



THE STOUR & ORWELL SOCIETY AGM 2024

CHAIRMAN'S REVIEW

I would like to start by thanking Stephen and Billy Clark for so generously hosting us at glorious Crowe Hall, on that very rare thing: a perfect English summer's evening. When the formal business of our AGM is complete, Stephen and Billy have most kindly invited us to wander through their beautiful gardens, which I suspect will be at their summer peak.

I would also like to thank Emma Proctor-King for her magnificent contribution during the year – liaising with Members and Officers of the Society and external parties to keep the SOS show on the road. Thank you, Emma.

We do need to appoint a new Hon Secretary and fill some Committee vacancies and so I will be encouraging you to consider whether you might be able to join the Committee and help with its work at the close of the formal business.

For those of you who are less familiar with SOS, I thought it would be useful to start with a quick reminder about what we do.

SOS has now been in existence for nearly 20 years. It came into being when some of us realised that the Stour and Orwell Area of Outstanding Beauty (“AONB”) and Additional Project Area (“APA”) did not have a locally based voluntary organization to promote and stand up for our area in the way that the Dedham Vale Society had operated for the Dedham Vale AONB for most of the 20th century.

So SOS was born in 2006 and we have operated since then – light on bureaucracy but nimble and swift to respond when the AONB and APA have been under threat.



We have had two principal areas of activity over the years.

First, participating in plan-making processes (the making of local development plans and the county minerals and waste plans); engaging with the planning authorities and appearing at examinations to ensure that the interests of the area are properly taken into account.

Second, responding robustly to direct threats to the AONB and APA when they have arisen: resisting 100 acres of solar arrays on an exposed site between Holbrook Park ancient woodland and Alton Water, other insensitive development at Pin Mill, adjoining Alton Water, at Stutton and at Mistley Quay.

We have achieved a great deal along the way, including two major “landmark” achievements:

1. Sponsoring, with Suffolk County Council’s AONB Unit, a Landscape Character Assessment of the entire Shotley Peninsula. This is a thorough and professional piece of work undertaken by Alison Farmer Associates, which has subsequently been relied upon as a development management tool.
2. Participating as local consultees in the statutory process which led in 2021 to the substantial **extension** to the Suffolk Coasts & Heaths AONB to include additional areas of Freston, Holbrook, Stutton, Dodnash in Bentley, much of the South Bank of the Stour and the surface of the River Stour itself. This was a major national event and the team promoting the extension had come to our area from the Lake District National Landscape, after completing their work on that extension.

I should mention at this point that the term “Area of Outstanding National Beauty” has recently been superseded by new term “National Landscape” which brings together both AONBs and National Parks. The precise significance of this change remains to be seen, but it expressly asserts the “national” significance of the areas formerly designated as AONBs.



However, much of the area for which we are concerned (the Additional Project Area or APA) did not have express statutory protection and has accordingly been considered to be more vulnerable than the statutorily designated areas. Some of this was protected by the Dodnash Special Landscape Area, but that designation has now lapsed. But, at the same time as its lapse, there has arisen another potentially powerful new concept: “the Valued Landscape” – introduced by the Government in 2014 in the NPPF, which enjoins decision-makers to “protect and enhance” valued landscapes¹, but without specifying which landscapes would and would not qualify.

It is fair to say that this all seemed rather vague and woolly in comparison with the old Special Landscape Areas. However, at the end of last year, that position changed for the Shotley Peninsula, with the adoption of the Babergh Local Plan in November 2023. This Plan includes a new policy, LP18, which identifies the old AONB APA (essentially the whole Shotley Peninsula) as a Valued Landscape and expressly requires that regard be had to the relevant Valued Landscape Assessment (“VLA”) undertaken for decisions affecting areas so designated. A very thorough VLA for the APA was undertaken by Alison Farmer Associates in March 2020 and this is expressly cross-referenced in Policy LP18.

So, the whole of the old AONB and the whole of the APA now have a measure of statutory protection, which recognises the special character of our area - still largely a well-farmed and forested tract of country, studded with far more than its proportionate share of historic buildings (many listed), ancient woodlands and veteran trees.

Now, I want to mention two case studies which relate to SOS’s activities over the past year.

¹ Para.180a of NPPF



Erwarton Hall

The first concerns glorious Erwarton Hall, which we were privileged to see at close quarters last year for our AGM, courtesy of SOS Members Mr & Mrs Francis Kyle. Erwarton Hall and its Gatehouse are iconic – in both a Suffolk and national context. Unfortunately, at some stage, the Estate Yard was sold off from the Hall and has been the subject of a series of development proposals which, in the view of SOS, were simply not sufficiently sympathetic to the outstanding Grade I and Grade II* complex and its location within the AONB - surrounded by public rights of way and viewpoints from every point of the compass, as four lanes and a bridleway converge on this historic ensemble.

Anyway, after a number of failed attempts at negotiating a consent, an appeal was heard at Chelmo Village Hall on a freezing January day. I represented SOS and made our views known alongside Babergh DC and Mr & Mrs Kyle. The appeal was comprehensively dismissed on a variety of grounds, which was, in the view of SOS, the correct outcome.

Brockley Wood, Bentley

The second case study concerns my own home patch at Bentley. Poor old Bentley: home to an extraordinary concentration of Grade I and Grade II* Listed Buildings and more named individual ancient woodlands than any other parish in Suffolk, covering over 400 acres. And yet it is beset by problems. There is pending planning application for 100,000 solar panels and two sub-stations over 116 acres, but this case study concerns the minerals allocation for a large area of farmland immediately adjacent to Grade II* Listed Bentley Old Hall and Brockley Wood and Old Hall ancient woodlands. 10 years of sand & gravel working was just bearable, but Suffolk CC decided to wave through 17 years of inert waste process on the site as well, with a very extensive plant area including a concrete crusher very close to Bentley



Old Hall. Local people objected; the Parish Council objected and SOS also objected. I attended the Committee in Endeavour House and tried to explain to the Committee the error of their ways, including the complete failure of SCC to apply new policy LP18 or to have any regard to the VLA. They took not the blindest bit of notice.

We wrote to them to warn that judicial review would follow if they didn't concede their error. They responded by rejecting all our points out of hand. So Bentley Parish Council and the residents of Bentley Old Hall backed by other local people and SOS commenced judicial review proceedings in May. A few weeks ago, SCC approached the Claimants with its tail between its legs offering to consent to judgment, agree to the quashing of the permission and to pay the Claimants' costs, admitting that it had misdirected itself as to a material matter when granting planning permission. The Consent Order is now with the High Court awaiting sealing by the Judge. So the small man can prevail...

What does the future hold? A great deal of uncertainty. However, it seems highly likely that there will be unprecedented pressures for development: for house building, energy and energy transmission development - and Suffolk is likely to be at the eye of the storm.

We need to ensure that decision-making is properly undertaken and that important factors are not overlooked. Our landscape has taken millennia to reach its present state. Its special qualities attract tourists and visitors from far and wide - who rightly see it as an important recreational resource. But it will need local people to defend it and so we warmly encourage your continued support for SOS.

Tom Hill KC



STOUR AND ORWELL SOCIETY

Chairman, The Stour & Orwell Society

25th June 2024