

## Sibford Gower Parish Council

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Planning Inspectorate  
ROOM 3L-KITE  
Temple Quay House  
2 The Square  
Temple Quay  
Bristol  
BS1 6PN

Dear Sirs

**Muddle Barn Farm, Sibford Gower: APP/C3105/W/17/3173098**

### **Submission of Sibford Gower Parish Council to the Inspector**

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the comments made by Mr Ian Gillespie of Carter Jonas on our previous submission, which were contained in an appendix to the letter of 28<sup>th</sup> September 2016; as Councillor George Reynolds pointed out at the Planning Committee meeting (27<sup>th</sup> October), these comments were sent in at the last minute so that we had no time to respond.

The application has been professionally prepared. Shortly after purchase a Certificate of Lawful Use Existing against the previous condition of agricultural occupancy was obtained (14/01100/CLUE). When it was known that the initial application (14/02157/F) was recommended for refusal, the application was withdrawn at the last minute, and later replaced with the current modified scheme. More recently Cherwell has issued a 'Certificate of Lawfulness of Extension to existing dwelling house and new ancillary building' (17/00191/CLUP), on which the Parish Councils were not consulted. Apparently this is to provide changing rooms for a proposed swimming pool; we leave the Inspector to discover how this relates to the proposal to demolish and replace the same building.

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Our original objections to this development were based on the fact that it was contrary to the Planning Regulations in force, notably H 17 and H 18 (Cherwell Local Plan 1996 reaffirmed in 2015), policies ESD 13 and ESD 15 Cherwell Local Plan and paragraphs 17 and 55 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The applicants do not apparently deny this, nor do they offer any reasons why the regulations should be ignored. The applicant Mr Besterman attended the relevant meeting of the Parish Council Planning Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> Sept 2016, and spoke in support of his proposal; when he was asked in what way the latest plans met the previous objections of the Parish Council, his reply was deemed unsatisfactory. That is the reason why, having carefully perused the new plans, the Parish Council came to the conclusion that they did not materially affect the basic point at issue, and we therefore reaffirmed our view that the proposal was contrary to Planning Regulations. Neither the applicants nor the Cherwell Council Planning Department have challenged this view.

Moreover Cherwell District Council has not explained at any point why they have reversed their opinion on this fundamental issue from the recommendation prepared by Planning Officers for the meeting of 18th February 2016, the conclusions of which we endorsed in our submission to the Planning Committee of October 27<sup>th</sup> (omitted from the officers' precis). Indeed the officers still specifically stated that the proposal is contrary to policies H17 and H18, and gave no reasons for the special circumstance deemed to overrule this (paragraphs 7.2-8, p. 140-1). It was on grounds of this conflict with the new 2015 *Cherwell Local Plan (2011-31)* that the application was rightly refused by Councillors in the full Planning Committee meeting.

It is not therefore true that we had failed to take into account the modifications proposed: these were immaterial to the point at issue, even though the repositioning and the reduction in size from five times the permitted development to 1 ½ times (according to the applicant's calculations; according to Cherwell's calculations 200%) might make the development appear marginally less dominant.

There are however a number of reasons why this proposal is particularly objectionable, which do not seem to have been considered by either the applicants or the District Council.

1. In response to the Localism initiative, in 2010-12 the combined parishes of the two Sibfords prepared and published an independent *Sibfords Community Plan* (available on the Sibfords website). One particularly contentious issue was where development might be permitted or discouraged. The strongest opposition voiced by residents was to development on the Colony Road (54%) and Wheathills/the Sib Valley (88%); see p. 21. Although (for reasons of expense) we were not able to progress this Plan to full legal status as a Neighbourhood Plan, the report remains a powerful expression of the views of local inhabitants, which the two Parish Councils feel required to take into account. There has therefore been full and recent local consultation on this issue, contrary to the views of Mr Gillespie and Mr Wass.
2. We expressed worry at the relationship between the new proposal and its immediate neighbour New Barn Farm. This is a long-term planning concern related to the close proximity of the two buildings, which has not been adequately addressed: it is irrelevant that the current owner of New Barn does not object, given his close involvement with the original purchase of the property. Two large properties side by side and with conflicting architecture in the middle of the valley seem to us undesirable.

