

Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee

19 September 2008

7. FOREST OF BOWLAND AONB VISIT

Background

1. Who Went and Why

The suggestion that Malvern Hills AONB Partnership might be able to learn something useful from the Forest of Bowland AONB about working with local landowners had been discussed at JAC meetings in late 2007 and early 2008. These meetings had supported the idea of a visit to the Forest of Bowland. The opportunity to participate in the visit had been offered to all members of the JAC and in the event three of them, Bryan Smith, John Raine and Diane Rayner, took up the invitation together with Paul Esrich the AONB Unit Manager.

Summary

2. The Political Situation in the Forest of Bowland

Forest of Bowland has much in common with Malvern Hills AONB. Its land is in more than one county, Lancashire and North Yorkshire in their case, though in terms of both area and active interest, Lancashire is clearly the dominant force. More particularly this divide also splits it between two Regional Development Agencies. It has six district councils.

Like Malvern Hills it is the nearest 'rural scenic escape' from heavily populated conurbations which are under the jurisdiction of different local authorities, i.e. Merseyside and Greater Manchester in their case.

It is perhaps significant that the Forest of Bowland AONB office is actually based in Preston alongside Lancashire County Council, some distance from the AONB itself.

3. The Ecological Situation of the Forest of Bowland

The Forest of Bowland AONB covers 803 square kilometres (almost 8 times the size of Malvern Hills AONB). Thirteen percent of this is designated as SSSI. The extensive heather moorlands are designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Birds Directive because of their importance as a habitat for upland birds including grouse and hen harriers.

4. The Economic Situation of the Forest of Bowland

The Forest of Bowland AONB has a population of 16,000. Though it is not too far from the headquarters of Lancashire County Council in Preston, it is more than one hour's commuting distance from the major centres of employment in



Greater Manchester and Merseyside. Local house prices were quoted and are certainly at least as high as in the Malvern Hills AONB and probably higher. This was said to be an important determinant of the future of the area and of the approach to its management. The prices and nature of the food served at the local pub seemed to confirm this general air of affluence. As affluence is certainly not the first descriptor which comes to mind when describing the adjacent town of Clitheroe it would seem that the AONB does, one way or the other, add to the prosperity of the area.

The villages in the AONB are of two types. Some are largely estate owned tenanted properties whilst others are largely owner occupied. There are several very big estates, belonging to, for example the Duke of Westminster, the Duchy of Lancaster and United Utilities. Significant factors in local estate management include the preservation of grouse shoots and maintenance of water catchment areas.

5. Recent History

The defining step in the recent developments within the Forest of Bowland occurred in 1999 when the AONB and (presumably) Lancashire County Council recognised that farm incomes were falling and that this was threatening the ability of farmers to maintain the environmental standards of the AONB. This led to the creation of the Bowland Initiative.

5.1. The Bowland Initiative

This was not actually part of the AONB organisation. It was however strongly supported by the AONB who in effect worked alongside it.

It was launched as one of two national pilot schemes (the other was Bodmin) when it was becoming clear that Europe's Common Agriculture Policy needed to be given more of an environmental bias but it had not yet been decided how best this could be done. It was thus really a time-limited experiment. It obtained the majority of its funding from Europe and from MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries). Its objective was to explore ways of generating new income on farms and it divided its work between business advice/support and land management advice, for example, in securing the uptake of agri-environment support schemes. It took on 6 full-time staff which included one person from MAFF. There is no doubt that Lancashire County Council, which is generally perceived to be a successful and progressive council, were largely instrumental in bringing all this about and they led the Bowland Initiative Partnership.

The leader of the unit – John Wellbank - is an interesting character. He trained as a chartered land surveyor and was



managing an estate in North Yorkshire when he was hired specifically “because he could talk to landowners” and would thus establish the ethos of “we are the people you can talk to if you have a problem.”

It was deemed to have been such a success when its time expired that Lancashire County Council then recreated it and expanded its remit to cover all of rural Lancashire under the title of Lancashire Rural Futures. Thus the Bowland Initiative and Lancashire Rural Futures were really one continuous initiative insofar as the Forest of Bowland AONB were concerned.

5.2. Lancashire Rural Futures

At this time the economic background had changed because the Common Agricultural Policy had been reformed. The team was increased and split 50:50 between environmental specialists and business advisers. The environmental staff helped to attract approximately £1m pa. in environmental schemes such as woodland grants and stewardship schemes.

The business advisers were drawn from a variety of backgrounds including farming, the legal profession, marketing and planning and in practice they found that their biggest roles were to assist in planning applications, negotiating with highways, obtaining market research (from commercial bodies) and preparing marketing plans. The main funder of the schemes they were involved with was the North West Development Agency who provided approximately £0.8m pa, but there was also some European objective 2 money.

Between them the Bowland Initiative and Lancashire Rural Futures are calculated to have created 1,200 new jobs, got 17,000 hectares into stewardship and brought in £26m capital investment. They worked with 2,500 clients.

Gradually bureaucracy took a toll on this initiative as more and more parameters had to be monitored on behalf of the funders until approximately 1/3 of the unit's time was being consumed by monitoring these 36 parameters.

Eventually in March 2008 the funding ran out,- because it had been anticipated that the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) would take over from that date. Unfortunately there has been a delay in the availability of RDPE funding (now expected to start sometime in 2009) and so Lancashire Rural Futures ceased to be a local authority funded unit and was cut down to a rump of business advisers who currently seek (and apparently find) work on a more commercial basis.



5.3. Sustainable Bowland

This is a separate initiative launched by the AONB itself. It is focussed on sustainable tourism.

