

Pressures on the High Weald AONB

At the October 2016 WKPS Public Meeting in Goudhurst, the principal speaker was Sally Marsh, Co-Director of the High Weald AONB Partnership, based at Flimwell. The subject of the meeting was this AONB: Sally Marsh spoke of both its unique historic landscape character, and some of the pressures and problems facing it today.

The High Weald's character has survived wonderfully well. But at Goudhurst the unprecedented pressures it now faces were explained to us. The habitat losses, the traffic growth, the air quality deterioration and the fracking threats are familiar, but the vulnerability of

AONB landscapes in face of government's GNP growth aims and, in particular, of the genuine national need for more housing, is new and alarming.

Sally Marsh explained the conflict between priorities as it stood when she spoke to us: the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, with so very much of its area either AONB or Green Belt, is required to allocate land for 12,960 new houses in the 2013-33 period.

Para 14 of The National Planning Policy Framework strongly emphasises its 'Presumption in favour of sustainable development'.

However, Para 115 states

that 'Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads, and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty'.

Furthermore, Para 116 states that 'Planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas, except in exceptional circumstances.'

As Sally Marsh put it, 'Which trumps Which?'

Inspectors' and ministerial decisions, subject to legal findings, will furnish the immediate answers.



Extending as far west as the edge of Horsham, and as far south-east as Rye, the AONB includes the large majority of the villages and towns which WKPS seeks to protect. Still some 27% forested, with gills running beneath its sandstone ridges, the AONB retains much of its medieval landscape character. This derives not only from its formation, geology and climate, but from its human history: the pre-Norman settlements when 'dens' were created in the great forest of the

Weald; the establishment of numerous small farmsteads rather than larger units with communal agricultural working; the development of villages, with traders and craft workers, particularly on the ridges. It is a quietly beautiful historic landscape, certainly not appropriate for large scale development.

The AONB designation, dating from 1983, gave the High Weald most of the substantial rights of protection already enjoyed by the National Parks, and access to

funding from central and local government. Unlike National Parks, however, the High Weald AONB was not created as an independent structure with its own planning powers or even statutory right to be consulted on planning applications; its management is by a Joint Advisory Committee drawn from the 4 counties and 11 district authorities covering it. Sally Marsh's AONB Partnership proposes policies for, and runs activities within, the AONB, subject to its approval.

Anaerobic Digesters and the AONB:

Permission given in Benenden

Permission for the anaerobic digested plant at Forest Farm, Benenden has finally been given by Kent County Council.

There had been no objection by the environmental bodies including CPRE (who, however, expressed concern) and the High Weald AONB Authority, with whom WKPS find themselves normally in agreement, but WKPS, like many local residents, had opposed it.

Our view was that the digester, visually damaging to the AONB and accessed by winding country lanes, was for an inappropriately sited commercial facility, rather than a method of converting the farm's own waste into heat and power.

The KCC, in granting the consent, recognised 'potential harm to the landscape, environment and local residential amenity', but concluded that this was 'outweigh(ed)' by the 'benefits from a small-scale plan within the farm complex to process agricultural waste arising from existing farm activities'.

That conclusion appeared to have left some of the criticisms unanswered, but the KCC acknowledged them to the extent that it imposed conditions limiting the annual throughput and confirming that only feedstock from specified sources might be processed, with importation by tractor and trailer only.

Debate on the application has been full, and the reasoned decision, with the conditions imposed, has to be accepted. Yet WKPS sympathies remain with saddened Benenden residents.

Anaerobic Digestion: what is it?

According to the Official Information Portal on Anaerobic Digestion, AD is 'the breakdown of organic material by micro-organisms in the absence of oxygen'. It produces methane-rich biogas which can be used as a fuel, and digestate, a source of nutrients that can be used as a fertiliser.

Increasingly, it is used for turning our waste into renewable energy.

It 'benefits many different groups, including the local community, industry, farmers and energy entrepreneurs, government and the environment'.

The Information Portal is maintained by the Bioeconomy Consultants NNFCC.



Example anaerobic digester plant

WKPS Planning Committee Work

The Planning Committee has been inundated with work associated with the emerging Local Plans for Maidstone and Ashford, and we are shortly expecting a revised draft plan for Ashford involving additional allocated sites for development in the villages. The Ashford plans will be available online, and WKPS members' views on them, or indeed on all local planning issues, would be most welcome.

