

Berwick Town Council Planning Meeting 13th March 2023: Report

by Julian Smart, 2023-03-14

Committee:

Chair: Cllr R Driver. Vice Chair: Cllr M Greener. Committee Members: Cllr R Bruce, Cllr A Forbes (absent), Cllr G Smith and Cllr J Turton (absent)

Also present: Town Clerk Gareth Davies, Assistant to the Clerk Steve Cozens, and Rosemary Mackenzie(?)

From the Ness area: Julian Smart, John Cridland, Denise Yates, Mark Pearson, Jo Batey and Ray Batey.

Other people attending: Georgina Hill, Zoreen Hill, Wendy Robertson (councillor for St Boisil Ward)

The friendly introduction at the beginning in which they introduced themselves to us and we gave our names was at odds with the quick, almost brutal dismissal of residents' views by the Town Clerk after the open portion of the meeting.

In the open portion, Julian Smart gave a three-minute speech and Jo Batey noted the activity in the back yard, the consequent vibration, and its potential to damage nearby houses.

At that point Gareth Davies took over the meeting, and after saying 'contact your insurer and lawyer' about possible house damage from works in the yard, gave a monologue that dismissed the points in our talk using the narrowest possible interpretation of each to support the required official view.

Here are his arguments:

1. There was no board on the Town Wall above the huts indicating that the huts are of significance, implying they therefore can't be of any value.
2. The huts weren't independently listed, so again, no value. He argued that they have no more value than a farmyard building that happens to be within the curtilage of the farmhouse. Obviously, this doesn't begin to address the actual significance of these particular huts: they are tarred with the same brush. Yet again, curtilage listing is dismissed as having no significance, undermining the whole purpose of the legislation describing curtilage listing.
3. The carbon aspect must not be considered at all because the report in the appendix hasn't been officially sanctioned yet. The report that was actually put in the appendix of the minutes of this meeting was belittled in order to discredit our point, as if there was no real problem with carbon. No one challenged this view, despite Councillor Rachel Driver strongly supporting the town's Climate Emergency declaration.
4. We can't speak of the value of the army huts to the history of Berwick because apparently the army hut's history in Blyth, not its significance to the Grammar School for over 100 years, is the only thing to consider.
5. Various museums didn't want to accept the huts, by strong implication proving they are worthless, and presumably also absolving BYP from further duties regarding the huts. It's not surprising the offers were rejected because they involve some restoration expense.
6. Damage to the reputation of Berwick for heritage needn't be considered because people have different opinions about the importance of heritage. This stance beggars belief.

7. Lots of Army huts were sold, and lots of Speirs buildings were made. This is another attempt to make them seem less valuable. However, how many Georgian buildings are there that are similar to one another, such as terraced houses? Does that make them less valuable? There are very few WWI and Speirs huts compared with, say, Georgian buildings.
8. The Town Clerk mentioned that conditions placed on planning applications are a matter of good faith and trust. We take that to mean that the condition that the new builds won't be started until the first resident moves into the main building is therefore not enforceable. We don't understand this point, since conditions are meant to be enforceable. We also don't understand why he is raising this: to prepare us for the applicant to ignore conditions?
9. The Town Clerk stated that there was no reason to change the committee's previous stance.

There was no discussion of these points, no debate on the wider issues in the case, and no mention of our proposal to reuse instead of build anew. The Town Clerk directed and monopolised this part of the meeting (we didn't stay for the other items), and then there was a vote to recommend application approval to the County Council on the 23rd March.

A County Councillor afterwards expressed their surprise to us at the domination of the meeting by the Town Clerk. It would appear to us to be abuse of power, and a failure of due process.