



Worcestershire

Standing up for your countryside

From the Chairman:
Dr. Peter King

DRAFT

Director of Planning
Worcestershire County Council (by e-mail)

Dear Sir,

19/000053/CM Lea Castle Farm

We object to the above application.

I set out in an appendix at the end of this letter a history of the site. My sources for this and the depth of research will be greater than anything likely to be provided by the Worcestershire Archaeological Service. For reasons expressed below, the Worcestershire Landscape Character Assessment is significantly flawed. My doctorate is in economic history. I am a very experienced local historian having cut my teeth in the subject in the 1970s with a 'tenement reconstruction' of Kinver and Wolverley, in other words reconstruction landownership history, which in this case I have been able to take back fairly continuously to the 14th century.

Green Belt

NPPF para 90 makes mineral developments an exception to the general prohibition on development in the Green Belt, this is subject to the qualification '*provided they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in Green Belt*'. This means that the Green Belt status of the land cannot be just overridden as if it did not exist. The commonly-heard unqualified statement that mineral extraction is a use that is appropriate in the Green Belt is an incorrect oversimplification.

The phrase '*purposes of including land in Green Belt*' clearly refers back to the five purposes of the Green Belt in para 80. These include:

- *to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another*
- *to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment*

In the present context, keeping towns apart should perhaps be extended to include significant settlements of all kinds. In this case, the settlements in question are Kidderminster and Cookley, which are about 1.4 km apart at their nearest points. This is a narrow gap and this site sits in the middle of it. Accordingly the development of the site for gravel quarrying will substantially erode the Green Wedge keeping these settlements apart.

This relatively narrow wedge has already suffered encroachment by the establishment of the former Lea Castle Hospital, which was presumably permitted under the "very special circumstances" exception about 50 years ago, but is now under Wyre Forest's Development Plan classified as a major developed site in the Green Belt, whose redevelopment is being permitted. In addition the draft Local Plan (submitted for examination) proposes that the rest of the block of land between A449, B4189, A451, and Axborough Lane should be developed, perhaps for mixed uses, but mainly housing. Scattered development along B5189 Wolverley Road and Sion Hill already detracts from the openness of the Green Belt. The proposed quarry will aggravate this so that there will cease to be much open countryside between Kidderminster and Cookley. The result of any erosion of this Green Belt gap is likely substantially to endanger the viability of the rest of it.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country.

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There are circumstances where exceptionally land needs to be taken out of the Green Belt and released for development, but NPPF paragraph 83 indicates that Green Belt boundaries should only be amended *in exceptional circumstances*. The need for sand and gravel, when there are substantial other resources available, clearly takes this out of anything exceptional.

The presence of quarry machinery and processing plant will almost inevitably affect the openness of the area. The eastern end of site appeared to be in arable cultivation when recently I passed it. A449 runs in the bottom of a dry valley, so that the eastern end of the site is highly visible from A449 and B4189 westbound from Parkgate Inn to A449, so that extraction from the slope above A449 will have a considerable landscape impact.

I am also concerned about a quarry in this location generating add-on development, as has happened at Wildmoor Quarry in Belbroughton, where the quarry has generated a truck repair business and perhaps a takeaway kiosk in a rural Green Belt location where that kind of thing ought never to be permitted. This is perhaps a sort of stealth development, where planning enforcement has failed and ancillary uses have been allowed to expand beyond being ancillary. It would be highly undesirable to have such development in a narrow Green Wedge.

Local impact

The site is crossed by several well-used footpaths. Mineral development will have devastating effect on the settling of these.

Immediately west of the site is a street called Brown-Westhead Park, which is separated from the development in places by a narrow belt of trees. There are also houses on and a school on the opposite side of Wolverley Road, as well as the lodges of Lea Castle Park (which are listed buildings). Mineral development of this kind inevitably involves machinery (and hence noise). Sand extraction is liable to involve dust. These should be unacceptable in immediate proximity to people's homes. Since this concerns so-called solid sand, machinery will be needed to grind it up

The resource

I would further question the assessment of the geological resource that underlies the selection on the area. Geological maps appear to show the summit of the hill at SO843790 as sand and gravel, but much of the rest of the area as Upper Mottled Sandstone (a soft rock, not sand). Parts of the plan appear to refer to this rock as "solid sand". The sandstone is certainly friable, but very considerable energy would be required to convert the rock into sand. At a time when we are seeking to reduce energy consumption, in the light of climate change, converting sandstone to sand should be a low priority option, to be pursued when easier ones are exhausted.

The western portion of the preferred site (nearest Brown-Westhead Park) appears to be the Fourth River Terrace. I am aware of places in the area (some beyond the county boundary) where these sands and gravels have been worked, but I cannot think of any case of the river terraces being worked in this immediate area. However, lower Terraces have been worked near Stourport and Astley. Both the sands and gravels and the River Terraces occur elsewhere within the corridor, so that there is no dire necessity to select this site rather than other sites within the corridor.

