

ALTERNATIVE USES

FOR THE

CHRISTMAS LODGE SITE

THE ALDERSHOT CIVIC SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 10 years, Hampshire County Council (HCC) has, in the Manor Ward alone, sold three educational facilities and failed to intervene in the sale of a fourth by the Farnborough College of Technology (FCT) even though the town was left without adequate Adult Education facilities.

Without exception, all of these facilities had great potential for alternative community use.

Both, FCT and HCC made many millions, money that was spent elsewhere, without any benefit to the local community.

Negative impact on the community: The town was left without any adult education facilities and the already inadequate residential care provision was further reduced.

In addition, the loss of the Open Space/Amenity Land that surrounded these buildings has had a negative impact on the visual quality of the local Street Scene and the Manor Park Conservation Area. Moreover, the lack of such public land reserves in the town has now resulted in the Council being forced to build on designated Public Park Land to provide the community centre in Manor Park and the sports facilities in Aldershot Park. Although there is a very real need for these facilities, they, together with the required associated parking space, will lead to a further reduction of the actual Open Space in the town.

In January 2006, Hampshire County Council closed the Christmas Lodge Residential Care Home and announced the decision to sell the site for development.

Local people campaigned to keep the residential home; a petition was signed by more than 4000 residents [Ref.1]. HCC has now refused to reconsider the matter.

Hampshire County Council is now seeking an Outline Planning Permission for residential development, in order to maximize the profits from the sale of the site.

Once again, public land that is already in very short supply is being wasted on short-term financial gain, regardless of the damage inflicted upon the local quality of life.

Another major concern for the local community was the direct and indirect impact any development of the Christmas Lodge site would have on the adjoining Brickfields Country Park (BfP), a small but well used local Park that is much loved for its undisturbed, natural feel and its wildlife.

The Aldershot Civic Society has produced this report to examine, in a local context, all the negative impacts on the local community that residential development would have **and** highlight the benefits to the local community that could be achieved by a sympathetic use of the site.

1 THE LOCATION

The site of Christmas Lodge is situated in a quiet and secluded location close to the town centre and surrounded by mature and dense residential development.

Whilst the train station appears to be within walking distance, unless one is prepared to use narrow and secluded footpaths which intimidate vulnerable people, particularly after dark, the street layout of the surrounding development significantly increases the walking distance to a degree that makes walking impractical.

This also applies for the bus services which run along Church Lane East. This service does not run after 7 pm or indeed on Sundays [Ref.2] and is often unreliable.

Access to the site by car is via existing residential streets which are, especially outside business hours, heavily congested by parked cars. This imposes an unreasonable amount of stop/start manoeuvres that produce significant, **additional** amounts of air pollution in an area that already suffers from some of the worst air pollution in the Borough.

2 THE BRICKFIELDS COUNTRY PARK

The site of the Christmas Lodge is immediately adjoining the Brickfields Country Park (BfP) which is described as the smallest Country Park in Great Britain.

In the Rushmoor Local Plan 2000-2011, [Ref.3], the BfP is listed as 7B Pond/grassland/scrub of local wildlife importance. However, the Hampshire Wildlife Trust rates the BfP as 6A "Sites which support one or more notable species" [Ref.4].

An analysis of the existing BfP website [Ref. 5] and new records has revealed that the BfP is home to more than 400 species of flora and fauna.

- **270** species of flora and fauna are now fully recorded
- **140** more species are work in progress, i.e. recorded but need to be confirmed, described and edited.
- **8** of the bird species that have been recorded in the park are Status Amber and **3** are Status Red.
- So far, **4 species** have been identified as UKBAP Priority species.
- A further **5 species** that are candidates for a UKBAP, are work in progress.
- **2 species** have a Hampshire BAP.

- 5 species are cited by the EC.
- 10species are listed as Nationally Notable
- 1species is listed as Insufficiently Known.
- Moth, Rodents, Insects and Pond life need a systematic survey to be carried out in 2007. There is a potential for hundreds more species to be added to the lists.

