

## **The Campaign to Save Port Meadow: Sushila Dhall's presentation to CPRE Oxfordshire's AGM in June 2013**

"My name is Sushila Dhall, community campaigner and a founder member of the Campaign to Save Port Meadow, which CPRE is supporting. I joined CPRE recently on the basis of your care to protect this and other public green spaces in Oxfordshire. The Campaign to Save Port Meadow has become a high profile one, with a legal challenge from yourselves awaiting an outcome, and other legal action being discussed should a Judicial Review not be called for in response. The issues are many and seem to increase as time goes on, with numerous dubious issues in the planning process having come to light. I am here to give you a sense of the background to this campaign, how it started and where it came from.

This time last year the view across Port Meadow was as it had been for centuries, with peaceful views all round of greenery and spires, with a few rooftops showing through as allowed by stringent planning rules. People were shocked to see that view suddenly change, when last September eight ugly blocks covered with scaffolding started rising from behind the mature leafy willows at the southern end of Port Meadow, and were already in those early weeks damaging the beautiful view of the Grade I listed St Barnabas tower. Last September the character of Port Meadow was fundamentally altered by the ugly intrusion of blocks which are too large and tall, too close together, too uniform, too visible. The precious sense of a place of relaxation and refuge that Port Meadow provided residents and students of this pressured town was being wiped away.

Upset and outraged in the face of this, I started searching for the planning application, appalled to have missed something so large and wide with such an impact. It took a while to find it as Oxford City Council website is not very user-friendly. Finally I tracked it down and scrolled through the documents to come across a piece of paper, signed off by Oxford City Planning Officers Murray Hancock and Michael Crofton-Briggs, stating that an Environmental Impact Assessment was not required as 'this is not a sensitive area' and 'impact can be mitigated'.

Alarm bells rang. The area and view are highly sensitive, there is no way the impact of this development can ever be 'mitigated'. The view of the Dreaming Spires and St Barnabas tower, the timeless atmosphere of Port Meadow can never be restored by any tree planting or paint jobs.

This development was approved by the West Area Planning Committee in February 2012 as a 'variation' to an extant permission dating from 2002, which meant although a major development, consultation beyond the barest minimum was not required. The bare minimum was a few notices on Roger Dudman Way (where hardly anybody goes), and a notice in the back page of the local paper.

The City Planning Department said it was too late to complain and everything was above board. Apparently Oxford University just wanted to be a good neighbour by increasing numbers of student rooms to help free up residential homes in Oxford for non-student residents.

Matt Pickles of Oxford University Estates Department kindly sent me the whole application submitted to Oxford City Council. It included a series of photographs showing the views from Port Meadow untouched, giving the impression that the buildings would not impact on the views. A single photo showed that from Wolvercote the buildings would skim the tops of the willows at the southern end of Port Meadow, indicating that the protected 'view cone' would be undamaged. The words 'will not be visible from the majority of Port Meadow' were clearly written in the University's application.

The not yet completed buildings were already visible rising above the willows from Wolvercote, intruding devastatingly into the view cone, and looming ever higher the closer they were viewed to the City. They were already highly visible and dominating from everywhere; along the other side of the river, the canal,

the river towpath, willow walk, Walton Well allotments, even the railway station. And they were clearly ruinously devastating to Cripsey Meadow allotments.

Upset, anger and ignorance about what had been proposed and allowed, seemed to be shared by everybody who loved Port Meadow and the view of Dreaming Spires.

Two of us set up a petition exposing the lack of an Environmental Impact Assessment, the lack of consultation, and the vandalism to the view of the spires and St Barnabas, and the fact that no mitigation could ever repair such vandalism.

People signed in droves, at one point at the rate of 100 people a day, and soon the petition reached 1,500 signatures, triggering a right to address a meeting of full City Council in December. The public attended this meeting in such high numbers that the public gallery, St Aldates room and the corridors were crammed with supporters of the petition, whistling, shouting, stamping and applauding, so that their feelings were abundantly clear, and this is where today's campaign began, now with many active members and over 3000 supporters, bringing together people from all walks of life and backgrounds.

