

## SLAP BOTTOM WOOD

“*VILLAGERS FIGHT TO STOP TREE FELLING*” Did you read that in the local press (*New Milton Advertiser*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2019)? Were you involved in the protests at that time against the Felling Licence Application by the Forestry Commission - now known as ‘*Forestry England*’ (FE) – to remove between 232 & 500 trees from Burley with minimal notice? And/or were you just wondering what was all that about?

The Parish Council keenly joined in the strong objections from neighbouring villagers but the apparent reasons for this work under the NF Higher Level Stewardship Scheme demand some further explanation: -

The woodland area known as ‘Slap Bottom’ lies immediately north of Burbush Car Park at the south-west end of Pound Lane. Whilst a screen of mature broadleaf trees is to be maintained for the benefit of the adjacent houses, the felling will mainly involve the loss of Scots Pine conifers through the intended decimation of this locally popular & attractively wooded natural recreation area, which has been unobjectionably growing for the past 70 years or more. So, despite their very important carbon sequestration function and positive contribution to the landscape, we are told that the purposes of the tree-felling “would be to restore a significant area of ‘*Wet Lawn*’”. On site, this can be seen to be relatively dry ground, gently rising above the stream & mire that serves Whitten Pond (which lies south of the old railway track). 50% timber clearance of part of this area is said to be necessary for the maintenance & improvement of the condition of this unit of the NF SSSI (i.e. Site of Special Scientific Interest, as most of the New Forest is designated) and help diversify the wetland habitats.

Although it seems that this project has been in hand as part of the HLS Whitten Wetland Restoration project since at least 2017, formal notice of the intended tree-felling was only given on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 with 3 weeks allowed for objections. Naturally, with all the current recognition of the necessity for large scale tree-planting to counter-act the effects of global climate change, it seemed grossly inadequate for neighbours’ objections to be rejected without provision of a meaningfully scientific explanation and understandable justification for such a proposal. FE talk of ‘Consultation with villagers & Parish Council’ on the subject - but that only really meant recounting what they had decided with their HLS partners some considerable time ago.

Always involved in such ecological habitat matters is, of course, Natural England (‘NE’, the DEFRA dept. responsible for getting FE to undertake all & any works they consider to be necessary to restore SSSI units to ‘*Favourable Condition*’). But what has particularly concerned the Parish Council is NE’s unexplained omission to previously record the Slap Bottom woodland as being in ‘*Unfavourable Condition*’; nor at any prior stage to have recorded (in one of their regular ‘SSSI Condition Assessment’ reports) the state of the extant woodland and indicate any need for such consequent work as now apparently required without delay

It may help your perspective of this situation if you bear in mind that the current NF Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (A partnership agreement between Forestry England, The Verderers, NF National Park Authority, and Natural England with attendant EU-sourced grant funding) expires at the end of March 2020. That Scheme only applies to areas of ‘Open Forest’ such as this where it is probably better known for its ‘Wetland Restoration’ programme that included large scale projects like Harvestslade and Latchmore Brook (the latter rejected at Planning Application stage and, moreover, the competency of this whole WR programme execution brought into severe question by a National Audit Office Report of July 2017 [See BVM edition of April 2018])

However, it is also worth bearing in mind that -quite separately - FE are at an advanced stage of gaining government approval to their updated ‘*Forest Design Plan*’ for all those areas defined as statutory ‘Inclosures’. We have made previous reference to this framework for inclosure-by-inclosure ongoing NF management. Most significantly for Burley is the plan to fell over 240 hectares (600+ acres) of coniferous NF woodland over the next 10 years for the purpose of restoring that land to open heathland. A significant part of this lies within inclosures close to Burley, notably Burley Walk, Dames Slough & Bolderwood. Areas can be found (particularly in Dames Slough Inclosure and Dur Hill) of where large-scale conifer felling has already been undertaken. What is not apparent is

how exactly – and when – will such land exhibit the characteristics normally expected of heathland.

But more about that in due course. Meanwhile, FE & NE between them have granted the Slap Bottom Felling Licence. Is it unlikely, therefore, that more can be done about it at this stage? Discussions continue...

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