

Premises Licence 19/00380/LAPRE

Community Meeting at Hush Heath Winery

20 January 2020, 6pm

Present from the winery:

Mr & Mrs Balfour-Lynn

Winery Manager (Sarah Easton)

Head Winemaker

Tasting Room Manager

Approx 15 residents

1. Mr B-L welcomed residents to the meeting and introduced his team.
2. There was no set agenda for the meeting, rather an opportunity to share information and respond to residents' concerns.
3. Mr B-L confirmed that foremost HHW exists for wine production and it has won many awards for wine, including 2 recent awards from the Times and Guardian for best wines.
4. Production rates of wine are expected to remain constant for the coming year and HHW is not looking to expand production.
5. HHW wants to share its vision and passion for wine making and that is what the tasting room was built for. The last thing Mr B-L wants is too many people coming but he recognises that he needs to share the brand and be generous to support his brand. Visitors come from overseas, London as well as local people to experience the brand and share in the estate. There are no plans to expand on current activity.
6. 15 acres of wildflower meadows have been planted. Nature is important to HHW. Fences have been removed to allow wildlife to move freely. A 100 year woodland programme is underway to leave a woodland legacy.
7. Mr B-L acknowledged a tension with business and rural living. He highlighted that vineyards offer an opportunity to employ local people, especially young people and HHW has 2 apprentices. He highlighted that rural areas need more affordable homes and noted that he did not support the Marden campaign against 2000 new homes.

Residents asked questions:

Q: What can the winery do to address the increase in traffic, especially coaches on the lanes? Resident noted that the lanes are too narrow for coaches and more traffic has been seen on the lanes in the last few years.

Mr B-L said a mini-van was preferred to collect people from the train station and that not many coaches come to the winery. HGV deliveries are timed not to occur at rush hour / school times. Local residents often blame HHW for the traffic but the situation is that there is just more traffic now and not all going to HHW. Another resident supported this and said sat navs are sending HGVs down the lanes to reach Goudhurst and they are not all coming to the winery. Mr B-L said that the winery monitors traffic and reviews this to ensure visitors arrive / leave safely.

Q (NDH): Concerned about traffic levels on open days when there is a high volume of cars in a concentrated period and HHW uses shuttle coaches at hourly intervals to take visitors to/from the train station along Five Oak Lane. Traffic data produced by the winery doesn't show results for these events or other coach travel.

Mr B-L said buses only take visitors to/from Marden station, not Staplehurst. HHW only has 1 open weekend across 2 days in a year. In 2020 this will take place 23/24 May. The Winery Manager agreed to look again at the size of the bus used and conceded that the shuttle vehicle used last year was the size of a coach and next time they will specify a smaller vehicle and they will not use the same company in future as they felt the drivers were not good enough. Mr B-L stated that wine tourism is growing and that there are coach tours that want to include HHW on their itinerary, but they do not want the car park clogged up with multiple coaches.

Angus Codd: Changes have been made to the external lighting scheme as part of a recent planning process. Thank you to the winery for making changes that have had positive impact on local residents living nearby. Have these changes negatively impacted the business in any way?

Mr B-L stated that no, the changes have not had a negative impact. The winery was keen to make the changes and they proposed the changes to the planning team. Mr B-L stated that complaints about the lighting scheme were driven by a small group of people only, but that the winery would have been happy to talk about the lighting directly rather than have to deal with formal objections.

Angus Codd: Has the winery any plans to construct more buildings / develop the site further?

Mr B-L confirmed that there were no plans to build more on the site or to expand beyond the present production size.

NDH: Are there any plans to vary the licence or increase the number of events under the licence regime / TENS?

Mr B-L stated that there were to be no more events beyond those allowed under the existing licence and TENS systems. The Winery Manager added that they did not have enough staff to increase the number of evening events.

Resident: Will HHW hold outside music events?

Mr B-L stated there was no intention to be a live music venue or to hold music events outside. This was a misconception and stemmed from the licence application which has standardised forms that had to be ticked and included music, but it was not the intention of the winery.