### 3. Landscape Issues

The response of the Landscape Officer of Cherwell DC to the latest proposals on p. 137 of the Planning Committee agenda of 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2016 is scarcely adequate. There is no reference to the important reservations contained in his previous report on Landscape and Visual Impact (7.21-31). We therefore make the following comments:

We pointed out that the Landscape and Visual Assessment study commissioned by the applicants on their behalf wrongly divides the Sib Valley into two contrasting area types: 'Rolling Village Pasture', and 'Wooded Pasture Valley and Slopes'. We could see no reason for this division, since the landscape on both sides of the Colony Road is identical, and in our view is correctly categorised as 'Rolling Village Pasture'. However the proposed new division might appear to justify extensive garden landscaping and planting around the house, which would indeed change the landscape nature of the valley as a whole. This point was both misreported and indeed reversed ('incorrectly' instead of 'correctly') on p.135 of the council agenda.

In local planning decisions over the last few years Cherwell has laid much emphasis on the importance of not altering the local setting of villages; there have been great efforts by themselves and the Parish Councils to prevent the encroachment of gardens into the surrounding agricultural landscape. This is a continuous battle in relation to the increasing gentrification of the villages. The proposal to allow the development at Muddle Barn Farm on agricultural land is a major change of policy. To Page 4

Whether or not this valley remains designated as an Area of High Landscape Value, the officers of Cherwell do not seem to think this particular valley is worth preserving from development. But they have not considered its historical associations.

The property lies on the edge of the Cotswolds AONB, alongside a track which is the oldest road in Britain, the so-called Jurassic Way; this is a salt trading route running from the Bristol Channel to the Wash. Its importance is highlighted in the pioneering work of landscape history by W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) ch. 8. Running past the Rollright Stones, this track has been a major feature since Neolithic times, dictating the original boundary of the first Roman conquest up to the Fosse Way; in this particular stretch it is well marked and still preserved in the modern county boundaries.

Since the Norman Conquest there have been only two changes in this historic landscape. The Enclosure Act of 1774 established the present field pattern; and the sale by New College, Oxford in the 1950s of their land to local tenant farmers created a new ownership mosaic. The valley has therefore developed a pattern of isolated farms and stone barns.

Sibford Gower Parish Council has been extremely careful to preserve this landscape heritage. Two recent developments have been regarded by us as models, Haynes Barn and Heath Barn (on the B4035 to the north). Each of these conversions preserved a historic stone barn, and each contributed to the sustainability of rural industries (smallholding and thatching). We urge the Inspector to visit both these properties to see the sensitivity and care with which planning rules have hitherto been applied in the last ten years.

The villages of the Sibfords are believed to be the oldest surviving Quaker communities in the world. Quakerism was established here during the 1660s shortly after the battle of Edgehill; George Fox preached here for the second time in 1678 and the first Meeting House was built about 1680 (see Pauline Ashton, *Protestant Paths* (Kershaw 2016) ch.3). The Quaker influence was strengthened by the foundation of Sibford School in 1842. In contrast there was no Anglican church or vicar in the Sibfords until 1840.

As a result there has never been a substantial manor house or country house in the villages. Two houses called 'manor houses' stand out from the general run of modest Quaker housing built up from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as having some architectural pretension.

The 'Manor House' in the Ferris is a 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse in origin, refaced in Queen Anne style in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a wealthy Quaker farmer; in 1842 it became the nucleus of Sibford School. In 2001 it was bought by a developer and sold off as flats. The 'Manor' in the Gower is an Edwardian mock medieval fantasy created ca. 1915 by a local impresario out of two cottages, and extended each time he had a success on the West End stage, into what Pevsner calls 'a riotous nightmare of the picturesque' with thatch, a tower, stained glass and flying buttresses; it contains a minstrel's gallery and a theatre organ on which Ivor Novello is said to have composed 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. Both of these houses are indeed examples of past pretentiousness, but both sit reasonably well integrated within the main village groups of houses, not in isolated countryside.

Thus the claim by Carter Jonas that large houses are part of the vernacular tradition of this area is not true of these two villages: moreover the examples that they adduce from elsewhere in the area are well situated within their respective village envelopes, not isolated in open country.

In the earlier report of 18<sup>th</sup> February 2016 the Council's Landscape Officer commented on the proposed architectural style that its scale 'could inadvertently convey a building of power and authority where one previously did not exist' (para 7.26). The proposal for an isolated Country House in position and style does indeed seek to make a statement: it appears to deny the particular non-conformist history of these traditional peasant communities. In our opinion it does not respect tradition but rather falsifies history, suggesting a claim to ancestral manorial rights and privilege. We regard this as a particularly undesirable and insensitive proposal.

Yours faithfully

  
Clerk  
(P B Hardman)