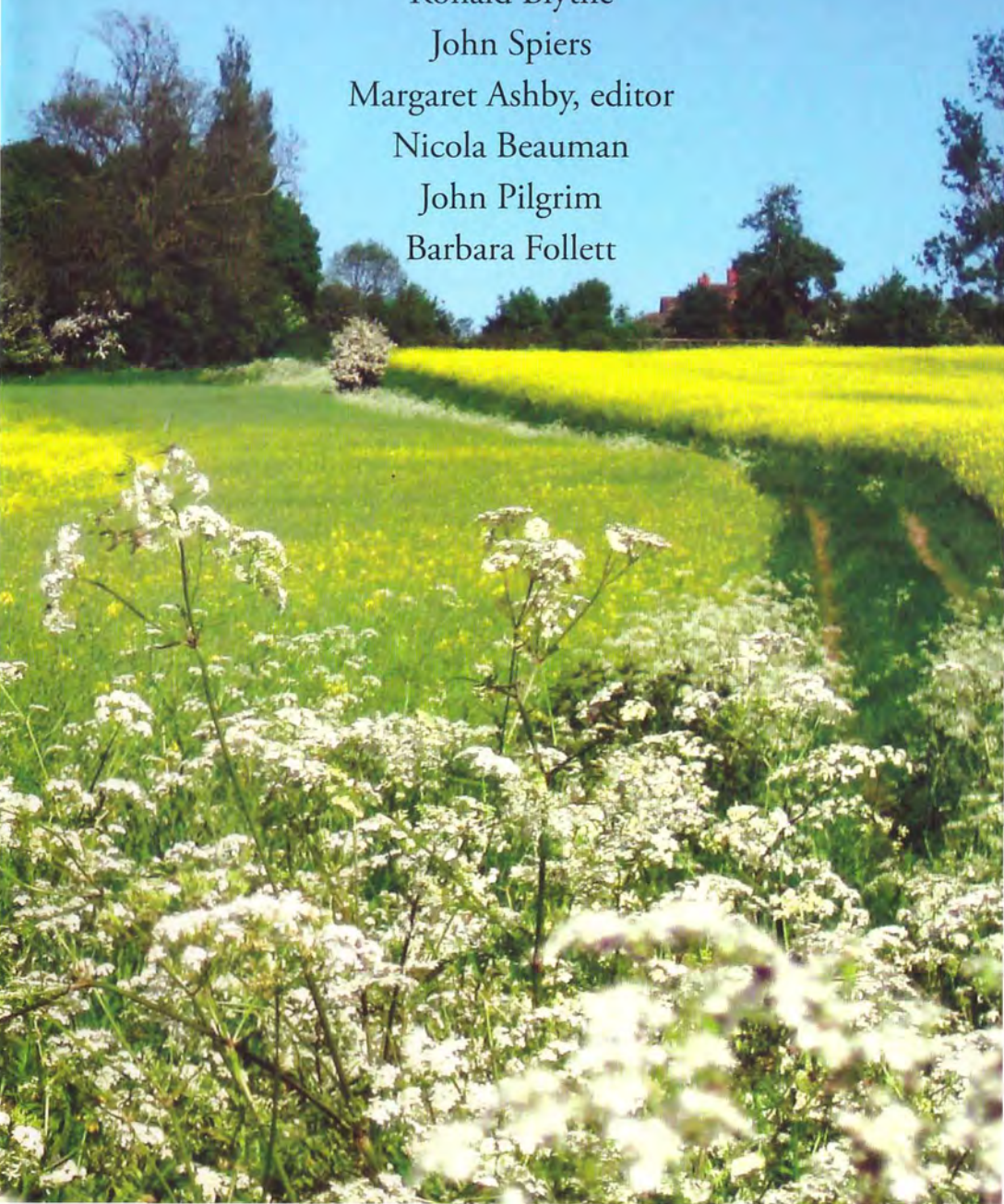


A GUIDE TO THE FORSTER COUNTRY

Ronald Blythe
John Spiers
Margaret Ashby, editor
Nicola Beauman
John Pilgrim
Barbara Follett



A GUIDE TO THE FORSTER COUNTRY

A Brief Chronology



E.M. Forster



Elizabeth Poston

1883 - 1893 From the ages of four to fourteen Edward Morgan Forster lived in Rooks Nest House with his young widowed mother. The house was also known locally as 'Howards'.

1910 By this time, Forster had become an established writer; his novel *Howards End* was published to great acclaim. The house of the title was clearly Forster's childhood home, and the Hertfordshire countryside is portrayed with love. He had kept in touch with former neighbours, particularly the Poston family whose characters were the inspiration for the Wilcoxes of the novel. In 1914, Clementine Poston, with her son Ralph and daughter Elizabeth, became tenants of Rooks Nest House. During World War II, Elizabeth, by then a noted composer, met Forster and they became lifelong friends.

1946 - 1989 During this period there were a number of development plans which would have resulted in houses being built on the countryside close to Rooks Nest House. There was strong opposition to these, with national publicity. Very soon the area was recognised by scholars as part of our cultural heritage and the term 'Forster Country' began to be used. There were repeated threats to the area but Stevenage Borough Council refused planning permission and their decision was upheld following a Public Inquiry.

1989 The Friends of the Forster Country (FoFC) was founded by Margaret Ashby and John Hepworth, with the aim 'To preserve for all time the open green space in the north of Stevenage, known as the Forster Country'. 1989 was also the centenary year of Hertfordshire County Council, who erected a plaque commemorating E.M. Forster and Elizabeth Poston, at Rooks Nest House.

1994 After the Public Enquiry, the Green Belt boundary was adjusted to include the part of the Forster Country within Stevenage Borough.

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Edited by Margaret Ashby

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with thanks all those who helped
in any way in the preparation of this Guide.

