

16 May 2019. Dorchester Civic Society

Dorchester and the boundary of the proposed Dorset and East Devon National Park: why Dorchester and its landscape setting should be included within the proposed National Park.

1. Introduction.

1.1. *“Dorchester Civic Society exists to stimulate people’s interest in the town and its setting; promote high standards of architecture, urban design and planning; safeguard buildings and areas of historic interest; and promote civic pride.”* The Society, therefore, has a considerable interest in safeguarding the town and its landscape setting both now and for future generations.

1.2. The Dorset and Devon National Park Team submitted its bid to the Glover Review of Designated Landscapes in December 2018. The Team has presented a good in-principle case for designation without, at this stage, specifying a boundary [other than showing the original 1945 proposal comprising the current AONB and the area termed ‘Egdon Heath’ – which was not included in the designated AONB]. Dorchester is not within the present AONB boundary [although part of Poundbury is included]. The Society would argue that National Park boundaries should be drawn wider than AONBs as their purposes are different – National Parks are larger areas suited to tourism and public recreation, whereas AONBs are designated more specifically to protect their natural beauty.

1.3. **Should the principle of designation be accepted, the Dorchester Civic Society would wish to see Dorchester and its surrounding landscape setting included within the proposed area.** This note sets out the way in which Dorchester lies – historically, culturally and geographically – at the heart of the proposed National Park. The Society strongly believes that Dorchester is an integral and cohesive part of the surrounding landscape which, itself, forms the setting of the town. To include nearby landscape without including Dorchester would be an artificial separation which would deny centuries of cultural tradition.

1.4. Dorchester is the hub of a network of road and rail communications connecting to its agricultural hinterland and towns and cities further afield. For over two millennia it has served the rural community of a wide area engaged in farming. It was established as a Roman town in AD 43 after the fall of Maiden Castle, its neighbouring hill fort, which had been the cantonal capital of Celtic Wessex. In following centuries the town expanded to become the nucleus of its County, providing all those services of government, law,

finance, markets, and commerce that promoted the growth of population and rising wealth.

1.5. Today the town underpins a thriving agriculture, service economy, local government, health, legal and financial services and a growing tourism industry. Its population, alongside residents of the surrounding villages, is engaged in all this town based employment. The County's growth in retirement and holiday homes speaks to its attractions: its ambience and facilities meeting the needs of established and new residents alike.

1.6. Dorchester is integral to the surrounding landscape in physical siting, in cultural connections and in everyday life – the very functioning of the area. Successive generations left heritage landscapes, artefacts, buildings and arts. These are now the capital from which Dorchester and its countryside derive much of their daily income. This area has limited possibility of expanding its commercial base. Thus the past will, to some extent, be its future. The proper conservation of all its natural and cultural treasures will allow Dorchester and its hinterland to prosper.

1.7. The Society believes that this submission represents a cogent argument for Dorchester's inclusion in the National Park based both on Dorchester's integral relationship with its surrounding landscape, and its significance as a heritage town - an historic, cultural, and community centre suited to meeting greater recreation and tourism needs.

2. Dorchester has a nationally important cultural and literary heritage:

2.1. **The renowned heritage of Thomas Hardy's literary landscape is centred on Dorchester – his 'Casterbridge'. Dorchester's landscape setting is Hardy's 'Wessex' and Egdon Heath.** Dorchester's position at the heart of Hardy's landscape, [and the focus of all the houses, villages and locations referred to in his novels], is vitally important. Hardy's birthplace at Bockhampton, and later home at Max Gate, [both now owned by the National Trust], lie just to the east, as do Stinsford Church where his heart is buried, and Lower Bockhampton where he first went to school. Dorchester is the centre of the important 'literary tourism' that is associated with Hardy and the venue for the International Hardy Conferences. The following two quotes from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* encapsulate the relationship between Dorchester and its rural setting. That 'distinct' edge referred to remains a feature of the town along its northern edge marked by the Mill Stream.