Clearly, the B7 rating in the LP is outdated and needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Also clear is, that HCC's decision to sell the site for development was made without the knowledge or understanding of the true importance of the BfP and the site of Christmas Lodge for the maintenance and protection of biodiversity in Rushmoor.

3 IMPORTANCE OF THE CHRISTMAS LODGE SITE FOR NATURE CONSERVATION

- Pippistrelle Bats, a UKBAP Priority Species, are resident in the BfP and confirmed by a 2006 independent survey [Ref.6].
- The mature trees within the northern and western boundary of Christmas Lodge are an essential part of this habitat for a protected species, forming a flyway to the neighbouring Crown Estate and Manor Park [Ref.6].
- We now have strong scientific evidence that light pollution has a significantly harmful effect upon the life cycle of moths, which are the primary food source for bats [Ref.7].
- Over recent years, within a radius of 500 metres of the site, two prime habitats for bats have been destroyed by development (Manor Park Annexe, Mid-Southern Water Site). As a consequence, daily sightings of groups of bats have now been reduced to occasional sightings of single animals (local Residents observation).
- The Bat boxes that are usually provided in mitigation for the loss of roost locations, combined with the reduced food supply, appear to be too poor a substitute to ensure the maintenance of a healthy, biologically viable population [Ref.8].
- The build-up of leaf mould and twigs along the northern and western boundary of the Christmas Lodge site forms a prime habitat for beetles,

including the Stag Beetle which is also a UKBAP Priority Species. Most of the facts listed above also apply for the stag beetle, particularly the reduction in numbers due to the loss of habitat [Ref.9].

Whilst the Christmas Lodge site is enclosed with permanent fencing on three sides, including the southern Boundary that is shared with the Brickfields Country Park, the existing fencing along this boundary does not represent the legal boundary but excludes a strip of land that also belongs to HCC but is held under license by Rushmoor Borough Council. This strip of land has been an integral part of the BfP since its formation in the mid 1980's [Ref10]. It has now emerged, that HCC (and any future developer?) wants to keep control of this strip of land, including the steep slope that forms the edge of this southern boundary, because the stability of this slope is vital to any development. Given the fact that this slope has been formed by backfill (local Residents, Eyewitnesses), major construction work to create stable conditions for a significant development cannot be ruled out.

Negative impact: Any changes or construction work would:

- Damage or destroy existing nesting and hibernating habitat for bumblebees (observation).
- Damage or destroy essential shelter.
The dense scrub/ bramble thicket in the main section of the slope is the one and only area in the park where animals can find a shelter/nesting habitat safe from people and dogs
- Damage or destroy essential breeding habitat for birds.
This section is also the only undisturbed and safe area of the park for ground nesting/ near ground level nesting birds (at least 6 species).

This slope has been an integral part of the BfP since it was founded in 1985. As such, it, together with the whole Christmas Lodge site, plays a well established and vital role in the maintenance of Biodiversity in the Park.

Clearly, there is now an urgent need to carry out a full Environmental Impact Assessment to prevent harm to an environment that is rich in Species, and, as a 'stepping stone' location, essential for the maintenance of biodiversity in the wider community.

4 AIRQUALITY

To the North, within a 500 m radius is the Ash Road which has levels of air pollution that not only frequently exceed permitted pollution levels, it also frequently exceeds the levels measured along the M3 [Ref.11].

Trees are known to absorb CO2 pollution, and grassland is known to bind pollution particles into the soil. Other than a very drastic reduction in the use of cars, trees and grassland and other vegetation are the only means we have to reduce air pollution levels. Moreover, **they are free.**

Negative impact on the community: Given the fact that, in recent years, approx. 40% of Open Space/Amenity Land (Air cleansing capacity) has been lost in the Manor Ward [Ref.12], any further loss of grassland and trees would further increase the identified harmful levels of air pollution, with unquantifiable impacts upon human health and additional costs to the National Health Service.

