

St Laurence, Caversfield



Response to the North West Bicester Development Proposal, Outline Planning Application 21/01630/OUT

12th October 2021

This is the response of the District Church Council of the Church of St Laurence Caversfield, and has been agreed by the Council members. We will be grateful for our views to be reported to the Council when it considers the outline planning application 21/01630/OUT

Background

St Laurence's Church is located adjacent to Caversfield House, alongside the B4100, the Bicester to Banbury road, immediately opposite Home Farm and the proposed new development. Home Farm has been used for many years almost as an extension of the church grounds for outdoor services and events.

The development proposal recognises the importance of the church building as the centre of local heritage, with sightlines designed to give prominence to the church and churchyard. We welcome this, and see the church as a hub between the new housing developments in North West Bicester and 'old' Caversfield to the East.

The building itself is Grade II* listed and dates at least to the 12th Century, with some visible evidence of an older Saxon church on the site. It houses the oldest inscribed bell in the UK, several rare brasses and is renowned in North Oxfordshire for its beauty and special character. The churchyard is home to 25 graves of servicemen killed during the Second World War, one of the largest Commonwealth War Grave sites in North Oxfordshire.

The church is the only surviving standing building of the medieval settlement of Caversfield, this stretched from the church, and probably from the site of the present Home Farm, to the north-east and then north roughly aligned with the existing brook, which turns to the north. The present Caversfield House is on the site of the medieval manor house and lidar images held by the County Council show that there was a street with tofts (house enclosures) on either side of it on the other side of the stream. There is also a surviving medieval fish pond.

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Overall, there are significant remains of the village visible in the landscape and it should be regarded as a coherent feature in the landscape.

The church and churchyard are rich in flora and fauna, with the church providing a home to several rare species of bat. The church community has invested time and resources in developing its vision, which we summarise as 'Worship, Wildlife and Welcome'. This is more than a strapline, with the church offering community engagement events (over 120 people attended our 'Bat Talk and Walk' event in 2019, for example), and welcoming increasing numbers of visitors during the week, many of whom simply come to sit quietly in the peace of the churchyard. We continue to publicise the church through leaflet drops and social media and expect to see numbers continue to rise with the growth of the NW Bicester Development. Our worship takes advantage of our setting, with services conducted outdoors as well as in the church building. Services and events are also regularly held in the grounds of Home Farm.

Over the last ten years the church has seen a revival, with the number of Sunday services increasing from one to two per month and events and special services, such as the Christmas Carol Service, attracting substantial numbers (over 100). The congregation was continuing to grow until lockdown, and the legal status of the church changed a few years ago from being governed as a 'Chapel of Ease' to having its own 'District Church Council' (DCC), which in time is expected to lead to it taking on the status of a full Parish once again. While Covid has impacted our plans, as they have every area of our national life, we expect to return to growth in the future. Even now, increasing numbers of people from Elmsbrook (the Exemplar Scheme) are coming to the church.

One of the biggest challenges we deal with is difficult access to the church. At present visitors have to park in the driveway to Home Farm and walk down a grass verge along the dangerously fast and busy B4100. The previous applicant had offered access to parking for 30 cars, a path to the church from the new houses and a pedestrian crossing as part of the development proposal.

The Proposal

Overall we welcome the growth of the Eco-town and look forward to playing a significant part in building community and, in particular, helping new residents develop a sense of rootedness in the history and heritage of their location. However, there are a number of important concerns we wish to see addressed. These fall into two categories:

1. The impact of the development on the church and its context and landscape, both natural and cultural;
2. Practical implications for the sustainable use of the church in the future.

The impact of the development on the church and its context and landscape, both natural and cultural

Natural Environment

Chapter 10 of the Environmental Statement assesses the potential impact of the development on biodiversity. It identifies a number of habitats with important ecological features as well as a number of protected species which occur or could occur on the development site. The Environmental Statement says that, without mitigation, there would be potentially significant effects both during the construction phase and when the development is completed.

Mitigation and compensation measures are proposed along with some enhancements of habitats. These would be implemented through a Construction Environment Management Plan (CEMP) and a Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) but neither of these has yet been produced so that it is not possible to assess how effective they may be. In preparing these plans, we consider that the following issues should be taken into account, particularly with regard to the eastern parcel of the development adjoining the B4100 and Home Farm.

