

The Friends of the Forster Country

Newsletter

Issue No 30 April 2012

John Hepworth

John Hepworth, co-founder and then patron of The Friends of The Forster Country, died on 15th January, 2012. He was 92 years old and had remained involved as co-convenor until 2008.

A D-Day veteran with a distinguished career in Geology, he had spent many years travelling and living overseas and was not overjoyed at the prospect of living in Stevenage. However, he made his home in the town in 1975 and created a fulfilling life for himself after his retirement from paid work in 1983.

He became a familiar figure in the Old Town as he rode around the streets, initially on a bicycle and in the last couple of years in a mobility scooter.

Besides FOFC, he took a great interest in the Stevenage and Knebworth branch of the WEA (now SKAG – Stevenage and Knebworth Arts Group) and was for many years an active committee member. He also regularly attended meetings of the Stevenage Society and maintained close links with St Nicholas' Church, despite maintaining to the last that he was an atheist.

Indeed, his funeral service was, by his choice, a traditional Anglican one in that very church which has provided the focus for so many FOFC events. It was attended not only by many Stevenage residents,



Anne Conchie

including our Mayor, the Leader of the Council and several councillors, but by friends from further afield from the geological world and from his beloved

Rucksack Club. The many letters and cards received by the family after his death are evidence of the esteem in which he was held.



He is buried in Weston Road Cemetery, almost equidistant from his own home Dominic Cottage and Rooks Nest House, deep in chalk with a splendid view of Forster Country.

Angela Hepworth

(Abbreviated tribute page 2)

Abbreviated version of a tribute presented at John Hepworth's funeral on 31 January 2012

John and I first met in 1988, brought together by a planning application to build on the Forster Country. Both determined to oppose this, we quickly formed a remarkably effective working relationship and attended the Public Inquiry. Somewhat to our surprise, our objection was upheld.

In May 1989 we launched The Friends of the Forster Country at Rooks Nest House. For the next twenty years, supported by a dedicated committee and many loyal members, we worked hard 'To preserve for all time the open green space in the north of Stevenage, called The Forster Country'.

During that time, we met people from all walks of life, argued our case at public meetings and got to know a fair bit about planning and local government. Without exception, on all these occasions, John's wisdom and sense of humour gained him respect

and friendship.

In 1994, following another Public Inquiry we managed to get the whole of The Forster Country designated as Green Belt. To celebrate, we commissioned the 'Only Connect' sculpture which now stands in St Nicholas' churchyard. However, we can never be 100% certain of anything. Planning laws can change and we must continue to be vigilant.

The FoFC was very important to John. He would have been delighted to see it described in our local paper as 'a celebrated conservation group' and even more pleased to see so many supporters at his funeral. What he may not have realised is how much we loved him and will always miss him.

Margaret Ashby

JVH

Tall and spare
With complementary locks
Falling over heightened brow
And voice broadcast
From on high
Determined declaring encouraging
Caught up by such passions
That he must
Could not but transmit
Betrothed to map and rock and
countryside
Inviting us to share
Savour analyse excavate the scene
Feel the weight of these stones
Lying in our hand
And recall the land
That had been theirs
And so at the end
The extended survey drawing to a
close
His final act
Among so many
To carve a niche for himself
A trench for close inspection
And everlasting examination
Deep in chalk
Above a favoured place
Looking down with E M Forster
Across his cherished view.

Don Courtman

Birthday walk

The annual Birthday Walk took place as usual on January 1st with a respectable number of walkers including some unfamiliar faces and resulting in the recruitment of some new members.

The ground was not too muddy and the

rain held off for most of the way but a warm Parish Room with hot beverages and fancy biscuits (most popular with Stephen Pollock-Hill's dog) awaited and those who stayed on enjoyed the chance of conviviality.



John Spiers

Local plans

- how do they affect FoFC?

