



Bearsted & Thurnham Report

January
2006

The Newsletter of the Bearsted & Thurnham Society

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY DECISION

Is this what you thought you were voting for?

Any hopes that the change in control of Maidstone Borough Council from Liberal Democrat/Labour to Conservative following the elections last May might lead to development policies more in tune with the wishes of the people of Bearsted and Thurnham appear to have been dashed. The Council has voted to adopt 'Preferred Options' for the Core Strategy of the Maidstone Local Development Framework which specify the entire belt of countryside to our immediate north, east and southeast as an 'Area of search for development sites on the edge of the urban area', with 'Major growth focused within the east and southeast part of the areas of search'.

In short, the prospect now staring us in the face, in addition to the long-threatened commercial development of the greenfields at Junction 7 of the M20 around Newnham Court and along the Bearsted Road, is one of massive housing and business development in the countryside between us and Hollingbourne and in a huge arc to the south of that between the Ashford and Sutton Roads. The politicians protest that no actual sites have yet been selected, but given the clarity of their intention to focus development in that area, this is a meaningless statement, no doubt designed to ensure that the real protests come only when it is too late for them to have any effect.

The hint (note: not the promise) that the Leeds-Langley bypass might as a result be funded is offered as a bribe. But with or without the bypass the implications for Bearsted and Thurnham are dire, with a massive increase in traffic along the Ashford Road, Ware Street and Willington Street certain to result, along with the loss of much beloved countryside and the even greater urbanisation of our village - the opposite of the benefits for the whole area on which the case for such a bypass should rest.

The Council is putting out the spin that the housing targets imposed by central government leave it no choice but to do this. 'Spin' is too polite a term for this. The 20-year housing target proposed for Maidstone in the first draft of the South East Plan was 8200. The Council could have accepted that. Better still, it could have fought for a reduction, which would have made sense since the population of the borough in all age groups except the two oldest ones is projected to fall, not to rise. But it did neither. Instead, it demanded an increase in the total to 9200. It has now demanded a further increase to 10,080 in order to secure 'New Growth Point' status and, it hopes, the additional infrastructure funding that goes

with it (relatively paltry and far from guaranteed).

These acts were justified on the basis of the nonsensical notion that the Ashford and Thames Gateway Special Growth Areas constitute in some way a 'threat' to the prosperity of Maidstone which has to be countered, and that allowing commercial development on attractive greenfield sites near the M20 junctions will serve that end by attracting 'high quality' jobs to the borough, and by raising Maidstone's supposedly unacceptably low average wage levels. The postulated increase in jobs is then used to justify the proposed increase in the housing total. But given that the borough's population in the main working age groups is set to decline, this implies that many of the new jobs and houses would be taken up not by existing residents but by new ones drawn in from outside.

All this gives the lie also to the Council's other piece of spin - that it is motivated in all this by a desire to increase the supply of affordable housing to help locals struggling to get on the housing ladder. **It cannot be stressed too strongly that the Society agrees that more affordable housing is indeed badly needed**, but it could be achieved within the original overall housing total of 8200 by public funding and/or by more effective measures to compel developers to fund it. The 'Preferred Options' will in practice stimulate, in addition to the destruction of our countryside, an even greater explosion of small-scale, high-price garden developments in suburban areas such as ours by developers bent on avoiding having to provide the affordable housing elements which are compulsory on larger greenfield sites. No doubt the Council will then include all this expensive so-called 'windfall' housing when claiming it has met its 'New Growth Point' housing target.

The Council's 'Preferred Options' document tries to scare us all into believing that the only alternative is an even more massive increase in housing density up to 135 flats or 70 houses per hectare in both urban and suburban areas such as ours (most of Bearsted was originally built at 25 houses per hectare).

The Society totally rejects this claim and holds the view that **the first need** is to return, at worst, to the original target of 8200 houses over the next 20 years, and ideally to an even lower total based on a much more thorough and objective assessment of the likely patterns of genuine local demand.

The second need is to differentiate between inner urban and suburban, with the top priority being to make the town centre an attractive, vibrant and highly desirable place to live, work, shop and play by measures to stimulate greatly increased investment in shopping, leisure and other high-quality business facilities, and in high-density residential buildings of attractive design for those working in the town. The proposed opening up of greenfield sites for development will have the opposite effect, sucking out such investment from the town centre and generating urban decay - the very opposite of central government policy.

The third need is for more imaginative, sensitive and flexible use of existing

policies which allow exceptions to the presumption against housing development in and around rural settlements, including affordable housing, where it can be shown to meet a genuine local need and to enhance rather than damage the settlements concerned.

The fourth need is the imaginative conversion of no longer viable farm buildings to small-scale, high-quality business use. All recent pronouncements on high-tech, high pay employment talk about 'big positions at small desks' in small buildings plus much working from home, not about giant business parks.

