

Panacea for a pandemic

For all of us this year has seen a slow return to a form of normality. But for those who have been lucky enough to avoid, or only suffer mildly at the hands of Covid there has been a silver lining. Forster Country is still there in all its glory and it has provided many with a new realisation of its delights.

Throughout the summer some who have been able to take a lunch break from their screens have wandered in the fields for half an hour or so rather than spend it with a sandwich at their desk in the office. Others have discovered Forster Country for the first time and expressed surprise at its rural nature.

The skylarks have been a delight again and the walk out to Weston via Forster Country returning along its other flank has taken us into a different world of sheep, horses, buzzing insects and the occasional glimpse of a deer.

We believe that the loss of Forster Country would have a profoundly negative effect on the lives of many people and we have taken a firm decision to resist development for as long as possible. We cling to the hope that we may yet see many years of preservation of our countryside. One factor that is apparent is our falling

birth rate which is now around 1.6. This could lead to a fall in population and this seems to be borne out by recent Office of National Statistics predictions for new dwellings which are now significantly lower than those used to underpin the Stevenage Local Plan which was drafted in 2016. You may wish to raise this with your local councillors wherever you live.

Many attended the memorial service for Margaret Ashby at 3pm on Saturday 25th September at Holy Trinity church and FoFC paid a tribute to her along with others from the varied walks of her life.

We held our AGM on 7 August 2021 in St Nicholas Church by kind permission of The Rev David Brown and facilitated by Paul Drakes. There were about 30 in attendance and the meeting was followed by tea, cakes and conversation. I'm delighted to report that we gained two new and slightly younger committee members: so welcome Paul Drakes and Paul Sear, who we hope will bring some fresh ideas for us to grasp.

Turning to the future, things seem quiet on the northern front just now. But we remember Ethelred, and in an

attempt to be ready for any future moves on housing development we had a brainstorming session at our recent committee meeting. Ideas generated include, using the pandemic in a positive way, challenging SBC on their commitment to a carbon-neutral town, the quality of housing (should it go ahead), ie installation of solar panels, charging points etc, traffic and air quality, changes in housing demographics because of home-working, mental health and benefits of open spaces and countryside. We also needed to use all delaying tactics available to us, such as holding the developers to their commitment to bury the pylon and provide a country park, which in our view should take precedence over house construction.

This is not an exhaustive list, but I hope gives you a flavour of our continuing campaign.

I'd like to wish you a happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year. Thank you for your support and I hope that you can join us for Forster's Birthday Walk on 1st January at 2 pm, starting from St Nicholas Church lychgate.

John Spiers - Chairman

Peter Warlock Society weekend

This society held its annual AGM in October at St Nicholas Church followed by John Alabaster's talk on Elizabeth Poston and Philip Heseltine (aka Warlock).

He focussed on the things that brought them together: love of the countryside, music, especially songs and the small-scale. She could act as his amanuensis and play his sometimes

awkward piano accompaniments. It also touched on her grief at his suicide and the huge effort she made to correct what she felt were misrepresentations of his character and standing as a musician.

The evening concert included many songs and piano works by them and others and a delightful Poston Trio played by the Korros Ensemble. The

first movement expressed her anguish at the threat of the new town development.

The next morning many of the delegates enjoyed a walk in Forster Country ending at Rooks Nest House. We thank Chris for showing them around his home.

Anne Conchie

I recently joined the committee of the 'Friends of Forster Country.' With the planning now approved a reasonable person would ask why, so why did I?

Firstly, the world is a very different place than it was two years ago, you do not need me to tell you why, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions how been altered in such a short timescale which would have normally taken a generation. As a result, I think the evidence for needing to build on Forster Country is unreliable and needs revisiting.

I believe that if there is any doubt as to the feasibility of the development then a period of stability and reassessment would

possibly stop us from making a very big mistake. I know u-turns are not good publicity but ploughing on against the odds is worse.

I was in the Fire Service when the regional control project was scrapped with the biggest waste of public money in history but it was the right decision, the error was in the conception.

Michael Gove has already realised that the Government's housing plans are no longer fit for purpose. HS2 has just been reduced significantly.

Stevenage is no longer as precious a location for commuters, many of whom now have the option to work from home at least some of the time. The result is that towns further afield, far

more in need of some investment and with brownfield sites in abundance are now an alternative for housing.

I do have a vested interest in the scheme not going ahead, I walk Forster Country most days, attend St Nicholas Church and live close by. I am very aware of the need for houses for young people but even the demographic figures are now showing that the population is not increasing according to predictions, so let's take stock.

I hope I can help to at least put on the brakes with my colleagues on the Committee who have been working so hard for so long on this

Paul Drakes

E M Forster – quotes from Howards End

"What is the good of your stars and trees, your sunrise and the wind, if they do not enter into our daily lives?"

Since 2020, Forster Country has, perhaps like never before in the history of Stevenage, become so important to our lives.

The pandemic, with all its uncertainties, highlighted the healing qualities of nature. Octavia Hill, one of the founding members of the National Trust, summed it up best when she said, "We all want quiet. We all want beauty ... we all need space. Unless we have it, we cannot reach that sense of quiet in which whispers of better things come to us gently"

"The present flowed by them like a stream. The tree rustled. It had made music before they were born, and would continue after their deaths, but its song was of the moment."

I have a profound love of trees which began as a child when I would climb the horse chestnut trees in The Avenue to relieve them of their conkers. Forster Country has been my playground for 45 years and I still climb

an ancient oak tree there. I have often wondered if this is the oak tree that gave Stevenage its Saxon name 'Stithen-ac' – 'Place of the strong oak?'

"They had nothing in common but the English language."

This quote makes me 'smace' – smile and grimace at the same time – well if Shakespeare could make up words, I don't see why I can't? I smile because Forster's use of humour here expertly evokes the great gulf that can exist between two people that even language cannot bridge. I grimace because, for me, it also encapsulates the gulf between those who wish to save Forster Country and those who wish it to be concreted over.

"But this is something new!" said Mrs Munt, who collected new ideas as a squirrel collects nuts."

Forster uses both humour and words to paint Mrs Munt's character wonderfully. He also hints at the possibility that her ideas are nutty too. It will take some, 'out of the box' thinking to save Forster Country now but we are open to all your ideas.

"Live in fragments no longer, only connect."

Omnia vanitas - all is ego. It is the ego which creates the illusion that we are individuals. It is nature that confirms that everything in the universe is connected. This is why it is so important to connect with nature and live in fragments no longer. This is why it is so important to fight to protect it.

"Nature pulls one way and human nature another."

We are living in a time of climate change and the human race is sleepwalking towards extinction. Our situation can appear overwhelming and, if we are to turn things around, it will take all of us doing something, rather than a few of us doing everything. You cannot do all the good in the world but the world needs all the good you can do. That is why the fight for Forster Country is such an important one.

Please contact The Friends of the Forster Country if you wish to join us.

Paul Sear

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

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