

## **Objection To: Planning Application 11/00114/F**

“Demolition, in Part, of Existing Main House and Out Buildings  
and the Erection of a New Residential Dwelling”

Wincote, Cow Lane, Steeple Aston, Oxfordshire, OX25 4SG



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12 July 2011

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# 1. Introduction

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I am objecting to the planning application as a resident of Steeple Aston, and as a former tenant of Wincote. My family and I moved to Wincote in August 2005 and lived there continuously for the best part of 4 years, until we purchased our present property, just half-a-mile away in the same village.

## LOCAL INSIGHT

Because my family actually lived in the property continuously for four years, sent our children to the village school, attended the village church, and generally took part in village life, I believe we are well placed to comment on the proposed development from an absentee landlord.

I am including my own photographs of the property in this document. The aim is to underline the value of the existing property, and to present it in its true light—in contrast to the under-exposed pictures of the interior presented by the developer which give a misleading “dark and dingy” impression of the interior.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

I have divided this document into two main parts, followed by an overview of the regulatory framework:

- The first part is concerned with the proposed demolition of a heritage property within the village Conservation Area. This touches on the very foundations of rural life: Steeple Aston was an “Apple Village”, and this proposal threatens to sever a unique link with our local heritage.
- In the second part, I focus on the replacement “dwelling”, discussing its impact on the village in terms of traffic, highway safety, noise and disturbance, plus visual impact: affecting the Conservation Area, the setting of various listed buildings or monuments—and the broader impact on the heritage landscape.
- The two main sections are followed by discussion of how this proposal fits into the general regulatory framework within which planning decisions must be made. There are various national and local policies in force to protect the character of the area and its landscape, and to constrain replacement dwellings.

At the end of the document I summarize the main points, and show that this proposal cannot be approved within the context of current planning law.

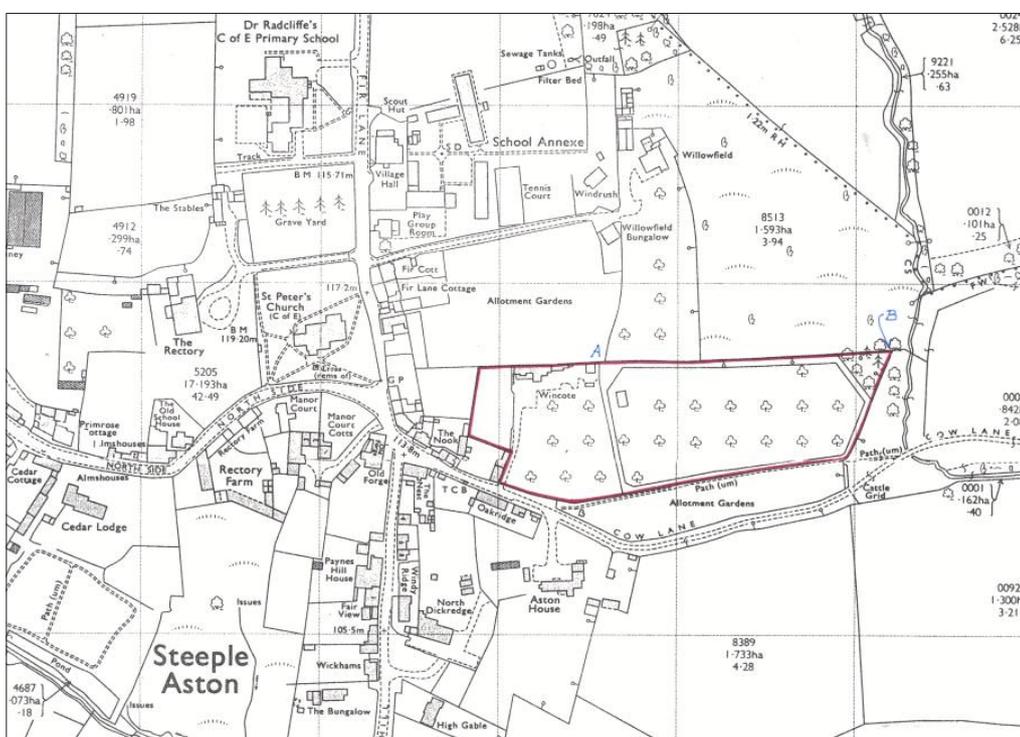
## 2. Protecting our Rural Heritage

In this first part, we consider the existing buildings, gardens and orchard at Wincote: their location, history, and local context. We also discuss the importance of this setting, in relation to the opening countryside, and emphasize the significance of the “heritage asset” and its value for this and future generations (whose protection is enshrined in H.M. Government Planning Policy Statement PPS5).

### CONSERVATION BACKGROUND

Wincote exemplifies the rural vernacular: the “workers’ cottages” that make up the bulk of Steeple Aston’s historic architecture. Built out of locally-hewn stone, it provides a discreet retreat from the bustle of daily life, yet remains open to the countryside, and close to the very centre of the village.

Figure 1: Location map, showing the correct boundaries—as reproduced from Land Registry Title Number ON216623.



### LOCATION

Wincote is the last property on the North side of Cow Lane (other properties continue on the South side). The house and its outbuildings are discreetly tucked away behind substantial hedges, and can only be seen through occasional gaps in the foliage.

