



FRIENDS OF THE DYMOCK POETS

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P1706/12/FUL Redhill Farm, Bromsberrow Road Redmarley

Erection of polytunnels, sedimentation pond, two reservoirs and the closure of an existing public footpath by Cobrey Farms Ltd

The Friends of the Dymock Poets continue to object to the above planning application for the following reasons.

1. The impact on the historical and literary value of the landscape

The Friends of the Dymock Poets (FDP) considers that the proposed development site and land immediately around it should be seen as a whole historical site which should be conserved and enhanced. The Forest of Dean Council places high priority on protecting a high quality environment both its own sake and to promote the district's economic health in its Core Strategy 2012 (on page 38). It explains that this policy involves the promotion of the local distinctiveness of particular areas. The FDP submits that the development site itself represents an area of great local distinctiveness and individuality and that part of this special character is inextricably linked to its history. This historical aspect of the site has the following elements:

i) Archaeological significance

In their survey of the archaeological value of the proposed development site, Cobrey Farms' consultants found evidence of up to four burial mounds. These have not yet been dated but are thought to have been created in prehistoric times, probably during the Bronze Age (2100 – 750 BC).

There is much archaeologists do not know about life in the Bronze Age in Gloucestershire and, when remains occur, they raise intriguing questions. The applicant's consultants note, "Barrows have not previously been recorded in this part of Gloucestershire and this makes their occurrence and partial survival of particular interest"./REF 1/ The remains of these barrows would be affected by the construction of one of the reservoirs and the covering of another with material from reservoir excavation as well as the construction of polytunnels.

The FDP considers that the eradication of these artefacts even if they were excavated would represent a significant loss, to our and future generations. Little is known about the evolution of the landscape here and it is often difficult for archaeologists to ascertain what it is important to retain. Other prehistoric artefacts might be uncovered in the future; indeed it is

important for students of landscape history to understand not only individual items but the relationship of man-made and natural features one to another in a whole landscape. What is more, the existence of these barrows, albeit much changed from the time when they were constructed, adds to the sense of a link with history over a very long period that one can experience here. Such an experience would be lost if they were completely destroyed or removed.

ii) Historical significance

The applicant's consultants note the possible existence of artefacts from the post-medieval period in their report, such as relics from the Civil War./REF 2/ One important embodiment of the way in which people have used this area over the centuries is public footpath GRA/31/1, which runs south-westwards across the development site, and whose closure is proposed as part of the scheme. It is not known at what date this path was first established, but its location on a natural route-way in a fertile, shallow valley, with barrow sites on either side suggests it may be very old indeed. At some stage it became the parish boundary between Berrow and Redmarley and it has served in the past as the county boundary between Gloucestershire and the old county of Herefordshire. The hedgerow along this path hosts bluebells, which are an indicator of sites that have long supported natural vegetation. So this path embodies a real link with the past: part of its attraction as a walking route lies in the knowledge that previous generations have trodden in the same steps. As explained below, we therefore consider that this path is a key feature of this landscape that should be retained, even if the proposed development goes ahead.

iii) Literary significance

The interest in the much more recent history of this area for the Friends of the Dymock Poets resides particularly in its use in the years 1910 – 1915. A young writer and poet called Lascelles Abercrombie settled in Ryton with his family and rapidly attracted other poets who either set up home in this area or stayed in it. Abercrombie's home in Ryton was the main base for the poets. Several of them, including Robert Frost, Edward Thomas and Eleanor Farjeon stayed there, and it was from Ryton that the poets published their work in a journal entitled *New Numbers*. Rupert Brooke's poem *The Soldier*, which is among the most famous poems written during World War One, was published from Ryton.

Rupert Brooke stayed with Abercrombie in Ryton a few months before *The Soldier* was written. He wrote to a friend of period as a time of friendship and of drinking great mugs of cider while looking at fields of poppies in the corn. It is not difficult to imagine that it was to this countryside and of his strong friendship with the poets that Brooke was alluding in his most celebrated poem.

It was a central feature of the poets' lives that they walked in the countryside of this area, and as they did, they forged a new approach to the writing of poetry as well as obtaining inspiration for particular poems. It was because this would have been a popular walking area for the poets that when local people in the Windcross Paths Group set about providing a means for present-day visitors to connect with the poets in the 1990s they included the public bridleway running from Ryton to Redmarley within the first of the paths they established – Poets Path 1. Artist and FDP member Barbara Davis designed the leaflet and drew the map for Poets Path 1, which continues to be sold today.

