

Objection to Ascendant – December 10th 2020

I live in Kirkwhelpington, and I am a founder member of the protest group, Keep the Wannies Wild. I attended the meeting of Northumberland County Council's Strategic Planning Committee on 4th June 2019 and spoke against the application. I moved to Kirkwhelpington 25 years ago, in part because I found the Wannies and the surrounding area entrancing. I walk frequently in the Wannies, I take friends and visitors there to experience its wild, remote and unique character, and in my capacity as Walk Leader for the Haltwhistle Walking Festival, I lead other walkers around the footpaths and open access land there.

It is from this perspective that I wish to object ; I do so on many grounds, and will separate these for ease of reference.

Lack of Consultation with local people and local businesses

I live in Kirkwhelpington, which is some 5 miles from the site at Cold Law. Although the planning application has always been described as relating to Kirkwhelpington, I was not consulted either formally or informally about the appellant's plans, and nor was anyone else living here. The Parish Council was not initially notified or consulted, despite the fact that its toilets and post office are sometimes mentioned by the appellant as forming part of local amenities. I informed the Parish Council of the proposal and of the formation of the group, Keep the Wannies Wild, on 10th June 2019 and asked that they consider the matter at their next meeting. The Parish Council has now considered the matter and has recorded its objections, as have four neighbouring Parish Councils; it is deplorable that nobody thought to consult with them at an earlier stage.

The appeal was lodged with a number of letters in support. However, analysis shows that most of the correspondents do not live in the immediate vicinity, nor do they have businesses here. They do not, therefore, reveal any form of consultation. I would like to draw attention to the misleading nature of one of the letters, from Mr W Browne Swinburne (dated 19th December 2019), which gives the impression that it is sent on behalf of the Parish Council he chairs. Mr Browne Swinburne's letter is written "in my capacity as chairman of Capheaton Parish Council." The village of Capheaton is some 8 miles away from Cold Law, and so I was interested to see why this Parish Council was consulted when closer ones were not. However, the Parish Council itself was **not** informed or consulted prior to the letter being written. The clerk, Peter Ware, has confirmed this to me, and has spoken to Mr Browne Swinburne who has confirmed as follows:

"Re-reading the letter he acknowledges that it implies the Parish Council may have discussed the matter , but that was not the intention and he apologises for any confusion."

I have asked Mr Browne Swinburne to retract his letter; if he has not done so, please therefore take note of his apology for confusing or misleading the Planning Inspectorate. It does not signify any form of consultation.

Despite his claims that the project will aid tourism (see later), the appellant has not at any stage in this lengthy process enquired of local businesses how their trade is faring, whether tourists ever use their services, where any tourists come from or what they are interested in seeing. From the material he has filed, it seems he did not ask local business owners whether they would welcome the monument, or whether they thought their customers would.

This proposal is for a monument designed specifically to be seen from a wide area. I find it insensitive and arrogant of anyone who describes their project in this way, not to consult or even inform the people who will be seeing it most frequently, and the people whose business may be boosted or harmed, about their plans. As I can attest from my work for Keep the Wannies Wild, the most common response to this application is revulsion, horror and indignation. The growth in members of the group both initially, and continuing over the time this process has taken, is a very clear indication of the response of anybody with an interest in, or love for, this place. Had any meaningful consultation been carried out before the original plans were submitted or the appeal lodged, the appellant would have discovered this. I note that in a poll in February 2020, the local newspaper, The Hexham Courant, found 86% objected to the proposal while only 14% approved. This breakdown accords with my enquiries, and I am sure the appellant would have had a similar response had he bothered to sound out relevant opinion. The lack of any meaningful consultation of local people or their democratically elected institutions either at initial application or appeal is an insult to the whole of the local population.

Tourism

The appellant has stated that “Providing an additional attraction for existing visitors and attracting additional visitors will facilitate higher expenditure by the tourists in the local and regional economy”

However, he has never provided any detail about **how** the monument will act as an attraction, whether it **will actually have** any power of attraction, or whether existing visitors to the area would be attracted or deterred by it. The assumption is that the proposed monument would be a draw simply because it is a monument. As mentioned above, there is no evidence that the appellant did any research about who visits the area currently, and what they would wish to see here. Our group of protesters, Keep the Wannies Wild, **has** asked its 2000 members about this, finding that overwhelmingly, tourists come to this part of Northumberland to enjoy the countryside in its natural state. The appeal does not conceive of the fact that existing visitors may be deterred, but that is what walkers, photographers, artists, climbers and cyclists have told us. These are people who come to the area and use the sparse facilities, maybe for a whole day, days, or even weeks. By contrast, people coming to spot a monument are likely to move on quickly to another “attraction”.