The official extent of land ownership is indicated by the red line in Figure 1, which is part of the Land Registry title deeds, a copy of which I purchased on 2 July 2011. (Note that this map does not include some newer buildings to the West of the property, such as “The Longbyre”.)

Figure 2: The existing house as seen from the gardens, showing its relationship to the Grade II\* Listed Church and the neighbouring property, "Longbyre".



Figure 3: View from the orchard, with the Rousham Eyecatcher framed by the boughs of an old apple tree.



Figure 4: Extensive herbaceous borders in the main garden forms a "wildlife" corridor on-axis with the South-facing facade of this property, towards the remaining orchard beyond (with human scalebars).



It is curious that the Land Registry boundary differs from that shown in this planning application. The developer incorrectly claims ownership of a stretch of land leading down to a stream, which we believe is actually owned by a local farmer, Mr. Tim Taylor (who also leases a substantial portion of the Wincote land to the West of this point).

## SETTING

Wincote is very much in character with the surrounding properties, both in terms of architectural style, and scale. It lies on an Eastern axis with the Grade II\*-listed Church (Figure 2), forming a stepped sequence down the natural slopes of the garden, and a very-discreet side-profile to the Grade II\* Listed Rousham Eyecatcher (Figure 3).

It is the setting that really distinguishes the property. Here, close to the heart of Steeple Aston, is the fusion of “town” and “country”. The garden slopes down towards open countryside, with oblique views of the Rousham Eyecatcher—and the house itself has a South-facing aspect, and is full of light<sup>1</sup>.

The gardens (e.g., Figure 4) are full of wildlife: with woodpeckers, pheasants, rabbits (and moles!), foxes, badgers, hedgehogs, grass snakes, butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies—and deer feasting on windfall apples in the orchard.

Wincote is not a grand, stately home. Neither does it have the kind of flashy architectural panache that is currently in vogue. Instead, it has a very English, understated manner. It is a gentle place, full of tranquillity, with a diverse ecosystem. It represents a gentle transition from village to countryside: not a pompous statement, but a modest respect for the natural landscape and its inhabitants.

## HISTORY

Wincote is believed to date back to around 1840 and, as with many rural properties, the current house is a collection of different buildings and styles, including a more modern dining kitchen extension.

For the past 30 years or so, the property has been in possession of the Squire family, who originally used it as a Summer retreat from London. In the last couple of decades, however, the property has been rather neglected. Despite suggestions to the contrary, the house itself is not “semi-derelict” (see Figs. 5–7), and is currently let. The property has been enjoyed—and loved—by a succession of tenants, including many families, and some celebrities: Ann Robinson and the Marquess of Blandford.

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<sup>1</sup> Having lived here for four years, I am surprised by the owner’s assertion that the rooms—apart from the kitchen—are all dark. The opposite is the case! The current property is ideally situated to take full advantage of its South-Facing aspect. It is full of light, and opens directly onto the extensive hedge-lined gardens.

Figure 5: Dining kitchen in the existing house.



Figure 6: Living room in the existing house (leading to the family staircase and study).



Figure 7: Master bedroom with window seat looking out over the South-facing gardens.



## HERITAGE ASSET

Wincote has been identified as a “Heritage Asset” by Cherwell District Council. We welcome this, and in the following section, I explain why this is such a unique, and vulnerable part of our local history.

H.M. Government  
Planning Policy  
Statement 5, HE7.2

### PPS5

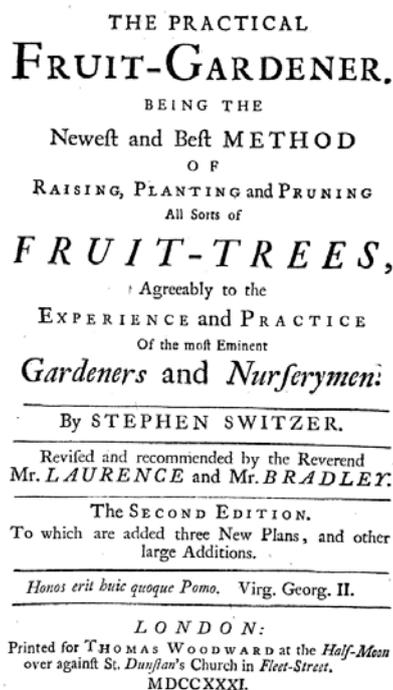
*“In considering the impact of a proposal on any heritage asset, local planning authorities should take into account the particular nature and significance of the heritage asset and the value that it holds for this and future generations. This understanding should be used ... to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset’s conservation and any aspects of the proposals.”*

### WHY IS WINCOTE IMPORTANT?

For centuries, Steeple Aston was famous for its apple orchards. Local people lived and worked amongst the apple trees, harvesting apples for all kinds of purposes. For example, the famous garden designer and early exponent of the English Landscape Garden, Stephen Switzer, wrote<sup>2</sup> in 1731 about the Nonpareil apple trees growing in this parish as being very old,

*“which (as they have it by tradition) were first brought out of France and planted by a Jesuit in Queen Mary’s or Queen Elizabeth’s time”* (reproduced in facsimile in Fig. 8).

