

Account of Purley on Thames

What to do with the Barn?

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Once Trenthams had closed its operations at Belleisle there was considerable debate about the Barn's future. The second barn used as the canteen drew no support for its future use and was one of the earliest buildings on the site to be demolished. Proposals for the Barn ranged from moving it to Long Lane School to conversion to housing. Its listed building status complicated matters and the potential costs involved frightened many of those on the fringes of the debate.

The 1989 Conversion Proposal

Under its new company name, Denehurst Homes West a Planning Application (130450) was submitted in November 1988. This involved the conversion of the barn to four dwellings but so many were the difficulties, this was soon reduced to three. The District Council set up a special working party to deal with the matter and numerous ideas were batted around and debated over. No one liked the conversion proposals at all. They entailed a total change in character of the building, but the alternative was completion demolition and loss of a historic structure which people wanted even less.

Eventually a conversion proposal was agreed and this was approved in May 1989.

Because the proposal to convert the barn to three residencies seemed to be almost an act of vandalism, a few members of the Parish Council conceived the idea to move it to a new site in the village. The idea was passed on to the Newbury Planning Department by District Councillor John Chapman and floated to the developers.

The developer, Egerton Homes, took up the idea very quickly as it offered them a number of advantages, first it enabled the site to be redeveloped without consideration of the barn and second it offered a considerable saving in conversion effort. They immediately commissioned a survey report to look at the possibilities and the job of re-design was given to John Sprattley, an architectural consultant from Dorchester on Thames.

Potential Sites

A number of possible sites were looked at by the Parish Council. First it was suggested that it might be of interest to Long Lane School. Mrs Burstow, the Head Teacher was interested but when the caretaker pegged the footprint of the barn out on the west side of the school playing field it was obvious that it would consume far too much valuable play area.

Another site considered was the District Council's Play area at the end of Thames Reach. In many ways this could have been quite suitable but it was too near the houses and would have been very difficult to supervise, especially with the vandalism problems that were around at the time.

The next site looked at was on the north side of the Lister Close Estate. This again was a very suitable site but there would have been problems with the levels and no parking facilities, in fact it would have taken up existing parking spaces.

The Pond Field and the Bucknell's Meadow Recreation Ground were then looked at. In many ways

these sites were ideal but there seemed little prospect of acquiring the land unless a general principle of Development for the area was conceded. This had already been turned down on appeal and the Parish Council were not prepared to consider offering any sort of precedent.

The next possibility was the Memorial Hall Grounds. The Barn would just have fitted in, particularly if it had been reduced by one bay or re-arranged in a different configuration, like an L-shape. However it took up all the grassed space and would have competed for parking space with the Hall. So that idea was dropped.

Finally schemes were considered for the Beech Road Recreation Ground. It could have been fitted on to the existing ground but would have reduced the playing area considerably to the extent of squeezing out the junior football pitch.

A meeting between Martin Jones, Managing Director of Denehurst Homes was held on 19th April at which all the possible sites were looked at. In a letter dated 25th May 1989 the developer indicated that of the sites looked at, the one adjacent to the Recreation Ground was the most suitable, with possibly a site adjacent to the Memorial Hall as an alternative.

The Goosecroft alternative

Eventually the Parish Council came around to the idea that the ideal site was in the field between the Recreation Ground and the southerly boundary of Beech Road. John Chapman was deputed to sound out Michael Moon to see if he would be prepared to sell.

Michael was very receptive to the idea and very keen on preserving the barn. In fact he offered to provide a site at Home Farm Sulham if it were not possible to find an alternative home. He offered to sell about three quarters of an acre to the Parish Council and indicated he would consider leasing additional land. He went away to consult the other members of the Henry Scutt Trust who were the actual owners of the land and eventually offered it for £15,000.

This valuation was considerably higher than the figure the Parish Council had in mind. They were thinking in terms of agricultural land at about £5000 an acre so the gap seemed unbridgeable, especially as the District Valuer gave his opinion that agricultural valuations should be used. John Chapman had several meetings with the Valuer, the Surveyors for the Henry Scutt Trust and the developer. Eventually a figure of £12,500 was agreed on with Michael Moon and a form of words was agreed with the valuer which overcame the objections of Reg Marshall, Chairman of the Parish Council who was concerned lest the Auditor should question the Parish Council paying more than the District Valuer thought the land was worth.

