

The Friends of the Forster Country



Newsletter

Series 2. Issue No 5. Spring 2004

Beware the EERA

The East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) is a relatively new element in the planning process and its ideas for squeezing huge numbers of housing units into Hertfordshire have come as something of a shock to most of us. As the Director of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Kevin Fitzgerald, said: EERA is "a body shrouded in mystery to most people in Hertfordshire" but one which "has such far-reaching powers over all our futures."

The Hertfordshire Branch of CPRE, also known as The Hertfordshire Society, will be campaigning to protect Hertfordshire's countryside from sprawling housing, just as, on a smaller and more local scale, FOFC will continue in its efforts to save the

Forster Country.

A meeting to explain regional development plans was held in Woolmer Green on 31 March and we are assured that there will be many more such meetings around the county. So watch out for the publicity so as not to miss them when they come to Stevenage.

On a more positive note, we can still enjoy what remains of the countryside which Forster loved in the early part of the twentieth century, as two of this edition's articles confirm. Following the quotation from *Howards End* describing the land around Rooks Nest House in spring Forster writes: "*Celandines grew on its banks, lords-and-ladies and primroses in the defended hollows; the wild rose-*

bushes, still bearing their withered hips, showed also the promise of blossom." We have a few specimens of these once prolific plants remaining; how wonderful if, instead of losing them altogether under housing estates and accompanying tarmac, they could be encouraged to flourish anew.

We hope to see many Friends at the Annual General Meeting on 26th June. Light refreshments will be provided and there will be a short programme of readings and music after business has been concluded. Meanwhile, our treasurer looks forward to receiving your membership renewal forms and subscriptions for 2004-2005.

A new threat?

In the last Newsletter we were "dreaming along" with two public inquiries taking place and no conclusions probable for a considerable time - so nothing much to worry about. Or so it appeared until a local newspaper discovered a plan to cover the county with concrete. North Herts councillors were quoted as saying that it would be "over their dead bodies" and we were quoted as saying that "the sheer size of its reach is frightening. The Forster Country would, it seems, be obliterated." So it would if the proposals were realised.

Not that the situation looks much better on reflection with the realisation

that this is part of a process which began in the New Year with the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, outlining regional development plans.

The present exercise is, it appears, a wide-ranging review by consultants to identify possible new areas for development. It does not present specific proposals. It is understood that more studies will be carried out before the East of England Regional Assembly formulates its draft regional planning guidance and this will be followed by a public examination in 2005, at which we could no doubt speak, and final approval in 2006.

We do not know how this fits with

long established Green Belt policy on which we have long depended. The Forster Country is, of course, unusual if not unique in being a piece of Green Belt within the borough's boundary as well as being important in ways which we have advertised for many years.

It is easy enough to promote momentarily passionate reactions to these reported proposals as representing a "flood of concrete" but perhaps we need to look again at our rusting armoury and consider how we can move into the attack once again to protect the Forster Country. Sword-sharpeners will be greatly welcomed.

Spring in the Forster Country

a seasonal reflection by Margaret Ashby

Although frosts and cold winds have delayed the arrival of spring this year, the weather seems to have suited at least one native tree. For weeks the pure white blossom of the blackthorn (*prunus spinosa*) has brightened the landscape.

The individual flowers are most delicate, but produced in such thick clusters that they completely smother the tree's thorny black branches, giving the illusion of a heavy snowfall.



In the autumn, the blackthorn will be laden with the purple fruits which give the tree its other name of sloe and are related to cultivated damsons.

In full bloom for Easter, the pussy willow (*salix caprea*), has also bloomed prolifically this year. A particularly attractive specimen flourishes in a dry ditch in the Forster Country, beside the footpath to Chesfield. Nearby, a few small tortoiseshell butterflies may be seen, venturing out after winter hibernation.



