

Parishes in the battle of Ganges

Wendy Le-Las, an independent planning consultant, describes the fight of the PPA in Suffolk to put sustainable communities back on the map

The Shotley Peninsula, in Suffolk, is a rural green lung overlooked, across two estuaries, by the ports of Harwich and Felixstowe respectively. The tip of the peninsula is a good vantage point and has, for millennia, been a defensive site. It boasts two Martello towers and fort. In 1905, it became a naval training establishment known as HMS Ganges.



It was a sustainable community before the term was invented. Generations have lived, worked and played on the site; men and supplies often arrived by sea and it provided some local employment and occasional use of sporting facilities. Amongst the naval heritage are listed buildings, sports facilities and other infrastructure.

However, since the Navy's departure in 1976 the site has been in need of redevelopment. In particular, the villages of Shotley and Shotley Gate have been blighted by Ganges.

The fight begins

In 2005, Shotley Parish Council produced a parish plan which set out its need for employment, education, health care, and leisure facilities. However, Babergh District Council chose to ignore this and decided to approve a scheme for 325 houses with token community and transport benefits. The rest of the peninsula became alerted to the traffic implications if a sizeable development at the end of the longest cul-de-sac in Suffolk, 10 miles from Ipswich went ahead.

Shotley and the parishes of Chelmondiston, Ewerton, Freston, Harkstead, Holbrook, Stutton, Tattingstone, Wherstead, and Woolverstone formed the Peninsula Parishes Alliance (PPA), and successfully lobbied the Government Offices for the East of England (GO-East) to call in the application.

The inquiry

During the inquiry by GO-East in February 2006, the PPA mounted a highly professional case. They had raised the money to employ experts, but they would not have won the day had it not been for well-informed local witnesses speaking on specific topics. The case was strengthened further by a brilliant DVD showing the various traffic problems along the B1456, the effect on the built heritage and spectacular tidal flooding which periodically cuts off the peninsula from the mainland.

The PPA case was supported by 52 local residents, each of whom spoke on a different issue during the afternoon and evening session in Shotley Village Hall.

The verdict

The verdict of the inspector and the secretary of state is of wider public interest.

Firstly:

“The scheme would make a valuable contribution towards meeting the housing requirement of the district and without it there would be a deficit... However, the immediate advantage of meeting housing requirements does not take precedence over the need to provide well designed sustainable communities and the long-term advantages that can be secured through the use of sustainable locations.”

In other words, isolation of the site from facilities and services could not be compensated for by the need for the houses, the utilisation of a brownfield site, the conservation of historic landmarks, public access to the site for recreation, and the developer's community and transport goodies.

Secondly:

“The secretary of state agrees that the proposals to demolish the extensive collection of buildings on site need to be carefully justified to ensure that an existing resource is not being wasted.”

Re-use appears preferable to demolition, partly to reduce construction traffic.

Lastly:

“The inspector considers that there would be negative (traffic) impacts in terms of local pedestrian and cycle users, increase in noise, vibration and emissions and the effect on the character and appearance of villages... There would be a significant negative impact on the Woolverston Conservation Area. She (is) concerned over the tendency of the B1456 to flood... and the severe disruption to residents and emergency services that arise at such times.”

The future

The challenge now is to find a sustainable use for HMS Ganges but Babergh District Council refuse commission a planning brief. However, Shotley Parish Council and Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) may commission their own.

Watch this space.