

Awakening

The publication of the Bellway-Miller (BM) revised Outline Planning Application to build on Forster Country submitted to Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) by Savills Estate Agents on 20th September 2019 has stirred many into action. This application is numbered **17/00862/OPM**. For those with computers that can be found by using the link <https://publicaccess.stevenage.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=POMVJWPH08E00>

At the time of writing there have been 428 representations to SBC relating to this application most of which are objections to the proposed development. One formal objection has been that from Hertfordshire County Council's Local Flood Authority (Director of Environment & Infrastructure - Mark Kemp). They have said that the information provided (within the outline planning application) to date does not provide a suitable basis for an assessment of the flood risks arising from the proposed development. They therefore object to the grant of planning permission and recommend refusal. It is possible that BM will require some time to react to this.

Additionally, an online petition has been started and the number of signatories rose to over 1,000 within a week.

There have also been two prominent articles in the Stevenage Comet pointing out the loss of Green Belt, the reduction in green lung, the loss of heritage and the increase in congestion and pollution.

FoFC have lodged an objection which can be summarised as :-

- The application is unsustainable as it contributes significantly to climate change. These 800 houses will emit 64000 tons of CO2 in their construction and 11,000 tons each year from now on from the householders.
- This land has recently been removed from Green Belt protection in defiance of planning law. This was a travesty of justice.
- Historic England has stated that this land is a heritage asset and should not be built upon.
- This application would significantly contribute to the urban sprawl of Stevenage.
- The development is not needed as the Office of National Statistics (ONS) now shows that the UK population growth is slowing. The Stevenage building need is at least 2000 dwellings less than current plans.

It has also been pointed out that the developer appears to have made no realistic attempt to make the individual dwellings sustainable by using modern technology to reduce carbon emissions and that the risk to health posed by the high voltage cables may not have been properly assessed. Please make your own objections in your own words as soon as you are able.

So as mentioned in the previous Newsletter Forster Country remains untouched. We hope that the objections and the petition could well influence SBC in their consideration of the planning application and we may yet harbour hopes that Forster Country might be saved.

In the meantime, we have met BM

in conjunction with SBC for some discussion of the way forward for the 45 hectare country park which of course we hope will not become necessary. These discussions were friendly and SBC and BM are prepared to take account of many of our wishes. The country park will be retained as hay meadows but will be arranged with informal routes to allow public access. Discreet sculptures and benches may well be possible. The names of E M Forster, Elizabeth Poston and Malcolm Williamson could be marked within the country park in various ways.

It just remains for me to wish you a Merry Christmas and to say that I hope that we will see you outside St Nicholas Church on 1st January for the 3 mile walk around Forster Country to mark E M Forster's birthday.

John Spiers (Chairman FoFC)

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A meeting of minds at Rooks Nest House

Rooks Nest House, was a beloved home to both E M Forster and Elizabeth Poston. He lived there with his widowed mother during his young, formative years of four to fourteen and there, educated at home, he set deep roots, exploring the neighbouring countryside and developing an interest in gardening – including growing tall red poppies – especially enjoying identifying the local flora. In his earliest known teenage writings he said *‘the surroundings of the house were altogether very pretty, first and foremost the fine view’*.

His affection for his home was profound since it represented stability and security and so he was distraught when he had to leave it to be educated away, first in a boarding school at Eastbourne and finally as a day-boy at Tonbridge in 1893. His mother had socialised with the local gentry including Charles Poston and family, recently arrived at a nearby large Georgian Manor, called ‘Mallows’ but later renamed ‘Highfield’. The family made a lasting impression on the 7-year old Forster.

Charles’s wife died in 1900 and he remarried – the much younger Clementine – whose beauty and gentle personality captivated Forster when he travelled down from Cambridge and visited Highfield briefly in 1907. Clementine’s first-born, Elizabeth was just a year old at the time, but as a child she later had an indirect acquaintance with him through inheriting one of his dolls, christened ‘Morgan’! To be

truthful the doll was not very popular and, when given away to a needy neighbouring child, involved a certain amount of tossing to and fro over the garden hedge!

Forster’s *Howards End*, published a few years later, in 1910, reflected very strongly his connection with the world of his childhood. In its first few pages he reiterates, *‘the views marvellous – views westwards to the high ground’*. There is also a clear connection between his fictional characters and aspects of people he knew in his youth, including Clementine (who we can identify in *Howards End* as Ruth Wilcox, the first wife of Charles).

Charles himself died in 1913 and the widowed Clementine, having to economise, moved, quite by chance, as tenant of Rooks Nest House. Here, Elizabeth, after initial disappointment, became just as enchanted with the place as Forster had been and was as sad at leaving it when sent away to boarding school, even absconding on one occasion to return home.