Policies such as these can secure the future of Maidstone as a pleasant, prosperous, high-quality county town set amid beautiful countryside and attractive suburbs. The vainglorious ambitions of politicians set out in the 'Preferred Options' threaten to destroy all three.

Public consultation on the 'Preferred Options' starts on January 26, from when the documents can be downloaded from www.digitalmaidstone.gov.uk and objections can be e-mailed to ldf@maidstone.gov.uk or posted to: *The Planning Policy Team, Maidstone Borough Council, 13 Tonbridge Road Maidstone ME16 8HG.* **Please make your views known. It's your last chance.**

Should We Field Candidates in Borough Council Elections?

With all three major political parties now pursuing development policies which we believe to be repugnant to the great majority of residents of this part of the borough, it looks increasingly as though the only way of stopping them may be for residents associations such as ours to field their own candidates in future borough council elections.

This would be a major change of policy possibly requiring amendment to our Constitution at the next AGM in May, so the earliest borough council election we could contest would be May 2008. **Please use the reply slip and envelope enclosed with this Newsletter to let us know whether you think the Society should pursue this.**

A Message from the Chairman of the Thurnham Parish Plan Group

Many thanks to everyone who took the time to complete the questionnaire which the Thurnham Parish Plan Group circulated to every household in Thurnham parish during the summer. I am delighted to say that over 50% of households responded. The many comments and ideas you included in your replies were very helpful and will form the basis of the plan we produce later this year.

At the moment we are still hard at work analyzing the mass of information you provided. But it is already evident that speeding traffic and a wide range of noise disturbance are amongst your main concerns. It is also clear that Thurnham's rural atmosphere and access to its countryside are highly valued, that many of you see these as under threat from development, and that preservation is amongst your highest priorities.

We will soon be organising an open day at the Tudor Marriott Hotel to tell you about the results of the questionnaire and to obtain feedback on them. The day will be well advertised beforehand and we hope as many as possible of Thurnham's residents will be able to come along.

Richard Horton

Bearsted Parish Plan

The Bearsted Parish Plan Steering Group is now up and running with an elected Chairman (Tony Extance), Vice-Chairman (David Cockerham), Treasurer (Steve Winchomb) and Secretary (Clive Palferman). It has invited all organisations in Bearsted to list the five issues of greatest concern to them and five specific projects, ideas or initiatives they would like to see pursued over the next five years. The idea is to use the responses when designing the Parish Plan Questionnaire to be sent later to all households. We e-mailed our Members inviting them to let us know how they thought the Society should reply.

The issues most frequently mentioned in their responses were excessive housing development and the resulting damage to the character of the village (33 mentions), parking problems (27), traffic density and speed (24), pedestrian, footpath and crossing issues (9), public transport (9), village activities, landscaping, decorations etc (8), greenery, open space, Bearsted Woodland Trust etc (8), M20 Junctions 7 and 8 development (7), development of the Bearsted station coalyard (6), lack of openness and accountability in Parish and Borough Council decision making (6), policing, vandalism and anti-social behaviour (5), road maintenance, street cleaning, litter picking and dog fouling (4).

Also mentioned just once or twice each were the need for more post office and shop facilities, public conveniences, street lighting, open play areas for children and young people, affordable housing, improvements to the Bearsted Library garden, and measures to reduce noise from the M20 and CTRL; the risk of flooding, and the high estimated cost of the proposed new cricket pavilion.

Taking account of all these views, the Society Committee sent the following response to the Parish Plan Steering Group on behalf of the Society as a whole:

The Most Pressing Issues and Concerns

1. Excessive housing development, damage to street scenes and gardens
2. Parking - lack of public and private spaces and all the consequences of that
3. Traffic density and speed, and the even greater threat posed by Junction 8 development
4. Pavement, footpath and crossing safety and user-friendliness
5. Village activities/BWT/open spaces/greenery/decorations/landscaping

Initiatives, Projects and Ideas We Would Like Achieved in the Next 5 Years

(NB. To be seen in the context of the overriding need for action on 1 above)

1. A solution, in collaboration with Thurnham Parish Council, to the dangerous Ware Street pedestrian crossing situation, including a single integrated system of pedestrian controlled traffic lights at both sides of Bell Bridge (outside the Bell Pub and opposite Chapel Lane), and zebra crossings at Sandy Lane and at the main Station entrance.
2. A solution to the village's major parking problems by the creation of greatly expanded public parking space both in the area of the Ashford Road shops/post office/surgery/Esso filling station and in the area of the Station and the Green, including early development for this latter purpose of the Coalyard.
3. Improved bus services, including improved frequency of daytime services between Bearsted and the town centre with improved shelters; improved evening and weekend services, and transportation for the aged/infirm between Bearsted Green and the Ashford Road shops.
4. A campaign to beautify Bearsted with improved shrub and flower planting in verges and open spaces including the garden of Bearsted Green library, hanging baskets; new

and improved village signs, procurement and opening up of new green spaces and protection of existing ones including by support for BWT.

