

Cynical Eagle Star still pushing to build at Micheldever

Eagle Star has confirmed that it will continue to promote its new town proposal for Micheldever Station.

The Zurich-owned insurance company was giving evidence on October 21 at the public enquiry into the Winchester District Local Plan Review, which sets out Winchester City Council's proposals for the use and development of land and buildings up to 2011.

Under cross-examination by the Council's barrister, Eagle Star's planning consultants, Barton Willmore, confirmed that the company would continue to promote a new town at Micheldever Station in the forthcoming Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East. This is what will replace the current Regional Planning Guidance as a result of the new Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. It will be produced by the regional assembly, a non-elected bureaucratic monolith.

"Bizarre"

Eagle Star was given a whole day at the public enquiry to pursue its objection to the inclusion of Barton Farm, north of Winchester, as a potential housing site in the Local Plan.

Phil Dowson, the Society's treasurer, blasted its arguments against possible development at Barton Farm as "bizarre", because they were similar to those the Society has used many times to oppose the Eagle Star's plans for Micheldever. For example, its landscape expert had concluded that development at Barton Farm would cause harm to Winchester's historic setting as a result of the loss of open, rolling arable farmland and many important landscape features, such as ridges and hedges, adding that the development would cause unacceptable visual intrusion! Then another gem from its transport expert, who stated that car traffic into Winchester would increase, especially at peak times!

"We could have been listening to our own experts criticising Eagle Star's proposal," said Tessa Robertson,

the Society's vice-chairman. "In recent years, we and the City and County Councils have all cited in reports loss of valuable arable farmland, ridges and hedges, a huge increase in traffic both locally and in Basingstoke and Winchester as a result of commuting, and the significant impact on the landscape. In addition, it has been widely agreed that development of the upland downs at Micheldever would be visible for miles around, and would be a massive blot on the landscape of mid-Hampshire."

A "hypocritical and self-serving" U-turn

"Eagle Star professes to care about Barton Farm, but in fact its objections are hypocritical and self-serving", said Society chairman, Richard Cowen. "We too have formally objected to the inclusion of Barton Farm as a reserve site in the Local Plan, partly because we do not believe that the houses will be needed, and partly because we oppose unnecessary development on greenfield sites. But Eagle Star is opposing the site's inclusion because it clearly believes that if Barton Farm is built then it has even less chance of ever getting permission to carry out its ridiculous plans for Micheldever. So now it is pulling out all the stops to prevent Barton Farm from going ahead."

How ironic that after 14 years of promoting the new town on the basis that Hampshire needs thousands of new homes, and criticising Hampshire County Council and Winchester City Council for failing to plan for enough new housing, Eagle Star has suddenly performed this U-turn. Now, it argues, houses at Barton Farm are unnecessary because the Local Plan already contains provision for more homes than will be needed. Somehow we do not believe it would be making the same arguments if the County and City had decided on development at Micheldever.

In a nutshell, its argument is that houses are only needed if they're at Micheldever – those proposed for anywhere else in the district are not needed. How cynical is that?

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A young journalist's greatest scoop

Compliments and complaints arrived in equal measure on the morning of Friday, 19th January, 1990 – but not from the expected sources.

That was the day the Hampshire Chronicle broke the news that Eagle Star had plans for a new town on open countryside at Micheldever Station. The same front page also carried an interview with Winchester's beleaguered Tory MP, John Browne, whose divorce was coming back to haunt him.

Both stories were written by Cathy Rodgers, a junior reporter at the time. Cathy felt she had given a sensitive account of Mr Browne's troubles, but was concerned about her Micheldever Station scoop. She knew her source of information was good, but no-one was prepared to confirm the existence of a specific proposal, and Winchester City Council had dismissed the scheme as a 'total non-starter'.

As she headed into the office that morning Cathy mused that Eagle Star was a wealthy and influential company, and if upset and could well afford legal bills. But at least Mr Browne would be happy that his version of events had been published. How wrong she was!

Mr Browne was on the phone to the editor by 8.30am to complain about his young reporter's 'hatchet job'. A short while later Eagle Star called to congratulate the paper on its handling of the new town story, although it pointed out that it only wanted to build 5,000 houses, not the 10,000 reported. Later that day it issued a press statement confirming that it aimed to provide 'a sensitively designed settlement in which the community would benefit from the creation of a high quality environment'.

The proposal was written off as 'kite-flying' by Dudley Keep, then chairman of Hampshire County Council's planning and transportation committee. Micheldever Station, he said, was a 'total no-go area' for development owing to the county's strict countryside policy.

Looking back through the Hampshire Chronicle files, Cathy – now a full-time mum – says she can understand how the new town proposal may have gained credibility through the Hampshire Structure Plan process, even to the point that some now favour it. Eagle Star, she says, has consistently called for 'rational, informed and even-handed debate' on the subject of where to build the thousands of new homes required in the Winchester area.

