

THE COCKPIT

NEWSLETTER OF THE CHISLEHURST RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

FOUNDED 1934 REGISTERED WITH THE CIVIC TRUST

The Cockpit, on Chislehurst Common, has been the traditional meeting place for Chislehurst people on all great occasions from time immemorial.

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CONTINUING VIGILANCE ON PLANNING

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

We apologise to members for the delay in publishing this issue of 'The Cockpit'. Our aim has always been to produce three or four issues each year. The past few months have been particularly difficult for those members of the Committee who are vitally involved in the production of our news-letter. Our Editor has had to make many business trips abroad since the April issue, but he should be home-based again for the next few months. Our Secretary, who is our planning expert, has spent a great deal of his time site visiting, attending Public Hearings on behalf of the Association and writing letters to the Department of the Environment in connection with planning appeals — all this apart from his duties as a member of the Board of Commons Conservators, which again take up considerable time. Your Chairman spends much of his time answering the 'phone in response to queries about planning matters and to complaints regarding litter, illegal parking, tree felling, and the telephone can start ringing at 8.30 in the morning.

Please don't think that we are complaining. It's just to indicate to members that there are times when our plans sometimes go awry. We are comforted, however, when we learn that the previous Mayor of Bromley is said to have observed that the CRA are a tough lot to deal with, and when a director of Crest Homes declares that we are the strongest Residents' Association in the area. We need to be both tough and strong, as members will appreciate when they read the contents of the articles concerning planning matters.

THREAT TO THE GREEN BELT

The threat to the Green Belt started to rear its ugly head some three years ago and is still with us. Earlier this year

there appeared from the Department of the Environment a report by the Property Advisory Group on the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1972. The Group had carried out a 'wide-ranging and fundamental review' of the Use Classes Order under the Town and Country Planning Act 1971, with the object of modernising and recasting it. Reference to some of the more objectionable suggestions made in the Report appeared in the April issue of 'The Cockpit', and as was reported at that time, the Association, and the Bromley Federation of Residents' Associations made their objections known to the Department of the Environment in no uncertain manner. Since then the Department has issued a consultation paper setting out the Government's proposals for modernising the Use Classes Order. Whilst account has been taken of some of the objections to the earlier Report, there remain in the consultation paper proposals which are still unsatisfactory, not only to the Association and the Federation but also to the London Borough of Bromley Development Control Committee. Further observations on the latest proposals have been made by these bodies to the Department of the Environment.

CONCERN OVER APPEALS GRANTED

We would now draw your attention to yet another aspect of planning which has given rise to growing concern on the part of your Committee. That is the rapid rise over the past two or three years in the numbers of appeals being made by would-be developers to the Department of the Environment. Coupled with this concern is another, namely, the growing number of appeals being allowed or granted. We print, in full, an article on these subjects, which appeared in the Daily Telegraph on 30th August, and we thank the Daily Telegraph for giving us permission to reproduce the article. When you have read its contents you will appreciate the depth of our concern. This matter has been raised at Federation level, whose delegates were unanimous in supporting Chislehurst's suggestion that the four local M.P.s. should be asked to enlist the help of their colleagues in the House to have the subject debated. Having mentioned this latest concern to Councillor Barkway at a Civic function, your Chairman was happy to report to his colleagues that the Leader of the Council had asked for a copy of the Federation letter so that its contents could be discussed informally with his fellows in order to

Chairman:
A. T. C. JONES
(01-467 2796)

Vice-Chairman:
A. J. OSMOND

Editor:
P. A. TURNER

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see what measure of support could be given to our campaign.

So, although you have seen little printed evidence of our activities in the past months, you will now appreciate that we have not been idle. We make no apology for dealing with planning matters at such great length. After all, they can impinge very closely on the quality of living.

We thank The Daily Telegraph for permission to reprint the following article, which first appeared in that newspaper on August 30th.

Whitehall's planning bulldozer rides roughshod in the Shires

As most people are probably aware, southern England is facing a tidal wave of new house building. Towns and villages from Somerset to Essex, from Oxfordshire to Hampshire, are being deluged with development schemes, ranging from a couple of bungalows to estates of several hundred houses.

What is not so widely known is that the Government is actively assisting this process by a curious method which many planners, councillors and conservation groups see as a threat to the foundations of our democratic procedures. As the chairman of one West Country planning committee puts it: 'We are facing a real crisis of confidence. If the Government carries on like this, we have the prospect of a complete breakdown in the whole system of local planning as it has evolved in the past 40 years.'