- *"Casterbridge, as has been hinted, was a place deposited in the block upon a corn field. There was no suburb in the modern sense, or transitional intermixture of town and down. It stood, with regard to the wide fertile land adjoining, clean-cut and distinct, like a chessboard on a green table-cloth"*
- *"Thus Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life; differing from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies set down like boulders on a plain, in a green world in which they have nothing in common. Casterbridge lived by agriculture at one remove further from the fountain-head than the adjoining villages – no more".*

2.2. The **Thomas Hardy Society** has set out its case for the inclusion of Dorchester and surrounding area in its Short Case Study Series No 3, **'Thomas Hardy and the Proposed Dorset National Park'**. The Civic Society endorses the content of the case study, particularly in respect of *"Casterbridge/Dorchester, Egdon Heath"*, and *"Stinsford/Mellstock/Waterston Ridge"*, and will not repeat its content here. The Civic Society fully supports its conclusions, particularly:

- *'Dorchester forms the nodal point of Hardy's life, his fiction and his poetry and as such should be included within the National Park'*. The Civic Society emphasises that the abrupt boundary between town and country does indeed still exist on the north and east of the town, with the water meadows of the Frome marking that boundary which remains an unspoilt and essential part of the character of Dorchester.
- *'Egdon Heath is ... both the fundamental landscape of Hardy and an environmentally sensitive and endangered habitat. Whilst some of it remains unspoilt*

and undeveloped, it is also largely unprotected and vulnerable. It must be incorporated into the National Park'. The Civic Society emphasises the close physical and cultural relationship between the Heath and the town. Egdon Heath is the setting for the 'Return of the Native' and borders Hardy's birthplace [now a National Trust honey pot] at Upper Bockhampton and situated in Thornecombe Wood which is owned by the County Council.

- 'All this area [Stinsford/Mellstock to the Waterston Ridge] must be included within the National park if Hardy's landscape is to be preserved. 'This landscape forms the heart of Hardy's Wessex – if it is to be preserved for posterity, then the downland immediately behind Dorchester needs to be included in the National Park – in particular, the parishes of Stratton, Charminster, Stinsford and Puddletown –traversed by the Ridgeway path from Charminster Down, across Wolfeton Eweleaze to Waterston Ridge.'

The case study effectively makes the Civic Society's point about the close and intimate relationship between Dorchester and Hardy's landscape

- 'The best possible way to preserve this unique literary environment is through the creation of a Dorset National Park, including all those parts of the County described herewith –and so important to Hardy'. **The Civic Society can only add that Dorchester is the centre of that environment and is indivisible from the surrounding landscape which forms the setting of Dorchester.**

2.3. This '**indivisibility**' is illustrated by the various visitor guides to 'Hardy Country'. The *Kingston Maurwood Walkabout No 2* shows the walk connecting with Dorchester's High Street at the County Museum. Noted points of interest include the Frome's watermeadows [Hardy's Vale of Great Dairies], Max Gate, Grey's Bridge and Dorset County Museum. '*Exploring Thomas Hardy's Rural Dorset*' also references St Peter's Church, the King's Arms Hotel, The Corn Exchange, the Antelope Hotel, Hangman's Cottage, Henchard's House [Barclays Bank] and Maumbury Rings – all of which feature in Hardy's novels. Additionally Eric Kennington's memorial statue to Hardy is at Top o'Town.

2.4. Dorchester has many other important cultural associations including **William Barnes – the Dorset dialect poet**, friend and mentor of Hardy. His memorial statue is outside St Peter's Church in High West Street, his Rectory at Old Came and the Church where he was rector at Whitcombe, both just to the east of the town. Of his poems, the internationally known *Linden Lea*, set to music by Vaughan Williams, is a concert mainstay.

2.5. The Tolpuddle Martyrs, transported to Botany Bay in the 1830s, were sentenced at Shire Hall, Dorchester, and form an important foundation of the Trade Union movement. Transportation was debatably a less violent term than that meted out here by Judge Jeffreys after the Monmouth rebellion of 1685. "*Rural life could be far from idyllic.*"

2.6. The town has many other items of cultural interest including the Roman Town House, and the now reburied Roman Baths, the Elisabeth Frink Statues [the Dorset

Martyrs], the Town Pump at Cornhill, the Brewery Square development based on the Eldridge Pope Brewery, the Borough Gardens and Salisbury Fields [both relating to the Roman Walls], the Walls Walks, the Keep Military Museum, and the Charter Market. **All of these are important, not only in their own right, but in their association with, and importantly, as an aid to understanding, the surrounding landscape.**

2.7. Of architectural and town planning significance is Prince Charles's **Poundbury** – within Dorchester and yet also partly within the AONB. It has proved increasingly influential with development professionals and its success is recognised far beyond Dorset. This *“beautiful, unique and fascinating”* development [Poundbury.org.uk] generates many organised tours and individual visits every year. Being set on higher ground, it is prominent in the wider landscape with views particularly to and from Maiden Castle. On the east side of town, just beyond the Walls and Salisbury Field, lies historic **Fordington** acting as a counter point to Poundbury, with its ancient church of St George, village green, and location of several farmhouses prior to the enclosure movement of the early nineteenth century.

