

## Ex-care home hit by arson

by Lindsey Eudo-Mitchell

CAMPAIGNERS' hopes of saving a community building from redevelopment are in ruins following an arson attack. Christmas Lodge care home was closed in December 2005 as Hampshire County Council moved to save money. Since then the council has been considering whether to sell the land off for redevelopment while campaigners have been working to keep the building available for community groups. But vandals have taken matters into their own hands, setting the building, which was a nesting place for bats and stag beetles, ablaze.

Three fire engines, and about 20 firefighters raced to the scene of the three-storey fire shortly before 1pm on Tuesday May 5. The building suffered damage to one wing, losing large sections of the roof as gallons of water were pumped in to quell the flames. It is thought that the building could now be declared structurally unsafe effectively ending the dream of restoring it for the use of the community.

Bats are a protected species and the fact that they nested there was a key argument in campaigners' efforts to save the building. However, there is every chance the bats would have been destroyed in the blaze, or at best scared off.

A report listing potential uses for the building and reasons why it should not be demolished had been submitted by Aldershot Civic Society in February, but now the future looks bleak. Society chairman Johanna Lance said: "Yet again one of our community facilities, standing empty and awaiting its fate, has been set on fire.

"No doubt the mindless morons responsible for that act feel that the buildings were worthless and doomed to destruction anyway and that no great harm is done by setting them alight. "Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Firstly, with a planning application for the site imminent, they have robbed hard working local campaigners of a very important argument, namely that the site should remain available for other community uses. "Secondly, the Christmas Lodge buildings were a known site for bat roosts. "Again, local campaigners have been robbed, not only of a valuable argument in the planning process, but also of a protected wildlife species that they have been working very hard to protect.

"Bat populations within the urban areas of the borough are already small and the loss of yet another colony could easily lead to a complete loss of the species in this part of Aldershot. "It doesn't bear thinking about what has happened to the bats during the fire.

"With all this in mind the Aldershot Civic Society urges the authorities, particularly the police, to carry out a very thorough investigation and, once these mindless criminals have been found, charge them not only with arson, but also under the existing firm wildlife protection legislation for the destruction of a protected wildlife habitat and the harm caused to a protected species."

Mike Hatch, chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Country Park, which is next to the building, had hoped part of the building could be used as a meeting point for those using the park. But the future was very different now, he said. "It is extremely disappointing that this has happened, though not completely surprising, and it's likely that it may help Hampshire County Council decide to redevelop the site.

"There were reports from bat surveyors that there were bats in the building and obviously this now may have either moved them off or killed them. "It wouldn't surprise me if Hampshire County Council say 'well, the building's unsafe now so it can't be used anyway'. "It's frustrating because we put all sorts of uses forward that would have meant the building could have continued to have been used for the community."

Police are looking for two teenage boys in connection with the attack. They are both 16 or 17 and of normal to slim build. One was wearing a grey hooded top and the other a navy blue hooded top. Pc Louisa Drumm said: "This was a mindless act of arson. "I would urge people living in the area to be vigilant and report any suspicious behaviour to the police immediately. "I am appealing to anyone who may be able to help us identify the youths, who were seen in the area at around 12.50pm on Saturday. "The two youths are thought to have left the area through the Brickfield nature reserve. "There are usually a lot of dog walkers in this area and it is likely that someone saw them.

"Anyone with any information is asked to contact Pc Drumm at Farnborough police station on 0845 045 45 45 or to call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111."