

STRiFE9/01

**Public Inquiry into Appeal by Helioslough Ltd into
a proposed Strategic Rail Freight Interchange on
land in and around Former Aerodrome, North
Orbital Road, Upper Colne Valley, Hertfordshire**

**Proof of Evidence by Adrian Wallace on behalf of
STRiFE**

GREEN BELT

1. Introduction

I live at Toll Cottage which lies at the eastern end of Burydell Lane at which point the road ends. A bridleway ("the Bridleway") continues eastwards and then northeastwards towards Hedges Farm and to the A414 and a footpath ("the Footpath") continues initially northwestwards and through Hedges Farm and then to Sopwell and St Albans and beyond. The Footpath is part of the Ver-Colne Valley Walk.

Toll Cottage is Tudor in origin and is a grade II listed building. Although the house itself sits in the valley, higher points of the property provide magnificent views across unspoiled countryside to the north and northwest. The property is surrounded by farm land (Hedges Farm) to the north and east and allotments to the west. In the fields immediately adjacent to the property large numbers of sheep and cows graze and many horses also graze in the fields 200 metres up the Bridleway.

I have lived at Toll Cottage with my wife and our daughter (born January 2005) since March 2005. Shortly after my wife became pregnant in April 2004 we decided to move out of Central London. We decided to move to a more rural location as we did not wish our child to be brought up in city centre and we sought a quieter and cleaner environment.

Toll Cottage met all the criteria we set and more. In particular: the absence of traffic noise, as Burydell Lane is a no through road, the immediate access to the countryside via the Footpath and the Bridleway and the countryside feeling provided by being surrounded on almost all sides by fields of agriculture. On clear nights the sky is quite dark and far more stars are visible than in town; and outside, even on week days, the garden is exceptionally peaceful and quiet and at night there is no noise at all.

I enjoy jogging and walking and take every opportunity I can to enjoy the immediate access to the countryside provided by the house. What is particularly important to me is the unspoiled natural farm land. My daughter loves the farm animals which are found so close to home and her greatest joy is to be taken to see the horses, sheep and cows at Hedges Farm, which she pleads for my wife and I do at all times and in all weathers! The pleasures of the countryside so close to my house is something I enjoy with countless other joggers riders and walkers. The Footpath is particularly well used as it forms part of the well known Ver-Colne Valley Walk (Photo 3) and hikers are to be seen enjoying it everyday. From the raised elevation of the Bridleway as it crosses Hedges Farm there are magnificent country views towards St Albans. In particular, there are excellent views of the Cathedral from several places from the Bridleway. There are also good views on towards Napsbury across the restored former Aerodrome. The Bridleway is also well used by walkers, joggers and of course horse riders for recreation and quiet enjoyment (Photo 6). It is also used as a means of pedestrian access from Cottonmill and other part of St Albans to Park Street.

From the train (Thameslink) the open aspect of the countryside is immediately apparent on leaving Radlett towards St Albans and there are magnificent views across open countryside throughout the greater part of the journey. From the train it is also possible to enjoy views of St Albans and, in particular, the Cathedral.

Please refer to the photographs in the Appendix which illustrate a number of the points made above.

2. The Proposal

The Helioslough proposal involves the construction of five huge distribution warehouses 20 metres high which together with associated road rail and other infrastructure works would create a massive industrial complex covering virtually the whole of the area described as above, and comprises some 172 hectares of land within the Green Belt. The proposal includes works within areas 3 to 8 to provide public open space and community forest.

3. Planning Policies

PPG2 provides:

The fundamental aim of Green Belts is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open: The most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness. (Para 1.4)

The purposes of including the land in Green Belts are:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
- To prevent neighbourhoods from merging into one another;
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

(Para 1.5)

Once Green Belts have been defined, the use of land in them has a positive role to play in fulfilling the following objectives:

- To provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban populations (my emphasis);
- To provide opportunities for outdoors sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas (my emphasis);
- To retain attractive landscapes and enhance landscapes near to where people live (our emphasis);
- To improve damaged and derelict land around towns;
- To secure nature conservation interest; and
- To retain land in agriculture, forestry and related uses (my emphasis).

(Para 1.6)

The purpose of including land in Green Belts is of paramount importance to their continued protection and should take precedence over other land uses. (Para 1.7)

The essential characteristic of Green Belts is their permanence. Their protection must be maintained as far as can be seen ahead. (Par 2.1)

Green Belt boundaries should be altered only exceptionally and the Secretary of State will wish to be satisfied that the authority has considered opportunities for development within urban areas. (Para 2.4)

Within Green Belts there is a presumption against inappropriate development (i.e. which is harmful to the Green Belt). Where inappropriate development is proposed then it is essential to demonstrate very special circumstances to justify the same (Para 3.1).