5 OPEN SPACE IN ALDERSHOT

Experience with other recent developments in the town has highlighted, that prospective buyers of property in locations adjoining public open space, see open views and green space – and the peace and quiet that is implied. Once they move in and find that they have to share “their” piece of paradise with the existing community, they create their own reality, for instance by stamping all local youths as drug takers, troublemakers and underage drinkers. This then leads to bitter resentment from existing residents, parents and children/youths alike, particularly if existing playground equipment is removed and local councillor’s call for restraining orders and no go zones for local youngsters [Ref.13].

Without exception, whilst the perceived needs of a tiny minority are satisfied, the community at large loses out, because the open space that was intended to provide for the needs of all sections of the community is turned into an underused, sterile and uninviting buffer zone.

In recent years, Privatisation and the frantic pace of development have resulted in the loss of so many of the open spaces that once belonged to the community (Public Utility Land, School Grounds/Playing fields, Sections of Parks), that the Council has no choice but to use sections of Public Parks for much needed community facilities such as the proposed community centre in the Manor Park or the proposed sports academy in the Aldershot Park [Ref.14].

Both will result in the significant loss of open space within the respective parks, thereby diminishing the parks amenity value both visually and physically.

Although, when questioned, the Council insists that there is no shortage in the provision of Open Space in the town, the figures in the consecutive Local Town Plans for 1994, 1997 and 2000 tell their own story.

In the 1994 LP, a population of 26 000 was “assumed”.
The forecast population for 2001 was 26 500.
In the 1997 LP, the forecast population for 2011 was 26 500.
In the 2000 LP, the forecast population for 20011 is 26 500 [Ref.15].

The actual figure is already in the region of 40 000.

Even with those figures (26 500), a shortfall of 23 % in the Open Space Provision was acknowledged. It should also be noted, that the quoted provision of 77% include sports grounds, playing fields and open space that belongs to the military and are under their control.

The Local Plan also shows that the two “Important Open Areas” (the Queens Parade and the MoD Playing Fields/Mons Hill) that are assigned to Aldershot actually belong to, and remain under the control of, the Army.

A similar shortfall in the Open Space Provision in Farnborough was rectified by the creation of approx. 70 ha. of new and additional Open Space at Southwood, Queen Anne’s Gate and Cove Brook. Most of the Developers Open Space Contributions for the West Gate are used to finance the Southwood Project [Ref16].

Whilst it is acknowledged that the Council’s hand may well have been forced by English Nature’s demands for mitigation for the Thames Valley Special Protection Area [Ref.17], it speaks for itself that all that is left for the People of Aldershot is having to fight even for the tiniest potential additional Open Space such as the Christmas Lodge site.

Negative impact on the local community: The development of the Christmas Lodge site would seriously harm and possible even reduce the Open Space at the Brickfields Country Park. Given the limited opportunities for a new and additional supply of Open Space in Aldershot [Ref.18], and keeping in mind the newly emerged need for mitigation for the Thames Valley SPA, any potential additional Open Space must now be seen as an irreplaceable community resource, the loss of which the town can no longer afford without seriously undermining the health and wellbeing of the community.

With all the above listed factors speaking **against** the development of the Christmas Lodge site, the Aldershot Civic Society would argue that, since Rushmoor has already exceeded its housing target for 2011 [Ref.19] (without counting the Urban Extension!), the relatively small number of new homes that can be achieved at the Christmas Lodge site can only be described as surplus to requirement.

In contrast, due to the existing conditions, the Christmas Lodge site and the Brickfields Country Park have to be seen as one space or unit that is irreplaceable once reduced, damaged/destroyed by development. Only a sympathetic use of the existing buildings and the surrounding land that

preserves the existing environment and its character can prevent such irreparable damage.

With this in mind, the Aldershot Civic Society has examined the opportunities on offer that would result in a solution that would maximise the benefit for the town, its people and its wildlife.