Figure 8: The Practical Fruit-Gardener references the unique Apples of the Astons, back in 1731.



### 140 *The Practical Fruit-Gardener.*

and it must be observ'd, that the longer they hang on the Tree the better their Colour is.

*Of the Nonpareil.* The Nonpareil shall bring up the Rear in this List of Apples, being a Fruit so deservedly valued for the Briskness of its Taste, the lovely Russet of its Coat, so much improv'd if expos'd to the Sun, that even the Colour equals the finest Russets, and the Taste is incomparably better. This Apple is no Stranger in *England*; though it might have its Original from *France*, yet there are Trees of them about the *Astons* in *Oxfordshire*, of about a hundred Years old, which (as they have it by Tradition) were first brought out of *France* and planted by a Jesuit in *Queen Mary* or *Queen Elizabeth's* Time. The great Improvement that is made to the Bearing of this Fruit as well as Golden Pippin on *Paradise Stocks*, is well known, and their beautiful Aspects in Pots and in the Middle of a Desert, has been the Glory of one of the most generous Encouragers of Gardening this Age has produced, I mean the Right Honourable the Lord *Castlemain*.

Wincote is unique, in being the last-surviving example of an historic orchard preserved in relationship with the original workers' cottages. Nowhere else in Steeple Aston do we see this relationship preserved. Other orchards have been built on, or divided into smaller lots and separated from their buildings.

<sup>2</sup> in “The Practical Fruit-Gardener”, printed for Thomas Woodward, Fleet Street, London, 1741.

That Wincote preserves this historic *setting* is spectacularly important! Demolishing those cottages (which form the present house), on the grounds that “there is nothing remarkable about the buildings” is tantamount to vandalism. Who cares if the buildings are not architecturally “significant” (whatever that is supposed to mean). It is the *setting* of those buildings, in relationship to the orchard, that is so important.

### MISCONCEPTIONS

The developer asserts, in his Design & Access statement, that the existing buildings at Wincote “*make a negative contribution to the Conservation Area*”. This is absurd:

- The main dwelling at Wincote is widely regarded as an attractive building, consistent with the traditional stone-built character of the neighbourhood.
- Arguably, none of the buildings in Steeple Aston are particularly significant from a purely-architectural standpoint; but “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”, and it is this collective whole that distinguishes our core Conservation Area.
- These buildings, constructed from locally-quarried stone, in a modest and unassuming manner, may not catch the eye of an ambitious London architect, but they do define the character of the area. Here we find a human expression of the underlying geology: an element of living history linking today’s generation with past villagers and, if this proposal is rejected, with future generations as well.

Local materials, local people, living amongst a shared landscape. These are all expressions of a shared heritage which should be preserved.

### THE CASE FOR PRESERVATION

In closing this section, I wish to summarize the following key points:

- The existing gardens, hedges and orchard provide a rich, diverse habitat—including for protected species such as badgers, hedgehogs and grass snakes. Has the developer carried out a survey for slow-worms?
- The existing property is fully serviceable as a family home.
- There is ample space available for a sympathetic modern extension on the footprint of the existing outbuildings.
- Wincote is justifiably designated an “Heritage Asset”. It represents the last-remaining example of local people living and working amongst the apple trees in this, the historic “Apple Village”.

PPS5 requires planners to take this unique heritage into account, both for existing, and for future generations. I urge you not to discard our heritage in the interest of short-term “development”.

### 3. Inappropriate Development

In this part we move onto the proposed demolition of Wincote, and its replacement with a large accommodation/entertainment complex with six separate garden bedroom/apartments. We discuss the ramifications of the proposed designs, using standard planning criteria.

#### TRAFFIC IMPACT AND HIGHWAY SAFETY

##### TRAFFIC IMPACT

This proposal is misleading in its description of parking arrangements. It claims to reduce the amount of parking from 7 to 6 spaces. This does not seem consistent with the plans, and we believe the proposal will increase the volume of traffic using Cow Lane:

- The existing parking at Wincote is limited to around 4 permanent parking spaces (although if one were to park end-to-end along the driveway, it might be possible to pack in more cars). However, for day-to-day parking, the total number of convenient parking spaces is probably 4 (5 at a pinch).
- The plans submitted with this proposal clearly show 6 double-length parking spaces, as marked out by trees. The total number of parking spaces is therefore 12.

We therefore have an *increase* in the amount of parking from 4 to 12. These have been moved from the present, discreet location—away from neighbouring properties—to a new location directly off Cow Lane. This dramatically raises the impact of property traffic, with manoeuvring and general access pushed out to Cow Lane (Fig. 9).

Figure 9: Cow Lane, opposite the entrance to Wincote.



