

## 'Urban myth' about Lodge - Star Letter 6/6/2008 from HCC Cllr Eric Neal

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***"In a recent article in the local press Coun Adrian Collett Lib/Dem leader at Hampshire County Council stated that Conservative lead HCC "had ignored the wishes of the Christmas family who had donated the land for the Community's use". Adrian, you must stop believing in urban myths and do some homework; this land was never donated by the Christmas family to Aldershot. I quote from an email sent to me from HCC properties services: "The Chief Executive has reappraised our legal position regarding the ownership of Christmas Lodge."***

The "homework" for this particular "Urban Myth" takes quite some research; the documents for Christmas Lodge are spread between Hampshire County and Rushmoor Borough Councils and number into the hundreds going back to the 1800's. Researching Christmas Lodge has taken a lot of time and could take much, much more.

"Urban Myths" at some point must have originally had a grain of truth to start that myth, and indeed if you go back far enough the Christmas name IS mentioned in this regard in a transfer document, but you do have to go back to the late 1800's. Perhaps the fact that before Christmas Lodge was built the land had a Scout Hut on it (site plan in the HCC archives and recently mentioned in the Aldershot News) may have lent credence to this particular myth, but in the end it may turn out to be just that, a myth, more research could be done but in the end where would it get you?, HCC own this land and come hell or high water they are going to sell it.

***"He has reaffirmed that there are no restrictive covenants affecting the land, which would restrict our ability to sell the site for redevelopment. "Hampshire County Council acquired the site from Aldershot Borough Council in 1974, who in turn purchased the site from Dorland Properties Limited in 1957. Neither of these conveyances referred to a covenant preventing development of the site. "There is also no mention of the land being bequeathed to the people of Aldershot. "I can therefore confirm the site is owned by Hampshire County Council and that there are no restrictive covenants affecting the land, which would restrict our ability to sell the site for redevelopment."***

The 1974 transfer document in fact does not correctly outline the land bought by HCC. The boundary description only mentions the Western, Southern and Eastern boundaries, no mention is made of the Northern Boundary, Croft Lane. Does this constitute a problem for the pending sale? Documents prior to the purchase by RBC of the land from Dorland Properties, i.e. how the land got from the Aldershot Brick and Tile Works to Dorland have never come to light, HCC do not have them in their archive.

***"My friend and colleague Coun David Welch also supplied me with the following information. It was given its name to honor (sic) Coun Joan Christmas who was a Conservative County Councillor for Aldershot who played a major role in the building and setting up of the lodge".***

What would Mrs Christmas make of this situation today, honoured by her peers in naming the home she helped to set up, Mrs Christmas was chair of Social Services, the very group that later summarily closed Christmas Lodge on "economic" grounds.

***"With regards to Christmas Lodge Hampshire County Council has spent nearly £5 million on refurbishing and expanding Ticehurst Nursing home. Aldershot now has a state of the art nursing home less than a mile from Christmas lodge. It can accommodate nearly 70 people and now houses the staff and residents from the lodge, regrettably for many reasons the lodge is no longer required by the County Council".***

£5m apparently from the Health Service budget. What of that £40m that HCC managed to find to virtually rebuild their offices in Winchester, would not that money have been better spent on the Adult Social Care budget.

***"Because of the fire, which was an act of arson a 24-hour security patrol has been put in place for Health and Safety reasons. This is costing you and I a lot of money therefore the building will be demolished ASAP by HCC".***

24 hour security was not placed on the Christmas Lodge site for nearly five weeks AFTER the fire, and had that not happened it is very unlikely that any security would ever have been employed. HCC's "Health and Safety" excuses about vandals injuring themselves applied equally well before, as after the fire.

***"With reference to turning the site into a community resource, RBC has already drawn up plans for a new Community Centre in Manor Park. Why would Rushmoor Borough Council fund another community facility within the immediate vicinity?"***

A community Centre that is still not built, and not likely to be in the near future. Christmas Lodge would have provided such a facility for the local community immediately and at relatively little cost. Aldershot Scouts have spent time and funds on being part of that Manor Park centre, this week we hear in the Aldershot News that Cllr's Neal and Kimber have found funding for the Scouts to improve their current facilities, does not look like they are to move anytime soon.