The AONB approached the Europarc Federation with a view to obtaining a European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. This Charter is awarded to protected areas that are following a best practice approach in delivering tourism that takes account of the needs of the environment, local communities and the local economy. The charter approach ensures that organisations, local people and businesses are working together to protect the area whilst at the same time increasing opportunities for visitors to discover and enjoy it.

This required that they produce a business plan and partners. The plan, described as 'grandiose' was produced with the assistance of external consultants. It enabled the AONB to become the first protected area in England to obtain such a charter,- and one of only 25 across Europe.

This enabled a number of businesses to enhance their environmental branding. Those that obtained gold, silver or bronze awards under the Green Tourism Business Scheme were given the opportunity to become members of the Forest of Bowland Sustainable Tourism Network. They display this as their commitment to work with the AONB and other tourism businesses in the area. These quality assured businesses encourage consumers to contribute towards the area's visitor payback scheme, the Bowland Tourism Environment Fund that puts money directly into environmental projects in the area. Two of the businesses in this network were visited.

6. Developments Visited

Four developments which have in some way benefited from these initiatives were visited.

6.1. Slaidburn Village Hall

This delightful new village hall on the edge of the green in the conservation village of Slaidburn overlooks the river Hodder. It cost £1.5m and is much bigger and built to a far higher standard than the normal village hall, and actually enhances the appearance of the village. It is run as a venue for conferences, courses, weddings etc. During the latter part of 2007, its first year, it took over £30,000, (which, though it seems an awful lot for a village hall, would not actually be enough to pay interest charges if the money had been borrowed). Its income is still growing rapidly. It was funded predominantly by EU Regional Development Fund, Lancashire Environmental Fund, Lancashire Economic Partnership and Landfill Communities Fund. The extent of contribution from a



very wealthy local resident was not clear.

6.2. Poor'sland Commercial Units, Slaidburn

Poor'sland is a charitable trust which owned a starter farm in Slaidburn. In 1999 when the last farmer retired it was clear that the farm was no longer financially viable. The Trust therefore converted the big barn into eight small and very attractive commercial units by 'mobilising the generous grants available and by using some of the funds realised by the sale of the farmhouse'. These units have now all been let to small businesses including hairdressing, landscape architecture and environmental consultancy.

6.3. Clough Bottom

This is a very diversified farm down a single track road. It includes several self-catering cottages, a management training centre (including army style assault course and facilities for blindfolded driving of Land Rovers with reversed steering boxes!) plus a catering facility for both of these facilities and a mature tree nursery. The farmer and his wife are clearly very entrepreneurial and might have done all this diversification anyway. However it became clear the Bowland Initiative/Lancashire Rural Futures had helped with planning and had at least encouraged him along the way.

This business is now part of the Forest of Bowland Sustainable Tourism Network and thus widely advertised.

6.4. Bowland Wild Boar Farm

This was an extraordinary place to find tucked away in the middle of an AONB. Although the farm does stock wild boar they are some distance from the part we visited which was basically a pure visitor attraction with a large car park, a zoo/menagerie, various rides for children powered by tractors, a café and play area. It was busy, particularly with parties of children in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon in half term. It employs four full-time and three part-time staff plus 'several girls in the café'. The proprietor acknowledged the considerable help he had received from LRF to source grants, for example on renewable energy, and to deal with planning applications etc etc.

He too is part of the Forest of Bowland Sustainable Tourism Network and thus widely advertised.

7. Conclusions

There is little doubt that economic development features higher on the agenda of Forest of Bowland AONB than one would expect according to the basic charter of AONBs. This appears to have been triggered by the realisation in the late 1990s that



falling incomes was making it difficult for farmers to maintain the high environmental quality that the AONB aspired to.

Working in partnership with others, (most notably Lancashire County Council), and drawing on the significant grant funding regimes that have existed at different times a number of ground-breaking local initiatives have been set up to encourage entrepreneurialism within the AONB.

Although it is difficult to tell just how successful overall this has been there are certainly some highly successful examples and the AONB does generally look more prosperous than the surrounding area.

An unusually high proportion of people with unconventional backgrounds for AONBs, such as businessmen, estate managers, lawyers, as well as more traditional farmers and land managers have worked on these initiatives. Probably this has helped to create an entrepreneurial ethos.

8. Potential for Application in Malvern Hills

The driving force for all three of the initiatives which have played so prominent a part in the recent development of the Forest of Bowland AONB was the recognition that environmental standards would slip unless more wealth was created within the AONB.

Therefore, in considering the relevance of the approaches described herein to the Malvern Hills AONB it would clearly be sensible to check whether or not there is a comparable sentiment in this area. A suggested first step would be to question local landowners and bodies involved in promoting economic development (such as Business Link) to find out what they think about this.

Another prerequisite for success in the Forest of Bowland appears to be the wholehearted commitment of a weighty local authority alongside the active support of many other key partners. These are difficult times for our local authorities and in any case they may have other priorities /interests. It may be useful to talk to both Worcestershire and Herefordshire Councils on this subject.

The availability of funds from the Regional Development Agency and from Europe has also been central to the success of many initiatives in the Forest of Bowland AONB.

9. Acknowledgements

Don McKay (AONB Unit leader) and Mike Pugh (AONB Tourism Officer) both gave up a whole day to make sure the team from Malvern Hills benefited to the maximum from this



most interesting visit. Our grateful thanks are due to them. John Wellbank (Project Manager with Lancashire Rural Futures) is also thanked for the time and enthusiasm he gave to us.

Recommendation

The Committee is recommended to:

- 1. Note the report and ask any relevant questions.**
- 2. Consider whether lessons and/or approaches from the Forest of Bowland could be relevant to the Malvern Hills AONB.**

