

## **The Exmoor Society welcomes a new eight-point plan for National Parks and raises concerns over the state of Exmoor's moorlands**

The Exmoor Society Chairman, Mrs Rachel Thomas, in her Annual Report to members at the recent AGM, very much welcomed an eight-point plan for England's National Parks. It was published by the Government in March this year under the themes of Inspiring Environments, Drivers of the Rural Economy and National Treasures. The plan concentrates on core National Park purposes, overcoming concern on the extension of their role into providing services which are the responsibility of Local Authorities who still operate fully within the boundaries of national parks, apart from planning responsibilities. The Exmoor National Park Authority has diverted resources - funding and staff to delivering the eight-point plan for example – by increasing educational activities, supporting farming networks and developing the health and well-being agenda.

She went on to say that the Society itself has a role to play in the new agenda. It is particularly engaged in telling the story of Exmoor as one of the finest landscapes in the country recognised by being a National Park. Through the material in The Exmoor Society archives, for example, it is known that Exmoor nearly missed out in achieving this status in 1954. The stunning scenery, views and extent of the moorland landscape, with its semi-natural vegetation, rich heritage and open access, with the fine coastline was the crucial element providing the essential qualities of being a National Park - openness, wildness and tranquillity for people to experience and enjoy. Four years later, plans to afforest The Chains, the central moorland spine, led to the formation of the Society with its focus, over the next two decades, on fighting moorland loss. This year The Society has acquired photocopies of the original Exmoor 6-inch to 1-mile field maps, produced in the early 1960s but never published, for the 2nd Land Utilisation Survey of England and Wales directed by Professor Alice Coleman. These field maps are of national importance today with their fine detail and, for Exmoor, provide baseline evidence of moorland vegetation, extent and landscape features of the heather and grass moors at that time. They formed the basis of the campaign that saved Exmoor's heather and grass moorland from the plough. Through further detailed work for the Society in 1965, Geoffrey Sinclair estimated that the heather moorland and heaths consisted of 36,865 acres with a smaller area of 13,800 acres of Grass Moorland within the 1820 boundaries of the former Royal Forest or 72.7% to 27% respectively. The significance of moorlands was underlined later when the Exmoor Forest Moorlands were acquired for the nation through an ambitious and innovative purchase including significant

funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. It should be noted that the 25th anniversary of the ceremony marking the acquisition fell on 10 September, and Mrs Thomas called for some recognition of this event such as moving the Charteris cairn to a better site.

Moorland issues, however, remain contentious today, but for different and more complex reasons. Concerns have been raised by many over the increase in scrub and trees onto moorland being classified now as woodland and leading to overall moorland loss, reduction in areas of heather moorland and an increase of molinia grass outside the Royal Forest. There continues to be an anxious debate over traditional moorland management and today's prescriptive agri-environmental regimes not necessarily suitable for Exmoor conditions. This is why the Society had commissioned a report from Robert Deane, *Exmoor's Moorlands – Where Next?*, which was launched at the Spring Conference in April. The Society argues that the moorlands are why Exmoor remains a National Park and are valued for a whole range of special qualities; they dominate the landscape physically and aesthetically providing access to, and experience of, wide open horizons, a sense of freedom, glimpses of the wild, special habitats and wildlife, valuable natural resources, archaeological features and people's long cultural associations with the moorland. The glue, holding all these values together, is livestock grazing managed by farmers whose skills have been honed over the generations. Exmoor upland farmers are rooted in the landscape and understand it better than people from outside.

'However, not every demand for Exmoor's moorland can be met and keeping the balance between the different interests remains a real challenge for the future,' Mrs Thomas concluded, 'There will have to be some compromises and unprecedented times remain particularly now with Brexit. The challenge for Exmoor is to put forward its own land management scheme, within the national framework, tailored to its specific circumstances.'

The AGM, held for the first time in Porlock Village Hall included the presentation of awards: The Founder's Award to Dave Knight, the Brian & Mary Chugg Conservation Award to Rob Wilson-North, the Pinnacle Award to Thomas Lile and the Lucy Perry Poetry Junior Award to Hugh Kilvington. Stimulating talks were given by agricultural economist, Dr Keith Howe, on Brexit options and Robert Deane, Rural Focus consultant, on his recommendations for the future of Exmoor's moorlands.

Date: 19 September 2016

Word Count: 843

Images: Group2016

The Exmoor Society exists to promote and organise action for the conservation and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage of Exmoor national park. It was established in 1958 and successfully fought proposals to afforest The Chains, the central moorland area of Exmoor. It has continued to campaign against adverse changes and encourage people's understanding of the park's special qualities. It acts as an independent watchdog and champion for Exmoor's status as a national park.



From left to right: Dr Keith Howe, Rachel Thomas (Chairman), Dave Knight, Mary Chugg, Thomas Lile, Robert Deane, Sir Antony Acland (President)