



ENGLISH HERITAGE

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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Our ref: P00434887

23 October 2014

Dear [REDACTED]

**Notifications under Circular 01/2001, Circular 08/2009 &
T&CP (Development Management Procedure) Order 2010**

**LAND ON THE NORTH SIDE OF, HIGHFIELD LANE, SEVINGTON, KENT
Application No 14/00906/AS**

Thank you for your letter of 24 September 2014 notifying English Heritage of the above application. The following advice relates also to application 14/00910.

Summary

Sevington is significant as a small historic settlement that survives unusually intact and still with a strong sense of the agricultural setting that relates functionally to it and which provides an attractive buffer to nearby urban development. The spire of its church, a grade-I listed building of outstanding heritage significance, retains its intended commanding presence over the surrounding houses and this countryside despite the intrusion of nearby roads. These positive elements of the church's setting make a key contribution to its significance, as well as to many of Sevington's grade-II listed houses and farm buildings.

This application, when considered in conjunction with associated improvements to the M20, would result in the complete loss of the church's characteristically rural setting, and the new proposed buildings would compete in scale with its spire and might considerably reduce opportunities for it to continue in use and therefore be maintained. We conclude that this proposed development would do substantial harm to the significance of the church and severe harm also to Sevington's various grade-II listed houses and farm buildings.

Because of this substantial harm to the significance of a grade-I listed asset, the NPPF requires that your Council should refuse this application unless you consider these to



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be 'wholly exceptional circumstances' in which it is demonstrated that the substantial harm is 'necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss' (para. 133). These are very high tests and in determining the application your Council will need to give especially great weight to conservation because the church is a grade-I listed building (para. 132).

English Heritage Advice

Significance

Sevington is a small historic settlement to the southeast of Ashford. Until the twentieth century, Sevington, the neighbouring parish of Willesborough and hamlet at Lacton Green, were all completely distinct from Ashford. They each consisted of small clusters of farmsteads and labourers' cottages from which the expansive surrounding agricultural landscape was worked and its produce taken to market in Ashford.

Despite later substantial expansion of Ashford that has subsumed Willesborough and Lacton Green, firstly with the introduction of the railway in the mid nineteenth century and then in more recent times as a government-defined growth area, Sevington has remained a distinct historic settlement in an agricultural setting. That setting has been compromised to an extent by its close proximity to the A2070 by-pass of Ashford to its west and the M20 to the north. However, despite the physical and aural intrusions of this modern infrastructure, Sevington retains a strong sense of its historic setting. The church is still encircled by fields and sits on high ground above the roads which are fairly well screened from it by trees.

Sevington was recorded in Domesday as a small agrarian settlement served by a church. By the end of the eighteenth century the great Kent historian Edward Hasted described it in his *The History and Topographical Survey of Kent* (1798) as a parish of only eleven houses, with its church standing on rising ground overlooking the weald. That picture has remained remarkably and unusually unchanged up to the present, with the majority of those eleven houses still surviving and now listed at grade II; the spire of the grade-I listed church continues to stand proud on elevated ground and its physical presence is a reminder of its former dominance also in the lives of the local community. Together this largely unaltered ensemble provides an extraordinary sense of continuity with the past.

The bulk of the church of St Mary, Sevington is Norman, i.e. it is in part the same church as, or at least a close successor to, the one mentioned in the Domesday Book. The adjacent farmstead at Court Lodge also has medieval origins and may either have been the manor house or, as suggested by Sir Charles Igglesden in *A saunter through Kent with pen and pencil* (1906), a grange to Christ Church, Canterbury. Granges were outlying farming estates belonging to a monastery. They were concerned with



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food production and often contained barns for the collection of tithes. Around the central core of buildings would have been a system of fields farmed by the grange. Those fields illustrate why it would have been desirable for a grange or a more conventional farm to be based in this location.

The other buildings in the settlement were all related in one way or another to working the land. Sevington's landscape setting of fields and hedgerows is therefore not only a highly attractive buffer to the encroachment of Ashford, but is also of historical value for illustrating why this significant place came in to being. This setting therefore makes a key contribution to the significance of the place as a whole, as well as to its constituent heritage assets.

The same may equally be true of the heritage assets at Willesborough, Lacton Green and Mersham that have been identified in the applicant's Heritage Baseline document as being within 500m of the application site. However, because English Heritage's role in this case is to advise principally on the most highly graded assets and also those assets which we think are most seriously affected by the proposed development, this letter focuses on Sevington only. You will need to seek advice from your own in-house conservation officer and archaeological advisors at Kent County Council in order to collate the full impacts of this application on heritage significance.

Impact

This application is for a commercial development of a range of large and very large sheds located to the east and north-east of St Mary's Church, Sevington. Although not part of the current application, a new slip road to the M20 is also proposed directly to the north of the church. The development has been set 100m from the church, but even so if this development were to go ahead there would be practically no remaining sense of the landscape setting that, as described above, is a key contributor to its significance. The churchyard would have major roads close by on two sides and commercial sheds around the remainder of its perimeter. Additionally, the height of the sheds is such that the presence of the church spire would be considerably diminished.

