

A new government strategy – are we ready?

As some of you may know I took on the role of Chairman of FoFC in June of this year and the six months have flown by. I am not quite sure how well the word strategy sits with me but clearly if we are to protect Forster Country we need to be aware of the threats and to be able to tread the very thin line dividing our love of our own countryside and our concerns for those who need acceptable homes. There is enormous pressure arising from population increase, family demographics and a general desire for bigger and better castles.

The Government has set out a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to simplify and consolidate planning policy in England. Its objective is to set out the Government's economic, environmental and social planning policies for England. Taken together, these must ensure "sustainability". However, there seems to be some difficulty in arriving at a precise definition of this word in the context of planning.

The CRUCIAL point is that once this becomes law local authorities will become almost autonomous within the policy guidelines in decision making on planning issues within their own confines so long as this does not have any detrimental impingement on neighbours. Stevenage Borough Council is generally in favour of the expansion of Stevenage.

So how could this affect Forster Country and what can we do about it?

Margaret Ashby and I met SBC's Head of Planning (Mr Viv Evans) on 29th November and had a very instructive and constructive discussion.

He said that the law has not yet changed so local authorities cannot act under the new proposals yet. However, plans can be set in motion. It seems likely that any major plan for Stevenage will not be available until around 2014 or 2015 when it will go out for consultation. There is very limited scope for expansion of Stevenage within the current boundary and

boundaries are jealously guarded by those surrounding Stevenage. Open areas are located at the southwest just north of Norton Green on the west side of the A1(M), Forster Country itself and a very small area towards Aston. Access to the Norton Green area is very awkward. Other possibilities include development of the New Town centre. Green areas within the Old Town were not discussed.

Bearing in mind the latent threat to Forster Country implicit in the requirement for new homes, we need to retain our vigilance and garner support from wherever we can.

Forster Country is very clearly within greenbelt thanks to action by Margaret Ashby and John Hepworth some years ago. Whilst it is in greenbelt it remains essentially sacrosanct. However, strategic reviews of greenbelt are possible, although not undertaken lightly.

One idea given to us by Viv at the meeting was that of recognised neighbourhoods. Stevenage has no parish councils but neighbourhoods can be formed as a kind of equivalent to a parish council. This is something that I would like to explore further.

Bearing in mind the latent threat to Forster Country implicit in the requirement for new homes, we need to retain our vigilance and garner support from wherever we can. My approach is to take action in three areas -

- Maintain a close watching brief on planning applications and any other moves that may affect Forster Country. This will mean utilising the SBC and North Herts websites as well as keeping an eye on the local and national press.

- Run an event annually with the idea of engaging with local people. Currently we are running a photographic competition and I hope that you will all enter some photographs. I have already talked with the Great Ashby Community Centre on this and intend to make it known better to Graveley residents who live either in or on the edge of Forster Country.

- Attempt to win support from national organisations such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). A suggestion has been made by Stephen Pollock-Hill that we try to link with other areas that have a literary connection, such as Bronte Country or the Lake District with a view to forming a network or even a new national organisation. We need to consider this further.

So I leave you to judge whether or not we are ready. If you think not, then any ideas will be well received.

Finally may I wish members a happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

John Spiers

In this issue

Country Parks	page 2
Patron's Talk	page 3
Birthday Walk	page 3
Photography Competition	page 4

Country parks

Following a suggestion made at the AGM, three committee members took a trip to Aldenham Country Park, Elstree. It was created in 1973 on greenbelt land and, at 175 acres, is a comparable size to Forster Country, though the centre is a 65 acre lake where sailing and fishing are allowed.

Woody pathways wind round the lake and there are picnic areas, an adventure playground and a farm – apparently breeding rare livestock – attached. Other facilities were loos and a refreshment kiosk, which was not open when we visited on a rainy afternoon in August. We felt that it was more ambitious than we should like for Forster Country and we certainly didn't want a large car park charging £4 per visit!

Great Ashby Park is perhaps more the style we should like. At the end of Serpentine Close and backing on to undeveloped land, this has a small free car park and a playground on the periphery but is predominantly grass, with variations of contour, surrounded by woods and farm land. The circular path offers easy walking and a chance to enjoy the space and openness. If you haven't already been, it is well worth a visit.

Angela Hepworth



Above and below
Aldenham Country Park
(Photos John Spiers)

Left
June Pitcher and John Spiers at Aldenham
(Photo Angela Hepworth)



Patron's talk

On the evening of 4th November, three of us journeyed across Hertfordshire to St Mary's Church, Redbourn, to hear a talk by the former Poet Laureate, Sir Andrew Motion. During this year, he has been giving a series of lectures at locations throughout England to mark the 400th anniversary of the King James' Bible. We, of course, had an additional reason for going to his lecture, as he is a patron of the Friends of the Forster Country.

When we arrived, the church was already full and extra chairs were being brought in. The large audience listened attentively as Sir Andrew discussed the importance of biblical narrative in our culture and its influence on our language and literature. To illustrate this, he read extracts from the work of several poets and ended with a memorable reading of the whole of his poem *Whale Song*.

There was prolonged and enthusiastic applause, after which the audience was invited into the church room for nibbles and an opportunity to buy books. We were fortunate in that we happened



Photo St Mary's

to be seated near the door and so were some of the first in. I took the opportunity for a quick word with our patron, who asked how things were going and said that he read the FoFC Newsletters with interest. I thanked him for his support and he wished us well.