With regard to local planning policies, the proposed development site is covered by the following policies of the St Albans District Plan Review 1994 and of those policies that were 'saved' beyond September 2007. The following policies are of particular relevance:

Policy 1 (Metropolitan Green Belt), the whole of the District with the exception of the main built-up areas is within the Green Belt. Within the Green Belt except for development in the main built-up areas or in very special circumstances, planning permission will not be given for development for purposes other than that required for: mineral extraction; agriculture; small scale sports and recreation facilities; other appropriate rural uses; and the conversion of existing buildings to appropriate new uses.

New development within the Green Belt shall integrate with the existing landscape. Siting design and external appearance are particularly important and additional landscaping will normally be required. The circumstances and locations in which development will be permitted will also have regard to other policies. [my emphasis]

Policy 74 (Landscaping and Tree Preservation), when considering planning applications affecting existing landscape the Council will take account of the following:

- (a) significant healthy trees and other important landscape features (e.g. hedgerows, ponds and watercourses), shall normally be retained unless it can be shown that their retention is incompatible with overall design quality and/or economic use of the site;
- (b) planning applications shall be supported by a full tree survey, indicating all landscape features; [my emphasis]
- (c) trees shall not normally be severely topped or lopped or endangered by construction work or underground services;
- (d) Tree Preservation Orders and/or landscaping conditions will be attached to planning permissions to safeguard existing trees.

Policy 80 (Floodlighting), applications for floodlighting will not be granted where the intensity of lighting or glare, would detract from the character or amenity of: residential properties; or rural areas. [my emphasis]

Policy 97 (Existing Footpaths, Bridleways and Cycleways), applications that will result in the loss of definitive rights of way will be resisted. Permanent diversions of rights of way will only be acceptable if they compare favorably to the original route in terms of distance, gradient, ground conditions and amenity. Any development which could endanger users of footpaths, bridleways and cycleways will be resisted.

Policy 102 (Loss of Agricultural Land), development which would result in the loss of agricultural land will be assessed against both land quality and farm economics and management. With regard to land quality development resulting in the loss of high quality

land (classified as grades 1, 2, & 3a) will normally be refused. Planning applications for development of agricultural land must be accompanied by an assessment of the agricultural grading of the land. [my emphasis]

Policy 143 (Land uses for the Upper Colne Valley) In order to provide for visual and ecological improvement of the Upper Colne Valley to accommodate pressures for leisure development and to promote the enjoyment of the countryside, the Council will encourage on the former Radlett Aerodrome low and medium intensity leisure uses including water sports together with extensive landscaping.

Policy 143A (Watling Chase Community Forest), the Council will support the establishment of Watling Chase Community Forest in the southern part of the Borough. Within the Community Forest, the Council will welcome detailed proposals for the purposes of landscape conservation, recreation, nature conservation and timber production. Proposals should be consistent with Green Belt policy (Policy 1) and other appropriate policies in the plan. [my emphasis]

4. Impact of the Applicant's Proposals

- (1) The Helioslough's proposal involves the utilisation of 172 hectares of the Metropolitan Green Belt. Not only will this use permanently remove a significant parcel of land from the Green Belt, it will remove one of the last significant areas of Green Belt which separate St Albans to the north, London Colney to the West, Radlett to the south and Park Street/Frogmore to the east. This would inevitably eat significantly into the separation of these areas, a separation which Green Belt designation is intended permanently to protect. If some areas of Green Belt are more important than others because they are the last barrier preventing urban coalescence, then this is certainly one of the best examples.

The large area of Green Belt which lies between St Albans, London, Park Street and Radlett (Hedges Farm and the former Radlett Aerodrome) not only separates the above urban areas, justifying its retention as part of the Green Belt, at the same time it is a much loved and prized jewel in a shrinking crown of Green Belt in the vicinity, more precious, perhaps, because it is the only area of Green Belt between what are essentially four separate communities.

The proposal would, therefore, be in direct contravention of the purpose stated in PPG2 for retaining Green Belt, to prevent the merge of neighbouring towns and to assist the safeguarding of the countryside from encroachment.

It is to be noted in this regard that the last Inspector agreed that "the development would also contribute to urban sprawl" and that "the nature and form of the development proposed is fundamentally different in character to that found nearby" (Inspector's Report 16.9), but curiously he stated that "there is, to my mind, little merit in the contention that the proposal would involve the merger of towns and settlements" (ibid). This I find very surprising as the most superficial examination of Helioslough's own materials demonstrates that Area 1, in which the development is to be located, is the only area of Green Belt between Park Street/Frogmore and London Colney/Napsbury. Further, whilst I accept that Area 4 (which is not to be developed) will still lie between St Albans and Radlett, the development of Area 1 will permanently remove a very large part of the Green Belt between London Colney/Napsbury, Colney

Street, Frogmore and Park Street and I think therefore it is fair to say that these areas will effectively merge.

