

Alternatives to housing at Hall Farm

There are numerous objections to building 4,500 houses at Hall Farm/Loddon Valley, however, it is not intended to raise those objections here. Other, more sustainable alternatives to building at Hall Farm have been proposed and it is hoped that the land proposed for the “Loddon Valley Garden Village” can be used for more environmentally sustainable purposes.

This report is therefore intended to open a dialogue between the community and the University of Reading (UoR) about how alternative ideas to selling the land for housing development could provide a long term revenue stream that will enable the University to continue to provide top quality research and education. Such a dialogue being encouraged by the Vice-Chancellor, Robert Van de Noort, in his recent interview on BBC Radio Berkshire. These ideas are intended as a starting point for creative and imaginative thinking, not as definitive solutions.

1) Food production

First, it should be noted that some of the land proposed for housing that adjoins Mole Road/Church Road is not owned by UoR. Some is owned by other, local landowners, and it is hoped that this would continue to be used as it is now, predominantly for farming. One of the key arguments for preserving Hall Farm as productive farm land is based on the need for a reduced “carbon footprint” on our food, both by reducing foreign imports and encouraging people to buy locally.

What is also seen as increasingly important to many people is the quality of the food they consume, where that food comes from and how it is produced. Organically produced food that avoids the use of chemicals is seen by many as highly desirable because of the health benefits an additive free organic diet can bring. There are many alternatives to high intensity farming using chemical additives and mechanisation which not only create better quality food products but are also much less damaging to our environment. Diversification of crop species, adding wildlife habitat to farmland, reducing soil tillage, and enriching soil with organic matter, to name but a few.

These often more traditional, less invasive methods enhance the soil by encouraging the microorganisms. This will benefit the plants, wildlife and the surrounding ecosphere. To engage in the practice and study of this low impact farming would provide the University an invaluable opportunity to help develop a diverse range of sustainable agriculture methods such as permaculture, silviculture, aquaponics, hydroponics, polycultures and integrated pest management that would be of enormous benefit, not just locally but across the world, as farmers struggle to come to terms with managing climate change.

One of the biggest problems with these non-chemical alternatives from a modern perspective is the increased need for labour, particularly manual labour willing and able to do basic agricultural tasks without recourse to mechanisation. This leads us to our second discussion point on community involvement.

2) Community involvement

A key component of making this labour intensive, environmentally sensitive farming workable would be to involve the local community as voluntary labourers. In line with best practice from other successful Community Farms around the country investing time, effort or money could be rewarded with a share of the produce. A farm shop could also be set up to sell produce direct from the fields

to visitors. Children, students, volunteers and specialists could be brought together to work the land and manage the site, provided they are given suitable guidance and safeguarding measures.

As a starting point shares could be sold to interested parties in a co-operative venture to raise some capital. Sponsorship could also be sought from local businesses, and as well as selling the produce direct to consumers, some of it could be used for “value added” products and services. But being outdoors, working with others, achieving a common goal, breathing clean air and seeing the results of your labour miraculously “coming to life” before your eyes is also a very powerful reward, in and of itself.

3) Products and services

The low carbon farming methods could be matched with similarly low carbon impact products. For example fibres grown as crops could be treated with natural dyes, woven into fabrics, then made into products, either for use on site or for sale to visitors. With the current interest in learning practical craft skills, workshops could be set up to teach people some of the techniques used. For example: turning, potting, spinning, weaving, curing, brewing and cooking. Such classes would then provide yet another possible revenue stream.

Food and drink lend themselves to being the basis of a local “Farm to Fork” organic restaurant. Goats, ducks and venison could possibly replace the existing Hall Farm dairy herds. A fish pond could be dug and guest chefs could be invited to come and prepare dishes. Dairy farming comes with a high carbon cost and it is believed that these and similar options offer a more sustainable source of income. The University could use this as an opportunity to delve deeper into the links between health and nutrition, investigating alternatives to our traditional diets that sustain our bodies, and at the same time help to sustain our planet.

Given the potential at the site for open country vistas this could become a wonderful opportunity to develop other activities alongside farming such as an open air theatre, nature based art classes or outdoor classrooms where local schools can visit and experience “hands on” environmental education. Fruit trees could be planted and the fruit then used to make cider or juice. Bees have long been kept as pollinators and as a useful resource for honey and beeswax. Honey, candles and mead could then be produced. Sustainably grown pine, bamboo or willow could be used for onsite construction work and clay dug up for use in bricks or ceramics. Hemp, linen, jute, sisal and flax are traditional plants that can be grown sustainably for fibres that can then be made into fabrics. Indigo, woad, cochineal and berries are all examples of natural products that can be used as dyes. These traditional materials lend themselves to environmentally friendly products and can also be seen in the context of our developing social history.

4) Heritage and history

One of the key features of the Hall Farm site is the local history and heritage associated with it. Berkshire Archaeological Society are investigating the site for the remains of an Iron Age settlement believed to have once existed here and the Old Church and Mill, together with several old agricultural buildings might suggest yet another idea for alternative development.

The Museum of English Rural Life in Reading might be interested in extending the facility it offers to visitors. By becoming part of a “Living History Project” the Museums Partnership of Reading might well be interested in expanding into an outdoor space where examples of Berkshires rural beginnings could be more fully explored. (Something along the lines of the Chiltern Open Air Museum). The Iron Age village mentioned above could be reconstructed by historians, sociologists,

archaeologists and engineers to recreate an accurate living reconstruction of “AEbber Feld” (the enclosure belonging to the Anglo Saxon Lord, AEbber and the precursor to present day Arborfield).

