

TIME TO PRESERVE THE DARK SKIES OF DEDHAM VALE

This year an astronomer helpfully measured one of the things we have long believed made the Dedham Vale special, its dark skies. His readings prove that the Dedham Vale is indeed unusual in the south of England, it forms a dark corridor between the domes of light from Colchester and Ipswich and the lit-up ports of Felixstowe and Harwich. In its darkest places on a clear night, you can see as many stars from the Vale as in as the South Downs national park which was recently awarded the status of "dark sky reserve" by the International Dark-Sky Association. Now the facts are established the Dedham Vale Society has a new responsibility to protect our nocturnal heritage before the fingers of light from development blot our view of the stars.

We first realised we had something special when Bob Mizon from the British Astronomical Association first came to give a talk a couple of years ago. Bob was staying at the Crown in Stoke by Nayland. I asked him whether you could see many stars above the Vale. In the lights of the car park he was non-committal. He said that you could see a few hundred stars, not bad for the south of England. Then, much later, he went out in to the meadow behind his room. He looked up to the zenith and saw four times as many stars and the Milky Way distinct in all its glory - and he got quite excited.

It took a couple of years and a new kidney, which Bob says has made him feel 30 years younger, to get him back to the vale. He came on a clear night this February. What he found with his Sky Meter - taking care not to point it towards aircraft bound for Stansted - amounted to what he described as a good, but not perfect, rural night sky. Technically speaking, that was a sky good enough to qualify for Bronze Level International Dark-Sky place status in the official jargon. To qualify for an international designation, night sky brightness must be routinely equal to or darker than a measurement of 20 magnitudes per square arc second. The South Downs national park has values in the low 20s. The measurements Bob took in the Dedham Vale were as follows: south of Shelley: 20.98; Withermarsh: 20.42; near Nayland on Stoke Rd: 20.51; Nayland, Bures Rd: 20.40; Arger Fen Nature reserve:

20.49; Stoke Tye: 20.60; Homey Bridge: 21.25.

So the Vale is in the same league as areas that have already successfully sought an international designation. If we want to do the same, Bob says we should start by purchasing a sky meter. We should measure the Stour and Colne valleys and build a pattern of readings to define where the skies are the darkest. Several members have volunteered to help in this endeavour but we would welcome more.

Meanwhile, I have spoken to Martin Morgan-Taylor, an academic who is a board member of the International Dark-Sky Association. He explains that getting designated involves writing a management plan to promote good lighting, getting hundreds of letters of support from individuals and political bodies and doing a review of lights in the area (only 70 per cent have to be compliant). There is a lot to do but he advises us to just chip away.



Areas that have been successful already include the South Downs, Galloway Forest Park, the Brecon Beacons, the Elan valley, the islands of Sark and Coll, Keilder in Northumberland, Moffat, Snowdonia and Exmoor national parks. There are kindred spirits in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, too. One of these is Linda Nunn, originally from Ipswich, now the director of the Cranborne Chase area of outstanding natural beauty partnership panel. Cranborne Chase is applying for dark-sky "reserve" status - a designation that is more difficult to get than the one for which the Dedham Vale seems to qualify, a "dark sky place." She says it will take another 18 months to jump through the hoops.

The great thing, says Linda, is that dark sky status is good for the rural economy. It gives local businesses, pubs and hotels a reason they can attract customers out of season. On Exmoor, B&Bs advertise astronomical breaks away on autumn and winter evenings. Pubs organise barbecues after their night sky viewing. Around Cranborne Chase as many as 50 people turn out.

Martin Morgan-Taylor says, surprisingly, that our proximity to London is our main selling point. For one of

the International Dark-Sky Association's criteria is accessibility. The Vale already seems to fit some of the others: we have a distinct area; we have reason to protect the night sky to protect the character of the area and for ecological reasons; we want to encourage dark sky tourism; and we already have local authority support, through the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project.

We have a lot to do. But the benefits should not be underestimated: we now know that dark sky status is one of the most important ways of making sure the Dedham Vale stays special for all.

Charles Clover
Chairman



Dedham at dusk.



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