Alternatives

It is clearly the case that the whole of the North West Worcestershire mineral corridor is in the Green Belt, but that does not mean that all of it is an equally important part of it. The whole of the area between A449 and A451 was before inclosure Wolverley Heath, which also extended to some extent south and west of the latter. Unfortunately, the Worcestershire Landscape Study has misclassified this area as Sandstone Estatelands, rather than as Inclosed Common. However there should be plenty of space within that area (north of Lea Castle Hospital) to find a site for a sandstone quarry. This area has wide inclosure roads, some of which are potentially suitable for the HGV traffic that is likely to be associated with a quarry. Upper Mottled Sandstone (which the application calls "solid sand") is an extremely plentiful resource.

The area west of the river Stour (within Cookley and Wolverley Parish) was the medieval open fields of Cookley, Caunsall and Blakeshall. These fields were the subject of inclosure by private agreement, probably in the early

modern period. They generally have narrow roads, characteristic of old inclosed lands and are unsuitable for significant HGV traffic, making them unsuitable for sand to be worked.

Inadequate restoration

The proposals for restoration seem to involve creating fields in the bottoms of quarries where the land will inevitably have greater shade and thus be less productive. The proposal involves a permanent reduction of the area available for agriculture at a period when the need to grow crops for food and bio-fuels is as high as ever and is only likely to increase with an increasing demand for organic bio-fuels as the country decarbonises to meet the government pledge on climate change. Additional footpaths will no doubt be welcome, but most are merely providing a path within the park wall that parallels a roadside pavement outside it. It must be born in mind that unsurfaced bridleways are churned up by horses to an extent that they become a more impassable to pedestrians, so that additional bridleways are not necessarily welcome. Even if they were desirable, it would be necessary to ensure that they became part of a network of such routes, to provide through routes for those riding for leisure.

Conditions

If your council is so ill-advised as to permit a quarry, the following conditions would be appropriate:

- Full archaeological investigation. The location of the deserted medieval village is probably outside the quarry site, but its precise location is not wholly certain. Detailed field-walking needs to be undertaken to recover surface finds: fields elsewhere in the area have produced Mesolithic flints and Roman and medieval pottery. After the removal of the topsoil, a watching brief will be needed to identify any archaeological remains. If any are found, these will need excavation, as quarrying will irrevocably destroy any remains.
- Land should be restored to its present contours to prevent damage to an attractive, though undesigned landscape with rolling hills and a dry valley (occupied by A449).

Committee visit

I would ask that the planning committee before reaching a decision on this application should be driven along A449 out of Kidderminster and turning into Cookley, pausing to view North Lodge. If possible they should be taken along the bridle way from there and walk footpaths 62.4 across part of the site and 62.2, being met by their transport where this reaches Wolverley Road. They should then be driven to the gate of Lea Castle Hospital, near which there is a good viewpoint from which to see the east part of the site.

Yours Sincerely,

Appendix

Lea Castle Park consists of two elements:

- The medieval farm of La Le, which belonged to the Pitancer of Worcester Cathedral Priory and devolved upon the post-Dissolution collegiate cathedral, from whom it was held by lessees. The late 18th century lessees were successive members of the Knight family, ironmasters with Wolverley Old and Cookley Forges (among other works). Under a private Act of Parliament in 1812, they exchange The Lea (as it was by then spelt) for land they owned at Bromsgrove. This land is to the north of that within the planning application.
- The township of Wolverley (later called Little Wolverley), consisting of four half yardlands (*virgates*) in 1240. Most of these came into the hands of the Jewkes family by the 18th century and were sold to Edward Knight in 1747 with the rest of their local estates. The last messuage and half yardland were sold by Slade Nash to John Knight in 1806. At about the same time he bought a piece of land called Cheeses and in 1807 a cottage at Little Wolverley, the last house in the original village of Wolverley, so that this is a deserted medieval village. This would have had the usual set of three open fields.

The mansion of Lea Castle takes its name from The Lea (whose house is between Lea Lane and the Canal), but was actually on copyhold land adjoining the northern boundary of Wolverley township, the creation of Lea Castle Park must date from after the Nash purchase. Lea Castle and its Park were sold by the Knight family to John Brown in 1828. The park was probably enclosed with its present brick wall and 1818 when John Knight bought a large part of Exmoor and built a new house at Simonsbath. From John Brown it passed to his wife's nephew J.P. Brown-Westhead and descended to his son Marcus, who enfranchised the property in 1893. His daughter Mrs M.F. Carpenter in 1933 sold Lea Castle, described as a "stately castellated mansion with extensive gardens and beautifully timbered and shrubbed ground and delightful Park Land." The purchaser immediately resold the mansion to H.W. Mitchell (of Mitchells & Butlers, brewers). Not long after this the mansion seems to have been demolished. However, the North and South Lodges (both listed buildings), reflecting the architectural style of the mansion survive.

Sources:

P.W. King, 'The townships of Wolverley' *A Journal of the Wolverley and Cookley Historical Society* 3 (1992), 24-32.

L. Ince, *Knight family and the British Iron Industry* 1991).

Wolverley Manor Rolls (WAAS).

Deeds of the Brown-Westhead family, deposited by writer (for his then firm) in WAAS.

Deeds of Knight family in Kidderminster Library collection (now in WAAS).

Sale particulars (1933) in writer's possession.