

Melksham Joint Neighbourhood Plan (draft stage)
Heritage Assessment of emerging site for new housing development
Whitley Farm, First Lane, Whitley

Overview

Whitley Farmhouse is a substantial stone-built late C17 building. The farmhouse and adjacent 8 bay threshing barn are both grade II listed buildings which have group value in addition to their individual architectural and historic significance. A C19 mounting block at the farm entrance is also grade II listed. There are several single storey historic farm outbuildings to the south of the farmhouse which would have comprised of stables, cattle housing, pigsties etc. These undesignated heritage assets are within the curtilage of the listed building(s).

The farmhouse and barn are prominently positioned on First Lane and contribute to local distinctiveness. The site under consideration for development is therefore extremely sensitive from a heritage perspective. Modern bungalow development constructed on the opposite side of the lane to the farm intrudes on its historic rural setting. The surrounding rural landscape to the south is relatively flat but gently undulating farmland with large open fields and limited tree and hedge growth. The public footpath across the fields to the south of the farm allows views from this open landscape towards the historic building complex and other large modern agricultural buildings at the farm.

Relevant legislation and policy

Under Section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, when a local planning authority (LPA) is assessing development proposals affecting a listed building it is required to consider the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as revised in July 2018 is national policy in the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment, including listed buildings, which must also be taken into account by the LPA, together with the related guidance given in the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG).

Development proposals must also have full regard to the requirements of relevant heritage policy in the Wiltshire Development Plan.

High level site assessment

A heritage assessment of the emerging site in the draft Neighbourhood Plan has been carried out, involving desktop research and the site visit on 10th February 2020. Available evidence material including sketch proposals for the site provided by planning consultants Savills who represent the landowner, has been reviewed. The landowner is proposing 21 units on the site, including conversion of one of the listed buildings together with off-site flood mitigation to benefit the wider area. A sketch plan and sketch view of this proposal has been received.

The methodology applied is based on the guidance contained in 'The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans - Historic England Advice Note 3 October 2015'

Whitley Farm, First Lane	Heritage Assessment
Heritage assets affected by the potential site allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whitley Farmhouse – grade II listed building • Barn at Whitley Farm – grade II listed building • Mounting block at Whitley Farm – grade II listed building • C18 & C19 single storey farm outbuildings of stone construction – undesignated heritage assets <p>This group of buildings form a traditional historic farmstead which now includes modern agricultural buildings. They front on to First Lane with an undeveloped farmland setting to the south, east and west.</p>
Contribution made by the site in its current form to the significance of the heritage assets	<p>The proposed site for development comprises land to the south and west of the historic element of the farmstead, currently occupied by large footprint modern agricultural buildings, together with farm bungalow structures of no architectural or historic merit close to the entrance.</p> <p>Despite the poor appearance of the modern buildings on the site they visually identify as working-farm agricultural structures in the rural landscape and as such do not necessarily harm the significance of the farmstead heritage assets. Nevertheless their removal would enhance the setting of the heritage assets and better reveal their significance.</p> <p>The land proposed for development projects south into the surrounding countryside with open fields adjoining to the south, east and west which form a longstanding association between the historic buildings and their farmland setting, assisting the understanding and appreciation of the significance of the heritage assets as a farmstead.</p>
Impact the site allocation might have on the significance of the heritage assets	<p>Replacing the modern agricultural buildings with extensive new residential development would seriously intrude on the setting of the heritage assets.</p> <p>Such development would visually dominate and sever the important visual and physical historic connection between the farm complex and its associated farm land, harming significance.</p> <p>The historic rural setting of the listed farmhouse and barn has previously been part-eroded on the north side of First Lane by C20 bungalow housing development on the opposite side of the lane and further C20 development extending north west along the lane. Developing the land as</p>

