

The Friends of the Forster Country

Newsletter

Issue No 48. December 2018

Thoughts of a new patron

It is a pleasantly surprising honour to be elected a patron of the Friends of the Forster Country, an organisation whose aims and activity have strongly appealed to me ever since its inception. And it is all the more pleasant since many of its members, past and present, I regard as very good friends.

I have always felt close to the land, having been born and bred within a stone's throw of a farm, had farm holidays as a child and then worked on my brother's mixed farm before embarking on a career as an environmental scientist. I am no stranger to hedging, hand milking and ploughing with horses! My wife Beryl and I have always been drawn to the countryside and have enjoyed many holidays walking and skiing cross-country and still hate to miss a day trudging part of the Green Belt Forster Country.

My interest in the heritage of Forster Country, particularly its musical heritage, actually predates the establishment of the Friends, for I became aware that Elizabeth Poston was President of the Stevenage Musical Society when, a few years after its re-founding in 1950, I played as an extra among the violins in its orchestra. Then, in 1959 she was revealed to me as an accomplished soloist when she played Walter Leigh's Piano Concerto at Alleynes Grammar School (a work whose first performance she had given earlier in London).

Subsequently I came to know her formally (and her music much better) when I became Chairman of the Society in 1976 and I met her at home at Rooks Nest House and realised its connection with *Howards End*. In addition, there were other, less formal

occasions, when she sat on our piano stool at home and regaled us with amusing stories of her amazing life, all wonderfully told. I also soon discovered that we had a common interest in beekeeping.

Songs were her 'first and permanent love' and perhaps her second was for the English countryside, particularly the Hertfordshire countryside, vividly described in many letters to her friends and shared, of course, with E. M. Forster who regarded it as 'the loveliest in England'. When, in 1970, we moved to Granby Road at the edge of Green Belt Forster Country we understood better what Forster meant and what Elizabeth loved so much.

My acquaintance with Elizabeth's life and work remained relatively superficial until 2004 when I had the good fortune to be asked by John Hepworth to organize, for the following year, the celebration of the centenary of her birth.

The help and encouragement I then received from Elizabeth's friends, particularly Margaret Ashby, allowed me a unique glimpse into some of the many facets of her life and gave me an understanding and an appreciation of the nuances of her many different friendships. I felt, and still feel very privileged.

Much of Elizabeth's work was, of course, published but there were unpublished compositions I wanted very much to include in some of the Centenary Concerts. Fortunately, her Literary Executor and Copyright Holder, Simon Champion proved very generous in supplying all these and very much more.

Many other people have helped



John Alabaster

and the more I ponder, the more I remember but the list is far too long to extend here. Nevertheless, I should reiterate my thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund which covered all costs of the celebration year and, in addition, allowed profits from the sale of concert tickets and books to be generated for the publication of more books, culminating in the recently produced Catalogue of Works.

We have learned a great deal about Elizabeth's life and work, but her story has necessarily come out piecemeal and incomplete, and continues to do so. Already the Catalogue is slightly out of date, for an original MS of *Festive Te Deum* was located only last summer in Northampton whilst material for a radio play, *Gorboduc*, was found even more recently at the BBC Music Library. More remarkably, letters from Peter Warlock, thought to have been destroyed, also turned up, together with a collection of his infamous limericks! One hopes for more and, eventually, that someone will undertake a full biography.

... continued over page

... continued from front page

In the meantime, whatever area of Green Belt Forster Country survives in defiance of inexorable urbanisation, we must hold to the terms of our constitution, 'to encourage the appreciation of the historical, literary and musical heritage' of Forster Country, 'created in particular by E. M. Forster and Elizabeth Poston' but not forgetting Master of the Queen's Music, Malcolm Williamson.

John S Alabaster

Developments

Despite our best efforts - and those of other petitioners - the Stevenage Local Plan was accepted in October 2017 and the North Herts Local Plan has now been passed by the Inquiry Inspector, subject to some minor modifications.

Our local authorities are ignoring the reduced projection for housing needs right across the country calculated in the recent report produced by the Office for National Statistics as well as disregarding the overwhelming opposition of current residents. The 31.5% reduction estimated for Stevenage would mean 2,300 fewer dwellings and if these were not built Green Belt land could be saved.

So, sadly, the building of 1700 dwellings across Forster Country seems inevitable and we will be left with 48 hectares of open space, called St Nicholas' Meadows by the developers. We are anxious at least to have this renamed to conserve some of the cultural history, perhaps as Forster Heritage Park.

Positive Note

Our apple tree close to Stevenage Museum is still flourishing.

Changes to our committee

Michael Catty retired from the Committee and has moved to Burgess Hill. Michael was a tremendous asset to our committee for many years, especially when writing up and editing our responses during the public consultations.

We welcomed Reg Norgan of Graveley as a co-opted member during the year and he was duly elected at the AGM. He is fighting hard for Forster Country as part of his more general efforts to protect the countryside in our land.

Stephen Pollock-Hill, our vice chairman, retired at the AGM. Stephen has put in a great deal of effort and expertise over many years and in particular recently in our efforts at both the Local Plan Hearings and the deliberations with CPRE. His initiative for a national organisation called Historical, Artistic and Literary Landscapes (HALLS) is attracting some support which we hope will lead to its success.

Margaret (Maggie) Dolan

We were so sad to hear of the death of former committee member, long-time Friend and supporter Margaret Dolan on 7th October, following a cycling accident. There was a private family funeral and a Memorial Service on 1st December, which some committee members attended.

Friends will remember Maggie from AGMs and Birthday Walks - to which she generally brought home-baked goodies - always a smiling and positive presence. We shall miss her.

AGM

The AGM at Springfield House on August 25th was well attended. There was little good news, however, as stated elsewhere in this Newsletter.

In his report, the Chairman outlined what action we had taken in the past year as well as noting the events we had been involved in. We attended a number of hearings at the North Herts Plan Public Inquiry and attempted to speak forcefully on the wrongfulness of building on the Green Belt, which we consider to be permanent and sacrosanct. Letters have been published in the local and national press and Margaret Ashby and John Spiers appeared on Look East as well as speaking on local radio. John also spoke at a demonstration in Letchworth alongside its organiser, a lifelong environmentalist, Peter Perry, and CPRE's Kevin Fitzgerald. We have had meetings with representatives from our local councils and CPRE. There was also a very successful walk across Forster Country as part of the annual Stevenage Walking Festival.

A presentation of the latest Poston publication, a catalogue of her works, was made to Margaret Ashby by John Alabaster and a presentation was made to Stephen Pollock-Hill for his contribution to FOFC.

Birthday Walk

The annual walk across Forster Country to celebrate the author's birthday will take place on Tuesday, 1st January, 2019. All welcome. Meet at the lych-gate of St. Nicholas' Church, Rectory Lane, Stevenage SG1 4DA at 2pm.

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

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

Officers

Chairman - John Spiers, 25 Whitney Drive, Stevenage SG1 4BE. 01438 350217
Secretary - Marion Ohlendorf, 4 Chestnut Walk, Stevenage, SG1 4DD. 01438 361470

Newsletter

Editor - Angela Hepworth 01438 351462. Design - Peter Kingsnorth 01438 869557
web - www.forstercountry.org.uk