

FoFC NEWSLETTER DECEMBER 2022

WE FIGHT ON

Our motto which is “*To preserve for all time the open green space north of Stevenage known as the Forster Country*” remains firmly our goal.

We have been through a long quiet period. During this time we have not published many newsletters or charged any subscription fees.

But the time has come to renew our efforts to stop the housing development and other desecrations on our beautiful countryside.

The pandemic and downturn in the economy gave us the hope that the developers may have put their plans on ice, particularly bearing in mind that the promise by SBC to consult us had not materialised.

However, on 22nd September 2022, five detailed planning applications were publicised by Stevenage Borough Council. These are listed below.

STEVENAGE FORSTER COUNTRY - PLANS SUBMITTED

Please look at these plans including the current objections and frame your own

17/00862/OPM	800 Dwellings - Original outline application and representations
22/00781/RMM	Reserved Matters - Country Park
22/00806/RMM	Reserved Matters - 115 Units
22/00808/RMM	Reserved Matters - Site Wide Infrastructure Highways Infrastructure etc
17/00810/RMM	Reserved Matters - 243 Units

We were given a short period to respond to a huge number of documents (some being detailed reports). In the event we managed to send in objections to the Country Park application and a small objection to the Infrastructure application within one of the housing parcels.

More comments on these applications will now be accepted up until at least 9th January 2023 and most likely later.

WE ARE FURTHER CHALLENGING THESE PLANS. YOU CAN TOO. THERE IS STILL TIME.

We have found significant variations to the Outline Plans and these are summarised below and can be seen in detail on the Stevenage Borough Council website.

22/00781/RMM - Country Park

50-car carpark, toilet block, electrical tower and breaking through tree screening proposed at outline planning stage

A northern ‘landscaped mound’ made from 25,000 cubic metres or more of spoil accumulated during the housing construction. We are still seeking further clarification on this but it is shown extending over an area of 9 acres and may be up to 10 feet tall.

A 2.5 kilometre 3.5-metre-wide orbital “path” which to all intents and purposes is a road, intended to be used by maintenance and refuse trucks and an excessively urban approach to path layout, furniture, litter bins and benches not in line with national best practice.

22/00808/RMM - Site Wide Infrastructure

Construction of a maintenance road through the Rectory Lane and St Nicholas Conservation Area



Our grounds for refusal of applications

- These features were not properly included in public consultation prior to submission
- Due process has not been followed with regards the proper assessment of the heritage/conservation impact of the plans. Best practice guidance has not been adopted.
- It is not possible for the Planning and Development Committee to adequately determine whether this proposal is compliant with the Conservation Areas Management Plan or the intention of Local Plan policy NH8

Despite promises by SBC there was no consultation with FoFC (and we believe none with local people generally) about planning the area of Forster Country called St Nicholas Meadows in the Local Plan (some now refer to a Country Park.). Council papers appeared in the planning section of SBC website but we only found them this autumn when planning permission was sought.

We had a site meeting with SBC planning staff on a very wet, late November morning to show them why we do not like the current plans for this open area. We are hopeful of having made an impression but have not, at the time of writing, seen any revised plans.

NORTHERN FORSTER COUNTRY (WITHIN NORTH HERTS)

It should not be forgotten that the proposed NS1 development is part of the open rural landscape that E.M. Forster characterised as among "the loveliest in England".

H.M. Planning Inspector added many main modifications to the submitted NHDC Local Plan to make it sound, concluding that all Green Belt sites proposed by NHDC planners would be developed, but he did suggest flexibility. He said that the Council must undertake a whole plan review of the Local Plan 2011-2031 by the end of 2023 at the latest. NHDC have said that they will start work on that immediately.

The NHDC Local Plan was formally adopted by a majority of NHDC Councillors on 8 November 2022.

Objectors to the 900 houses proposed for NS1 by Croudace Homes can take a small crumb of comfort in so far as he was persuaded to suggest a decrease in numbers from 900 to 775.

CAMPAIGNING

Our latest campaigning against the Council's plan for a municipal car park and further development on Forster Country has gathered good momentum. We have had coverage in the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, the Times, HertsLive and the Comet and public support also from Emma Thompson (a star of the 1992 film of Howards End) and Professor Michael Proctor, Provost at Kings College, Cambridge where Forster was a Fellow.

Our Change.org petition gathered more than 1,800 signatures, though this achievement has been tempered by disappointment at the Council's refusal to accept it. On the upside as a result of our campaigning and your voices, the Council has asked Bellway Miller, the developers, to review its plans for the municipal park on Forster Country, with a view to making the design of the park less intrusive

Forster fans want park plans to end

Proposals to transform meadowland near the author's childhood home have provoked outrage, writes **Kaya Burgess**

In EM Forster's *Howards End*, Margaret tries to recapture "the sense of space which the motor [car] had robbed from her". More than a century later, a similar battle is raging in the meadows of Hertfordshire.