We know from past environmental assessments that several trees in the development area are used as roosts for 'our' bat populations. We would like to see these carefully preserved with adequate distance between them and housing and pedestrian traffic which might disturb the populations.

We are concerned also that the biodiversity corridors should be of an adequate size and scope. A green track with tunnels under paths and roads is not enough. The corridors need to be wide enough and have sufficient cover to minimise the impact of human footfall. If the biodiversity corridors simply become green areas for general use their usefulness in encouraging wildlife will be severely diminished.

Earlier proposals gave rather wider green margins around the eastern parcel of the development site. These have now been much reduced and should be reinstated.

We are also concerned that a sufficient 'buffer' is retained between new houses and the grounds of Home Farm, which is itself a Grade II listed building whose setting needs to be enhanced rather than diminished. Apart from visual amenity from the grounds when the farm is being used for events and services, the grounds offer a rich wildlife habitat. Positioning new buildings too close is likely to be disruptive to natural habitats which have been protected for many years.

Built Heritage

Impact on the built heritage is assessed in Chapter 11 of the Environmental Statement. This states that the development will have no direct physical impact on designated historic buildings, namely the church (listed Grade II*) and Home Farmhouse (listed Grade II), or on the unlisted, but still historic Caversfield House and its associated buildings and gardens. We agree that there is no physical impact but are more concerned about the impact of changes in the wider setting of the buildings. The Environmental Statement recognises that the

change from a primarily agricultural landscape to a largely developed one will have an impact on the buildings in their setting.

However, it is argued that the linkage between Home Farmhouse and the surrounding rural landscape has already been weakened by the Exemplar Scheme, and by the conversion of the farm buildings, as well as being screened from the North West Bicester site by a thick belt of vegetation. On that basis, the harm is assessed as being less than substantial and therefore acceptable. It is recognised too that the development will erode the rural surroundings of Caversfield House but this too is seen as a non-significant effect.

The Environmental Assessment judges that the immediate setting (i.e. the churchyard) of St Laurence's will be preserved but recognises that the wider setting will be permanently changed from a broadly agricultural, rural setting to one of modern residential development. The Assessment argues that the relative lowness of the tower means that the church is not highly visible from a distance. In fact there are currently clear views of the tower across open fields from the Exemplar Scheme and these will be lost, to be replaced by a specific view along a roadway on the axis of the church. The benefit of this is argued to balance out the harm caused by the loss of the wider rural aspect so that the impact of the whole scheme on the church is neutral.

In our view, while the vista will be beneficial, it cannot fully compensate for the loss of the rural setting of the church, particularly now the building line is so much closer to the B4100 and the church than was the case with previous proposals. We also consider that the impact on the individual buildings is not the only aspect of the setting that should be considered.

Together the buildings form an assemblage which is related to the former medieval settlement of Caversfield and we consider that this too needs to be considered as an entity. Taken as a group, together with the extant archaeological remains in the ground of, and beyond Caversfield House, this is important evidence of a medieval settlement which declined over the centuries. It is important, as far as possible, to maintain the rural settlement of the group of buildings and other remains. Leaving more open space around the edge of the development by reducing the number of houses and restricting the perimeter of the built area would go some way towards achieving this.

Buried Archaeology

Archaeology has been scoped out of the Environmental Assessment but is covered in Appendix 11.2 nonetheless, and also in Chapter 2. The County Archaeologist has advised that no further mitigation is needed on the eastern part of the development site (the area which most affects St Laurence's) on the basis of various past desk-top assessments and trial trenching and this approach is endorsed in the Environmental Statement (Chapter 11 and Appendix 11.2). However the earlier work did identify medieval ditches and a hollow way between the B4100 and the drive to Home Farm. These are presumably related to the medieval settlement of Caversfield (see above).

The assessment also does not take account of the discovery in 1866 under the B4100 of five burials at the north-west corner of the churchyard. These graves are said to have had sides lined with loose limestone laid edgeways and covered with larger stones. Similar graves

were found in the churchyard around the same time when the bank and ditch which then enclosed the churchyard were levelled¹.

