

FOREWORD

by Viscountess Downe



My first memory of Danby Lodge reaches back to September 1966, just a year after my marriage to my late husband John, when we came up for the annual grouse-shooting season.

We soon realised that these historic buildings, set in the beautiful surroundings of the Esk Valley, would make an ideal information centre for the National Park. In May 1976 we were delighted when this vision was finally realised with the Lodge opening its doors to visitors for the first time. Since then the Moors Centre has provided a focal point for the tens of thousands of visitors who come each year from near and far to experience and enjoy the heather moors and learn more about the history and culture of this fascinating area.

Sadly, the magnificent copper beech tree that graced the front of the Lodge has now been lost. However, I was heartened to see the memory of this noble tree living on through the imaginative History Tree Project. In 2010 the North Yorkshire Moors Association placed an inscribed commemorative plate where the tree once stood. And now the publication of this attractive book – a varied collection of essays and photographs – brings new life and meaning to the story of the Tree and will inspire a greater understanding and appreciation of our irreplaceable National Park and the natural world which we all share.

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Introduction

One winter's day in early 2007, a truly awful sound echoed around the Esk Valley. From the front of Danby Lodge - The Moors Centre - across the River Esk, over Duck Bridge on to Danby Castle and beyond, incessantly it rasped through the morning air: chainsaws! And whenever this dreadful sound is heard, you can guarantee there is a tree on the receiving end of it.

So it was, in just a few hours, two hundred years of life, formed from the air, rain, soil and sunshine through the passage of time, a magnificent copper beech tree was no more, reduced to a tangle of severed branches, twigs and slices of trunk spread across the ground. Fears over safety had sounded the death knell, demanding it be cut down, and with it went a delightful and irreplaceable feature in the landscape and the setting of the Lodge. It was no-one's fault, no-one to blame, just that – sadly - nothing is forever. But the memory lives on.

Such was the sense of loss of this beautiful tree, that to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the North Yorkshire Moors Association (NYMA), a steel plate etched with events during the decades of its life was placed where the tree once stood. At first it was fixed to the tree stump. Later, when the wood decayed, the remains of the tree were removed and the 'History Tree' plate was set permanently into the ground.

Looking at the empty space today, where the vast branches once stretched across a ha-ha, offering cool shade on summer days, triggers many fond memories for me.



The Moors Centre, Danby Lodge 2018

I first encountered the History Tree 40 years ago, when I came to Danby Lodge to be interviewed for the role of Assistant Director of the National Park Centre. No-one could fail to have been impressed by its imposing presence in front of the buildings. As with any ancient tree it challenged the imagination to contemplate the events it witnessed, or that occurred in the wider world, over its years.

The History Tree

Our tree would have shared this corner of the moors with all manner of events and changes: look-outs passing up or down to Danby Beacon at the time of the Napoleonic wars; the first trains, first motor cars, first aeroplanes and first electric lights, which would begin their insidious assault on the darkness, to mention just a few.

Seasons would come and go, the wind would sound the same, the rain, snow and frost would be the same; the sparkling of moonlight and the stars, the same. The sounds of the birds - the owls, the cuckoo and the curlew, the same; the sounds of war planes; it heard them too, not just during the Second World War, but through the Cold War, as thunderous jets on manoeuvres before the fall of the Soviet Union shook the very foundations of nearby buildings with the shock-waves of their deafening roar.

There are indeed many points in the tree's story that could have been chosen to commemorate on the Plate. Practically, someone had to make that choice, and no doubt each of us would have had a different view.

I will suggest four I might have argued to be added. The first two are rather technical, but hugely important for the National Park, wildlife and the countryside; the third just a lovely experience and the last an event that includes a bit of self-congratulation.

My first choice: the Government scrapping the grant payments for converting heather moorland into grassland in the early 1980s, which had been a devastatingly bad idea for the landscape and all that lived on the moorlands concerned. Having been a part of the campaign aimed at stopping this seriously harmful practice, it was, for me, a pivotal moment in the drive to protect the moorland.



Moorland conversion to grassland

Secondly: the adoption of the EU Habitats Directive (1992) and its associated Regulations, for the key part they have played in establishing Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas for Birds which embrace much of the moorland. These rules placed the onus on anyone proposing change to show that it wouldn't cause harm to the environment, rather than the hitherto other way round.

Thirdly, reflecting the very best of the National Park Movement: the Festival of National Parks at Chatsworth in 1989, held to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the legislation which founded the National Parks. A unique occasion, sadly unlikely ever to be repeated, saw the National Parks putting on a large country fair celebration on a beautiful September day at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, honoured by the presence of Diana, Princess of Wales.

In a complex network of journeys, representatives of each Park visited over 90 cities throughout England as

they worked their way across the country, converging on the centre of Birmingham for a massed rally through the streets, before travelling on to Chatsworth House for the Festival. Staff from our own Moors left Rievaulx Abbey dressed as monks and a nun, towing a two-dimensional sheep on wheels and carrying the banner for the North York Moors.

It was a spectacular demonstration of national park unity and collective sense of purpose.

Finally, I would also have added the foundation of NYMA as a tree-ring position on the plate.

Most National Parks in the United Kingdom have a respective 'friends of the area'. Run by enthusiastic and committed individuals, mostly volunteers, they provide mechanisms to both support the Park Authorities and at times to challenge and hold them to account when the principles which underpin the well-being of the parks appear at risk of being compromised.

