

Notes taken at Public Meeting arranged by Walford Parish Council on June 11th 2009 at Bishopswood Village Hall held to discuss the 3 applications at Cobrey Farms for development on land near Coleraine Buildings

(1223) SE2009/0901/F seasonal workers' accommodation (173 caravans); (1225) SE2009/0944/F erection of 9900 sq mtrs polytunnels;(1226) SE2009/0945/F irrigation tank, pumphouse and liquid fertiliser store

Present Cllrs F Myers (chairman), SM Cole, SW Cole, M Downey, H Evans, P Heath, G Symonds. Clerk.

Mr J Chinn, Mr H Chinn and Mr E Chinn

Ward Cllr Bramer (Penyard), Chairman S Lewis (WuP) and Chairman R Duberley (HM) and 65 members of public.

Apologies: B Vine, A Whitlock, E Drummond, Ward Cllr Jarvis, Mr & Mrs J Farr (Howle Hill)

The Chairman asked Mr J Chinn to present the applications. He said that the caravan application was the same as the Sept 08 one in a block of 170 vans, but he was hoping to gain consent to grade the site in order to move most of the vans down hill nearer the brook and to provide bunds for tree planting. This would improve the visual appearance of the site. 3 other caravans nearer the Buildings would house graduate students on training schemes. The blueberry nursery and tank were retrospective applications.

The Chairman invited questions from the floor.

Mike Heath (Bailey Lane End). Asked about the number of caravans , the sanitation arrangements and shopping for workers.

JC: 123 caravans. Water used was from a bore-hole on site with chlorine added. There was an aerobic digester on site which pumped water to lagoons which were used for irrigation. It was a closed system so there should be no leaking into the stream and thus to the Wye. Transport was provided by mini-bus to shops, to away-from-site crop fields and to entertainments.

Steve Cox (Pontshill) The expansion of the season from 32 to 37 weeks meant further burdens on the community.

JC: Agricultural expansion was lawful. The business had to deal with its effects.

Nigel Mummery (HM) Remarked that all the applications were retrospective as the necessary work had already been carried out without planning consent

Caroline Elnett, (HM). Queried the burden on local services – health , transport and schools.

JC: All workers were EU citizens and paid National Insurance as does everyone else. Cobrey Farms paid employer tax , for refuse collection and rates on caravans. No children were allowed on site.

D Preece (Coughton). It was impossible to hide that number of caravans. Coughton Lane C1275 cannot support heavier traffic. There were passing difficulties with tractors / trailers and the increase in numbers and frequency of transport buses were making life difficult for residents. Lay-bys were needed urgently

JC: It was necessary to separate the issue of traffic for the caravan site and farming business lorries. The caravans could be removed at the end of the season to be stored elsewhere but that would involve even more traffic movements in the valley. He felt that the planning application would create the least disruption of all options.

Janeen Liddle (Priory Lea) The extension of the season and the pressure of increased population meant that local residents were being driven to shop and to use schools elsewhere. (Applause)

JC: No children were housed on site. At his request, a business consultancy company had investigated and calculated that £15 million pounds was being pumped into the community by the enterprise.

Sandra Gibbens (Coughton) On the previous application a traffic survey was requested. This survey took place in March, before the growing season began. A survey is needed for traffic in the busy time.

JC HC asked us to do the survey at this date in order to determine the levels of background traffic not associated with the growing season.

Steve Griffiths Caravan sites have permission to be permanent or cleared during some of the year. There is a history of non-compliance at this site.

George Jones (Howle Hill). The idea that other farmers might follow suit and pursue similar expansion plans with caravans join the enterprise was rubbish. The Chinn family had always been innovative. He suggested that the

system of one way traffic, as he had introduced during the open cast mining period on Howle Hill, might be as successful along the C1275, with passing places at Castlebrook and Bill Mills.

JC Would pass on the suggestion

Brian Edwards (Coughton) He was probably the nearest neighbour to Cobrey Farms. He had had no cause for complaint in 33 years. Local produce should be encouraged. A farmer was entitled to harvest his crops. He remembered camps caravans of Romany gypsies being set up at hop-harvest time. He was fully in support of the enterprise. (Applause)

Judy Benwell (Howle Hill) spoke about the very loud baying of the hounds at Ross Harrier kennels at all times of the day and night as the seasonal workers walked to and from Ross and disturbed them.

JC He encouraged his workers to walk by that path to avoid the dangers of the road. There was now a new Master of Hounds at the Kennel House and he would liaise with him about the problem.

Mr Littleford (Ross) (representing Ross Ramblers walking group). He led groups of walkers from other parts of the country and had to explain to them the devastation of this beautiful valley caused by the mass of caravans. This will affect tourism in the wider area through the spread of litter on and next to the footpath through the woods to Fernbank Road. He had written to Mr Chinn and the litter problem had now been solved. He remarked that any trees planted needed 20 years to grow to maturity.

JC In response to Mr Littleford's letter, he had instigated weekly clearance of litter from the footpath and from the roads from Coughton through to Pontshill. He was pleased that this improvement had been noted. The requirement not to drop litter and to regularly check and clean up where necessary was included in the Management Plan.