Although it has cast itself in the role of arbiter, she says, it should never be forgotten that Eagle Star is part of Zurich Insurance Services, which must ultimately be driven by the production of profit for its shareholders, rather than a general interest for the good of the community.

On the other hand, Cathy believes that The Dever Society, set up 14 years ago in direct response to Eagle Star's proposal, will always be the true champions of the desire to protect, enhance and celebrate the Dever Valley, even if, inevitably, it gets accused of nimbyism.

Although she now lives outside the area, the threat of development did not stop her buying a cottage opposite the Eagle Star's estate office in Sutton Scotney (a move she likes to think ruffled a few feathers) or considering other properties much closer to the proposed development site.

For Cathy, the area around Micheldever Station, where she has fond memories of walking her dog in the quiet woods, is part of England's green and pleasant land.

(The above article is a lightly edited version of Cathy's own words.)

Stone-curlews thriving ...secretly

By now the stone-curlews that have been nesting on farmland in the Dever Valley area should be arriving in southern Europe and northern Africa, where they will spend the winter.

They will return next March/April to the same area, but it's a spot we keep secret because the stone-curlew is one of the UK's rarest breeding birds and their nesting sites are protected under national and European legislation. Between April and August, when they are breeding, it is an offence to 'recklessly disturb' them.



The UK's main populations are now concentrated around Salisbury Plain and Porton Down in Wessex, and the Brecklands of East Anglia. The main causes of the species' 85 per cent decline in both range and numbers are habitat loss and changes in land management, although conservation efforts since the 1980s have resulted in doubling the population to approximately 270 pairs (in 2003).

Phil Sheldrake, Project Manager for the RSPB's Wessex Stone-curlew Project, reports that by spending a large part of the winter working with farmers to create suitable nesting habitat on set-aside land, and through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, it found 93 breeding pairs of stone-curlews in Wessex this year.

Populations in outlying areas away from Salisbury Plain and Porton Down, however, are still very vulnerable as there are only small pockets of two to five pairs in widely scattered locations. The RSPB has located only two breeding pairs in the Dever Valley area. One pair nested once, and produced two chicks. Both were ringed and are believed to have fledged successfully. The second pair nested twice, failing at the egg stage on the first attempt. On the second attempt the eggs hatched but the chicks disappeared and their fate is unknown.

The Project will continue to work with local farmers to protect each nest, and to provide further safe nesting plots within the area which it is hoped will attract the offspring of the existing pairs. It is grateful to all the farmers and others who have helped it over the years for their support and cooperation.

Dever Society Concert

The late-17th century building in Winchester College known simply as School was the venue for The Dever Society's feast of chamber music on 15th July. That evening, five international musicians with strong Hampshire connections treated an audience of more than 150 to the Society's second fund-raising concert in its long campaign against proposed new-town development at Micheldever Station.

The full line-up was: Douglas Paterson, principal viola of the London Chamber Orchestra, and a member of the Schubert Ensemble; his sister Helen Paterson, principal second violin of the Philharmonia Orchestra; Elizabeth Pigram, a member of the London Symphony Orchestra, and onetime leader of the Hampshire Youth Orchestra; Alastair Blayden, sub-principal cellist of the London Symphony Orchestra, and a former Winchester music scholar; and international accompanist Julian Milford, also a former Winchester scholar.

The musicians were brought together by Douglas and Helen Paterson, whose family has been farming at Micheldever since 1940. All five Paterson children were musicians from an early age, and they sometimes wonder whether growing up surrounded by the beauty of the Hampshire countryside was a factor in nourishing their musical inclinations.

"Our motivation to do something towards the Dever Society's cause was strong", says Douglas, "and we were more than happy to help. For us it was deeply satisfying to play some great pieces of music with good friends in a

beautiful setting to a lively audience, and all in the cause of preserving the Hampshire countryside."

Said audience member Francis Wells: "The large, enthusiastic and appreciative audience was treated to works by Handel, Elgar, Mozart, Wieniawski, Thuille and Dvorak. This was a concert of glorious and inspired chamber music playing of a high order".

The Dever Society's Chairman, Richard Cowen, thanked the players 'for donating their time, skill and passion'. The Society, which raised nearly £2100 that evening, hopes to organise another concert in 2006.

Stuff, but no nonsense

Long overdue are the Executive Committee's thanks to a dedicated group of people who ensure our members receive their Newsletters. In a well-practised, half-day-long exercise they gather round a large dining table and address, stuff, seal and stamp thousands of envelopes, as well as count and bundle copies for delivery to our Area Co-ordinators.

