

**PROOF OF EVIDENCE OF  
STEDHAM WITH IPING PARISH COUNCIL**

To: Robert Neil Parry: Inspector

**1. Introduction**

My name is Jane Crawford and I am Clerk of Stedham with Iping Parish Council, a position I have held since July 1999. Prior to this date I was a member of the Parish Council for twenty years, which included a five year period as Chairman.

I have lived in West Sussex nearly all my life and within the parish of Stedham with Iping since 1972. I claim a familiarity with this part of the County that is probably greater than that of the experts and outside advisers who have given evidence on behalf of West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) and Chichester District Council (CDC). And many of our parish councillors, whom I am representing here, have a greater claim than I do.

I am speaking with the full authority of our Parish Council and we would respectfully request that before you reach your conclusions, you read our Council's letter to Defra of 25 February 2003; the joint letter from the parishes of the Western Weald to Defra of 14 September 2007, our Council's objection/representation to Defra of 22 September 2007 and our Council's letter to you of 4 February 2008. (Documents: 1, 2, 3 and 4).

**2. Our Position**

You will realise that the views of our Parish Council have changed since those expressed in 2003. Our Council had always been content with its AONB status and its links to the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and we were happy to support the status quo, in other words retention of the AONB versus substitution with a National Park covering a broadly similar area.

After your report became public knowledge in July 2007, in common with others in the Western Weald, we began to understand more clearly the effects of the WSSCC and CDC's stance. Up to that point, County and District Councillors had directed their arguments on the extra expense and loss of democratic control that a NP would entail, and mobilised opposition accordingly. They had not made it clear that there was to be a break-up of the AONB in pursuance of the Councils' 'chalk-ridge' policy that entailed a smaller NP, which left the distinct possibility of the remaining AONB being jeopardised. It also emerged that whether or not to reaffirm AONB status depended entirely on the wishes of the Secretary of State and could take years to implement if it happened at all.

Our Council reconsidered its position and decided that to support the original SDNP with boundaries as initially drawn would offer the best means of protecting the Western Weald. It also considered that the revised boundaries as currently proposed would cause a dangerous loss of cohesion between the Downs and the Weald, as well as a multitude of attendant problems for those living in the area.

Some of these matters are referred to in more detail later in this proof.

### **3. Proofs of Evidence from WSCC and CDC**

We have seen the joint WSCC and CDC Proofs of Evidence that were prepared by Moira Hankinson of Hankinson Duckett dated February and March 2008, which you have heard. We assume that these reports have been approved and subscribed to by both WSCC and CDC.

#### **3.1 Nature of Evidence**

This evidence has been produced so clinically and “rationally” that it lacks any acknowledgement of the special qualities of this landscape, or any desire to do so. It is a negative report without feeling, enthusiasm or understanding, and says more about those putting forward these reports with their essential disinterest in the Western Weald, than the subject it is supposed to address.

This is curious because the inherent beauty of the Western Weald remains to be seen in large extent by any visitor with open eyes, as many have already described to you in detail.

#### **3.2 Omissions**

The Proof of Evidence omits reference to the letters and representations that the Wealden Parish Councils and residents have made to Defra since July 2007. Had these representations been taken into account, para 2.1.2 of Proof for Submission 1007/849/2/1 (HDA ref: 373.4) re Topic 3: Boundary Petersfield to Pulborough dated February 2008 would NOT have stated:

*“There continues to be no support for inclusion of the Wealden area in the SDNP”.*

Within our parish and to my knowledge elsewhere within the Western Weald there is outrage at this claim.

But it is perhaps more astonishing that on 20 March 2008, the Leader of WSCC wrote to Fernhurst Parish Council to say “*I am not at all clear as to why the statement you refer to has been attributed to the County Council at the Inquiry*”. (Document 5)

In other words the County Council, on the one hand, tells the Inspector there is no support for the inclusion of the Western Weald yet, on the other, does not understand why it is considered that these words have been attributed to WSCC.

#### **3.3 Parish Councils’ Expressed Views**

We submit page 12 of the Midhurst & Petworth Observer Newspaper of 3 April 2008 (Document 6) which sets out in letters the views of several parishes and refers to the recent meeting with the Leader of West Sussex County Council on 31 January 2008. We also submit notes taken at that meeting by some of the attendees. (Document 7)

In addition, we submit minutes and notes taken at an earlier meeting held at Redford (Woolbeding PC) on 21 January 2008 attended by Mr Kieran Stigant, the County Council's Director of Environment and Development, who was the main speaker. (Document 8)

WSCC and CDC's Proof of Evidence 1007/2/3 (HDA ref: 373.4) of March 2008 re Topic 6: Western Weald, is only cognisant of the evidence given by the parties referred to in paragraph 1.2.2. All the views of the parishes and residents made known to Defra are omitted.

### **3.4 Rationale for Defining "Recreational Opportunities"**

May we refer to paragraph 2.4.23 of this Proof on Topic 6 and the sentence quoted from Defra that AONBs "did not offer the same opportunities for public recreation" compared with national parks? Do we conclude that one side of the boundary offers opportunities for public recreation, and the other side does not?