The facilities here are very limited. There is a Post Office in Kirkwhelpington, which does not sell items other than stationery and cards, and one public toilet. It seems to me unlikely that a visitor to a monument would typically plan to combine their trip with a visit to a Post Office, making it unlikely there would be any financial benefits to this community - which would nevertheless be supplying, and maintaining, the closest public toilet. People who have come to the area to see a monument may well wish to stop for a drink or a meal, meaning the pub facilities in the area are likely to benefit most. However, all of them currently limit their opening hours to save costs – this was the case even before Covid restrictions obliged them to close. If they could count on a regular influx of a significant number of customers on any given day or days, they may be able to open more frequently or even take on more staff. However, the proposal is not for a venue that would be open at consistent times or cater for regular numbers - people would come and go at all times of day and all times of year, and they may or may not go to one of the pubs. None of the relevant businesses could confidently take on extra staff to cater for the possibility of tourists coming to them from Ascendant. Would it

really be worthwhile for a pub to open on, say, a Tuesday afternoon in February, on the off chance that one or more visitors will be viewing the monument on that day and then want a meal? A landlord would have to open and heat the pub, lay on a menu, purchase the food, and pay staff – someone to cook, someone to serve. Would any profit be made on one, or even ten people, coming in for a meal? Probably not, and if nobody chose to visit the monument, or to go to that particular pub on that day, that is a nett loss.

The County Council's Tourism Officer Paul Nichol produced a one and a half page report dated 13th June 2019; as far as I know, it has not been updated. It contains no description or analysis of the businesses in the area, and does not say **how** the monument might actually attract tourists to the area. Similarly, it fails to ask who currently does visit the area, or consider what effect a structure of this sort might have on their willingness to return. Mr Nichol makes claims not even expressed in the first person, indicating hesitation in reaching his unevidenced assertion, that the structure will "contribute directly to ambitions for sustained growth in our economy". He says "it is believed the structure will be a sensitive asset in relation to the landscape and the environment", not saying who believes that to be the case. Given the evidence from our Group, Keep the Wannies Wild, I think the Inspectorate can assume that very few people believe the structure might be a sensitive asset.

In summary:

- No local business could confidently expand on the strength of what is envisaged, as visitor numbers and times are very unpredictable.
- Existing tourists, and the tourism that the area currently has, will be diminished by this encroachment onto the magnificent existing landscape.

Environmental Harm

In preparing the original application and the appeal, the appellant commissioned an environmental impact assessment. Our group has analysed and commented on this, and has also commented on the likely effect of the construction process. I want to add to this my own personal incredulity that, now we are all so much more aware of the effect our industry and habits are having on the environment, anyone could be proposing such an environmentally damaging project that will have no practical benefit. The building process would involve sacrificing a huge slice of what is now moorland and replacing it with tonnes of concrete. Upland moors are being increasingly recognised as our bastion against climate change and flooding. They act as a sponge to the water that would otherwise behave as we have seen so frequently recently, surging into valleys and swamping communities. Remember Storms Ciara and Dennis. We must be serious in our efforts to reverse the effect of global warming, not go all out to accelerate it. This project represents the double whammy of desecrating moorland and involving the production, transport and application of concrete – which creates one tonne of greenhouse gases per tonne poured. On June 11th last year, Northumberland County Council declared a climate emergency. The Planning Inspectorate should assist the council in its aim of becoming carbon neutral, by not allowing this harmful structure or setting any sort of precedent for such a useless development.