These factors suggest the need for a more precautionary approach to the archaeology along the eastern edge of the development site, and during any works under the B4100.

Practical implications for the sustainable use of the church in the future.

Access to the Church

The outline proposal talks about ‘a development that integrates with its context’, and proposes a vista along the axis of the church as a key benefit for new residents, so it would seem natural to provide people with the means to access the church. This is not included in the proposal in its current form despite the District Councils’ statement in their letter of 2nd February that provision of a pedestrian crossing of the B4100 to St Laurence’s will be a requirement. Crossing the B4100 to reach the church is already a matter of concern.

Currently worshippers and visitors have to park on the access drive to Home Farm, walk along the grass verge and cross the road opposite the gate into the churchyard. Traffic on this road is often heavy and fast and there is a level of risk in crossing the road. With the development of this scheme, the number of people wishing to come to the church can only increase. We are already seeing the beginning of this with Elmsbrook residents coming to the church. Creating a road on the axis of the church to use it as a viewpoint for the development can only increase the likely numbers coming to St Laurence’s.

If this scheme is to be given planning consent, it is essential that a safe road crossing is provided, with an appropriate access path along the verge from the estate and the Home Farm entrance to the crossing place. There will need to be paths in the development that lead towards the church.

Parking

A second issue of access relates to car parking. Currently, visitors and worshippers are permitted to park on the access drive to Home Farm through the kindness of the occupier of the farm, and we also make use of the garden of the farm for open-air services. This is dependent on the goodwill of the present and future occupiers of the farm, and cannot be guaranteed in the future. Earlier designs proposed 30 car parking spaces at the entrance to Home Farm from the B4100 along with allotments on the neighbouring patch of land. The parking space would have served both the church and the allotments.

Maintenance of access during the construction phase

An issue during the construction phase, which will last for some years, will be the proximity of the eastern works entrance to the entrance to Home Farm. These are very close together and it is difficult to see how both can be safely used at the same time. This may affect people trying to visit the church, and wishing to park in the Home Farm drive.

¹ J C Blomfield *History of the present Deanery of Bicester, Oxon*, Oxford and London 1882; J C Blomfield *History of Ardley, Bucknell, Caversfield and Stoke Lyne*, London 1894

Conclusion and Recommendations

As noted above, overall we welcome the growth of the Eco-town and look forward to playing a significant part in building community and, in particular, helping new residents develop a sense of rootedness in the history and heritage of their location. However, there are a number of important concerns we wish to see addressed.

We consider that the density of the development of the scheme is too great. Previous proposals totalled around 400 houses on both land parcels of the North-West Bicester scheme. This application seeks consent for 550 dwellings. One consequence of this is that green margins around the eastern parcel have been greatly reduced which will lead to adverse impacts on biodiversity and on the setting of the church and other historic buildings.

We recommend:

1. The density should be reduced to allow much wider 'green' margins around the eastern parcel. This would help to deal with many of our concerns about biodiversity, archaeology, and the setting of the historic buildings and their relationship to a rural landscape.
2. The CEMP and LEMP should take into account our specific concerns about biodiversity issues.
3. The archaeological strategy for the eastern parcel should be reconsidered to give more weight to the potential for archaeological discoveries on the edge of the medieval Caversfield settlement along the B4100, perhaps by excluding construction activity in this area altogether.
4. Rather than considering each of the historic buildings – St Laurence's Church, Home Farmhouse, and Caversfield House – individually, they should be regarded as an entity and the impact of the development on the setting of the group reassessed. We believe that it will be seen that greater effort should be given to retaining a wider rural buffer around the group to maintain the sense of this being a shrunken settlement.
5. If the scheme is to be granted consent, the provision of a crossing for pedestrians should be a condition set by the planning authority, with an appropriate access path along the verge from the estate and the Home Farm entrance to the crossing place. The development should include paths that lead towards the church.
6. The provision of car parking which could be used by visitors to the church should also be a condition.
7. The feasibility of safely using both the Home Farmhouse entrance and the eastern works access at the same time should be further examined and, if necessary, the eastern works access should be placed elsewhere.

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October 2021**

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