

‘Poets versus Polytunnels’ by Marion Shoard, published in the *Newsletter of the Friends of the Dymock Poets*, Spring 2014

As the Dymock poets walked and talked in the fields and woods of the little corner of England where Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire meet, the rural environment helped shape their lives. Some of them used its rich soils to grow fruit and vegetables to feed their families. For all of them, the countryside was the backcloth both for the creation of poems and debates about the form poetry should take.

That is why the FDP champions the protection of that landscape and seeks to enhance the scope for all of us to move around in it. The extent to which we have managed and indeed needed to do this has varied over the years, but the last twelve months have seen us focus on two major threats to particular landscapes that we know the poets held dear.

The first involved a planning application to erect a mansion in an open site on the southern flanks of May Hill. We joined with many other individuals and organisations in opposing this proposal and it was finally withdrawn, as I outlined in ‘The Battle of May Hill’ in the autumn 2013 edition of this newsletter.

No sooner had we breathed a sigh of relief over May Hill, than we heard that a large farming company based at Ross-on-Wye, Cobrey Farms Ltd, wished to construct a grid of plastic polytunnels so that it could extend the growing season for asparagus at Redhill Farm, on the western edge of Redmarley D’Abitot. The site involved, covering 24 hectares (or the equivalent of 28 football pitches) of farmland in a shallow valley, is bounded on its southern edge by Poets Path 1 as it makes its way westwards from Redmarley to Ryton.

Asparagus farming consumes a great deal of water, while covering land with polythene prevents it from acting as a natural sponge. Irrigation as well as water containment was thus central to Cobrey Farms’ plans, and the planning application included the construction of two reservoirs and a sedimentation pond, as well as concrete spillways. The reservoirs would collect rainwater running off the polythene; this water would be pumped up from the reservoirs to the soil under the polytunnels to irrigate the plants. Cobrey planned to build the reservoirs at the lowest point in the valley, where Poets Path 1 intersects a public path running south-westwards across the site, along the line of a parish boundary. That path would be closed and another created along a ridge to the south.

Having drafted an objection on behalf of the FDP in November 2013, in January I organised a site visit for any FDP committee members who might be interested. The Forest of Dean District Council's planning committee was to decide on the application at its meeting in Coleford in February, and I thought we might lobby councillors in advance of this meeting. Maureen Diss, the clerk to Redmarley parish council, who had originally got us involved through seeking the FDP's support for the parish's own objection, accompanied us on our exploration. And so it was that on one wet, windy and memorable day in late January, Ray Canham, Barbara Davis, Val Evans, Richard Simkin, Jackie Tweedale and I tried to evaluate the likely impact of the scheme by looking both at Redhill and also neighbouring Lintridge Farm. Cobrey was granted planning consent to erect 22 hectares of polytunnels at Lintridge in 2007; we assumed that those erected at Redhill Farm would closely resemble those in place at Lintridge.

We soon realised that the covering of Redhill Farm with polytunnels (with just a narrow buffer between those at Lintridge), would involve far more than a change from one rural landscape to another. The covering of such a large area of farmland with polythene, of outside ditches with black sheeting to smother any natural water-side vegetation, together with the construction of the reservoirs and concrete spillways, would effectively remove this area from being countryside at all. There would be virtually no space for birds to alight on the ground. Little wild vegetation would survive.

Richard Simkin managed to secure the place of objector-spokesperson at the planning committee meeting; and trenchant criticism also weighed in from the representatives of Redmarley and Dymock Parish Councils, who were also able to address the committee for a few minutes. After a long and well-informed debate, the committee voted to defer a decision until it had made a second site visit; this was contrary to the recommendation of its planning officer to allow the application.

Not losing any time, clustered around a tea-table at the Co-op in Coleford, we immediately set to work to plan the next stage of our campaign. The result was that Jackie and I drew up a more detailed critique of the landscape aspects of the scheme, while Ray and Richard focussed on analysing its drainage and pollution aspects. Barbara wrote to individual councillors, inviting them to view the site with her and sending them copies of her beautifully-drawn, annotated maps. We all encouraged individuals to send in objections of

their own and were delighted that so many FDP members and indeed other people did so, including Sir Andrew Motion, who feared “a horrendous act of vandalism”.

At the second committee meeting in March, it was my turn to win the slot to address the meeting, along with the parish council spokespeople. Councillors voted to reject the application since, “The cumulative visual impact of the erection of polytunnels on this site will adversely impact on the visual amenities of this special and historic and value landscape ... which has an important historic association with the Dymock Poets and their associated paths”.

As I write this, we wait to hear whether Cobrey will appeal. If it does, we shall have more work ahead of us, perhaps at a public inquiry. In the meantime, those of us who have been involved in the May Hill and polytunnels struggles would much like to extend this part of FDP activities. Of course we appreciate that the FDP will always remain primarily a literary society and of course we prefer to work with farmers, landowners and developers wherever possible. However, we should like to monitor proposals to make major changes to the landscape and to rights of way. In addition, we should like to draw up our own suggestions for strengthening the protection of the poets’ landscape and enhancing recreation opportunities in it, perhaps, through new conservation area designations and extensions to the Poets Paths network. If you would be interested in joining us in this sphere, do please get in touch with me. The struggle can be heart-breaking – but also enormous fun. And it’s heartening to think of the poets celebrating FDP victories on celestial cider up in an English heaven.

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