

The Amberley Society

The aim of the Society is the conservation and improvement of the amenities, character and interests of Amberley and its surroundings

Newsletter August 2009



Building bridges and forging relationships

"A bridge that has captured the imagination of the local community" was how West Sussex County Council's cabinet member for environment and economy, Deborah Urquhart, described the North Stoke suspension footbridge at the official reopening on Monday, July 27.

The completion of the restoration work by the Gurkhas – within budget and ahead of schedule – and the important role played by the Amberley Society in helping to save the bridge was duly acknowledged during the ceremony, organised by WSCC.

"We are very fortunate that the Amberley Society was so passionate about the restoration and the fact it managed to persuade the Army to get involved," said Mrs Urquhart (pictured above). "Without that we would not be looking at a suspension bridge at all, due to the excessive cost of restoration."

The original estimate to rebuild the bridge was £100,000, which was reduced to approximately £35,000 on a materials-only basis when the Army became involved, she added. In the event, the Gurkhas managed to complete the job for around £25,000, representing a considerable saving for council taxpayers.

Invited guests, who included senior representatives from the Army, agencies such as Natural England and the Southdowns Joint Committee, the Norfolk Estate, media and, of course, members of the Amberley Society, were welcomed by Jon Perks, the county council's principal Rights of Way officer.

Mrs Urquhart was led by a lone Gurkha piper to the bridge, followed by marching Queen's Gurkha Engineers. Using the tradi-

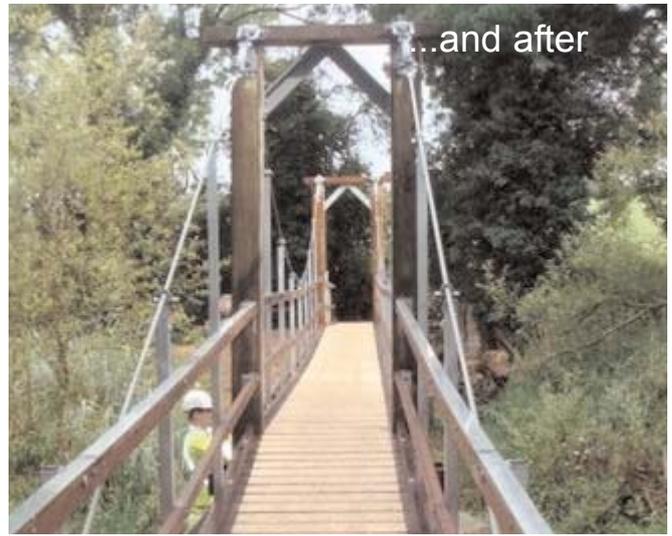
tional Gurkha Kukri knife, she cut the ceremonial ribbons, in the dark red and blue colours of the Engineers, to declare the bridge open. A large flag of 70 Field Support Squadron, who have been responsible for the bridge restoration, was then parted to reveal a commemorative plaque on one of the main towers.

Commanding Officer, Major Gavin Brown, thanked the community for its support and friendship, adding that it had been a valuable training exercise for the squadron. It had also been an unusual assignment, their last bridge project having been in Kosovo.

Grahame Joseph, chairman of the Amberley Society, said that throughout the campaign to save the bridge there had been total support and encouragement from members, who now number more than 200. "This bridge was always special and important to us and restoration by the Queen's Gurkha Engineers makes it even more so."

He continued: "This has not only been a training exercise for the Army – we have all learned a lot and developed good working relationships." In particular, he paid tribute to WSCC's Jon Perks, and also expressed thanks to the many others who had worked so effectively together to achieve such a satisfactory result. These included Simon Mockford, senior ranger of the Southdowns Joint Committee; Peter Knight and his team at the Norfolk Estate; David Lock, the local farmer whose field had been used for the project; and Alex Macdonald, of Natural England.

He also acknowledged the key role played by two retired Royal Engineers – Reggie Trench, of Amberley, and John Fitzmaurice, of Birdham – without whose help restoration of the bridge would



have been difficult, if not impossible. John had successfully persuaded the regimental colonel, Colonel David Caulfield, to take on the project as a training exercise.

“We couldn’t have wished for anyone better to repair and refurbish the bridge than 70 Field Support Squadron, ably led by Major Gavin Brown,” said Grahame. “They have exceeded expectation in every respect and it has been a pleasure working with them all.”

Such had been the enthusiasm of Amberley Society members to view the construction work, to do this with minimal interruption it had been decided to set aside an evening when they could all meet the Gurkhas. “There was such interest that the event, on Friday, July 17, turned into an amazing celebration for the 150 people who attended.

