



THE BLEASDALE COLUMN

NEW HOUSES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Many people have written on this matter before, including myself, but the problem doesn't go away. Planning Applications to build new dwellings on isolated sites in the open countryside or on the outskirts of towns and villages continue to be submitted at a steady rate, so much so that if someone cared to do the research in Local Planning Authority records, I think it would be found that not a single field, excepting only perhaps marsh and moorland, hasn't had at least one application to build on it! This, of course, over a period of 50+ years.

Mercifully, most have been REFUSED, if not, how different the countryside would have looked. Would it still have been countryside?

The desire of the British to have a house in the country seems insatiable. Do foreign countries have the same problem? I don't think they do but it would be interesting to know.

Though I don't think much of many Government Policies, I do believe that the Policy which seeks to prevent such development has been right and most Planning Authorities have supported it, more or less. As the pressure gets greater – as it must as land and property values rise – it has been applied more rigorously by even the most reluctant Councils.

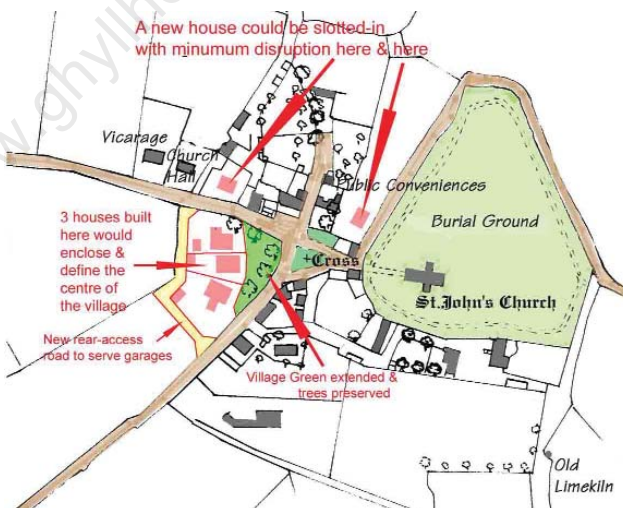
Now the value of a planning permission in the countryside often exceeds the value of the building itself.

Various contributors to this Magazine have suggested partial solutions but personally I don't see any way of meeting this demand other than in a token way. However I feel that even a token solution or amelioration shows that someone cares and is much more constructive than an everlasting "No".

Not all potential applicants are rich businessmen or pop-stars (and they have a habit of finding their way around the restrictions sooner or later. If you've got enough money, you can always buy an existing house and knock it down!) Some are the off-springs of local families who want to start a new home in the locality and a certain amount of new growth is essential to the well-being and continuing life of a village or small settlement.

Thus, whilst I would defend the open countryside against new building at all costs; there is still scope for small and carefully integrated growth immediate around the nucleus of many existing villages or even small groups of dwellings which don't, as existing, quite qualify as a 'village'..

The attached sketch-plan shows the sort of thing I have in mind.



Strict design controls would need to be exercised to ensure that the new dwellings blend-in.

Years ago, when we had Rural District Councils in England (before the 1974 fiasco which swept them all away in favour of urban-orientated District or Metropolitan Councils), some of them enabled this sort of scheme by buying a parcel of land, installing roads, sewers and organising services and then selling off individual plots, usually to self-builders or families who would employ a local builder to do it for them. They also built council-houses in similar situations supplying the rental market.

The new D.C's, apart from not being interested in villages or the countryside, have been so emaciated by Government spending restrictions, that they can no longer do any such thing and have largely become expensive bureaucratic organisations intent on controlling things rather than doing things. All highway, drainage or even housing powers have been stripped away from them anyway. They seem to cost us all a great deal of money but produce little or nothing in return. And now the Government (spurred on by the EU) wants to introduce yet another tier of bureaucracy in Regional Authorities. Will they have any powers to actually DO anything rather than just talk?

ASBESTOS

Talking about controlling things, Christopher Booker (in the Sunday Telegraph) and others have been fighting a losing battle against the regulation of asbestos and particularly the stupid idea that asbestos-cement is just as dangerous as the other sorts. The Health & Safety Executive eventually gave way to the extent of admitting that asbestos-cement (as used on almost every farm) is not highly toxic. They nevertheless insisted in retaining it within the scope of the new Regulations whilst reluctantly agreeing that a much less strident level of control would suffice.

It now seems as if, having got the Regulations adopted, they are conveniently forgetting all about this agreement and I read of a number of prosecutions involving asbestos-cement roofing sheets. Very heavy fines have been imposed for merely having such materials on one's premises or for burying some of it. This is a fine way for them to generate income, of course.

Asbestos-cement was a wonderful material (providing you don't walk on it – in those circumstances it has to be treated as one would treat glass) it was cheap, totally rot proof such that you could use it in damp or otherwise dodgy situations where steel or timber would be attacked, widely available and generally a great boon to the construction industry and their clients in all other industries, not least, farming.

It is absolutely shameful that it should get such a bad press and thus be subject to an excess of zeal from so-called but misguided, do-gooders.

Like all materials, one has to use some care when working with it, chewing upon it or sticking strands of it up one's nose is obviously not a good idea but it's not going to poison the human race no matter how much is used and what if a bit is buried – it's a solid material and is not going to leach away.

The so-called blue asbestos used in heating and refrigeration as insulation, is and always has been, known to be dangerous and special precautions had to be taken when using it. Even this though, when properly installed and covered, performs a valuable service and is much safer left alone rather than being disturbed by removal, such as is now all the rage.

We live in a strangely mixed-up world where, on the one hand we are taught to value the saving of energy and recycling, whilst on the other, perfectly serviceable materials have to be ripped out and expensively disposed of.

I have just taken some asbestos sheets off one shed roof and re-used them on another and feel no remorse whatsoever!

You may remember the scare, a few years ago, over lead and many miles of lead pipe were torn out and replaced. I have a sneaking suspicion that the next target of the doom-laden do-gooders will be tanalized timber. How many farmers have got that lying about or incorporated in buildings/fences?

Ian K. Bleasdale MRICS., Dip. TP., Dip. LI.

17th. February 2003