***“The Christmas Lodge site will be sold, the county council needs the money for further investment in its care and nursing homes which provide a total of 1,300 units of accommodation across the county”.***

Sold, yes and now at a loss, if the published £1M cost is to be believed. At a meeting last August with HCC Property Services, CLECT were told that we could buy the site for £3M, HCC stating “we do not care who we sell to”, and a stance that totally ignored Government provisions for the disposal of unwanted Council property to the community. Since then the property market has gone into a steep decline so HCC may not even make that £1M.

***“In my literature when I was elected to represent Aldershot East I basically made two pledges, to see that council tax payers obtained value for money and Aldershot did not miss out. Unlike certain other people I do not promise things that cannot be delivered”.***

Is a supposed £3m to £1m reduction in the potential sale price of Christmas Lodge due to HCC delays, value for money ?, does it really take nearly three years to sell 1.45 acres of prime building land, we think Aldershot has missed out.

***“As you know Hampshire County Council has agreed to my request to transfer the land mentioned above to Rushmoor Borough Council and therefore Brickfields. This is no small piece of land and is over a quarter of the original site”.***

All credit to Cllr Neal if he has managed this, but his facts are not quite right. In this weeks Aldershot News he seems to say that this - “no small piece of land” - is only 15% of the site, not “over a quarter”. So which is it - the Christmas Lodge plot is 1.45 acres, the land already in Brickfields Park is 0.17 of an acre, not over a quarter, not 15% but less than 12%. If you want to check it for yourself we can point you to the HCC survey pins in Croft Lane and Brickfields Park.

***“Why not transfer the land now?”***

***It is sound financial sense to sell the entire site with an obligation for the purchaser to transfer this area of land to Rushmoor Borough Council. The new owner would than be able is offset some of the open space provisions required under section 106 of the Town and County Planning Act. This provision will make the site more valuable and therefore HCC should obtain a higher price for the land”.***

Financial sense to HCC maybe, after all they have stated it often enough, remember that phrase - “maximise contributions to the Adult Social Care budget”. HCC make their books look good, and also transfer a problem that they could have dealt with many years ago to somebody else. A prospective developer could argue that in the light of current market conditions, returning the land already in Brickfields Park to Rushmoor is unfair, being effectively a 12% premium for being allowed to build a few houses, it may even put some developers off.

Section 106 contributions were intended to increase the overall open space provision or to provide for the improvement of existing space. Forcing a developer to hand back land that is already existing open space is not what most people would regard as above board or even fair, especially on the users of that open space, even if it might be within the rules. Whilst it makes money for HCC it does not benefit the local community, it does not increase open space provision and does not provide funds for improving existing open space.

***“In contrast I came out of the recent borough elections amazed by the uncosted promises made to the Aldershot electorate by the local Labour party. From free parking in the town centre for Aldershot residents to subsidised late night bus services for North Town, plus an odd £20 million for a road access from the A331 to North Town industries”.***

At least they have promised something. Free parking for Aldershot Town would be the shot in the arm the town so sorely needs, removing short term free parking and putting more meters is not, whatever the Council. North Camp has a vibrant shopping centre, currently free but threatened with meters. An A331 link would help to remove the severe transport problems that the residents of North Town currently experience and are only set to get worse if recycling an/or incinerator plans come to fruition, not to mention the projected 4,500 houses in Project Connaught whose residents will use North town as a southbound cut through to the A331.

***“.....plus a considerably plot of land from the Christmas site to Brickfields”.***

Land we ALREADY have Cllr Neal, have you not noticed, Brickfields Park Volunteers have maintained under licence it for years.

***“Hampshire County Council hopefully will realise about a £million from the sale which HCC will than spend for the benefit of all in the County and that includes the people of Aldershot”.***

I sincerely hope they do benefit Eric, but let's just wait and see.

CLECT 11/6/2008

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