Daffodils by John Drinkwater and *Ryton Firs* by Lascelles Abercrombie are some of the poems that contain specific references to this small area. Wilfrid Gibson's poems *The Golden Room* and *The Old Nailshop* capture the spirit of the friendships that were forged around here and the poets' love of this countryside. Many other poems could well have found their direct inspiration in Ryton/Redmarley, such as Robert Frost's famous poem *The Road not Taken*,

which begins “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood”. This area was famous as much as any other of the Dymock poets’ countryside for its dazzling display of wild daffodils. Frost often walked in this area with the other poets and indeed lived for a while at Ryton. It was during a walk with Edward Thomas that he had a much recorded confrontation with a gamekeeper. This confrontation took place at a gamekeeper’s cottage that was situated on the edge of Cobhill Rough, just a few yards from Poets Path 1. Visitors come from far and wide to see the site of the cottage, now romantically overgrown and a haven for wild flowers, and to remember its eventful history.

If the scheme goes ahead, Poets Path 1 should remain in its present location. However, the experience of walking along or near it will change a great deal. Anybody standing at the site of the gamekeeper’s cottage and looking north-westwards, for example, will be confronted close at hand and over most of their field of view with dams, reservoirs and polytunnels. At least one side of the path is likely to be fenced in, to prevent people falling into the reservoirs.

Sir Andrew Motion, former poet laureate and president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, described the proposed development at Redhill Farm as “a horrendous act of vandalism” in a statement in January, 2014. Sir Andrew explained: “These are the pathways and fields beloved of the Dymock Poets – the places where Edward Thomas walked with Robert Frost, and where they all in their different ways used the landscape as their inspiration and subject. ... It is one of the most significant literary sites in England, and deserves to be protected for that reason alone – not to mention its particular and outstanding beauty.”

The Friends of the Dymock Poets agrees with Sir Andrew Motion that the covering of an area equivalent to 28 football pitches with polytunnels over this area would amount to “a horrendous act of vandalism”.

The FDP notes that neither the applicant’s Landscape Appraisal nor the Historic Landscape Assessment mentions the literary significance of this landscape. The authors of the Landscape Appraisal speak of people looking at the landscape as if they are only passive observers – rather than with a real interest in its meanings and its detail. The authors of the Historic Landscape Assessment explain that theirs was merely a desk study and do not list any sources of information about the unique literary importance of this area, although several well-known books have been published that refer to it./REF 3/

The proposed development would transform not only the historical and literary aspects of this landscape. Buzzards would no longer linger overhead, as, covered in polythene, the ground could not provide any home for ground mammals. Other birds would disappear without any insects, seeds or worms on which to feed. Indeed, insects and birds have been known to fly into cloches and polytunnels, killing themselves in the process: they mistake the plastic for water. The land would no longer serve its ancient function of acting as a sponge to absorb rainwater.

iv) Significance of the landscape as a whole

Perhaps the most striking effect would be on the landscape as a whole. Where once was a glorious patchwork of field, hedge, wood and gorse-covered hillside would come an alien, industrial landscape. Henry Chinn of Cobrey Farms Ltd himself acknowledged on BBC local radio Hereford and Worcester on 10th February, 2014 that most people do not like to see plastic polytunnels. For anybody aware of the literary heritage of this area, the impact would be truly sickening. The Dymock poets were in tune with natural things – the wildlife of the countryside and its rhythms. It is hard to think of something they might like less than to see the land suffocated in polythene. While walking, Edward Thomas was asked by his friend and fellow poet Eleanor Farjeon why he had volunteered to go and fight in France (a decision which was to cost him his life). Miss Farjeon recorded “He stopped, and picked up a pinch of

earth. ‘Literally, for this.’ He crumbled it between finger and thumb and let it fall.”/REF 4/
Had they been strolling past a prairie of polytunnels, it is difficult to imagine that his response would have been the same. The soldiers of tomorrow and today are being given less and less to fight for.

v) Significance of the proposal in the light of the Forest of Dean’s Core Strategy 2012
The transformation of the landscape this proposed development would bring in its wake would fly in the face of many of the Forest of Dean District Council’s key policies set down most recently in its Core Strategy 2012. For instance, policy CSP1 states: The design and construction of new development must take into account important characteristics of the environment and conserve, preserve or otherwise respect them in a manner that maintains or enhances their contribution to the environment, including their wider context”.