Margaret Ashby

Publicity

Since the last Newsletter appeared in August we have been fortunate to receive a fair amount of publicity locally. The Comet has featured Friends of the Forster Country and its chairman three times! Possibly motivated by the first article, Jack FM (a local radio station) interviewed John Spiers for its morning News programme.

Our organisation was mentioned as was the location of Forster Country and its significance, but it would have been difficult for the general listener to piece together a decent story since the interview was offered in sound bites. News comes on the hour and a different (short!) comment from John was broadcast at 6, 7, 8 and 9 a.m. I noticed the same technique with another story – about Hoddesdon Swimming Baths – but I suppose we have to believe in the adage that any publicity is better than none!

Angela Hepworth

email

FoFC are endeavouring to create an email address listing. This will be held by the Secretary and will not be available to other members. The purpose of this is to allow us to contact people more easily should the need arise. To retain confidentiality members will be contacted using the blind copy method "bcc" so that they cannot see other people's email addresses.

Some of you have already agreed to be on the list, others have provided e-addresses



on their membership renewal forms. If you are not willing for us to contact you in this way, please let the Secretary, Marion Ohlendorf, know (rmohlendorf@gmail.com). Thank you.

Birthday Walk

The annual walk of about three miles across Forster Country in honour of E M Forster's birthday will start at 2 pm (slightly earlier than previously) at the lych-gate of St Nicholas' Church, Rectory Lane, Stevenage, on Sunday 1st January 2012. We can't guarantee mudless or even dry conditions but we can promise you a warm welcome and tea and biscuits in the Parish Room of the church afterwards.

The Friends of the Forster Country Photography Competition 2012

The Friends of the Forster Country (FoFC) are holding a competition for the best photographs taken within Forster Country. The area comprising Forster Country for the purposes of the competition is shown on the map below. The competition is open to all.

RULES

Photographic entries together with entry form shall be submitted electronically.

1. Title - 'The Friends of the Forster Country Photography Competition 2012'

2. Geographic area. For this competition Forster Country is as defined on the map. Entrants must keep to public rights of way. Photographs of the fronts of private properties in Weston Road (e.g. Rooks Nest House and Rooks Nest Farm Barns) are not permitted.

3. Photographs can be of anything within the Forster Country - or views from it, e.g. plants, people, buildings, close-ups, panoramas, harvesting etc.

4. Age bands - entries are invited in 2 age groups as follows: 'those under 18 on 30th September 2012' and 'open to all'. Those under 18 on 30/9/2012 may enter both bands.

5. Original Work. All works submitted must be original and produced solely by the photographer entering the competition.

6. Prizes. Successful images will be printed and exhibited locally and winning artists will be awarded a prize in each age category. These will be in the form of vouchers for use in photographic retailers plus wine for minor placements.

7. Digital submission. Photographs can be black & white or colour and must be submitted as digital files in the first

instance. They should be taken using a minimum 3 Mega pixel camera or 300 dpi in a high quality jpeg format.

8. Address for submission. Images are to be sent as an attachment to an email to photocomp@forstercountry.org.uk. One image per email please.

9. Prize giving. Prizes will be awarded at the time of exhibition at one of the hanging venues below during October 2012. This will be accompanied by light refreshments.

10. Judges. Will be selected from local photographers, artists and Friends of the Forster Country committee.

11. Venue for hanging. It is hoped to exhibit the photographs in at least 3 separate venues depending upon permissions, these being the Great Ashby Community Building, the Gordon Craig Theatre Bar and the Stevenage Community Arts Centre at Roaring Meg. Schools will also be asked to show the photographs.

12. Title, location and name. All images must have a title, defined location at which the photograph was taken - using either an Ordnance Survey grid reference or a defined position along a right of way which is clear to the judges - and the entrant's name. The maximum number of entries per person shall be 10.

13. Closing date. The closing date for entries is 30th September 2012. Photographs may be taken at any time from date of entry until 30th September 2012.

14. Promotion of FoFC. Selected entries may be used for promotion of Forster Country including production of calendars, cards etc. Copyright will remain with the photographer.

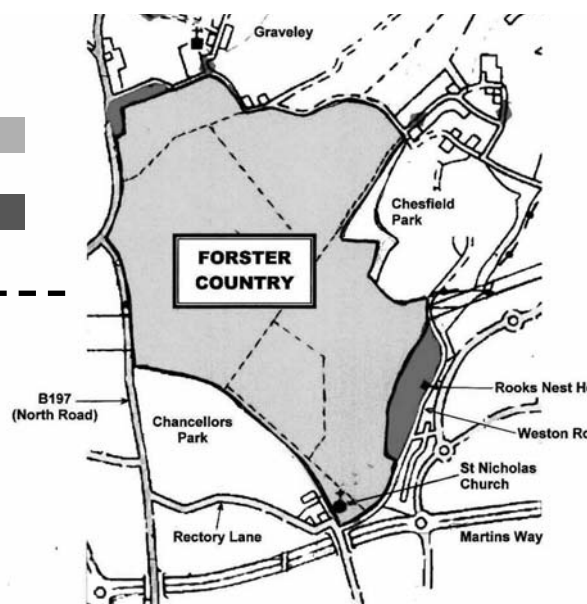
15. Entry fee. There is no entry fee.

For entry form - see website - www.forstercountry.org.uk

Area for photographs to be taken

No photographs here please
- private property

Public footpaths and bridleways
- please keep to these



Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

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