

# The National Trust and coastal conservation in Devon

David Pinder, BA, PhD, KNAW  
School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences,  
University of Plymouth, Plymouth PL4 8AA

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*Brief consideration of coastal characteristics precedes a review of the growth of the Trust's holdings since the early twentieth century. This growth is shown to have been highly cyclical, the most fruitful periods being the 1930s and, based on the national Neptune funding campaign, 1965–1995. The ways in which properties came into Trust hands are analysed and shown to have become more complex with time. Coastal comparisons identify differences with respect to the pace and manner of growth. Slow growth since the mid-1990s signals a policy shift towards environmental management rather than acquisition. This phase is explored via a range of case studies.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Devon is extremely fortunate to have two outstandingly scenic coasts. Testimony to their high landscape value comes partly from the fact that, except for urban areas, almost every kilometre lies either in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or Exmoor National Park. But recognition of the importance of these landscapes also arises from the scale of the National Trust's presence. Altogether the Trust owns, manages and protects 152 km of coast<sup>1</sup>, the majority concentrated in impressively lengthy sections (Fig. 1). This makes the charity the county's largest coastal landowner, by a very large margin.



Figure 1. Devon: National Trust holdings, 2018, and protected landscapes.

The Trust's strong presence is an undoubted attraction for Devon residents and visitors alike, generating considerable economic, as well as recreational, benefits. Yet it is probable that few who use the coasts – whether to simply sit and admire the view, go for a local walk, or tackle a lengthy section of the South West Coast Path – have more than a general appreciation of the scale of the organisation's activity around the two shorelines. And very few indeed can have more than a passing grasp of how this major estate, from which so many people now benefit, came into being.

Today, insights into these questions can be gained via the internet. Searching for coastal properties by name will frequently bring fragments of information to light on the Trust's numerous web pages. Informative though they are, however, they are no more than fragments, and no substitute for an historical overview.

The aim of this contribution, therefore, is to provide at least an initial historical survey of this important subject. To do so it examines chronologically a series of issues. First, how rapidly have properties been acquired over the decades, and have certain periods been of key importance? Second, how have these properties come into the Trust's possession? What has been the balance between gifts and purchases? Has this balance changed with time? And, a particularly complex issue, how have purchases been funded? Third, has there been a geography, as well as a history, to the story? Have there been, for example, significant differences between the two coasts in terms of the speed of growth or the means of funding? Finally, but of great importance for the future environmental health of Devon's coastlines, to what extent has the emergence of heightened ecological understanding influenced the Trust's approach to land management? Before turning to these issues, however, discussion of coastal character is appropriate as a backdrop to the main investigation.

## COASTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Many readers will already be familiar with the county's coasts; consequently only key points will be highlighted here. Extensive background material on structure and landscape is, however, readily available (Derek Lovejoy Partnership, 1993; East Devon AONB, 2008; Land Use Consultants, 2015). All can be downloaded in pdf format.

Cliffs predominate on both coasts, though derived from geologies that are far from identical (Fig. 2). In places they are dramatic: sheer, rocky and active (Fig. 3). Where they are 'dead' and vegetated, many still present impressively steep slopes to the elements. On the north coast the highest cliffs rise immediately inside Exmoor National Park, just east of Combe Martin. They include the highest cliff in England and Wales (244 m beneath the Great Hangman). The Great Hangman itself is 318 m, and several nearby summits exceed this.

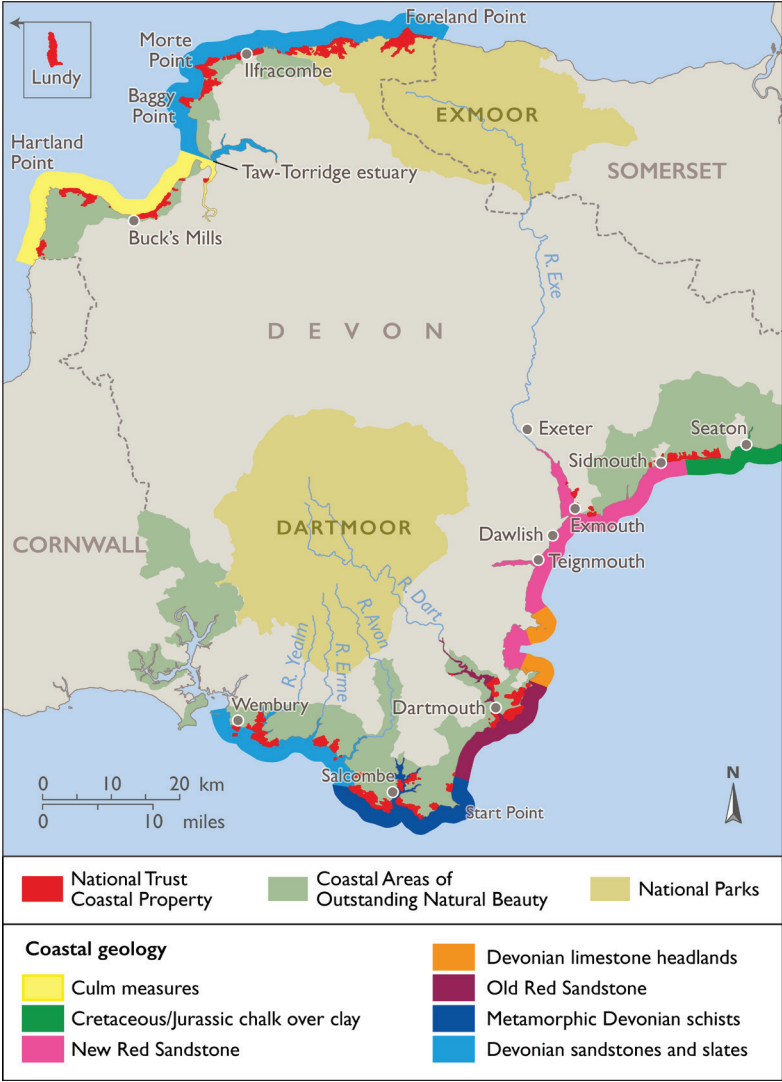


Figure 2. Devon: generalised coastal geology.





Figure 3. *Baggy Point, view north to Morte Point.* © National Trust/Joshua Day.

The barrier-like north coast is in places broken by deeply incised valleys, especially south of Hartland Point and at Lynmouth, Heddon's Mouth and Combe Martin, all in the National Park or close to it. Extensive beaches and dunes are chiefly confined to the section between Morte Point and the only substantial inlet on the entire north coast, the Tawe-Torridge Estuary. At the mouth of this, and extending for more than 8km, are the most impressive depositional features on the coast: the dunes and beaches at Braunton and Northam.<sup>2</sup>

The south coast, with its varied geology, is more diverse than the north, though still with sections of impressive cliffs. Outstanding amongst these is the craggy and jagged metamorphic schist coastline which extends for over 20 km from Start Point to Hope Cove, and which is broken only by the Salcombe Estuary<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 4). Other highly scenic stretches include the western cliffs (from Ringmore to Wembury), the Coletton Fishacre cliffs south of Brixham, and the strikingly different chalk cliffs and undercliffs close to the Dorset border.