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J.H. - John Hepworth, A.M. - Aris Mariner, M.O. - Marion Ohlendorf,
A.W. - Ann Ward, Cover Picture by Marion Ohlendorf.
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The Friends of the Forster Country 2016

www.forstercountry.org.uk

A GUIDE TO THE FORSTER COUNTRY

Preface

This Forster Country Guide is a reminder of what so easily can become unknown in a modest landscape. Once comprehended, it awakens the imagination of those who live in it and those who watch it from the commuter train window. It is one of those rare scenes which are an integral part of English literature, and also a personal experience which grows in importance the more one thinks about it. It is where the young novelist began to evaluate the soul of the English bourgeoisie. He was a small boy when his mother rented a farmhouse called Rooks Nest in Stevenage and he was to observe with shocking clarity the English class system; also the beautiful unemphatic English scenery. This is the land which inspired the new towns and an entirely different urban view of life from what had previously been called 'living in the country' which had for so long been the Englishman's ideal.

But Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910) exploded the myth of rural tranquillity. He would, all his life, make us see the loveliness of scenes only a few miles from London, but always recognising them as complex and dramatic because they were both surprisingly residential and yet quietly rural at the same time, and these opposites had helped to create a special kind of society. As a nation we have succeeded in bringing the village into the town, and Stevenage is a classic example of having the best of both worlds. Its ideals may be those of the garden city builders, but they have lasted and remain fresh and practical.

The Friends of the Forster Country are those who know it best and their Guide is a delight. I used to meet E. M. Forster when he came to Suffolk to talk about his Guide - to Alexandria!

Ronald Blythe

Ronald Blythe is widely acclaimed as Britain's greatest living rural writer. He has spent a rich life among artists and writers in his native East Anglia. His many books include *Akenfield*, which became an instant classic. In 2006 he was given the prestigious Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature. He is a lay canon of St Edmundsbury and has, for the last twelve years, written a weekly column for the *Church Times* about daily life in the Stour Valley on the Suffolk/Essex border, where he lives.



The view from Rooks Nest c1860 by Sydney Massie

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Foreword

This short Guide expounds the importance of the Forster Country and its preservation. It illustrates with great clarity the value Forster himself placed on this piece of countryside which has been named after him. It demonstrates its significance today in terms of the well-being of the many people who live within its environs and make use of it. The contributors are to be congratulated for their perspicacity in realising and promoting the value of our local countryside and its literary connections.

The Guide includes contributions by four people who have enriched our Society in many ways and who care deeply about maintaining this piece of countryside. These contributions have been made entirely independently and we are aware that to a small extent there are conflicting views. However, The Friends of the Forster Country remain totally dedicated to preserving the whole of the Forster Country as open green space for all time.

Nicola Beauman has drawn on the words of the author who recognised the need for people to have somewhere to live but who despaired at the thought of losing England as 'a green and pleasant land'. He could not 'equate the problem'. She alludes to the necessity to ensure that this countryside remains above the tide level of 'red rust' encroaching ever more on to our land.

Margaret Ashby reviews her personal memories, evincing the facts of the sad loss of some indigenous species, but remains positive about the present variety of flora and fauna in the Forster Country. She believes that preservation of this green lung is necessary for the good of people living in and around Stevenage.

John Pilgrim refers to the pressures of everyday living and the importance of giving people breathing space. That is becoming ever more important nowadays. John can envisage a nightmare scenario where Stevenage, Hitchin, St. Albans, Watford, Luton, Dunstable are all joined up! He asks for more attention to be paid to brownfield sites.

Barbara Follett as a former Minister for the East of England takes a 'helicopter' view. She sees the necessity for many more homes in the east of England and envisages a mosaic of green spaces and dwellings around urban areas. This vision exists as an embryo. It is up to us all to consider its future.

I commend this guide to you both as 'food for thought' and also as an informative work for those less familiar with the Forster Country and who wish to see it as an historical and green landscape worthy of preservation.

John Spiers, *Chairman The Friends of the Forster Country*

John Spiers is a degree-qualified chartered engineer. He worked in the chemical, oil and gas sectors for over 40 years. In 1990 he was awarded the title Eur Ing by the Paris-based European Federation of National Engineering Associations.

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Introduction

The Forster Country, in Green Belt land, stretches from Rooks Nest, E. M. Forster's childhood home in the north of Stevenage, to Chesfield and Graveley. It is accessible by footpaths leading from St Nicholas churchyard, Rectory Lane and North Road through arable farmland and on towards Weston. It forms an invaluable green lung between Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth. In 1946, when it was first threatened with development, Forster called this countryside 'the loveliest in England'. Since that time it has survived many attempts to build over it and currently it is facing the most serious threat so far.

The Friends of the Forster Country were established in 1989, by John Hepworth and Margaret Ashby. We had, and still have, one aim, 'To preserve for all time the open green space in the north of Stevenage, known as "The Forster Country"'. John and I were introduced by Jim Poston in 1988 when, unknown to each other, we were both concerned about a planning application to build in the Forster Country. From the moment we met we became dedicated to the apparently impossible task of saving the Forster Country from development, not just temporarily, but for all time. If John had been alive today we would have been writing and editing this booklet together, with many a late-night phone call over the precise words needed to complete a document. And often I would receive, through the letter box, a hastily-written message headed 'Thort!!' followed by a new idea or a possible solution to a problem. John's contribution to the protection of the Forster Country was immense and no publication about it could be considered without acknowledgement to him.

As well as many supporters locally, nationally and internationally, we have been fortunate over the years to have a number of eminent patrons, including, in chronological order:

Richard Whitmore, Sir Nigel Hawthorne, Gunnvor Stallybrass, Dr Malcolm Williamson, Nicola Beauman, John Pilgrim, Dame Thea King, Sir Andrew Motion and Barbara Follett.

Now, at a time when the future of the Forster Country is in doubt, the current patrons have come together to create *A Guide to the Forster Country* which includes cogent arguments for its continued protection. This was suggested by Nicola Beauman, through whose generosity it is published.

Margaret Ashby

The Forster Country is entirely Green Belt land. That part of it within Stevenage Borough is shown in green. Surrounding it is the Green Belt land of North Hertfordshire District.



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In Forster's Footsteps

Despite the changes that have occurred in the one hundred and thirty years since Forster came to live at Rooks Nest, it is still possible to walk in his footsteps. The best place to start is the site of the old Great Northern railway station, at the top of Julians Road. Little now remains of the station buildings. The forecourt, where once passengers were met by horse-drawn cabs and later motor taxis, is now a parking space beside two small shop buildings that Forster would have remembered.

