

PRESS RELEASE:

SAVING THE SPLENDOUR: New book explores Exmoor Society's struggle to conserve National Park

Some of the most respected names in the British conservation movement in the second half of the 20th century were at times driven to near despair during the struggle to prevent Exmoor's scenic beauty, wildlife and age-old hill farming culture from falling victim to the plough and the conifer. The battles fought over six often turbulent decades by the Exmoor Society, a voluntary body devoted to the well-being of the National Park, are described in a new book, *Saving the Splendour*. The author, journalist Philip Dalling, uses his skills at marshalling facts in an entertaining manner through lively anecdotes and powerful pen portraits and has produced a balanced account of successes and failures from when the Society was founded in 1958.

Just four years after the national park's creation, as the result of a successful local campaign to prevent the iconic central moorland plateau, The Chains, being covered by regimental lines of conifers, the Society was born. Its founder John Coleman Cooke and others recognised that this would not be the final threat to Exmoor's landscape and their concerns proved justified. The early history reveals how author and sometime local farmer Victor Bonham-Carter and veteran campaigner Malcolm MacEwen, who with his wife Ann wrote some of the seminal British works on national parks and conservation in general, both served spells on the Exmoor National Park administration but turned to the Society when they tired of finding themselves in constant conflict with the local government representatives and powerful landowners who dominated the body.

Exmoor straddles the border of West Somerset and North Devon and takes in many miles of spectacular coastal scenery along the Bristol Channel. When plans were first announced to create a National Park the scheme was opposed by both Somerset and Devon County Councils, afraid of losing control of the area in respect of planning and other powers, whilst the response from other bodies and the public as a whole was, at best, lukewarm.

Bonham-Carter and MacEwen soon discovered that the local authority representatives and powerful landowners had a tight grip on the National Park and were generally supportive of extending cultivated areas of the moor, usually in line with Government policy at a time when agriculture and forestry took precedence over conservation.

There were many years of what Victor Bonham-Carter described as 'often bitter conflict' between the powers-that-be and the Society, which culminated in an incident which has passed into legend as "The battle of Exmoor House' (the headquarters of the Park Authority). Police were called to eject the Society's Chairman, who objected forcibly but unsuccessfully to the exclusion from a critical meeting of the press and public. As Bonham-Carter was to recall in later years, "There were fierce arguments on both sides, a lot of bad feeling and the assumption that the Society was a bunch of up-country outsiders interfering in other people's business."

The Society's great strength throughout the difficult times was its insistence on adopting an essentially positive role. It sought to offer alternative solutions to issues, and recruited acknowledged experts in many fields to support its cases. The decision to commission land use and ownership maps of the Park eventually led to the appointment of a Government commission, headed by Lord Porchester, to investigate the best land uses of Exmoor and from the commission's report stemmed many positive measures such as Management Agreements that led to future agri-environmental schemes.

These difficulties were overcome, as Dalling shows. The Society has not always been liked but it has now gained widespread respect and it is generally recognised as being an integral part of the history of Exmoor National Park, and an organisation that punches above its weight. Present-day concerns about conservation and protection of the environment in nationally and internationally important landscapes are discussed with emphasis on evidence-based solutions. Its recent commissioned report “Towards a Register of Exmoor’s Natural Capital” has been praised for breaking new ground as it brings together natural and cultural assets, is place-based and involves farmers identifying all their assets valued by the public and therefore worthy of public payments for public services.

Another aspect of the Society’s work is its support for and encouragement of cultural, social and educational developments on Exmoor. For example, its literary and photographic competitions, contributions to schools through the Exmoor Curriculum and Forest Schools, promotion of theatrical performances and the prestigious Pinnacle Award for young entrepreneurs are part of its successes. The Exmoor Review, its annual journal, is recognised nationally in the national park movement as one of the best magazines covering national park matters.

The official celebration in 2019 of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of British National Parks, hosted by Exmoor National Park Authority in partnership with the Exmoor Society and Exmoor Hill Farming Network and held in the centre of Exmoor where picnickers were joined by The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall was an indication of the Society’s key role in Exmoor life. The book ends with a discussion of the future challenges to Exmoor and how the charity in its role as champion, vigilant watchdog and a critical friend of the Authority and other relevant bodies will face up to them. Anybody who wants to understand Exmoor and who recognises the importance of the inter-relationship between people and landscape beauty, nature, heritage, rural livelihoods and way of life over time should read this well-illustrated, informative and most readable book.

Date: 30 June 2020

Word Count: 903