Figure 4. Gammon Head: view west from Prawle Point. © Pamela Pinder.

Unlike the north coast, the south is highly fragmented by estuaries, the largest being the Exe and Teign. In the west the smaller Avon, Erme and Yealm rivers have cut the coastal plateau into a series of isolated semi-peninsulas. Here the valleys are quiet, wildlife-friendly incursions with extensive woodlands. This is also true of the Dart Valley and the Salcombe Estuary, especially in the latter's spacious upper reaches.

Three factors – good accessibility, a mild climate and tourism – have produced a highly urbanised coastline from Brixham eastwards to the Exe. Moreover, east of the Exe there is another succession of settlements, from Exmouth to Seaton. Urbanisation, therefore, has created a fundamental distinction between the south coast's eastern and western sections and, indeed, between the south coast and the north. As early as 1965, a survey conducted for the National Trust concluded that 31 per cent of the south coast was 'beyond redemption', largely due to this urbanised arc.<sup>4</sup> The equivalent figure for the

north coast was 12 per cent. This urbanisation factor has clearly been extremely influential as the Trust has built up its south coast holdings: very little is owned between Sidmouth and Brixham (Fig. 1). Yet urbanisation is only one dimension of the complex story of how the Trust became such a major coastal landowner, the story to which we now turn.

### **FOUNDATIONS: 1909 – 1945<sup>5</sup>**

On 15<sup>th</sup> November 1909, 1.8 km of coast at Morte Point, 7 km west of Ilfracombe, was signed over to the Trust (Fig. 5). This was a landmark both locally and nationally: the first coastal acquisition in Devon and only the second in the country as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Eleven years later an additional 1.5 km was acquired at Morte. And in 1928 the first land was secured on the south coast: 3.2 km on the east side of the Salcombe Estuary. Although this was a hesitant start – just three acquisitions in nearly 20 years – the pace then rose significantly on both coasts. By 1945<sup>7</sup>, 22 transfers to the Trust had been completed, giving it ownership of 10.3 km on the north coast and 19.1 km on the south.



Figure 5. *Morte Point: view towards Woolacombe.* © National Trust/David Noton.

A striking feature of these acquisitions was their strong geographical concentration. In the north, Morte Point and Baggy Point (neighbouring headlands at either end of Morte Bay) accounted for 70 per cent of the coastline for which the Trust was now responsible. Moreover, another 18 per cent lay nearby, between Morte Point and Ilfracombe. And on the south coast the degree of concentration was even greater. While the acquisition process here had begun on the eastern side of the Salcombe Estuary, in the 1930s and 1940s the western side became the very active focus of attention. Here a series of transactions added almost the whole coast between Bolt Head and Bolt Tail to the Trust's portfolio (Fig. 6), with another 1.5 km further west at Wembury. In sharp contrast, only one small property was held towards the eastern end of the southern coast – at Lympstone on the Exe Estuary.



Figure 6. *The Bolt coast: view from Bolberry Down towards Bolt Head.*  
© David Pinder.

How did these properties come into the Trust's care? As in the remainder of the country at this time, it was overwhelmingly a consequence of altruism by small numbers of individuals. Apart from one donation by a charitable trust, every new holding in this early era was a gift from either a landowner or a local appeal committee. But what is equally striking is that the relative importance of landowner donations and local appeals was completely different on the north and south coasts.

In the north, gifts by landowners were overwhelmingly dominant. Rosalie Chichester, who in 1909 made the initial Devon donation at Morte Point, later made several others in the vicinity.<sup>8</sup> Immediately to the south, beyond Woolacombe Sands, Constance and Florence Hyde followed her example when they donated Baggy Point in 1939. And Colonel R. Longstaff and Miss F. Abraham similarly signed over substantial holdings at Ilfracombe (1942) and Brownsham (1943). Only Kipling Tors, just south of the Tawe-Torridge Estuary, and adjacent to Westward Ho!, did not come from an individual. Yet this, too, was a gift – from the Rudyard Kipling Memorial Fund. On the south coast, in sharp contrast, only three acquisitions (at Wembury Cliffs, Bigbury and Lypstone on the Exe) were donated by their owners. The remainder (i.e., the Salcombe cluster, stretching from East Portlemouth to Hope Cove, plus a much shorter stretch at Wembury) were secured by appeals launched and run by local people.

Although, at this remove in time, it is difficult to be certain about the cause of this sharp divide, a significant factor may well have been contrasted north-south development levels. South Devon, with its much higher and well-distributed population, in centres from Torbay, through Dartmouth, Kingsbridge and Salcombe to Plymouth, must have seemed to have far more potential for appeals to be successful than did the more lightly populated north. Following from this, as the appeals option took root in the south, local landowners may well have felt inclined to sell land to fundraisers rather than donate directly to the Trust. And in the north, without the prospect that appeals might raise substantial sums, donation was the only route nervous landowners could take to protect the coast they loved and wished to preserve for others.

For all concerned, donors and appeal activists alike, it was the spectre of development that was their prime motivation. When Rosalie Chichester made her first donation in 1909, train travel and the char-



abanc had already kick-started the expansion of nearby Mortehoe, Woolacombe and Ilfracombe. Other parts of the Devon coast were, of course, also changing under these same influences as land demand grew – not just for holiday accommodation and visitor facilities, but also for a new stream of well-to-do residents, often with eyes set on prime coastal locations. Although World War I provided a respite, in the inter-war years the same pressures intensified greatly.

Nowhere illustrated the tensions better than a stretch of coast to the west of the Salcombe Estuary. While Salcombe grew rapidly seawards, heading for Bolt Head (Anon. c. 1932, p. 32), a 6 km stretch of coast to the west became studded by substantial speculative village expansions at Hope Cove, Thurlestone and Bigbury-on-Sea (Fig. 7). And between these two pincers, lying completely unprotected, and comprising a developer's dream of extensive flat and gently sloping land above rugged cliffs, lay what many considered the jewels in the south coast's crown: Bolt Head, Bolberry Down and Bolt Tail. This was the situation which in 1925 sparked the largest public appeal, to save 'The Bolt'.



Figure 7. Coastal suburbanisation: Hope Cove from Bolt Tail. © David Pinder.