The reason for such expressions of dismay, which are echoed in council offices all across southern England, is the unprecedented extent to which central government — in its determination to see more houses built — has recently been moving by ministerial diktat to overrule the decisions of local planning committees.

At the heart of Britain's planning system since 1947 has been the right of local communities, through council planning committees, to have some control over new development in their area. The need to obtain planning permission gives local representatives, planners and other interested parties, the chance to consider all new development in the light of overall plans and local interests.

To safeguard the rights of developers, it has been an equally important part of that system that where a developer feels he has been unfairly treated in having his planning permission refused, he can appeal to the Secretary of State for a second opinion. If a Ministry inspector or the Minister himself agrees that the developer has a case, they have the right in the last resort to overrule the local planning committee's decision.

What the present Government has done is to transform this appeals system from a quasi-judicial safeguard into a direct instrument of policy, to force through a major increase in planning permissions over local authorities' wishes.

Not only under this Government has the actual number of appeals risen sharply, to an all-time record last year of 14,639 — against 11,643 the year before and an annual average of less than 9,000 in the late 1970s: more significantly, since the Department of the Environment put out new guidelines to its inspectors in July 1985, in the circular 14/85, the percentage of appeals allowed has itself jumped dramatically, from just over 30 per cent to more than 40 per cent.

The combination of these factors means that the number of local authority planning decisions being overturned has more than doubled in the past few years, while in the south of England the rate of increase has been considerably higher.

But it is not just the quantity of decisions now being overruled that is arousing a wave of concern among many of those involved in the planning process. It is also the fact that the DoE now seems prepared to act much more arbitrarily in undermining the role of local planning committees.

No longer is it just the marginal decisions that are being reversed. I have spoken to councillors and planners in Wiltshire, Berkshire, Somerset, Avon and Essex. Each of them reports the overturning of planning decisions in recent months in ways which seem to contradict all established planning guidelines — in many cases running directly counter to local structure plans approved by the Secretary of State himself.

In north Wiltshire, for instance, a Ministry inspector recently granted an appeal for 50 houses in the village of Broadhinton, entirely contrary to a structure plan approved only last summer.

With dozens of similar stories elsewhere, it is hardly surprising to hear a deputy chief planning officer remark that 'it seems that all normal planning considerations are being sacrificed on the altar of making land available for residential building'. Indeed the most often-voiced worry is that local planners no longer know where they are. 'There no longer seem to be any firm rules about what can or should not be allowed. For the developers it is turning into a free for all.'

Christopher Booker on the house-building free-for-all that has let loose the developers

As a result both planners and councillors are becoming demoralised. In the words of one planning chairman: 'Why should my officers and members spend hours of time on discussions and site meetings, when some inspector is going to come along and make a nonsense of the whole thing? We might as well pack up and go home.'

One irony of the situation is that much of the greatest anger against the new policy comes from Conservatives themselves. In the name of placating one body of Conservative support, the would-be developers and builders, the Government is antagonising another, its own district and county councillors who see their decisions swept aside.

Another obvious irony is that it should be this of all governments which seems to be proclaiming such a devastating new version of the old principle that 'the man in Whitehall knows best.'

The DoE's own reply to such criticism is that the present situation is only temporary. As soon as local planning committees get the message the Government is trying to put across — that the need for more houses has become an overriding priority — then planning committees will learn to grant more permissions.

But the critics retort that this is an extraordinarily cynical way to put across a policy — to manipulate the appeals system which was set up to serve a quite different purpose, and simultaneously to undermine the whole

principle of local responsibility for planning.

Conservative councillor Michael Purse, chairman of the Mendip District planning committee in Somerset says: 'If we're going to have such a fundamental change in policy then we must have a clear public debate and the new policy must be conscientiously explained. If they try to force a policy on us like this by stealth, simply by moving the goal posts, it is not just going to make life difficult — it is going to drive the whole bloody thing into chaos.'

FEDERATION LETTERS TO M.P.s

'Constituent Associations of the Federation, reflecting their members' disquiet, are increasingly voicing doubts, to put it mildly, about the present Government's real, or underlying, intentions — as distinct from its bland pronouncements — to uphold the planning structure, including the Green Belt, through the local authority mechanism that has served so long to maintain standards of development.

One aspect, and cause, of this growing volume of disbelief in the Government's good faith in this context is the frequent change of Secretary of State for the Environment, with all that can be, and is, read into the implications of such changes. This aspect, however, only augments, and serves to confirm, the sheer weight of evidence represented by the Daily Telegraph article of 30th August (reprinted overleaf), which itself merely puts into a wider scene the growing experience of planning appeal decisions affecting Bromley.