Walk down Julians Road until it meets the modern Lytton Way, take the pedestrian underpass on the right and emerge at the Bowling Green. There was no war memorial there when Morgan lived at Rooks Nest, but he would have seen it on his later visits and would have recognised some of names inscribed on it: local names such as Ansell, Chalkley, Fellowes and others, belonging to families he knew as a boy.



Horse-drawn carriages outside Stevenage station c.1900

Opposite the Bowling Green, across the Great North Road, is the building, now refurbished and converted to apartments, which was formerly The Grange School, where Morgan was so unhappy in May 1893. The Great North Road leads southwards into the High Street, where many of the buildings well-known to the Forsters remain perfectly recognisable today, although their occupants, and the trades they are used for, have naturally changed with the times.



The Grange School as Forster would have known it. (Stevenage Museum)

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At the south end of the High Street is Holy Trinity church, described in *Howards End* as 'being roofed with tin'. Possibly this was a temporary covering at a time when the church was being extended and Morgan remembered it from his youth.

If you now continue south for about half a mile, to the town centre and beyond, you will find the six hills, which featured so prominently in *Howards End* and may even have been the origin of the name 'Hilton' in the novel. They are no longer prominent in actuality, being overshadowed by the back of the ASDA store and two roundabouts near the Royal Mail sorting office. A modern road has been inserted on their east side and the remains of the Great North Road has been downgraded to a cycle way on the west. The hills themselves now appear insignificant and the 'ugly new' Edwardian houses which Morgan complained of, where the Charles Wilcoxes lived in *Howards End*, have been demolished to make way for the town centre. It takes a little imagination and a pre-1950 street map, to visualise the six hills as they were.

Returning to the High Street, walk on the east side until you reach the Grange and continue to the start of the Avenue. From here, it is easy to follow the FoFC's 'Forster Country Walk' with its waymarked signposts.



Forster Country Walk sign



St Nicholas church (M.A.)

Continue to the top of the Avenue. Straight ahead is St Nicholas church, which the young Morgan attended and where he was inspired, at the age of six or seven, to write one of his earliest childhood stories 'Chattering Hassocks'.

A footpath through the churchyard leads to the 'Only Connect' sculpture and the Braille plaque at the gateway into the Forster Country. Go straight ahead and you will come upon clearly signed paths to Graveley and Chesfield, across the gently undulating fields which Morgan knew so well. Take time, as he did, to search for wild flowers and to enjoy the views. Morgan even appreciated the electricity pylons which were erected after the Second World War, calling them 'naked ladies'.

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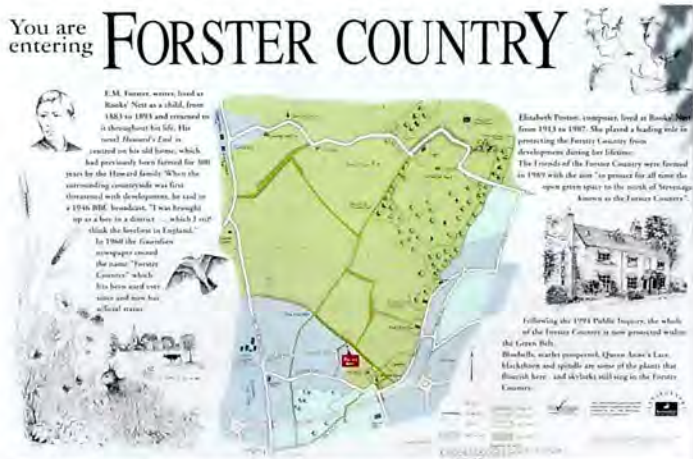
Rooks Nest House (M.A.)

It is possible to catch glimpses of Rooks Nest House from across the fields, but to see it properly, go back to the footpath through St Nicholas churchyard, turn left at the tall cross which is the Barclay memorial and follow the path through the modern cemetery until you reach the old Weston Road. Turn left, passing some modern houses on the right. The first building you will reach on the left is Rooks Nest Farm (formerly Lower Rooks Nest). Next door is Rooks Nest House (formerly

Upper Rooks Nest or Howards). When the Forsters lived there, the main entrance was further along the road, and not where it is now.

Please remember that this is a private house and not open to the public.

Return to St Nicholas church, then walk down Rectory Lane, a road very well-known to Morgan, as he and his mother often visited Rector and Mrs Jowitt at the Rectory. It is now called the Priory and is divided into two dwellings. A plaque commemorates the Rector's son, William Jowitt, who was born here in 1885, grew up to be Lord Chancellor of England and took an important role in helping the legislation for postwar new towns through parliament. Almost opposite, on the other side of the road, is an ancient footpath into the Forster Country which leads at first beside some modern houses. Just before it emerges into farmland, it passes the information board which was erected by the FoFC in 1997.



Information board erected by the FoFC in 1997

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'See Life Steadily and See it Whole'

The novelist E.M. Forster is one of the very few writers whose books have been transferred to screen with almost total success. *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *A Room with a View*, *Howards End*, *A Passage to India* and *Maurice* have all been turned into superb and eminently watchable films; only the most philosophical and least accessible, *The Longest Journey*, has not (yet) been filmed.

Although Forster's books have been read by millions over the course of the last 110 years since his first novel was published, it is the Merchant Ivory films with which the novelist is nowadays mostly associated. And because of the films, and perhaps the cinema-goer's subsequent reading of the novels, for many people Forster has come to represent a certain concept of Englishness and of tradition.

And what is represented for the film audience or the novel reader? Englishness certainly. Values: tolerance, kindness, unselfishness, liberalism. Various entrenched beliefs which are alluded to time and again both on screen and in print. And of these the most important is a deeply-held belief in the importance of the countryside.

This is why the Forster country is more than just some woods and fields north of Stevenage, north of Forster's childhood home of Rooks Nest. Forster is one of our greatest novelists, indeed one of the greatest novelists in the world. And throughout the novels, and his later non-fiction writing, he celebrates, either directly or indirectly, the rural traditions which are embodied in Hertfordshire and, in particular, in the Forster Country: 'The great estates that throttle the south of Hertfordshire were less obtrusive here, and the appearance of the land was neither aristocratic nor suburban.' (This is characteristic Forster, when a straightforward landscape description becomes a moral evaluation).