Two further observations shed light on the nature of the acquisition process in this period. First, nine individuals donated coastal properties to the Trust, yet only one was male. Moreover, the female donors were either unmarried or, in just three cases, widows. In this respect, therefore, the foundations of the Trust's coastal estate were not laid by a broad cross-section of the land-owning class, but by a much narrower group of ladies, many of whom probably lacked immediate heirs able to continue to safeguard their properties.

Second, while donating land was a relatively straightforward legal process, launching and running successful appeals was far more challenging. One insight into this is provided by the appeal for The Bolt. Here the fundraisers assembled blocks of land piecemeal, building the holding like a jigsaw – between 1929 and 1941, no less than seven separate purchases were made. Even on a much smaller scale, it took Wembury Preservation Society from 1935 to Christmas 1938 to raise the £3000 that would pay off a loan taken out to save fields surrounding the cliff-top parish church from house building. This was despite intensive fundraising in nearby Plymouth, national exposure in the form of an illustrated double-page article in *The Times*,<sup>9</sup> and a generous offer of support by Lady Astor. One consequence of this was that hopes of also purchasing a coastal strip to the west evaporated. Moreover, the appeal's slow progress could have obstructed the gift of Wembury Cliffs to the Trust, because their owner, Mrs Ida Sebag Montefiore, had proposed that she would make the donation if the appeal could pay for covenants prohibiting development of fields overlooking the cliffs. Fortunately Mrs Sebag Montefiore, a country lover and prominent benefactor, was also pragmatic. Abandoning her proposal, she presented both the cliffs and the covenants to the Trust 1938.<sup>10</sup>

## **POSTWAR DROUGHT: 1945–1964**

Any expectations that acquisition rates would soon return to pre-war levels after 1945 were swiftly dashed. By 1954 only four additional properties, amounting to no more than 2.9 km of coast, had been secured. And the following ten years were little better: just four more properties and 4.6 km of coast. Over the whole twenty-year period, therefore, no more than 7.5 km were added, compared with 16.7 km in the 1930s.

This is not to undervalue the acquisitions which were made. On the north coast, which gained 80 per cent of the new land, particularly important additions were a 2.2 km stretch at Woolacombe Barton and Warren (extending the major Morte property to the south behind Woolacombe's impressive beach); and 2.9 km at Heddon's Mouth and Trentishoe, in the recently created Exmoor National Park. Meanwhile on the south coast, by far the largest step forward – the addition of 1.1 km of shore – was the Prattshayes property, adjacent to Exmouth.

As in the pre-war period, gifts and bequests at this time remained important means of acquisition, but with two significant departures. For the first time on the north coast, the Heddon's Mouth acquisition was secured partly by an appeal, run by the Exmoor Society, and benefitting from 'generous support' from Devon County Council. At Woolacombe the notable development was the first example of central government support, this large new property being a transfer from the Atlee government's National Land Fund (NLF)<sup>11</sup> (Rickwood, 1987).

Despite a sprinkling of promising signs, however, overall the growth of the Trust's coastal holdings was lacklustre. This was paradoxical, because these were also the years when pre-war pressures – urban spread, village expansion and tourism growth – re-emerged and intensified substantially in an era of rising prosperity. Although no survey of urban and village expansion appears to have been undertaken, one investigation by Devon County Council (Turnbull, 1967, 36) highlights the intensity of rising tourism pressures (Table 1). For example, between 1948 and 1965, static caravan numbers rose by 43 per cent to 11,300, while the chalet count virtually doubled to almost 5,800.

Table 1. Growth of caravans, chalets and tents, 1958 – 65.

	<i>Permanent</i>		<i>Seasonal</i>	
	Static caravans	Chalets	Tourist caravans	Tent pitches
1958	7,906	2,921	1,285	7,555
1965	11,302	5,766	2,132	7,828
<b>Within 3.2 km of the coast, 1965</b>				
	89%	95%	75%	86%

Source: Turnbull (1967, 40)



A second paradox was that, while the Trust's newly protected land was biased towards the north coast, additional evidence gathered by the County Council clearly revealed that the most intense pressures were being felt in the south, especially to the west and east of the Exe (Fig. 8). Moreover, while these were general findings, they were confirmed in great detail by the 1965 land-use survey undertaken for the National Trust and noted earlier. Produced at the scale of 1:25,000, and conducted by geographers from Reading University, the original maps produced by this investigation can now be viewed online.<sup>12</sup>

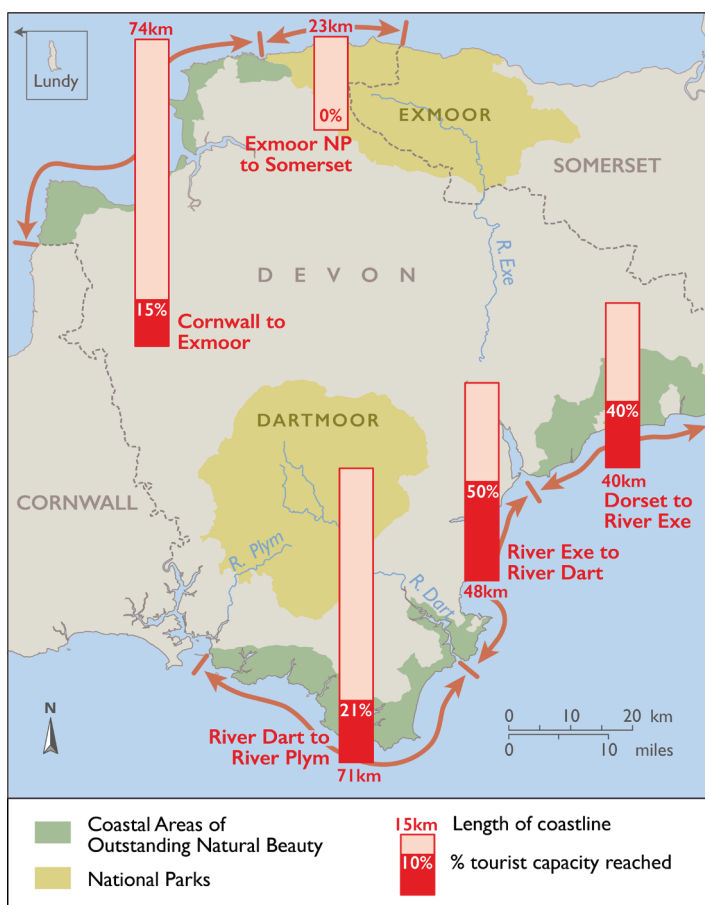


Figure 8. *Tourism pressure, 1965.* Source: Turnbull (1967, p. 36).