The sale went through on and the next day the developer almost went broke.

Plans for the Barn

While there was a body of opinion, lead by John Chapman, that the barn should be preserved, almost at any cost, there was a countervailing view lead by Reg Marshall that this was a considerable potential liability for the Parish and there was little that could be done with it. Concerns were also expressed that it would compete with the Memorial Hall which was having one of regular financial crises at the time and could ill afford to lose patronage.

At the same time the local Scouts were experiencing problems in accommodating the large number of boys who wished to participate. They had been using the Memorial Hall and Denefield School but had no proper base from which to operate.

A small steering committee of the Parish Council consisting of Reg Marshall, Jeannie Smart and John Chapman set out to come up with some firm proposals on how the barn could be used to advantage. What emerged was a proposition to divide it into two parts. The western part consisting of three bays and the extension would be turned into a youth facility for all year round use. The other

eastern part consisting of five bays would be restored as an empty barn to be used for limited functions during the summer.

As part of this study the Parish Council looked into three areas of concern:-

The mechanics of relocating the basic structure

What needed to be done to it to make it a useful asset and

How to cover the future costs of maintenance

There was general agreement that whatever happened this should not be a charge on the ratepayer.

The Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service was consulted and Mr Grace, the Fire Safety Officer, responded with a number of detailed points on 5th April 1990. He recommended the fitting of panic bolts, standards for fire resistance, ventilation, signing and the provision of fire-fighting equipment

For the western part it would be necessary to provide insulation, lighting and heating with a false ceiling to keep the heat in. Four offices would be provided and fire doors as required by the Fire Officer. At one time it was hoped to provide a large storage area above the false ceiling but this was impracticable because access in a public building would have to be of such a high standard, with enclosed staircases etc.

In the western part it was proposed to provide a small kitchen and toilets which could be used by the users of either section. Otherwise it would be only lightly draught-proofed and provided with a minimal level of lighting. It was envisaged it could be used for exhibitions, shows, barn dances and parties but only in the Summer months.

The ideas were set out on paper and put to the developer. Martin Jones the Managing Director of Egerton Homes was very supportive and generally agreed to all the suggestions although he did suggest a few alternatives. John Sprattley was asked to prepare more detailed plans and displays and photographs were assembled for a press launch in May 1990.

Just as the invitations were about to be sent out the bombshell dropped. Egertons were in severe financial difficulties because of the down turn in the economy which had deterred home purchasers, so only one or two of the houses already being built had been sold and problems with the roundabout on Purley Rise caused in the main by British Telecom. Martin Jones was made redundant, together with most of his staff and the project was put on ice for several months.

Seeking Planning Permission

By the end of 1990 the problems with the roundabout had been resolved and some of the flats were beginning to sell. Egerton Homes began to look at the barn proposals again under the new management. Discussions were resumed with the Parish Council and complete agreement reached fairly quickly. Egertons would fence the site, demolish, refurbish and reconstruct the barn on the new site, carry out the interior works, construct a new car park and provide the Parish Council with £25,000 to fund future maintenance.

At least four planning applications would be required. A listed Building Application to demolish the barn, an application to re-plan the site without the barn, An application to re-locate the barn on the new site and a Change of Use for the new site.

The Change of Use was dealt with first and was submitted on 23rd November 1990 by the Parish Council (Application 138329) This was approved despite a small amount of objection from the residents of Beech Road whose properties adjoined the field.

Next in sequence was the re-planning of the site (Application 138608 of Feb 1990). However the Planning Officers were unable to deal with this before the other two which had yet to be submitted. A draft of the relocation plan was considered by the Parish Council on Feb 21st 1990 but there were a number of technical errors and it had to be returned to the developers.

When the matter finally came before the Planning Committee on 17th April 1991 the three applications were 138608 for the conversion of the Farmhouse and erection of flats where the barn and offices had been; 138850 for the erection of the barn in its new location and 138888 for the Listed Building Control to cover the demolition and re-assembly. The Planning officers raised a number of minor objections about parking, noise and lack of information. As a result a site meeting was called for and this was held on 21st May 1991.

