

# KENT FEDERATION of Amenity Societies

SNEZANA LAWRENCE

## *The 24th Autumn Conference*

AT WITHERSDANE HALL – WYE COLLEGE – KENT  
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I WENT TO THE CONFERENCE IN WYE during September, as a representative of the Dover Society. The theme of the Conference was 'A Sustainable Kent' with talks which covered many issues of the main theme.

When I now look back the first thoughts that come to me are about dogs and manure. Oh, you will say, how awful. But not at all. I will put dogs and manure in context soon enough

We were welcomed by **Mrs Joan Clark-Hall**, who prepared labels with names. This, I must admit, helped, especially in cases like mine. It was the first time I have ever been to Wye, let alone to a KFAS conference.

The schedule for the conference was very tight and very well planned, thanks to our Chairman, **Jack Woolford**, who is also a Chairman of the KFAS. After his welcoming speech we were then addressed by the Chairman of Kent County Council, **Mr Peter Morgan**, who said he welcomed any suggestion for the improvement of life and amenities in Kent.

He reminded us about the functions of Amenity Societies, and here we met with the one of the promised 'dogs'. These

societies, Mr Morgan said, may be characterised as being

the watchdog,  
the warning-dog  
and the wish-dog

of the local communities.

Above all, he has described our federation as:

**K** – caring  
**F** – friendly  
**A** – active  
**S** – social

Next **Keith Nicholson** from Tonbridge Borough Council gave a talk on Material Planning Considerations.

His role within the Council is to translate the wishes of local communities to Planning authorities. He looked at a range of questions to which planning authorities need to seek an answer. First and most important is the question of deciding which considerations are material within a planning process.

Coordination of global, national and international and local governments and societies was discussed.

**Elizabeth Melling**, who was for a long time a Membership Secretary of the KFAS (a role that I have proudly acquired at the last KFAS AGM), was then given a presentation on her retirement from the committee. We were then addressed by **Mr Bernard Gambril**, who is a representative of the Union Railways Ltd. which has recently become a part of the London & Continental, a company which sets out a plan to local groups but can give information on and other rail links which lead from it.

Mr Gambril is apparently also an old friend of the KFAS and has on several occasions addressed the Federation as a representative of his company, in charge of community relations.

London & Continental has already set up a plan by which in early 1997 they should acquire the Royal Assent, and by 2003 the Channel Tunnel Rail Link should open. The company cannot consult with local groups but can give information on the developments. Local groups should consult with local planning authorities which will be granting (or not) planning permission to London & Continental. However, Mr Gambril made it clear that he would listen to any suggestions from such groups as Amenity Societies.

We learnt that the British Government has made a contract with the company that they will not subsidise any other rail link until 2031; a line which London & Continental are building would be also capable of carrying freight. Both factors mean that any other proposal on the construction or improvement of the rail network in Kent would not get the support from the Government until that year and makes it unlikely that any company can meet that challenge. This development considerably decreases the danger of yet another rail freight link being built in Kent during the period.

I asked Mr Gambril whether there would be cheaper tickets for travellers joining the train at Ashford. Mr Gambril was not informed on the subject.

In the afternoon we visited **Ashford International Station**. We saw an enormously big and well built car park with, from 1st October, a charge of £4 per day per car.

The station tour was led by stewards who explained few important points to us: for example, if you happen to miss the train in Waterloo, you can tell their staff and they will keep your seat for you until Ashford. How to get to Ashford from London, before the train, I did not grasp, but presumably this works for people who know that they are going to be late!!

The first class lounge with the bar and bathrooms costs £300 return. If you pay this much, you can be late whenever you like. They will even pay your entry to the museums, etc. Standard class is now around £80.

We went to see the signalling centre - which had a lot of space for expansion. We were, somewhat unwillingly, given an explanation of the basics of the computer system, which, if it fails will fail in the safe mode (that was met with all-round approval!!).

I was very impressed with the station. However, when I asked one of the ladies what she thought of it she pointed to too shiny floors and automatic round doors and unmarked beginning of the moving stairs, which are all, indeed, possible hazards for some people. Definitely, automatic doors proved straight away to be a hazard - people kept pushing them and every time this happened the door would beep and then stop for a moment.

When we went back, a member from the Otford Society - **Mr T. M. Corson**, brought up the question of preservation of local communities and societies as an important issue - at least as important as preservation and planning of physical structures. He pointed out that this has to be looked at by societies like ours, especially in this age of multimedia and world wide computer networks.

**Jacqueline Elton** of the Central Rail Link gave a courageous talk about the failure of her company to persuade the

12 planning authorities of Kent to build a new freight link. She was sad that they did not succeed, and not only because this meant the abandonment of the whole project on which she had worked for some time, but because she firmly believed that their freight link would take around 35% of the freight from the M20, and this would, in a long run be very beneficial for Kent. Some lively and emotional discussion followed.

We learned from **Lord Berkeley** that this problem of taking freight from the roads, may be solved by the company he is leading - Piggyback Consortium. Their approach was much less drastic for the Kent countryside. The improvements and changes on the existing lines would be made gradually over the years. This was a prime example of the 'do what you can, start with what you have' approach.