6 NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS

Identified constraints: In this quiet neighbourhood, Noise levels and light pollution need to be kept to a minimum and disturbance of any kind of the areas of importance to wildlife needs to be avoided.

The surrounding residential roads are not suitable for a significant increase in road traffic levels.

Identified needs: The Friends of the Brickfields Country Park, the volunteer group that has maintained the Park since its formation, have no storage facilities for their tools and their meetings are held in the homes of the members. The group works closely with local schools, but there is no sheltered/indoor space for lectures or for the collection/storage of teaching materials. There are no facilities to provide refreshments and there are no toilets for the park.

Global Warming, together with the increased threat to biodiversity, has resulted in a change in Government thinking and policy that emphasises the need for public education in environmental issues and sustainability. They include waste production/disposal, the use of water, air quality, wildlife conservation, the use of energy and our choices in the use of transport - where we go and how we get there.

This is a huge challenge for local authorities and individuals alike, which, first and foremost, requires a willingness to think “outside the box”. It can only succeed if an appropriate financial commitment at the outset creates a sound basis at which the authorities lead by example and invite and inspire individuals to do “their bit”.

As a unique opportunity the Christmas Lodge site is now available to create a social enterprise with a wide range of benefits for the community, affecting not only the Brickfields Park, but also the Manor Park.

7 THE SITE

The Land

The site is on a slope and, in part, on top of a landfill site. This will add very significantly to the costs of any new development.

The financial value of the site is in the land. However, if the existing legislation protecting bio diversity and community interests in the proper manner is fully applied, then the resulting constraints in the development of the site will significantly reduce the area of land available and therefore the value of the site.

The Buildings:

The former residential care home consists of two substantial buildings approx. 25 years old. Whilst HCC reported that the home was no longer meeting with the criteria of the Commission for Social Care inspection, this concerned only the interior layout. The buildings themselves look sound and there is no local awareness of any structural problems.

Without knowledge of the existing interior layout, it is almost impossible to assess the work that would need to be done to adjust the internal layout to the requirements of new users. However, there will be larger rooms that served as communal meeting/dining areas, kitchens etc. Many of the interior walls will be stud walls rather than load bearing structural components of the buildings i.e. the buildings are flexible.

The Northern wing could be adapted for utilitarian uses:

This building has a very substantial floor space on two levels.

The main purpose of the Council Depot in the Manor Park appears to be the storage of machinery and materials.

Why not re-locate the Council Depot from the Manor Park, where it has a very damaging visual impact, to the Christmas Lodge site?

The Council Depot occupies a very prominent location in the Manor Park Conservation Area, but, it appears that little or no consideration is given to the appearance of the site. In its present state, it resembles a poorly maintained industrial site:

- To allow vehicles to drive along the footpath, the screening hedge has been trimmed to a degree it resembles a skeleton rather than a living hedge.

- The buildings are an ill chosen selection of brick, pre-fab concrete and steel and a Polythene tunnel has been added, whilst the existing greenhouse looks empty, dirty and neglected.
- The tool shed and the Weed killer storage tank which form the frontage to the Park are on the whole unsightly and have a very negative impact on the visual quality of the Park.
- The new tin sheet gates on Church Lane East are so cheap and nasty, it beggars believe that this should be inflicted upon a Conservation Area. Moreover, they represent an open invitation for Graffiti.
- The rusty wire mesh gates in the Park are wedged open halfway across the footpath to accommodate vehicular access.



Altogether, the neglect of the Manor Park Depot and the attitude that this neglect demonstrates is nothing to be proud of for those in charge or the People of Aldershot [Ref.20].

Benefit to the community:

- The removal of the Depot could free this location as a more appropriate site for the proposed community centre. At the site of the existing scout hut, the proposed design of the centre would clash with the architectural style of the historic Manor House and the Coach House.