## POSTWAR COASTAL PRESSURES – THE NATIONAL DIMENSION

Devon was not, of course, the only area experiencing these intensified pressures. Moreover, in many other locations around the country new, and often severe, pressures were building, particularly through the unprecedented scale of industrial expansion, coupled with the economic benefits which technological change in shipping was now conferring on tidewater locations (Pinder and Witherick, 1990, p. 235). For example, British Petroleum's Isle of Grain oil refinery in Kent extended over 6 sq km, much of it environmentally rich coastal marshes. In Wales, immediately adjacent to the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, the magnificent ria of Milford Haven was selected as the location for no less than four oil refineries and a major power station (Pinder, 1992, p. 26). And the eastern edge of the New Forest, which at that time extended up to Southampton Water, became an almost unbroken corridor of urban and industrial development.<sup>13</sup>

## TOWARDS ENTERPRISE NEPTUNE

At National Trust headquarters this rapidly deteriorating situation began to ring alarm bells – in some minds at least. In the past there had been suggestions that the Trust should become much more proactive in coastal protection (Waterson, 1994, pp. 76–78), a view which in the early 1960s was now raised forcefully. But not all minds thought the same, the immediate consequence being to plunge the Trust into what almost became an existential crisis (Waterson, 1994, pp. 163–168). Ultimately the interventionists prevailed. What had in effect been a pilot scheme that had for several years been run by the National Trust's Northern Ireland Committee, spearheaded by its chairman, Lord Antrim, was subsumed into the main Trust and made national policy (Waterson, 1994, p. 155). Thus in 1965 Enterprise Neptune, a major appeal for the coast, benefitting immediately from £250,000 of government support (*c.* £4.7 million today) was launched.

One measure of the importance attached to this project was that its small steering committee was not only headed by Lord Antrim (now the Trust's chairman), but also included Professor Alfred Steers, the country's leading expert on coastal development pressures (Steers, 1944, 1964), and Reginald Hookway, a leading civil servant who

would shortly become the first Director of the Countryside Commission. It was this committee which commissioned the Reading geographers' detailed survey of the entire coasts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, creating not just a management tool, but also hard evidence demonstrating to potential donors (and any remaining opponents in the Trust) the severity of coastal threats.

### **THE NEPTUNE ERA: AMBITIONS ACHIEVED**

Analysis of progress in the Neptune era is complicated by one highly unusual and outstanding acquisition: the purchase of Lundy Island in 1969. Entirely funded by Mr (later Sir) Jack Hayward, Lundy added 18.2 km to the Trust's Devon coastal estate, almost three times the next-longest acquisition (the 6.4 km Portledge Estate). Quite apart from its unusual location, therefore, Lundy was also statistically untypical; reflecting this, the remaining Neptune analysis focuses on the county's mainland coasts.

Headline figures for the growth of ownership of these coasts in the Neptune era are impressive. In the first five years more than 15 km of coastline came into the Trust's hands – twice the amount acquired in the previous 20 years. By 1979 the figure had reached 38 km – as much as was taken over between 1909 and 1945. By 1985 the Trust was protecting 40 per cent of the Devon coastline, a higher proportion than in any other county (The National Trust, 1987, p.4). And by 2015, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Neptune project, 96 km had been secured since 1965.

Figure 9 explores the manner in which, on both coasts, this growth led to a radically different geography of holdings. At the outset, the Trust's north coast ownership was still exceptionally strongly concentrated: no less than 72 per cent still lay in the Morte – Baggy Point cluster. Moreover, this cluster continued to expand, nearly doubling in size to reach almost 20 km. Yet despite this the Morte district's share of north coast holdings halved as the Trust's control of other areas grew rapidly. To the east this growth focused on Watersmeet and the West Exmoor coast. In 1965 no land was owned around the former, but now two major properties were added: Foreland Point and Countisbury Cliffs, together totalling over 7 km. Along the West Exmoor coast no fewer than nine acquisitions were made, expanding

the Trust's holding from 3 to 13 km. Here no less than five of the acquisitions each added more than a kilometre of coastline, the largest section being the Little Hangman (2.6 km), overlooking the popular village of Combe Martin (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. *The changing geography of National Trust holdings, 1965 – 2017.*



Figure 10. *Great Hangman and Little Hangman from Watermouth.* © North Devon Coast AONB/ Neville Stanikk.

West of Morte, expansion was again partly a matter of establishing a completely new foothold: 3 km of coast at Welcome, close to the Cornish border. But the lion's share was devoted to strengthening existing small holdings at Brownsham and Portledge. Seven acquisitions were made at Brownsham, those at Fattacott Farm (1.3 km) and Beckland Cliff (1.1 km) being particularly important. Portledge similarly benefitted from a series of purchases, but would have remained a relatively small cluster if the 6.4 km of coast on the Portledge Estate, noted above, had not become available in 1988.

South coast progress strongly echoed the northern experience. Largely thanks to the pre-war success in securing The Bolt, in 1965 the Salcombe area possessed no less than 82 per cent of the entire south coast estate. With Neptune underway, 11 km were added, taking the total to almost 28 km. None the less, growth elsewhere meant that, by the turn of the century, Salcombe's relative importance had fallen below 40 per cent. The new holdings responsible for this to the east were in the Weston area, close to the Dorset border, and around

the Kingswear Peninsula and the Dart Estuary. At Weston, which currently extends from Sidmouth to just east of Branscombe, the foundation was laid as early as 1965 when 3.2 km of coast were obtained from the Branscombe Estate (Fig. 11). Today, after eleven other acquisitions, this property extends for 9 km. Around Kingswear and the Dart the dominant gains have been at Little Dartmouth (2.3 km just west of the estuary) and Coleton Fishacre. Here a series of transactions brought over 8 km of outstanding cliffs into Trust ownership in just five years.



Figure 11. *National Trust coast viewed east from Branscombe. Development, typical of coastal access points, predates Trust ownership.* © National Trust/Tim Bowden.

West of Salcombe, efforts focused on Ringmore and the vicinity of the River Yealm. In 1965 the Ringmore foothold comprised only a very small donated area, given in the late 1930s, at Bigbury-on-Sea. For almost forty years nothing changed, until in the 1990s opportunities arose to purchase 5 km of coast, chiefly at Scobbiscombe Farm. Ownership around the Yealm has risen from only 2 km to almost 17, largely through the acquisition of over 9 km of cliffs at The Warren and Netton Farm, both in Noss Mayo.

From this account it may appear that growth in the Neptune era has been a smooth process, but this is not the case. Although there are no detailed records, some proposed purchases have come to nothing, even after lengthy negotiations. More generally, the many successful projects have not come in a steady stream (Fig. 12a). An initial wave from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s gave way to less spectacular growth, which was in turn followed by a second wave concentrated in the late 1980s. Thereafter moderate growth returned, in this case to be followed by even lower gains that have continued to the present day. Here it should be noted that the use of 5-year periods in Figure 12a disguises the true timing of the onset of extremely slow growth. Most of the gains between 1995 and 99 came at the start of the period, so that negligible gains date from around 1997, and consequently have now lasted 20 years.