Our hitherto unsung heroes are: Elizabeth Asdell, Tony and Ruth Burrows, Helen Chivers, Kay Cole, Rosemary Havilland, Barbara Holder, Hermione Pison, Sue Sanders, Jane Spankie, Elaine Walker, Jill Whitear, and, of course, organiser Angela Dixon and husband Clive. The team sadly misses Rosemary Corfield, who died suddenly during the summer.

Says Angela: "Our willing and enthusiastic volunteers save us a great deal of money. Given our limited resources, it's hard to imagine what we'd do without them".

Forthcoming Events

The Society's Events Committee has, as usual, been working hard to put together a packed events programme:

Saturday 13th November (8PM) – 70s Disco:

Northbrook Hall, Micheldever

Monday 13th December (6.30PM) – Carols in the Barn,

Manor Farm, West Stratton

Christmas/ New Year Quiz

March – Dever Clean-up

April – Spring Sponsored Walk

June – BBQ Camping

July – Open-air play, Kitelands, Micheldever Station

Further information about these events can be obtained by phoning the office on 01962 774040.

Membership and Area Co-ordinators

Society membership remains buoyant at 8,131 (4,268 households)

Our thanks to **Dr and Mrs Neil Bath** who have resigned as area co-ordinators for the Crawley area. We would be very grateful to any Crawley member who could help with future deliveries.

Nimbyism can bring planning benefits, say geographers

At least, this is what some Spanish and Australian delegates said at an international geographers' congress in Glasgow in August.

In speaking up for the nimby (not in my back yard), they suggested that groups often accused of being selfish and parochial were sometimes engaged in progressive community action against planning authorities that are too influenced by particular, often private, interests. "It [nimbyism] can prevent poor planning decisions and act in the interests of local democracy," said a spokesman, before adding "Of course, in other places it works against the broader interests of the community as a whole".

The Dever Society has always been very careful not to attract accusations of nimbyism by pointing out that new town development of the sort envisaged by Zurich/Eagle Star would be unacceptable anywhere that is as close to existing large settlements as Micheldever Station is.

Just the place to plant a new town

The concept of the free-standing new town is on the way back, according to an article in *The Economist* in August. And some might get built, it warned, although it was doubtful about Micheldever Station new town.

Plans like those that led to the development of new towns like Stevenage, Corby and Milton Keynes, are being pulled out of developers' bottom drawers, it said, thanks to housing pressures, the rise in house prices, and the new Housing and Compulsory Purchase Act, which started taking effect in September. By shifting the planning bias from county councils to regional spatial strategies drawn up by unelected regional assemblies, central government could get its way more often.

The Economist said that Cambridgeshire and Devon each look set to get two new towns, and Bedfordshire and Stirlingshire one apiece, all with support from the county and district councils concerned. But, it continued, "Not so the purest – and most potentially controversial – example of the trend, in Hampshire. That rich county is now in uproar over a developer's plan for 2,000 new homes on farmland at the edge of Winchester" [a reference, of course, to Barton Farm]. Then, it continued: "Few of the protesters know that a far bigger scheme is afoot, one that they thought had been crushed decisively long ago – a plan for an entire new town a few miles to the north (at Micheldever Station)".

Today's call for low-cost housing, it suggested, could benefit Eagle Star. In 1990, its offer to build 20 per cent of the development in this bracket looked generous; today, Winchester City Council looks for 30 per cent or more, which Eagle Star could afford, thought *The Economist*.

Even so, it concluded, the scheme may never go ahead because Hampshire County Council thinks it can meet its housing target without even Barton Farm. But there was a sting in the tail: "But as the new regional strategies come into force, expect more projects, Eagle Star-style, for outright new towns where no new town ever was."

'Concrete Britain' says Daily Mail

Under this headline, the *Daily Mail* political correspondent Graeme Wilson called *The Economist* article a 'blistering attack' on the deputy prime minister for riding roughshod over local people by using unelected quangos (ie the regional spatial strategies) to force through plans for sprawling developments across southern England. "Huge swathes of rural Britain will vanish under explosive plans to create a fresh generation of new towns," he wrote. "Villages will disappear and rolling fields will be replaced by endless suburbia under a crusade led by John Prescott."

Photographs of locations under threat superimposed on a map of south east England, included Micheldever, where, said Wilson, there were "contentious plans" to build 9,000 homes on a greenfield site.

The Mail also included a comment from *The Economist*, from the Conservative Party's spokesman for the regions, Bernard Jenkin: "These (regional) assemblies are little more than agents of Whitehall. John Prescott is determined to force through development based on a ludicrous central plan, rather than let local communities decide on what type and scale of development is appropriate for their area".

Notice of AGM 2005

The Society's AGM will be held at 7.30pm on Monday, 31st January 2005, in the Community Hall, Micheldever Station. As usual there will be a guest speaker, and cheese and wine will be served at the end of the evening.

A copy of the AGM 2004 minutes may be downloaded from the Society's website.

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