## HIGHWAY SAFETY

Cow Lane is very narrow at this point, and presents serious challenges for traffic movement and safety:

1. There are two residential properties beyond the Wincote entrance, that require access at all times: Oakridge and Aston House.
2. Further access is required for fields and farm buildings at the West end of Cow Lane. This has included the emergency services—called to at least one major incident (suspected arson) in the past few years.
3. Access along Cow Lane is required at all times for Railway contractors, working on the Oxford–Birmingham main line, which intersects Cow Lane further West.
4. A Public Footpath runs along this section of Cow Lane. This is part of an Oxfordshire Circular Walk to Upper and Lower Heyford and Rousham—and is very well used, especially by dog walkers and young families.
5. There is no pavement along this section of Cow Lane, thereby putting pedestrians directly in the path of traffic. This includes young children riding their bicycles along the public footpath or playing outside their homes in Cow Lane.

The current proposal, with its increase in parking provision, will add pressure to an already dangerous road. This will be exacerbated if, as we suspect, this is not a conventional family residence, but is actually designed for parallel occupancy via the six “apartment” bedrooms. For example, the “contemplation pools” in each of the six gardens might suggest an informal corporate retreat (perhaps for the developer’s colleagues).

Finally, there is the not-inconsiderable problem of Paines Hill. At the junction with Cow Lane (Fig. 10), access is extremely difficult, with poor sight lines, and a staggered cross-roads.

Figure 10: Paines Hill at the junction of Cow Lane (right) and North Side.



Immediately to the South, Paines Hill narrows so that two vehicles can barely pass (Fig. 11). This widely-used road connects Lower Heyford, Steeple Aston, Middle Aston and North Aston and is very congested at school access times. Add school coaches and farm vehicles into the mix, and one can see why the possibility of yet more traffic is regarded as such a toxic issue by many local residents.

Figure 11: Paines Hill, looking South from the junction with Cow Lane.



## PRIVACY, VISUAL IMPACT

### SCALE

The proposed building is of truly gargantuan scale. The ground area of the dwelling (excluding the terrace, coach house, Summer house, car park...) is nearly 7 times that of the dwelling it replaces, and more than 5 times the size of the largest neighbouring dwelling (Aston House: an example of a “large family home”), as summarized in Table 1:

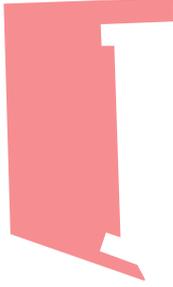
	Wincote	Aston House	Proposed
Ground Plan:			
Relative Area:	1 / 6.6	1 / 5.4	1 / 1

Table 1: Comparison of the relative ground floor plans and areas for the existing Wincote, Aston House (the largest neighbouring property) and the proposed new dwelling. I have excluded garage blocks, car parks and out buildings, in order to focus on the sizes of the actual dwellings. These measurements were made using high-resolution vector graphic overlays above the developer-supplied site plans.

In section 8.5.8 of his Design & Access Statement, the developer tries to justify this “substantial scale” on the grounds that:

1. *“the building itself fits within the urban context”.*

What is this supposed to mean? Steeple Aston is not an “urban context”; it is a rural community, situated in a C13 area of High Landscape Value!

2. *“a large family home fits entirely within the history of the village itself”.*

Again, this is a meaningless statement. There are large, medium and small family homes all over the village. However, this historic conservation core comprises small workers’ cottages—not millionaire mansions. The developer’s attempt at justifying the scale only serves to reinforce its inappropriateness.

At this point one ought to consider the size of the development with respect to the plot of land available. Putting aside for one moment our objection to bulldozing a beautiful orchard garden, it is clear that a substantial portion of the plot (from just above the tennis court to the eastern boundary) is actually unavailable for development, being classed as agricultural land. This leaves a much smaller pocket of land, encompassing the Upper Garden and the lawns South of the existing dwelling, for development. The present development now covers a significant part of that area.

If we now examine the impact on the local neighbourhood (Fig. 12), things are even more dramatic. A combination of the sheet scale of the proposed building, and moving the dwelling to the West, impacts severely on all the neighbouring properties: The Longbyre, The Nook, Lockhall Cottage and Oakridge (plus other properties on Cow Lane and Fir Lane, such as Velator, Applegate, Cowslip Cottage, Church Cottage and Merlins).

Figure 12: "Before" (left) and "After" (right) maps showing the relative sizes of the current (black) and proposed (red) buildings, in relation to neighbouring properties (blue).



Increasing the scale of the property would appear to be legitimate grounds for objection: precedent exists in other planning applications of developers being forced to scale back their projects, to match the original. For example, the conversion of the former Leonard Cheshire home in Adderbury.

## CHARACTER

The new design is out of keeping with neighbouring properties. The massive timber-and-glass facade of the predominant Eastern Elevation (Fig. 13) does not match anything else in the village. It is a totally alien design, with an outrageous visual impact.

Figure 13: Proposed Eastern elevation for new building (taken from the Design & Access Statement).



In Section 8.5.8 of his Design & Access statement, the developer tries to justify the bizarre character of the proposed development, based on two assertions about the village:

1. The character of the village is defined by its evolution.
2. There is a variety of building ages, styles and sizes.

The first statement is meaningless: simply noting that some aspects of the village have changed over time, is not sufficient justification for allowing a totally alien structure to be teleported onto the lawn at Wincote. All villages evolve, but their success depends on the organic nature of the evolution. The present imposition, in the heart of the historic conservation core, is entirely inorganic!