- This problem would not exist at the Depot site however, because the modern design of the centre would be very compatible with the appearance of the adjoining new MPA development.
- It would prevent any further loss of Open Space or trees.
- It would give the Manor Park a much needed focal point and amenity in keeping with the surrounding Conservation Area.

Another option to improve the visual quality of the Manor Park would be to re-locate the Heroes Shrine to site of the Depot.

Again, this would provide the much needed focal point for the park.

Moreover, the Shrine should be regarded as a reminder of the town's historic and present role as "Home of the British Army" and, as such, it should have a prominent place in our daily lives.

In its present, out of the way location, the Heroes Shrine and Garden is reduced to serving as a meeting place for local vandals.

Moreover, since the loss of the large deodar tree, the statue is dwarfed into insignificance by the coach house that now dominates the background.

As a National Memorial, it deserves better. We should be able to be proud of it.



8 ALTERNATIVE USES

The Southern wing of Christmas Lodge, overlooking the BfP, should be reserved for community use:

Benefit to the community:

- Toilet facilities would be available for visitors to the park.
- The Friends of the Brickfields Country Park could have tool storage and meeting and lecture facilities.
- Bird watching is already one of the nations favourite past times and still growing. Why not adapt the existing balcony for bird watching?
- The area of the existing gardens/amenity land is of a sufficient size and with a variety of growing conditions that are very suitable for establishing a **public wildlife demonstration garden.**

Why not create

The “**Brickfields Environmental Sustainability Trust**” (BEST).

Benefit to the community:

The established role of a community centre is to provide space and facilities for the activities of interest groups, i.e. the Scouts, clubs, playgroups and private celebrations and the proposed community centre in the Manor Park will cater for all those needs. With the exception of the Scouts, the activities of those groups support individual interests in isolation, but they are generally not a fertile ground to inspire and promote environmental awareness, Civic Pride or indeed a communal spirit that asks “What can **I** do?”

The BEST Centre should be set up as a working base and research/resource centre for community involvement in RBC services and activities.

The role of BEST would be to address the environmental issues created by Global Warming that have a direct effect upon the local quality of life and the local public purse. It should be the aim of all its activities to create an agenda that promotes community involvement and a good working relationship between the Council and the community. By providing relevant information, by demonstrating effectiveness through practical example and by drawing

together a pool of the individual expertise, creativity and ingenuity that exists in the community, locally sustainable solutions can be found.

Moreover, an acceptance of personal responsibility and Civic Pride can only develop, if the community is directly involved and if residents are enabled to make connections to their own activities.

BEST could be a very powerful educational tool to:

- Provide a fascinating introduction to biodiversity not only to all members of the community but particularly to the children of the nursery/junior schools that are located within a few minutes walking distance. (Education)
- Demonstrate how a habitat works, the interdependence between plants and animals or plant and plant or animal and animal. (Biodiversity)
- Monitor species at Brickfields Park and elsewhere in the Borough and establish and maintain local records. (Community Involvement, Civic Pride, cost savings)
- Demonstrate the compatibility of wildlife gardening with modern ideas and fashions in garden design. This could include a “bee wall or cairn” constructed from building rubble and “environmental” sculpture made from wood leftover (bee nests) from DIY projects. (Biodiversity, Waste Reduction, Community Involvement)
- Maintain and promote biodiversity in the Borough. This could include a Perspex fronted compost heap. (Biodiversity, Waste Reduction).
- Promote awareness of Global Warming and how simple actions can reduce the damaging impact of human activity, i.e. record the changes that have been brought about by the centre, such as locally grown plants – no transport mileage; more permeable surfaces – less run-off, less flooding etc. (Global Warming, Cost Saving)
- Educate the public on weed control. Create a public understanding that the use of weed killers is now restricted to chemicals that have only a short term impact i.e. weed control is a bottomless pit that can never achieve value for money. Whilst few residents would take kindly to being told by the Council to pull the weeds up themselves, the BEST Centre, possibly supported by the Civic Society, could educate the public to do their bit. (Cost Saving)