The Federation looks to its M.P.s, in conjunction with their colleagues, to achieve a striking reversal of the policies, and their consequential appeal decisions, now emanating from the Department of the Environment.'

LITTER ABATEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE BOROUGH

We welcome the present discussions taking place at Council Committees' level in preparation for the launching of a campaign which, it is hoped, will help to make the Borough a far cleaner and tidier place in which to live. The exercise, following hard on the recent Clean and Green project, is being given a great deal of thought, judging by the Discussion Paper which has been drawn up by the Director of Technical Services Committee.

The CRA Committee has moved in quickly to emphasise to the Chairman of the Litter Abatement Sub-Committee that a fundamental requirement for the success of the campaign is the frequent and regular servicing of litter bins and streets. There is no point in having a generous supply of litter bins placed at strategic points unless they are cleared fairly promptly. There are other considerations, such as ensuring that the litter bins are as vandal-proof as possible.

We have already expressed our readiness as an Association to give the campaign full support, and are indicating to the Council certain black spots which need to be given priority.

UPGRADING OF THE BOROUGH'S HIGH STREETS

Members will be pleased to learn that, in accordance with the earlier stated intentions of the Council to make improvements in the Borough's High Streets, a meeting was held on 10th September at the Civic Centre in order to discuss with representatives of Chislehurst organisations the priorities concerning Chislehurst High Street and Royal Parade. The representatives, drawn from the CRA, Royal Parade Traders' Association and the Board of Conservators, had a very amicable discussion with our Ward Councillors, Officers of the Planning and Technical Services Departments, and the Chairmen of the Planning and Technical Services Committees. Councillor K. V. Crask chaired the meeting.

It was generally agreed that of a list of twenty-one suggested improvements priority be given to improvement of the footpaths and verges in the High Street and Royal Parade. It was also agreed that landscaping of the area in front of the Library should follow. These items would cost something in the region of £50,000. A further sum would be available for added improvements in a second phase.

TREES IN CHISLEHURST

At the time of going to print distribution of a new and attractive leaflet with the above title is being made to all Road Stewards who deliver within the Conservation Area. In view of the increasing number of houses being built in Chislehurst and of the constant changes in residence it was felt that a fresh reminder should be given to all those who live in areas where trees are protected. The leaflet has been produced in co-operation with the London Borough of Bromley, and it is hoped that it will impress upon all residents concerned the importance of protecting our rich heritage of trees.

Members' Social

The Members' Social, held on 20th June, was an outstanding success thanks to the efforts of Kate Osmond, Andrew Osmond, Pat Howley, Nicolette Comport, Kit Bell and others who gave assistance on the evening. Unfortunately, the Mayor and Mayoress had a previous engagement as did Councillor Mrs. Joan Bryant. However, we had the pleasure of the company of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Sims, Councillor Mrs. Joan Wykes and Mr. Wykes and Mr. G. Gammon (Chairman of the Federation) and Mrs. Gammon.

NOTE THE 1987 DATE

Next year's social will be held on September 12th at Graham Chiesman House, which has proved to be such a successful venue.

Obituary

It was with considerable sadness that the Committee received news in June of the passing of Mr. T. Twigg and Mr. G. Lemmens, long-standing members of the Association. Mr. Twigg, before ill health overtook him, had made valuable contributions to the work of the Association in submitting to the Committee papers on various problems which arose from time to time.

Mr. Lemmens had given long and loyal service as a Road Steward for Sturges Field and Bromley Lane. He was punctilious in keeping us informed of problems arising in the sphere of his responsibility.

We can ill afford to lose the services of such devoted supporters. Our sympathy has been expressed to Mrs. Sheila Twigg, who continues as Road Steward for Poyntell Crescent, and to Mrs. Lemmens.

Resignation

In receiving the resignation of Mr. George Payne from the Committee colleagues unanimously expressed their great regret at having to lose such a respected member. George, a Committee member for the past twelve years, was a stabilising influence in our deliberations. Quiet of manner and in address he was always listened to with serious attention, for he was known for giving a great deal of thought to the subject under discussion. He could always be relied upon to give sane and balanced advice. His contributions will be very much missed.

Congratulations

This issue would not be complete without expressing our congratulations to Councillor Christopher Reeves and Mrs. Reeves on their elevation to the positions of Leading Citizens of the London Borough of Bromley.

It is pleasant to note that following a delayed commencement of duties, due to illness, the Mayor now appears to be in good health and is certainly enjoying his duties, charmingly supported by the Mayoress.