Our objections to numerous traveller sites in the Maidstone area have fallen on deaf ears, unfortunately, and we are concerned that 187 pitches have been included in their emerging plan. The picture in Ashford is not comparable, however, and whereas additional pitches will be required, nonetheless the Borough is not accept-

ing random settlements in the countryside and we are pleased that many of our objections have born fruit.

One of our main concerns is that 50 houses should not be built on a site in Smarden where the emerging Local Plan has allocated 25 houses. The developer, Gladman, is taking this to appeal and we will be represented there alongside Smarden Parish Council and the Borough at the end of March.

There was disappointing news about the bio-digester in Benenden as this has now been approved by the Kent County Council. We anticipate serious traffic issues on the narrow road serving this development.

At least some good news has resulted from the campaign to prevent the Tong

Farm solar array in Headcorn, and we are glad to say that the developer has withdrawn the appeal. This is a particularly lovely stretch of countryside which should not be spoiled.

WKPS members are e-mailed a copy of the Planning Committee's planning Newsletter regularly after our meetings. However, some of our e-mail addresses appear to be out-of-date, so please let WKPS Secretary Fay Merrick and our Planning Committee Secretary Peta Grant (petagrants@me.com) have your e-mail address if you have not been receiving it.

Do keep in touch with us about your concerns on planning issues.

**Rosemary Taylor, Chair,
WKPS Planning Committee**

Smarden under Siege

The proliferation of unwanted planning applications by speculative developers in the villages within the Ashford Borough is reaching epidemic proportions. They are all using the excuse that Ashford Borough Council do not have an adopted Local Plan in place and therefore it is open season. The lack of a credible emerging or adopted Ashford Borough Local Plan makes it very difficult for parishes to fight these applications and subsequent Appeals. In Smarden we are faced with the prospect of four or five potential developments, as it now appears that yet again the housing numbers need to increase and new sites must be added.

The emerging Local Plan for Ashford Borough Council, published in the summer of 2016, appears to have been out of date before it was a couple of weeks old, so that the Council struggles to find a credible reason to refuse

applications.

But the Weald of Kent is a precious part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and Smarden is one of the loveliest of its historic villages. The existing community, here as everywhere, must be respected and have a voice. Most communities, including Smarden, will want to grow and develop, but the development must be sustainable. Thought must be given to how new developments will integrate into our existing communities and whether the existing infrastructure will support them. The creation of new homes, actually enhancing the existing community, need not mean sizeable, profitable houses on the green fields of developers' land banks.

If we must build, let's build communities that work for everyone, not just the developers.

Sarah Ellison, Smarden



Smarden's historic centre has problems enough already

No second Gatwick runway

We rural inhabitants of Kent should be deeply sympathetic to all those Londoners and others who will be so harmed by the proposed Heathrow expansion. But we can at the same time sigh with relief that Gatwick's bid for its second runway has failed.

Gatwick expansion was opposed by KCC and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, as well as numerous environmental organisations including CPRE, RSPB, Friends of the Earth and World Wildlife Fund. The impressive local group, Gatwick Airport Conservation Campaign, pointed to some of the dire results which the second runway would have brought: substantial urbanisation including not less than 40,000 houses, marked deterioration of air quality with increased pollution, considerable flight noise, and increased traffic congestion.

We can be grateful. Many WKPS members may feel that the whole argument in favour of any such new runway in south east England is unconvincing.

The Hop Pickers Line

Meandering through the picturesque High Weald landscape, the Paddock Wood to Hawkhurst Branch Line was typical of the many rural railway lines that existed in this country to serve small rural communities. Most have now disappeared. The 11.5 mile Hawkhurst Branch differed from most in originally having substantial goods traffic to support its passenger services and, of course, it became well known for bringing down from London, large numbers of families who participated in the seasonal hop picking activities. However, with the advent of the private car and road haulage in the 1950s, the writing was on the wall. Of the stations on the line – Paddock Wood, Horsmonden, Goudhurst, Cranbrook, Hawkhurst – the latter three were located some distance from the places they purported to serve and this only hastened the line's demise. Closure took place in 1961.