Hertfordshire gave Forster a lifelong empathy with country values. He came to live there when he was four, in 1883, and did not have to leave 'paradise', as he thought of it, until 1893 when his mother took him to live at Tonbridge so that he could attend Tonbridge School as a day-boy. When she first thought of moving he wrote to her that he 'was very surprised to hear you are looking at flats. I hope you are looking at them only to live in them till you find a house in the country for I know you would not like London and I should hate it.'

Thus he had already concluded that life in the country is more 'real', has more integrity, is more in touch with preceding and successive generations. He knew that Britain's urban dwellers had increased from one in five to four out of five during the nineteenth century; yet nothing ever changed his opinion that 'in these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole.'

In 1910 Forster based one of his greatest novels *Howards End* on his beloved childhood home, Rooks Nest.

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'The garden, the overhanging wych-elm, the sloping meadow, the great view to the west, the cliff of fir trees to the north, the adjacent farm through the high tangled hedge of wild roses were all utilised by me in *Howards End*... People who were accustomed to call Herts an ugly county were astonished at this view'.

In the novel, *Howards End* is the symbolic house in the contrasts between country and city, between traditional landscape and 'this outer life of telegrams and anger [motor cars, rush], between rural England and the expansion of the cities. Houses and bungalows, hotels, restaurants, arterial roads, by-passes, petrol pumps and pylons, are these going to be England? Are these man's final triumph?'



Rooks Nest House 1914, painting by Constance Margaret Thomson (Stevenage Museum)

It can thus be truly said that Forster's experience of living in Hertfordshire coloured the whole of the rest of his life and the whole of the rest of his writing life, and was why he became a visionary about the England of the future: he wrote in 1908 when he was 29 and a published novelist: 'It's coming quickly, and if I live to be old I shall see the sky as pestilential as the roads. It really is a new civilisation. I have been born at the end of the age of peace and can't expect to feel anything but despair. Science, instead of freeing man ... is enslaving him to machines. Nationality will go, but the brotherhood of man will not come ... The little houses that I am used to will be swept away, the fields will stink of petrol, and the airships will shatter the stars ... such a soul as mine will be crushed out.'

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It was for insights like this that Forster became revered. In some ways they do not seem very profound, because haven't writers and thinkers praised the countryside and mourned the expansion of the cities since time immemorial? But the importance of Forster's way of saying things is the compassion, the simplicity and the everyday directness of his style. What he cared about was 'love, beauty, liberty, affection and truth'. As Virginia Woolf said, 'Morgan says the simple things that clever people don't say': in fact he was not afraid to state the blindingly obvious, and one of the most obvious facts for him was that the countryside, pastoral values, the tradition of the land, are the backbone of England. Poets and novelists and playwrights and philosophers have been writing about this for centuries, but Forster put it in a crucial way that no one else has replicated, both in his non-fiction essays and in his novels.

His first book was *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in 1905. It is about a girl who abandons English middle-class conventions in order to marry a glamorous-seeming but rapidly disappointing Italian. The crux of the novel is Lilia's realisation of what she had lost: England may be inhibited in a way that Italy is not but her greatest moment of nostalgia comes when she thinks about what would be happening at home: 'It was September. Sawston would just be filling up after the summer holidays. People would be running in and out of each other's houses all along the road. There were bicycle gymkhanas, and on the 30th Mrs Herriton would be holding the annual bazaar in her garden for the CMS. It seemed impossible that such a free, happy, life could exist.'

This is not an ironic description. The novel is subtle enough to castigate the inhibited values of small-town England while it praises its strengths: Forster was not blindly committed to a wild, under-populated England. On the contrary, he empathised with people's wish to live in their own house in their own community (their own castle). And in fact one part of him believed that the life encapsulated in these sentences about Sawston is the ideal. He may have been excluded from it by being homosexual and therefore unable to marry and have a family life. But he thought it was a good way to live.

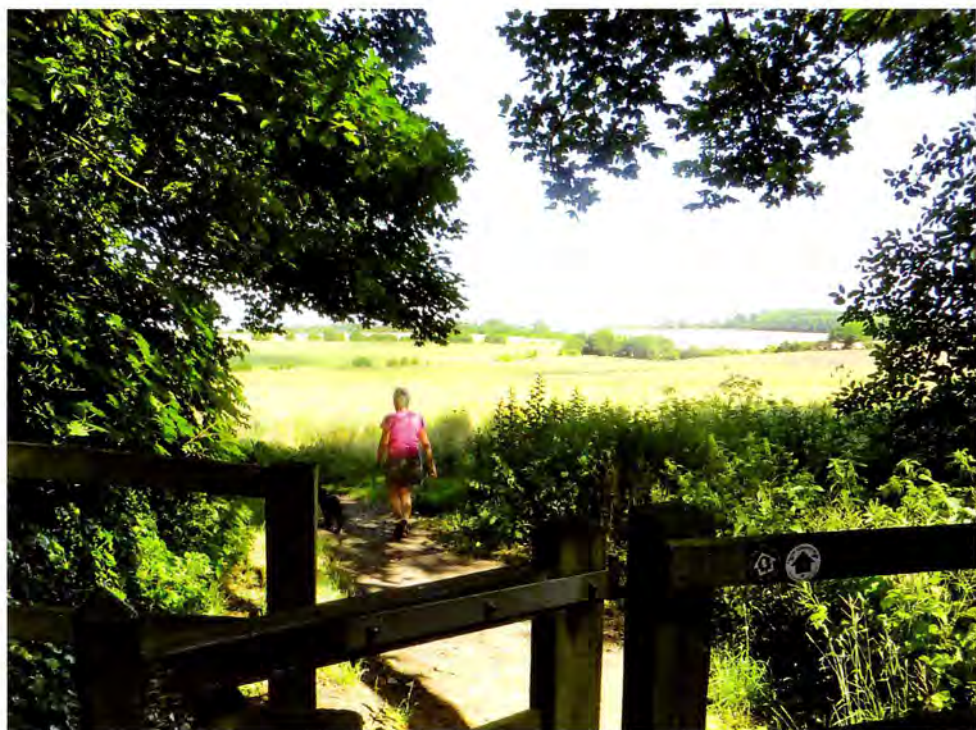
So one of the key themes for Forster was the knowledge that people must have houses but his accompanying dread was that the countryside should be eroded. When, twelve years after he had left Stevenage, he visited it again, all he could think about was the change in the landscape that he had fatalistically anticipated. He wrote about Admiral Fellowes at Woodfield, Rectory Lane, that he: 'Naughty man, has sold a good deal of his property for building - the part that touches the Baldock Road and made a road into it... There is also a whole new street, parallel between the High Street and the railway: that will spoil nothing.'

