

19 September 2005

Dear Friend,

### **Update on Blackhorse Road Cemetery**

It is 6 months since I last updated you on the old Wesleyan Methodist cemetery on Blackhorse Road, Kingswood. Anyone who has driven passed the cemetery will have seen that it is no different than before and may well be wondering what has been happening. Behind the scenes some slow progress is being made, so here is a run-down on that progress.

1. You may recollect that following the press coverage we achieved, the Director of Community Services at South Gloucestershire Council (Steve Evans) asked a senior officer (a chap called Paul Trew) to head-up a group of officers to try and find a way forward. This group met twice in the first half of the year. At their first meeting (in early April), the group agreed a) to meet regularly, b) that a so-called section 215 enforcement notice would be appropriate to serve on the owner of the burial ground to get it cleared in the short term, c) that swift action was necessary to preserve the burnt-out chapel and d) that a long-term strategy for the whole site should be explored. The group agreed that before their next meeting they would gather as much information as possible about ownership and past history so that they could make rational decisions such as enforcement action.
2. At their second meeting in early May there does not appear to have been much progress. The planning enforcement section felt that it would not be appropriate to serve a notice on the cemetery owner because it was felt that it could expose the Council to never ending costs and health and safety liability from dangerous headstones and general access. It was also felt that once exposed there would be misuse of the area (drugs, rubbish etc). Despite this the officers at the meeting agreed that something had to be done. So, the main actions from that meeting were a) to carry on as if serving a section 215 notice was the Council's intention, b) serve a "requisition for information" notice (whatever that is) and a warning letter on the cemetery owner and c) that the Council would use an outside agency if necessary to track down the cemetery owner. That was the last update I had from Paul Trew.
3. In July I made enquiries with Paul as to any further progress only to be told that he had been pulled off of this officer group and moved onto other things ! The lead role in the group had been passed jointly to an officer from the Planning department's Enforcement section (Mark Davies) and an officer from the Planning Department's Listed Building Section (Greg Beale). These officers were asked to keep us (local councillors) informed.
4. Despite enquiries with these two officers from myself as to what progress was being made I was met with silence.

5. So, last Wednesday (14<sup>th</sup> Sept) I put down a question at Full Council to the Director of Planning, Transport and the Strategic Environment (i.e. the top man in planning). This is what I asked;

"In February this year, the Director of Community Services appointed an officer in his department to head-up an officer group to find a way forward with the overgrown and derelict former Wesleyan Methodist cemetery and chapel on Blackhorse Road, Kingswood. This officer fed back progress to local Councillors for which we are grateful as it has enabled us to keep concerned relatives of those buried in the cemetery informed. In June this officer was withdrawn to concentrate on other activities and the lead role passed to officers within PTSE with an instruction to keep local Councillors up to date. No such update has been forthcoming. Will the Director explain what progress has been made?"

and this is the answer I got;

The Officer Working Group formed in February this year with a view to investigating issues at the Blackhorse Road Chapels site. It met twice this spring and made good progress in investigating the constraints and legal issues associated with what is a very complicated situation. Amongst other actions the officers reviewed the steps taken to make sure the site (mainly the buildings and perimeter walls) were safe and assess the potential to secure site conservation and public access.

After the last meeting on 9th May it became apparent that the lead officer had been given other duties and would no longer be able to chair the group. The lead role passed to officers in PTSE on a temporary basis until longer-term management arrangements are agreed.

The Planning Officers (Enforcement and Listed Buildings) have continued to discuss the potential for redevelopment of the main Chapel building with an architect working for the site owner, but as yet no formal proposals have been brought forward. It is to be noted that the buildings and surrounding graveyards are in different ownership which makes a comprehensive approach difficult.

The next step is for the Officers Working Group to meet by 7<sup>th</sup> October 2005 to prepare a report to set out their findings to date and to highlight issues in resolving the future of the site. The group will also need to identify a new lead officer to chair the group and to ensure that key tasks are completed.

In summary we apologise for not keeping the local members informed over the summer and we will update members once the progress report is available.

So, as you can see there has been little real progress since May other than some discussions with an architect about the chapel. There has certainly been no progress with the cemetery. In fact the Council still has not been able to trace the physical whereabouts of the owner – although they do know his name and last known address (from ca. 1999) in Staple Hill.

Needless to say we were disappointed with the progress that has been made. It seems to have taken my tabling of the question to prompt the promise of another officer group meeting before 7<sup>th</sup> October and the promise of a report. In a supplementary question that I asked at Full Council about progress on the difficult issues like finding the whereabouts of the cemetery owner, the

response I got was that the Council might use a private investigator - although again that is nothing new as it was an outcome from the second officer group meeting in May !

6. I'm sure most of you will share my disappointment that progress on this issue has been slow and that it has needed us, yet again, to use a Full Council meeting to remind officers that we won't let it drop. That said, we do now have the promise of another officer meeting by 7<sup>th</sup> October and a report to follow. We will await that report with interest.
7. Aside from the cemetery itself, you will recollect that the owner of the boarded-up Sunday School (what was Crackers Snooker Club) had re-submitted a planning application to convert it into maisonettes. Planning permission for this development was granted on 3<sup>rd</sup> May<sup>1</sup>.

Once again I would like to thank you all for responding to the press coverage back in January. Since then further people have continued to contact me about the site. Currently I have had 37 responses (being 43 individuals as some were joint responses). This just goes to show that even after many years, this is an issue that matters to people and is why I will keep plugging away at the Council.

With best wishes,

Andy Perkins (Councillor for Woodstock)

Telephone: 01454 864092

Email: [andy.perkins@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:andy.perkins@southglos.gov.uk)

PS. I am more than happy for you for copy or forward this letter to anyone you wish.

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<sup>1</sup> For those with access to the Internet, a copy of the decision notice can be found at <http://www2.southglos.gov.uk:8080/servlet/UKPdisplaydocument?council=0&docid=484915>.