In her mind the house was very much identified with *Howards End*, so much so that she often used the name as her address, often speaking of its charm and special atmosphere. In a letter to friends after they had organised an abridged performance of *Howards End* at the house she wrote of its mysterious secret, *‘fragile and yet so strong, a spell that is a sense and seems also to impart one ... too mysterious for description. Yet one can’t*

*attribute it only to Forster, as he was conscious of it when he first trotted in [...]. All those 300 years odd of Howards perhaps, living and dying and going on again?** But, no more. It defies analysis. *Feeling is enough.’*

So, Forster and Elizabeth shared a deep love of Rooks Nest House and the garden and surrounding landscape but it was not until 1940 when she was an established musician that they actually met. It was the occasion of a Myra Hess wartime concert at the National Gallery at which she was performing, quite against the rules of the BBC for whom she was working as Director of Music for the European Service. Of course she invited him to see the house, and entries in her pocket diary, like *‘went to sleep in the cowslips’*, show increasing contact with him until just before his death in 1970. He often brought presents for the house and even paid off the mortgage.

When the house and neighbouring land were threatened by the New Town development after World War II Forster responded to Elizabeth’s call for support, publicly questioning whether building houses were *‘man’s final triumph’* or whether *‘there [was] another England, green and eternal, which will outlast them?’*

The longstanding threat to Forster Country has come to a head this year with a planning application to build 800 houses on it, though we may be grateful that at least Rooks Nest House has been saved from destruction.

Also Elizabeth has preserved some of the local folk culture, in particular three Hertfordshire Folk Songs, Garland Gay, which Forster would have heard sung in his youth and which she arranged as a surprise to celebrate his 90th birthday as part of the concert given by King's College Musical Society.

That same year Elizabeth composed the incidental music for the BBC TV production of *Howards End*, commenting that, *'no one else knew the real story. A lifetime – several lifetimes – went into the music: not only the poignancy of the present, but an almost unbearable nostalgia for a past, which the book enshrines.'*

Recalling shooting of the burial scene of the first Mrs. Wilcox, she said she could have wept. In even more reflective mood, she empathized not only with Margaret Schlegel's marriage to a man so much her senior, likening it to that of her parents, but also with the youthful relationship between Leonard Bast and Helen Schlegel, speaking of Forster's *'amazingly penetrating perception and understanding of aspects of the other sex and of its relationships [...] I know of no other man who states with more uncompromising truth, aspects of life as I have known and lived it [...] it has been an almost symphonic experience to enter in*

as a part of the story – even to write the music for one's own funeral, for Mrs Wilcox holds the key to the whole thing,'

Elizabeth had many friendships but none so closely connected to Rooks Nest House and its environs as the one she had with Forster.

*A royal grant of land was made to a George Howarde as early as 1558 (see Peter J. Harvey (1999) *The Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity in Ashby*, Margaret (editor) *St. Nicholas Church, Stevenage: Recent research*. The Friends of St. Nicholas Trust in association with Cambridge University Board of Continuing Education).

John Alabaster



View over Gravely

John Alabaster

Objections to planning application in Forster Country

The FoFC objection campaign is going very well with over 400 objections on the SBC website and more constantly pouring in. My own contribution has been in door-knocking the Chancellors estate twice, Rectory Lane, Weston Lane, Whitney Drive and Graveley.

Unfortunately, during daylight hours many people are at work and do not always take notice of the leaflet that I push through their letterbox, which is why I have done some streets twice over.

Our objections centre on lack of sustainability, damage to bio-diversity

(the Skylark is a Red List species the loss of which cannot be mitigated against) and the loss of good agricultural land.

Despite our successful campaign one thing worries me. I had a long phone call with Dave Rusling the relevant Planning Officer, who stated the fact that Forster Country is allocated in the Local Plan could, in itself, override all our objections to the planning application. I have asked to know the legal power by which he states that position but as yet have no response.

Reg Norgan

Email addresses

In order to reduce our overheads, we are going to send all future communications, including newsletters, by email wherever this is possible.

We will of course continue to post information to Friends who aren't on email and if you object to receiving the newsletter via email, do let the membership secretary know.

Elizabeth Poston in the news

Some of Elizabeth's music is soon to appear in an *Anthology of Sacred Music* by Women Composers to be published in three volumes by Multitude of Voices.

The first, *SATB Anthems* will include the already published item *Sing unto the Lord*, the second, *Upper Voices Anthems* will contain the hitherto unpublished *Te lucis ante terminum*, which is the second movement of *An English Day-Book*, most recently recorded in 2010 on Signum Classics, while Volume 3, *Liturgical Works* will include the *Festal Te Deum*, commissioned by St. Matthews Church, Northampton, manuscript of which was discovered only last year,

Her music will also feature in a concert to be organised by The Peter Warlock Society on 16 May next year at St. Nicholas Church in recognition of the close friendship between Elizabeth and Peter, made clear by the recently discovered letters of his.

John Alabaster

Subscriptions

The committee hasn't asked for subscriptions during the past two years because of uncertainty about the future of FoFC. However, we have decided to reinstate them as our fight to save the land continues.

The membership year will now run from January to December and as you

can see from the enclosed renewal form, fees have not increased and you are now able to pay online.

If you think we don't have a current email address for you, please send it to the membership secretary, Marion Ohlendorf rmohlendorf@gmail.com.

Birthday Walk

Our annual Forster Birthday Walk takes place on Wednesday, 1 January 2020, starting from St Nicholas Church lych gate (Rectory Lane, Stevenage SG1 4DA) at 2 pm.

The walk is about three miles over undulating ground and can be muddy, so wear appropriate footwear. Unfortunately the church is closed for renovation, so we can't meet there for refreshments as we usually do.

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

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

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