

THE HOBBS MOAT COMMUNITY PROJECT 1985 - 1988:

A Note Of Two Problems Affecting The Development Of The Project, And Their Consequences.

When it began in 1985 the Hobs Moat Project had four main aims - to conserve the monument, to create work locally, to develop an amenity in the neighbourhood and, through its archaeology and historical research, to understand the history of the site. Paramount among these intentions was the preservation of the earthwork, but, such is the nature of the difficulties on the site, all four were seen as interlinked, all contributing to a strategy to ensure the monument's survival beyond the times in which we live.

As things have developed, the strategy has been largely successful and the Project has made substantial gains for the monument. By any standards these have been great indeed. However, there are two areas where there is a degree of dissatisfaction and of which a note of qualification must be made. Both these areas, as it happens, are outside the control of the Community Programme.

The first concerns the overall management policy for the site, as it may be styled. There is an absolute need for the landowner, S.M.B.C., to formulate a policy to help build on the gains made since 1985, since the life of the Community Project must be seen as strictly limited. It may be asked, for instance, what will happen to the site after the end of the Project, and further, what attempt should be made now to establish the ground rules for the future. Such questions cannot be addressed by the Project because, in the nature of things, decisions cannot be taken for the landowner unilaterally, and in any case there could be no guarantee that they would be adhered to later on. It is for this reason, also, that when the Community Project comes to an end in due course, it seems at present that work will simply cease, the fences will be removed and the pre-existing problems which were there before the Project came into being, and which caused the condition of the monument in the first place, will be allowed to become re-established.

If this should be so then the outcome is predictable:

1. Bike-riding will soon become restored to the earthwork, up and down the ramparts, and this will lead to -
2. A progressive deterioration of the groundcover on the earthwork, which will lead to -
3. Erosion.

Within a very short space of time, at most five years, if this does happen, the topsoil will be stripped away from the ramparts, the tanalised boards will be exposed, and the site will be returned to the condition it was in in 1984. This will not be to the credit of a responsible local authority. It will certainly not appear an intelligent or hoped-for outcome to all the resources and efforts expended on the monument by Community Programme.

The second source of dissatisfaction concerns the manner in which the conserved ramparts have been re-vegetated. In order for the boarding/topsoiling programme to be successful it is essential that groundcover be established on the imported topsoil. The obvious way in which this can be achieved is by grassing. At Hobs Moat, an intensely 'woodland' environment, with restricted light at ground level, this can only be done by seeding with special grasses, and this has indeed been done in places, but in the majority of instances the local authority has chosen turf as its preferred medium. Whether this is for cheapness or out of ignorance is hard to discern, but it is obvious and apparent that the decision is perverse and wrong - for the simple reason that the turf belongs to an open meadowland environment. Everywhere the consequences of this naive disregard of the facts can be seen, for the turf is dieing back and being replaced by other faunal species which generally in this low light environment means moss. As an effect it is most marked on northern- and western-facing slopes, but this is as would be expected. Over the whole earthwork the effect will however be noted in due course and the effect of the dieback is potentially very serious.

I have discussed this difficulty with Borough Officers but, as with the observation regarding the general management of the site in future, I have obtained no satisfying answer. It is for this reason I consider it unavoidable that my observation should be put in writing. I hope thereby that a useful discussion will be stimulated.

I hope too to establish the point that the earthwork should not be allowed to deteriorate once again, to reach the most regrettable condition which existed in 1985, when the Community Project was established to rescue it from its sad fate. Such a thing should not happen to a Scheduled Ancient Monument in Solihull in the 1980s.

James Debney,

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