	<p>proposed would result in the heritage assets virtually surrounded by development, damaging their important rural/agricultural setting.</p> <p>Guidance in Part 1 of Historic England’s ‘The Setting of Heritage Assets’ advises that:</p> <p><i>Where the significance of a heritage asset has been compromised in the past by unsympathetic development affecting its setting, to accord with NPPF policies consideration still needs to be given to whether additional changes will further detract from, or can enhance the significance of the asset. Negative change could include severing the last link between an asset and its original setting.</i></p>
<p>Site opportunities to maximise enhancement and avoid harm (mitigation measures)</p>	<p>The extent of new housing proposed would harm the setting of the heritage assets, and the site is therefore not considered to be capable of providing for such large scale development.</p> <p>Development does however provide an opportunity to preserve the heritage assets, enhance their setting and avoid harm by applying the following mitigation measures:</p> <p><u>Reduced scale of development</u> Subject to design and layout, a substantially reduced and more modest scale of development in the north west corner of the site only, adjoining First Lane may avoid harming the setting of the heritage assets.</p> <p>This part of the site abuts No 126 First Lane, a C20 bungalow of mediocre appearance. Further C20 development continues along the lane to its junction with West Hill to the north west. In this context it is considered that a modest level of new development in the north west corner could be accommodated.</p> <p>In contrast, approaching the farmstead from the south west along First Lane, the farmhouse has an open countryside context, retaining some sense of its historic rural setting on this part of the lane.</p> <p><u>Removal of modern agricultural buildings</u> Assuming the farming use would cease, the development should be accompanied by the opportunity to remove the modern agricultural buildings on the remainder of the site, which would improve and enhance the setting of the heritage assets.</p>

Design quality

A high quality purpose-designed development, possibly to emulate the appearance of a small and informal group or courtyard of linked farm estate cottages could avoid harming the significance of the listed buildings. It should integrate rather than conflict with the historic layout and form.

The longer distance views of the listed buildings along the lane from the west could be enhanced by removing unattractive structures and introducing high quality built form and planting. For example, tree planting along the east boundary of No 126 First Lane would improve the setting of the listed barn by softening the visual impact of the C20 development to the north west.

Urban or suburban form of development should be strongly resisted.

Detailed proposals for the preservation of the heritage assets

Any scheme would need to be supported by fully detailed proposals for the refurbishment and repair of the farmhouse, with its significance recognised by inclusion of a proportionately large garden space about the historic building.

Before any residential conversion of the barn is considered, less invasive uses, including commercial, educational or community uses should be fully explored. These would have a less invasive/damaging impact on the historic fabric, character and setting of the historic barn. If residential use is accepted a fully detailed scheme of repair and conversion would be required by the local planning authority.

Such detailed proposals could also include the potential to restore the undesignated single storey heritage asset farm outbuildings, possibly for use as individual residential units, with surrounding modern structures removed. Certain of these structures may now be considered as beyond economic repair, and full assessment of their condition and suitability for conversion would be necessary.

Access arrangements

The separate vehicle access to the barn and farmhouse as existing should be retained. This would enable a layout

	<p>design which could retain the historic yard as an open and shared area between the two listed buildings and also provide informal parking in gravelled areas.</p> <p>The land to the west of the side of the listed barn is considered to be less sensitive in terms of potential impact on the heritage assets, and subject to highways agreement new development could be serviced from the existing farm access. Main entrance(s) to the barn if converted should be from the east side (the existing shared yard area), and any associated private space set to the west, possibly screened and separated from the access road to the new development by stone walling and planting.</p>
<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>The entire site is not considered suitable for development as this would result in harm, albeit ‘less than substantial’ to the setting of the heritage assets and their significance.</p> <p>The north west corner is considered as less sensitive in terms of context and may have potential for a modest scheme which fully recognises the setting and significance of the listed buildings.</p> <p>NB: should it be decided to promote the site for development it is advised that specialist advice is sought on its archaeological potential. It is in the Avon Vales Area researched by Historic England as part of its West Wiltshire National Archaeological Identification Survey (Lowland Pilot Project Report 2016) where there is clear evidence of historic occupation and settlement.</p>	

Desk- top study key references:

- The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans – Historic England Advice Note 3 October 2015
- The Setting of Heritage Assets – Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3 December 2017
- West Wiltshire National Archaeological Identification Survey – Historic England 2016)

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