The second statement is simply not true—but it crops up again, and again, throughout the Design & Access statement as if the developer were clutching at straws. Steeple Aston may have a variety of architecture—particularly the housing estates towards the fringes; however, the context of the present proposal does not concern 1960’s housing estates, but the historic conservation core of the village, which is remarkably coherent, in terms of architectural sizes, styles and building materials.

Having successfully eliminated these two arguments, we encounter a third assertion, which is that “any development must be of high quality”. Here we entirely agree with the developer: the development *must* be of high quality. However, the perception of “quality” can be subjective, and I for one find the proposal to be a rather *low-quality* design, more reminiscent of an office building or retail superstore, than a domestic dwelling. Again, it is the character of the design that fails to match the character of the area.

## LOCAL IMPACT

The new building is located in a most insensitive way: right up against three neighbouring properties: Lockhall Cottage, The Nook and The Longbyre (incorrectly labelled as “Church Cottage” in the Design & Access Statement). To make matters worse, this proposed building “turns its back” on these properties—and the village in general—facing away from the village:

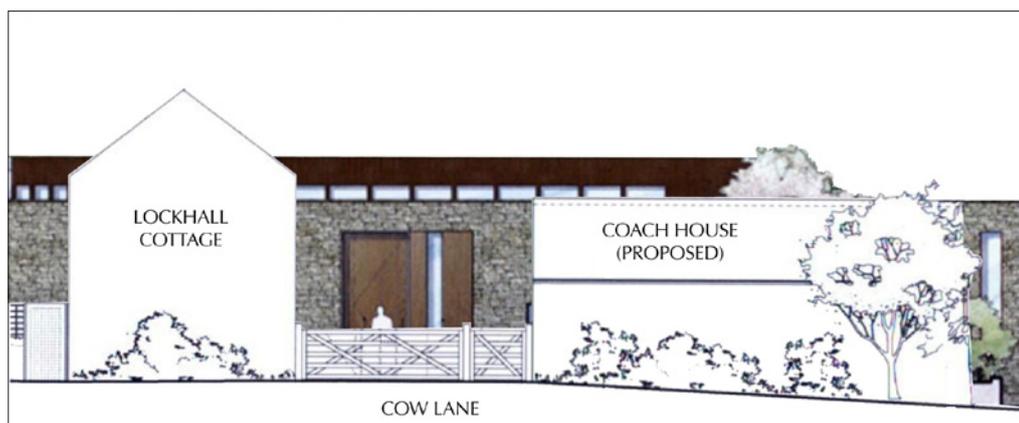
- Local residents lose the natural “breathing space” that Wincote currently affords.
- They lose the existing hedge, which screens their properties from the Western edge of Wincote. Their privacy is thus breached.
- They gain—if “gain” is the right word—an ugly stone wall, butting up against their property and cutting out light.
- Lockhall Cottage gets a “Waste Recycling and Disposal Facility” right under their bedroom window.

This proposal dramatically changes the views from Cow Lane (Figs. 14 & 15): one of the most idyllic parts of the village, and the starting point for most local walks.

Figure 14 View from Cow Lane along the existing driveway at Wincote. All this greenery will go in the proposed plan.



Figure 15: Computer simulation of the visual impact of this development (to scale).



## LANDSCAPE IMPACT

The open gardens at Wincote currently provide a clear outlook towards the Grade II\* Listed Rousham Eyecatcher, constructed in 1740 by William Kent as part of the vista for the Romantic gardens at Rousham House.

- The present Wincote house is South-facing, and so presents a very modest, side-on aspect to the Rousham Eyecatcher (Fig. 16).
- Its proposed replacement presents a “full frontal view” (Fig. 17). This will, in our opinion seriously mar the view from the Eyecatcher. (Seen from other angles, this new building will also affect the view of our church, also Grade II\* listed.)

Figure 16: Existing view from the Rousham Eyecatcher towards Steeple Aston (photo courtesy of Matthew Butcher).

