

Variation of Condition 3 (plans) of 19/02708/OUT - To vary the approved parameter plans

Bicester Heritage, Buckingham Road, Bicester. Planning reference: 23/01941/F

Comment on Historic England advice.

Historic England's advice letter (18th August 2023), comments that the proposed amendments to the layout would result in an increased level of harm, compared to the approved outline planning application. The advice states that the revised layout '**could result in an increased level of harm compared with the previous, established, layout, through the removal of *any* potential appreciation of the south-west aspect**'.(emphasis added)

Historic England's previous advice (28th January 2020) made the following observations about the designed line of sight of the defensive structures and about the changed context:

'Most of the various elements of the defensive system were intended to cover the airfield (this being the most likely site for an invasion), rather than being intended to defend the airfield from attack from the surrounding countryside. Because of this the intervisibility of the surviving defensive elements, the other components of the airfield and the flying field itself are critical.

While critical to the understanding of the operation of the seagull/mushroom complex itself, the south-west facing aspect - the direction of fire from the south-west seagull trench - can be considered to be of less significance than the north-east aspect in understanding how the complex fitted in to the overall system.

The proposed development will impact upon the appreciation of the function of the complex, insofar as it will make it harder to understand the operation of the south-west seagull trench because new buildings will effectively block much of the field of fire. It is the case that the setting in this direction has already been compromised to a degree by new buildings, but these are located some distance away across Skimmingdish Lane. There will therefore be harm to the significance of the historic asset.

Not only is there now modern industrial and housing development blocking the 'view', but also historic analysis shows that the alignment of Skimmingdish Lane has changed (affecting our understanding of the historic boundaries) and the panhandle areas that once extended beyond the existing airfield boundary have all been erased. This means that understanding of the south westerly field of fire has been severely compromised. Not only that, but it is also perhaps worth remembering (though the evidence is now all gone) that the panhandle areas would have been enclosed by 'blast' mounds. Together with barrage balloons it seems unlikely that there would have been any south-west field of view and that perhaps it was never intended, but just the consequence of a standardised defensive structure design that would work in a range of different environments.

That said, the current proposals do not intend completely removing *any* potential appreciation of this south-west aspect.

The submitted application is accompanied by a series of parameter plans, one of which identifies the 'Proposed Developable Areas' (220127-3DR-XX-00-DR-A-08004) as a single area (it includes the parking areas). This is intended to allow the precise siting of the units to be adjusted. It is not intended to show a continuous unbroken development. The plan needs to be read in conjunction with the Proposed Heights and Massing Plan (220127-3DR-XX-00-DR-A-08006), which shows gaps with landscaping between the proposed business units.

The adjusted alignment of the developable area is in response to a review of site constraints and opportunities and now gives greater emphasis to the omni-directional design of the defensive structures. It is intended, as in the previous proposal, that the precise siting of the units would take reference from the contribution that the setting of defensive structures makes to their significance. Indeed, it is worth repeating the comment in the previous heritage report (WA 2019), about the opportunity to explore new ways of integrating the old with the new:

'The application is actively seeking to include the defensive structures as a positive component of the development, to use the juxtaposition between the old and the new to tell a powerful story and to enhance the current setting of the monuments.' (page59)

This is consistent with Historic England's advice in 'Historic Military Aviation Sites' (2016) in which it discusses development options stating in paragraph 5.3:

'It may be possible to incorporate features such as runways, perimeter tracks and defensive structures into new development proposals.'

Indeed, deliberately creating a gap between the business units to suggest the historic line of fire would be unconvincing and have the effect of appearing very artificial as a 'field of fire', as well as being difficult to interpret as such. It could risk compromising a good design solution to the new development.

The heritage impact on views out from the defensive structures was reviewed as part of the assessment of the impacts of the proposed development (as revised). The Addendum Heritage report (WA 2023) states (page 8):

Furthermore, the pavilion qualities and proposed siting will offer a greater sense of permeability that will help to better illustrate the aesthetic qualities of the group of defensive posts and the designed views out.

Capitalising on the pillbox's and trench's sculptural qualities and history, such that they become the key points of interest within the foreground with a re-focused view out over the airfield, will ensure that people have the opportunity to understand and enjoy the structures and the historic function they were designed to perform. The proposed development will help facilitate this.

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