The City Council referred the matter back to WAPC to deal with.

A group of us began researching the planning proposal in depth, collecting misleading statements such as that the buildings would only be visible as 'glimpses from some parts of Port Meadow'. Oxford University issued a statement saying the plans had been submitted as they were 'in good faith', which has been their final official word on the matter. We made Freedom of Information requests, which are still ongoing, and uncovered further incredible facts such as: A report by the Heritage Officer, Nick Worllege saying, 'There is no justification for this harm (damage to the views)', suppressed by the City Planning Officers so that Councillors never saw it, justifying this suppression by having a tiny 1.2m snip taken off the roof apexes (not the roofs themselves); soil contamination surveys were not carried out although the land here is known to be highly contaminated; trees which were said to be able to be planted were not approved by the Freemen of Oxford or the Wolvercote Commoners, and consultation which Oxford University said they had carried out with local groups and residents had never actually happened. The number of student rooms was fudged so that it is now clear the bigger wider buildings represent FEWER student beds than the extant permission (439 as opposed to an original 517), so that the bigger buildings have larger units (with desirable views across Port Meadow) rather than more units. So even the justification for the bigger buildings is in question. Councillor Colin Cook, who is the City's 'Heritage Champion' says the buildings are fine and he is happy with them, and that the Campaign to save Port Meadow does not understand what a Heritage Champion actually is.

Several months on, the Campaign to Save Port Meadow has taken on a vast momentum, with many City Councillors having been forced into expressing major disquiet, and under public pressure asking City Planning Officers to negotiate with Oxford University to 'ameliorate the height and impact of the development'. However, even these negotiations were not carried out in the spirit in which they were intended, with another FOI request uncovering a correspondence indicating Oxford University and City Council Planning Officers trying to draw a line under the issue and turn the focus instead onto what they call mitigation (in reality this would mean less tree planting than was originally promised due to there being nowhere to plant them) and which anyway would not hide the buildings at all. No amount of 'screening' could ever restore the fragile beauty of the Oxford skyline or the sense of endless space which our beloved Port Meadow so recently gave us.

So it is in this climate of mistrust that Oxford Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) supported by the Campaign to Save Port Meadow has launched its legal challenge against Oxford City Council, which goes right back to the beginning of the campaign in terms of issues, in that it challenges the lack of Environmental Impact Assessment which would have covered damage to views, light pollution (which will

spill all over Port Meadow should these buildings get up and running), and soil contamination, amongst other issues. An EIA would also have heeded warnings of harm from Nick Worlledge the City Council's Heritage Officer. We believe that had an EIA been undertaken, as it should have next to a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the disastrous development would never have gained planning permission.

The whole issue is a major concern for ever-increasing numbers. The campaign has received messages of support and donations from people all over the country and internationally. It seems that the guardians of our city have under-estimated how much Port Meadow is loved. Meanwhile Oxford City Council and Oxford University have failed to make any meaningful attempt to engage with in working out a way forward. The only practical response to the considerable public outcry has been the planting of a small number of baby trees, planted in haste as a public relations exercise. The planting was not thought through, and as a result the baby trees were quickly damaged by livestock. The Freeman of Port Meadow and members of our campaign had warned this would happen. No other step has been taken to relieve the view from Port Meadow and restore the view of Dreaming Spires.

The buildings have now been shortlisted for the Carbuncle Cup, a national architectural award for the ugliest buildings erected in the country.

We are still fighting to have the top two stories of these horrifically ugly and intrusive buildings removed. To this end we need Oxford City Council to issue a discontinuance notice forcing Oxford University to re-apply for planning permission, this time with an Environmental Impact Assessment. We cannot make this happen alone. We need your time, energy and money. Oxford's community is under the sort of threat that sets a precedent. Should these tall ugly blocks be allowed to remain we can say goodbye to all views from Port Meadow, and all views of the Dreaming Spires from here and elsewhere. Developers will be watching what happens here like sharks. If we don't draw the line and fight for our Meadow we can only lose more. Together we have to stand up to the underhand tactics and short-sighted greed that threatens to destroy all we hold dear."

Sushila Dhall June 2013