**Harley Sherlock**, an architect from London and the author of *Cities are good for us* gave us an enthusiastic talk with the theme '*Cities to the Rescue*'. He spoke on redevelopment and revitalisation of cities which would stop development of housing in the countryside. The whole idea is based on preposition that cities need more people to work properly - to support local enterprise like corner shops, pubs etc. He has been supporting one in Islington, London.

After this speech, our Chairman, Jack, introduced our President **Lord Astor of Hever**. We heard how he once was designated as being Lord Astor of Heaven (thankfully not yet, so he said). We were all very glad to have him among us and to hear an inspiring and thoughtful talk about progress being made in Kent in regard to the sensitivity of environmental issues. His talk, in many points, made a well informed conclusion on the issues that were discussed during the conference.

And so, after few drinks at the bar, we were all ready to go and in the darkness and solitude of our rooms, reflect on the questions raised during the day and prepare for the next morning.

Early on Sunday, we were greeted by **Prof. Brian May** of The Ramsgate Society, who gave a report on the developments in Ramsgate and on his society's doings. We learned that The Ramsgate Society is just over thirty years old. It is primarily concerned with conservation matters and issues a quarterly newsletter.

Then, we encountered the 'Robin and manure' story:

Once upon a time there was, apparently, a robin dying of cold somewhere in Kent. A farmer, passing by with his horses, horses, saw the robin, half-dead on the frozen land. He took the robin and put him on top of the freshly produced horse manure. Heat from it gradually warmed the robin and he got better. He stood up and started cheerfully to sing. Hearing his song, a fox came from behind, grabbed the robin, and ate it.

The moral of this story, if you haven't guessed yet, is that it is not always the enemies who put you in the manure, and not always your friends who get you out of it.

We then met **Mrs Davis Hughes** from The Oaten Hill Society, Canterbury, who talked on the 'Theme Pubs' that are asking for licences in Canterbury. These pubs are a real menace, so we heard, and Mrs Hughes did not spare time or energy to investigate more of them at the height of their activities (usually about midnight) to be able to tell us all about it. She lived to tell a tale and warned societies to be alert. A bit of heated discussion followed.

The City of Rochester Society was represented by **Peter Downtown** a member of the KFAS committee. This society is, like that of Ramsgate, about thirty years old. It has 420 members and was heavily involved in getting the funding for the building of a tunnel which was to take heavy load city traffic from the city centre. Unfortunately, we also learned from this example what bad planning is, as they did not build up linking roads leading to and from the tunnel. On the good side, was the number of their postcards being sold at the conference.

Having had reports from the societies, we came to the conclusion that people want to maintain the towns in which they live as 'living places' not to let them become museums, or 'theme' places. This is perhaps one of the 'sustainable' issues – not only that the countryside needs this approach, but cities need it as well.

**Clive Potter** of Wye College told us a lot about Britain countryside after the Common Agricultural Policy. We were shown how the Common Agricultural Policy did not cause degradation of countryside, decline in management and loss of features, but it certainly hastened these changes.

To try to prevent this overall downgrading of the English countryside, a programme of Agri-Environmental Schemes was put forward by the Government in 1992-95. Most of the money from these schemes goes to Environmentally Sensitive Areas. AEP (Agri-Environmental Schemes) Policy is:

- to 'inject' new money to protect farmland and landscape
- to investigate potential of pan-European Union to tackling problems of this nature.

At the end of the talk we came to the inevitable questions which showed us how many of these changes actually depend on us personally. We were reminded of two crucial points:

What sort of countryside do we want?

Would we be prepared to pay for it?

**Elizabeth Street** from KCC held an interesting talk for which she insisted she did not represent KCC but gave her own opinion. We were, through a sort of a workshop, introduced to the issues of human or social and economic factors which overlap with environmental ones within the planning process.

This was interesting also in connection with the project of another KCC member who was present at the conference –

**Miss Debbie Bartlett**, a Landscape Manager of Kent County Property Services. She could not address the conference but she brought some interesting information about the project that is currently under way – named *Jigsaw*. This project consists of local population investigating the natural beauties of the locality in which they live and promoting it to the KCC. It would then incorporate this knowledge in its planning strategy. – Miss Bartlett still needs many coordinators in the area – Dover and all (or almost all) the surrounding villages included. If you wish to participate, or if you'd like to hear more about the project, you could contact her at the KCC in Maidstone

**John Gibbs**, who until two years ago worked for Pfizer as their Environmental Co-ordinator, gave us a talk about Environmental Issues and Initiatives in large companies.

Although by this time we were all a little tired, this lively and inspiring talk brought us all back to Earth. We learned that only 3% of UK companies have a policy on environmental issues and only 250 CBI members out of 10 000 signed their Environmental Commitment.

This is, however, all to be changed, hopefully, by the opinion shapers (media, pressure groups, etc.) now influencing lenders who have started to determine which businesses are environmentally unsafe, and stopped lending to them.

Finally, to summarise my recollections of this colorful and dynamic conference. I found it extremely educational; excellently planned and the group interaction was beneficial to us all. I would recommend to any member of The Dover Society (and not only because of the quality of the catering) who wishes to learn more about the work of the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies and meet people who are involved with the various local and government planning authorities, attend the conference next year.