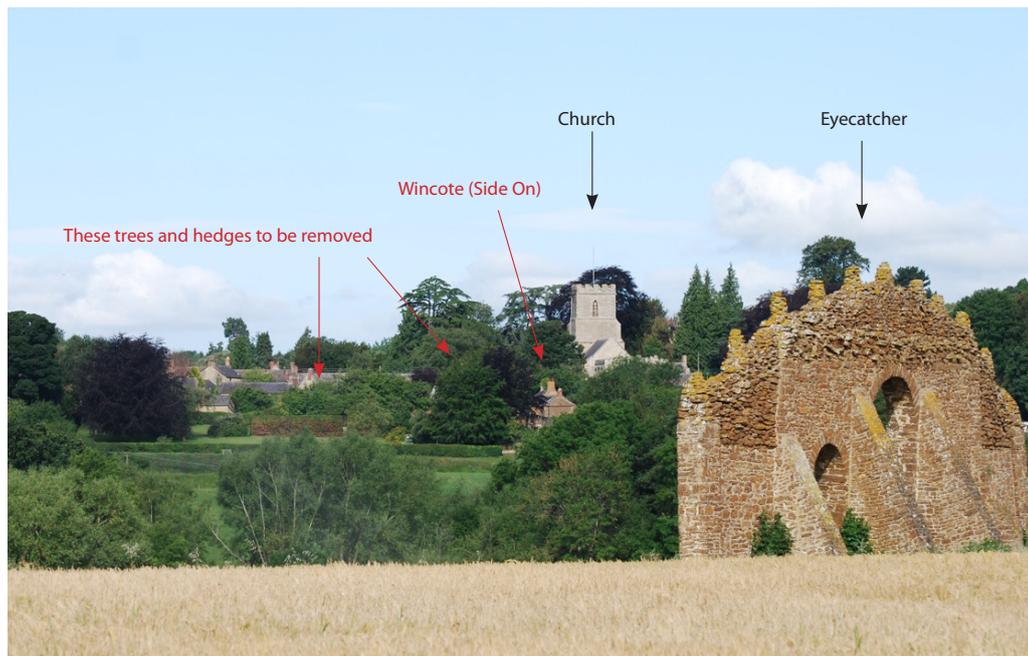


Figure 17: Computer simulation of the view, showing the new building, as scaled from the developer's plans.



To quote from a Conservation Report on an earlier application in close proximity (Aston House, Cow Lane, reference 09/00179/F),

Conservation Report  
for planning proposal  
09/00179/F

*this development would appear incongruous, reflecting nothing of the size or style of vernacular architecture found throughout the village... the proposal does not enhance the setting of the listed structure, since one of the quintessential aspects of the romantic garden is 'the views'.*

## NOISE AND DISTURBANCE

### 1. DURING CONSTRUCTION

This proposal entails the removal and remodelling of large areas of earth. This is a massive undertaking, with heavy equipment required. The disturbance to surrounding properties will be horrendous.

- Given the close proximity to neighbouring properties of all this excavation, we are concerned about the danger of undermining those properties—either directly, or through vibrations.
- This work is being carried out on a hillside with soft clay, and abundant natural springs.
- Has a full-scale soil geology/engineering study been carried out?
- It is not clear where all the earth and rubble will be taken: whether this will be reused on site, or transported off-site in fleets of heavy trucks, to be dumped elsewhere.
- The noise and disruption caused by this will be horrendous! Steeple Aston is served by only narrow roads, with many cottages opening directly onto the street. Properties along Cow Lane, Paines Hill, North Side and/or South Side, will all be affected.
- Following the earthworks, the actual construction of this large building will cause further noise and disruption throughout the village.

### 2. FOLLOWING CONSTRUCTION

This proposal seeks to transform Wincote from a modest family home, to a large-scale accommodation/entertainment complex (which could be six semi-independent residences). This means at least a six-fold increase in the potential disturbance:

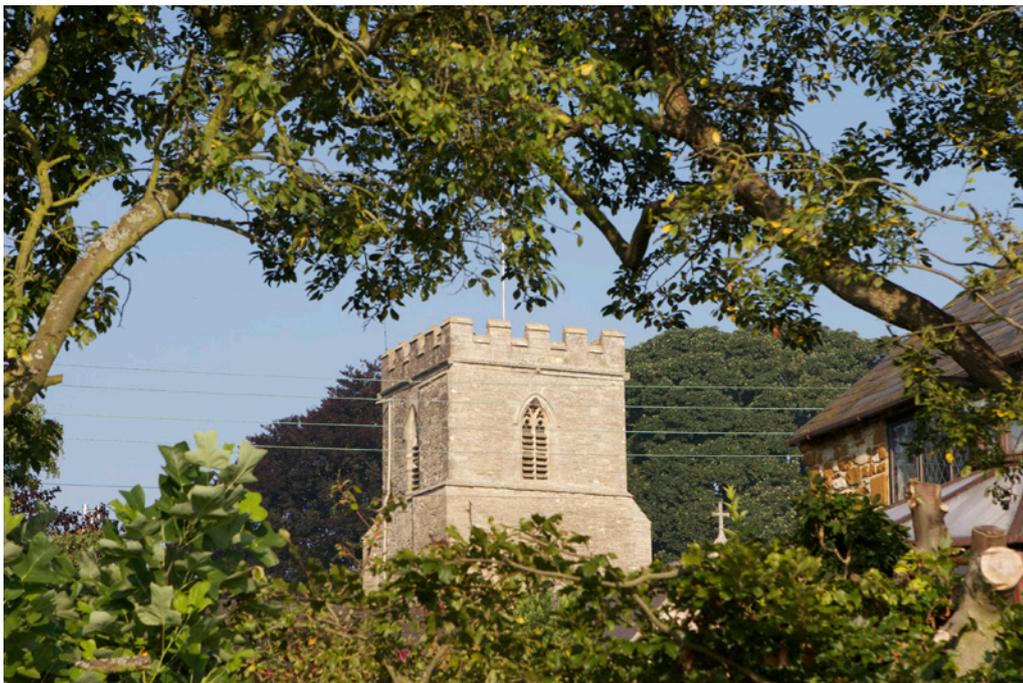
- More regular comings-and-goings of traffic along Cow Lane.
- Weekend parties disturbing the peace and tranquillity of this part of the village.
- The individual “garden apartments” and the outside seating/entertainment areas (including a roof terrace!) are situated much closer to the neighbouring properties than for the current property, and will therefore cause a much greater disturbance.
- The parking area has been moved from its current, discreet location, to a spot right up against Cow Lane, and directly opposite Oakridge. This makes the impact of car movements much greater, including slamming of car doors—and at night, the illuminated parking spaces will cause a visual disturbance.
- An “air-handling system” is mentioned—which we interpret as air conditioning—but it is not clear where this is to be located. Usually, such devices are located on the roof top, run continuously, and can be very noisy!

