

South Stoke: to be, or not to be?

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The next threat came not from any proposed boundary changes but through the planning system. It is a long and complex story that ran for a decade from 1980 to 1990, and it can only be summarised briefly here. It is intimately bound up with the Avon County Structure Plan, and more particularly with the Wansdyke Environs of Bath (WEB) Local Plan, mention of which cannot be avoided. The former sets the general strategy for land use, the latter its

application to individual plots of land.

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The draft Structure Plan was published in May 1980 and immediately raised concerns about the future use of the 'white land' areas. The Parish Council founded, with interests outside the Parish, what became the Bath/Wansdyke Residents Group to mount a strong and unified campaign that all the land south of the Wansdyke between Combe Hay Lane and South Stoke Lane should be formally designated as Green Belt. In September the Group submitted to the chairman of Avon County Council a carefully argued case to this end, supported by a petition signed by 1630 people. This was "*praised by Avon planners*" and undoubtedly influential, but the County Council could only determine general policy, not the detail of the Green Belt. This was the province of the district councils, Wansdyke and Bath.

When Wansdyke Council put the WEB Local Plan 'on deposit' for public comment in July 1986, it proposed putting all the South Stoke 'white land' into the Green Belt. Landowners and developers alike were quick to object to this, and a public inquiry into the Plan was held in 1987. The inspector recommended that none of the 'white land' should be included in the Green Belt, and indeed that some land on the north side of Packhorse Lane should be removed from the Green Belt. This was a seriously flawed report and, to its lasting credit Wansdyke Council, rejected the recommendations early in 1988. Thereupon the Secretary of State instructed Wansdyke Council not to adopt the WEB Local Plan: he only finally released it without modification two years later, and it was eventually adopted by Wansdyke Council in May 1990. The direct consequence of this was that all the previously 'white land' was brought within the Green Belt. However, this decision was a long time in coming and by the end of the 1980s there were planning applications on virtually all the open space across the south of Bath, as shown in plan.(087) It will be evident to the reader that the face of the Parish could have been totally transformed, almost overnight. The following paragraphs set out as briefly as possible what transpired in each of these cases, as no history of the Parish would be complete without this record.

The Hignett family had long been opposed to any development of the land west of South Stoke Lane (1) but in 1984 reversed this stance, as a consequence of which Crest Homes plc, in May 1986, applied for planning permission to develop this site. The application originally referred to 71 acres, but 18 acres in the south west of the site was already Green Belt and was withdrawn. Some 350 houses were envisaged, but that would have been a low density and the number could well have been double that figure. The application was refused by Wansdyke Council in July 1986, against which Crest Homes appealed. Both Jack Aspinwall, MP for Wansdyke, and Christopher Patten, MP for Bath, opposed development of these fields. A public inquiry opened at Keynsham Town Hall on 1st March 1988, and lasted seven days instead of the scheduled four days. It attracted much press and public interest; many local residents attended, a number participated and made valuable contributions, and many people had written letters. Shortly before this crucial inquiry, the Parish Council was dismayed to learn that Wansdyke was not intending to be represented by a barrister. A special Parish Meeting had been arranged on 20th February to explain how critical this inquiry was to the future of the village, and it attracted a huge attendance. At the meeting an appeal for funds was made which produced £1650 within 72 hours, and this, with £1000 from the Parish Council, persuaded Wansdyke Council to engage a QC, which may have been decisive. It was not until

June 1989 that the Inspector reported to the Secretary of State and recommended dismissal of the appeal. Crest Homes continued to fight a rear-guard action for a further 18 months, seeking to have the inquiry re-opened; eventually, six months after the site had been formally designated as Green Belt, they withdrew their appeal in November 1990 to avoid having it dismissed.

Plough Field (2) had been acquired by the Bath building firm Beazer (of which Lansdown Homes Ltd was a subsidiary) at the time when it took over the local builder, Wills, after WW2. Applications for development of *Plough Field* for housing or other purposes were refused in 1956, 1966, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1985 and 1986. Appeals against four of these refusals were heard at public inquiries in 1957, 1976, 1978 and 1986, and in each case the appeal was dismissed. In April 1988, another application was made for residential development, with access off the B3110 via *Cranleigh*. This was refused by Wansdyke Council: an appeal was lodged and a public inquiry held in February 1989. In June the Inspector dismissed the appeal. Dismissal of all these appeals rested basically on the absolute need to keep this field open, to avoid consolidating a built link between, and the merging of, South Stoke and Bath.