Residents, heritage bodies, an academic and an Oscar-winning actress have raised concerns over "hugely regrettable and entirely inappropriate" plans to build a car park and a toilet block in the fields that inspired Forster's 1910 novel.

Stevenage council wants to turn an area of meadow near Forster's childhood home into a "country park". The proposals include a car park for 50 cars and a building with toilets for visitors, as well as metal fencing and newly landscaped areas.

John Lucas, the literary historian, wrote that the automobile was presented as a "symbol of intrusive, unsettling power" by Forster in *Howards End*.

Opponents of the council's plans appear to take a similar view, raising concerns that the car park and increased traffic would "fundamentally change [the] essential character" of an area still known as "Forster country".

The term was coined by writers including John Betjeman and Graham Greene, who wrote to *The Times* in 1960 to call for the area to "be allowed to remain as it is, rural farmland, not only because it is one of the last beauty spots within 30 miles of London but because it is the Forster country of *Howards End*".

The countryside charity the CPRE said in a formal response to the plans: "The provision of the proposed car park... is hugely regrettable and an entirely inappropriate feature within land that should form an open countryside setting to Rooks Nest House". It added that the plans would "introduce alien features into this highly valued rural landscape".

Historic England has also lodged concerns, noting that the proposals risk "cluttering the natural landscape with a proliferation of man-made features".

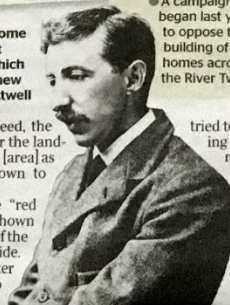
Alison Heil, a local resident, said in a



EM Forster's childhood home sits among the fields that inspired *Howards End*, which became a film with Matthew MacFadyen and Hayley Atwell

formal objection: "If agreed, the proposal will forever alter the landscape of the conservation [area] as it would have been known to Forster."

In *Howards End*, the "red rust" of suburbia is shown encroaching on the idyll of the Hertfordshire countryside. The Friends of Forster Country campaign group



Classic cases of people power

● Plans to build 1,200 homes on Chawton Park Farm near Jane Austen's former home in Alton, Hampshire drew local ire, with a petition and protest last year. The campaign continues.

● A campaign began last year to oppose the building of homes across the River Tweed

from Abbotsford, the country house created in the 19th century by the novelist Sir Walter Scott in the Scottish Borders, with fears that the estate would spoil the views from Abbotsford. The local council said views would be protected by the planting of trees.

● Julian Fellowes, the writer who created *Downton Abbey*, was

part of a campaign that prevented a housing estate being built near a manor that provided inspiration to Thomas Hardy for his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. About a hundred people objected in 2018 to plans to build 120 homes 200 yards from Wolfeton House near Dorchester, fearing it would have a negative impact on the "Hardy Country" area.

fully adhere to the conservation area's purpose of protecting this unique part of Stevenage. The new proposal has changed what was originally an accessible 'meadow park' to a manicured municipal park.

Many of Forster's papers are held at King's College, Cambridge, whose provost, Michael Proctor, said: "The setting of *Howards End*, one his most evocative novels, takes inspiration [from] Forster's childhood home, Rooks Nest House, and its surrounding countryside. I was thus disturbed to hear that Stevenage borough council plans to change this beautiful countryside into a 'country park' with all that implies for the degradation and commercialisation of what has been a precious and magical place."

Emma Thompson, the actress, has called it "madness" to "destroy beautiful countryside in aid of a car park".

Stevenage council said it was committed to "the highest of ecological and environmental standards" and to "respect local heritage including that of EM Forster". They said the plans were for "a new country park for all residents to access and enjoy".

Literary landscapes should be preserved, leading article, page 29

NEW YEARS DAY WALK

Our E M Forster birthday walk on Sunday January 1st will start at St Nicholas Church lychgate at 2pm. There will be a "short" walk of 45 minutes to an hour and a "long" walk of about an hour and a half. Members of our Committee will be coming along so there will be opportunities for questions as we stroll. A hot drink will be available in St Nicholas Church at the end of the walk. We are hoping to publicise this walk more widely than in previous years and hopefully get a long "snake" of people which can be photographed and used for an article in the press. Please come along and bring as many friends as possible.

HOWARDS END IN JAPANESE

At the end of August we had a visit by Dr Kaoru Urano of Kyoritsu Women's University of Japan and her friend Kati. Kaoru is translating Howards End into Japanese. We showed them around parts of Stevenage including the Six Hills, the Old Town generally, the Grange, the Old Station, The Avenue, the inside of St Nicholas Church, the inside of Rooks Nest House and of course Forster Country itself.

Kaoru Urano at Rooks Nest House