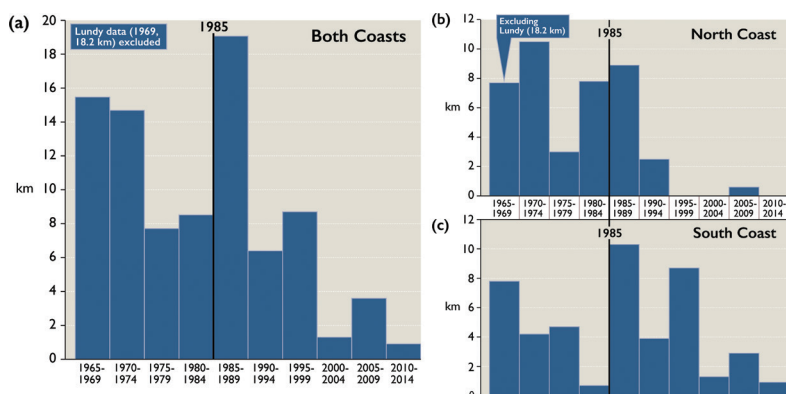


Figure 12. Coastal acquisitions through time: (a) both coasts (b) north coast (c) south coast.

In part these cycles have reflected the swings and roundabouts of Neptune fundraising. The first reflected Neptune's initial success, which then waned but was rejuvenated by the campaign's relaunch in 1985. However, further analysis of the Devon data suggests that the fluctuations also had a strong geographical component. Table 2 details the evidence, based on the main property groupings identified in Figure 9. By 1984 north coast acquisitions were either complete, or nearly complete, in four of the six areas. The south coast figures, in contrast, were substantially lower. Although much progress had been made, by the mid-1980s no area was more than three-quarters com-

plete, and the figures for the western districts, around the River Yealm and Ringmore, were particularly low. Figures 12b and 12c, similarly highlight the contrast. Before 1985, gains were dominantly in the north; after that date progress swung firmly in favour of the south.

Table 2. National Trust property clusters: % owned by 1984.

Property area <sup>1</sup>	2017 NT ownership (km)	% acquired by 1984
<b>North coast</b>		
Welcombe	3.1	0
Brownsham	6.1	88
Portledge	7.5	14
Morte	19.7	99
West Exmoor coast	13.3	86
Watersmeet	7.8	100
<b>South coast</b>		
Yealm	16.8	46
Ringmore	5.0	6
Salcombe	27.5	71
Kingswear Peninsula & R Dart	13.9	76
Weston	8.7	63
Others <sup>2</sup>	3.5	34

<sup>1</sup> Listed geographically, west to east for both coasts.

<sup>2</sup> Prattshayes, Exmouth, Start Bay and South Milton.

Source: calculated from NT data.

While several factors may have contributed to this geographical reversal of fortunes, one probable candidate is the availability of suitable properties. Later it will be shown that, in later years, acquisition policy favoured large purchases. But the fact that so much progress had been made on the north coast may well have meant that by the mid-1980s few potential large acquisitions remained. After 1984 only one purchase exceeding 3 km was made on the north coast, the Portledge Estate. To the south, where matters had proceeded less swiftly, there were four such major purchases; together these secured more than half the land bought in these later years.



Although growth of the Trust's holdings can be quantified in considerable detail, what is impossible to measure is the role played in this expansion by its staff, whose numbers increased substantially in the Neptune era. Some key individuals were at headquarters, especially those responsible for fundraising. But many others worked at the regional and local levels and were also crucial for several reasons. Although acquisition plans were never revealed, staff at these levels knew their areas intimately and consequently were well aware of the localities they would prioritise. Also, they had many contacts with other landowners and could drip-feed the attractions of donating or selling to the Trust. And, by no means least, it was not unusual for local contacts to alert them to the impending appearance of a property on the market, allowing early planning for a purchase strategy. At this point, therefore, it is appropriate to ask how the growth was funded.

## FUNDING THE GROWTH

More than half a century after the launch of Enterprise Neptune, it might be assumed that, from the mid-1960s onwards, coastal acquisitions in the country as a whole were dominated by purchases from the new fund. This was by no means the case. Fundraisers at headquarters were anxious to avoid the appeal eclipsing traditional forms of acquisition, and consequently Enterprise Neptune was given an additional ambassadorial role. In this its task was to alert potential major donors to the scale of current threats to the coastline, in order to boost land donations, legacies and local appeals.

The fruits of this approach in Devon can be established through data provided in the handbook *Properties of the National Trust* (1997). Although this does not cover the last twenty years, on a county-by-county basis the volume lists every acquisition up to 1997, and therefore spans the most intense period of Neptune acquisition activity. The key information provided by this volume is a statement as to how and when each property came into Trust ownership. In addition each property's size is recorded. Measured in this instance in hectares rather than kilometres, this has the advantage of enabling growth to be evaluated from an alternative quantitative perspective.

In the 30 years after 1965, only a quarter of all acquisitions in Devon involved funding directly raised by the Neptune Appeal.

Meanwhile, gifts of coastal properties now occurred at the rate of almost one a year, three or four times what was previously achieved. The result was that, over the whole period, they produced as many new properties as did Neptune funding. Chiefly, as in the past, the land came from highly motivated local owners anxious to preserve their land unspoilt. Similarly, a fifth of all acquisitions benefitted from a rise in local appeal funding, the rate at which these appeals were launched having doubled compared with the pre-Neptune era. Arguably most successful of all were the bequest results. Before 1965 only four properties had been purchased using legacies; between 1965 and 1996 this form of funding was channelled into more than 30 acquisitions.

While the expansion of these traditional funding sources proved highly successful, by the late 1960s Neptune was also being deployed to target new potential funding streams, particularly from government agencies and charitable trusts with environmental interests. An important feature of most of these was that they would not cover the full cost of acquiring individual properties. Instead they required matched funding, leading directly to the need for the Trust to assemble funding packages from the range of sources at its disposal. Typically these packages comprised funding from two or three sources, but in a few instances they were substantially more diverse.

Table 3. External sources of matched funding.

	Number of agencies	Contributions to packages
Government agencies <sup>1</sup>	6	22
Exmoor National Park	1	2
Local government <sup>2</sup>	3	6
Trusts and charities <sup>3</sup>	9	12

<sup>1</sup> Countryside Commission (15 contributions); Capital Transfer Tax (3); English Heritage (1); Heritage Lottery Fund (1); Nature Conservancy Council (2).

<sup>2</sup> Devon County Council (4); North Devon District Council (1);

<sup>3</sup> Allen Lane Foundation (1); Dawn Charities Trust (1); Devon Federation of Women's Institutes (2) Leach Family Trust (3); Northcott Foundation (1); Sir Robert Hunter Memorial Fund (1); South Hams Centre (1); WF Southall Trust (1).

