



Grove Farm Solar, Bentley

Proposed Development of a Photovoltaic Solar Array on Land at Grove Farm, Bentley

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Rebuttal Proof of Evidence Landscape and Visual Matters

On Behalf of the Applicant



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Appended:

Appendix JM3 – Commentary on Ms Farmer’s Table 1

Appendix JM4 – Hansard extracts

Appendix JM5 – Hedgerow growth information

Appendix JM6 – Conservation Area ‘Important Views’



1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.1 This Landscape and Visual Rebuttal Proof has been prepared on behalf of the Appellant in response to the landscape and visual matters raised in the landscape evidence submitted on behalf of Babergh District Council ("the Council") and the Rule 6 party. It has been prepared to respond to those matters as they relate to this Appeal.
- 1.1.2 This Landscape and Visual Rebuttal Proof has been prepared by Jon Mason, a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute and Director at AXIS P.E.D. Ltd, and the author of the Landscape and Visual Proof of Evidence. The statement of truth as set out in my Proof of Evidence also stands for this rebuttal.
- 1.1.3 This rebuttal has been prepared in order to assist the Inspector in the decision-making process, by addressing specific points of disagreement and clarifying matters arising from the landscape and visual evidence submitted by others.



2.0 THE APA STATUS AND “VALUED LANDSCAPE” STATUS

2.1.1 In paragraph 31 of her proof **[CD: C18B]** Alison Farmer asserts that the 2020 Valued Landscape Assessment **[CD: G9]** was commissioned to provide an evidence base *for the continued recognition* of the National Landscape Additional Project Area (APA). I do not accept that characterisation.

2.1.2 Ms Farmers own narrative confirms that the APA was in fact identified as an indicative *search area* within which landscapes might prove comparable to those in the adjoining National Landscape, and subsequent work has differentiated landscape value spatially within that search area. In those circumstances, continuing to rely on the APA as a single planning construct – a quasi-designation - is neither conceptually nor evidentially justified. If any weight is to be applied to the outcomes of the work undertaken it should be rooted in the resulting evidence base, rather than to an umbrella APA label.

2.1.3 The 2020 evaluation work does not “designate” land north of Bentley as a valued landscape. It states that there is a “weight of evidence” which, in the report’s view, may support recognition as valued landscape. However, that formulation necessarily implies a further judgement as to whether the weight of evidence is sufficient to justify categorising the area as valued. It is therefore an evaluative planning judgement rather than the formal identification of a defined receptor with fixed boundaries or status, and any consideration should be applied proportionately to the specific attributes and areas identified.

2.1.4 References to “land north of Bentley” are imprecise. If taken broadly, it could be inferred to include the appeal site; however, the report narrative is describing a particular composition of qualities—especially around Bentley Hall—where there is a localised assemblage of elements. Properly tied back to those specific qualities and their mapped/geographic expression, the “weight of evidence” conclusion may not extend to the appeal site at all.

2.1.5 In any event, many of the components contributing to higher value are already subject to established protection regimes (e.g. ancient woodland/veteran trees, important hedgerows, biodiversity interests, and heritage regimes). For the



avoidance of doubt, the APA carries no formal planning status and should not be treated as a policy designation or a proxy for one.

2.1.6 I have prepared a commentary on Table 1 from Ms Farmers Proof and this is attached as Appendix JM3 to this rebuttal – much of the commentary is relevant to the above analysis



3.0 THE 1945 AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH

3.1.1 In her proof **[CD: C18B]**, Ms Farmer suggests (by reference to a single 1945 RAF aerial photograph (contained within the proof of Mr Martin **[CD: C18C]**) that former internal field divisions were “not substantial”, with few trees or substantial hedges, and that this contrasts with the hedgerows and trees proposed as part of the development.

3.1.2 The inference drawn from the 1945 image is not robust: it does not adequately account for the well-documented mid-20th-century drivers of hedgerow weakening and removal, and it sits uneasily with other evidence relied upon regarding boundary loss and the typicality/importance of established hedgerows.

3.1.3 The appearance of weakly expressed boundaries in 1945 is consistent with time-specific pressures on hedgerow condition and management during and immediately after WWII, rather than demonstrating that hedgerows were historically insignificant. Wartime and immediate post-war priorities emphasised output and operational efficiency, making it plausible that boundaries persisted in layout while being cut low, rendered gappy, or poorly managed—therefore reading as “insubstantial” from aerial photography. An extract from Hansard from 6th February 1945 is appended [in Appendix JM4] reading of which confirms that pressure was being applied to farmers in order that they should maximise their efficiency. Specific reference to hedges is made in the 5:48pm entry for. Mr Craven-Ellis.

