

Save the Highgate Bowl and Southwood Nurseries

by Gordon Forbes

Over the last 50 years there have been many planning applications to build housing on the Highgate Bowl open land that lies in the Highgate Conservation Area behind the listed buildings on the north side of Highgate High Street. All have failed because Haringey, as local planning authority has steadfastly refused them, seeking to preserve the break in housing development that gives Highgate Village its distinctive character sitting on its ridge. Those refusals were upheld at appeal

The Owner of the garden centre, Capital Gardens Ltd., decided that it was time to try yet again, submitting new development applications, under planning, and Conservation Area legislation. Once more these have been refused by Haringey, and their refusal is being challenged at Appeal. We support Haringey's policy.

The Highgate Society has sent in our Statement of Objection. When I called the Planning Inspectorate recently to ensure it had arrived, the best they could say was that it was heavy. It's nice to know that they are weighing our evidence carefully, even though they haven't yet got round to reading it. The Public Inquiry is to be held on 7 February 2012 and the following two days, but the Planning Inspector has not yet been chosen.

The Appellant has plumped for the Conservation Area application as the lead application, perhaps reasoning that since there had been only two Consultation Responses, (- to you and me, that means letters), and fewer reasons for refusal given by Haringey, -that that might offer an easier ride. We argue strongly that both applications be considered together, (the planning application generated 116 responses). One consent without the other just doesn't make sense.

The Owner has used much of the land to run a landscape contracting business as distinct from the Garden Centre, turning much of it into something more like a builder's yard than a nursery. This landscape business has caused most of the damage that now covers three-quarters of the site, scattering it with structures, portacabins, gates and cabins, plus roads and vehicle hardstandings. Indeed, the Owner confirms that he has never grown anything on the land, although it has long been a key part of the protective green cordon surrounding Highgate Village. He has kindly offered to clean up his mess in exchange for planning permission for his three new houses.

The Garden Centre is a much-used local amenity. Even in 1986 when the present Owner bought it, it was difficult to find anyone willing to take on a lease and run it as a market garden as Mr Southwood had done since 1970. The problem has been that nobody, - however hard they work, could generate enough income from market gardening on Southwood Nurseries to afford the rent it commands because of its development potential.

These days, the idea of fertile urban land disappearing under tarmac or buildings doesn't seem such a good idea. Suspicion grows that there might be something fundamentally unsound in the blind pursuit of substantial capital gains, discounting any thought for the future.

If this development is permitted, the cordon of greenery that has so long protected the northern edge of Highgate Village and has contributed so much to the preservation of its unique character will be breached. Despite the skill of the scheme's architects in burying much of their design in the ground so that it can be coloured green on the drawings, the tide of residential development that has for so long been held back only by wise planning policy, would sweep up the hill, turning Highgate into just another bump in the carpet of housing.

To sit by and watch as this piece of open land, so very important to the townscape is lost to public access forever seems to us to be less than responsible. Not so long ago, even as late as the 1970's it was still open fields, crossed by hedgerows and a network of public footpaths that connected Highgate with its surroundings. Those are now all gone or closed to the public, Southwood Nurseries being the last accessible bit left; and even that only during the hours when the garden shop is open.

We would like you all to come to the Public Inquiry and to make your opposition to this development very clear. We will keep you posted.

We have made it clear in the Conclusions at the end of our Statement of Objection that if the Inspector dismisses the Appeal, the Highgate Society will seek to set up a Charitable Trust representing all the main interests in Highgate to try to negotiate with the Owner to find some way of using the land in the public interest and local benefit.

We cannot dictate the form that public interest is to take, - that must be decided by agreement by such a Trust, but we think the land should be returned to the productive condition it was in before it was crushed into near-lifelessness. Bearing in mind that we already have the Harington Scheme in the Bowl, eager to expand their educational charitable activities, we think that if the land were to be run by the local community for growing plants and produce, and for leisure enjoyment, that would reflect better what people want.

There are already many similar community initiatives in London, and we think that such a project here would add to the attractions of Highgate as a place to visit. Local trade would benefit from increased numbers of visitors coming to enjoy more of the living vibrant Highgate with its community-venture gardens, and its shops.

We already know you support us in resisting the threatened loss of our Garden Centre, but if the Owner remains determined to shut it down, we would like you to join with us, - and with him if he will participate, - to find something better than three more luxury houses that would open the way to the loss of the rest of the Highgate Bowl to development. As you told us very clearly at our public consultation in September 2010, that would be a thoroughly retrograde step. There must be a better solution.