

## Should an exception be made for Latchmore?

The Friends of Latchmore believe that it should. Latchmore, unlike the other sites that have been 'restored' as part of the HLSS Wetland Restoration Scheme, is used every day by walkers, riders, and visitors to the Forest. Two car parks make it easy for everyone, including the elderly and young families, to enjoy. And the NFNPA recognised this when it designated Latchmore as an area of both recreation and conservation. Unlike other wet areas, hidden in the deeper parts of the Forest, this one is well-known, well-used and well-loved, just as it is. It was a beauty spot more than 50 years ago when Colin Tubbs wrote about it, and it still is today.

It is also the most important lawn for commoners' ponies and cattle in the Northern Forest, with as many as 200 stock at a time grazing there and drinking from the stream.

At Latchmore (where the work would have been carried out by now if The Friends of Latchmore had not challenged the project) an incredible array of fauna and flora has been found, from a grasshopper thought to be extinct in the New Forest, to 80 species of birds, many on the red list, including nesting kingfisher, curlew, cuckoo, lapwing, snipe, redstart and spotted flycatcher. In the stream (considered by many to be the best for fish in the Forest) sea trout, eel, lamprey, bullhead, roach and dace are to be found. There are also newts, frogs, toads, smooth snake, adder, grass snake, lizards and dragon/damselflies, including the highly endangered Southern Damselfly. Plants include the rare Pillwort - the list goes on and on...

Most of the species were not known to be present before the Friends of Latchmore started doing surveys - the Forestry Commission did not even know there was a large pond adjacent to the stream, and this is now classified as a Priority Pond and must not be damaged.

This raises a very serious question: is the precious New Forest being looked after according to the highest standards? You might be forgiven for asking this question when you see some of the 'restorations' that

have taken place in our area recently (photographs of some of them were posted on the Friends of Latchmore website on 24 June and 20 January 2015, and 26 July 2014.) <http://friendsoflatchmore.org/>

Ditchend has been re-worked every year since the new channel was dug in 2011. It is now dry from Spring to late Autumn (with heather bales already protruding yet again) - unless there has been heavy rain, in which case the new channel flash floods, carrying the thousands of tons of imported materials downstream. Stagnant pools are a feature, and the once magnificent holly tree is now a sad sight, a mere skeleton, left standing in a pool of water after the works.

Broomy/Amberslade Bottom: The beautiful bluebell wood in Broomy Inclosure was in full flower in May when the contractors moved in; the middle of the breeding season for birds and many other species. The stream they filled in was not a 'deep eroding drain' but an ancient stream which features on old maps.



The stream and bluebell wood before and after 'restoration'



At Amberslade Bottom the wooden footbridge has gone and the crossing is deep stones (the surface has already been removed and replaced once, as it was impassable due to the size of the flints used). But in less than six months the heather bales are starting to protrude, shedding their plastic binder twine, and the infill is washing down into Dockens Water – a hazard to stock, riders and walkers alike.



Heather bales already protruding at Amberslade Bottom.

You might think that Latchmore would be safe from such destruction. It carries the highest environmental protection: it is a Wetland of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention (RAMSAR); a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); a Special Area of Conservation (SAC); and a Special Protected Area (SPA). It has been rated by Natural England as 'favourable' on all counts except for that of historic human interference. Alterations to the watercourse were made so long ago that (according to Natural England's own guidelines) the stream, having re-established a healthy ecosystem, should be left alone. That, in itself, should be enough to prevent any interference with the area.

But although these Natural England designations of 'favourable' and 'unfavourable' are used to justify heavy engineering works in the Forest, they can apparently be over-ruled without any trouble: Thompson's Castle is rated by Natural England as being in 'favourable condition', but nevertheless it is in line for 'restoration' next year!

So do the designations of the highest level of protection count for anything at all? Apparently not - Natural England are quite happy for these engineering projects to be carried out in the most protected areas

without even undertaking an Environmental Impact Assessment. We have all heard about the 'success' that has been claimed by the partners in the HLSS Wetland Restoration Scheme for 'restorations' on various other sites, but they cannot possibly evaluate any of the works as they never carried out any base line assessments before the works began!

Latchmore is waiting for the results of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), but since the timetable for the project has already been published, with work to start on Thompson's Castle Mire and Latchmore Mire in 2016, it is clear that the partners don't take that very seriously.

The sad fact is that the scheme is badly compromised. The NFNPA is both a partner in the HLSS Wetland Restoration Scheme, and also the local planning authority - responsible for the planning decision on Latchmore. Most of the local organisations that have been consulted about the 'restoration' works have a vested interest in the HLS funding, either directly or indirectly. The commoners are unable to speak out against the scheme, despite their loss of grazing, because the funding ties their grants from the Verderers' Grazing Scheme with the Wetland Restoration; "The commoners may find it an unpalatable fact, but they are being subsidised by conservation interests and should reflect that in their attitude to restoration works" (Published Verderers' Court Minutes September 2010).

The Precautionary Principle should be enough to save Latchmore from destruction. According to Natural England's own guidelines, the Precautionary Principle applies: 'where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage' nothing should be done without clear, scientific proof of success. The lack of success of previous 'restorations' surely speaks for itself.

So there is no justification for subjecting Latchmore to the same heavy-handed engineering works. The HLSS partners' statements are wrong: It is not "disconnected from its flood plain (it overtops its banks every time there is heavy rain). It is not a "deep and eroding drain"(alterations to the watercourse were made so long ago - and then only with bucket and spade - that, according to Natural England's own precautionary principle, the stream, with its healthy ecosystem, should be left alone). It

is not true that it is in “unfavourable/recovering condition and must be restored” (it fulfils all the criteria for flora and fauna). It is not true to say that “previous wetland restorations have been successful” (too many projects have failed and been ‘snagged’ or completely reworked a number of times, each time requiring larger quantities of barren, foreign materials to fill them in and destroying their fragile ecosystem). Or that “previous work has been sufficiently monitored and properly evaluated” (it can’t have been, since no preliminary assessments were done by which to measure success).

Work is currently under way at Harvestslade, north-east of Burley. Burley Parish Council were very quick to act when the threat loomed and called a public meeting with presentations by the Forestry Commission, New Forest National Park Authority and the various other bodies involved. They were unhappy with the answers they received to their very valid concerns and recommended refusal for the works, but it was given Planning Permission despite the objections. They are horrified at what is currently happening to this once beautiful site that boasted nesting kingfisher and sea trout, eels and much else.

Latchmore must not be allowed to suffer the same fate.