

SLAP BOTTOM WOOD

The fight to save these maturing Scots Pine trees has not relented. In the February edition of the Magazine we were pleased to report that the felling project had been ‘paused’ by DEFRA through the intervention of our MP, allowing discussions to continue with Forestry England.

Regrettably, the Secretary of State’s email did not get through to FE in time to halt operations immediately. So 44 trees (out of a planned c.230) were cut down by 18th December, regardless of the protestations of certain upstanding villagers (doubtless well-known to you) whom it was thought necessary to have removed from site by the local constabulary, despite their holding of evidence of the S of S’s ‘pausing’ order. (Funny how ‘law & order’ can be seen to work in Burley nowadays, you may be thinking). However, by noon the message got through from FE HQ in Bristol and the contractors were then quickly dispatched elsewhere.

Since then there has been a meeting of Sir Desmond with FE’s Deputy Surveyor, followed (at his request) by a frank meeting of BPC Cllrs. Daubeney & Clarke with the DS & staff at Queen’s House. Several other meetings ensued, and 2 at which Cllrs joined with neighbours/villagers to meet the DS on site. These culminated in a lengthy public discussion at BPC’s Monthly meeting on 12th February, also attended by the DS (and with the Official Verderer as a quiet observer).

All those meetings may be described as ‘animated’ in the face of the continuing lack of meaningful scientific explanation and comprehensible justification. There would seem to be a clear belief on the part of FE and its NF Higher Level Stewardship Scheme partners in their ‘Wet Lawn Restoration’ policy [as there was, of course, in their ‘Wetland Restoration’ programme pre-NAO report and Southampton University research]. But trying to establish what sort of Wet Lawn may exist at Slap Bottom and just to what that might be restored in time (when the overall site is recognised to have been dry heathland in 1946) remains baffling to mere locals like us in the continuing absence of authoritative analysis.

Of course, it can’t be ignored that there are those who feel very differently about coniferous trees in the New Forest. The very worthy Friends of the New Forest/NFA have published a strong article in support of the Slap Bottom felling, describing Scots Pine as an “Invasive Exotic Tree” and saying that this is a “a well-considered and moderate proposal to restore habitats without harmful landscape impacts”.

That may well be a reasonable understanding of many. However, in the case of Slap Bottom SP felling, the HLS policy encouraging “Wet Lawn” restoration has yet to be demonstrated (let alone readily understood) to be effective in the longer term (in such a location) simply by felling coniferous trees.

It would be plainly wrong to put all the blame for the absence to date of credible supporting scientific evidence for their actions at the doorstep of FE when the real motivation & direction of such works lies with Natural England. Regrettably, however, NE are largely noticeable by their absence in this matter. They have given their permission for the Felling (as required) but that seems only to be in generic terms. So far there is no written evidence available that they are actually familiar with the site - or have even specified what may be wrong and how it should be addressed within their relevant SSSI unit ‘Condition Assessment’ report. That was last carried out here in 2013 without any direct reference to Slap Bottom or wet lawn restoration.

Meanwhile, Forestry England have agreed to reduce the planned felling area twice already – and the DS has indicated a further reduction remains possible.

The clear feeling at the BPC meeting on 12th February was that “*FE should do no further felling while Natural England have the opportunity to re-visit the site, and provide proper scientific evidence to support the need & value of undertaking the work of Scots Pine felling in the current widely supported global climate change emergency*”. This has been communicated subsequently to Forestry England’s DS, from whom we await to hear further.

Meanwhile, if you would like to get to grips with the fuller details of this matter, then you can go to on line to: www.burleyparishcouncil.gov.uk and view our Slap Bottom Tree Felling ‘*Position Statement Feb. 2020*’ - as provided to FE in clarification of the points reached in our ascertainment of the facts of this project to date.

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