“Tours of the works were arranged, the Gurkhas cooked a curry and performed their cultural dances, including their famous Kukri

knife dance, the Amberley Folk Club provided further entertainment, and funds were raised for the Gurkha Welfare Trust.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Grahame said that an incredible amount of money had been raised by the community as an expression of their appreciation. “Their generosity shows how much the people of Amberley and surrounding villages value the bridge and its restoration by the Gurkhas.”

He went on to present a cheque to Capt Tarabahadur Pun for the Gurkha Welfare Trust. “I find it hard to believe that, in little over a week, we could raise so much. The latest total is a staggering £3,100.” He added that with Gift Aid applied, the final figure would be considerably more. “Your generosity is amazing and we know, from the presentation by Capt Rjen Gurung at the bridge celebration evening, how much it will be appreciated in Nepal.

“I know a number of the ever cheerful Gurkhas wish to come back with their families to visit and they will be warmly welcomed.



Work in progress: (1) a VIP visit from the Commander of the Royal Engineers, Col Andy Bellingall, with WO2 Martin Burns, Maj Gavin Brown OC, and Grahame Joseph, chairman of the Amberley Society, who discuss the project in the camp headquarters at North Stoke (2) concreting the abutments to secure the suspension cables (3) Spr Arun at work on the construction of the wooden towers back at the 70 Gurkha Field Support Squadron’s base at Maidstone (4) Spr Sunil Rana, assembling one of the galvanised steel hangers attached to the bridge cables



This bridge proudly stands bearing the crest of the Queen's Gurkha Engineers, and our thoughts will be with them wherever they are in the world."

Finally, Grahame expressed his special thanks to Tim Ralph, who first alerted the society to the fact that WSCC was proposing to replace the landmark suspension bridge with a conventional beam bridge, and also to Guy Leonard, David Lyon, Reggie Trench, Steve Edge, Mike Toynbee and everyone who had provided so much support and help throughout this project.

"There were some challenging days but we achieved all we could have wished for and more," he concluded.

● Pictured: (1) A Gurkha piper and men of the 70 Gurkha Field Support Squadron line up on the newly completed bridge. (2) The commemorative plaque attached to one of the towers. (3) Simon Mockford, senior ranger, South Downs Joint Committee, with one of three new oak 'kissing' gates that have replaced stiles. (4) Spr Mohan, Cpl Suan, Cpl Arun, Capt Tara, Cpl Ajay and SSgt Man, all members of the project team. (5) from left to right: Commanding Officer Maj Gavin Brown; Capt Tarabahadur Pun; Spr Balaram Rai; Nick Herbert MP; and Grahame Joseph, Amberley Society chairman. (6) Former Royal Engineer Reggie Trench, of Amberley, accompanied by Major Gavin Brown, was one of the first to cross the restored bridge. (7) A cheque for £3,040 (since increased to £3,100) for the Gurkha Welfare Trust, presented on behalf of the local community by Grahame Joseph to Capt Tarabahadur Pun.

Party time: bringing the Gurkhas and local community together

The Amberley Society staged a party to celebrate – and to thank – the Gurkhas for their work on restoring a historic local landmark. The evening, enjoyed by 150 people, included a traditional Gurkha curry and entertainment, coupled with music by the Amberley Folk Club. More than £3,000 has been raised locally for the Gurkha Welfare Trust.



Guests enjoyed a traditional Gurkha curry (above left), together with Nepalese and ceremonial dancing by Dilasha Rai (above), daughter of Lcpl Bhimal Rai, and (left) by members of 70 Gurkha Field Support Squadron. Pictured (top) is Commanding Officer Gavin Brown, who spoke on behalf of the Gurkhas, while below are Grahame Joseph (left), chairman of the Amberley Society, and former Royal Engineer John Fitzmaurice, who was instrumental in getting the Army's involvement in the repair and restoration of the North Stoke bridge. He was presented with a bottle of malt whisky in appreciation.



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Amberley Parish Map

Unveiling ceremony in St Michael's Church
Saturday, September 26, at 11am

Gliding on the South Downs

Friday, October 16, 2009

St Michael's Church Hall at 7.30pm

An illustrated talk by John Land, of Amberley Museum, about the life of artist Jose Weiss, who lived at Houghton and built the world's first soaring glider, which made its historic flight from Amberley Mount exactly 100 years ago.

To be followed by a talk on gliding today, by Craig Lowrie, chairman of the Southdown Gliding Club.