This policy develops the government’s own National Planning Policy Framework at district level, not least the NPPF’s statement that, “The planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, geological conservation interests and soils; recognising the wider benefits of ecosystem services; minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity where possible”./REF 5/

The FDP is delighted that the council has gone one step further and translated its Core Strategy policies on landscape protection into an Allocations Development Plan Document (ADPD), circulated in 2014 for consultation. This says the Core Strategy should be implemented in a way which does not degrade footpaths in this area (including the views from them), nor its landscape or nature, including its wild daffodils. The council explains in this draft ADPD: “The safeguarding of the environment and the increase in tourism and recreation in the manner described are aims of the Core Strategy and will be reflected in the ADPD”./REF 6/

2. Cumulative impact on the landscape

The proposed development would exacerbate the already devastating visual impact of existing expanses of polytunnels and also cloches in the locality. At Newtown Farm in Newent, polytunnels cover an area of 22 hectares, at Toney’s Farm, Bromsberrow more than 10 hectares. To these are added the expanse of polytunnels at Lintridge Farm of 22 hectares, which would be separated by only a narrow buffer from the proposed 20 hectares at Redhill Farm.

The Friends of the Dymock Poets urges the council to consider this cumulative impact in its deliberations, not only on the landscape but also on the potential of the area to continue to sustain a healthy tourism industry. The FDP notes that the applicant’s consultants fail to consider the important cumulative impact on the landscape if this scheme goes ahead in their Landscape Appraisal.

3. Impact on tourism

Today, tourism is the industry that unites people who live in this area. It is a major employer of people both directly and indirectly in B&Bs, hotels, restaurants, pubs, taxis, shops and tourism venues. It is an obstinately labour-intensive industry. The location of north-west Gloucestershire, fairly close to major cities yet retaining a genuine rural feel, means that it can sustain tourism-related employment throughout the year.

What attracts tourists and indeed residents when they move around the countryside here is its matchless landscape, the diversity of wildlife it supports and the historical and literary value of the land. As the FDP noted in its earlier evidence, such recreation routes and events as the Geopark Way, Poets Path Potter, Poets Path I and II, the Daffodil Way, the Poets’ Bridle

Trail, the Ledbury Loop and the Masefield Trail are popular and attract visitors as well as those who come to explore the countryside generally.

The wild daffodils are a particular attraction both for local people and visitors, who come to marvel at the spectacle of these beautiful flowers in abundance in a small area and to go on associated walks and teas. Dymock poet Lascelles Abercrombie enthused in one of his poems:

"From Marcle Way,
From Dymock, Kempley, Newent, Bromesberrow,
Redmarley, all the meadowland daffodils seem
Running in golden tide to Ryton Firs,
To make the knot of steep little wooded hills
Their brightest show"/REF 7/

Although daffodils are no longer abundant over the cultivated fields of the proposed development site, they do occur in the hedgerow along path GRA/31/1, near the ruins of the gamekeeper's cottage and along Poet Paths 1 where it runs alongside woodland. The attraction of the wild daffodils to visitors, the rarity of the species in the UK and the location of the proposed development site within the heart of the "Golden Triangle" make this proposed development particularly inappropriate.

Understandably, the Forest of Dean Council has singled out tourism as an industry to be supported both for economic reasons and because of its close link to the maintenance of the beauty of the landscape. The strategic policy that underlies policy CSP.7, for example, is "to develop the local economy including tourism". This reflects the council's Core Strategy Vision, that: "The Forest of Dean will be a thriving sustainable community with a high quality environment" and "a developing local economy including tourism".

The Friends of the Dymock Poets considers that the harm this proposed development would inflict on the local landscape would impair the tourism industry. Tourism is a highly competitive business and if tourists do not find the countryside experience they seek in north Gloucestershire, they will go elsewhere – taking with them money which could have been injected into the local economy. As FDP member Jackie Tweedale, whose livelihood depends on a local bed and breakfast business (The Horseshow Inn at Bromsberrow), points out: "My customers come here for the landscape. I am sure they will stop coming if vast stretches of this countryside are swathed in plastic."

4. Inadequacy of Proposed Landscaping Measures

We have studied the applicant's Landscape Appraisal carefully, but we regretfully conclude that the measures it proposes to hide the polytunnels could not possibly succeed. The entire site is overlooked from higher ground, it is vast and no amount of planting could hide it. In other words, the cosmetic aims of the measures proposed will not work or they are deplorable, in particular that for mitigation of the impact of the views of polytunnels for people walking along path GRA/31/1 – to close the path.

Another serious defect of the landscape mitigation proposals is their lack of any real understanding of ecological matters. Most wild plants and animals cannot exist as viable populations in isolation – they need the wider environment and a network of semi-natural if not natural habitats to survive. So while yellowhammers have regularly nested in the hedgerow alongside public path GRA/31/1 in the recent past, they are unlikely to do so if the scheme goes ahead, since the adjoining land will no longer provide the insects and seeds the birds need on which to feed themselves and their young. We fear that the ancient valley of

Redmarley's Long Field is likely to resound in the future not to birdsong but echoes of the title of Rachel Carson's famous book – *Silent Spring*.