Could “Bodgers” once again be hand crafting wooden products in the woods using pole lathes? Could clay pots be made, decorated and fired in the style of the Anglo Saxons? A traditional Blacksmith would extend the range of possible products and activities even further. Schools could visit to see how life was lived thousands of years ago, with the clothes, customs, tools and food as closely reproduced as possible. At the heart of it is an opportunity for UoR to be in the forefront of our understanding of sustainable living and to develop some world leading educational and historical research.

5) Holistic Health

This has already been alluded to in the comments above, but it is worth stressing that the impact of nutrition on health, together with the opportunity to engage in meaningful activity, outdoors in the fresh air could be of enormous help in dealing with social and mental problems. Taken together with some of the possible alternative therapies now being prescribed by many health practitioners, such as gardening, meditation, yoga or tai chi, this area could be so much more than just another Special Area of Natural Greenery (SANG). As well as providing a space where people could walk in the fresh air and enjoy the countryside, the value of working outdoors on practical projects could also be used to offset some of the costs to the surrounding Local Authorities of social care.

It is difficult to quantify how much mental health issues or anti-social behaviour concerns can be mitigated by this kind of activity, or how much could be saved from the cost of providing such services in the traditional way of care homes and medication, but the research is becoming increasingly well documented. Further, as a leading light in sustainability, education and agriculture the University is extremely well placed to develop this research further, perhaps working together with the likes of Social Services, Mencap or the NHS.

“Wellness Spas” where people can come to relax, enjoy being outdoors and possibly pursue a course of meditation, exercise or instruction could additionally be complimented by some fairly basic cabins for short stay accommodation. The cabins themselves could be sustainably sourced and built using local materials and labour. Everything on the site would be based around the idea of a “circular economy”, and in doing so would itself become an exemplar of a better way of living sustainably. Such centres of excellence then become a model for others to study and perhaps follow.

6) Multi faith ceremonies

The working party set up by members of the community to investigate alternatives to housing came up with a number of ideas relating to ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. Wedding venues are possibly well catered for already, although we did wonder about the possibilities of “multi-faith” wedding venues.

For example, a Humanist or Pagan Wedding space could fit well with the pre Christian historical reconstruction mentioned above. A “Green Burial site” is something other, similar “environmentally friendly” sites have provided, and with the listed 13th Century Church yard already part of the site and the close proximity to it of the Church of St Bartholomew’s, “green burial” might be further explored. The views across the fields to the new church, and a sensitively repaired old church ruin could be enhanced with a suitable area of quiet reflection, away from the noise and bustle of our busy urban lives. Once the deceased has been buried in a biodegradable casket the grave is left

unmarked and the land allowed to return to a “natural” condition, allowing wildlife to return, plants to grow, and visitors to enjoy.

The possibility of a Crematorium was also discussed as being of great social value, but the environmental issues connected to this of high emissions and high energy cost then led us to a consideration of “aquamation” instead. This uses alkaline hydrolysis to break down the body of a deceased person. It uses less energy and creates fewer greenhouse gases than standard cremation, the funeral of Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu being a recent well publicised example of the process. For those who are not sensitive to disposal of friends or family in this way might it also be possible to regain some nutritional value for the environment from this process.

7) Energy

With the recent focus on rising energy costs many ideas are being put forward for alternative energy supply. Wind turbines were proposed at this site several years back but roundly rejected by the local community, primarily due to the impact on the landscape, but also because of perceived ill effects on health. However, in keeping with the “working museum” outlined above it might be possible to use wind power in a traditional style windmill and use it to create a “stone ground” product from locally grown grains.

Depending on the suitability of the geology, ground sourced heat pumps might well be sufficient to heat the site and possibly more. Farming or livestock might then be reintroduced after installation. Solar (photo-voltaic) energy capture is visually intrusive in a countryside setting such as this, but installing P.V. panels over car parking bays could be used to generate electricity fairly unobtrusively, and the River Loddon here was once a source of power used to make paper, perhaps the mill could be restored to a working condition. Composting toilets would be another way to minimise waste and maximise sustainability. With water drawn from the nearby Bearwood lake the site has the potential to be completely self-sufficient and 100 % carbon neutral while running some basic visitor accommodation, teaching and research facilities and exploring some of the “circular economies” outlined above.

8) Re-wilding and carbon capture

Nationally there is huge support for re-wilding projects and the Government is now offering financial incentives for this on a range of scales. Also, the planting of trees for long term carbon capture and storage is not only highly desirable in terms of helping to achieve net zero by 2050, it has all the advantages of fitting well with all of the ideas outlined above. Significant parts of the Hall Farm site are ancient woodland dating back hundreds, if not thousands of years. Other parts are flood plain and are completely unsuitable for housing. Taken together they represent a significant proportion of the site that is already an important part of the local ecology, with huge potential for further increasing bio diversity by providing a wide range of wildlife habitats. If even just some of the adjacent fields were left to return to their natural state it would provide a fantastic research environment for the University, as well as helping to fight local biodiversity loss.

This is a “once in a lifetime” opportunity for the nascent city of Reading. With the University of Reading leading the way, and with the reputation of the University behind it, sponsors could be sought from across the globe. In this, the year of Queen Elizabeth’s Platinum Jubilee, what better way to celebrate the past 70 years and to look forward to the future.

This report was produced by Save Our Loddon Valley Environment at Hall Farm (SOLVE Hall Farm)

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