

## Email from Adrian Thornton to the Mills Archive

**Sent:** Tuesday, November 04, 2003 12:59 AM

**Subject:** Combe Mill: planning application

I attended the WODC Planning Sub-committee on Monday November 3rd. The outcome was reasonably good for Combe Mill, and distinctly bad for Blenheim; despite the Planning Officer rather seeming to side with Blenheim.

English Heritage have now not only recommended refusal of the application, but also re-graded the Mill's listing to 2star.

The Highway Authority had recommended refusal on highway grounds.

Blenheim had (in response to the consultation process) "confirmed their agreement" to certain further points, including "the addition of a second door to the Beam Engine room", "the investigation and retention of the line shafting and some of the fixed equipment in Combe Mill, if feasible", and "continued support for the Combe Mill Society and assistance with moving to the new building".

The Planning Officers believed "this proposal presents the opportunity to retain employment on this site, improve the appearance of the site and protect the listed mill building", but its acceptability rested on three key issues:

Traffic: "Any proposals which significantly increase traffic levels are likely to be unacceptable. Indeed, the Highway Authority has recommended refusal. Your officers are, however, mindful of ongoing discussions between the applicant and Highway Authority and the benefits of retaining employment on this site. Accordingly your officers await the further comments of the Highway Authority and applicant before making a recommendation on this point."

Impact upon listed mill: "The proposals present the opportunity to enhance the setting of the listed building through demolition works and landscaping..... many listed buildings can sustain some degree of sensitive alteration to accommodate new uses. However, PPG15 recognises that some may be sensitive even to slight alterations; especially those with important interiors and fittings, for example industrial structures with surviving machinery ..... Your officers are in no doubt that Listed Building Consent should only be granted in this case if the significant internal features are retained, i.e. steam engine, line shafting, water wheel, bellows and forge chimney. However, your officers can find no basis upon which it would be reasonable to refuse permission simply because these elements were no longer working or in use .... Your officers consider, subject to the retention of the key internal features, that the upkeep and historic interest of this building can be secured. Accordingly the applicant should be invited to submit more detailed internal plans."

The future of the museum: The working steam engine is the centrepiece of the museum and its loss is very regrettable. However, if the steam engine remains in situ, along with other key internal features and a secure future for the museum is achieved through the provision of a building for the display of working exhibits it could reasonably be argued that the proposal does maintain this leisure and educational facility."

Most members of the Sub-committee, however, including the Chairman, felt that it should proceed with consideration of the merits of the application, a site visit having taken place. Most members spoke, and most seemed to feel it had very little merit indeed, and felt positively that the Combe Mill Society should be able to continue to operate in the mill building. A few thought that if the Society could retain the ground floor that could be enough, but most appeared to feel that both floors should be retained, and some members were even a bit scathing about Blenheim for making such an application. Two even felt that WODC should consider helping the Society.

It was decided unanimously to defer consideration of the application. But a resolution was also considered dealing with the merits. I did not catch the precise wording, and I am unclear about its precise status, but the gist seemed to be that both floors of the mill building should be retained for museum use, if possible, though the door should be kept open in case an acceptable solution could be negotiated. This resolution too was passed unanimously.

The contribution of WODC's own Head of Cultural Services was an odd feature. He had written: that the application "will consolidate the position of the Museum on site and give them some more appropriate display areas for their collections. As such we would seek to support the application for the benefit it will bring to the Heritage sector in West Oxfordshire and for the tourism potential such a facility has. This accords as far as I am concerned with the Council's aims to encourage leisure and cultural facilities for all as well as encouraging in part enterprise in the local economy." Luckily though the planning officers were impressed by this, the Councillors were not.

The future is now thus very open. The Sub-committee seems in effect to have set goalposts for Blenheim's guidance, and set them in a position where Blenheim will find it quite hard to score. Meanwhile presumably Blenheim cannot appeal (yet), as there is not (yet) a refusal for them to appeal against.

The submissions of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Mills Section), and the County Museums Officer were printed in the meeting's papers in full. Many other representations received were also summarised there. Many thanks to all who took so much trouble to support Combe Mill.

#### **Update 5 January 2004**

The Combe Mill Society, which in April 2003 resolved to wind up in 2004, on 13 November 2003 reversed that decision and now plans to resume its normal public openings for the foreseeable future

#### **NB**

Please note that this note is contributed by me as an individual, and not by the Combe Mill Society