Roger Morgan, (Leys Hill) (rep 400 members of Wye Valley Society of AONB) The caravans and the polytunnels were blots on the landscape and although they were not actually within the boundaries of the AONB, they seriously detracted from the landscape. He had heard that blueberries needed acid soil to flourish- was this acidification of the soil being made?

JC Trees and hedges were to be planted under the landscape scheme but the necessary soil-moving cannot take place at the site until planning consent is received. After the blueberry seedlings are grown under low plastic cloches for the first year, they are then planted in fibre containers, not directly in the soil. Rain-water, which requires very little increase in acidity is used and the minimum amount of acid and fertiliser added is carefully monitored. The run-off is monitored daily.

Mike Elnett (HM) The caravan site has been allowed to grow to a very large size.

JC It is not illegal for caravans to be sited for agricultural purposes whilst occupied. He needed consent in order to move soil to complete the landscaping scheme. There had been an 18-month delay whilst talks with the Environment Agency took place. When he re-applied in Sept 2008, a local councillor wanted further surveys on traffic and the ecological system. These have now been presented with the new application.

Mike Heath The blueberries are under plastic for a year – is this not industrial farming?
Chairman ruled that this was not possible to assess at this meeting.

Janeen Liddle. You said money was going into the community but Ross is visibly dying. Should not an impact assessment on the area be carried out?

Nigel Mummery 105 new caravans were on site from the original 68? Confirmed.

Robin Bennett (Walford) Many of the crops sites were away from the farm centre. Would it not be better to break up the mass of caravans and put them in several different locations? This would reduce the adverse effect on the neighbourhood in Coughton.

JC Most of the further fields were in Walford or Symonds Yat. It would be difficult if not impossible to find sites at these places to site 50 or so caravans.

Mike Dinnick (Bishw'd) wanted to know the projected numbers of seasonal workers.

JC 2009- 570 increasing to 700 in 2012. On the 3000 acres owned or rented there were 700 acres of asparagus.

Mr Tecke (Howle Hill) If there were 700 workers for 40 weeks a year, should not more permanent accommodation be provided?

JC – No – for permanent staff only

Brian Paige (Ross) Traffic surveys were undertaken at times dictated by Hereford Council

Mike Dinnick Wanted to know if an award could be sought for appearance of the site could be obtained as had been done at Peterchurch.

Mr Duberley (Ch'man HMPC.) If applications are consented to, this would de-value all nearby properties. Residents and planners were being treated with contempt. A shanty-town was developing fast in the valley with the excessive number of caravans. Would the stringent conditions be complied with?

JC A bull-dozer to move soil and create sheltering tree-planted bunds will improve the appearance of the site

Virginia Morgan (CPRE). Damage was being caused on a large scale to the natural environment. Would it not be better to plant more traditional crops e.g. cider apple trees?

Nigel Mummery The impact on the Coughton Valley was tremendous with hedges being ripped out and with the road infrastructure being insufficient for the amount of traffic. And there was no local employment being created.

JC No. He had conferred with the local job centre and 8 applicants had been accepted. Only two now remain but they are very good workers.

Name of questioner missed

If blueberry plants are not covered, how can bird-damage be controlled?

JC Some bird predation on the uncovered blue-berries had to be accepted.

Adrian Barlow (Bulls Hill) There was great interest being shown in this enterprise for its highly-rated for efficiency enterprise for in asparagus production. There was a wide market for the produce. The alternative was importation from Peru.

The caravans were over-conspicuous because of the roofs. They would be improved with matt green/grey paint.

JC would comply with any conditions set.

Sandra Gibbens It was HC policy that caravans would only be consented to only if permanent housing would be consented to.

Doug Preece From a long association with growers in the Evesham area, he considered that wages were not sufficiently high to attract local workers. Where is the expansion going to stop?

JC Migrant Workers were paid the agricultural wage, which is higher than the minimum wage, and good work was rewarded with bonuses.

The Chairman brought the public meeting to a close by thanking those that had attended and the Chinn family.

CLLrs SM Cole and SW Cole left the room for the Parish Council discussion since they declared an interest by being related to the applicant.

WPC Comments:

SE2009/0901/F Change of use from Agricultural land to site for seasonal workers' accommodation

This was a difficult observation to settle.

We do recognise that a business enterprise such as this needs support as it cannot succeed without it. But we also recognise the depth of feeling in the community that the number of caravans has grown beyond an easily absorbable figure. It was decided to support planning consent for caravans to the year 2010. During this time the strictest conditions are to be complied with in relation to comprehensive landscaping, camouflage of caravans, and the Code of Conduct document for workers. Beyond 2010, the applicant would have to apply for extended consent.

SE2009/0944/F Erection of poly tunnels (low height)

It was felt that restrictions should be put in place on the scale of polytunnels to prevent their spreading down the Coughton Valley

SE2009/0945/F Erection of agricultural plant

Concerns were expressed about possible run-off from the acidic irrigation

