

Lodge will be razed in weeks

by Andrew Milford.

CHRISMAS Lodge will be demolished in September at the latest, it has been confirmed. The former care home, owned by Hampshire County Council, suffered serious damage in an arson attack at the beginning of May. The building, which was a nesting place for bats and stag beetles, lost large sections of the roof as gallons of water were pumped in to quell the flames. It is now claimed to be "a serious health and safety risk" and will be pulled down.

County council leader Cllr Ken Thornber said: "The arson attack at Christmas Lodge caused structural damage to the building and highlighted its vulnerability. "The site now poses a serious health and safety risk, which is exacerbated by the threat of trespassers and vandals attempting to gain access to the vacant property. "To eliminate any possible risk to the public it has been agreed that Christmas Lodge should be demolished as soon as possible."

The county council is required to issue two forms of notice in connection with the demolition. The first, a prior notification form, has been served on the county council itself as the planning authority. A Section 80 notice has also been served on Rushmoor Borough Council, with the date for demolition depending on the timing of the response that the county council receives from the borough.

There is a statutory notice period of six weeks for approval, which means that demolition will start in September at the latest.

"The work to pull down the property is due to take place during the summer," said Cllr Thornber. "In the meantime a 24-hour security system has been installed to meet our health and safety obligations. "This increased security has been introduced to deter people from trying to access the site and hurting themselves or causing any further damage to the building."

Christmas Lodge has been the subject of wrangling between the county council and the people living near the care home ever since it closed in December 2005. Last month more than 75 people packed into St Michael's Church in Church Lane East for a meeting to decide what they wanted to happen to Christmas Lodge. Their ideas for the site included an environment education centre, a playgroup, an internet cafe and a museum chronicling the history of Aldershot.

It would seem, however, that the county council remains determined to sell off the land and pump the money made back into the ailing social care kitty. Once again the Tories blamed central government, even though the county council recorded an £11million over-spend in its adult social care budget last year.

Cllr Thornber said: "The demolition will not affect our plans for the disposal of the site, which have always been to secure capital receipts that we can re-invest back into adult services facilities for the old and vulnerable, which is a priority for us in light of the reduction in government funding for these vital services."

Paul Lynch-Bowers of the Christmas Lodge Environmental Community Trust stood as a Liberal Democrat candidate in the recent Heron Wood by-election. He and his colleagues fear that the Tory county council is seeking to sell the site to a housing developer. "The key point here is that a large part of the community wants some sort of community centre, whatever that might be," he said. "The community does not want any more homes and the Conservatives are riding roughshod over the people. "The space there cannot fit any more housing and people are very angry about it."