

## Alternatives to housing at Hall Farm.

The Hall Farm site offers many opportunities for partnership working between the University of Reading (UoR) and local stakeholders. The site has huge potential to be developed as an ongoing resource and it is hoped that the ideas outlined in this document will be a starting point for the UoR to work together in partnership with the community to create a working demonstration of agricultural and environmental sustainability.

This report is therefore intended to open a dialogue between the community and the 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. 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.

Working in partnership with others in the local community, Hall Farm presents the UoR an opportunity to create a unique environment that will directly benefit those communities as well as enhancing the university’s reputation as a world leader in agriculture, sustainability issues and managing climate change.

Organically produced food that avoids the use of chemicals is increasingly 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.

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 could 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. Automation, artificial intelligence and robotics are making great strides in the field of agrotechnology, but we are probably still decades away from this being a viable alternative to people power. 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, pigs, 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. Examples such as [Jimmys Farm](#) are also popular TV shows.

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, 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 Museum’s 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 Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (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 and dealing with anti-social behaviour, both problems that cost Local Authorities a great deal of money.

“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. Some of the accommodation might also be offered to temporary field workers and farm hands.

#### 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. 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 provide. Additionally, with the listed 13<sup>th</sup> Century Church yard already part of the site and the close proximity to it of the more modern Church of St Bartholomews, “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.

#### 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 generate electricity. 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.

#### 9) Sustainable drainage

The Environment Agency are keen to promote Sustainable Drainage Schemes (SuDS) and with the River Loddon at Hall Farm forming such an important local Flood Plain it would seem sensible to include some further flood risk mitigation measures into these proposals, particularly given the increased risk of flooding following on from rising sea levels as a consequence of climate change.

There is a general understanding that good flood risk management is about slowing the flow rather than dredging which speeds water conveyance up. Hall Farm represents a fabulous opportunity to implement many such activities (riparian woodlands, water meadows, etc) which will have a positive impact on local flood risk but an even greater biodiversity and environmental benefit.

We note with interest that the University of Reading is involved in a project to restore over 18 Hectares of former agricultural land to a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) along the banks of the River Loddon at Langley Mead.

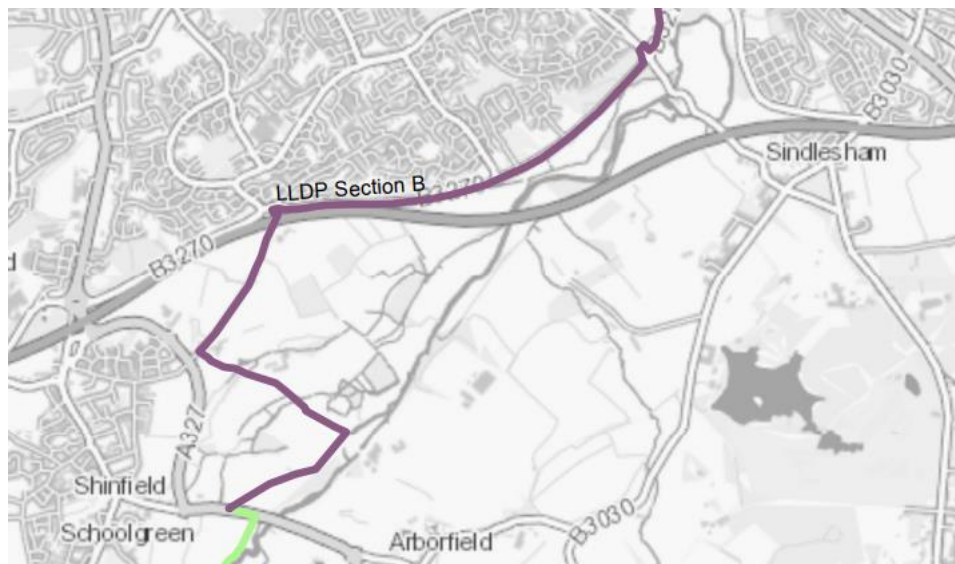
#### 10) Improving the “Greenways” network

Wokingham are keen to promote alternatives to cars that are less damaging to the environment. Clearly encouraging people to use Public Transport is a significant part of this process, but we note that “active” transport is now being widely promoted as an even better solution to getting around.

At a recent Local Access Forum (LAF) meeting, one of the routes discussed for a potential new greenway was the Loddon Long Distance Path (LLDP). This map shows the initial route, through Hall Farm, along the banks of the river Loddon.



The second map shows the revised route along the cycle path next to the B3270.



Comparing the two routes above, not only is the first route much shorter, it is also “greener”.

The main problem with the first route is the low head height where the footpath passes under the M4. At the Northern end this is only a little over 1.3 Metres. However, at the Southern end it is a

more reasonable 2.2 Metres. Might it be possible to excavate the track to a height of 2.4 Metres throughout? (This is considered by Cycling England to be a good height for Subways used by cyclists).

The LLDP would be significantly more attractive as a cycle route if it was away from the busy B3270. A greenway that led into, across and out of the site would also be a great way for visitors to the site to access it without recourse to motorised transport. However, it is recognised that although Public transport might still be a way of getting to the site from further afield, and that provision would probably need to be made for visitors arriving in private cars, electric Charging points would need to be a key feature of any car parking and some motorised access might need to be enhanced beyond what is currently available.

### Summary

Hall Farm is a site that could enable the UoR to showcase its environmental, biodiversity and community knowledge and expertise at a world class level. At a time when food security and climate change adaptations are key, reducing this site to houses misses the opportunity for the UoR to lead the way as a climate change champion and to help build greater resilience into our National food security.

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This document was produced by Save Our Loddon Valley at Hall Farm (SOLVE Hall Farm) for discussion with the University of Reading. It is intended as a starting point for further investigation, analysis and research and it is hoped it will be expanded upon and developed as discussions proceed.