We are also seriously concerned that by marooning the church by roads and commercial development the probability of it remaining in use and in good condition is considerably reduced. We recommend that you should treat this likely impact on the future of the church as harmful to its significance and the overall harm to its heritage significance as substantial. The impacts on the grade-II listed buildings at Sevington are also severe and, taken collectively, we think this scheme should certainly be treated as constituting substantial harm to heritage significance.

Policy

The 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' set out in paragraphs 6-16 of



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the NPPF requires that new development achieves economic benefits simultaneously with social and environmental benefits, not at their expense.

The NPPF also requires that 'when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be' (para. 132). The church of St Mary, Sevington is a grade-I listed building and is of the highest order of significance. It therefore demands that the greatest weight should be given to its conservation when determining this application.

In deciding how to progress this application, you should also be aware of a number of recent Court of Appeal decisions that have confirmed that the 'special regard' requirement of Section 66(1) of the Planning (LBs & CAs) Act 1990 should be interpreted as requiring 'considerable importance and weight' to be given to listed buildings and their settings in the determination of planning applications [e.g. *Barnwell Manor Wind Energy Ltd vs East Northamptonshire District Council*, *English Heritage, National Trust and SoS for CLG*, paras 16-29].

Paragraph 132 of the NPPF goes on to say that significance can be harmed or lost through alteration or destruction of the heritage asset or development within its setting. Setting is defined by the NPPF glossary as 'the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced'. The Planning Practice Guide (PPG) provides useful clarification that works in the setting of a heritage asset have the potential to cause substantial harm to its significance (PPG, Conserving and enhancing the historic environment, para. 017).

Substantial harm itself is described in the PPG as 'a high test' occurring when the adverse impact of a proposed development 'seriously affects a key element of its special architectural or historic interest' (para. 17). We describe above why we think the church's setting should be treated as a key element of its special interest or, in other words, its significance.

When considering the impact of development within the settings of designated heritage assets, 'they [local planning authorities] may also need to consider the fact that developments which materially detract from the asset's significance may also damage its economic viability now, or in the future, thereby threatening its ongoing conservation (PPG, para. 13). We set out our concerns above about the effects of the proposed development on the viability of St Mary's Church, but this guidance may equally apply to other assets around the development site, such as the farm at Court Lodge.

The NPPF acknowledges that substantial harm to the significance of grade-I listed buildings should be refused except in 'wholly exceptional circumstances' (para. 132)



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and only where it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm is 'necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss' (para. 133).

English Heritage Position

We responded to an EIA scoping opinion for development of this site in December 2012 and at that time raised the need for any subsequent applications to be mindful of the setting of designated heritage assets. We do not think this advice has been acknowledged in the proposed development. We did not anticipate at the time of the scoping opinion the scale of the proposed development and in our opinion the result of it is substantial harm to the significance that the collection of designated heritage assets at Sevington derive from their settings.

Particularly badly affected is the setting of the grade-I listed church of St Mary. The scheme could also compromise the future viability of that church, and possibly also of the adjacent farm. This application should therefore be refused unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm to significance is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm.

We acknowledge there are public benefits associated with this application that will be seen as desirable by your Council, such as new commercial activity and improvements to the M20. However, the NPPF and the Planning (LBs & CAs) Act 1990 are clear that heritage considerations should not be dismissed lightly in favour of such claimed benefits.

Your Council will therefore need to carefully consider and determine in this case whether: i) the public benefits truly constitute 'wholly exceptional circumstances' and outweigh the associated substantial harm to heritage significance; and ii) those public benefits can only be realised by development in its current form.

We acknowledge that proximity to the M20 is a key factor in the positioning of the proposed development, but a masterplan for this allocated site should actively seek means of minimising harm to designated assets. We wonder whether the large units could, for example, be set further away from the church and on the lower ground nearer the M20. Although the site allocation is for commercial uses, it is clear that smaller scale residential uses would be less harmful around the church, and could also help to support its future.

If your Council is able to satisfy itself that these high tests can be fulfilled, at the very least we think you should seek to reduce the level of harm to the church as described above and by seeking more substantial landscape buffers and specific provisions that will help to sustain the church. Such provisions should include developer contributions in the form of a bond to pay for ongoing maintenance of the church, and better and



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safer connections to it from existing or proposed residential development. The church should not be allowed to become marooned and without a likely ongoing use.

Recommendation

English Heritage recommends that you should treat the current application as constituting substantial harm to the heritage significance of the group of designated heritage assets at Sevington, and particularly the grade-I listed St Mary's Church. Planning permission should therefore be refused unless it can be demonstrated that these are wholly exceptional circumstances and that the substantial harm is 'necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss'. These are very high tests and this substantial harm to significance should therefore not be accepted lightly.

We would welcome the opportunity of advising further. Please consult us again if any additional information or amendments are submitted. If, notwithstanding our advice, you propose to approve the scheme in its present form, please advise us of the date of the committee and send us a copy of your report at the earliest opportunity.



Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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Conservation



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