

Tribute to the life of Margaret Ashby

We are sad to announce the death on the afternoon of Monday 8th March 2021 of Margaret Ashby, co-founder along with John Hepworth of the Friends of the Forster Country.

Margaret was born locally and spent all her life in Stevenage, at 'Flaunden' – No 10 Pound Avenue. She was heavily involved in education and was for a time Head of Learning Resources at Hertford Regional College.

Margaret worked tirelessly to defend Forster Country applying her diplomatic skills to the task over a period of more than 30 years. She emphasised the beauty of the Forster countryside with its views of the Chiltern Hills some 8 miles distant. These views would have been those loved by E M Forster on his wanderings as a child and adolescent to Graveley or Weston. He described this countryside as the loveliest in England.

She was hugely knowledgeable about the life of E M Forster who lived at Rooks Nest House between 1883 and 1893, overlooking what we now call Forster Country. She understood his realisation about the unjust nature of class in our society. She was instrumental in the purchase and placement of the "Only Connect" monument in St Nicholas Churchyard at the very edge of Forster Country. Forster used this to mean connection between the head and the heart, the cerebral and the passionate and Margaret followed this mantra always retaining a balance between clear logic and a sympathy for people's feelings.

Margaret was also a friend of Elizabeth Poston who lived at Rooks Nest House until her death on 18 March 1987. Elizabeth was a great

friend of E M Forster and thus provided a strong link to his heritage. Margaret was an author and many will have read her works including "Forster Country" which traces the early life of the internationally acclaimed author. This book also indicates the link with Highfield House where Elizabeth Poston was brought up and which was on the edge of a broader "Forster Country" until its demise with the coming of Stevenage New Town.

Margaret also gained the patronage of eminent literary supporters and politicians and councillors both locally and from further afield.

She remained on the FoFC Committee and worked closely with it up until only a few weeks before her death.

She will be remembered also for her work with the Betty Game Opportunities Trust which was set up in 2009 in memory of her dear friend, Open University graduate Betty Game. The Trust aims to give small grants to Stevenage students who need financial help, particularly those studying with the Open University.

Because of the pandemic, only 30 people were allowed to attend Margaret's funeral, but her friends throughout the town, hope to hold a memorial event later in the year, which many more can attend. As Friends of the Forster Country, we hope to hold our own event to celebrate Margaret's life.

Margaret will be sorely missed by many who admired her intellect, quiet determination, energy and dedication as well as valuing her friendship.



Photo Marion Ohlendorf

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Since our last Newsletter of October 2020, we have had to digest the sad news that the Outline Planning Application to build on Forster Country was passed on 8th December 2020 by the SBC Planning Committee. Voting was seven 'for', five 'against' and one 'abstain'. Our efforts to persuade planning councillors to vote against this application did not succeed although we feel that our views were heeded and there was at least an abstention.

We considered the overriding requirements of Government and sitting under that the Stevenage Local Plan which was passed by the Inspector in 2017 and finally formally adopted in 2019. The Chairman of the Planning Committee emphasised the primacy of this Local Plan and we regard that emphasis as fair. We believe that such emphasis would have weighed with the planning councillors.

We were disappointed that the Chairman of the Planning Committee had not been bold enough to institute a planning meeting to consider the current validity of the Local Plan bearing in mind the huge decrease in housing requirements for Stevenage predicted by the Office for National Statistics whose work had formed the basis for the Local Plan in the first

place. SBC argued against this on the basis that a plan finally passed only in 2019 should not come up for reconsideration only a year later.

We considered that the summing up of the meeting of 8th December showed pre-determination by its Chairman, Simon Speller. 12 of the 13 members of the Committee had restricted their comments to questions and comments directly about the Outline application.

The Chairman appeared to have come to the meeting with prepared notes or opinions including references unrelated to the Application itself. This included a statement that FoFC had a narrow view of Forster Country which did not include land towards Hampson Park or anything about Highfield House (Elizabeth Poston's childhood home). He also mentioned The Avenue as being outside the purview of FoFC.

These statements are incorrect and we feel that they must have been prepared in advance to persuade others that FoFC do not have a complete view of Forster Country and must therefore be suspect.

The Chairman also extolled the virtues of the so-called Country Park. Although this in itself is directly related to the Application, it is a view that he had put forcibly to FoFC ten years ago,

asking us to visit Aldenham Country Park to view its merits. With this knowledge it seems that he had considered for a long time that a country park of the sort projected is the right way to go.

We made a formal complaint to SBC about predetermination by the Chairman along with a number of individual complaints from members of the public. This was considered by Simon Banks, the legal adviser to SBC and his appointed independent assessor. The complaint was rejected although the assessor did make an oblique reference to predisposition which was unnecessary unless he felt that there could have been such predisposition.

Making this complaint was of course a serious issue for FoFC as predetermination is very much disallowed by rules governing standards in public office. But we believe that it was right to do it. We now feel that it is not worth pursuing this further as the Ombudsman is likely to say that it has been independently assessed and so we have no further grounds for complaint. Further to this, the difference between predetermination, which is not allowed and predisposition, which is allowed, seems to depend on nuance.

