Tamar Valley
National
Landscape



June 2026

Tamar Valley National Landscape **An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan No.6** 2026 - 2031

Special qualities

Overview of the Tamar Valley National Landscape

The TVNL sits at the boundary between Cornwall and Devon, a place of transition or confluence encompassing a rich mosaic of farmland, woodland, moorland, estuary, and historic settlements. Covering around 75 square miles, the area includes parts of five local authorities and 24 parishes, and borders Dartmoor National Park. It is home to a population of 11,755* people, with a strong rural character shaped by centuries of land use and stewardship.

This is a working and lived-in landscape, where agriculture, heritage, and biodiversity are deeply intertwined. The Valley contains European and nationally designated wildlife sites and ancient woodlands, internationally designated mining heritage, and a once-thriving market gardening economy.

The unspoilt pattern of settlement dating mostly from medieval and postmedieval enclosures, lanes, fields, woodland and hedgebanks is an outstanding landscape legacy. Extensive mining activity throughout the Valley exploited mineral reserves from the late 18th century. The combination of workers' housing, Methodist chapels, chimneys, engine houses, inclines and associated infrastructure has created a distinctive mining landscape which is now recognised through World Heritage Site status. Evidence of the river's importance can be seen across the landscape by a series of structures, leats, weirs, quays, fords, viaducts, limekilns and bridges. The Valley's unique market gardening industry supplied many crops, via railway and river, to London and elsewhere, and evidence of this activity is still visible in the landscape today.



Aerial view of the River Lynher and surrounding landscape near St Germans, illustrating the wooded valleys, farmland and river corridors characteristic of the Tamar Valley National Landscape.

The Valley's designation as a National Landscape reflects not only its scenic beauty, but also its cultural depth and ecological value. The area continues to evolve, balancing the needs of nature with that of local communities and growing urban populations in urban centres like Plymouth, as well as realising the benefits the valley brings for people in those communities.

In 1992, the Countryside Commission undertook a detailed landscape assessment of the Tamar Valley, which helped establish the case for its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1995. That assessment identified five defining characteristics, now referred to as the Valley's special qualities, that capture the essence of its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and ecological value. These qualities continue to guide how the landscape is protected, managed, and celebrated.

**This figure has been provided by Defra based on census information and 'cut' to the boundary of the National Landscape. Our previous figure of 16,500 included whole parish populations.*

1. A Rare Valley and Water Landscape

The TVNL is defined by its distinctive river system, an intricate network of the Tamar, Tavy, and Lynher rivers that rise from Woolley Moor in the north, Bodmin Moor in the west, and Dartmoor in the east of the Tamar's catchment area. These rivers converge to form a dramatic estuary complex, flowing into Plymouth Sound.

The geology of the area has created a compact yet varied landscape, where steep wooded valleys, tranquil floodplains, and tidal mudflats, reedbeds and saltmarshes coexist within a relatively small area.



Aerial view of the River Tamar at Gunnislake, illustrating the steep wooded valley sides and river corridor that characterise the rare lowland river landscape of the Tamar Valley National Landscape.

The middle valleys become dramatic with steep fringing woodlands, high cliffs and rocky outcrops juxtaposed with gently meandering stretches through lush pastureland. The higher areas of the National Landscape possess a more gently rolling pastoral floodplain.

This rare lowland river system is a defining feature of the Tamar Valley, offering a sense of continuity and natural rhythm that has shaped both the ecological and human stories of the region.

2. A Landscape of High Visual Quality

The Tamar Valley offers a landscape of exceptional visual richness. From the enclosed intimacy of ancient lanes and hedge-lined fields to the expansive estuarine vistas seen from Kit Hill or Weir Quay, the Valley presents a striking contrast of scales and textures.



Wooded river valley within the Tamar Valley National Landscape, illustrating the enclosed, intimate character and rich textures that contribute to the area's high visual quality.

These visual experiences are deeply rooted in local character. Fingerposts, wildflower-rich Cornish hedges and Devon banks and traditional field patterns all contribute to a sense of place.