5. A comprehensive programme of improvements to all pavements and footpaths in the parish to ensure that they are even surfaced, clean and dry, well lit and free of obstructions to wheelchairs and scooters, and that they have drop kerbs at every corner and junction.

If you are not one of those who received and responded to our e-mail message and would now like to do so, please use the form and reply envelope enclosed with this Newsletter.

The Parish Plans of Bearsted and Thurnham, no matter how well prepared, cannot compel parish or borough councils or central government to adopt or abandon any particular policy, but they are an essential part of the process of applying effective pressure by providing incontrovertible evidence of the wishes of the overwhelming majority of residents.

It is therefore critically important that a very high percentage of households complete the final questionnaire when it is ready. It is clear that this can be achieved, in the case of Bearsted, only if the small Parish Plan Steering Group can call upon a large army of volunteers to deliver the questionnaires to every household and, equally importantly, return to collect them a week or two later, and pursue the laggards to maximise the response. We hope that many Society Members will be willing to volunteer to do this in their neighbourhoods. **Please use the form and reply envelope enclosed with this Newsletter to volunteer** - your support could make the difference between success and failure for the whole exercise.

Elizabeth Harvie Field Multi-Game Area Issue Reignites

Bearsted Parish Council has decided not to appeal against the refusal of its application for planning permission for its proposed 'multi-game area' on the Elizabeth Harvie Field but to submit instead a modified one without waiting for the final outcome of discussions with the Scouts and the Bearsted Woodland Trust about the possibility of their making more suitable sites available. We have told the Parish Council that there are strong objections within our Membership to this plan. **The Parish Council insists that the project has widespread support across the whole community. More details are set out on the response sheet enclosed with this Newsletter. Please use it and the envelope provided to give us your views.**

Planning Applications

The Society has objected strongly to an application to build a large modern house on rural land adjoining **Burnham Cottage in Sutton Street** on the ground that it meets none of the criteria set out in both the local plan and in central government guidance for allowing exceptions to the normal ban on house construction on rural land. The result is awaited. We objected, unsuccessfully, to the proposed construction of a dwelling to the rear of **The Limes** and to an application by builders to display a large sign and fly flags at the already approved **lower Snowfield** site development, both in the Bearsted Green Conservation Area. The Limes planning consent was however outline only, and we were given to understand that the grounds on which we had objected could be

considered only when the detailed application is submitted. The Society did not object to an application by the **Oak on the Green** to build a small 10-room hotel building to its rear because it seemed to us to be marginally less ugly and less damaging in its impact on neighbouring homes and on the conservation area than the previously approved apartment block which it would have replaced. Maidstone Borough Council has taken precisely the opposite view and refused the application on design grounds (a decision perhaps not entirely unrelated to the fact that, unlike apartments, hotel rooms do not help meet housing targets or count for 'New Growth Point' qualification purposes?). It remains to be seen whether the applicants will now give the Council the apartments they seem to want, or whether they will submit an improved hotel design.

Members will have noticed that hoardings have gone up around **Lipscomb Volvo**. No sign yet though of the detailed planning application that has to be submitted and approved before construction work can begin there.

Other Recent New Planning Applications

Let us know if any of these cause you concern:

Reference	Location	Description
MA/07/0037	63 The Landway	Erection of a shed to be used as home gym/hobby room/office - retrospective application
MA/07/0019	3 Manor Rise	Erection of a summerhouse and re-siting of existing garden shed.
MA/07/0016	38 Button Lane	Erection of a single storey extension
MA/07/0013	Kentish Yeoman	Change of use of land for the stationing of one portable shellfish kiosk
MA/06/2348	177 Ashford Road	Single storey extension to existing detached garage.
MA/06/2320	White Horse Inn	New porch canopy and door openings on car park side

Parish Council Elections: Why Not Stand Yourself?