This last phrase is significant. He was not being a nimby (not in my back yard). He was accepting that building had to happen. But he felt it should not encroach on the unspoilt. He also knew the vital importance of preserving the countryside we have, of

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building on what we today call brownfield sites, of not destroying what is now, in tribute to him, called the Forster Country. As he said in a BBC broadcast in 1946: “Well,” says the voice of planning and progress, “why this sentimentality? People must have houses.” They must, and I think of working-class friends in north London who have to bring up four children in two rooms, and many are even worse off than that. But I cannot equate the problem. It is a collision of loyalties. I cannot free myself from the conviction that something irreplaceable has been destroyed, and that a little piece of England has died as surely as if a bomb had hit it.’

Howards End is, in essence, about this collision of loyalties. When, famously, he inserted the words ‘Only Connect’ on the frontispiece, he meant that human beings should connect with one another; but he also meant that we should make every possible effort to be loyal to each other rather than allowing our loyalties to collide. He wanted Rooks Nest to stay ‘exactly the same’. He wanted people to have somewhere to live. But he was in despair at the thought of losing England as ‘a green and pleasant land’. He could not ‘equate the problem’.



Footpath into the Forster Country (M.A.)

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Yet for Forster the countryside was not only for those who lived in the country. In a memorable scene in *Howards End*, the clerk, Leonard Bast, recounts the Saturday night when he walked from Wimbledon up to the North Downs to 'get back to the earth'. He walked through the woods, into grass, through gorse bushes. He recounts this adventure to Margaret and Helen Schlegel 'with a flow, an exultation, that he had seldom known.'

So, in conclusion, *Howards End*, and Forster himself, reveal an impassioned feeling for the English countryside ('in these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole') yet anticipates the future ('month by month the roads smelt more strongly of petrol'). Or, to put it another way, throughout the book, in the words of Virginia Woolf, a 'struggle goes forward which takes place in all Mr. Forster's novels - the struggle between the things that matter and the things that do not matter, between reality and sham, between the truth and the lie.'



The Forster Country from St Nicholas church tower (A.C.)

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Several times a year I drive north to Cambridge, the source of the intellectual beliefs that E.M. Forster was to hold so dear all his life. On the A1 on the right we pass the Lister Hospital at Stevenage. Then there are fields and unspoilt countryside. Here, as Margaret Wilcox thinks at the end of *Howards End*: 'The peace of the country was entering into her. It has no commerce with memory.' She will have nothing to do with the 'tide of rust' (red-roofed new houses, being built in the early twentieth century along the London Road out of Stevenage and since destroyed) which is creeping towards her. We must, of course, have a great deal to do with the tide. But perhaps we can ensure that it does not flow over the Forster Country.



Spindle bush in the Forster Country (A.M.)

Nicola Beauman

Nicola Beauman, writer and publisher, is the author of *Morgan: a biography of E.M. Forster*, published in 1993. In 1998, she founded the publishing house Persephone Books, which currently has 117 titles in print. She has been a patron of The Friends of the Forster Country since 1993.

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'The Loveliest in England'

I was first introduced to the Forster Country as a child, before it was given that name. We walked through St Nicholas churchyard, along the footpath beneath beech trees, past primroses growing between gravestones, then over an old stile into open farmland. The gently undulating fields, the wide view and big sky gave a sense of space. In the fields, flint stones, like those used for the building of St Nicholas church 800 years ago, were clearly visible among the furrows. The church, with the Old Bury next to it, stands on the site of Stigenace, the Saxon village which was the original Stevenage. This place, this rural heritage, is the only agricultural landscape now remaining within the Borough of Stevenage.

Since that first introduction, I have been countless times to the Forster Country to walk in peace, enjoying the green space and the wild flowers. Bluebells, a few cowslips and masses of Queen Anne's lace flourished in the banks, poppies, speedwell and scarlet pimpernel in the cornfields, wild roses and old man's beard covered the hedges, as they still do today. In early spring the bare hedgerows are made beautiful by abundant blackthorn blossom and in autumn the square pink fruits of the spindle trees appear - something of a Forster Country speciality. Before the building of Chancellors Road and its subsequent extensions, the meadows to the west of the path were full of meadow saxifrage, buttercups, yarrow, lady's slipper, marguerites and too many others to mention.

On one early walk, with a school-friend, I saw my first nightjar in the bank beside the footpath, just yards from the churchyard boundary. In classic pose it was crouched motionless against a fallen branch under the hedge and only moved when, startled by our voices, it flew up almost in our faces. Many years later, almost at the same place, I often met a little owl, who seemed pleased to be spoken to as it perched confidently in the hedge. In the winter, flocks of lapwings would descend on the wet fields - they still do occasionally, but in much smaller numbers as they are now red-listed as birds of conservation concern by the British Trust for Ornithology.

While lapwings are now rarely seen in the Forster Country, another red-listed bird, the skylark, still survives. Its unique song can be heard in spring and summer, above wide fields as yet undisturbed by development. Once that happens, the skylarks will disappear for ever, as will the hares that seem so fearless in spring. I once had the surprise of meeting a hare coming steadily towards us on the path to Chesfield, quite unafraid until we were almost face-to-face, when it decided to make a detour into the wheat field.

About 100 years before my first exploration of the Forster Country, this same path was familiar to Sydney Massie, sister-in-law of George Becher Blomfield, Rector of Stevenage from 1834 to 1874. Sydney was a talented artist who painted many scenes in the Stevenage area, including several of the Forster Country and one of this path.