3.1.4 The later sequence of rapid mechanisation and (from 1957) explicit grant support for field enlargement/rationalisation provides a coherent explanation for the progressive loss of internal subdivisions. Further extracts from Hansard on 23rd March 1950 and then 30th January 1957 are provided in Appendix JM4. The first describes the rapid proliferation of tractors on farms during the 1940s. The second describes farm improvement schemes being applied. The farm improvements listed include (x) *removal of hedges and banks, filling in of ditches, removal of boulders, tree roots and other like obstructions to cultivation*

3.1.5 Accordingly, a sequence in which boundaries appear diminished but still legible around 1945 and are largely absent by the end of the 1950s is entirely consistent



with known drivers, and the present open character can reasonably be interpreted as a product of mid-20th-century interventions.

- 3.1.6 In her para 26, Ms Farmer quotes LUC (1993) to the effect that agricultural improvement led to the loss of “*many field boundaries, copses, hedgerow trees and even hedges along roads*”, resulting in “*open, unstructured landscapes...*”. This supports the proposition that openness is the consequence of boundary/hedgerow loss. No evidence that I have seen suggests that hedges in this area were not significant enclosing elements.
- 3.1.7 In para 88, Ms Farmer acknowledges that the relationship between manor houses and surrounding fields remains appreciable “*despite the loss of internal enclosure boundaries*.” It is my view that it must be the case that prior to the degradation and subsequent removal of those internal enclosure boundaries, the character and appearance of this landscape was distinctly different. The fact that modern openness reveals visual relationships between a number of landscape components does not, of itself, mean that preservation of this openness is desirable. It certainly isn’t historically faithful.
- 3.1.8 In paras 142–143, Ms Farmer treats hedgerows as a character-defining feature, criticising access points and tracks that would be “*uncharacteristically wide... utilitarian... and undefined by hedgerows*.” This criticism only has weight if hedgerows are generally expected to define and structure the local landscape and its interfaces.
- 3.1.9 Ms Farmers para 158 strengthens that position by referring explicitly to “*the established hedgerows typical of the area*”, stating that standard mixes would be unlikely to emulate them for a considerable time. This sits uncomfortably with any general implication (as suggested by para 95) that internal hedgerows would not historically have been substantial or enclosing.
- 3.1.10 In conclusion, no inference should be drawn from the 1945 photograph that hedgerows had not been substantial enclosing elements over the longer term. The 1945 image is certainly not a sound basis on which to discount reinstatement of hedgerows aligned with historic boundary lines as a means of restoring a more faithful historic landscape character.



4.0 MITIGATION

4.1.1 In paras 154-158 of Ms Famers proof **[CD: C18B]** it is contended that reinstatement of hedges to screen and introduce a smaller-scale field pattern is “inappropriate”, by reference to a statement in GLVIA **[CD: G1]** that mitigation should fit existing character “where this is a desirable landscape objective”. Ms Farmer is treating retention of present-day openness as self-evidently desirable because it currently provides visual linkages between lanes, heritage assets and woodland. That approach elevates a present-day visual condition into a landscape objective without properly grappling with whether that openness is itself the product of comparatively recent boundary degradation and removal.

4.1.2 It certainly does not follow in my professional opinion that because modern openness reveals intervisibility, its preservation is therefore a desirable objective. This is particularly the case where that openness is acknowledged elsewhere to be a consequence of agricultural improvement, boundary loss and hedgerow removal which has lowered landscape quality/scenic value. In that context, the interpretation advanced by Ms Farmer risks being outcome-led: defending the present openness rather than testing its origins and landscape consequences.

4.1.3 I am surprised by the extent to which Ms Farmer departs from what I would consider to be the orthodox understanding of post-war boundary loss and hedgerow removal in lowland arable landscapes.

4.1.4 Her position seeks to minimise the historic contribution of hedgerows to enclosure and structure in this location, notwithstanding the well-documented mid-20th-century processes of degradation and removal and her own reliance elsewhere on hedgerows as a typical, character-defining element.

4.1.5 In the Bentley Neighbourhood Plan Landscape Appraisal (2019) **[CD: G7]**, Ms Farmer treated the hedged field framework as an important component of local character: she identified areas of the parish with “*time depth*” and noted that “ancient woodlands and hedgerows are valued habitats” (p31 4.7.2). In the same document (p40 6.3.3 – management guidelines) she advocated hedgerow reinstatement/planting, including an explicit guideline to “*Plant/reinstate hedgerows*



and trees using native species..." (and associated landscape strengthening measures)