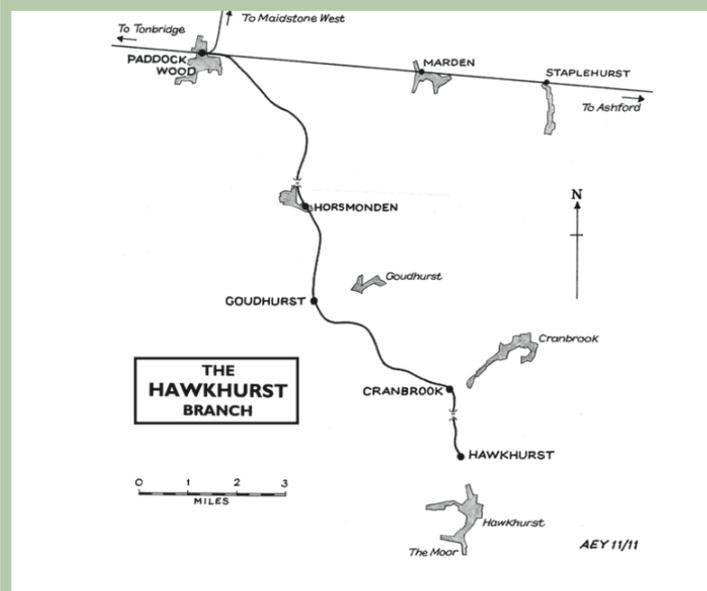


The history of the line from inception through to opening would be sufficient to form a separate account altogether. However, it is worth bearing in mind that construction work commenced in 1891 and was completed in September 1893. The line passed from the South Eastern Railway to the Southern Railway and finally via nationalisation to the Southern Region of British Railways in 1949.

It was in September 2008 that representatives of Paddock Wood Town Council, together with the parishes of Goudhurst, Cranbrook and Hawkhurst, met to consider the possibility of reopening the disused line as a route for walking and cycling. The Hop Pickers Line Heritage Group was born. When it became evident that landowning issues would rule out use of the old track bed, attention turned to using the existing public footpath network to take walkers through the very countryside where the railway originally ran. Later, a survey was undertaken that listed all the buildings and structures that still remain. The first section of the interpretation scheme was officially opened on 22 November 2016 at Paddock Wood as a result of partnership working with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council that included installation of new finger posts with distinctive markings.

The Group are continuing to investigate the existing footpaths network with the aim of interpreting the railway's hop-picking heritage, eventually reaching Hawkhurst.

Graham Holmes



WKPS Villages and Towns BENENDEN NOW!



Benenden's Village Shop: volunteers and VIPs

Exactly two years ago a group of five parishioners published the Benenden Parish Plan. More than forty parishioners had joined eight working groups to develop stratagems, and a whole village survey revealed the topics of particular interest.

A crucial topic was that of village communication. With active support, various newsletters have been amalgamated and in its second year a volunteer team now compiles a fully coloured and illustrated 40-page monthly magazine which is delivered free to all 840 households. A similar approach to websites is also evolving. Improved communication has revealed the marvellous breadth of skills available locally and many have already been willing to develop initiatives.

The last 18 months has seen the emergence of a Village Shop team, which masterminded major fundraising to re-equip the old shop comprehensively. Benenden School now owns the building, partly to provide staff housing, and has leased the shop area to Benenden Community Shop. The shop, a new café and post office are all open seven days a week. Interaction between volunteer helpers and customers creates a truly friendly shopping experience which is enhanced by events such as regular wine tastings.

A new Bonfire Society was hugely well supported in November and

complements the established summer Garden Fete, and Iden Green Fair. The parish church used by the Primary School for its assemblies with parents has innovated Messy Church and Cakes & Chaos, bringing together many parents with younger children in refreshing ways. The long established Village Panto is written locally and performed in the Village Hall by a huge cast, and the eighty-years-old, re-expanded 5-day tennis tournament continues on eleven Benenden School tennis courts every summer. St George's is the only village church in Kent with thirteen bells. Recent recruitment and training has meant that twelve of them are regularly pealed by an all-age village band.

Recently an initiative to establish a free standing Village Charity, recruiting those locals with relevant expertise to act as its Trustees in the management of a range of community assets, has been submitted to the Charity Commission. Fresh impetus to develop a Neighbourhood Plan will allow parishioners a more direct say in the future development of housing and business premises, tailored to our widely scattered population. Topics including the local economy, the environment, roads and byways, health & wellbeing and activities for teenagers are also under consideration.

Robin Dalton Holmes

The former Great Chart Motors site

The family-run Great Chart Motors business in the village had been a successful firm until the A28 bypass was built, separating Great Chart from the then new community of Singleton, and reducing the passing traffic.

