

Full Council meeting 19/12/2011

Address to Agenda Item 22 regarding Ruskin College's proposal to include two fields in the BAAP, made on behalf of the Ruskin Fields Group, a subcommittee of the Friends of Old Headington, and in support of officers' recommendations.

To all Councillors:

We do not dispute the City's need for housing, and plans for the land at Barton to provide up to 1200 homes will make a real difference. However, we strongly disagree with Ruskin's assertions that their fields should be developed as part of these same plans and that this could be done without detriment to the Old Headington conservation area.

There is a long history of protection of these fields from development and it's worth looking at briefly here before considering a proposal which would change the area irretrievably.

In 1933 the first threat to develop the meadows we know now as the Ruskin Fields was averted because your predecessors here in the City Council refused an application submitted by a firm of builders who had recently purchased the house and land.

In the 1940s the next owner safeguarded the fields with covenants restricting building.

These covenants – still in place today – don't necessarily have great significance in planning terms, but they are evidence of a long-standing recognition of the value of keeping the fields as green open spaces.

Nor is it just past owners and present neighbours who regard the fields as special.

In 1994 the City Council stated that “the fields had no development potential and should properly be kept permanently open to preserve the setting of the northern edge of Old Headington”.

In 1998 the fields were brought into the conservation area, and given a “Special Open Space” designation.

In 2009 their value as a key feature of the area was restated by Ruskin College; this is what they said: ‘The site bears a close relationship with the village of Old Headington from which you can catch distant glimpses of the Rookery through the seasonally changing trees. It also bears a wider relationship with the surrounding fields and rural landscape. The adjacent fields to the north, expressed through a different language of planting in their rural setting, are one of the most important features’. (*Design and Access Statement* 09/00636/FUL (March 2009)).

This year, in July, The Conservation Area Appraisal for Old Headington was commended and adopted by Council. That document makes it clear that all the Ruskin Fields play a vital

role in setting the village of Old Headington within its rural context as well as providing an open green space which gives the whole area its special character.

Now, near the end of 2011 the Planning Policy team has decided to exclude the Ruskin fields from both the Draft Submission for the BAAP and from the Sites and Housing DPD on the grounds that they are not – for planning and conservation reasons - suitable for development.

Oxford is a national asset for its architecture, history, and beauty, but also for its green “spaces in between” which provide the setting for so many of its listed buildings and key features. The Ruskin Fields are the green “space in between” for Headington, and an important survivor of pasturage from a rural landscape, which today gives Old Headington its special character.

The fields also provide a green buffer between the conservation area and the A40; and we need to bear in mind that these and all the other fields within the ring-road round Oxford are vital not just as a natural local amenity but as providing the wider landscape setting of Oxford; they must be preserved if at all possible.

If Ruskin’s proposed development is allowed here, in a conservation area, many other green spaces will be brought under threat, and the long tradition of valuing these particular fields for what they are: an entirely natural uncultivated green space within the City boundary will be at an end.

You are the latest custodians of the historic village that is Old Headington; its rural character is a precious inheritance which the Ruskin proposal would irretrievably damage. The planning officers have recognized this in their recommendations to Councillors and on behalf of the inhabitants of Old Headington I would urge you all to support that decision this evening.

Thank you.

Speaker to be drawn from one of these three:

Veronica Hurst (9 Stoke Place, OX3 9BX)

Zoe Traill (10 St. Andrew’s Road, OX3 9DL)

Clive Hurst (9 Stoke Place, OX3 9BX)