Elections for all seats on the Parish Councils of Bearsted and of Thurnham will be held in May this year. The public spirited members of our community who serve as Parish Councillors and take the flack for their decisions deserve our respect. Many complain about those decisions, but few if any of those who do so are willing themselves to serve. It is an unhealthy state of affairs that there are so few volunteers and that so many Parish Councillors are in practice co-opted for lack of candidates rather than elected on the basis of their publicly known views and qualities. To correct that, we would very much like to see many more of our Members offering themselves as candidates this May, and would gladly offer procedural help to any who are willing to do so. **Please use the response slip and envelope enclosed with this newsletter to let us know if you are willing to consider this.**

Public Footpath on Bearsted Golf Course

Members will be pleased to know that there has been a successful outcome to the effort by the Society's Footpath Group to ensure proper provision for the public rights of way across Bearsted Golf Course now that previously unofficial diversions have been legalised. All the footpaths now have yellow marker posts and arrows and, where needed, direction of play warning signs. Signs on the tees warn golfers of the footpaths and of the fact that members of the public using them have priority. A sign welcomes visitors to the course and asks walkers please to keep to the footpaths. Some further improvements - about which the Group is in touch with the Club, are still required, but we hope more Members will now feel able to make use of this good public walking facility.

Footpath Group Walks Programme

Date	Start Time & Place	Route
Saturday 17 February	1.15 p.m. at Bearsted Green Pond. 1.45 p.m. at Langley Village Hall car park	Langley Village Hall - Langley Loch - Lacey Farm - Leeds - Burberry Lane - Langley Village Hall. Distance: 5½ miles
Saturday 17 March	1.15 p.m. at Bearsted Green Pond. 1.30 p.m. at Hollingbourne Railway Station	Hollingbourne - Eyhorne Street - Old Mill - Leeds Church - Leeds Castle grounds - Eyhorne Street - Hollingbourne. Distance: 4½ miles
Saturday 21 April	1.15 p.m. at Bearsted Green Pond. 1.30 p.m. at Harrietsham Railway Station	Harrietsham - Bell Farm - Boldrewood Farm - Runham Farm - Fairbourne Mill - Harrietsham. Distance: 5½ miles.
Saturday 19 May	1.15 p.m. at Bearsted Green Pond. 1.30 p.m. at Coldblow Youth Hostel	Coldblow - Scragged Oak - Broad Street - Five Wents - Aldington - Civiley Wood - Coldblow. Distance: 6 miles.
Saturday 16 June	1.15 p.m. at Bearsted Green Pond	Bearsted Green - Barty Farm - Five Wents - Broad Street - Scragged Oak - Coldblow Lane - Aldington - Bearsted Green. Distance: 6½ miles

Friday Evening Walks will take place on the second Friday of the month, commencing on 13 April 2007. They will start from Bearsted Green Pond at 6.30 p.m.

Neither the Society nor the Walk Leaders accept any responsibility for any accidents occurring to or caused by any person, animal or dog on our walks. Walkers are urged to be vigilant when crossing or walking on roads, paths, etc. Dogs are welcome but must be kept on leads and under control at all times. Adults should be members of the Society, and children should be accompanied by a responsible adult. Walkers need to wear stout footwear, bring adequate wet weather clothing, be prepared to negotiate rough ground, and be able to climb over stiles and up steep slopes. For further details call Mike Perring on 739109.

Wet Weather may make it necessary for the Walk Leader to change the route. If in doubt, telephone 736467 or 739109.



Round The Oasts

An occasional feature page in which we review interesting aspects of life past and present in and around Bearsted and Thurnham. We gratefully acknowledge that this piece draws with their consent on the research of Roger Vidler and the Bearsted and District Local History Society, and on material in Kathryn Kersey's 'Bearsted and Thurnham Remembered'.

Many visitors to Bearsted Medical Practice must be intrigued by this old building with the first floor door which they see facing them across the old wall of the car park as they emerge, and wonder what part it has played in the history of our village.



It is in fact a surviving building of the former Otteridge Farm which once occupied all the land bounded by Yeoman Lane, Tower Lane and Roseacre Lane, and was later replaced by nurseries and then by housing (hence 'Otteridge Road' and 'Nursery Avenue'). The farmyard stood on the land now occupied by the Medical Practice. The tenant of the farm back in 1830 was also the landlord of the Yeoman Pub, a photograph of which taken in 1925 shows that an oast house still stood immediately behind it.

There is a tragic twist to the tale of Otteridge Farm. This barn-like building stands adjacent to the spot where, years earlier in November 1830, a barn and other outbuildings were torched during the so-called Swing Riots. A Bearsted man, John Dyke, was tried, convicted and publicly executed for the crime at Penenden Heath. Throughout the proceedings he protested his innocence and implied that the chief witness against him, William Hewitt, was the guilty party. Some 40 years later, so the story goes, Hewitt made a death bed confession that he committed the crime.

This stone marks the spot where John Dyke is buried in Holy Cross churchyard just by the small side gate that leads to the Glebe. Of Hewitt's grave there is no trace, but it is said to lie on the north side of the graveyard by the old vicarage wall - as far away from Dyke's as could be managed at the time in order not to disturb his spirit!

The History Society is researching John Dyke's life and times and plans to produce a book on the subject in 2008.

Published by the Bearsted and Thurnham Society

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