

Ref: Pre-application
Address: Land south of Abbey Road, St Bees
Proposal: Erection of 11 dwellings and new access road
Comment: Date: 15 May 2009

The site is a linear strip of open land immediately south of Abbey Road, south west of the Abbey Farm building group. It is in the St Bees Conservation Area and within the setting of the Grade I listed Priory Church of St Mary & St Bega.

The site is part of an open, undulating, scrubby grass paddock adjoining Abbey Road. The site falls away steeply south-eastwards into the rest of the paddock which sits on the lower north slope of the valley where St Bee's is settled. The site is bound on most of its north-west side by a tall, thick hedgerow and to the south-west by an old, low stone field wall. At the east end, the site is bound by a recent low boundary wall associated with adjoining residential development. The boundary at the south-east corner is a tall wall and a series of small trees around the adjoining graveyard. The rest of the site's south-east side is open to the paddock, which is itself bound to further south by a continuation of the old field wall. Outside the paddock on the other side of this wall is a public footpath from the B5345 to Beach Road and beyond.

The pre-application enquiry is for outline permission to erect 11 no. two to three-storey detached and terraced dwellings along a new access road feeding off, and running parallel to, Abbey Road.

Local Plan Policy ENV26 says that development within a conservation area or that impacts upon the setting of one, will only be permitted where it preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the area and, if appropriate, views in and out of it. It requires, inter alia, that development respects positioning and grouping of buildings, and their form and scale, respects existing hard and soft landscape features including open space, respects traditional street patterns and plot boundaries, and improves the quality of the townscape. It also says that outline applications will not be acceptable for sites within conservation areas unless they contain sufficient detail to understand the visual impact of the proposal. Local Plan Policy ENV33 says applications for development affecting the setting or important views of a listed building will only be approved when there is no significant adverse impact on the listed building.

There Council does not have a character appraisal for the St Bees Conservation Area. *PPG15* (DoE/DNH, 1994) says that conservation areas are significant for "the quality and interest of areas, rather than that of individual buildings" (para 4.2), and identifies characteristics including topography, historical development, the character and hierarchy of spaces, and trees and other green features (para 4.4) as part of their special interest. English Heritage's *Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals* (Feb 2006) sets out aspects which can contribute to an area's character and appearance, including landscape setting, historical development, plan form, spatial patterns, views and vistas, and the character of open spaces (pp14-19). In relation to this site:

Landscape setting and topography

St Bees is settled at the wide coastal foot of valley running north-east to south-west. It has quite steep sides, more so on the north side. Its setting is agricultural rural. The site is part of the setting of the settlement in the lower slopes and flood plain of the valley.

Plan form

St Bees has two focuses: (a) a nodal focus at the Benedictine priory (St Bees' origins) and associated development on the lower part of the valley's north side, and (b) a linear focus at the village itself, rising up the southern side of the valley. The site is on the periphery of the priory's nodal focus.

- . *Historical development*

St Bees grew as a result of the Benedictine priory founded around 1120. The linear village on the south side soon followed. The nodal focus mostly comprises the Priory Church, its buildings and land, the Abbey Farm group, and buildings at St Bees School, founded 1583. There are also various other 18th, 19th and 20th century buildings.

- . *Spatial patterns*

The Priory Church sits with smaller buildings in enclosed grounds. Abbey Farm has a house, cottages and other buildings around yards on sloping land. The school has various large buildings, some around courtyards, others in blocks along Wood Lane. Abbey Road is one of the main routes into the priory node. Its north-west side has been built up with mostly 20th century ribbon development (detached housing to the street, plus a recent cul-de-sac) which has to a notable degree blurred and distorted the nodal focus to the east. Abbey Road's south-east side is open land on the lower slopes and flood plain of the valley, providing the southern and western setting of the Priory Church group. The site is part of this open land on Abbey Road's south side, immediately west of the church group.

- . *Views and vistas*

Four view types are relevant, within the conservation area and also into it from outside the boundary:

(1) Views across the valley are characteristic of the area. The site is clearly visible in significant and publicly accessible views across the flood plain from the B5345, from Station Road and its extension across the flood plain towards Beach Road, and from the railway line. These views are dominated by the red tower of the Priory Church and its surrounding tree cover. The background is the upper valley slopes, partly green and partly built-up with grey/brown housing; the foreground is the green flood plain and lower valley slopes. Abbey Road's ribbon development is visible as a grey/brown strip dividing the foreground and background – the site sits just below this Abbey Road dividing line. The site is also clearly visible from the footpath across the flood plain which runs directly past the paddock.

(2) Linear views along the north side of the valley are also significant. The site is visible at an oblique angle in views north-east along Abbey Road. Approach from the west creates a series of attractive vistas of the church tower through hedge and tree cover, or above the site's grass, with a clear horizon.

(3) Panoramic views up the valley are also had from the elevated open land at the south-west end of the valley near the St Bees Golf Club. They describe the whole settlement on both sides of the valley. The site is clearly visible adjacent to the Priory Church group.

(4) Public views from within the linear village core of St Bees to the south east are more restricted, but the site is visible in long vistas from Egremont Road, from south of its junction with Nethertown Road.