Source: compiled from *The National Trust* (1997).

Devon's matched-funding net was cast widely (Table 3). For example, the Leach Family Trust supported three schemes, and the Devon Federation of Women's Institutes celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> anniversaries by donations to the funds for Little Dartmouth and Holden Head, Countisbury. Soon after the Neptune launch, Devon County Council gave grants towards purchases at Woody Bay, west of Ilfracombe, and Damage Cliffs, Mortehoe. Similarly, in 1989 Highveer Cliffs near Heddon were obtained partly with the support of Exmoor National Park Authority. National organisations drawn in included the Nature Conservancy Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund, while three properties were transferred with the assistance of the Capital Transfer Tax (CTT) concession. But one central government agency, the Countryside Commission, played a substantially greater role. Established in 1968, as a successor to the National Parks Commission, this body part-funded the purchase of sixteen coastal properties in the county. In total, these acquisitions accounted for half the land secured in Devon by matched-funding projects.

Table 4. Changing balance between single-source and match-funded acquisitions, 1965-96.

	1965-79	1980-85	1986-96	Total
<b>Number</b>				
Single source	31	8	17	56
Match funded	7	9	21	37
<b>Per year</b>				
Single source	2.1	1.3	1.5	1.8
Match funded	0.4	1.5	1.9	1.2

Source: calculated from The National Trust (1997).

Although there were significant shifts as the years progressed (Table 4) package-funded schemes were not numerically dominant in Devon in the 1965-1996 period as a whole. Altogether they accounted for only 40 per cent of all acquisitions. Yet in terms of area acquired this strategy was central to maintaining the coastal estate's growth momentum. The average size of package purchases was 67 ha, three times the figure for purchases made using a single funding source; and two-thirds of all the land acquired was secured via package funding.

To a considerable degree, this outcome was connected with another significant shift in Trust policy, namely to purchase farmland adjacent to the coast, as well as the coast itself. Most immediately, this was attractive because of the potential to generate rental income, but there were also other considerations. Ownership in depth assisted greater landscape protection ('Buy to the skyline' was a slogan sometimes employed). And, environmentally, possession of larger areas opened the way for improved environmental management which, as the following section demonstrates, has now become a key objective.

### **NEPTUNE, BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION**

As already noted, the period since the mid-1990s has been strikingly different to that of the Neptune purchasing heyday. Since 1997, on average, only 0.3 km of coast has been added to the Devon total each year. Factors behind this include the cost of maintaining the greatly enlarged estate, currently at least £2,000 per kilometre; rising land costs; and a reduced supply of outstanding available properties. This does not mean that additional purchases are entirely off the agenda — indeed, two of the case studies below demonstrate that this is not the case. But, as acute awareness of its environmental responsibilities has taken root in the Trust, the pendulum has swung firmly away from expansion as a priority and towards management practices capable of promoting biodiversity throughout the existing estate. The following examples illustrate the multi-faceted manner in which this approach is developing in the county.

#### *The fight against scrub*

The most common form of environmental management those walking the Devon coast are likely to encounter is activity to control the onward march of gorse and other scrub species. Where land is not farmed, as is often the case on cliffs and steep valleys, the spread of scrub has a smothering effect, rapidly reducing the range of local flora and fauna. The easiest appropriate response is to graze such areas with hardy livestock such as cattle or ponies, or sheep where the problem is not too advanced. Now that in many places the Trust owns substantial farmland immediately behind the coast, this can often be achieved by working with tenant farmers to adapt their farming practices.

However, scrub can frequently be so invasive that grazing cannot prevent its ultimate advance, the usual response in this case being machine clearance. Often the public reacts negatively to this because the immediate appearance is anything but beautiful (Fig. 13). Yet, within a few months, wild flowers possibly not seen for years may be blooming. Moreover the clearance process is well-planned and far from total. Typically, corridors are driven through the scrub, leaving thickets on either side. Here small reptiles, mammals and birds find a protecting habitat, but are able to feed in the clearings created. And this in turn opens the way for predators – weasels, stoats, kestrels, sparrowhawks, buzzards – to return as the local ecosystem recovers.



Figure 13. *Clearance and regeneration: January and May, 2017.* © David Pinder.

One frequently overlooked benefit of this rehabilitation work is the justification it provides for Trust ownership of land in the county's AONBs and, indeed, Exmoor National Park (Fig. 1). Ownership in these localities has at times been questioned: why should the Trust invest in areas that are already officially protected? One answer is that the Trust has the commitment and expertise to promote this important work.

***Woolacombe Warren: landscape, new technology and environmental management***

When grazing is employed to control cliff-land scrub, it may appear that the stock are roaming freely. Normally this is not the case: instead they are constrained by fences that are set at wide intervals, and are consequently relatively unobtrusive. But in some circumstances fencing may be inappropriate because of its landscape impact, an issue that has led directly to an 'invisible fencing project' on Woolacombe Warren.

Here the dunes provide a delicate environment perpetually threatened by the invasion of scrub species. The standard solution to this has been mechanical hay harvesting, which has itself exacted an environmental cost. Annual clear-cutting has regularly removed a high proportion of the hay-based habitat, with a substantial impact on associated fauna, notably reptiles and crickets. Substituting winter grazing for mechanical harvesting would appear to be a simple solution, but would normally require stock fencing which would be completely out of character in this open landscape. As an innovative alternative, the project has installed a buried electric cable – the invisible fence. Cattle grazed on this area wear collars which emit a warning signal when the animal is five metres from the cable, and an extremely small shock if it approaches more closely (Fig. 14). While this system is not cheap, initial results suggest it can be effective, enabling much less ecologically damaging scrub control, maintaining the historic open landscape, and allowing walkers to continue to roam.





Figure 14. Woolacombe Dunes: cattle 'fenced' using collars and buried cable.  
© National Trust/Joshua Day.

### ***Bull point and biodiversity***

The problem of invasive scrub is not simply confined to rough grazing areas. Where farming returns are low, fields may gradually become marginal to a holding's economy, leading to under-use, the steady encroachment of undesirable species and a downward diversity spiral. Even where scrub cover is incomplete, surviving grassland species may shrink in number through lack of grazing. Near Bull Point, a

short distance north of Morteohoe, these issues are being addressed by a second pilot project. Meadowland un-grazed for several years had been extensively invaded by scrub, while remaining grassland had become coarse and rank. Rehabilitation began with a scrub-clearance programme lasting three years. This was followed by the re-introduction of cattle, not simply to graze, but also to break up the compacted sward. Although the project is still in progress, the signs are that the resulting improvement in soil structure is already enabling the locality's 'seed bank' – dormant seeds from the range of native plants – to begin biodiversity restoration.

