

FRIENDS OF THE FIELDS Iffley

December update

Greetings of the season. Lockdown has probably given you many opportunities to stroll round our (everybody's!) beautiful village, and you will have seen our publicity. As you know, changes are looming. Since much has happened, we'd like to set out the chain of events.

Once upon a time… village cricket was played on what is now called the Horse Field beside Meadow Lane, before it was given to grazing. Children used to feed the lambs, ride and muck out the horses. The adjacent Memorial Field is named after the Memorial Institute, a temporary building set up to commemorate WW1, used as a village hall, and pulled down in 1973. This is the field beside the village noticeboard where locals and visitors used to linger at the gate and gaze at the animals. Scouting continued in the field until the 1980's, when the villagers lost access.

April 2020. OCHL (Oxford City Housing Limited), an autonomous company owned by Oxford City Council, enters into private discussion with the landowner Donnington Hospital Trust.

May 2020. Workmen are spotted with survey instruments. One prospective buyer kindly passes on the marketing brochure from DHT's agent, proposing 49 houses across both fields.

June 2020. The 'Oxford Local Plan 2036' is formally adopted by OCC, and has statutory force. It promises planning permission for 29+ houses on the Meadow Lane site, with the expectation that this will 'conserve and enhance the unique characteristics of the Iffley Conservation Area'. It is not clear what this means. Although OCC undertook a formal consultation, hardly anyone in Iffley knew it was happening, and we'd be glad to know if anyone back in 2017 received any leaflet on the subject. The plan still places the fields in the wrong Oxford ward, and cites the wrong landowner, and there was no serious environmental survey. The plan cannot now legally be contested, but specific proposals can be shown to be unviable.

August 2020. Friends of the Fields Iffley is set up with the aim "to preserve the remaining fields of Iffley for the sake of future generations and the City of Oxford, and to secure the land for the benefit of community and nature."

September 2020. Friends of the Fields write to the trustees of Donnington Hospital Trust, proposing a better alternative. They assemble a petition aimed at DHT which collects in the course of one week 600 physical signatures and some 4000 online signatures. The online signatories cite reasons for their support, which repeatedly include the value of green spaces to mental health and the importance of Iffley's historic heritage.

Summer 2020. At some point OCHL's bid for the land is successful, apparently beating off numerous competitors. How much they paid remains a commercial secret.

October 2020. Friends of the Fields engage in zoom conversations with our local councillors and our MP Anneliese Dodds, who all promise to contact DHT, expressing dismay at DHT's behaviour. Meanwhile OCHL have already started tendering for a builder to develop the fields. The tender info makes no mention of affordability, and seeks ideas for the Memorial Field.

October 2020. Friends of the Fields go leafleting in Iffley, Rose Hill and Donnington, to share information and advertise a public 'meeting' which 83 people attend, inevitably on zoom.

November 2020. Friends of the Fields undertake a survey of walkers, runners, cyclists and vehicles using Meadow Lane, which forms part of Oxford Cycle Route 18 linking Littlemore and Rose Hill to the city. These are areas of planned population growth, and the City Council aims to increase commuting by bike by 50%. Traffic accessing a new estate from Meadow Lane would make this route more dangerous. It turns out that during daylight hours under Covid approx. 500 active travellers go past on weekdays and 900 on weekends.

12 November 2020. The *Oxford Times* features 'plucky' Iffley protestors, with a focus on the involvement of Peggy Seeger, a passionate activist within Friends of the Fields. An editorial comments that "concreting all over our remaining green patches risks ruining the charm of the place for ever. Not only will that be a disaster for nature and wildlife, but it impoverishes all our lives. It also makes the city less attractive as a tourist destination."

November 2020. The tender invitation comes to light, and Oxford City Council quickly issue a press release confirming that OCHL has purchased the land with "no plans" to develop the Memorial Field, and that the development will include 12 units of social housing + 3 units that will be affordable through shared ownership. We learn that the social housing will be managed by the Council, so presumably at some point right-to-buy may be exercised. More coverage of our activities in the Oxford Times. More conversations with our councillors, who set up a helpful meeting with the OCHL team. We ask about the possibility of the community buying the Memorial Field, but are told it is not for sale. We will continue to push for this.

22 January 2021. Closing date for a building company to tender for the development work. It's all going to happen very fast. OCHL are in a hurry. More speed, less fuss?

1 March 2021. A design-and-build company will be chosen and hired to put together a formal planning application. It is expected that the same company will then do the building work.

Friends of the Fields are well aware that social housing is needed and local government is underfunded, but we do not feel that as citizens of Oxford we have been given any meaningful chance to have input on the future of our city. We understand but deplore the model of building houses on precious green spaces to subsidize Council budgets. Once gone, the land is gone for ever. There are better options to meet housing needs, on sites no longer needed for retail or employment in a digital age. The local plan looks like the product of piecemeal aspirations, with not enough joined-up thought about the climate emergency, and the future of urban living. Good intentions do not necessarily result in good government.

We aim to prevent or in the worst case mitigate the damage to our environment by pointing up all the contradictions and short-term thinking in the Council's published intentions. Let us and your local councillors know what you think. We would appreciate practical and financial help. Please complete our online survey at **http://info.iffleywoods.org/survey** and let us know what you think, so we can present your views to the Council, working with other village organizations.