The application for a dry ski slope in Horsecombe Vale (3) was submitted in March 1989. This apparently would have been the largest such facility in the country, catering for regional, national and international events. In addition to the white plastic ski run, ski tows, stainless steel toboggan run and lighting, there would have been a large building with restaurant, coffee shop, shop, gymnasium, sauna, changing rooms etc. and a large car park, covering in all 6.5 hectares (16 acres). It received widespread support from many quarters, but equally strong opposition locally. Wansdyke Council was set to refuse planning permission on the grounds that it contravened Green Belt and countryside policies and would generate an unacceptable amount of traffic: however, it failed to do so within the statutory 8 weeks, and the applicants appealed. A public inquiry was to be held in March 1989. By this stage the Parish Council had teamed up with others outside the parish to form the Horsecombe Vale Association to fight the proposal. By early January it had already raised some £3500 of its £5000 target, and was about to distribute 2500 leaflets when the promoters withdrew their planning application and appeal. The financial backing for the project was believed to have been withdrawn.

The appeal relating to residential development of Combe Path Lawn (4) was eventually withdrawn when the site was brought within the Green Belt. *Springfield Nurseries (5)* was already statutory Green Belt and the application for residential development was refused.

Only one school (St Gregory's) having been built on the area transferred under the Bath Extension Act 1950, there remained a surplus of 31 acres (6). Bath City Council resolved in 1973 to treat the surplus land as non-statutory Green Belt, and in 1983 to make it statutory Green Belt. A public inquiry into the Bath City Local Plan was held in April 1988 at which the Green Belt designation was strongly supported by Avon County Council and Wansdyke Council, but opposed by Crest Homes. The Inspector decided that the area served no Green Belt purposes and recommended accordingly: his reasoning was demonstrably seriously flawed, but this was what many city councillors and officers wanted. The City Council accordingly proposed to modify the City Plan to allocate the area for housing. This modification was strongly opposed by the County Council, by Wansdyke Council and Christopher Patten, MP for Bath; and locally also by the Bath/Wansdyke Residents Group which distributed 5000 "Save Bath's Green Belt" leaflets. Resulting from this, over 230 letters of objection were written, and a collective objection was signed by some 3500 people. By contrast the allocation for housing was supported by Crest Homes, landowners and two individuals. However the City Council was unmoved. The Residents Group in July 1989 asked the Secretary of State to 'call-in' the Bath City Plan, which he duly did. In August the County Council did the same; but a month later the full Council over-ruled its Chief Planning Officer and reversed the decision, on the grounds that this site was a unique opportunity to provide low cost housing for Bath. In the event, the Secretary of State declined to intervene,

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The approved Structure Plan policy stated that 'the inner boundary of the Green Belt for Bath will be defined so as to follow generally the limits of existing development'. There could hardly have been a more well defined limit to existing development at the time than the Wansdyke between Combe Hay Lane and South Stoke lane. In retrospect it remains astonishing that Sulis Meadows estate, one of the largest housing developments in Bath, was allowed to intrude into the open countryside south of the Wansdyke and that Ministers allowed totally inconsistent planning decisions on the two parts of this stretch of open plateau, separated only by a wire fence. It is an arbitrary administrative boundary and anomaly of the **Bath Extension Act of 1950**. Moreover, in July 1980 the two district councils had agreed the development of 500 houses (later increased to over 1000) at Peasedown St John to provide over spill for Bath (especially of lower-cost homes) and to prevent further building on the fringe of Bath.

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"Will the village identity and distinctive character and its remarkably rural surroundings survive?"

In 1981, South Stoke village was formally designated by Wansdyke Council as a Conservation Area, the purpose of which is to preserve or enhance the special character or appearance of the area, and this positively assists survival of the village identity and distinctive character.

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There was however to be an ironic end to this saga. Some councillors had been over hasty in accepting Crest Homes' assurances about the provision of low cost homes, despite warnings that these were unenforceable through the planning process. Crest Homes' subsequent planning application to develop the site went to appeal and, after an inquiry, the Secretary of State ruled in April 1994 that the City Council could not tie Crest Homes to a legal agreement compelling it to include social housing on the site. The press reported councillors feeling angry and betrayed, quoting certain councillors' comments: *"I feel we have been betrayed; I will never trust another developer again"*; and *"I think we have been taken for a ride"*.

