

Statement of Significance for the Wye Valley AONB

The Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is regarded as one of **the finest lowland landscapes in Britain**, with the River Wye one the **nation's favourite rivers**. The AONB, straddling the English Welsh border, with the river as the centrepiece, is an area of striking contrasts. In the north, the river meanders through the **broad meadows** of the Herefordshire lowlands. The more dramatic scenery, including famous spots like Symonds Yat and Tintern Abbey, lie downstream from Ross-on-Wye. Here the river has cut **dramatic gorges** with sheer **cliffs and steep wooded slopes**, interspersed with broader valley reaches, with rounded hills and bluffs.

The Wye Valley AONB contains a **splendid variety of geological outcrops** and important examples of **active and past geomorphologic processes**. Formed over millions of years, the underlying rocks have been worked on by ice and then the river to produce the landscape of the Wye Valley we recognise today. The differing geology has given rise to a **range of distinctive settlement and farming patterns**. The oldest rocks are the Silurian limestones and sandstones that make up the grey soils of the Woolhope Dome in the north of the AONB. The Old Red Sandstone creates the fertile red and brown soils of the Herefordshire lowlands along with the rich river alluvium of the floodplain. These softer rocks allowed the river to meander more widely. From Lydbrook the river cuts in and out of the harder Carboniferous Limestone strata of the Forest of Dean plateau to form dramatic gorges. The area has a **full sequence of the Carboniferous Limestone Series** and excellent exposures and formations including limestone pavement, quartz conglomerate, caves, natural stream channels and tufa dams.

The Wye Valley is particularly important for its **rich wildlife habitats**. This is reflected in the remarkable juxtaposition of three separate Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), under the European Union's Habitats Directive. The river is a SAC as well as being the first major river to be designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) along its entire length. Nearly a thousand hectares of valley side woodland are also designated a SAC. Nine roosting sites for Greater and Lesser Horseshoe bats make a third SAC. Underlying this are 45 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) including 4 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and 204 County local/key wildlife sites. The limestone woodlands are renowned as a refuge of rare species and form part of **one of the largest remaining areas of ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland in the country**. As a predominantly wooded and riverine environment, the Wye Valley has a greater combination of ancient and natural features than virtually all the other AONBs and National Parks in the UK. Priority Habitats cover nearly 17% of the English part of the AONB. The traditional orchards, pastures, hay meadows, hedges and copses within the farmed landscape also provide rich habitats for wildlife. The strong mosaic of these habitats makes the landscape robust and permeable for many species.

The AONB contains an abundance of sites of historic and cultural significance. Many activities **fundamental to the cultural identity of Britain** have an origin in the Wye Valley. This is reflected in the fact that there are 123 Scheduled Monuments (SMs) in the Wye Valley AONB, 10 registered Parks and Gardens, 17 Conservation Areas and 915 Listed Buildings. The river is

both the backbone and the border of the historic environment that underlays the landscape of the Wye Valley AONB. There is a range of distinctive settlement types and patterns, field systems, and vernacular building styles and materials. The whole of the lower Wye Valley, from Goodrich to Chepstow, has been included in the **Register of Landscapes of Outstanding Historic Interest** in Wales. Features range from caves with Palaeolithic occupation, ancient forests, Roman and Celtic settlements, defensive structures such as hill forts, Offa's Dyke and Mediaeval castles, secluded early churches and monasteries. Tributaries cascade down side valleys to join the Wye, giving focus to settlements and power to **pioneering industries** including wireworks, papermaking, tanning, tin-plate and quarrying. The river was the main transport route up and down the valley, superseded by the railway and eventually the roads. The scenic qualities of the Wye Valley are important in the history of art. Landscaped parks, gardens and viewpoints inspired some of the great British poets and writers. The Reverend William Gilpin was inspired in 1770 to write his treatise on the notion and depiction of landscape and gave birth to the **'picturesque' movement**. As a result of his work the valley became very popular with visitors.