## IMPACT ON THE CHARACTER OF THE AREA

Conservation of our heritage is important—that’s why we have Conservation Areas, and why some properties are listed, or designated as “Heritage Assets”—as in the case of Wincote. This proposal is particularly dangerous, however, because it affects the historic conservation core of Steeple Aston, arguably the most precious heritage in our village:

- The proposed development completely dwarfs the scale of any neighbouring building (Fig. 12 and Table 1).
- The majority of neighbouring properties are all stone-built, artisan cottages. The proposed structure is vastly out-of-character, from a purely-visual perspective.
- The timber-fronted design of this proposed property is also at odds with virtually the entire village.
- This development will impair the view of the most-important building in the village: our Grade II\* Listed Church (Fig. 18). This is a key focal point of the village, and provides a visual reference as seen from the countryside, including much-travelled walks from the Heyfords and Rousham. By dominating this section of our landscape (and, we believe, partially-obscuring the church) this proposal makes a **negative impact** on the character of this area.

Figure 18: The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Steeple Aston—as viewed from the proposed development site.



## EFFECT ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, INCLUDING TREES

This proposal seeks to destroy existing hedgerows and wildlife habitats, replacing them with a sterile lawn and a contrived “new planting” that does not compensate for the magnitude of the environmental destruction:

- This proposal will destroy the remaining orchard, replacing it with asphalt for a 12-space car park. The claim that those old trees will simply be replanted is absurd: trees like this rarely survive upheaval.
- All other trees on the South lawn are apparently to be removed (as far as one can tell from the plans). This includes mature specimens and some beautiful fruit trees.
- The existing hedgerow alongside the driveway will be destroyed
- The existing hedgerow along the Western boundary of the property will be removed.
- The existing herbaceous border and its pair of mature hedgerows that form a ceremonial passageway to the existing property (and a visual reference to the historic orchard), will be eliminated. These provide a vital nature corridor, and their loss will be irreplaceable.
- The existing beech hedge alongside the current parking area will be eliminated. It was the preservation of this beech hedge that was used to justify the removal of a magnificent Golden Leylandii tree in an earlier planning proposal (09/00079/TCA).
- The hedgerow that separates the tennis court from the house will be destroyed.

There are also serious ramifications for drainage. The proposed “lake” will flood land owned by a local farmer, Mr. Tim Taylor.

Figure 19: The South Garden at Wincote, as viewed from the remaining orchard, showing some of the hedges and borders.



## 4. Inconsistent with Official Planning Policies

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In this final part, we consider the legal and regulatory context for this development, both in terms of national, and local planning policies. We also re-visit the architectural merit of the proposal, as regards a possible “exemption case”. Finally, we present our own suggestion for more sensible and sustainable development of the site.

### GENERAL POINTS

#### GENERAL PLANNING LAW

Before we consider specific policy frameworks, we do need to question the very reason for this proposed development. Just because the existing house is alleged to be small and dark (untrue!) and not suitable for elderly members of the family to use the stairs, does not justify its demolition! It is well established in planning law, that suitability for a specific purpose, or disability is *not* a reason for permission to be granted.

In the present case, we have a four-bedroom house with three bathrooms. Surely, the developer could simply add a ground-floor extension to provide the requisite space? The fact that the steep staircase may be unsuitable for an unspecified individual is completely irrelevant to this application<sup>3</sup>.

#### SUSTAINABILITY

The developer would apparently have us believe that Wincote is derelict and needs to be torn down. Interesting then that a succession of tenants have been willing to pay in excess of £26,000 a year to rent the place!

The truth is that Wincote is structurally sound. Yes, the roof could probably do with some work, as could the windows and paintwork—and the hot water system needs to be upgraded to modern energy-efficiency standards. All these things could—and should—have been done by the owners, during the 14-or-so years the property has been let. Or was this a sign of deliberate neglect, in the hope that they could then apply to have the property demolished?

Surely it is more sustainable to maintain and repair this structure (with appropriate extension), than to tear it down and start again?

#### QUALITY AND INNOVATION

This proposal could have been an opportunity to provide a genuinely inspiring architectural element into a successful village. Good-quality architectural design has the

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<sup>3</sup> Though it is worth noting that the proposed new building hardly offers a solution to impaired access, containing as it does multiple levels, separate staircases to each bedroom, and two spiral staircases to the upper levels!

potential to enhance the natural setting, and the juxtaposition of old and new elements can be very appealing.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case here. We have a relatively plain design—a box—which is presented on a massive scale much like any other commercial development. Where is the genius in that? We see these uninspiring designs littering the margins of our towns, festooned with retail logos. Good architecture is more than just bricks and mortar. It is also about understanding location, context, and people. It is about the “soul” of the place. In my opinion, this is not good architecture. This design lacks soul.

## NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

The government's policy on housing in rural areas is presented in *Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas*. This contains a special "fast track" option for buildings of architectural merit. Of particular note are paragraphs 10 and 11:

Planning Policy  
Statement 7:  
Sustainable  
Development in Rural  
Areas

10. *Isolated new houses in the countryside will require special justification for planning permission to be granted ...*
11. *Very occasionally the exceptional quality and innovative nature of the design of proposed, isolated new house may provide this special justification for granting planning permission.*

Whilst we can argue about quality and innovation, paragraph 10 does refer to isolated new houses in the countryside. The proposed development—within metres of other houses—is hardly isolated. We therefore do not feel that the exemption, given in paragraph 11 can be applied here. In other words, this proposal must be judged on the standard criteria that would apply to any other village development. There should be no special exemptions!

Additional policies with regard to the historic environment are given in *Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment*. In particular, clause HE7.2 does require that local planning authorities take into account the value of the heritage asset that it holds for this, and future generations. I have tried to emphasize this value in Section 2.

## LOCAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

Since the developer is trying to claim that the existing house is unfit and substandard and needs to be replaced, we can invoke the relevant clause in our adopted local plan. For Cherwell District Council, this is clause H17, covering one-for-one replacement of an existing “unfit or substandard dwelling”. Paragraph 2.75 states:

Adopted Local Plan,  
paragraph 2.75.

*The protection of the character of the countryside will be a primary objective in all cases, and proposals for substantially larger and more conspicuous dwellings in the landscape will be resisted.*

We note that the proposed development is substantially larger and more conspicuous than the building it replaces.

Clause H17 is to be retained in the new policy framework, outlined in the Draft Core Strategy. This strategy also includes a vision for rural communities such as Steeple Aston:

“Our Vision for  
Cherwell District”,  
Draft Core Strategy,  
February 2011

*We will cherish, protect and enhance our distinctive natural and built environment. Cherwell will maintain its rural character where its landscapes, its vast range of natural and built heritage and its market towns define its distinctiveness.*

Note the words “cherish” and “protect” in relation to the distinctive natural and built environment.

Policy SD11 in the draft Core Strategy also specifies that:

Policy SD11: Local  
Landscape Protection  
and Enhancement

*Proposals will not be permitted if they would:*

- *Cause undue visual intrusion into the open countryside*
- *Be inconsistent with local character*
- *Harm the setting of settlements, buildings, structures or other landmark features*

The present proposal most definitely causes visual intrusion into the open countryside. It is inconsistent with local character—both in terms of design and scale—and clearly harms the setting of the historic conservation core of Steeple Aston, its Church and the Rousham Eyecatcher.

Policy SD13 further emphasizes the need for sensitive siting and high-quality design.

In particular:

Policy SD13: The Built Environment

*New developments should:*

- *Respect local topography and landscape features, including ... landmarks, features or views, in particular within designated landscapes, within the Cherwell Valley and within conservation areas and their setting.*
- *Preserve and enhance designated historic assets, features, areas and their settings, and ensure new development is sensitively sited and integrated*
- *Respect the traditional pattern of routes, spaces, blocks, plots, enclosures and the form, scale and massing of buildings*

We again argue that this design does *not* respect landmarks or views within the Cherwell Valley, the Steeple Aston conservation area, and their setting.

This proposal would *destroy* a designated historic asset (the present Wincote house). The new development is *not* sensitively sited, and it is most-definitely not integrated.

Finally, the new development does not respect the traditional pattern of scale and massing of buildings within the local conservation area.

### **A Sensible Alternative?**

It seems sad to tear down an attractive—and perfectly-serviceable—building to make way for what can only be described as an architectural vanity project. Does Mr. Squire really want to be remembered for his “Aston Eyesore”? Whilst this project might be acceptable in a more isolated setting—perhaps on a remote cliff-top overlooking the sea, it is simply not right for this location.

I would like to see an inspired, modernistic extension to the existing Wincote property—presented “side on” over the footprint of the attached out-buildings. This would take advantage of the South-facing views and light (ignored in these plans) and would not seek to arrogantly dominate the setting of both our Grade II\* Listed church, the Grade II\* listed Rousham Eyecatcher, and its heritage landscape.

## SUMMARY

This proposal is completely unacceptable for the following reasons:

1. The alleged justification for this development (unsuitability/size of the existing dwelling) is not legally valid. The owners should either sell the property and purchase another, or consider a sympathetic extension.
2. Even *if* the property were genuinely “unfit or substandard”, the scale of the proposed development is not consistent with planning policy H17, which requires one-for-one replacements to be of similar scale.
3. The design of the proposed building is inconsistent with the visual character of the surrounding conservation area (Cherwell draft core strategy, SD11).
4. The proposed location, orientation, and design of the East elevation will cause undue visual intrusion into the surrounding countryside. This is also inconsistent with Cherwell policy SD11.
5. The proposal will harm the setting of listed buildings and monuments.
6. An exception condition cannot be valid, as this property is *not* an isolated country location (PPS7). Furthermore, the architectural design lacks sufficient merit for any consideration.

I urge you to reject this proposal.





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