- (2) There is, in addition, no doubt that proposals would provide significant detrimental effects: -
- (a) In relation to Area 1, on which the SRFI would be built, “the openness which is now a characteristic of the site would be lost to development” (Inspector’s Report 16.6). “Helioslough accept ... in terms that the proposal would on account of its size have a substantial impact on openness. To my mind, the impact would be substantial” [my emphasis] (Inspector’s Report 16.7) and furthermore “the impact on openness of the Green Belt is fundamental and harm on this account cannot be mitigated [my emphasis] (Inspector’s Report 16.7).
 - (b) Hedges Farm would disappear: Not only is this directly contrary to a defined Green Belt objective, (to retain land in agriculture) its loss in local terms is incalculable. The disappearance of the farm animals so much a part of the local culture would be devastating to the local community and all those who enjoy our countryside. The developer’s proposal to replace the farm with a country park and represent this as a benefit to the community is misleading as they already provide public open space.
 - (c) To me and my family the loss of a working farm which currently surrounds our property would be devastating and the proposed country park would offer absolutely no consolation. To take away a treasured amenity and replace it with something less authentic is hard to measure as any form of benefit.
 - (d) The loss of the Bridleway and its replacement by an alternative route which could be too steep to be suitable for horses and which would run next to the access road is not an attractive proposal. Its current use for quiet enjoyment would be permanently lost. As the Inspector put it: “The alternative route would run close to the proposed access road and bypass and those who choose to follow it would, without doubt, be exposed to a level of traffic noise and disturbance not associated with the present route” (Inspector’s Report 16.88).
- (3) The views of open countryside would be diminished or in some cases eliminated. The important view of the Cathedral from the main Thameslink line would disappear forever as a result of the building the massive earth bunds that form an essential part of the proposed development site. Views from Park Street to Napsbury would be prevented by the rail freight terminal. Although this would be bunded it would nevertheless interrupt views from elevated areas. Again enjoyment of the views of St Albans would be interrupted either by the facility or by the proximity to infrastructure from the facility.
- (4) The last Inspector agreed “that the proposal would fundamentally change the nature of the view towards St Albans across the site from the Midland Main Line. Massive warehouses would replace an essential open area of countryside and the glimpses of the historic skyline of St Albans that can essentially be seen from the train” (Inspector’s Report 16.11). He then went on to refer to what he considered to be even more adverse in its impact on the setting of St Albans, namely the reduction (by the presence

of the proposed development) of the “sense of separation between St Albans and Radlett” (ibid) and “in this sense I conclude that there would be some harm to the setting of the city” (ibid). With regard to the visual impact of the proposals, the Inspector stated: “the bunds would be very large and of a wholly different scale to the existing bunds and embankments about the site ... In my opinion they would appear artificial and intrusive in their own right” (Inspector’s Report 16.16). Further, he stated: “there is little doubt that the scale, bulk and nature of the development proposed on Area 1 would result in significant visual impact from some quarters (Inspector’s Report 16.17) and from passing trains “the impact from this viewpoint would be significant and adverse” (ibid). He also stated, significantly, that Helioslough’s attempt to mitigate the proposed development by works planned for Areas 3 to 8 in his view “do practically nothing to ameliorate the impact of the built development on Areas 1 and 2” (Inspector’s Report 16.19).

- (5) St Albans is one of the most important historic towns in England and views of and from it are extremely important. Furthermore, the association with St Albans also merits preservation. It is difficult to see how building a huge industrial facility so close to a historic town can do anything other than harm its association and reputation. One of the purposes of including land in Green Belts is to "preserve the setting and special character of historic towns"; the proposed development clearly fails in this respect.
- (6) The proposal would, therefore, be in conflict with every objective of established Green Belts stated above and seemingly offers nothing to the local community in return.

5. Conclusion

Green Belts play an important role wherever they are situated. In some areas however their role is crucial in preventing expanding communities merging together, particularly in areas where the Green Belt has already suffered ravages from previous development. People who choose to live in this part of the country do so because they wish to enjoy the advantages of the country whilst still being close to London. To introduce a facility of the type and size proposed represents a cruel irony for those who chose to live in the country but would find themselves encroached upon by one of the largest industrial complexes of its types ever seen in this country. The added significance of its proximity to an historic town of the importance of St Albans borders on industrial insanity.

From my own personal point of view, my life in Park Street would be ruined. I would not hesitate to move (albeit taking a loss on the sale of my property) at the earliest opportunity. I have a young child, my wife is asthmatic and it would be unthinkable for us to continue living next to a construction site for a number of years which would lead to a facility the size of which is almost equivalent to five Terminal 5s with its effective destruction of our way of life in terms of noise, air and light pollution and enormous increases of traffic on local roads. It is hard for me to find words that would accurately convey the extent of the loss that would be occasioned by the arrival of this industrial leviathan within the boundaries of the beautiful and historic city of St Albans.

Although the views stated above are personal to me, similar views are common throughout the local community. I am yet to meet anyone who lives locally who does not believe that the arrival of the proposed development would be anything other than a catastrophe. There are numerous people that I have spoken to who have lived in the area for many years and some for all their lives. Every one of them has their own tale to tell of the personal loss they would

suffer were this proposal to go ahead. This statement is intended as just one typical example.