In St Nicholas' churchyard, primroses and violets are in full bloom among the gravestones. Trees are acquiring their springtime haze of new leaf and the hedgerows, bright green in places and as yet still bare in others, call to mind Forster's description of the fields around Rooks Nest: *'The hedge was a*



half-painted picture which would be finished in a few days.'
(*Howards End* Ch. 33 p251)

Margaret Ashby



Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the Forster Country

Saturday 26 June 2004 at 7pm

Agenda

1. **Apologies for absence**
(to Marion Ohlendorf, FoFC Secretary on 01438-361470)
2. **Minutes of the 2003 Annual General Meeting**
3. **Matters arising from those minutes**
4. **Treasurer's Report and Accounts**
5. **Chairman's Report**
6. **Election of Committee Members**
7. **Any other business**
8. **Refreshments**
9. **Music and readings**

A dog's eye view

I like to think of myself as the Forster committee dog. I have been present at several of their meetings and I have attended a couple of their walks across what they call Forster Country.

I love the Forster country. Some of my best adventures have been there. My person likes it too. We usually go through the churchyard to get to it.

Once I was in great trouble with my person. I was running ahead when I heard a pheasant shout. It seemed quite close. The dog hunting spirit possessed me and I ran and ran. I did not catch the bird but the smell of it was intoxicating.

After what seemed quite a long time, I heard my person calling my name. She sounded all sort of high-voiced and funny but I could not tear myself away from hunting. Quite a bit later the bird smell faded and my person's voice was still going on. I went back to her then, by now a bit worried.

She was pleased to see me but I realised she was very cross as well. I got the most awful telling off and was

smacked. As she had never done that before it dawned on me I was in great trouble. My ears went back and my tail went down but even that did not seem to placate her.

I was put on my lead straight away. She rushed back to the car. I trailed behind which I never normally do because dogs that are proud of themselves always walk ahead, not like cowed 'well trained' dogs who 'walk to heel' - whatever that is. Anyway, after a while she calmed down and I realised I could be my normal self again.

The other thing I enjoy occasionally when the dog spirit gets into me is to roll into something wonderfully smelly like fox dung. But I know the punishment for this is terrible because she complains a lot and says "phoaa" over and over again. The punishment is much worse than a mere smack. I get taken upstairs as soon as we get home and put into - A BATH FULL OF WATER. It is too terrible to describe. I am a terrier and do not hold with water except to drink. I can only stand there



and endure what she does to me. At last I am lifted out and dried and it is all over until the next time the dog spirit compels me to roll and roll.

So that is a little look at the life of a dog in the Forster Country. Lots of other dogs and their persons enjoy regular outings there. It is a pretty good life really. My person is not a bad old thing and I feel useful in my way. I keep her company and bark like mad when someone comes to my door.

Sam (alias Sue Pugh)

The Public Inquiry into West Stevenage Letchworth 20th January 2004

A small group of friends attended the opening session of the latest Public Inquiry which relates to the fate of parts of the countryside around Stevenage. Not that the proposed expansion east of the A1M directly affects the Forster country, although, as remarked before, if West of Stevenage were to be undeveloped greedy eyes would perhaps intensify their glance eastward towards us.

Nor could we draw any Forsterian moral from the situation and gloomily concluded that two dogs at either end of a bone were indeed Only Connected but not in the way the author meant.

On the other hand this is an elegantly smooth procedure in democratic decision making which leaves us little to be indignant about

and a long way from the march of a thousand supporters of CASE, the anti-West of Stevenage reaction to the proposal to build on this piece of Green Belt some years ago.

Suited, civilised, urbane and unwigged, no fewer than six Queen's Counsels read their opening statements, copiously supported and copiously documented by many tonnes of paper. On the one side were the opponents: Herts County Council, North Herts Council and CASE; on the other the applicants (the developers) together with a slightly embarrassed Stevenage Borough Council, who determinedly wish to extend and expand Stevenage largely, they are convinced, for its economic good.

