

Inquiry Day 5

Richard Knox-Johnston, leading the case for CPRE and the Joint Parishes' Group, began the day by introducing the first witness, Bill Lash, currently CEO of the Leeds Castle Foundation. Mr Lash said he was a former Royal Marine officer who, on leaving the service, had taken up an appointment as Comptroller, Woburn Abbey and, more recently had joined the Leeds Castle Foundation first as Director of Operations and Business Development, then as Estate Director. Mr Lash described the public benefit of Leeds Castle, which includes no fewer than nine listed buildings, and classed as a major heritage site. He emphasised the importance of tranquillity to visitors and also the importance of its setting in the landscape, both within its boundaries and its approaches. Anything detrimental within the setting, therefore, would have an adverse impact on its tranquillity. He added that Leeds Castle made a not insubstantial contribution to the local economy, and emphasised the importance of its approaches, critical to the enjoyment of the visit experience.

Of great concern also was the possibility of such a development creating a precedent for future development in the area. At present, 550,000-600,000 visits are made to the castle p.a., which also provides a focus for other activities such as accommodation, food and retail in the local area. Mr Lash disagreed entirely with the appellants' evidence regarding traffic impact, suggesting instead that the figures would be hugely inflated during the summer holidays and also Operation Stack. He felt that flawed evidence had been produced by traffic surveys carried out at appropriate locations **but** at inappropriate times. He explained that Kent Police impose limits on visitor numbers for licensed events due to existing effects of traffic, and required a traffic management plan for each event.

Mr Lash was not pleased to have read in the Appellants' rebuttal that the Castle was seen as a pastiche. He briefly described the castle's history through the centuries, emphasising a multitude of royal connections, adding that, like any other building, changes had taken place, from being a fortified castle, to a home for many royal kings and queens, to a country home for Lady Baillie, and latterly as a venue for the Northern Ireland Peace talks. **It was quite clearly a real castle and not a pastiche.**

Cross examination of Mr Lash began with Mr Howell Williams' assistant launching into an attack on the approaches to Leeds Castle appearing to be an already damaged area ie. a sprawling hotel car park (Great Danes) and the presence of intrusive road signs. Mr Lash valiantly fought back, initially with an inquiry as to her name, since she had not introduced herself. Miss Stafford retorted that no evidence had been put forward to show that the development would damage Leeds Castle. Mr Lash responded calmly that the Appellant had not advocated the opposite view.

A discussion regarding mitigation measures ensued with Miss Stafford attempting to belittle Mr Lash, suggesting that he might be a big figure within Leeds Castle but not outside. Mr Lash, however, proved an extremely robust witness, impervious to her stern questioning, saying that "he doesn't do status, only protection of Leeds Castle". Miss Stafford introduced an odd line of questioning about twilight golf, suggesting that castle visitors were not welcome to a particular high point in the grounds. In re-examination, Mr Lash was able to reassure the Inquiry that there was no restriction of movement of visitors staying in the castle grounds or users of footpaths.

Mr Knox-Johnston then introduced Cllr Tony Harwood, Chairman of the Management Committee of the River Len Local Nature Reserve since 2002, currently employed by KCC in charge of Resilience and Emergencies. He began by saying that the scale of this proposal was greater than the need for employment of this type within the whole borough. He explained that MBC's duty to co-operate with neighbouring authorities had not been explored fully during the past few years and that "the onus should be on doing the least harm".

THINK 'LILK MEADOW' AT THIS POINT!

He went on to describe the continuing effort required to clear silt traps at Hollingbourne, Vinters Nature Reserve and along the Lilk, following construction 24 years ago of the M20, since when significant quantities of sand have ended up in the River Len from local tributaries. Since then, of course, construction of the CTRL had taken place. Also, there has been an increase in the amount of diffused pollution from road salt, hydrocarbons, fertilisers and rodenticides ending up in the River Len. However, certain species require clean water not silt in suspension, particularly in this area where historically a high number of water mills have reduced water flow.