Since our last Newsletter we have been made aware of two local plans which have potential ramifications for FoFC. These are the St Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area Management Plan and the North Herts District Council Local Development Framework Core Strategy

The former of these sets out a range of measures to conserve a large part of Forster Country in its present state as a primarily rural area of charm and character. We feel that this plan is very supportive of our objectives and have written to Stevenage Borough Council with some comments which we hope will enhance the plan. This includes views, use of footpaths, support for literature explaining the history of the area and possibly placing one or two benches if agreed by the landowners to allow people to relax and enjoy the view.

The latter document is more worrying. By the time of the publication of this newsletter a preliminary response to that will have gone back to NHDC. This core strategy is based significantly on the old East of England Plan which was formulated by the East of England Regional assembly and which was scrapped as an unnecessary QUANGO when the Coalition Government came to power.

The strategy discusses the need for between 2,500 and 15,800 new homes to be built in North Hertfordshire. The favoured number is 7,000. There is a direct comparison of options between building development around Hitchin, Letchworth,

'whilst this option could be met without any development on the edge of Stevenage we believe that some sites on the edge of Stevenage would be preferable to some of the least desirable sites on the edges of Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock, Royston & the villages'

Baldock, Royston & the villages and building around Stevenage. This needs more study.

It would need development of greenfield and greenbelt land. The document says – *'whilst this option could be met without any development on the edge of Stevenage we believe that some sites on the edge of Stevenage would be preferable to some of the least desirable sites on the edges of Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock, Royston & the villages'*. We will need to be very vigilant.

In connection with planning, we are pleased to say that Don Courtman,

although not on the FoFC committee, has kindly agreed to review planning applications which come under the aegis of both SBC and NHDC. 99% of these have no impact on Forster Country but occasionally something could affect us and the NHDC plans could possibly become a major issue.

We have also appointed Rupert Litherland as a new trustee, making a total of six now. Ru, who is Angela Hepworth's son, does not live locally but has a great interest in Forster Country. He would like to see significant enhancement of its hedgerows and we may in due course gather as a group and carry out some planting, again with the permission of the landowners. He has also agreed to act as a back up for Don when he is away in France.

We have not so far taken any action on forming a "recognized neighbourhood" (a formally constituted body with similar status to a parish council) but are pursuing the idea of contact with other groups with literary connections as well as trying to gain some rapport with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE).

The photographic competition has attracted fewer entries than we would have hoped. PLEASE send in your entries. Spring is here and the sun is out. Details can be found on our website - www.forstercountry.org.uk.

I hope to see you on a stroll in Forster Country.

John Spiers

As a lasting memorial to John Hepworth it has been suggested that an annual lecture should be held on one of the many subjects in which he was interested.

Did you know?

There is a Forster Suite in the Lister Hospital.

It has been there since 1992 and is on the top floor.

We are sorry to report the recent death of Friend Sarah Graham.

The E M Forster pamphlet she kindly donated to us has now been sold by David's Bookshop in Letchworth and we have received £32 for it.



According to reliable sources, there are this year more larks in Forster Country – in the field immediately by St Nicholas' Church, so not too arduous to get there if you'd like to hear them.

Congratulations

to our Patron, Sir Andrew Motion, on becoming President of CPRE. This is, for us, a significant organisation.



Membership Renewal

Annual subscriptions to the Friends of the Forster Country are now due. We enclose a form for your completion. If we are to achieve our aim to **preserve for all time the open green space in the north of**

Stevenage known as the Forster Country we need you all to continue supporting us and trying to recruit new members to our cause. Subscriptions for 2012-2013 remain at £7 per individual and £10 per family.

The truth will out!

The National Planning Policy Framework with its "presumption in favour of sustainable development" had already produced fierce opposition from countryside campaigners and organisations, including The National Trust, before its publication.

How genuine then, or how politically expedient, is the recent article written by the Prime Minister for the Countryside Alliance magazine?

In it, David Cameron draws attention to his rural upbringing and his continuing links with the English countryside. It should be 'loved, enjoyed and protected for everyone' he writes. 'Hear, hear!' we say but only time will tell whether it will be.

Angela Hepworth

AGM

The AGM will take place at Springfield House, High Street, Stevenage, on July 14th at 2.30. It will be followed by light refreshments and musical entertainment. There will be no charge for Friends attending but donations on the day will be welcomed.

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

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