The AONB in which our Parish is situated offers the attraction of numerous public footpaths and bridleways through fields, woodlands, commons, along the river and across the hillsides on the north side of the Rother Valley.

What is the significant difference between those recreational opportunities south of the proposed boundary compared with those of the north? We can suggest none; nor do we accept the arguments put forward by WSCC and CDC's Proof of Evidence attempting to distinguish adversely the Rother Valley in the north from their more favoured areas in the south.

There is no mention of the height of the hills to the north and spectacular views afforded across the valley to the Downs to the south. These views are as wonderful as those from the Downs themselves.

### **3.5 Inconsistent Rationale for excluding Western Weald**

Paragraph 2.5.11 is patronising about the western Weald "*...(it) is beautiful, worthy of AONB status, but has a less distinctive character*". It seems that our County and District Councils do not see, or are incapable of seeing, the beauty of our Parish and of other Parishes in the Weald. Has no-one concerned with the WSCC/CDC Proof of Evidence driven or walked or ridden down towards Rogate from the north or likewise explored North to South, East to West through the other areas north of the proposed boundary?

Our Parish Council's letters and those of residents have addressed the cultural links with the Downs. Their severance, which your first Inquiry report envisaged, is potentially destructive of the environment because of the different standards of control that will be applied.

Severance will also unnecessarily complicate the administration of this Parish and will create a two-tier system of management.

This is because the proposed boundary line: (a) excludes that part of our Parish which is north of the A272, and (b) creates another, and unnecessary division to the south of

the A272 by following the Minsted Road rather than our Parish boundary which is along the stream about 500 metres to the east of Minsted Road.

The draft exclusion of the Western Weald has important implications for our Parish as our Council's response to Defra of September makes clear.

While Iping Common and part of Stedham Common – the Local Nature Reserve - are included in the Park, there is no recognition in the proposals for reducing the boundary that the heathland actually extends right across to Midhurst town and is being severed by an arbitrary line.

Stedham Common itself has two other parts:

- The second part is a Site of Nature Conservation Interest on the east side of Minsted Road and is omitted from the proposed Park. There are public footpaths all round this Common including the Serpent Trail that crosses it.
  - The third part of Stedham Common is on the north side of the A272 and is also omitted from the park. It abuts the village of Stedham and the “walking bus” route from the main road across the common to Stedham School is a major part of the School Travel Plan. .
- a) At Quag's Corner there is a rare mire and a similar bog in a nearby wood on the Minsted Estate which are both omitted from the proposed Park.
  - b) To the north of the parish, and also omitted, is part of Woolbeding Common on which one of our parishioners, a commoner, grazes cattle.

Architectural and historic aspects:

- a) There are 32 listed buildings in the parish all of which (except Fitzhall) are outside the proposed boundary of the SDNP.
- b) Stedham village comprises a conservation area.
- c) Both Churches in Stedham and Iping are listed.
- d) Iping Bridge is an Ancient Monument.

### **3.6 Parish Projects and Opportunities for Public Recreation**

- a) We are represented on the Management Committee of the Iping and Stedham Commons Local Nature Reserve.
- b) We have organised scrub clearance work parties on Stedham Common.
- c) We are active in promoting improved cycling facilities in the Midhurst area and are a founder member of Midhurst Area Cycling (MAC).
- d) Our Council, on behalf of MAC, commissioned Sustrans (the sustainable transport charity whose flagship project is the national cycle-way network) to do a study on cycling in the Midhurst area.
- e) We support MAC in clearing the public path along the A272 between Stedham and Midhurst in order that it may be designated as a dual use path under the Cycle Tracks Act 1984 to enable our children to bicycle safely to Midhurst.
- f) Our Council is in close contact with the South Downs Joint Committee and their volunteers to make sure that all the public rights of way in our parish are kept in a fit state.

#### **4 Summary**

As a parish of 675 electors we recognise that we may be of little economic or demographic importance to West Sussex County and Chichester District Councils – a position we share with most of the rural parishes north of the Downs. WSCC (and CDC) must be more concerned with the large urban areas to our east and south – from Horsham and Crawley with Gatwick airport, and along the south coast from Shoreham to Chichester.

The boundary which WSCC and CDC are promoting, i.e. the chalk face only, will increase further the isolation of those “north of the Downs”. This would be particularly so if, as we understand it, planning control for a reduced size park would be retained by the Park authority, but not if the Park included the Western Weald when delegation to the District would be involved.

We believe the stated aims and arguments of WSCC and CDC to be disingenuous and that whatever else they are seeking to protect it most certainly is not the Western Weald. Our parish, as with other parishes in the Western Weald, do not wish to leave their fate to the vague hope of some new, diminished AONB but prefer to seek inclusion in the South Downs National Park with the northern boundary as originally proposed, for all the reasons given and referred to in this evidence.

Where WSCC and CDC have failed to do so, may we please impress upon you the concern of our parishioners and other similar settlements in the Rother Valley?