It was attended by a large number of the new Planning Committee and the proposals were very favourably received. As a result when it came back to the Planning Committee on the 29th May it was given approval subject to the provision of an engineering report and the completion of a legal agreement to secure its long term future. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward to rapid progress.

The relief was short lived. On Friday 7th June Egerton Trust went into Receivership.

The Engineering Report was submitted fairly quickly in July 1991 by Ken Endean, together with detailed proposals on how it was proposed to relocate and re-furbish the barn.

Meanwhile the Listed Building Application was sent off to the Department of the Environment for its approval and nothing was heard of it for many months. After about six months they responded asking for more time to consider the matter and a short while later responded by telling the District that it was not a matter for upwards referral and that the District had sole jurisdiction.

Receivership

The site went into the hands of the Receiver and the Parish Council immediately wrote to him setting out their interests in the matter. As well as the transfer of the barn and the associated support fund there was still the matter of fencing the land to be dealt with. As no joy could be got from the Receiver the Parish Council had to act and pay for the fence to be installed.

Apart from the plots already sold by Egerton's, most of the former Trentham's land was taken over by the receivers who were not prepared to acknowledge the arrangements made previously with the Parish Council. The Barn, along with the other property was offered for sale. Several potential buyers approached the planners at Newbury to sound out various schemes - almost all involving conversion of the barn to residential use. Eventually the western part of the site was sold to Cala Homes and eventually redeveloped at the 'new' Belleisle. The remainder of the site, including the barn was acquired by Bryant Homes who focussed their attention first on the southern and eastern zones which were redeveloped as Sherwood Rise/Sherwood Place and Bowling Green Lane respectively. The Bowling Green was transferred to the Parish Council with a long lease for the erstwhile Trentham's Bowling Club.

Bryant Homes

The site was eventually sold to Bryant Homes who were committed to conversion of the barn to residential purposes. So they flatly refused to consider signing the legal agreement. In fact the Parish Council had great difficulty in establishing any communication with them whatsoever so no discussions or dialogue could take place.

Eventually in January 1993 they submitted a new Planning Application (142338) for the conversion of the barn to three dwellings. While the new plan was somewhat better than the 1989 version, the destruction of the barn's character remained. After a deferral for a site meeting the matter came to the Planning Committee at Calcot on 16th June and despite strenuous opposition, permission for the conversion was granted. By this time there had been considerable changes on the Parish Council and some of the newer members were unaware of the issues involved. They eventually decided not to comment on the application and this generated quite a heated atmosphere within the Council for a while.

A New Barn

On 28th July District Councillor John Chapman went to see Colin Barlow, the Director of Recreation for Newbury DC, to sound him out on ideas for recreational use of the land which the parish had acquired now that the barn project seemed to have fallen through entirely. As some sort of centre seemed desperately needed, especially for the scouts, but also for the Youth and Community Service, ideas were investigated for the design of a brand new purpose built hall and John drew up some preliminary sketches, based upon the style of the Trenthams Barn. These were warmly welcomed by the scouts and consideration was given to sources of funding and to produce estimates as to costings.

The general consensus was that the shell for a new building could be constructed for somewhere between £80,000 and £150,000 depending upon the square footage. The plan was that all the interior fitting and partitioning would be done by the scouts over the years. The planners at Newbury were not very supportive as this would be a brand new building and although of slightly less bulk than the barn and on the same site, the feeling was that it would set an unwanted precedent and would have no countervailing merit like preserving an old building. The crucial problem however was car parking. While the argument about having a sub-standard number of car parking places could be accepted for the relocation, it could not be for a new building.

About the same time as the conversion application was being processed a management change at Bryants occurred and the project was transferred from one Division to another. The new management team were somewhat sceptical of the proposal as they believed Bryant's business was in building new homes and not messing about with listed buildings. They had already written to the Scouts on Feb 8th 1993 suggesting that they might like to take the barn off their hands and move it. Naturally this was not what the scouts had in mind at all as the costs to them would have been astronomical. They replied that would consider the offer but the matter was not pursued by them.