The lower Wye Valley remains nationally renowned as a **destination for tourism and recreation** with 2.3 million tourist days per annum. Overnight stays, while common, are outweighed by day trips with many people travelling for less than 2 hours to visit the Wye Valley. Amongst these visitors are some of the **29,300 residents** living and/or working in the market towns, villages and hamlets of the Wye Valley AONB.

The **high quality environment** of the lower Wye Valley makes a significant contribution to the area's economic development. The natural beauty of the area is recognised as **contributing to economic activities and well-being** such as tourism and inward investment, as well as the overall **quality of life**, making the Wye Valley a more attractive place in which to live and work. However, the general locality is renowned for limited job opportunities. Many residents work outside the AONB, often commuting to Birmingham, Bristol or Cardiff. The reality for some is an area of low incomes, limited housing, inadequate services and poor transport.

Agriculture, forestry and tourism are the main industries that operate in the landscape of the lower Wye Valley along with mineral extraction. Combined together they have to a large extent **crafted the landscape** we see today. Agriculture and forestry are the most apparent land uses with farmland covering 58% of the AONB and woodland 27%. There is a great diversity of enterprises dependant on all these industries, which tend to be characterised by low pay and seasonal employment. The viability of some of these businesses can have significant implication for the natural beauty and social well-being of the area. Tourism, from the early days of The Wye Tour, has focused on the river corridor and the market towns. It is still predominantly based around **enjoyment of the scenic beauty** and the **palimpsest heritage** of the Wye Valley. With increasing diversification tourism is spreading throughout the AONB. Limestone extraction continues at one commercial quarry, with another abutting the AONB boundary. Neither of these quarries are operating at full capacity at the moment.

The majority of employment in the AONB comes from distribution, education, manufacturing, public administration and tourism. The growth of environmentally beneficial activities in these sectors is becoming an increasingly important factor in the local economy. For example the increased interest in **locally produced food** is generating renewed investment locally in environmental land management, local food processing and distribution, food tourism, education and recreation. Other influences that have the potential to benefit the local economy include changes in working practices and the development of woodfuel and other local renewable energy technologies.

The **Special Qualities of the Wye Valley AONB**, which contribute significantly to the ecosystem goods and services of the area, include:

1. Overall Landscape

Biodiversity

2. Woodlands
3. The river & tributaries
4. Species-rich grassland, including small field pattern of un/semi-improved grassland, often bounded by drystone walls or old hedges
5. Boundary habitat diversity & connectivity, e.g. between grassland & woodland, farmland & heathland, tidal river & ASNW, hedges &/or drystone walls, lanes, banks, verges and fields & woods

Geological

6. Silurian Rocks
7. Devonian - Lower Old Red Sandstone
8. Quartz Conglomerate outcropping between Lower and Upper Old Red Sandstone
9. Carboniferous Limestone
10. Riverine geomorphology

Visual and Sensory

11. Picturesque, extensive & dramatic views.
12. Overall sense of tranquillity, sense of remoteness and naturalness / wildness

Historic Environment

13. Prehistoric sites from Palaeolithic to Iron Age
14. Roman and early Medieval sites including Offa's Dyke
15. Mediaeval Defensive and Ecclesiastical sites and associated landscapes
16. Post-medieval industrial sites and associated landscapes
17. Railway heritage
18. Ancient trees
19. Historic / registered parks and gardens
20. Vernacular architecture: Farmsteads, Commoners cottages, Estate houses

Language

21. Welsh language & accent; Forest of Dean & South Herefordshire dialects & accents

Access and Recreation

22. Old tracks: often in sunken ways &/or bounded by drystone walls
23. Offa's Dyke Path
24. Wye Valley Walk

25. Access land

26. Small commons; largest are Coppet Hill, Broadmoor, Staunton Meend, Whitelye, The
Hudnalls

Other

27. Orchards