The firm relocated to Ashford, and the Great Chart site, which is in the Conservation Area, was deteriorating when the owners eventually in 2008 obtained planning permission for a well designed scheme of three attached cottages looking on to The Street and a commercial building at the rear, to be reached by an archway between two of the cottages. Sale to a developer was expected to take place reasonably quickly. Unfortunately, the recession hit and the property became unsaleable, largely owing to the commercial element. The original garage buildings were demolished, rats moved in, and wire fencing was erected. It was a constant irritation to the villagers.

At last in 2016 a saviour arrived, when the very experienced local developers Jarvis Homes, whose head office is in Chilmington Green, bought the Great Chart site. Their first proposal was to build two houses facing The Street with extensive gardens at the rear, but the Ashford BC planners thought these too large compared with neighbouring properties, and were opposed to vehicles reversing onto The Street. Much negotiation produced a new plan harking back to the three original cottages on the frontage and, instead of



the commercial site previously proposed at rear, two attached houses. This was the start of another battle, as the site was simply not large enough for five properties with two car parking spaces each: the gardens would be minute and where would the wheelie bins go? Ultimately, further negotiation has provided a much improved design with four houses (eight car parking spaces) and places for wheelie bins and bicycle sheds. The front cottages

will be suitable for first time buyers and interest has already been expressed in the house behind them.

At the time of going to press the planning decision has not been made, but WKPS is pleased to be able to support this application. It does emphasise the importance of discussing potentially controversial applications with a Planning Department in order to get a solution acceptable to all involved.

'Local Heritage Assets'



Notoriously, English listed buildings, though they include many uninteresting earlier ones, fail to include some splendid Victorian and early 19th century ones.

A belated, on-the-cheap, central government initiative, which may remedy this to some extent, has been to encourage Local Planning Authorities to organise what are sometimes called 'Local Listing' schemes. These identify buildings and other landscape items, of any period, which might warrant extra care by the LPA when considering applications which might affect their character or setting.

Not a simple task, for the

under-resourced and over-worked Planning Departments. Our Kent LPAs have responded variously, or not at all.

Tunbridge Wells BC, though, with vigorous Conservation Officer backing, have made a start. In Cranbrook, long fortunate in having its own Conservation Area Advisory Committee (currently including substantial WKPS membership), nominations for 'Local Heritage Asset' designation have now been submitted for a respectable number of late 19th century buildings. None is finer than West Terrace, W.D.Neve's superb Arts and Crafts creation, shown in the photo.

NATURE NOTES



The British Trust for Ornithology reports that populations of many species of migratory birds are declining in Britain. However, the picture is not equally gloomy across the country, with many species doing much better in northern Britain than in the south. Among the species faring better in the north is the Willow Warbler, a tiny intercontinental

traveller which used to be one of our commonest species but is now very scarce indeed in some places in Kent and Sussex.

The BTO has constructed population models for each region looking at nest records, survival and other factors. These showed that years of good productivity with lots of fledged chicks were rarer in the south where the population is declining, and beyond that, years of good productivity never coincided with years of high survival rate. In the north, population growth has been fuelled by years of good productivity with high survival rates.

Modelling indicated that, if productivity in our region had been similar to that in the north, populations in the south would have recovered. Accordingly, we need action to improve productivity on

the breeding grounds and this means reversing the habitat loss which has occurred in our area over the last 25 years. Improvement in the size and quality of available habitat is likely to be successful and much easier than seeking to improve survival on African wintering grounds.

Development, road and infrastructure construction will have contributed to habitat loss, but also lack of woodland management during the period when forestry returns have been inadequate to enable our woodland owners to achieve the biodiversity that the natural world requires. That comes from controlled harvesting to give open canopies and sunlight among the high forest.

Mike Bax

'Our Collective Responsibility'

WKPS notes taken from the address by Lord Deben (formerly John Gummer), Chair of the government's Committee on Climate Change, at the Kent Environment Strategy Reception on 1 December 2016.

Lord Deben pointed out that there have in the past been too many denials when climate change was discussed; the issues are now beginning to be understood alongside recognition that the only solution will be to tackle problems through human partnerships. We humans are in charge of what happens around the globe and our current generation is the first to endeavour to establish some authority through regulation, although many of us remain conscious of overregulation's threat to historic liberties.