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The name 'Forster Country' was coined by the Guardian newspaper on 19 October, 1960, in recognition of its influence on the writer E.M. Forster. In a BBC broadcast, in May 1946, he had described this countryside, which stretches from St Nicholas church towards Chesfield and Graveley. He said: 'I was brought up as a boy in one of the home counties in a district which I still think the loveliest in England. There is nothing special about it - it is agricultural land and could not be described in terms of beauty spots...I have kept in touch with it, going back to it as to an abiding city...'



Lapwing (P.C.)

There are criteria for designating Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other dramatic landscapes. There are no recognised criteria to describe and protect an area of ordinary countryside. If some official report condemns it as 'unremarkable', it succumbs to housing development. But for the people who grew up with those fields and hedges, or who came to live there and learned to call it 'home', the area is special. Most people are 'ordinary'. Surely they deserve protection for the 'ordinary' countryside they know intimately and appreciate deeply. It is not just the visual impression of a piece of landscape - the 'view' as the Victorians put it - that is important, but also the fact that it is a green, breathing space, with its own wildlife, its own little heritage, held in the affection of 'ordinary' people.



Painting by Sydney Massie of the field way from Stevenage to Graveley. The scene is very little changed today. (Stev Mus)

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Forster has made the countryside around his childhood home famous. But we are not saving it for Forster, we are saving it for ourselves and for future generations: for the people of Old Stevenage, who, during their lifetimes, have seen beloved fields and woods demolished and concreted over: for the people who came to New Stevenage, lured by a vision of a green town, with access into the country and who have grown to love their rural surroundings.

The building of Stevenage New Town inevitably brought with it some destruction, but it was a tremendous achievement, immediately after the Second World War, when Britain was nearly bankrupt. It has housed far more than the 60,000 homeless Londoners originally planned for and it is now a borough, with a conscientious council which is often faced with impossible dilemmas. In Forster's words, they face a collision of loyalties. But Stevenage, old and new, needs the Forster Country. A new town needs heritage and tradition, to connect it to the past and give its people a sense of belonging. An old town needs to retain at least some of the rural beginnings it grew up with, to feel a sense of security in a rapidly changing environment. We all need breathing space, separation from Hitchin and Letchworth, not to be forced into a conurbation but to be given a green lung where wildlife and human beings co-exist and the past and the present merge. For so many reasons it is vital to preserve for all time the open green space to the north of Stevenage, known as the Forster Country.

In 1994, the FoFC decided to commission a piece of sculpture to celebrate the decision to confer green belt status on the Stevenage Forster Country. They chose 'Only Connect' as the title and Angela Godfrey, BA, ARBS as the sculptor. Both HCC and SBC gave grants towards the cost.

'The sculpture, the only memorial in the world to E.M. Forster, stands in St Nicholas churchyard, beside the footpath into the Forster Country. Its purpose is to remind people that they are entering the Forster Country, which is protected as Green Belt land and to remind planners that this countryside is so special that the Green Belt boundary was altered, by the legal planning process, specifically to protect and preserve it.

Since that time, governments and planners have effectively downgraded Green Belt status. Once again, it has become necessary to fight to preserve the Forster Country.

Margaret Ashby

Margaret Ashby is the author of *Forster Country* (1991) and twelve other publications on Stevenage and Hertfordshire. After a career in further education, she was for fifteen years a tutor in local and oral history for the Cambridge University Institute of Continuing Education. In 1989 she and John Hepworth founded The Friends of the Forster Country.

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The Forster Country: Why we should save it

Way back in the 1940s when I was born in the county of Hertfordshire the pressure was growing even then on that small and beautiful part of the county known as the Forster Country. To a certain extent the planners got their way, although the Forster Country was spared. The new town of Stevenage became a reality and truthfully we can't argue about that because the country needed housing. The trouble is that ever since then eyes and desires have been focused on developing our Hertfordshire countryside. It makes no sense unless you can justify removing a part of our history and heritage for ever. These kinds of decisions to build are critical because they can never truly be reversed. We need to start making a stake in the future environment as well as for the present.

London is spreading its tentacles wider and wider but tearing apart the Forster Country is short sighted to say the least. In fact the Hertfordshire countryside and its people did their bit to relieve genuine pressure when the postwar new towns were built.

We are constantly reminded that 'people have to live somewhere' and who can argue with that? But people also require somewhere to spread out and enjoy themselves in simple ways so that they can face the everyday pressures of life.



Blackthorn Blossom (M.A.)

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It's true that Forster Country would be a most desirable place to live but we simply cannot continue to ignore our countryside. We are a small country with ever decreasing countryside and we cannot and should not ignore the fact that our part of England is quickly becoming attractive to folk who live in London.

By building more houses in and around Stevenage we will simply be depriving even more people of the enjoyment of filling their lungs and their hearts with healthy country air, fine views and a sense of history. I am starting to believe that we are in danger of forgetting just how important these things are to human beings. We need to rest, play and relax even more during these high pressured times. If we have nowhere to drop out for a while, our lives will become harder to bear, our jobs more difficult to face and our children will never know what they have missed, because it will not be there any more!



Children enjoying the freedom of the Forster Country (M.O.)

It's all very well teaching the history of literature by telling kids what they have missed but we should be able to SHOW them what we mean. Last summer I took my eighteen-year old grandson Joe on a couple of walks in Hertfordshire. He is studying art and photography and wanted to find out about the county. We walked through Cassiobury Park in Watford and the next day we took a stroll through the Forster Country with my Springer Spaniel Gemma as company. I haven't spent a more enjoyable couple of walks for years! Joe just clicked away with his camera while I nattered on about some of the great people who have contributed to the English way of life by writing, painting and photographing it. I was so proud of my grandson who, when he was asked by his dad if he enjoyed our trips, said: 'It was great dad there was just one problem, granddad kept asking me if I was bored and I don't think he believed me when I said that I wanted to

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find out more!’ That’s Joe, and there are thousands more young people out there who live locally and want and need to experience our history and heritage.

