



## **Minsmere Levels Stakeholders Group. Newsletter No 5. November 2010.**

### **A new Government... What has it got in store for the Levels?**

Welcome to our autumn newsletter!

We were very pleased when our new MP for Suffolk Coastal, Therese Coffey joined us towards the end of our public meeting 11 June and then adjourned to the Lion with many of those present for extended informal discussion. We were encouraged that she appeared to have her predecessor, John Gummer's interest in, and determination on, issues of coastal protection, as well as our particular concerns regarding inland water. Several press reports of her subsequent meetings with ministers on coastal issues seem to be further evidence of this.

However, interest from a new MP, even if a member of the party in power, is sadly no indication of any similar commitment from a new Government committed to savage budget reductions. It is not as if its predecessor had shown a great deal of enthusiasm for rural areas such as the Levels, according them the local priority ranking.

We now know that as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review announced on October 20 that the Rural Affairs will, at a budget cut of 30% in real terms, be one of the departments hardest hit, and that of this, a disproportionately high amount is likely to have to come from the Environment Agency's (EA) funds for flood and coastal defence. An early symptom of this has been the decision of the EA not to replace Giles Broomfield, who has had day to day oversight of the New Cut, the Old River and the Minsmere sluice has thus been our main link with the Agency. It is therefore at present very hard to find anyone within the EA with his detailed knowledge who 'owns' the Levels.

Until the implications of the Government spending review are worked through, it is probably inevitably that much remains in limbo. However, there was at least one immediate and positive decision from the new administration. Any further work has now been abandoned on the Boundary Committee's recommendations on local government re-organisation. MLSG has spent an inordinate amount of time and effort over the last three years responding to successive consultations. It is also encouraging that our local councils, freed from outside intervention, are looking to organic solutions, Waveney and Suffolk Coastal districts are looking to merge or integrate as many of the activities as possible, which will mean that we have in effect one council working alongside the County on all coastal issues.

## Two new nuclear power stations

We had anticipated that 2010 would have involved us in a greater deal of activity on the proposals for the construction of the two Sizewell C and D power stations. MLSG has two vital interests in these.

1. The reinforced coastal defences that any development is likely required will have a considerable impact on the coast line immediately to the north and south. A new access road will also have to be constructed on a causeway to cross a very sensitive part of the Levels immediately adjacent to the site.
2. It is essential that the Levels should receive a share of the funds for projects intended to mitigate the consequences of the development, particularly in view of the fact that the sluice will require very major refurbishment or even replacement within the next 5 to 15 years. In the present financial climate it is unlikely that this, as well as other essential coastal protection works, can be carried out without a substantial contribution from non-governmental funds.

The reality is however that plans for the power stations appear have advanced little over the last 12 months, and even moved into reverse. In December 2009 the then Department of Energy and Climate Change held a very unsatisfactory local public consultation of its Draft Nuclear Energy Policy, central to which was the 'fast track' process through which it was intended that all planning application would be progressed. The new Government has abolished the Infrastructure Planning Commission that was to undertake this, and has yet to make any announcement as to what will replace it

The new government has just announced that it still intends to proceed with the programme of new nuclear build, but only on the basis that the developers undertake it entirely from their own financial resources and also make provision for the costs of decommissioning. It is also clear that EDF, the owners of Sizewell B, which is one of the sites that continues to be designated, are keen to continue, which is evidenced by site investigations underway at various points both on the beach and on the Levels at the planned crossing point for the road. .

The MLSG Planning Group had a very useful meeting with representatives of EDF on 6 March 2010 from which it was very evident that EDF were greatly concerned to engage in dialogue with groups such as MLSG, and indicated that Sizewell C was likely to follow on after their first development at Hinckley, with work here starting in earnest in 2015, with completion envisaged in 2020. The plan was to produce a first stage consultation document at the end of 2010, followed by a programme of public meetings and discussions with organisations such as MLSG

It appears that this programme may have fallen back slightly, but EDF have very recently announced that the public consultation on Sizewell C will begin in 2011, and it will be opening an office in Leiston town centre from which this will be coordinated. EDF assure us that it looks forward to 'running a rigorous, open and informative programme of local consultation'. Let us hope that it really is a two way exchange.

