

Planning Application - DC/23/05656 – Land at Grove Farm & Land East of the Railway Line – Construction of photovoltaic Solar Array, Ancillary Infrastructure, DNO Substation, Customer Substation, Grid Connection & Landscaping.

I would like to register my objection to this application and do it through the words of a Babergh Heritage officer and a local resident of Bentley. They have described the main problem, that of harm to the heritage assets and landscape, perfectly.

Heritage officer's Report

“The proposed development has the potential to affect a number of designated and non-designated heritage assets.

There are several listed buildings to the north of the western site with the closest being the Grade II* Listed Church of St Mary, a parish church with a nave of 12th Century origin, a 14th Century west tower and south porch, and a chancel of approximately 14th Century date. Further to the North are the Grade II* Listed Bentley Hall and the associated stables (separately listed), and Bentley Hall Barn, which was upgraded to Grade I Listed in 2022.

Bentley Hall and its associated outbuildings are one of the best preserved and historically significant Tudor manorial complexes in Britain. The Hall was the medieval seat of the Tollemache family, which established their seat at Helmingham Hall in the 16th Century where the family remains. The earliest part of Bentley Hall dates to the early 15th Century, but most of the building dates to the late 16th Century when it was refurbished as a dower house. The stables are early 16th Century and the barn dates to the late 16th Century.

The landscape setting of the Bentley Hall group is known to be closely related to the historic seigneurial landscape of the Hall, with a grand avenue approach to the Hall from the north, flanked by the large barn which would have been replicated on the western side of the road. This avenue is now Old Hall Lane. The group is highly significant, and the landscape setting makes a positive contribution to their significance. The landscape north of the site is also identified as parkland associated with Bentley Park on historic, 19th Century, OS maps.

The addition of the railway in the mid-19th Century effectively cut off Bentley Hall from the Church, its route and interchange can be seen on the ground, and the public footpath north of the site to the west of Church Road partly follows the route of the dismantled railway line. A bridleway bounds the west side of the western site, and the network is connected to rights of way moving through the landscapes of Bentley Park and Bentley Hall. The network carries through to the road network and across the current railway line to Maltings House to the east, and a loose group of Grade II listed buildings including Maltings Farm and Maltings Cottage. It is therefore highly likely that the application site(s) will be widely experienced in the context of the historic landscape settings of the listed assets whilst using the public right of way network.

In addition to the designated assets, there are also several buildings identified within the Bentley Neighbourhood Plan as being of local interest within the vicinity, and by the applicant's own designation within the Heritage Impact Assessment the site is very close to the setting of several such non-designated assets. To the south of the site the Neighbourhood Plan lists “Red Cottages and Potash Cottages” (“a run of charming red-brick houses at right-angles to each other” which dates to the 17th to 18th Centuries) and “Falstaff Manor” (one of the original medieval manors in Bentley and mentioned in the Domesday Book). To the north are “Uplands” (a dwelling with a blend of

contemporary and traditional forms), and “Little House”, “Glebe Cottage” and “Bentley House” (“a cluster of swellings focussed on the church”).

The applicant’s Heritage Impact Assessment also includes “Grove Farm” (a post-medieval 19th Century farmstead recorded as part of the Farmsteads in the Suffolk Countryside Project) to the south, and “Church Farm” (another 19th Century farmstead) and “Engry Wood” (an ancient woodland) to the north-west of the site, as non-designated assets.

The presence of these designated and non-designated assets within the surrounding agricultural landscape adds to their historic significance, and the loss of the rural character of the landscape would therefore be to their detriment.

Assessment

Overall, I am concerned that the proposal would have a potential negative visual impact on the wider setting of the nearby designated and non-designated heritage assets. I therefore disagree with the conclusions of the Heritage Impact Assessment, which suggests that the proposal would not cause harm.

The current character of the site is agricultural, with ancient woodland (Engry Wood) bounding the north-west corner and is in keeping with the wider rural landscape setting. The site contributes to the significance of the group due to the tranquil undeveloped character which is consistent with the wider setting of all the heritage assets.

The proposed infrastructure, fence, gateways and substation, as well as the solar arrays (which are described as up to 3 metres high) are likely to transform the field sites from a rural into a more industrial landscape. The harsh reflective materials, angular support structures, security fencing, and any hard surfacing would contrast sharply with the current character of the open farmland. This will have an adverse impact on the tranquillity and agrarian character of the surrounds in which the heritage assets are experienced, and could reduce the contribution the setting makes to these heritage assets to the detriment of their significance.

Any proposed lighting is also likely to be highly intrusive and impact the tranquillity and darkness of the rural setting, which is an important “intangible” quality of this locality. Additionally, the Bentley Neighbourhood Plan identified the protection of their dark skies as an important goal, with “access to the night sky contribut[ing] to the rural character and sense of place” within the area as a “highly valued asset”.

The church tower will be seen in conjunction with the proposed development and the quality of its immediate setting would be affected, with the array in the foreground of views of the tower from the south, west and east boundaries of the site.

The change in character of this large parcel of land and associated infrastructure is likely to result in harm to the setting of the group at Bentley Hall, and if there is a historic relationship between the sites and Bentley Hall then the assessed level of harm is likely to be greater than if there is no relationship.

Conclusion

The proposal is likely to cause harm to the significance and setting of the Church of St Mary, the manorial group of highly graded listed buildings associated with Bentley Hall, and the various nearby non-designated assets. The level of harm is likely to be less than substantial, but the change of

character of the area (from rural to industrial) through the addition of the proposed infrastructure would have a negative impact on the setting in which the heritage assets are experienced, to the detriment of their significance. At this stage I am not convinced that there is any scope for the proposed solar farm in this location, due to the potential for harm to the significance and setting of several heritage assets.

In conclusion, I consider that the application in its present form would cause a low to medium level of less than substantial harm to the significance and setting of designated and non-designated heritage assets. It therefore does not meet the requirements of the NPPF and does not accord with Joint Local Plan policy LP19.”

Local Resident’s Comments

A Bentley resident who told the public meeting – organised by the parish council –

“that he is a long-time student of History as well as Law and has spent much of the last 10 years studying the history of Bentley over the past 800 years with 4 Manors extant at the time of the Norman Conquest all still clearly recognisable today. We live in a remarkable parish where the historic mosaic of farmland, woodland, houses, farms and other buildings is very largely intact – there are Grade I and II* listed buildings in abundance – 15 separately identified and named ancient woodlands (more than any other parish in Suffolk) and at the heart of all this, centrally within the parish, lies Engry Wood and Falstaff Manor – one of those Norman manors held by the Tollemaches from the reign of Henry VIII. This is not the place to site 100,000 solar panels inside 4km of security fencing with innumerable CCTV cameras on 3m masts, innumerable inverters, 11 substantial transformers and two substations including 7m tall elements – The application site stretches end to end 2 km across our village and cannot be absorbed without very serious adverse impacts which will change the character of Bentley and its historic core forever.”