The removal of such an enormous amount of sand would render the land even less stable. Cllr Harwood added that any resulting (artificial) light pollution would upset animals' diurnal rhythm. At this point Miss Stafford attempted to discredit Cllr Harwood's lack of formal qualifications. Cllr Harwood refuted this, citing his lifelong work in flora and fauna in the local area, mentioning his published works, and establishment and chairmanship of local management committees.

In re-examination Cllr Harwood pointed out that with the scale of proposed sand cut it would be almost impossible that no sand would find its way into local watercourses.

Dr Simpson followed with a very detailed statement on behalf of the Bearsted & Thurnham Society, reinforcing local peoples' views.

After lunch, David Jarman, partner of Hobbs Parker, gave a statement in support of the planning application for commercial development at Woodcut Farm, a similar size to that proposed for Waterside Park, with a notional decision date of 30th July 2015. It seems that ADL had considered the Roxhill site some time ago but had gone on to choose Waterside Park.

Mr Knox-Johnston introduced Brian Lloyd, Chartered Town Planner, with 30 years professional experience, currently employed by CPRE.

A lengthy discussion followed about the relative weights given to social and economic aspects of the NPPF as opposed to environmental. Mr Lloyd felt that the Local Plan process should be a plan led planning system, not developer led.

Mr Howell Williams queried whether Mr Lloyd's advice to organisations looking at Local Plans within Kent was independent professional advice or just professional advice to further CPRE aims. Mr Lloyd said that the dynamic of this application had changed following ADL's withdrawal, and that the size of this site, if approved, would provide sufficient employment space across the borough, so therefore selection of employment sites should remain within the local plan process and not be developer led.

Mr Howell Williams gave Mr Lloyd a hard time nitpicking over extraordinary details. Mr Lloyd said it would be very unusual for a Local Plan, even under MBC's new constitutional system, to be revisited and for any return to earlier decisions of the scrutiny committees.

Mr Knox-Johnston introduced John Cobbett, Chartered Management Accountant, Legal Publisher, resident in Hollingbourne since 1984, and Parish Councillor since 2004. He explained the community's concerns as: scale of sand extraction, traffic and no guarantee that the buildings would ever be built, highlighting the KIG Inspector's report – he did not feel that this site was any different.

He spoke passionately on behalf of local villagers: plenty of other appropriate sites, including the former Detling Aerodrome site, existed.

He eloquently described the site visit yesterday and said this development would be a "blot on the landscape".

He said that three serious accidents had occurred around J8 just in the last six months (plus plenty of minor shunts) and that it was always jammed during rush hours and, of course, particularly following accidents and Operation Stack.

The proposed development would offer no benefit to surrounding villages, just traffic and noise/light pollution.

Mr Cobbett read a brief extract from William Cobbett's "Rural Rides"

"Rural Rides" by William Cobbett - Source Penguin Classics ISBN 0-14-043023-7

*5th September 1823 - "When I got to the edge of (Hollingbourne) hill, and before I got off my horse to lead him down this more of a mile of hill, I sat and surveyed the prospect before me, and to the right and to the left. This is what the people of Kent call the **Garden of Eden**. It is a district of meadows, corn fields, hop-gardens, and orchards of apples, pears, cherries, and filberts, with very little land which cannot, with propriety, be called good. There are plantations of Chestnut and of Ash frequently occurring; and as these are cut when long enough to make poles for hops, they are at all times objects of great beauty."*

and confirmed that Hollingbourne was downwind of the sand extraction process, rendering it totally exposed to significant dust pollution.

On 1st May 2013 an Appeal to the Supreme Court directed the British Government to comply with the European Directive on reduction of NO₂.

He emphasised that if this Appeal were to be allowed it would be:-

A BLOT ON THE LANDSCAPE

Mr Howell Williams confirmed he had no questions for Mr Cobbett.

The Inquiry would open at 9.30 a.m. on Thursday 14th May with Messrs Smith and Sinclair, witnesses for CPRE/JPG, followed by witnesses for the Appellants, Mr Lewis and Mr Etchells.