

Summary of “The history of conservation on the Malvern Hills”

by Pamela Hurle, Voice of the Malvern Hills Conference 2016

Our final session was on Conservation on the Malverns. The speaker, Pamela Hurle, pointed out the main threats to the hills and how they have been addressed. Several thousand acres of medieval landscape, in 13 parishes, were preserved largely intact for 600 years after William the Conqueror decreed the area a Royal Forest – the legal term for a hunting ground where development was forbidden by laws protecting the habitat of the deer.

By the 19th century encroachment and enclosure seriously threatened the landscape, a problem addressed by establishing Malvern Hills Conservators in 1884 to prevent the loss of any more common land, originally always designated for exclusive use by locals. The 1884 Act, however, gave public access to common land in the former Royal Forest, resulting in conflicts of interest between local farmers and the general public.

A new threat appeared when stone was needed to build roads for the new motor vehicles which replaced horse-drawn traffic. Guarantees to local manorial lords, required to get the 1884 Act passed by Parliament, stopped early 20th century Conservators protecting the hills from appalling damage by quarrying. During the high unemployment of the 1920s and 1930s, a dramatic conflict of interests led to those desperate for work in the quarries confronting those trying to protect the hills. When talking about this particular conflict, Pamela Hurle showed the audience quite a startling document: a copy of a death threat sent to Fred Ballard, who was Chair of the Malvern Hills Conservators at that time, which had been written by some quarry men.

Today the greatest threat to Malvern’s landscape is tourism: the hills, their flora and fauna are at risk. In the last 60 years conservation groups have proliferated but are faced with hard choices as they struggle to balance conflicting demands and the best interests of conservation.