- 4.1.6 This position in respect of the proposed mitigation also sits uneasily with the treatment of hedgerows as a normal, character-defining feature elsewhere (including criticism that access points/tracks are “*uncharacteristically wide*” and “*undefined by hedgerows*”, and reference to “*established hedgerows typical of the area*”).
- 4.1.7 Taken together, these points underscore why it is not reasonable to discount hedgerow reinstatement as a sound mitigation response that will improve the current (degraded) baseline.
- 4.1.8 Michelle Bolger in Section 7 of her proof **[CD: C17B]** – includes themes similar to those explored above with regards to hedgerow loss / mitigation
- 4.1.9 Ms Bolger acknowledges that the Site’s “Western Part” has experienced “*a loss of (historic) field boundaries*” and that this has “*opened up*” views such that Church Farm and Bentley Church “*can be appreciated across the field*”. However, she then treats this modern openness as essentially neutral for historic integrity (“*no detractors... currently harm its historic integrity*”), rather than recognising it as precisely the kind of change that diminishes historic landscape structure, enclosure and intactness when viewed in its proper time-depth context.
- 4.1.10 Ms Bolger quotes from Policy LP18 Part 3 which expressly points to the requirement to deliver enhancement “*where the special qualities have been impacted by changes in farming practices*”.
- 4.1.11 On her own evidence, the boundary loss she identifies is a change in farming practice that has altered the grain and enclosure of the historic field framework; LP18 therefore provides a clear policy basis for restoration/enhancement through reinstating appropriately aligned boundary vegetation (rather than treating the present openness, created by boundary removal, as a landscape objective in its own right).



5.0 HEDGEROW GROWTH RATES

5.1.1 The Rule 6 Party in para 158 of Ms Farmers proof [**CD: C18 B1**] states that mitigation planting “*would take at least 10 years...to be sufficiently established to achieve screening*” and that a new hedge “*is unlikely to emulate the established hedgerows typical of the area...not for a considerable length of time.*” Ms Bolger makes a similar claim in her proof [**CD: C17 B1**] in para 7.3.4.

5.1.2 It is accepted that a newly planted hedge cannot quickly replicate the maturity, historic character and ecological complexity of a long-established hedgerow developed over many decades or centuries. However, the pertinent question is whether the proposed planting and management will deliver an effective and increasingly robust hedgerow structure within a reasonable mitigation timescale, not whether it instantly recreates centuries of maturity.

5.1.3 Government hedgerow guidance on GOV.UK for the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) (a Defra scheme for England that funds and sets requirements for environmental land management actions, including hedgerow actions) states that “Hedgerows will usually be fully established around 5 years after they’re planted”, and explains that “Light, regular, incremental trimming...in its early years will encourage dense, bushy growth.”

5.1.4 For common native hedgerow components, published indicative growth rates are in the order of 40–60cm per year (e.g. Woodland Trust figures for hawthorn and blackthorn – See Appendix JM5), subject to conditions and the trimming regime adopted (with formative trimming used to promote basal density). On good soils in south east England, and with appropriate aftercare and formative management directed at density, it is therefore reasonable and cautious to anticipate that the hedge will be established by around year 5 (typically achieving circa 2–2.5m by that stage), with circa 3m typically achievable around year 7, while recognising that the hedge will continue to become denser and more structurally complex beyond year 5 as the shrub layer develops under ongoing management.

5.1.5 Accordingly, the contention by both the Rule 6 and the LPA is not supported by the evidence presented in published guidance. Hedgerows can be reasonably expected to be well established around 5 years after planting.



6.0 CONSERVATION AREA 'IMPORTANT VIEWS'

6.1.1 In her proof [CD: C17B] in paras 8.4.3, 8.5.3 and 8.6.3 Michelle Bolger indicates that seven important views within the Bentley Conservation Area will be adversely affected by the development. Views 1, 2 and 3 are all located on Church Road. Views 5, 6 and 7 are located on Potash Lane and view 8 is located on Pond Hall Lane.

6.1.2 In the case of Church Road views, she says that:

The screening of the panels and other infrastructure does reduce some of the harm to visual amenity although it does not reduce the harm to the landscape character.

6.1.3 In the case of Potash Lane, she says:

As with users of Church Road when the planting eventually establishes it will remove some views of the development, although not the access road. However, it will also result in the loss of the existing characteristic views identified in the CAAMP as contributing to the significance of the Bentley CA. Views across to the wooded horizon with Church Farm and the top of the Church tower animating the view will be lost.

6.1.4 For Pond Hall Lane:

When the planting eventually establishes some views of the development will be removed but the existing views will not be restored.

6.1.5 Consistent with earlier discussion of hedgerow loss and mitigation by replanting, there is no acknowledgment that the existing views have resulted from harmful removal of the historic fabric of the site. The existing views that are being 'lost' are views of a modern farming landscape.

6.1.6 In Appendix JM6 I include single frame photographs taken from all thirty-four of the 'Important Views' that were listed in the Conservation Area Appraisal. The same views are all referenced in the Conservation Area Management Plan [CD: F1].



- 6.1.7 The Management Plan includes a further three Important Views – two of which are taken from the A12 trunk road with the other from White House Farm to the SW of the Site.
- 6.1.8 CD:F1 provides very little discussion as to why any of the 36 identified views is considered important, and it seems to me that the majority record very ordinary views rather than important ones.