Both Woolacombe and Bull Point have required significant investment. At the former this has chiefly been for cabling and collars; at the latter for clearance, stock fencing and other necessities for cattle re-introduction, particularly water supply. Once again, therefore, both schemes highlight the importance of Trust resources to support environmental rehabilitation, a need that will certainly grow if successful approaches are applied elsewhere. In addition, the significance of human factors should not be overlooked. Neither of these pilots would have come to fruition without good working relationships between local Trust staff and the individual farmers.

## **NEW ACQUISITIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION**

### *Wembury Point*

When Wembury Point, just outside Plymouth, was purchased in 2006, it was an acquisition unlike any other in Devon, and comparable with very few in the remainder of the country. As a former military site (until 2001 it had been the naval gunnery school, HMS *Cambridge*) it was highly developed with a hotch-potch of buildings. Despite this the site clearly had considerable potential, primarily because of the views to the Great Mewstone, an island just offshore, and along the Devon and Cornwall coasts.<sup>14</sup> For the Trust, therefore, it offered the opportunity to engage in environmental rehabilitation starting from a base quite different from its normal experience.



During the sale negotiations the Trust was not entirely successful in achieving its ambition of total clearance: the navy required a radar facility to be retained, and the main road into the site could not be removed because it provided the only access to a small water treatment plant. However, the remaining buildings and infrastructure were swiftly demolished, contaminants were taken for disposal elsewhere, and accumulations of rubble were landscaped with material obtained on the site. Since then, more than a decade of cyclical grazing and scrub clearance, applying the well-tried techniques developed on other properties, have brought back to much of the site an air of undeveloped cliff land.

Beyond this, ownership of the Point has enabled the Trust to pursue very effectively its recently adopted social-inclusion policy. Central to this has been the initial requirement that the access road must be retained. Originally a wide, straight, and highly intrusive feature in the landscape, as part of the rehabilitation programme its impact was softened by narrowing, by introducing gentle curves and by allowing the vegetation on either side to encroach. The outcome has been that this feature, retained by necessity, has enabled the Point to become a recreational lung for many nearby residents of Plymouth, the majority of whom would probably not wish to walk on the main coast path. As well as traditional walkers (who come especially when bad weather makes unsurfaced paths difficult) the site's outstanding views are now enjoyed by families with children, the elderly, wheelchair users of all ages, and many others. Understandably, Wembury Point is now considered to be one of the Trust's great recent successes.

### ***Bolt Tail***

In 2009 the Trust purchased three substantial lots of farmland in the Bolt Tail vicinity (Fig. 15). This was at considerable cost, only made possible by very substantial support from no less than seven bequests. At first sight the need for this acquisition might not be obvious: for sixty years it had appeared that the jigsaw steadily assembled by public donation in the 1930s was complete. In reality the purchase unlocked the opportunity for the Trust to resolve a number of significant environmental and landscape handicaps which had previously been intractable.

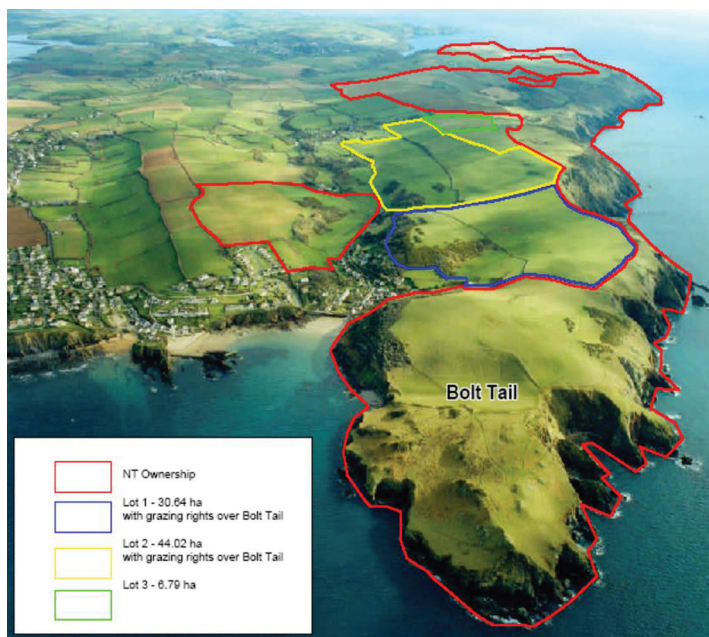


Figure 15. Bolt Tail: land in Trust ownership pre-2009 (red) and purchased that year (blue, yellow and green). © National Trust.

Most obviously it enabled a growing problem of erosion caused by visitor pressure to be alleviated. Degradation arose from the fact that the 1930s appeal was unable to purchase a substantial area (essentially lots 1 and 2 in Figure 15) between the Bolberry Down plateau and Bolt Tail. All that could be secured was a narrow strip of land between the cliffs and the neighbouring farm fence. As visitor numbers in this highly popular area grew, therefore, unsightly footpath erosion became inevitable.

Purchase of the missing jigsaw pieces has transformed this situation. With the fence which previously constrained visitors removed and replaced by one well back from the cliff, walkers can now roam over a far wider area, opening up the opportunity for pressure to be spread much more widely. Moreover, this simple change has also made a major contribution to landscape restoration. Walkers at the

crest of the Tail are now met by a far more open prospect, significantly more akin to that of a century ago.

Beyond these gains, expansion of the Bolt Tail holding has enabled a less obvious, yet very significant, biodiversity issue to be addressed. In this context the problem has been that, although the appeal was able to purchase Bolt Tail for the Trust, it failed to secure the grazing rights over it, which remained with neighbouring landowners. Over the decades this led to an increasing problem of grazing pressure by sheep, and consequent reduced biodiversity. Purchase of the additional lots therefore became doubly important, because the grazing rights came with them. With these rights secured, the Trust is now able to work with its tenant farmer to control both the intensity and seasonality of grazing, opening the way for recovery of the herb-rich grassland. In addition, the tenant farm is now a more coherent unit, which also means that wider environmental management has a greater chance of success. Thus the Bolt Tail story amply illustrates the value of the Trust's willingness to adopt a patient, long-term approach to land acquisition.

## CONCLUSION

The growth of the National Trust's holdings in Devon has been markedly cyclical. From a modest early level, the pace accelerated encouragingly in the 1930s, but declined disappointingly after World War II. Recovery only came after the mid-1960s as a result of Enterprise Neptune – the very public face of the Trust's major policy decision to adopt a more proactive approach to coastal protection. But eventually the Neptune campaign also peaked, sharply reducing the acquisition rate since the mid-1990s. Despite this new low, however, Neptune has undoubtedly been critical to expanding the Trust's presence. If acquisitions since 1965 had continued at the pace achieved between 1945 and 1964, growth on the mainland would have amounted to a mere 20 km – little more than a fifth of the actual figure (96 km).

