

## WETLAND RESTORATION

A great deal has happened concerning Wetland Restoration (WR) in Burley since we last updated on the subject at the end of 2016. A more comprehensive report & explanation seems essential for villagers now.

Of course, if never personally encountered, WR works may seem rather remote and unimportant to you. Significantly, however, the Forestry Commission (FC) now have in hand **7 more such 'Stream Engineering' projects works around Burley village** (albeit individually on a much smaller scale) within designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). These plans were keenly awaited by BPC but the expected ultimate consultation on what was proposed was sadly disappointing. Thus, it was apparently thought un-necessary to involve our councillors until the point at which the project planning process had been completed and implementation about to be approved.

[Please note the comments later in the first paragraph of the NAO's report – still no change in FC/HLS attitudes about the need for 'local communications', apparently.]

You will soon see, therefore, material stream changes at: -

- 4 points in the **Burbush/Slap Bottom** area (plus large scale Scots pine clearance),
- 3 points in the **Turf Croft/Forest Road** area.

Such works are preceded by large scale felling/clearance of birch, willow & undergrowth to facilitate machinery access in the project areas – as can already be observed just east of the Burbush car park.

[There were also to be works at 5 points in the **Red Rise** area, between **Bisterne Close & A35** but those are largely not now proceeding, apparently due to strong resistance from local Commoners.]

*For those who would like to be reminded* - WR is carried out by the FC as partners in the EU/HMG-funded **NF Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS)**. In this context, the original large local project was at **Harvestslade Bottom**, north of Forest Road & Turf Croft Farm (just above the point at which that watercourse joins another one and become the better-known Mill Lawn Brook). It was the subject of a FC planning application in September 2014. At that point BPC held a well-attended public meeting to examine how such a substantial and environmentally intrusive project of Stream Engineering works could be justified. This SSSI unit was (and still is) categorised to be in 'Unfavourable Condition' by Natural England. Thus NE said they required the FC to improve conditions in order to:

- A). Prevent further erosion & drying out of the mire systems, protecting these important habitats;
- B). Restore the original natural meandering course of this stream, reconnecting it to the floodplain & reducing further erosion by slowing the flow.

Despite many unsatisfactory/inadequate answers to BPC/villagers' natural concerns for the implications of such works, Planning Permission was granted and works were carried out in August-October 2015 to replace 320m. of artificial drain with c.525m. of restored stream (i.e. re-routed along what was said to be the original meandering watercourse), bed level raising of 340m. existing watercourse and infilling of the redundant drainage channel etc. - with the use of 4,700 tonnes of hoggin, gravel, stones & clay.

Those works were closely observed by BPC & colleagues during and after their completion. Sequential photographs show heavy erosion of sections of the new stream bed & banksides took place almost immediately, along with washing out of huge amounts of hoggin, gravel, stones and sediment. All as a result, it seems, of the under-estimated strong flow of the Harvestslade watercourse, which can rise to truly torrential proportions at times of heavy rainfall (as particularly witnessed on a joint site inspection with FC & colleagues on 15<sup>th</sup> January this year).

However, it has taken 2 years following practical completion of that project for the FC to come to terms with the need to undertake reparations in order to reinstate the re-routed watercourse to its intended new form. A further week's work by the original contractors has recently resulted in the introduction of hundreds of extra tonnes of new hoggin etc. for the remodelling of over 150 metres of stream bed and the smoothing of the water flow gradient – thus taking the total registered cost of the works to over £400,000.

The importance and fragility of the New Forest's natural habitats are recognised by their designation as **SSSIs**. As such, one might reasonably expect the proposed remedial works required to be processed with full scientific rigour, starting with properly detailed baseline data against which to monitor & ensure satisfactory progress of recovery. Consequently, our close familiarity with the Harvestslade project led us to question the FC as to exactly how and what work was carried out by the contractors there, at what cost, under what controls and to what ultimate effect.

Despite use of the **Freedom of Information/Environmental Information** (FoI/EIR) legal mechanism to press for what we believed should be statutorily available, the expected explanations were not forthcoming – not even through reference of these issues to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Fortunately, we have our local MP, Sir Desmond Swayne, to thank (in conjunction with his efforts on the very much larger Latchmore Brook WR project) in requesting an **Enquiry by the National Audit Office** (NAO) to investigate concerns regarding the legal standing of the HLS, with particular regard to the management of their WR programme. [BPC were able to help the NAO with information in this latter respect, especially with what we learnt of the findings the Jonathan Cox WR report, as referred to in our commentary here in December 2016]

The NAO's enquiry report was issued on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2017. This indicated that from the information made available to them by the HLS partners (i.e. FC, NFNPA, the Verderers and NE), they considered the HLS to be appropriately constituted and operated.

However, the Comptroller & Auditor General concluded with the following recommendations: -

***“Firstly, the Forestry Commission need to improve local communications on planned schemes, their impact and the remediation of sites with the community. The recent refusal of planning permission in respect of Latchmore Brook is indicative of this need and has been accepted by the Forestry Commission.***

***Secondly, the scheme has lacked detailed evaluation evidence to inform its effectiveness. This concern has also been highlighted by various consultancy reports which reviewed the New Forest HLS. The Forestry Commission has cited that schemes of this nature can take time to fully demonstrate the habitat benefits, and require solid baseline data. This baseline data did not exist at the inception of the scheme to measure early projects, and work is now being undertaken to obtain this. It is important that scheme benefits are measured and evaluated against baselines to inform the design of future projects and that sufficient attention is given to post-project evaluations to assess value for money.***

***I understand that the Forestry Commission has appointed a new Monitoring Officer and developed a new Monitoring Plan and guidelines to improve these aspects of the scheme. I consider these to be important measures to enable all parties to more clearly measure and report on the delivery of objectives and to more specifically assess the benefits of the works over time. It will be important for these monitoring plans to be followed and I would encourage the parties to include these results in its public reports on the scheme.”***

You might reasonably ask then how such large scale engineering works on such valuable & fragile ecological sites of ‘Special Scientific Interest’ could be handled in a manner so lacking in scientific rigour.

It also emerged from a subsequent NAO letter that ***“the Forestry Commission had no statutory responsibilities to undertake wetland restorations ...”*** The significance of that comment will not be lost on villagers who attended the public planning meeting on the Harvestslade application (referred to in the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph above) and heard then (as constantly repeated subsequently) that these WR works had to be done as a legal obligation upon the FC.

Burley Parish Council now looks forward to a new and more constructive relationship with the Forestry Commission in Lyndhurst in light of the NAO's observations and recommendations (as concluded above). Indeed, the first really positive sign of this has been an announcement from Natural England, *in partnership with the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency*, that they had commissioned the University of Southampton, the River Restoration Centre and Jonathan Cox Associates to undertake a review of the New Forest Wetland Management Plan 2006-2016. Consequently, BPC (along with a large range of other concerned bodies) were represented at a workshop on 7<sup>th</sup> December last year to hear the nature of the review explained and contribute their inputs into the development of a New Forest Freshwater and River Restoration Strategy and Plan for the future, to be published in 2018.

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