Aesthetics

The Wannies is beautiful and requires no enhancement or interpretation. I have read promotional literature, and watched the promotional video, to try to see what the appellant is trying to achieve with "Ascendant". I cannot work out, though, whether his main motivation is to emphasise the beauty of the position, make some sort of complicated claim about the relative dimensions of surrounding features, celebrate the Queen, or the Commonwealth, or the industrial pioneers who lived or worked in this landscape, or provide some sort of sundial. There seems to me to be no clear purpose, and I cannot see from the photographs and mock-ups how this shape/structure will call to mind any of these things. Cold Law has no connection with the Queen and no significance for the Commonwealth. Claims about its dimensions or direction seem to me to be spurious – for example, pointing south to the capitals of the Commonwealth ignores the fact that Edinburgh lies to the north. I find the explanations of purpose and motivation utterly baffling, and cannot imagine how anyone less well informed about the landscape of the place (as visitors would typically be) would derive any sort of understanding from its erection. I think the monument will be ugly and elicit only bafflement and ridicule. I recognise that this is a subjective view.

I also think that claims that it will have an effect similar to other well know artworks are entirely spurious. It has been mainly compared with the Angel of the North, which was famously built on a reclaimed pit heap. Unlike that area of Gateshead, the Wannies need no enhancement or repair. The appellant has also likened it to the travelling "Poppies" installation. This is also misinformed, as the Poppies, which I went to see at Woodhorn Colliery Museum, were designed as a transient and moveable tribute to those killed in war. The symbol of poppies is a well known one, whereas a slice of hill is not, to my knowledge, often associated with the Queen or any of the other things the monument claims to reflect or celebrate. The Poppies were placed in an existing museum, with well established visitor facilities. Its only similarity to Ascendant is that it is perceived as "Art".

The Strategic Planning Committee Decision of 2nd July should be respected

By appealing against the decision of Northumberland County Council, the appellant necessarily claims that members of its Strategic Planning Committee were wrong. However, it seems to me (a former local authority solicitor) that their decision was perfectly correct, and should be upheld. The process by which decisions about planning are made is that an application is assigned to an officer who considers whether there is sufficient information to make a decision, carries out statutory consultation, and (in most cases) makes a recommendation. It is then for the elected members to make the final decision on the matter. They bring to bear their experience and knowledge of the area and the people they represent, and make decisions about Northumberland on behalf of the people who live here.

Although the planning officer had recommended approval of the application, when it was put to the 16 members of the Strategic Planning Committee on 4th June, they expressed their grave concern at the proposal, and thought they had insufficient information on which to base a decision. I was present at this first meeting, and spoke against the application. I was impressed by the rigour with which members questioned the officers, and was appalled to see that in many instances, the officers could not answer councillors' questions. For example, they could not identify Great Wanney Crag – the most notable local feature -in a series of slides, and they could not describe the extent of local amenities. Our local councillor, John Riddle, spoke eloquently against the proposal, giving many reasons why the monument would not be welcome in his ward. Very sensibly the councillors

decided to adjourn – to allow them to see the site for themselves, and to obtain more information from the council’s tourism department.

On re-convening, the committee had much more information available to them. They had the report of the tourism officer, referred to above; they had seen the site for themselves; they had a great deal more information from our group, Keep the Wannies Wild, which had formed in between the two meetings.

They turned the application down, for the very good reason that:

“The proposal results in development in the open countryside which fails to recognise the intrinsic character and nature of the countryside in this location”

The decision was not taken lightly – the councillors adjourned their decision, to allow them to obtain more information. The decision does not contravene the rules of natural justice, or the principles of public law. It was a decision that took into account only relevant considerations, and did not take into account irrelevant considerations. It was not a decision that was unduly influenced by any party. It was procedurally correct – there is no reason at all why elected representatives should “obey” the recommendations of officers, they are free to make their own decision, as long as it is lawful. This was certainly not a decision “so unreasonable that no reasonable authority would ever consider imposing it” – it is not, in legal terms, “Wednesbury unreasonable” (*Associated Provincial Picture Houses Ltd –v- Wednesbury Corporation*, [1948] 1 KB 223).

The lawful decision of the democratically elected representatives of the county should be accorded significant weight in the Inspectorate’s decision making as a result, and should be upheld. In his promotional video, Lord Devonport claims that he seeks to erect the monument in tribute to the Queen’s unifying of her Commonwealth under “shared values”, amongst which he enumerates democracy. How ironic then, that he now seeks to overturn the democratic decision of Northumberland County Council in order to do this. Indeed, one wonders if his motives are really genuine, given his attitude to our local Parish Councils and the proper decision of the County Council.