I worked for the BBC in the counties of Beds, Herts. and Bucks for over fifteen years and I can honestly say that I was never, ever bored by the hundreds of stories that I was told by local people all over the three counties. We have in Hertfordshire a fair blend of folks who live and work in the county and a number of others who have moved here to live whilst working elsewhere. We cannot afford to allow our heritage to dwindle away like this. Brownfield sights haven’t been exhausted by any means. Our towns and industrial areas need to be looked at before we simply cast off our history, destroy the countryside and ignore our heritage.

I repeat this is not just about Forster Country, it’s about the surrounding countryside as well. Imagine a conurbation where Stevenage, Hitchin, St. Albans, Watford, Luton, Dunstable and a few more smaller places are all joined up! Just where would we all go to relax and enjoy the countryside and the history of where we live or even worse, the history of where our forefathers lived and worked?

John Pilgrim

John Pilgrim is a retired writer, journalist and broadcaster. He contributed regularly to a local newspaper and to *The Hertfordshire Countryside Magazine*, as well as writing, producing and presenting programmes for BBC radio.



Friends of the Forster Country gathering for the New Year's Day walk, 2014 (M.A.)

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Politics, Planning and Preservation: why we need the Forster Country

No one who has ever travelled from London to Stevenage by train, as I first did in the winter of 1995, could fail to recognise the lyrical description of the last part of this journey in Chapter Three of E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End*.

Although the book was published in 1910, the picture the author paints of the north Hertfordshire countryside has not changed all that much in 105 years. The Welwyn viaduct is still 'immense' and its arches still 'span untroubled meadows and the dreamy flow of Tewin Water'.

There was no A1(M) in those days but there was the Great North Road, with 'its stench of motor cars', winding through 'untroubled meadows' carrying 'the traffic of coaching and pre-coaching days' which defined the size of 'the villages strung so frequently along it'.

Stevenage, where Forster spent ten happy childhood years, was one of the largest of these and he based the fictional village of Hilton in *Howards End* on it. Like Forster's Hilton, Stevenage, thanks to its proximity to London, 'had not shared in the rural decay and its long High Street had budded out right and left into residential estates'.

As the train in *Howards End* nears Hilton, it passes through a mile or so of 'tiled and slated houses' before these are interrupted by six small hills, standing 'shoulder to shoulder' along the high road. I see these 'tombs of soldiers' each time I drive down London Road through the 'tangle of habitation' of what is now, very definitely, a town.

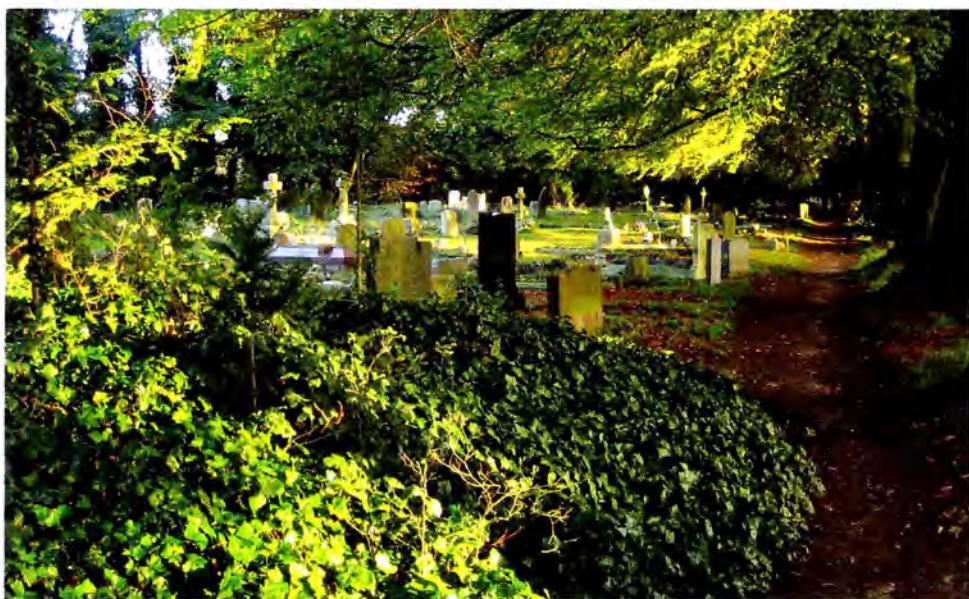
What I love about Stevenage is the way in which the old and the new co-exist and intermingle. Rabbits burrow in thousand year old Roman burial mounds alongside a modern hypermarket. Half a mile from the high tech factory on Gunnels Wood Road that makes satellite components is another, low tech but very successful, ironmongery business. The cobbled High Street hosts cappuccino-selling coffee shops and the Bowling Green, mentioned by Pepys in his diary in 1667, is now the site of the town's memorial to those lost in the terrible wars of the last century. The second of these conflicts brought huge change to Stevenage when, as part of the effort to house Londoners whose homes had been destroyed in the bombing, the country's first New Town sprang up around Forster's 'tangle of habitation'.

Sixty-five years later the Old and the New Towns of Stevenage fit together surprisingly well. Sometimes things are a little tight but that is more to do with the planners than the people. There are no divisions visible when our football club, Stevenage Borough, play at Broadhall Way. Then Old and New Towners cheer as one - especially if our opponents are an old rival like Woking.

This combination of new and old runs through the town's infrastructure, architecture, businesses, culture and people. They embody the town's history and help to give Stevenage a unique identity which frames, and gives continuity to, the lives of its inhabitants.

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As one of those inhabitants and, as the town's Member of Parliament from 1997 to 2010, I am determined to ensure that this mix of old and new is retained. I will never forget the first time that I walked from my little house on the Bowling Green up the long, unpaved Avenue next to the old grammar school, towards St Nicholas Church. It was in the late spring of 1997 and I was weary after weeks of campaigning and apprehensive about the then imminent general election. But as I emerged from the churchyard and into the open, green, expanse of farmland beyond it I began to relax. The birds were chirping sleepily in the trees and the grass smelt fresh and clean. Above me little clouds, touched pink by the setting sun, scudded across a wide, turquoise coloured sky. As the night breeze picked up and the distant hills darkened I headed for home feeling renewed and refreshed.



The footpath through St Nicholas churchyard (M.O.)