The large majority of scientists agree that climate change is a reality and we have to work with others to deal with its challenges, the biggest of which in the developed world is air quality. Throughout the world, more governments and peoples than ever before are trying to do something in mitigation. Once there is recognition that human actions are damaging, it may not be reasonable to expect them to be curtailed, but they have to be managed: traffic and transport being obvious examples.

One of the most difficult challenges is land use: we shall have to build differently and farm differently. In this country as elsewhere, current advice and strategy is generally broad brush, for regional or national application, but the emphasis now must also be on local strategy – from county to village to street – with policy and strategy based on clear science. Just as, in Germany, local cooperatives work well, there is no reason why our localities should not 'take back control' of their own circumstances.

Environment is at the heart of climate policies. We must change our mindset from just deriving enjoyment from countryside amenity to understanding that the environment is what we depend upon and is no less than the central issue to future quality of life. This is a moral matter and a question of what we owe to the next generation. The post-war generation has allowed destruction to take place, but also knows what it has enjoyed in terms of benefit from the environment. Surely we have a duty to work to ensure that those benefits continue to be available to future generations and are diminished no further. Unless we do our own bit, those future generations – our children, grandchildren and their descendants – will be impoverished: in that context, no one has any right to say that we have other things to do.

The relevance of an organisation like WKPS is as clear as day in the context of all this. It should not be difficult for current members to persuade the next generation to join. But it is. Why?

Mike Bax
WKPS Chairman

Subscriptions

Annual membership subscriptions to WKPS, due on April 1st, are still very low: £15 to individuals, £20 to couples.

The main reason for joining is to help protection of the Weald, but members also receive access to the various WKPS activities, in addition to posted copies of each Watch on the Weald and emailed reports detailing WKPS Planning Committee work.

Please save us 'chasing' expenses by sending timely subscriptions: either by post to **WKPS Secretary, 5 Castle Hurst, Bodiam, East Sussex TN32 5UW**, or by bank transfer to WKPS Charity 261992, account no. 01754514 sort code 30-90-28, stating your name as reference.

Many thanks!

Why doesn't WKPS hear more from its TENTERDEN members?

Watch on the Weald hears plenty from its membership in the Tunbridge Wells Borough and from its fairly small, but active, membership in the Maidstone Borough.

Yet most WKPS members live in the big AONB area of the Ashford Borough: from here, the energetic WKPS Planning Committee gets much of its drive, but the number of active WKPS Village Representatives is low, and we hear very little from our quite high number of Tenterden members! Can we hope for more active participation in 2017?



PROPOSED WKPS EVENTS FOR 2017:

(depending on members' responses)

Lack of response caused us sadly to cancel some of the events planned in 2016.

If you would be interested in any of the following, or if there are any events you would like to offer for WKPS members, please email secretary@wkps.org.uk

1. Visit Romney Marsh Churches.
2. Tour of Peregrine Massey's lovely garden and woodland near Woodchurch.
3. Visit Woodchurch's windmill and discover how the renovations were made.
4. Tour of a hop farm in early September when the harvest is on.
5. Presentation by Graeme Cooper – Indepth and personal account of the life of his father Johnny Cooper, 'one of the originals' of L-Detachment SAS. Johnny featured in the recent BBC2 Series 'SAS: Rogue Warriors'.
6. Tour of Sissinghurst Gardens.
7. Tour of Chapel Down Vineyard followed by lunch.

We can confirm that;

The WKPS Summer Party will centre on lunch at the lunch at London Beach Hotel, Tenterden; date to be notified to members;

The WKPS 2017 AGM – will be held in Tenterden Town Hall, date TBA, preceded, it is hoped, by a talk on the Town Hall and its history.

WEBSITE

The WKPS website is undergoing a complete overhaul, and we shall be launching the new version in April.

If readers have any good high resolution pictures of scenery or buildings in the Weald which we might use, please send to secretary@wkps.org.uk

ALL4Better Development

WKPS has added its name to the list of groups supporting All4Better Development, itself a sizeable pressure group.

It seeks, not to oppose all rural housebuilding, but to ensure that housing developments are appropriate for their location.

Website: www.all4betterdevelopment.uk

WEALD OF KENT PROTECTION SOCIETY

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Chairman: Michael Bax

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We welcome letters from members and the wider readership.

WOTW reserves the right not to publish and to abridge letters.

Please note that not all views expressed in Watch on the Weald will be the views represented by Weald of Kent Protection Society.