Joe Weston on the site of the proposed reserve

# Wildlife plan runs into the sidings

CONSERVATIONISTS are wondering if they will ever be allowed to build their wildlife reserve in a disused railway cutting.

The person who started the idea of a reserve is the same person who — three years later — is arousing local anger for taking so long deciding whether to allow it to go ahead.

It was Mr Peter Audley-Miller, then chairman of Wheatley Parish Council, who first thought of turning the Littleworth cutting, near Wheatley, into a reserve.

Since then he has retired as chairman. But, as a county councillor, he is chairman of the land, buildings and supplies committee which is taking the decision about what to do with the cutting, now owned by the county.

And it is a decision which, according to the plan's enthusiasts, has been a very long time coming.

The parish council and the local Friends of the Earth were very enthusiastic. The cutting had not been used for more than ten years, and as a nature reserve it could be used by local schools and for study by Oxford Polytechnic.

They rejected a first offer by the county council of a three-year lease, because there would be hardly enough time to grow anything there.

Since then there has been little news, and the plans' proponents have begun to lose interest.

"I don't understand what is happening, or why the process is being slowed down," said Mrs Cynthia Mancey, who drew up the plans for the parish council.

"Everytime we get letters back saying that the committee is waiting for details from the parish council. But Mr Audley-Miller is also on the parish council. He knows what the situation is — he is part of it."

Mr Joe Weston of Wheatley FOE said that the cutting was an ideal spot for a reserve.

Mr Audley-Miller said that the county council was in the process of deciding which pieces of land they owned were permanently surplus to requirements.

If the cutting is, then it would be sold. So no lease could be signed until that decision had been made.

There was also the problem of methane gas if the underground rubbish tip was disturbed, and legal problems about who owns the tunnel at the end of the four acre site.

"They know perfectly well why it has taken such a long time," he said. "It is a very sensitive site because the county council has spent a lot of money making the rubbish safe."

In recent years he had begun to wonder if the site was big enough or isolated enough to be a wildlife reserve.

A decision would be taken within the next few months, he said.