Bordering the proposed development site are three Key Wildlife Sites (designated by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and adopted by the Forest of Dean District Council in 2005) – Cobhill Rough, Ryton Coppice and Hazeldine Wood. The removal of 22 hectares of land that could support any wildlife whatsoever from the edges of these woods over a large area is bound to have an effect on wildlife populations within them and in the wider countryside.

The council fully understands the interconnectedness of the countryside for wildlife when it talks in Core Strategy of “green infrastructure”. In discussing the desirability of conserving and enhancing the wildlife interest of the countryside, it says: “There are also locally protected Key Wildlife Sites and other areas of local interest. In addition it is essential to take proper account of the need to safeguard certain protected species which may be present throughout the district. As a general principle development in these areas or development which adversely affects protected species is very unlikely to be permitted./REF 8/

The council also itself understands well the need to provide viable wildlife corridors as well as isolated pieces of terrain that can sustain the creatures of the countryside. Its Core Strategy 2012 states that: ‘Developments must support green infrastructure corridors that link existing habitat features and networks. They must show that the integrity of any affected nature conservation site is not compromised by the development proposed. Proposals that prevent and restrict network connections will not be supported’./REF 9/

These policies alone provide compelling grounds on which to turn down this planning application.

5.Loss of public footpath GRA/31/1

The development envisages that path GRA/31/1, which runs south-westwards across the site will be extinguished.

It is important to clarify the route and status of this path. In his report to committee, the planning officer says that this route is a bridleway and that it forms part of the Poets Paths network (p 36). In fact, this route has the status of a public footpath and it is quite separate from the routes that have been selected to be Poets Paths.

The Friends of the Dymock Poets strongly resists the proposed closure of this path. As noted above, it marks the boundary between two parishes and two counties. It is therefore likely to be very old. It provides a delightful walk in a shallow valley, with wild bluebells and wild daffodils flowering in the hedgerow alongside.

Part of the appeal of walking along this path is the experience of treading in the footsteps of people who lived in this area in the past and imagining the way in which they used the path to get to work, to school, to church and so on.

We believe that the path forms a key element in what is a valuable historical landscape and an important means of enjoying that landscape. We believe this path should not be closed to accommodate this farming operation.

It is true that the applicant proposes that a new path should be created along the ridge to the south. Clearly, this could not substitute for the old path in terms of historical value. The proximity of the polytunnels would mean that any attractive views it affords would be mainly only in the far distance. We doubt that walkers would consider they had gained in this transaction. We doubt that the route would be much used by riders as horses dislike

polytunnels and can be spooked by them, particularly if pieces of plastic are flapping in the wind.

It is true that this path would not be subject to flooding as the parish boundary path has been in very recent years. We suggest this flooding is much exacerbated if not caused by the run-off of rainwater from the large expanse of polytunnels at Lintridge Farm. This flooding amounts to an obstruction of the Queen's Highway which Gloucestershire County Council should require the landowner to deal with.

Were the Forest of Dean District Council to support the closure of the old parish boundary path and its replacement with the proposed new path we question whether it would thereby be condoning the breaking of the law by the highways authority, Gloucestershire County Council. As a public body and the owner of the surface of rights of way, the county council would be permitting a path at present passable (apart from the flooding) with one that would pose real problems for people with mobility difficulties, as they would have to climb a sharp incline particularly at the southern end of the path. The net effect would be to discriminate against disabled people and thus contravene public authorities' legal duty under the Equality Act 2010.

The applicant argues that the replacement path "will not inhibit the movement of pedestrians, regardless of their ability or mobility in areas of the site accessible to the public". We submit that the opposite is true.

References

- 1 MOLA (2013) *Redhill Farm, Redmarley D'Abitot: Evaluation Report*, page 26
- 2 Museum of London Archaeology (2013) *Historic Environment Assessment*
- 3 Gethyn-Jones, J (1951 & 1985) *Dymock down the Ages*; Hart, L (1995 & 2011) *Once They Lived in Gloucestershire: a Dymock Poets Anthology* Green Branch Press; Street, S (1994) *The Dymock Poets* Seren; Hollis, M (2011) *Now all Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* Faber & Faber
- 4 Farjeon, E (1958) *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years*, page 154
- 5 Department of Communities and Local Government (2012) National Planning Policy Framework, para 109
- 6 Forest of Dean District Council Draft Allocations Development Plan Document, para 148
- 7 Abercrombie, L *Ryton Firs*
- 8 Forest of Dean District Council Core Strategy 2012, para 6.4
- 9 Forest of Dean District Council Core Strategy 2012, policy CSP2, section 3

Further information may be obtained from Marion Shoard at marion@marionshoard.co.uk