While this is the county-wide picture, at different scales there were significant variations on the theme. Early twentieth-century progress on the north coast was dependent on gifts of land; on the south coast public appeals dominated. Similarly, in the early Neptune era south

coast progress initially lagged behind the north. And on both coasts the acquisition pace varied considerably from one locality to another, as the examples of Coleton Fishacre Cliffs (8 km in five years) and Morte (20 km in 84 years) illustrate.

The human dimension to these gains should not be overlooked, although this theme would justify a study in its own right. At headquarters there were those who fought the battle to launch Neptune, and others who were vital to fundraising. Locally and regionally there were staff who both established good relationships with potential donors and remained alert to new properties likely to become available. At this level, too, there were public-spirited individuals who ran local appeals. And, indispensably, there were numerous benefactors who, during their lifetimes and/or in their wills, gave land and donations which initiated the Trust's foothold in Devon, then expanded it and ultimately enabled it to flourish.

Besides Neptune, two other Trust policies have strongly influenced developments in the county. One, the shift towards package funding for (generally large) property purchases, was strongly dependent on the success of the Neptune campaign. Substantial external funding could not have been secured without the matching stream of bequests and other finance which the appeal generated. The second policy, the priority now given to high-quality environmental management, is a textbook example of an organisation embracing advances in scientific understanding.

What of the future? All the signs are that care for the environment will remain a key priority. Less clear are the circumstances in which this objective will have to be pursued. On the political front a report commissioned by the Trust has highlighted landscape protection difficulties experienced by many AONBs since the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012 (Green Balance, 2015). This underlines the continuing importance of protection provided by Trust ownership, the long-term reliability of which has recently been demonstrated by the *Mapping Our Shores* project. This demonstrated no deleterious land-use change on National Trust land since 1965, not simply in Devon, but in the country as a whole (Comber *et al.*, 2016; The National Trust, 2015a).<sup>15</sup>



Figure 16. Coastal erosion at Thurlestone. © David Pinder.

Equally topically, some have speculated that the UK's departure from the EU may eventually bring more land onto the market, opening opportunities to extend ecologically driven management to additional sections of coast. But two things are certain: the impacts of climate change will be unavoidable (Fig. 16), and the Trust will not invest heavily in coastal protection in response (The National Trust, 2015b). The consequences of this are likely to be felt most seriously on the charity's low-lying properties, which in Devon are fortunately few.<sup>16</sup> But, quite apart from the issue of coastal erosion, climate change and migrating species will increasingly pose new challenges for those responsible for the environmental management of the Trust's coastal estate. For them, the goal of promoting high ecological value is likely to be a moving target. Let us hope that they succeed in ensuring that these outstanding stretches of coast continue to be jewels in the crowns of both the National Trust and Devon.

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## NOTES

1. The only county with more coast in National Trust ownership is Cornwall (241 km).
2. These are a key part of UNESCO's North Devon Biosphere Reserve.
3. Also known as the Kingsbridge Estuary.
4. The estimate given was made by Dr John Whittow, who designed and managed the 1965 investigation. Waterson (1994, p. 165) states that the survey was conducted in 1963 but this was not the case. The project covered the entire coastlines of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and is well-described in The National Trust (2015a). This can be downloaded as a pdf, and is most easily found by searching for 'Mapping Our Shores'. The document's full web address (retrieved 14.3.2018) is <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/documents/mapping-our-shores-fifty-years-of-land-use-change-at-the-coast.pdf>.
5. Except for those in the section *Funding the Growth*, results reported have been derived by analysis of the National Trust's coastal properties spreadsheet.
6. The first was 900 m of coast at Barrow's Cliff near Tintagel, donated in February 1897.
7. Donations of land continued to be made during World War II. The average rate of acquisition was 1.0 km per year, compared with 1.3 km per year in the 1930s.
8. Rosalie Chichester had inherited the Arlington Estate, which included the Morte area, from her parents. She was keenly interested in the natural world, was a strong supporter of the National Trust, and made a series of land donations to it at various times in her life. Although there is no concrete evidence, it is possible that her generosity towards the Trust was heightened by the fact that her estate was in debt until 1928. She may have feared that debt would force land sales, almost certainly leading to housing development. This sequence of events was not uncommon at that time.

9. 'At the mouth of the Yealm: preservation of the coastline', *The Times*, 8.4.1933, pp.18–19.
10. The Wembury appeal also highlights the fact that there could be opposition to Trust ownership of the coast. One a contemporary letter declared '... I would a thousand times more see it built upon and developed for the benefit and health of man than as a sanctuary for seagulls and tomtits. ... I cannot see what earthly use it is ever likely to be to the community ...'. *Western Morning News*, 10.6.1938.
11. The National Land Fund was created by the Atlee government, with an endowment of £50 million, as a memorial to the dead of World War II. Its aim was to secure culturally significant property, including land, for the nation. The Trust was one of its major beneficiaries. It is possible that the substantial purchase recorded here, 2.2 km of coast at Woolacombe, was part of Rosalie Chichester's estate. She had died without direct descendants in 1949, and the NLF gift to the Trust was made in June 1951.
12. These maps can be accessed most easily by searching 'arc gis' and clicking on [natrust.maps.arcgis.com](http://natrust.maps.arcgis.com). The full web address (retrieved 14.3.2018) is <http://natrust.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Viewer/index.html?appid=ca69d4da0e8a4bccb175bdca68d5d520>. The maps include a layer giving the results of a replica survey conducted in 2014 as part of the celebrations for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Neptune Campaign. Detailed comparisons of coastal development between 1965 and 2014 can therefore be made.
13. The Act defined today's eastern boundary, inland from the urban-industrial corridor along the coast. See: New Forest Act, 1964, <http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/83/enacted>. Retrieved 9.3.2018.
14. The Great Mewstone is also owned by the Trust. As a consequence of being in the gunnery school's firing line, previously it was necessarily part of the MoD's holding at Wembury Point. Maintained as a bird reserve, there is no public access.
15. The project's results for coastal zone encroachment on land not in Trust ownership have yet to be analysed at the county or other local levels. The national figure for the loss of open countryside was 4.2 per cent between 1965 and 2014.
16. For example, it seems unavoidable that the wetland currently protected by the Trust's popular beach at South Milton Sands, a beach already under attack, will one day become a marine inlet. On cliff properties, in contrast, it will often be possible to respond to erosion by diverting the coastal path around the area of retreat because the Trust owns the adjacent land. This was an additional reason to buy the land at Bolt Tail in 2009 – a substantial cliff fall could have severed the link between the Tail and Bolberry Down.



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