly as a result of the addition of land alongside the three estuaries of the Deben, Orwell and Stour.

## Interpreting the Woolmore Report

Ray Woolmore's report describing the designation history of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB does not contain an explicit description of the reasons for designating the Conservation Area/AONB or the detailed criteria that were used to define the Conservation Area/AONB boundary. However, it does make several broad comments that provide some indication as to the value placed on certain aspects of the landscape that contributed to its special quality, natural beauty and sense of place at the time that plans for the designation were being developed. These are summarised below

- Suffolk coast, including low cliffs, gravels and sands;
- Low drowned valleys of the Deben, Alde/Ore and Blyth;
- Extensive saltings and marshes and shingle features (such as Orford Ness);
- Sandy heathland (the Suffolk Sandlings) and woodlands;
- Scenically quiet, unspoilt and remote quality with subtle contrasts in character between river estuary, marshland, and the heathland and woodland above; and
- Small attractive settlements on the coast.

With regard to the definition of the inland boundary of the Conservation Area, Woolmore notes that this was "broadly geological, and marked the border between the inland boulder clay country of Suffolk and its coastal fringe."

Woolmore goes on to report various discussions concerning the inclusion and exclusion of certain areas of land in the designated AONB. It is interesting to note that areas of 'Constabalesque' landscape were included, as were large areas of heathland and forest and the airfields at Bentwaters and Woodbridge. Farmed 'Constabalesque' countryside, airfields and managed coniferous forest all indicate a significant and perceptible degree of human influence, indicating perhaps that from the outset the importance of the designation was recognised as both a natural and a cultural landscape.

Both the Conservation Area and AONB Boundary were drawn to include the Sizewell site. Indeed, Woolmore notes that it was the emergence of a proposal for a nuclear power station on the Suffolk coast in 1958 that brought forward plans that year by the National Parks Commission to designate the AONB. Sizewell A power station was commissioned in 1966 – four years before the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Designation Order which was confirmed by the Secretary of State for the Environment on 4 March 1970.

**Designation History Series**  
**Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB**

*Without Folios*

Ray Woolmore  
Senior Planning Officer  
Countryside Commission  
1999

## **SUFFOLK COAST & HEATHS AONB**

### **Origin of proposal**

1. During the 2nd World War, John Dower was requested by Government to study the problems relating to the establishment of National Parks in England and Wales and his Report<sup>1</sup> (May 1945) included the Suffolk Coast and Heaths in his list (Division C) of "Other Amenity Areas" not suggested as National Parks, but as areas of landscape beauty which merited some form of national protection in the future. Many of these "Other Amenity Areas" became the basis of the 52 conservation areas of high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value listed in the July 1947 Report of the National Parks Committee, established by Government following the Dower Report, and chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse.<sup>2</sup> An area of 128 sq miles or 332 sq kilometres (Map 1) called the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths was included in Hobhouse's list of Conservation Areas.

2. The Conservation Area stretched south along the Suffolk coast from Kessingland in the north to the Deben Estuary in the south, including low cliffs in crag, gravels and sands, the low drowned valleys of the Deben, Ore, Alde and Blythe, extensive saltings and marshes, and shingle features like the massive bar of Orford Ness. Inland the boundary was broadly geological, and marked the border between the inland boulder clay country of Suffolk and its coastal fringe, mainly in sandy heathland (the Suffolk Sandlings) and woodlands. To the south the area extended seven or eight miles inland, almost to Woodbridge while to the north its width varied from two to four miles. Scenically the area had a quiet, unspoilt, and remote quality, with subtle contrasts in character between river estuary, marshland and the heathland and woodland above. With the exception (puzzling) of the town of Southwold all the small and attractive settlements on the coast were included in the Hobhouse area, and inland also included Forestry Commission plantations and the two wartime airfields of Bentwaters and Woodbridge.

### **Designation History**

3. After the completion of its National Park programme in 1957, the National Parks Commission (NPC) turned its attention to designating AONBs using the Hobhouse conservation areas for its initial list of proposals. The NPC reviewed a possible programme of AONB designations in 1957, including the Suffolk Coast and Heaths but gave the area low priority. However the emergence of a proposal for a nuclear power station on the Suffolk Coast in early 1958<sup>3</sup>, brought forward plans to designate the Suffolk Coast and Heaths as an AONB<sup>4</sup>, and by July 1958<sup>5</sup> the Commission had approved a draft boundary to submit informally to the East Suffolk County Council in advance of formal consultations of their proposal to designate the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. After taking into account the views of the County Council, the NPC's area for formal consultation accorded

broadly with the Hobhouse area (Map 1) but with the following differences - it also included land fronting the Orwell Estuary, defined in the East Suffolk County Development Plan as GLV (Great Landscape Value) - but excluded the Tunstall and Rendlesham Forest areas, as they were both affected by Forestry Commission plantations, and the airfields at Bentwaters and Woodbridge.