Future

We are continuing to fight on and would really like some new committee members, particularly in a slightly younger age range, so if you feel like helping, we would welcome you with open arms.

We held a Committee Meeting on 29th March 2021 by Zoom and are now looking to challenge the Detailed Planning Application when it is brought to the table. To do this will require some

imagination as many issues relating to green belt, congestion, pollution, history and others were raised at the outline stage.

We are not clear why only very minor reference was made to this at the meeting of 8th December and may raise this with SBC. But we appeal to all readers, particularly any with planning expertise to pass to us any ideas that might add to those we identify in our

brainstorming sessions as a Committee

It remains the case that we do not have a formal newsletter editor at present and that the Committee is holding the fort with a Newsletter every six months. But we appeal to one of our readers to take on this editorship.

We wish you a pleasant summer, hoping that the easing of lockdown will gradually return us to some form of normality.

Forster Country during lockdown

The countryside certainly came into its own during the past year and as with every cloud there is a silver lining, which for us was an increase in membership.

A number of people wrote to tell us that they had 'discovered' the Forster Country during lockdown and of course last April, the area was looking its best. Thanks to the glorious sunny weather there were any quantity of celandines, primroses and violets in the churchyard, cowslips, stitchwort and bluebells blooming along the pathways and blackthorn, cherry and hawthorn producing frothy clouds of white blossoms in the hedgerows. The Avenue too was a delight with white chestnut candles scenting the air and slowly falling like confetti.

Suddenly people were everywhere. In place of the usual runners, pedestrians and dog walkers, crowds descended and it felt that a fairly quiet byway had turned into a motorway. Families with young children, pushchairs and dogs, runners, cyclists, horse riders, young and old, fit and not quite so fit... everyone wanted to be out in the fresh air. I lost track of the number of people I chatted to who told me they had no idea that such a treasure lay on their doorstep.

As the footfall increased, so the pathways widened as people tried to observe the two metre rule. Others abandoned the designated footpaths and created their own routes, walking along field edges and down farm tracks, stopping for a picnic on occasions, enjoying the wonderful view across to the Chilterns and listening to the song of the skylarks and the mewing of kites and buzzards.

Spring turned to summer, dog roses appeared in the hedges and spindle trees, with their tiny flowers, lined the route out towards Chesfield Lodge and Back Lane, the road which descends to Graveley past the chalk pit. By this time some restrictions had been lifted, however there were still people in evidence everywhere. Some of our committee members did a head count at the churchyard kissing gate and recorded between 100 and 150 people using the area each day.

Mud arrived with the autumn and winter rains and footpaths turned into quagmires. Even the path which slopes along the back of the Chancellors Park estate and should in theory be well drained, was sodden, as was the grassy field edge. Walking became a challenge, with boots sinking into mud and water and squelching as we pulled

them out to take another step and gave serious consideration to the benefits of walking poles. A large pond appeared in the dip at the field edge adjacent to the Great North Road and our chairman is pictured (below) standing in it to give an idea of scale.

We all had our hearts in our mouths when it appeared that the farmer intended to leave several large fields (under threat of development) fallow, did this mean he knew something we didn't? However, on a dull afternoon in early March, we returned from a walk to find that the fields in question were being planted, what a relief! A lady stopped to chat to us saying that she'd felt concerned at the empty fields, but that this sight had "put a spring in her step".

The recent dry period means that Forster Country is again pleasant under foot. Blackthorn and pussy willow are making a brave showing in spite of the cold weather and the churchyard is again awash with primroses and violets. The countryside is still there for us to enjoy and we continue our fight to keep it so. I'm sure E M Forster would have been delighted that in the past year many more people have discovered his beloved Forster Country.



Photo Paul Seer

Forster's birthday walk

Because of the pandemic, we were unable to advertise our New Year's Day walk, so were delighted that eight hardy souls turned up, with several other Friends meeting at St Nicholas

Church lychgate to see us off, which was appreciated. We slithered and struggled through the mud, in 'socially distanced' pairs and were rewarded by the sight of snowdrops blooming at

Crow End, on the edge of Graveley. On our homeward journey we stopped to admire the decorated "Christmas tree" and take some photographs to prove we'd done it!



Photo Paul Seer

Website and email

Our web manager does an excellent job at keeping the website up to date <http://www.forstercountry.org.uk> so do have a look there for the latest information: you can also ask questions through the 'Contact Us' button on the

site. Please encourage your friends to view the website, or visit our Facebook page to make a comment or add a photograph of Forster Country. We do occasionally send out emails to

members, the most recent being two weeks ago. If you didn't receive this message, but would like to be on our distribution list, please let me have your email address. rmohlendorf@gmail.com

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

John Alabaster. Margaret Ashby. Nicola Beaman. 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 - Marion Ohlendorf 01438 361470. Design - Peter Kingsnorth 01438 869557
web - www.forstercountry.org.uk