

## Conservation Progress Report

*[This contribution is the sixteenth in an annual series (beginning in 1989 - Newsletter No.42) reporting on aspects of conservation affecting Hampshire's birds]*

### **Dibden Terminal: state of play early April 2004**

[Background notes and brief indications of HOS's particular interests may be found in previous Progress Reports, notably in Newsletters Nos. 90, 94 and 98].

The Inquiry Inspectors' report to government is understood to have been delivered last September (2003). Nothing more has been heard officially – the government has to publish both the Report and its response. Whether that will be soon, as Associated British Ports would like – with attempts, via private conversations, items in the media, erection of security fencing and recruitment of security staff – to create the impression the government decision will go in its favour.

However, there are one or two matters which may be delaying the political decision.

The House of Commons Transport Committee has advised government to weigh the needs for dock development nationally [“Ports” published 13 November 2003]. In the southeast this includes, as well as Dibden, the London Gateway brownfield site on Canvey Island (the now redundant Shell refinery), where some accommodation has been reached between the prospective developers and environmentalists [English Nature Magazine March 2004]; and opportunities at South Felixstowe and Bathside Bay, Harwich. All are currently in the planning system.

The second potential problem for the government is the outcome of various legal proceedings, as a result of challenges to the taking of land from Special Protection Areas for port development in the 1990s [see British Birds April 2004, p205]. This has caused Defra, as penance, to spend £5million to replace the lost shorebird feeding habitats by returning part of Wallasea Island, Essex, to intertidal mudflats.

### **National Parks**

The New Forest National Park Public Inquiry is expected to submit its Report during summer 2004. The South Downs PI is scheduled to report subsequently. Whether there will be any acknowledged interrelation between the former's boundary, which included the Dibden reclaim, and the Dibden dock proposal, may cause some excited media activity.

### **Avon Valley**

The changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) and ESA payments start in 2005. Some of the thinking behind these changes may be worth comment, since they could/should be of significant benefit to the Avon valley. In essence the latest agri-environment funding strategy is intended to promote, at least in lowland England, a wider countryside approach – “landscape scale” is the in phrase. Much of the latest issue of EN's Magazine, previously alluded to, is devoted to “Future landscapes”. For instance, lowland wet grassland breeding waders are in dire straits nationally, including areas such as the Avon flood-plain. Quoting EN's Senior Ornithologist “...over half of all snipe, redshank and lapwing were recorded in just six designated areas, where most of the birds occur on nature reserves...but we must also seek to secure favourable management at the remaining sites and seek to create new areas of wet grassland in suitable parts of England.” Loss of unimproved lowland grassland in England and Wales between 1930 and 1984 amounted to 97%!

“Landscape” now appears in the attributes which attract Heritage Lottery Fund grants and

such a bid is in preparation for parts of the Lower Avon.

Many landowners and other stakeholders in the English lowlands are beginning to see that, in future, attention to a wildlife-friendly land use will attract significant funding, whereas support for the previous intensive farming practices will attract significantly reduced funding by comparison.

### **Biodiversity Action Plans and related matters**

Whereas much is doom and gloom in the recent history of lowland wildlife, it is not necessarily so, if appropriate remedial measures are put in place. Delivery of national Biodiversity Action Plans is one way forward. One interesting example concerns the Cirl Bunting, formerly a relatively common and widespread Hampshire breeder, but now extinct in the county. Although still widespread in Europe, its UK population is now effectively confined to south Devon where, at its low point in 1989, about 100+ pairs were present. Once the various features of its habitat, breeding and feeding requirements were unravelled, a landscape-scale recovery programme was implemented by an EN/RSPB funded project. A survey in 2003 estimated the population had increased to nearly 700 pairs. A return to Hampshire on the cards?

HOS has been invited to propose criteria and lists of “notable” birds for the progression of the county SINC (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation – originally intended to be the tier down from national SSSIs). The county has currently more than 2500 such sites, though very few have been declared for ornithological reasons. Simple, you might think. Not so. Quite apart from the criteria, what constitutes a “site” for birds is not obvious. It is also compounded by the National and County-level “priority” species of the BAP process, which themselves will be under review next year. This may be thought to be of minor concern until it is realised that many planning decisions, at both county and local level, will need to “take note of” such matters.

In last year’s Conservation item, I mentioned a Coastal BAP workshop to be held last April, under the auspices of the County Council and the Solent Forum. This year a follow up “Solent Coastal Management Conference” is taking place at the University of Portsmouth on 27-28<sup>th</sup> April. This year’s meeting is also envisaged as related to the Solent Science Conference held in Southampton in 1998. The “managing” is about trying to cope with the many interests and pressures, some strongly conflicting, which occur in the modern-day Solent. Some flavour may be obtained from the list of presentations, which include contributions from many statutory agencies (English Nature, Environment Agency, Defra, etc.), the voluntary sector (RSPB), Consultants, commerce (ABP, Marine industries), academics, etc. Although part of the rationale of this meeting is that a number of decisions affecting the Solent are imminent, it seems to the writer that, because of the immense complexity of Solent issues, any outcomes of great significance are unlikely in the short term.

### **Lord Haskins’ Rural Delivery Review**

Last November Lord Haskins delivered his review of rural delivery. It attracted much criticism from informed sources in the media and elsewhere. In essence it comprised proposals to integrate, and avoid overlap between, some functions of several government agencies. Very laudable.

The Government’s initial response by Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State, Defra, was largely welcoming. It was anticipated a full response including a forward plan (a “refreshed” rural strategy) would be presented in spring 2004. English Nature were very concerned and much of the time since seems to have been taken up by EN trying to ensure its biodiversity remit was a core and equal component of the remit alongside access and recreation. Watch this

space!

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks for help during the past year to all who provided me with information and background. Last year's list was long. This one would be even longer, so I've decided a general thank you is in order. However, any resulting errors or confusion are mine.

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