4. The NPC consulted formally with local authorities on the designation as described above in December 1959; and at their Feb 1960<sup>6</sup> meeting considered a paper (A/G/801) summarising the results of the formal consultation. They noted that the East Suffolk County Council (which had been strongly lobbied by farming and landowners' organisations opposing the principle of designation) had recommended that the designation be deferred for 3 years. The NPC decided not to designate the area immediately, though agreed also that designation could not be deferred for any stated period. Importantly too, they decided to call a meeting between representatives of the Council and the Commission to discuss the designation with a view to dispelling public misunderstandings about AONBs and their implications. This meeting took place in May 1960, and while the Commission took note of the opposition expressed by the CLA and NFU to the proposal, the Commission decided, at their June meeting<sup>7</sup> to re-affirm their intention to designate the area in due course.

5. However, although more informal contacts took place between the Commission, the County Council, and the CLA, no further action on designation followed for several years, except for the consideration by the Commission in September 1962<sup>8</sup>, of two expert reports on the geography and geology of the proposed AONB by Professor Steers (both a National Parks Commissioner and an eminent coastal geomorphologist). The report by Steers (Papers A/111 and A/112) considered the question of the inner boundary of the AONB; and Steers advocated the use of a line broadly based on the geological boundary between the boulder clay interior of Suffolk and the crags, gravels and sands which gave the Coastal Heaths their particular character. He noted that behind Orford the crag-sand area was up to seven or eight miles wide, and despite the presence of a good deal of afforestation and Woodbridge aerodrome still retained its distinct (heathland) character. Furthermore he pointed out that more than sufficient of the distinct sandy heaths remained to justify inclusion of the whole - "and neither forests nor aerodromes are everlasting!".

6. In February 1967<sup>9</sup> the Commission considered its future AONB programme, and agreed that action should be directed towards the designation of a number of areas, particularly coastal ones, including the Suffolk Coast and Heaths. In November 1967 the Commission wrote to all the local authorities they had consulted on the original proposal in 1959/60, and asked for their current views on the proposal. East Suffolk County Council co-ordinated the responses to the designation in 1968. They observed a general welcome to the proposal from the

local authorities, but initial opposition from the NFU and CLA. However, following discussion, they persuaded the NFU and the CLA to withdraw their opposition. In January 1969 they wrote to the Commission, giving the comments of the bodies consulted and suggested a few amendments to the boundary before the Commission advertised the final Designation Order.

7. These proposed amendments were looked at by the Commission's Field Adviser, L J Watson, and the Commission accepted his recommendations in April 1969<sup>10</sup>, except that with regard to Trimley Estate at the mouth of the Orwell, (affecting the possible extension of Felixstowe Docks) where the Commission asked its officers to discuss this matter again with the County Council.

8. The two major areas, as well as a number of minor areas, added as a result of the County Council's proposals were - a strip of country on the northern bank of the Stour Estuary between Shotley Gate and Cattawade, which the Field Adviser described as being attractive and "Constablesque" in character (it almost linked up with the Constable Country of Dedham Vale AONB), and - a large area of heathland and forest, Sutton Common, Rendlesham Forest and Tunstall Forest, including the airfields at Bentwaters and Woodbridge. While these areas had been excluded from the earlier 1959/60 proposed designation, their inclusion reflected Professor Steers' 1962 views (as reported above). L J Watson, described the airfields as being less of a disfigurement than might be imagined, and that they did not affect distant views.

9. The proposal to extend the AONB to include the Trimley Estate at the entrance to the Orwell Estuary was considered by the Commission at their May 1969<sup>11</sup> meeting, and the County's proposal was accepted, along with another one to extend the AONB to include land (mainly marshland) on the southern bank of the Deben Estuary. The same meeting of the Commission authorised the advertisement of the designation order.

10. The representations received at the advertisement stage related to four small areas of land (as described in Commission Paper A/1045 Sept 1969). Two of these, including inclusion of a small strip of land along the B1069 road at Bentwaters (to allow the boundary to follow the revised line of the road) were accepted by the Commission at their October 1969 meeting<sup>12</sup>. At the same meeting the Commission authorised the making of the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB (Designation) Order, 1969, which was dated 23 October 1969, and then submitted it to the Minister.

11. The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Designation Order was confirmed by the Secretary of State for the Environment on 4 March 1970. It covered (Map 2) an area of 403 square kilometres (151 square miles) of the East Suffolk coast and heathlands, an area considerably larger than the original Hobhouse Conservation

Area (332 square kilometres). A comparison of Map 1 with Map 2 will show that the AONB's larger area was due to the addition of land alongside the three estuaries of the Deben, Orwell and Stour.

### References

1. John Dower, "National Parks in England and Wales", Cmd 6628, HMSO, London, May 1945.
2. The National Parks Committee (Chairman Sir Arthur Hobhouse), "Report of the National Parks Committee (England and Wales)" Cmd 7121, HMSO, London, July 1947.
3. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (1299) held on 26 March, 1958.
4. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (1323) held on 23 April 1958.
5. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (1391) held on 30 July 1958.
6. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (1748) held on 24 February 1960.
7. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (1829) held on 22 June 1960.
8. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (2434) held on 25/26 September 1962.
9. Minutes of the meeting of the National Parks Commission (3791) held on 28 February 1967.
10. Minutes of the meeting of the Countryside Commission (179) held on 1 April 1968.
11. Minutes of the meeting of the Countryside Commission (209) held on 6 May 1969.
12. Minutes of the meeting of the Countryside Commission (331) held on 7 October 1969.









# MAP 2



MAP 2 SUFFOLK COAST AND HEATHS AONB