

# From Wartime Decoy to Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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Arne has always been a small village parish, recorded in 1894 to comprise of 2,668 acres plus 2,209 acres of water and foreshore. By 1932 little of the area had been developed as stated in the Poole and Dorset Herald article:

*'its principal features have remained untouched for centuries and have suffered none but geological changes since the beginning of time'.*

– To Arne by Water and Road ([RON/2/2/ARNE/1](#))

However, all this was to change with the onset of WW2. Anti aircraft positions placed in the Arne area supported 'Starfish' decoy sites with a network of tar barrels and paraffin laden pipes. When ignited the fires would make it appear to enemy aircraft that a strategic target had been bombed. This proved to be highly successful in early 1942 when a bombing raid was diverted by the Arne decoy away from the armament factories on Holton Heath. Over the course of just one bombing raid 206 bomb craters were created on the Arne peninsular, ultimately leading to the evacuation and demise of Arne village. The Army then made use of their newly acquired land for battle training and preparation for the D Day landings. After the war the Army did not retain Arne but the scars of war remained. In an article written in June 1950 for the Bournemouth Daily Echo it notes that

*'the desolate heath of Hardy made more desolate by the hand of man, and the trees were white ghosts where the shellfire had swept'*

– [RON/2/2/Arne/2](#)

Typical of the sparse vegetation of much of the Arne holding. The timber was blitzed when the area was used as a decoy for enemy bombers during the war.



Extract from Bournemouth Daily Echo, showing impact of war on Arne.  
RON/2/2/Arne/4

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However, Arne was to undergo another transformation illustrating the resilience of nature and growing public awareness of the value of their natural surroundings. By 1954 the first area of 9 acres of Big Wood had been declared a national nature reserve. Arne was now being recognized for its ecological importance providing a diverse range of interrelated habitats from dramatic open heathland, ancient oak woodland, grass, reed beds and salt marshes.

It remains one of the few places in the UK where all six of the country's native reptiles can be found and plays a key role in safeguarding the future of species such as the smooth snake, the sand lizard and the Dartford warbler. Since 1965 Arne has been an RSPB reserve now stretching to over 1200 acres and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest attracting visitors from all over the country.



Arne as it is today. Photos from [D-LGG/PH/Box 3](#)

Should you wish to read more about Arne's wealth of wildlife habitat I would recommend two articles kept at the Dorset History Centre: Wild Flower Magazine – My Favourite Botanical Hunt of 20th Century ([RON/2/2/Arne/12](#))

Country Life Magazine – *Heaths of Plenty, Arne Nature Reserve* by David Tomlinson, 10 Sept 1981 ([RON/31/4/2](#))

—This was a guest blog written for Dorset History Centre by Jane Ashenden.