- Demonstrate the use of permeable surfaces (flowerbeds, gravel and grass) rather than hard standing to prevent/reduce flooding around properties and, during severe weather events, reduce run-off into the public drainage system. Perhaps establish a network of 'Gully Watchers'. (Global Warming, Self Help, Cost Saving)
- Demonstrate/record the surface temperatures of the different surfaces. (Global Warming, heat reduction/personal comfort)
- Demonstrate water saving measures for gardeners and homes (Grey Water).
- Demonstrate alternative energy systems (solar power) and energy saving measures/devices (heat sinks) within buildings and gardens.
- Maintain an "Innovation/Ideas Bank" for the re-use of materials/products and energy/water savings. (Waste Reduction)
- A good website would provide easy access to information, suggestions, new ideas, records and results/achievements.

Within this context:

- Provide an attractive opportunity for healthy outdoor activity for old and young alike. (Public Health)
- Provide a practical and attractive opportunity for involvement in community activities for residents from all walks of life. (Community)
- Create a base which promotes a community spirit and understanding and co-operation between the community and the Council. (Community)
- The wildlife habitats in the Brickfields Country Park and at the Christmas Lodge would be preserved in their entirety. (Biodiversity)

Why not, with the centre working together with the Depot, introduce a scheme in which the centre "adopts" local roundabouts i.e. hardy, drought resistant plants grown on the site are used for the planting of roundabouts and road verges? This would support newly adopted RBC policies. (Sustainability, Civic Pride, Community Involvement, cost savings)

Road verges are regarded as wildlife habitat; many of them are cared for by the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. The centre could work with that organisation to provide local knowledge (records) and practical assistance (maintenance). (Biodiversity, Sustainability, Civic Pride, Community Involvement, Cost Savings)

This could be a practical way to spread the agenda throughout the community, by allowing neighbourhoods to identify their “own patch”, improve it and look after it – and be proud of the achieved changes for the better.

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

For a number of years now, new development was required to make financial contributions towards the creation and maintenance of public Open Space. The formation of the Thames Valley SPA has significantly increased the weight given to the alternative provision of Open Space and/or the improvement of existing Open Space.

The Christmas Lodge site is possibly the last potential additional Open Space that exists within the built-up area of the town and within easy walking distance of thousands of residents.

If the existing legislation protecting bio diversity and community interests in the proper manner, together with the provisions for the SPA, are fully applied, then the resulting constraints in the development of the site will significantly reduce the development potential and therefore the value of the site.

Developers 106 Agreement and SPA contributions could provide a very significant portion of the purchase price.

The First floor of the Southern Wing could be used to provide housing for key workers, thereby providing a steady income for the Trust (BEST). Moreover, occupancy would enhance security on the site.

Possible providers of Grants: HCC Community Buildings Partnership; Defra – Environmental Action Fund; The Lottery Fund, “Breathing Places” etc.

Conclusion

Since the arrival of the Army in Aldershot 150 years ago, life and conditions in the town have been determined by the needs of the military, mainly through the use of land and its limited availability for a ‘normal’ growth and economic development.

Although, the civilian population of Aldershot has always risen to the challenges that came with life in a garrison town, the merger with Farnborough in the 1970’s and the consequent steady decline of the town have left the people disillusioned and disheartened.

Civic Pride and the willingness to get involved are at an all time low and respect for the Council and elected representatives alike is exceedingly difficult to find.

It is self-evident that these attitudes are harming the community and that therefore, they need to change.

However, with a population that has grown suspicious and cynical, this is not an easy task. Experience elsewhere has shown that people need an appropriate vehicle that caters for involvement in an attractive and popular activity that produces visible results with a 'feel good' factor, and that creates conditions in which the community can regain confidence in its self and in the authorities.

A body such as the "Brickfield Environmental Sustainability Trust" (BEST) could just be such a vehicle.

The Aldershot Civic Society would support such a body in every way.

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