## The (eventual) loss of the North Marsh

MLSG reluctantly accepted the outcome of the Shoreline Management review of 2008 (Check date) that, over the long term, the North Marsh, immediately abutting Dunwich Cliffs, should be sacrificed to secure the future protection of the majority of the flood plain- 218 ha), and residential properties to south. The Environment Agency announced in September 2010 that work will shortly be starting to raise and improve the Coney Hill Cross Bank- also known as the North Wall – this is assuming that the programme will not fall victim to the latest cuts in budget two bunds will be built connecting the primary and secondary defences just south of the Bank. This work will control the movement of water between the two embankments to reduce erosion of primary and secondary flood defences during storm surges.

This means that the North Marsh will become progressively more saline as a result of sea water flooding. The Environment Agency has undertaken, as is its statutory duty, to identify and secure 28 hectares of suitable freshwater habitat to replace that which will be lost through the rise in sea levels. However, in the short term, the Agency will attempt to repair breaches in the secondary clay embankment that still protects the North Marsh.

## The Minsmere Sluice

MLSG has, for many months, been much concerned about the condition sluice. During the early summer, extensive investigations were undertaken by Jacobs Engineering and Reds Divers who undertook an internal investigation of the chamber and the sluices and took detailed measurements and dimensions. As a result the EA has told us that it is forming a scope of works and design in preparation for a construction programme which will include

1. Replacing all three gates – Scot's Head Drain, the New Cut and Leiston Ditch, designing them in such a way as to require minimum maintenance so that the need for access to the chamber will be reduced.
2. The inclusion of eel passages in all three gates
3. the repair of all failing brickwork and damaged concrete inside the chamber
4. The design of safe access for maintenance into the chamber – i.e. platform, ladders, devit points.

The programme of works is due to start in September 2011, and we very hope that the funds we understand that have been earmarked will not fall victim to the Chancellor's axe...

Welcome as the planned programme of works is, we are concerned that the EA consultant appear not to have advised on the long term viability of the present sluice and its continuing ability to cope with projected rise in both rainfall and sea levels. The future of the sluice is clearly an issue that is not going to go away.

## Living with water...

Another successful and well attended stakeholders meeting took place at Theberton on 11 June, where the theme was the management and control of inland water, particularly at times of flood. Four key players whose collaboration and coordinated activity is so vital to the well-being of our Levels made presentations... Giles Broomfield, who for several years has had day to day oversight of the Environment Agency's responsibilities, spoke of the management strategy for the maintenance of the New Cut, the Old Minsmere River and the Leiston Main Drain, and also of the considerable investigations, described earlier, of the condition of the Minsmere Sluice then being carried out by consultants of the Agency's behalf.

He was followed by David Thomas who had just succeeded Ian Hart as engineer to the Internal Drainage Board who described the extensive works that had been carried out the previous summer on Drain no 7, the Landspring, of which Ian Hart gave a full account in the November 2009 newsletter. Nat Bacon of Theberton Hall Farm followed with an account of the considerable works undertaken on his land, of which he also wrote in the last newsletter. The overriding message from both these speakers was that works on either IDB or individual landowners' drain are of little value unless the main EA channels, and of course the sluice, can carry the increased flow of water away.

In the last presentation, Adam Rowlands, senior site manager of the Minsmere Reserve spoke of the management strategy for the considerable part of the Levels owned by the RSPB, including the control of salinity on the scrape, and the balance between reed beds and open water that it sought to maintain on sections abutting onto the Dam Bridge. His talk was accompanied by some fascinating aerial photographs, the earliest dating from the mid 1930's, which showed the progressive development of the reserve, particularly as a result of intentional flooding as part of wartime anti-invasion defences.

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