The intricacies of the interests and relationships within this elaborate

andango are not for detail here. The statements seem to carry just about equal conviction on both sides. The inspector, who will draw his conclusions and make his recommendations some time within perhaps the next year, gave a pleasant air of competent ability to listen and act wisely and impartially and one supposes will recommend a solution which will please or displease about fifty per cent of the public.

Our attempt to see more deeply into this situation ("more homes less country; more country fewer homes") and come up with a perceptive Forster-like comment has so far failed but as the inquiry is due to last for three months there is plenty of time for cerebration.

John Hepworth

Membership Subscriptions

Membership of The Friends of the Forster Country is open to anyone who supports our aim -

“To preserve for all time the open green space north of Stevenage known as the Forster Country”

We are compiling a new list of Friends so would ask you to complete the membership form below (or photocopy and complete) and send it with your remittance to:

Gwynneth Grimwood (Treasurer)
 190 Lonsdale Road
 Stevenage SG1 5EX
 Telephone 01438 350956

Subscriptions for the Year 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005

Please tick as appropriate

Family Membership	£ 7.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual Membership	£ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Donation	£	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total	£	

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms/Other _____

Name

Address

Post Code

Telephone

E-mail

‘Only Connect’ Forster and England

‘What a wonderful afternoon
 - so truly English!’

This was a common sentiment, both in 2002 and 2003, at the Friends of the Forster Country's Garden Parties at The Priory in Rectory Lane, Stevenage. Particularly apposite, as on both occasions dramatic readings from E M Forster were presented; whatever the subject of his pen, his words have *Made in England* stamped on them.

Howards End deals not only with London and with Stevenage, under the guise of Hilton, but with Swanage and its nearby landscape, about which Forster is ecstatic:

‘If one wanted to show a foreigner England, perhaps the wisest course would be to take him to the final section of the Purbeck Hills and stand him on the summit, a few miles to the east of Corfe. Then system after system of our island would roll together under his feet.’ (Penguin Classics p170)

‘...the bourgeois little bay, which must have yearned all through the centuries for just such a watering-place as Swanage to be built on its margin.’ (p189)

The warm springs in the bay found their health-seeking enthusiasts at last but, just as Stevenage is not only a New Town, this Edwardian seaside resort has a long history.

The southern horn of the bay - Peveril Point - housed a Roman signal

station, part of a system to give warning of approaching Saxon pirates, who settled eventually and themselves kept watch for Danish pirates and created - England.

The Romans came to Swanage to quarry the limestone which is not only excellent for building purposes but here and there has enough of the qualities of marble to be ornamental. Much in demand throughout the mediaeval period, there is hardly a cathedral, minster or ancient parish church without some Purbeck marble - including St Nicholas', Stevenage.

Forster characteristically follows his lyrical evocation of England by a sly

E M Forster has himself contributed richly, perpetually interweaving the English character with the English landscape

delineation of a foreigner's disparagement of that very view. (p171) Nevertheless, as the landscape graciously fills his eye, the idea of England fills his mind.

‘Why has not England a great mythology? England still waits for the supreme moment of her literature - for the great poet who shall voice her or, better still, for the thousand little poets whose voices shall pass into our common talk.’ (p262)

E M Forster has himself contributed richly, perpetually interweaving the English character with the English landscape.

‘Only connect’
 (Epigraph to *Howards End*)

June Pitcher

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

Nicola Beauman. Gunnvor Stallybrass. Richard Whitmore

Convenors

Margaret Ashby, 10 Pound Avenue, Stevenage SG1 3JA 01438 354171
 John Hepworth, Dominic Cottage, Rectory Lane, Stevenage, SG1 4DA 01438 351462
 web - www.forstercountry.org.uk e-mail: m.m.ashby@ntlworld.com

Newsletter

Editor - Angela Hepworth 01438 351462. Design - Peter Kingsnorth 01438 869557