Imagine my concern when, shortly after being elected, I learnt from an organisation called The Friends of the Forster Country that my oasis of tranquillity was in danger of becoming a housing development. I also learnt that Forster's childhood home, Rooks Nest House, previously known as 'Howards', was situated in the top corner of this beautiful piece of rural England which, in a very Stevenage way, rubbed shoulders with a densely populated urban area. Although passionately committed to building homes to meet the needs of the thousands of people on the Borough Council's Housing List, I was equally committed to making sure that these were built in surroundings and in such a fashion, that they enhanced, not blighted, people's lives. The green lung of what has become known as the Forster Country is a vital feature of that enhancement for Stevenage.

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That is why I joined the Friends of the Forster Country and campaigned vigorously to keep it intact. This was not an easy decision because it conflicted with the views of many of my colleagues and constituents who were, quite rightly in most respects, more concerned about the housing shortage in Stevenage than the preservation of green spaces. But, it was, and is, the right decision because people need both – good homes to shelter them and good recreational areas to restore and relax them.

Sadly, successive governments, including the one I served in, have failed to supply the people of Stevenage with enough of either. Over the past twenty years I have seen plans, proposals and petitions to deal with housing need written, submitted, compiled and consulted upon. I have also seen almost every one fail. Despite having two outstanding examples of the garden city concept, Letchworth and Welwyn, within its borders, Hertfordshire County Council has a sadly short-term, cost cutting approach to home building which tends to produce the 'little boxes made of ticky-tacky' type of development derided by Pete Seeger. No one wants to see more of them so everyone protests. As a result very few houses have been built and the situation has become desperate.

The pretty little villages that surround Stevenage will, I fear, lose even more of their character to infilling and parking spaces as local government tries to find enough space to build more homes. North Herts Council needs to put up 14,000 by 2031 and they are proposing to put 5000 on land currently designated as Green Belt. Frankly, I do not see how they could achieve their target without doing so.

But what, I hear you cry, about your precious green spaces? Surely the Green Belt was introduced in the middle of the last century specifically to protect them? Yes, it was and no one is a stronger supporter of the preservation of areas around towns where 'agriculture, forestry and outdoor leisure prevail' than I. But, just as I, over the years, have had to let out some of the notches on my own belts, so towns have to, in a planned, sensible and sensitive fashion, move parts of their Green Belt areas outwards. Otherwise, they will never be able to expand.

This suggested movement of the Green Belt emphatically does not mean its wholesale replacement or the diminution of its existing acreage. In fact, in some cases, this can actually be increased and areas, like the Forster Country, which are within or adjacent to towns can be, as indeed it already has been, included in that protective definition. In other words, we should try to convert the current Green Belt into a Green Mosaic which preserves its beautiful and interesting green areas whilst allowing some development in its other, less desirable, areas. At the same time we could create a new Green Belt on the outer edges of current urban areas. In time, this too, may have to lose some sections and become another Green Mosaic. But, it would, if done in a controlled and careful fashion, prevent urban cramming and village in-filling and allow us to grow in a more environmentally friendly fashion.

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But, if my Green Mosaic Plan is to work, we must make sure that the areas designated as protected are large enough to give that feeling of openness and space so essential to the healthy development of human beings of all ages. It will not work if we have just little pockets of preservation dotted here and there. This is something that concerned citizens should bear in mind when they respond to the many local government consultations on housing development. Especially as a large number of these now contain plans to build on Green Belt land. This makes the challenge to protect our precious green spaces as well as to build much needed homes even more difficult than it already is.

But, deal with it we must and urgently too. We have to be brave enough to do what Forster himself urges us to do in Chapter 33 of *Howard's End* 'connect - connect without bitterness' and come together to find a joint solution to a problem which concerns all of us, not just a few.



A summer evening in the Forster Country (M.A.)

We need homes but we also need places where, like the two heroines of *Howards End*, we can reflect in peace. Somewhere spacious enough to let the present 'flow by us like a stream'. Somewhere green enough to let us hear 'the music of the trees'. Music which they made before we were born and which they will continue to make long after we die. Somewhere that 'sharpens our senses' and allows us to 'apprehend life' in all its complexity, shortness and beauty.

The Forster Country is one of those places. I am honoured to be a patron of its Friends.

Barbara Follett

Barbara Follett was Member of Parliament for Stevenage from 1997-2010. She has held Ministerial posts including Minister for the East of England, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Equalities, Minister for Culture, Tourism and the Creative Industries and Local Government Finance Minister. She is married to the best-selling author Ken Follett and since leaving politics, has been CEO of the Follett Office, based in Stevenage.

The Friends of the Forster Country Committee 2015-16

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'Only Connect' Sculpture, (J.H.)

A Brief Chronology *(continued)*

1997 A sculpture by Angela Godfrey was erected in St Nicholas churchyard by the gate into Forster Country. Entitled 'Only Connect', it is the only memorial in the world to E.M. Forster. In the same year, an information board, designed by Claire Miles, was erected at the footpath entry into the Forster Country from Matthews Close.

2005 The centenary of Elizabeth Poston's birth. On behalf of the FoFC, John Alabaster, with the aid of a grant from the Heritage Lottery fund, organised a year of events, including concerts, a conference, planting an apple tree and erecting a Braille plaque beside the 'Only Connect' sculpture.

2010 The FoFC organised a programme of events related to the centenary of the publication of *Howards End*.

2012 Death of John Hepworth, aged 92. The FoFC established an annual John Hepworth Memorial Lecture.

2013 The Forster Country Walk was launched, with its distinctive signs.

2015 The FoFC is responding in detail to the Local Plans of both the North Herts District Council and SBC, both of whom are proposing to build on the Forster Country.

The FoFC has maintained a policy of constant vigilance over planning matters, responding to public consultation documents, liaising with SBC councillors and officers and keeping the public informed through well-publicised events, newsletters and a website. Each year, on January 1st, E.M. Forster's birthday, a walk in the Forster Country takes place.

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Unveiling of the 'Only Connect' sculpture. L to R - Ian Hamilton, Margaret Ashby, Cllr Ken Vale, Revd John Bainbridge, Barbara Follett MP, John Hepworth, Angela Godfrey (A.W).

The Friends of the Forster Country 2016

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