

‘The Battle for May Hill’ by Marion Shoard

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May Hill is probably the most important geographical feature for the Friends of the Dymock Poets. The poets derived their inspiration from the countryside around them. As they walked and talked together along the field paths and lanes, they constantly got their bearings from that unmistakable, reassuring upturned saucer with its fuzz of pines atop – May Hill. As Edward Thomas recalled in his essay about the Dymock country, ‘This England’: ‘Again and again we saw, instead of solid things, dark or bright, never more than half a mile off, the complete broad dome of a high hill six miles distant, a beautiful hill itself, but especially seen thus, always unexpectedly, through gaps in this narrow country, as through a window’. Several FDP walks have taken in May Hill, where members have read aloud ‘Words’, the delightful poem which Edward Thomas composed from its slopes while on a cycling trip with John Haines, the Gloucester solicitor and amateur botanist who joined the poets on many of their walks-talks.

In view of this connection, when FDP member Alexander Maltby, who lives on May Hill, contacted the FDP about a plan to build a five-bedroom mansion on an isolated site on its slopes, the committee was concerned. Alas, we do not have the capacity to check every planning application, so we can deal only with selected cases. Barbara Davis and I were the first committee members to go and visit the site, and this is the submission which Jeff Cooper, our chair, sent in on behalf of the FDP to Forest of Dean District Council, which will grant or withhold planning consent.

The Friends of the Dymock Poets is a voluntary organisation set up in 1993 to discuss and celebrate the work of six notable World War I poets who gathered together in the stretch of north Gloucestershire between Greenway in the north and Huntley to the south (and also over the county border into smaller areas of Herefordshire and Worcestershire) between 1910 and 1915, and explored the area extensively on foot and by bicycle. We also seek to increase public knowledge and appreciation of the cultural history and natural history of this area.

We object most strongly to the new building on Yartleton Lane that is the subject of planning application number P1049/12/FUL.

As the proposal contravenes or fails to meet several key policies in the Forest of Dean District Council's Core Strategy (2008), the applicants rely on clause 55 of the government's National Planning Policy Framework in support of their application. However, we consider the proposed development in no way meets the requirements of clause 55 for the following reasons.

1. Sensitivity to the local area

Clause 55 of the NPPF states that if new development is to be allowed it must "significantly enhance its immediate setting and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area". The new building that is proposed is completely different in character from any other building in the area. Here, the landscape is characterised by a small-scale patchwork of fields, scattered woods, little streams, small hills and deep lanes lying cheek by jowl with the relatively rough and wild slopes of May Hill. The Silurian sandstones of the Hill support habitats of rough grass, heather, gorse, bracken and trees not found elsewhere in Gloucestershire.

The development site and its immediate vicinity is a superb example of the way in which these two distinct landscape types come together in this area and complement each other. The field below Yartleton Lane opposite the proposed access turning into the development site consists of pasture, dotted with trees, grazed by sheep and running down the lower slopes of the hill. So typical is this view of what people consider to be a beautiful rural scene that the Forest of Dean District Council has seen to fit to use a photograph of it on the front cover of its landscape supplementary planning document, adopted in 2007.

On the other side of the lane – the development site – the vegetation is characterised by rough grassland, with gorse and bracken and dotted with attractive trees – entirely typical of the open, wild character of the upper slopes of May Hill.

The stretch of Yartleton Lane approaching (at both ends) and then running along the southern edge of the proposed development site is a key part of the experience of visiting May Hill at present. Bordered by oak trees and verges which, in June, for example, are covered in cow parsley, wild garlic, germander speedwell, buttercups, herb robert and greater stitchwort, this stretch of lane affords glorious views down and across to Plump Hill and Hazel Hill to the south west and, on its opposite side, behind a hedgerow of field maple, hazel and hawthorn, the rough upper slopes of May Hill.

We know the poets walked and cycled this way. The written accounts they have left show they used the Hill as a reference point, a unique topographical feature which enabled them to orient themselves virtually wherever they were from just south of Ledbury to Huntley. But they also rambled over its slopes. Indeed, Edward Thomas penned an important poem entitled 'Words' on the Hill, when stopping off on a cycling expedition. The poem reflects the character of the Hill. Thomas was on a cycling trip with his friend the then well-known Gloucester solicitor and amateur botanist John Haines, and they would almost certainly have travelled along Yartleton Lane. Thomas and Haines were also keen naturalists, and today the flora and fauna along the Lane remain abundant and diverse. Birds endlessly flit through the branches of the trees. For members of the Friends of the Dymock Poets, the knowledge that the poets travelled this way and that today's sights and sounds are little changed from those the poets would have known much enhances our experience of engaging with this area.

