

LAUNTON PARISH COUNCIL

Mrs Jane Olds, Parish Clerk

13 Oak Close, BICESTER, Oxfordshire OX26 3XD

01869 247171 clerk@launton-pc.gov.uk

www.launton-pc.gov.uk

10 June 2021

Launton Parish Council has considered Bicester Motion's planning application reference 21/01224/OUT for Land at former RAF Bicester, OX26 5HA with the proposal "Outline planning application for Automotive Experience Quarter comprising Commercial, Business and Services uses (Class E), Light Industrial (Class B2), Local Community and Learning Uses (Class F) and vehicle circuits (Sui Generis) with all matters reserved aside from that of access)".

The Parish Council objects to the proposals on the following grounds:

1. Irreparable damage to a nationally, if not internationally, important heritage asset in particular the flying field which is explicitly part of the Conservation Area.
2. Noise nuisance to nearby residents.
3. Aggravated Traffic problems on an already inadequate road network.
4. Intrusion of new buildings into protected, heritage views
5. Change of Use

1. Irreparable damage to a nationally, if not internationally, important heritage asset in particular the flying field which is explicitly part of the Conservation Area.

It seems clear that little, if any, thought has been given to avoiding impact on the heritage assets; in particular, the unique and irreplaceable fully open and omnidirectional grass flying field.

The Parish Council fully supports and endorses Historic England's strong objection.

No evaluation seems to have been made of the loss of the historic fully grass flying field.

In their Listing Entry, Historic England has stated:

"It retains, better than any other military airbase in Britain, the layout and fabric relating to both pre-1930s military aviation and the development of Britain's strategic bomber force in the period up to 1939. ***The grass flying field still survives with its 1939 boundaries largely intact***, bounded by a group of bomb stores built in 1928-1929 and airfield defences built in the early stages of the war."

In Cherwell District Council's own Conservation Area Appraisal from 2008, the flying field is explicitly mentioned as being covered by the Conservation Area and is one of the four main identifiable character zones. The Appraisal states:

9.7.1 The Flying Field

“The grass flying field is a remarkable survival of its type, and particularly of the various phases of RAF Bicester up to 1939. Although the World War II expansion of the airfield with the perimeter dispersal system is now largely gone, extremely important fabric of the 1920s-1930s, bounded by a perimeter track of the World War 2 period, survives, together with early World War 2 defences and bomb stores. It is this interrelationship, taken with the preservation of RAF Bicester as a whole which ***attaches a national, if not international significance to the flying field*** and its wider context.”

10.3 Preservation

“Aspects of the site identified as essential and requiring preservation: ...

6. The open nature of the flying field, free of structures or trees and shrubs.

7. The views across the flying field ***particularly from the control tower***, the hangars and the pill boxes.”

The applicant consistently appears to be claiming that the views across the airfield will not be compromised by the building of the circuit or the building of the Experience Quarter, neither of which the Parish Council believes is correct.

The view across the flying field from the Watch Tower (control tower), explicitly mentioned as requiring preservation in the Conservation Area Appraisal, will certainly be massively harmed by the imposition of motor circuit tracks into the existing heritage view of a fully grassed flying field.

The Aviation Impact Assessment gives no consideration whatsoever to the heritage aspects of the airfield.

In the opinion of the Parish Council, the artists’ impressions of what the airfield will look like are extremely misleading and disingenuous, particularly in relation to the colouring of the airfield and the circuit (which is assumed would be tarmac).

The Parish Council takes issue with the applicant’s claim that the proposal will “not cause demonstrable harm to the topography or character of the landscape” or that building three car circuits within it “will not change the underlying open character of the flying field”.

The Parish Council has noted that the applicant has carefully avoided describing it as a “grass flying field”: they almost seem to be suggesting that, provided that it still remains “open” (i.e. without any buildings), it would be perfectly acceptable to concrete over the entire flying field!

The Parish Council further notes, in the applicant’s Design and Access Statement, the way the heritage value of the completely open grass flying field has been reduced to “retaining and enhancing the continued use of the grass runways for aviation”. However, this is purely a functional statement, not related to any form of heritage consideration.

In the Heritage Report Summary of the site's key characteristics, it is noted that references to the omnidirectional grass flying field have been reduced to 'grass runways'.

On page 8 of the Heritage Report under the heading of 'Summary of Impact' reference is made to "in that the proposals will involve building tracks within the northern corner of the flying field there will be some harm to the significance of the perimeter track and character of the flying field. This harm will be less than substantial and has been minimised by design and landscaping." However, this aspect of the report is out of date: there is now much greater intrusion of circuits into the flying field than seems to have been taken into consideration in the report.

Another important view of airfields is from the air, as seen on Google Maps Satellite View. Currently the aerial view shows the original omnidirectional grass flying field, an impressive, extremely rare and valuable sight. Once the bulk of it is covered in motor circuits, leaving just two runways unmolested, all that will be lost.

The value of a heritage asset lies not with whether it is still used for its original purpose: just because nearby developments and noise concerns have allegedly prevented continued use of the whole field as an omnidirectional flying field does not mean that all those parts of the flying field that are no longer available as functioning runways can therefore be redeveloped and tarmacked over!

The consequential loss to the historical heritage has not been properly evaluated.

It is clear from the description of how the tracks will be built that there will be barriers and/or tyre walls with grass bunds which will cause significant intrusion into a previously flat grass flying field.

2. Noise nuisance to nearby residents.

The Parish Council supports the concerns of many residents surrounding the site with regards to noise.

If CDC is minded to approve this application, the Parish Council believes that very significant restrictions should be placed on both the number of operational days and the noise levels permitted on those days. In particular, in the Parish Council's view, unsilenced cars should have no place on the site. But if unsilenced cars are permitted, then they should be on a very limited number of days per year.

The Parish Council was concerned that the Bicester Motion Noise Management Plan does not appear to be available, and it is therefore not possible to make considered judgement.

3. Aggravated Traffic problems on an already inadequate road network.

The Transport Assessment appears to focus on normal day-to-day traffic flows not on the concentrated flows on the days when there is an event. Anyone who lives in the vicinity of the area is very aware of the major traffic problems that already ensue when there is an event on.

The Parish Council believes that this development will only aggravate the traffic impact and make an existing bad situation worse.

4. Intrusion of new buildings into protected, heritage views.

The buildings will further intrude into the views across the flying field and the countryside beyond, which are supposed to be conserved.

5. Change of Use.

Bearing in mind this application proposes a significant change of use to the airfield, the Parish Council trusts that the appropriate approvals will be sought to clarify the change of use. The noise from cars is very different from aircraft noise.

Despite the fact that a Master Plan is referred to in some of the supporting documents, the Parish Council noted that there still did not appear to be a formal Master Plan covering the entire site.

The Parish Council is fully in favour of restoring the perimeter track: but once development within the flying field itself is permitted, the heritage asset is lost forever.

The Parish Council trusts that this is of help to the Planning Committee.