3. Dorchester is historically significant:

3.1. Dorchester is the pre-eminent heritage town in Dorset and deservedly should be included within the boundary of the proposed National Park.

3.2. Maiden Castle has an important visual relationship with Dorchester – both looking in and out. The very many Neolithic and Iron Age monuments which surround the town and the wood henge within the town are nationally important. The area has an exceptional concentration of Iron Age hillforts, notably Poundbury Hillfort, and barrows along the ridges which surround Dorchester. Maumbury Ring is itself a Neolithic henge.

3.3. In AD 43 Maiden Castle, Europe's largest hill fort, was overrun by Vespasian's troops and the native people displaced. This 6000 year-old Neolithic capital of the Durotriges tribe gave the seed corn for Dorchester's growth. Until then, the Dorset countryside had 27 hill forts of which Maiden Castle was the cantonal capital. Its adjoining South Dorset Ridgeway, which frames views to the south of Dorchester, is renowned for its 438 long and round barrows in a 12 km length.

3.4. Dorchester is a Roman Town which is significant in its own right but also in relation to its setting. The town retains the line of its Roman Walls. The Walls Walks are nationally acclaimed as one of the earliest known British example of a continental style boulevard. Tourists are able to follow the Walks – established along the line of Roman Walls enclosing the town centre – and still pass grazing roe deer that lie within 300 metres of the Town Hall. *“The farmer's boy could sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office window of the town clerk.....and at executions the waiting crowd stood in a meadow immediately before the drop, out of which the cows had been temporarily driven....”* [Mayor of Casterbridge]. The Roman Town House and other

artefacts within the town are all important. But the town is also significant as a Roman route focus. Roman Roads led out to all points of the compass linking the town with Ilchester, Badbury Rings, Old Sarum [Salisbury], and Weymouth. There is also the Roman aqueduct leading from the Frome in the vicinity of Bradford Peverell to the fountain in Princes Street.

3.5. Dorchester grew out of the produce of the surrounding chalk hills and water meadows. The subsistence pastoral farming, with some cereals, progressed to producing surpluses that assisted the growth of settlements. Dorchester's surrounding chalklands were improved by the 'Golden Hoof' – sheep and corn produced in synergy as soil fertility grew from manure. Over centuries, this gave rise to the lucrative wool and seed trades and, later the local breweries – Eldridge Pope [now the location of the Brewery Square entertainment and residential development], becoming highly regarded in southern England.

3.6. Over centuries, the town set up by the Romans expanded as the wealth of its farms created a merchant class who built homes and public buildings, even manufactories as typified by the town's Lott and Walne foundry at Fordington.

3.7. Dorchester has a wealth of Georgian buildings including the impressive High Street West and East. This notable uniformity of style is the result of the fire of 1613, erasing much of the older thatch and cob. New merchants' homes were later built with stone quarried from Portland and Purbeck, and brick from clay pits at Upwell and Broadmayne – this latter a distinctive pale brown and very durable. There remain a few earlier jettied houses – one from 1480 – including the infamous lodgings of Judge Jeffries who dealt harshly with the failed Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. There are many former coaching Inns. The prominent markers in the High Street are the old Shire Hall of Tolpuddle Martyrs renown, the County Museum – now subject to a major expansion – and the Corn Exchange. Other punctuations here are All Saints and St Peter's churches.

4. Dorchester occupies an important position within the local landscape.

4.1. This intimate connection of town with countryside still exists, with Dorchester a centre of tourism and its necessary transport hub. Hotels and guest houses cater for the influx of visitors who are well served by a large and diverse number of restaurants and cafes.

4.1. Dorchester is connected with its wider landscape by the ridgeways which converge on the town. To the north lies Waterstone Ridge leading to Puddletown in the east and Charminster in the west. To the north-west is Charminster Down leading to Sherborne. And to the south, the distinctive ridge running eastwards from Portesham and the Hardy Monument through Poxwell to connect with the Purbeck Hills. The town is well connected to these historic routeways by a comprehensive network of public footpaths

and bridleways. There are several named public footpaths in the area including the Hardy Way, Macmillan Way, Jubilee Trail and the South Dorset Ridgeway.