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Hopefully that situation will not be repeated. 'The whole Parish is now within the statutory Green Belt. However, already in the 1990s, during preparation of the successor Wansdyke Local Plan, objectors have been seeking the removal from the Green Belt of sites (1), (2), (4) and (5).

The question therefore remains: South Stoke; to be or not to be, a rural parish? or, to paraphrase the words of Geoffrey Wright which opened this section:

"Will the village identity and distinctive character and its remarkably rural surroundings survive?"

In 1981, South Stoke village was formally designated by Wansdyke Council as a Conservation Area, the purpose of which is to preserve or enhance the special character or appearance of the area, and this positively assists survival of the village identity and distinctive character.

When the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated in 1966, it

stopped short at the then Gloucestershire/Somerset boundary, which in landscape terms was artificial. The area around the north, east and south of Bath had long been held to be comparable in terms of landscape quality and natural beauty and, in December 1990, the Secretary of State approved an Order extending the AONB to include these areas. The whole of South Stoke Parish is now within the AONB, with the exception only of the area of housing along Midford Road east of the *Cross Keys*. The AONB should assist survival of both the village identity and its rural surroundings. **South Stoke: to be, or not to be?**

"Steep-sided valleys among the crumpled green hills south of Bath help village identities to survive in surroundings remarkably rural so close to a city. Physical factors have imposed their own limits on village spread. South Stoke, 3 miles from the city's heart, retains not only a distinctive village character but a magnificent fifteenth century barn ..."

(Geoffrey Wright, *The Stone Villages of Britain*, 1985)

This may have been the case in earlier times and the high flat plateaux round the city were bleak and inhospitable places to live by choice. But terrain is now less of an impediment to building, and to the modern volume house builder nothing is more desirable than a large, more or less level, green-field site adjacent to services.

Certainly the 1904 edition of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map shows how compact and isolated South Stoke village was only 100 years ago. In the next 40 years sporadic development occurred along South Stoke Lane, Packhorse Lane, Old Midford Road and most notably Midford Road east of the *Cross Keys*.

The real threat emerged after WW2. Bath had sprawled up the slopes to the Odd Down plateau and indeed on to it. The City Council had grandiose plans to expand the population of the city to over the apparently magic figure of 100,000 and, to this end promoted a parliamentary bill which sought to incorporate within the city boundary extensive surrounding areas, including South Stoke. The bill was opposed by Gerald Hignett on the grounds that *Manor Farm* would be unviable and that the city's housing targets were unrealistic. The House of Commons committee dealing with the bill accepted his case and amended the bill to exclude any change at South Stoke, except for a small area of 38 acres in the north west corner of the Parish. The committee was persuaded that this area was required for the building of two new schools, for which there was said to be an immediate need, and the land was transferred (with *Sulis Manor*) to the County Borough of Bath. In the event, only one school was ever built (originally called The Cardinal Newman, now St Gregory's), occupying only about 10 acres.

But for Gerald Hignett's resolute opposition, South Stoke would long since have become a totally built up suburb of Bath.

However, the threat returned in 1963 when there was a further major review of Local Government areas in the South West. Bath, which had expanded by 1770 acres in 1911 and 1126 acres in 1950, now sought a further 2882 acres, an increase of 46%. The Local Government Commission published some very radical proposals, including for example transferring the whole Limpley Stoke valley to Wiltshire. In this parish, the Commission proposed transferring to Bath the whole of Horsecombe Vale west of *Midford Castle* grounds. Also transferred was the area north of a boundary zig-zagging roughly from *Packhorse Farm* to the Evangelical Church, plus two fields to the west of South Stoke Lane (30 acres), and the next field to the west adjacent to the Wansdyke. Despite strong objections from many quarters, the Commission's recommendations to the Government for this area were unaltered and, in March 1965, they were approved by the Minister. However in December 1965, the Minister reversed his decision, stating that no land should be taken from South Stoke and "*the boundary between Sulis Manor and a point north of Midford Castle will be the existing city boundary*". The Parish had survived again.

The next threat came not from any proposed boundary changes but through the planning system. It is a long and complex story that ran for a decade from 1980 to 1990, and it can only be summarised briefly here. It is intimately bound up with the Avon County Structure Plan, and more particularly with the Wansdyke Environs of Bath (WEB) Local Plan, mention of which cannot be avoided. The former sets the general strategy for land use, the latter its application to individual plots of land.

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