Cornish hedges and Devon banks are key features of the Tamar Valley landscape. Both are referred to locally as ‘hedges’ and in Devon as ‘hedgebanks’, but their defining feature is an earthen bank. This can be stone or turf-faced in the case of Devon banks or stone-faced on a Cornish hedge. They traditionally have ditches on both sides and can have living hedgerows and lines of mature trees growing out of the top. In both cases, there is a growing awareness of their special contribution to local landscape character, distinctiveness, nature recovery, habitat connectivity and surface water alleviation, amongst other things. Despite this, the hedges are not protected through the Hedgerow Regulations unless they have a living shrubby hedgerow growing on top.

Despite centuries of industrial activity and development, the Valley has retained its rural distinctiveness, largely due to long-term stewardship by estates such as the Dukes of Bedford and Tavistock Abbey.

3. A Unique Wildlife Resource

The Tamar Valley is a haven for wildlife, supporting an extraordinary range of habitats and species. Its estuary complex is internationally significant, designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ), and multiple Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). These tidal zones are vital for wintering waders and wildfowl, and host important habitats such as salt marshes, reedbeds, and fringing oak woodlands.



Eurasian curlew in estuarine habitat within the Tamar Valley National Landscape, representing the wintering waders supported by the valley's internationally significant tidal zones.

Mining has left a surprising and valuable legacy for biodiversity. Abandoned workings and spoil tips have evolved into refuges for species like the Greater Horseshoe Bat and Nightjars, who benefit from the heathland characteristics that have developed on former sites such as Devon Great Consols, nestled within the conifer plantations of Tamar Trails. Meanwhile, sensitively managed woodland supports a stronghold population of Heath Fritillary butterflies, with the Tamar Valley being one of only four locations in the UK where this rare butterfly thrives.

The rivers of the valley are home to otters, beavers, and threatened fish such as the Allis Shad and salmonids. Even roadside hedges contribute to the Valley's ecological richness, sheltering nationally rare daffodils, living remnants of its market gardening heritage.



Tidal creek near Saltash within the Tamar Valley National Landscape, illustrating the estuarine habitats and wooded river corridors that support internationally important wildlife.

4. A Remarkable Heritage

The Tamar Valley’s cultural heritage is woven into its landscape. Medieval bridges, lime kilns, viaducts, and a rich mining legacy tell the story of centuries of human interaction. The Valley’s settlement pattern, lanes, fields, woodland, Cornish hedges and Devon banks, reflects medieval and post-medieval enclosures, preserved through stable landownership.



Former mining structures at Okel Tor, illustrating the industrial heritage and historic mining landscape of the Tamar Valley National Landscape.

Mining brought dramatic change in the 18th and 19th centuries, leaving behind a distinctive industrial landscape recognised as part of the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site. Market gardening also shaped the Valley, employing thousands and supplying produce to London via rail and river. These layers of history enrich the Valley's identity and offer a powerful sense of continuity.

5. A Landscape of Artistic and Public Appeal

The Tamar Valley has long inspired creativity and connection. Artists such as J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) painted its views, and the landscape designs of Humphry Repton (1752-1818), such as seen at Port Eliot, reflect its romantic appeal.



J. M. W. Turner, Crossing the Brook (c.1815), oil on canvas. Public domain.
The Tamar Valley has long inspired artists, and Turner's work reflects the romantic qualities and enduring cultural appeal of the landscape.

Today, the Valley supports a vibrant community of artists and craftspeople. Its cultural identity is rooted in traditional industries such as farming, forestry, mining, and salmon fishing, and is celebrated through local events including cherry fairs and apple days. The river and railway have long served as recreational links, offering scenic journeys and community connection. This enduring sense of place is one of the Valley’s greatest strengths, deserving careful stewardship and celebration.



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Date of Adoption:
June 2026

If you require information in a different format – for example in braille, large print, paper copy or other languages, please contact:

Tamar Valley National Landscape, Tamar Valley Centre
Cemetery Road, Drakewalls,
Gunnislake, Cornwall PL18 9FE

www.tamarvalley-nl.org.uk

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Acknowledgements:

Photography Credits: Trevor Burrows, Steven Draper, Tobi O'Neill / TON Drone Services, Ted Giffords, Apex Photography, Fotonow, Lesley Strong, National Trust and Sarah Gibson

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