- . *Character of open spaces*

The site is characteristic of the open spaces in the flood plain though is more undulating and scrubby than the larger, flatter fields on the valley floor. Its boundaries are similarly characteristic. Abbey Road has the character of a country lane, narrow with minor curves and undulations, enhanced by the hedgerow boundary to the south.

It is concluded that the site makes a positive contribution to the conservation area's character and appearance due to its grassy paddock character, its integral position in the rural setting of the priory node of St Bees, and its open green presence in views of the Priory Church group from several angles. It is also an integral part of the setting of the listed Priory Church collection being immediately adjacent to its south-west end. The proposal would change this character by:

- . altering the hierarchy of development at the priory's nodal focus,
- . building over significant open land,
- intruding into significant views.

These changes would, to varying degrees, unacceptably harm the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of the listed building.

Altering the hierarchy of development at the nodal focus of St Bees

A key characteristic of this part of St Bees is its nodal focus, ie. a development pattern which historically peaks at the strong centre point created by the Priory Church group. The school and the farm patterns are then closely focussed to its north and east. Although the Priory Church group continues to dominate the scene, ribbon development along Abbey Road has already blurred and distorted this focus (as has cul-de-sac development further up the slopes at Abbey Vale), stretching that focus westwards. Developing the

site with residential buildings would further alter the nodal development pattern, doubling the emphasis of ribbon development on Abbey Road and reducing the pivotal nature of the Priory Church. This would unacceptably harm this basic characteristic of this part of the conservation area. The principle of new development at the far north-east end of the site, adjacent to the Abbey Farm group, might be acceptable on this count as it would not unbalance the nodal development pattern. But the degree of new building here would need to be carefully considered in the light of the other factors.

Building over significant open land

The open green nature of the site is key to the valley setting of St Bees, and also to the listed Priory Church. Developing the site with two to three-storey buildings would encroach on the setting of the church to the south and west, which is characterised by the green open spaces around its tree-filled grounds. Buildings on the site would invade this open setting, harming the scene's hierarchy and reducing its green nature. This would unacceptably harm the fundamental green open appearance of this part of the area. Again, new development at the far north-east end of the site might be acceptable, but the green openness at this point is still an integral part of the church's setting, wrapping open space around three sides of the Priory Church group. The degree of new building here would need to be carefully considered in this light.

Intruding into significant views

Views across the valley from the south and east (1, above) are characterised by green openness, housing and the dominant Priory Church group. The upper levels of the valley form a backdrop to these views. This has been harmed in the past by the block of grey/brown housing at Abbey Vale and, following the recent addition of Monks Hill housing, it is now only the central section of Abbey Road – above the site – where the sloping backdrop to views across the valley remains strongly green. This heavy green backdrop is strongly connected to the green flood plain foreground by the greenness of the site – only the relatively narrow strip of ribbon development separates a green backdrop and a green foreground. Putting buildings on the site would increase the visual depth of the grey/brown strip, further breaking up the greenness of the views and challenging the dominance of the Priory Church group in those views. A similar effect would be felt in views from the elevated land near the golf course (3) and in distant views from Egremont Road (4). In oblique views from the south west (2), the presence of the housing would be very likely to entirely obscure significant public vistas of the church tower, particularly from near Abbots Court and Monks Hill. Again, new development at the far east end of the site may be acceptable, eg. if the church's tree cover obscured it in views from the south and east. But its layout, orientation and height would have to be carefully assessed to judge its impact on significant views and vistas including oblique views from the west. Further information on its visual impact would be needed if the proposals were submitted.

In summary, the pre-application outline proposals would harm the character and appearance of the St Bees Conservation Area by altering the development pattern, building over significant open land, and intruding into significant views. It would also harm the open green setting of the Grade I listed Priory Church of St Mary & St Bega. Local Plan Policies ENV26 and 33 would not be met. If submitted, further information would be needed to assess its impact in some views. A smaller quantum of development may be acceptable at the far north-east end of the site but its impact would need to be carefully assessed under similar headings.

Jules Brown

NB – The original copy I had of these photos was unsuitable for recreating here. These photos duplicate the originals as closely as possible



View type 1 – In many views from the south and east, the green backdrop is already encroached by grey/ brown housing, but the green valley backdrop survives intact directly above the site, only separated from the green flood plain foreground by a thin strip of ribbon development. Building on the site would increase the visual dominance of that grey/brown strip, further rupturing the green setting to the conservation area and the listed building. (Taken from Station Road at the point where it turns east across the flood plain)





View type 2 — A vista of the Priory Church tower across the site. This would most likely be obscured by the development as proposed. (Taken from Abbey Road at Monks Hill)



View type 2— By siting south of Abbey Road, the development would challenge the dominance of the Priory Church tower in views up the valley. (Taken from the eastern end of Station Road at Beach Road)



View type 4 — The green openness of the site marries well with the valley slopes in distant views from Egremont Road, allowing the open part of the north side of the valley to flow down into the flood plain. Putting buildings on the site would interrupt that relationship. (Taken from just north of the junction with Nethertown Road)

NB. — No shots of view type 3 were taken. — Site identification is approximate.



This last additional view inserted by me – Not in original report but is effectively a combination of the two images labelled View Type 1 on page 4.

NB – All text has been re-created from the original JPEG images of the report pages using Optical Character Recognition software. Other than any errors introduced as a result of that process, the text as as the original.

IWMcA 21/12/09