

Autumn Conference

"Water, Water Everywhere..."

Jack Woolford

Hosted by the Weald of Kent Protection Society the KFAS Autumn Conference at Bethersden on Sept 22nd could not have been more topical. It was also untypical in being addressed by no less than six experts who, instead of delivering seven opinions, were virtually unanimous.

Graham Warren of the Environment Agency said that Kent's recent flooding was unprecedented since records began in the 1760s, yet in the 1980s and early 90s hosepipe bans were the topic in a ten-year period of unprecedented drought. Experts had warned of a prospective climate of increasing extremes. Three quarters of Kent's low rainfall was lost by evaporation. Water resources should not be taken for granted, good housekeeping was essential. Half was abstracted for industry, agriculture and public supplies. The rest was left for nature - springs, streams, wetland areas.

Kent mainly depended on ground water from wells and boreholes from the North Downs. Rainfall income was beyond control but rainfall expenditure could be regulated by flood control and water supply reservoirs, and by controls on consumption. People were now prepared to pay more for environmental maintenance but demand was rising with economic growth, population growth, more domestic water appliances and gardens, and lower house occupancy. Although metering, leakage control and more prudent habits reduced consumption the trend was upwards by 1% per annum. In the next decade the Environment Agency would improve flows in the Darent, the Little and Great Stours, and the Dour.

Climate change had always been with us via vulcanicity, orbital wobbles and

asteroid impacts as well as man-made changes, notably in CO₂ emissions which had caused temperatures to rise especially since 1920. Rainfall had fluctuated less. The consensus of informed opinion for the SE was wetter winters and hotter, drier summers. Abstraction would have to decrease because evaporation losses would increase. Consequently, so must water recycling.

Dr Elizabeth Street, formerly of KCC and now a consultant and member of the Kent Flood Defence Committee, said that planners had been wrongly blamed for last winter's floods for building too many houses on the Upper Medway Catchment Area flood plain, which stretched into E. Sussex. From the 1970s the Environment Agency had stipulated that all houses should be two-storeyed in case of flooding. Property owners were also responsible for their own flood protection but local authorities had frequently refused planning permissions on flood plains. Unfortunately the barrier provided at Yalding could not cope with 100 cubic metres of water per second which was unprecedented. Climate change could have been to blame. Only a dam, which would be very expensive, would be adequate. Land left as formerly, for winter meadows (and ice-skating) would help.

Graham Setterfield, a non-executive director of Mid Kent Water, spoke of the national perspective of water resources. Water and sanitation differentiated civilisation from the Third World. Here in the UK regulation was strong. Since the privatisation in 1989, the Environmental Agency, OFWAT (economics) and the Drinking Water Inspectorate had strengthened regulation of water quantity,

8 quality and waste. The twin tracks of demand management and resource development had to be balanced and because developing new resources was very difficult, the priority had to be demand management because there was not any more water. This meant metering and tariffs, 10,000 meters had been installed since April 2001. In 2000, OFWAT had reduced prices by 15% which may have given a wrong signal. Restrictions, though disliked by suppliers, were available. The Bewl reservoir was an environmental improvement but took 25 years to achieve. Leakage control was the highest in the world and public tolerance of hose-pipe bans was very low. People bathed rather than showered or showered for hours, bought multi-bathroomed houses and made the 'instant' water-hungry gardens popularised on TV. The government lacked a policy on water. Ashford's housing projections were frightening.

Richard Alderton, Strategic Planner for Ashford Borough Council, said that although the government was consulting very widely with a host of authorities and interests, there was no planned figure for Ashford's 'sustainable' growth or its location, but with Milton Keynes, Stansted and Thameside, it was one of the hot spots

to accommodate the envisaged growth of the South East Region. Water, as well as land, was crucial but the government spoke with forked tongue. Reduction of the cost of water was a recent example. Ashford Borough Council would like to be in control and had commissioned many environmental, economic and social studies to be completed by Xmas 2001. Then the Ashford population must be asked what they would like, bearing in mind the changes of the last twenty years. There would inevitably be a great increase of waste water. Designated AsONB, and SSSIs, etc, were untouchable. The flood plain defences had worked extraordinarily well against the recent storms, and the resultant lakeside walks offered an alternative footpath to pedestrians. However, weather appeared to be getting worse. We must therefore use less water and use run-offs more sensibly.

Other speakers for Mid Kent Water and the Kent Wildlife Trust concurred. The agreed scenario was of increasing consumption, increasingly uncertain supplies and the necessity for strict control of consumption. There was no national policy and to have permitted the recent reduction of the cost of water was criminally irresponsible.

The October Meeting

reported by Tessa George

At the first indoor meeting of the Autumn, on October 15th, we had three speakers. For the first part of the evening, James Summerfield and the Town Mayor, Diane Smallwood, collaborated with talks on the subject of 'Town and Gown'. After the interval, the tenth Earl of Guilford gave a talk about his family and his estate, Waldershare Park.

'TOWN & GOWN' THE ROLE OF DOVER TOWN COUNCIL BY JAMES SUMMERFIELD

As Deputy Town Clerk, James Summerfield supports and deputises for the Town Clerk, Robert Bailey, who, as the

Proper Officer (a legal term) of the Council, is under a statutory duty to ensure that all the Town Council's functions are properly performed in accordance with the relevant law. He is required, for example, to give appropriate notice of Town Council meetings and of