A Change of Heart

Bryants wrote again in July to the scouts asking when they were going to move the barn and it was felt that an urgent meeting was called for. So, on August 2nd a meeting was arranged at Purley Lodge between Bryant's new land agent, Colin Godfrey, Rick Jones from the Scouts and John Chapman to see more precisely how the scouts could acquire the old barn and to discuss timescales.

Colin had come into this rather cold and was not really au fait with what had gone on before. He confirmed that Bryants were simply interested in acquiring the land upon which the barn stood and his job was to dispose of the building. He was horrified to learn of the recent history and promised to go back to give the matter further consideration. It was pointed out that as the land at Beech Road was owned by the Parish Council, the onus would be on them to agree. This could not be taken as a foregone conclusion. However all dealings must be through the Parish Council and it was agreed that John Chapman would brief them on the meeting.

When the matter was taken to the Parish Council on August 12th the reaction was extremely hostile. Almost all the members were against the idea of taking on responsibility for a building which was seen as a liability and a potential fire trap. However they were agreeable to the matter being pursued and on 3rd September the clerk wrote to Bryants setting out the arrangements already agreed with Egertons. In their reply dated 11th October Bryants agreed in principle and a meeting between them and the Parish Council was suggested.

The Home Farm Option

In view of the hostile reaction John Chapman broached the matter with Michael Moon. Michael had been very supportive of the scheme and had intimated that he would be pleased to accept the barn

himself to be relocated at Home farm, Sulham if this were the only way of preserving it. An opportunity arose at a party at Sulham House on August 21st and Michael instructed his surveyor, Keith Chopping, to follow the matter up. As a result Keith met John on 7th October to be briefed on the scheme and went away to report back to Michael who had by now become very keen on the idea. Coincidentally one of Keith's sons worked for Bryants and was able to make confidential soundings within the company.

Further meetings between John and Keith took place to explore all the options and to think through the potential problems. Meetings were also held with the Newbury planners to consider what the options were for building on the barn site. Bryants proposed two blocks of town houses, one with three 3-bedroom houses and the other with three 2-bedrooms. The planners were somewhat doubtful but there was sufficient encouragement that something could emerge that Bryants were given the confidence to press ahead.

By this time Keith Chopping had come up with a package which he agreed with John in principle. This would entail the barn going to Home Farm, the existing steel barn there going to Nunhide, Michael Moon leasing land to the Parish Council for additional car parking at the recreation ground, Bryants giving the Parish Council a capital sum towards a new purpose built hall and Bryants getting planning permission for six dwellings.

Keith put this to Bryants and on 1st December they made a firm offer to the Parish Council with two options:-

- To move the barn and make up the car park as per the original proposals

- To give the Parish Council £40,000 towards a new building.

At its meeting on 3rd December the Parish Council voted for the first of these and the clerk was instructed to convey their decision to Bryants.

The Second Scheme

The second scheme for moving the barn was essentially similar to the first except that it was repositioned facing south as it had done in its first location by the church and the orientation to which it had been designed. It was also pushed further north on the site to form a sound barrier between the Recreation Ground and the houses on Beech Road and the car park was re-designed.

Planning approvals

Once the planning permissions had been granted the matter was referred automatically to the Department of the Environment, even though they had decided against it in an almost identical proposal earlier. When the matter was queried it was explained that because a conversion did not involve demolition such a matter need not be referred, but as relocation of a listed building inevitably involved prior demolition there was no option.

The Department were very tardy at even considering the matter and it was not until October 1994 that they finally notified Newbury DC that they did not wish to call in the proposal. As a result Newbury's assistant solicitor Alastair Davies was able to draft a Section 106 agreement and this was considered by the Parish Council at their meeting on October 27th. A few points were asked to be changed but what emerged was the need for Bryants and the Parish Council to have a separate agreement setting out their relative obligations.

A meeting was held on 11th November with Richard Henshaw, from Bryants Winchester Office, John Chapman and Reg Marshal at which a 'Heads of Agreement' and a schedule prepared by John Chapman were discussed. November Richard took this back to Bryants and a draft agreement was rapidly concluded. This was signed by Bryants on 12th December, together with the Section 106 and by the Parish Council on December 13th.

