

Development threat

There has been much discussion about North Herts' District Council's Draft Local Plan which has been put out for public consultation. There have been articles in and letters to the local paper opposing the proposals for the building in the district of 14000 houses by 2031 and unspecified thousands thereafter.

Kevin Fitzgerald (Honorary Director of CPRE Herts) wrote that "the disastrous and unjustified" proposals should be scrapped. The implementation of these proposals would destroy decades of work done to protect the district's countryside.

In the response submitted by FOFC we question the basis of the requirement for the number of dwellings. We suspect these are not simply to satisfy local need but will attract London commuters. Too much pressure would be put on transport, roads, parking, health, education and all amenities by the building of so many houses. Local people do not want this expansion. According to the document there were 7 objectors to 1 supporter and we are supposed to have "democratically-accountable local control of development." There were no perceptible benefits for current residents, particularly those of North Stevenage, who would see their way of life significantly and adversely affected.

Under these proposals, Graveley village would become part of Greater Stevenage, something the residents there strongly oppose. The proposals were developer-led: the sites identified are those most desirable to developers. In answer to a query about analysis of brownfield sites, NHDC admitted that they had not studied these sufficiently.

The idea of compensating for building on Green Belt land by allocating a site several miles away is ridiculous. It is by definition site specific and was designed to prevent coalescence of towns and be of benefit to local people.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that "once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances." Councillor David Levett, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Enterprise NHDC confirms this. "The Green Belt can only be built on in very special circumstances and meeting a housing need is not enough to qualify."

There have also been articles and comments in the national press on the value of Green Belt and how it is threatened by development. Here are some quotations which FOFC fully endorses:

Tristram Hunt MP: "Sacrificing our natural and urban heritage might butter up the Home Builders' Federation but it will not make Britain a better place to live."

Simon Jenkins: "The Green Belt has been the star feature of British town and country planning for half a century. In one of Europe's most congested countries, it has prevented urban sprawl, protected a vision of rural England and retained access to green spaces for urban dwellers that has been admired worldwide... Planning control is now the slave, not the master, of profit."

Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government: "We will maintain protection for the Green Belt and the environment, as we are committed to sustainable growth."

Most recently, three local Conservative MPs have expressed the opinion that a new garden city on land other than Green Belt should be built in the area instead of adding on to existing communities.

We delivered nearly a thousand flyers to highlight the threat to Forster Country and to ask people to respond to the consultation. Deadline for comments was 6th February. Even more important will be a similar response to Stevenage's Plan; but that is not due to be published until October 2015.

We hope that public pressure will, as it should, force the authorities to think again. As one of the last refuges for an overcrowded town in an overcrowded region Forster Country, which in 1995 was included in Green Belt, must be preserved.

News items

Margaret Ashby gave a talk about FOFC to the Old Stevenage and Woodfield Labour Party. She told them that our fight is not with SBC or NHDC but with the planning process

EM Forster, Elizabeth Poston and Malcolm Williamson all feature along with Rooks Nest House on one panel of the SBC mural recently unveiled along the walkway through the Stevenage Leisure Centre.

Memorial lecture

The third annual lecture held in memory of John Hepworth, one of the original founders of the Friends of the Forster Country, was held in the Council Chamber of Daneshill House on Saturday, November 15th.

This year John's botanical interest was the focus and Trevor James gave an absorbing talk on the Flora of

Hertfordshire which he had produced.

Extremely knowledgeable though he is, his presentation was pleasingly informal and his concentration on locations that many of us knew kept our attention. He described the process of compiling a definitive academic work as well as highlighting some of his team's more surprising finds.

Our thanks to Cllr. Simon Speller for sponsoring our use of the Chamber and to Mayor Sherma Batson and her consort for attending yet another of our events.



Photo John Spiers

A walk around E M Forster

An account in verse to remind you of last year's walk

Twenty-eight souls
 On the wettest wildest
 Day of the year
 Crouched under the lych-gate
 Before the church
 Huddling for protection
 That was hardly there
 To set off heads down
 Bent under rain
 Buffeted by wind
 To slide, slither
 Through mud and rut
 Measuring each step
 Ready for a fall
 Together in a line
 In birthday celebration.
 Facing down the elements,
 Watched askance, if not with disbelief,
 On this first day of the year
 From fireside hearths
 Where the celebration
 Was to be warm indoors,
 The symbolic tour pressed on;
 Heads lowered to recall this man,
 This writer,
 This birthday, this patch, this place,
 This precious piece of England
 From which one of his greatest
 treasures came.

Don Courtman

Birthday walk

In Margaret Ashby's account of last year's walk she looked forward to the next, hoping it would be as dramatic. I'm afraid it wasn't. After several days

of blue skies and crisp frost, January 1st 2015 turned out to be grey and gloomy and the thaw had contributed to the production of the familiar

sqelchy mud. At least there was no rain and over twenty participants completed the round more quickly than on some other occasions, entering the Parish Room in good spirits for a cheering warm drink. We were pleased to welcome several visitors, including four children and one dog.



Photo Margaret Ashby

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

Margaret Ashby. Nicola Beauman. Barbara Follett. Sir Andrew Follett. John Pilgrim. Richard Whitmore

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