4.2. Dorchester is the route focus for the surrounding area and further afield. Apart from the many named walks previously mentioned, the town is a railway, road, bus and cycle route focus. There are two railway stations providing links to Bournemouth, London, Weymouth and Bristol. The A35 trunk road from Bournemouth and the east to Exeter and the south west, bypasses the town. The A37 connects north to Yeovil and Bristol. The A352 connects Wareham and Purbeck to the south east with Sherborne to the north. The A354 connects south to Weymouth and the Jurassic Coast. National Cycle Route 2 passes east- west through the town connecting Wareham and Poole Harbour in the east with Bridport and Lyme Regis in the west. National Cycle Route 26 passes north-south through the town connecting Yeovil and Sherborne in the north with Weymouth and Portland in the south.

4.3. The walk out of the town through Stinsford [and the designated park at Kingston Maurward] and on to West Woodsford Castle is outstanding. The town is indeed fortunate in the many attractive walks that radiate out from the town: to the north to Waterston Ridge and beyond; to the west to Charminster Down; to the south west to link up with the South West Coast Path via Maiden Castle; to the south to Weymouth; and to the south east through Broadmayne and on to the sea at Lulworth

5. The area around Dorchester makes a significant contribution to biodiversity.

5.1. The River Frome divides into several streams on the north side of Dorchester. The extensive system of water meadows, which abuts immediately the town's northern edge, is of historic and nature conservation importance. All down the Frome Valley there were water meadows. This system of water channels, weirs and 'hatches' [small gates] to regulate the water levels was developed by Dutch engineers in the 17th century. Whilst the water meadows are no longer maintained, some of the hatches are still used to regulate water levels in certain stretches of the river.

5.2. The Mill Stream acts as the northern edge to Dorchester as it did in Hardy's time. The stream powered Friary Mill and there are also mills to the west [West Mill] and the east [East Mill and Louds Mill]. The River Frome is as important an area of landscape as any upland. The protection of the headwaters of the Frome is a vital part of the protection of Poole Harbour from nitrate pollution.

5.3. Lowland heath ['Egdon Heath'] extends to the east and includes Rainbarrow, Duddle Heath, Bhompston Heath and Puddletown Heath – all of which relate physically to the town – and which surround Hardy's Cottage. Remnants of heath are also found south of the Frome at Knighton Heath and to the west at Black Down [surrounding the monument to the other Hardy and very visible from the town].

6. Dorchester is in an ideal location to act as the natural focus for the National Park.

6.1. Now the County town of Dorset, Dorchester is the area's centre of local government, finance, legal and health services, and market for local produce. Dorchester is an existing visitor focus, a role that it combines with that of administrative centre for the new Dorset Council, public health centre and market town. There would be considerable advantages to locating the administrative centre of the National Park alongside the headquarters of the new Unitary Council.

6.2. Given the need to manage visitor pressures for recreation and tourism across the whole of the proposed National Park, it makes sense to include Dorchester as an urban cultural alternative to the rural natural experience.

7. Conclusion.

7.1. Dorchester has much to offer to justify being included within the National Park. With its location as a route focus, it makes an excellent centre from which to enjoy the National Park. Indeed, visitors on limited breaks often express their regret at having insufficient time to enjoy all that is on offer both within the town and surrounding rural area. Dorchester looks out on all sides to attractive countryside and, in view of the topography, those areas look into Dorchester. In its own right, it is an important Roman, Georgian, Market and County town. It is Hardy's Casterbridge and is at the heart of his Wessex. Its cultural heritage is central to the wider area and it is in an ideal position to promote the understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities. Inclusion within the National Park will create the essential synergy to foster the economic and social well-being of both Dorchester and the wider area.

7.2. The attributes and attractions of Dorchester and its surroundings – its scenery, history, cultural heritage, architecture, civic and commercial functions etc. – create a living whole. But, it is Dorchester that is the nucleus, the core that radiates the energy that drives the local area. Dorchester deserves to be both in and at the heart of the National Park. As a fine wine displays its terroir, though Dorchester is physically distinct from its landscape setting, the town is culturally and emotionally woven into its surroundings.

DCS. 16 May 2019