The proposed access point to the new development is at a particularly lovely point on the Lane. Here, the verge is wide and covered in wild flowers. The new access road would have to cross this verge and run up the rough hillside. Inevitably much semi-natural habitat would be destroyed.

The new building would intrude an alien note into this environment. The appearance, scale and size of the mansion – sufficiently large to accommodate five bedrooms, a gym, multi-media lounge, games room, an estate office and two garages, and resembling more than anything else an unidentified flying object – is completely foreign to this rural environment. The large site on which the building would sit would be bound to display the normal domestic accoutrements of large dwellings in addition to the parked cars of which there is space for four next to the house. The mansion's large expanse of window would mean that the building would intrude into the landscape even at night.

The applicants make the point that Longhope has seen a changing settlement pattern over the years, with building in the Middle Ages and the 18th century, for instance. The implication is that further building in the present day would be part of a process of natural change. But what is proposed here is very large, very modern and on a greenfield site. The fact is that nowadays large numbers of people, some the descendants of former country dwellers of Longhope, are concentrated in large urban areas. They, like many other urban dwellers, value the peace and tranquility which unspoilt countryside can offer. At present the stretch of Yartleton Lane before and after the development site and right through to Cliffords Mesne remains remarkably little affected by any urban or suburban character.

We are also deeply concerned that if this proposal is allowed it would act as a precedent for the construction of further executive housing on May Hill.

2. Enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities

The National Planning Policy Framework stipulates that any new housing must “promote sustainable development in rural areas; housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities”. We cannot see any way in which this proposed development would meet either of these requirements.

We wholeheartedly support the Council's aim to retain and enhance the attractiveness of the area, while bringing a more sustainable and diverse economy to it. This aim is stated many times in the Core Strategy, for instance, “The recognition, safeguarding and protection of the natural and historical assets of the area must be the starting point for its regeneration” (para 4.7).

We believe this approach has widespread support. In its small way the Friends of the Dymock Poets supports tourism in the area. We run a twice-yearly programme of walks and talks about the poets and the environment they knew; each event attracts about 80 people, and many come some distance, staying in local bed-and-breakfast establishments and eating out in cafés, restaurants and pubs. Individual members have played an active part in local initiatives to promote the area for informal recreation. For instance, we had a major input into the creation of a display about the Dymock poets which stands on permanent display in Dymock church, and in the drawing up of the Windcross Paths Group's leaflets about the Daffodil Way and Poets Path 1 and Poets Path 2, which are on sale. Members are currently involved in devising plans for two cycle routes – the Daffodil Route being devised by the Ledbury Area Cycle Forum and a cycle route which will take in May Hill and its literary connections being created by Newent Transition.

Visitors and tourists come to enjoy the essentially rural character, peace and quiet, wealth of wildlife and literary associations of the area. We believe they will be less likely to come and visit, and in the process support the local economy, if the area comes to take on a different, more urban or suburban character.

Visitors' enjoyment would also be diminished by the knowledge that this development was encouraging greater car use and thus pollution and congestion in this quiet, secluded area. The

proposal for two garages and space for four cars seems at odds with the ethos of low or zero carbon impact which the applicants claim to espouse.”

As well as the FDP, several other organisations and individuals have objected, including CPRE Gloucestershire, the National Trust, the May Hill Society and May Hill, Longhope and Taynton Parish Councils. Several FDP members have lodged objections in a personal capacity, including Winston Baldock, Jonathan Lumby, Roy Palmer and me. As this newsletter went to press, we were expecting that Forest of Dean District Council’s planning committee would arrive at a decision on either 13th August or 10th September. But the matter may be delayed by further consultations.

If any other members are keen to help the FDP in conserving and enhancing the attractions of the poets’ country or would like to join in any efforts we may make on this case in the future, do please contact Barbara Davis (tel: 01531 890416) or me.

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