What exactly does the North Yorkshire Moors Association actually do, and what has it achieved over the

years? The answer to this question gives me the golden opportunity to unashamedly applaud the Association and to emphasise the importance of membership support for its work. However, a few words and one or two examples can never come anywhere near reflecting its full value.

Since the History Tree was felled, many of the Association's important 'moments in time' post-date the tree's demise. This in no way undermines the logic of mentioning them here. Anyway, the roots of the tree are still down there, decaying back into the earth from which they came, as is the natural order of things.

The 'voice' of NYMA was first heard in 1985, when the Rt. Hon. William Waldegrave, Minister of the Environment, spoke at the inaugural Annual General Meeting of the Association in Hutton-le-Hole.

The vision of the Association's founders, Dr Don Tilley, Major Peter Walker, Derek Statham and Gerald McGuire, had been firmly set to engage, inform, support, enjoy and sometimes challenge in the pursuit of safeguarding the future of the North York Moors landscape and culture.

In the face of constant pressures on the countryside their mission could not have been more timely. For a while, we saw the highpoints of enthusiasm and momentum for positive action for the environment in government and local authorities. This didn't last. In the face of economic pressures, the roles of leading bodies such as the Countryside Commission, champions of the original Countryside Stewardship scheme, Country Parks, Heritage Coasts and Community Forests amongst a suite of other initiatives - and English Nature, guardian of the natural world for the nation - were forced into decline. With narrower remits and



The Festival of National Parks, Chatsworth House

The History Tree

cuts in resources they merged and unacceptably withered into virtually nothing as the practically toothless Natural England, an organisation staffed by dedicated people at local level but with little central support to do the job that really needs to be done.

Only with concerted pressure from the public, through the continued effort of well-informed and motivated individuals and organisations, can we help to moderate the risk of constant attrition and irreversible loss of our precious countryside.

But the Moors aren't just a battleground of gloom. Cliché it might be, but 'laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone', is so very true. Several books have been published by NYMA, the quarterly 'Voice of the Moors' magazine keeps members informed; there are walks, events, talks and visits. Alongside these, direct conservation



Lapwing – the Moors are a stronghold for wildlife

projects have seen tree-planting in Park Wood and nurturing of juniper seedlings to restore this lovely tree to the Park, for example. Most spectacularly, and of great national

significance, a leading role in the collaborative Cornfield Flowers Project with CCT (a conservation charity), the National Park Authority and Ryedale Folk Museum has seen many rare plants of arable fields pulled back from the brink. Without the help of the Association the prospect for some would have been even more bleak.

Looking after the countryside is a bitter-sweet experience. Support for the Moorsbus, a delightful car-free and care-free transport to and around the Moors, is a joy, while at the other end of the spectrum, influencing local and national policies and planning matters, on which the character of the Park ultimately depends, can be a mind-numbing and time-consuming task.

When it comes to inappropriate major developments, the going gets really tough. Along with the Campaign for National Parks, the Association successfully encouraged the Secretary of State to overturn the National Park Authority's decision to allow an extension to Spaunton Quarry, a potential precedent in breach of national policy to avoid the operation of such works in the Parks.

Recent times have seen the National Park Authority, under considerable pressure, narrowly approve by eight votes to seven the proposal to mine polyhalite, used in agricultural fertilisers, including a mine shaft at Sneaton, accompanied by other infrastructure across the landscape to Teesside. A commercial opportunity to exploit for profit a resource in this way has driven a coach-and-horses through the principle of protecting the landscape for future generations - it will never be the same again.

Over many years the Association has sustained a forensic grip on the labyrinthine planning process to seek



The Founders of NYMA: Major Peter Walker, Derek Statham, Gerald McGuire and Don Tilley

to challenge the polyhalite mine project and subsequently to minimise the impact of this highly controversial scheme. Keeping informed and up to date in order to be heard and treated seriously is an unglamorous, daunting, but necessary task in the battle to try to ‘hold the line’ for the quality of the countryside into the future.

Even though the History Tree Plate was laid to commemorate a quarter century of NYMA, I would still have added its foundation into the series of memorable events mimicking the tree-ring growth on the Plate. Without the Association and organisations like it, who would there be to champion the cause?

So, these would be my nominations to add to

the fascinating marks in time explored in this book. The 40 essays which follow, each by an author passionate for their subject, take us deeper into an extraordinary range of ‘things’ which the tree lived through, to engage us with the past, fire enquiring minds to discover more in the present, and most important of all to encourage us to look after the North York Moors National Park into the future.

Whenever I think of the tree and gaze at the space where it once stood, I am invariably left with the same wistful thought ‘it’s a pity it had to be cut down’. But then I am lifted by a quote from Carolus Linnaeus, the 18th century Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist who defined the way we group and name plants: ‘If a tree dies, plant another in its place’. And that’s exactly what the National Park Authority did and what the North Yorkshire Moors Association continues to do when it has an appropriate opportunity.

So, as you enjoy these ‘stepping stones’ of the History Tree’s life over the last two centuries, you might like to speculate a little on the future and the events which the replacement tree might live through. Have we any idea at all? After all, looking back I wonder whether the people who planted the History Tree could even remotely have begun to imagine what it was destined to live through, and the stories now recorded in this book.

Ian Carstairs, OBE

President: North Yorkshire Moors Association

