

The Trees on St Catherine's Hill



Events prior to 2011 are recorded after 2011 to assist the majority of readers who are aware of the history.

2011

The last permitted phase of felling on the far slope of the hill caused outrage. The Forestry Commission was called in and wrote to ARC saying that they had broken the spirit if not the letter of their felling licence. The hill looked like a First World War battlefield and we received e-mails, letters and phone calls of anguished and outraged complaint.

Negotiation of the Management Plan commenced in earnest. We decided that our negotiating stance should be:

1. The hydrology of every area must be considered before any other criteria are assessed. As part of the on-going negotiations the hill was split into small areas, with each area related to the very local hydrology. In this way the consideration of hydrology was automatically made the first consideration in reviewing the area.
2. We do not envisage any future large scale felling, rather controlled thinning and management.
3. The record of contractors employed to work for ARC is at best patchy. This plan needs to devise a mechanism for ensuring:
 - a. Those trees to be thinned are clearly marked

- b. That only those trees and no others are removed
 - c. That ultimately the contractor suffers a large financial penalty if the wrong trees are felled
4. Other areas in the locality that have seen trees felled to promote heathland have not been properly maintained. They have quickly become covered in bracken and gorse. Trees have reinvaded the area. The responsible parties should explain how they intend to avoid such a thing happening in the future
 5. From now, absolutely no other work of any description is to be undertaken on the hill before all drainage ditches have been reinstated and restored and demonstrated to work properly and arrangements have been put in place to fund their future maintenance in perpetuity
 6. Sufficient attention must be devoted to the maintenance of Sandy Lane, St Catherine's Hill Lane and the bridle paths.

Events in the period 2004-2010 are covered on the next page

2004-2009

Back in 2004, acting with Hurn Parish Council, we spent a great deal of time fighting the request by the then Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT – now known as ARC), supported by English Nature (now known as Natural England) and EEC Directives, to fell 85% of the trees on Town Common and St Catherine's Hill. We received a good many congratulations on the quality of the paper that we submitted to CBC, the raising of the petition of more than 2,000 names and the local TV and radio coverage that we obtained. We were successful to the extent that CBC local councillors voted unanimously to oppose the felling licence.

The whole matter was referred back to the Forestry Commission (TFC) and we, with Hurn, made further representations both in writing and at a specially convened meeting in January 2006. Following that meeting with TFC the minutes were circulated. From these we learned that English Nature, speaking in camera, had said that they considered that the felling should take place irrespective of the views of local residents. We found this disregard for local democracy quite disturbing.

Also in 2006 TFC finally produced a hydrology report, something we had lobbied hard for. The first two pages were devoted to pouring scorn on the original report produced by HCT, which turned out as we suspected to be very misleading. Had we not successfully stopped this venture it is likely that there would have been even more severe water problems for some local residents.

TFC rejected the HCT application and divided the area into two portions: the contentious portion being the top of the hill and the side that faces the housing in Hillside Drive etc. and what was termed the non-contentious slope of the hill facing the Avon and the Avon valley itself; these two areas to be considered separately. Sometime after that some felling was allowed in the supposedly non-contentious areas in five phases running from winter 2007 to winter 2011. The felling that has so upset you and many others is the final phase of that compromise arrangement. ***Had this Association not acted the whole of the hill would now look like that.***

In 2009 the process of producing a management plan to cover the contentious part of the site – the hill itself – commenced. We and others felt it unlikely that the various parties concerned could reach an agreement they could all support without professional help. We therefore lobbied for and secured the appointment of an independent facilitator. This was managed by CBC through a tendering process in which we participated. We also provided £1,000 from our reserve funds to meet the cost of the facilitation process.

2010

The facilitator arranged a "meet the people" evening, expecting a dozen people to turn up. We made sure that locals were aware and about 120 people swamped the Hall on the Hill. They then told the naturalists that for most of them heathland restoration came a very poor third behind protection of their property and protection of trees.

We managed to arrange for a hydrologist to visit local properties in Hillside Drive, Hurn Way and Fairmile Road that were badly affected by the water that runs off the hill. In his report he counselled against felling any trees close to people's houses other than those that are dead, dying or diseased.