Resident: Will the winery host weddings?

Mr B-L stated this was another misconception. The winery never intended to be a wedding venue and does not have a wedding licence. Wedding venues were shown on the old website but there was no desire to hold weddings. This was just added by the website design company. Again, Mr B-L claimed that a small group of residents was stirring up concerns about being a wedding venue when it simply wasn't the case and had been explained as such.

NDH: Explained that concerns come from individual residents who viewed the website and publicly available material. Experience has shown that residents have to consider all possible scenarios and raise concerns as part of the planning and licence process to ensure that boundaries are clear and to protect the interests of local people, particularly should there ever be a change of ownership and a new owner decide to do things differently. Unless boundaries are specified within the planning permission and conditions there would be no protection in future. It is not an attempt to stir up problems or make things difficult. Examples given of operating hours in 2017 planning application – application from HHW indicated that opening hours would remain the same, residents took this at face value and did not object, and the planning conditions concerning opening hours that had previously existed fell away without any new conditions meaning there were not time restrictions and now the winery operates evening events and on Sundays/bank holidays.

Mr B-L said that residents had confused planning and licensing. Planning did not set operating times and the licence granted them extended opening times, which are not used to their full extent. We all need to accept that times change and things progress, for example there will be a housing development at Blantyre House which will create more traffic by his house but Mr B-L won't object.

NDH: A recent planning application was submitted for external lighting. This covered low level bollard lighting. Several bright floodlights are operating on the tasting room and warehouses. These were not shown on the planning application. Does the winery have planning permission for these and why weren't they included in the recent application?

RB-L: Those are security lights on motion sensors and as such they do not require planning permission. Marion Geary from the Planning Dept has visited at night and seen them and approved them.

Alison Clark: Thank you to the winery for making the changes to the lighting. Residents appreciate the compromise. Congratulations to the winery on all its good work and winning awards. It is an important business. Residents are keen to be positive and want the winery to be successful but also to protect the wildlife and the area for local people. We choose to live in this area to enjoy peaceful surroundings and the environment and want to work with the winery to look after it. The bright white floodlights undermine the changes made to improve the bollard lights.

Mr B-L stated that the Council had approved the high-level lights and as these are security lights and only on motion sensors, they do not need planning permission.

Resident: Can bottles be collected later in the day as the bottle collection is noisy and wakes him up?

Mr B-L will look at the times and see if the collections can be later.

Resident: How many bottles of wine are produced each year and can this be limited to cap visitor numbers and HGV collections?

Mr B-L stated approx. 300,000 bottles are produced / year. It would make no difference to HGVs as pallets are loaded onto supermarket lorries which are taking pallets from lots of different places so it would not mean more HGVs if more pallets were produced. They would just load more pallets onto the same HGV. Production does not affect visitor numbers as bottles sold direct to the public is a very small fraction of their sales.

Resident: Are grapes imported from elsewhere?

Mr B-L said this depends on the harvest and is unrelated to visitor numbers or the wine sold. Only 5000 bottles are sold from site / yr.

Resident: Need to balance planning, business, and expansion. Could there be a period of settle to establish the impact of the winery and build relationships with community?

Mr B-L confirmed that 2019 was the first full year of operation and was a learning journey. The business is now more mature. There are no plans to build more. This is their home.

Resident: This is also our home and we want to protect it.

Mr B-L said he is active on community matters and has attended Staplehurst Parish Council Transport Committee meetings and liaised with Helen Grant MP to lobby for improvements to Five Oak Lane. Thanks to his work and the substantial standing of the winery business he has secured improvements to address potholes and verges.

NDH: Would the winery staff join with any other interested local residents to see if the Staplehurst Village Clean Up can be extended down to Five Oak Lane to clean up the litter left along the verges? It takes place on 28 March 2020.

Sarah Easton (Winery Manager) confirmed she would be pleased to work together on this and offered to meet NDH to discuss.

Residents thanked HHW and Mr B-L for hosting the meeting.

Email addresses were collected by HHW to avoid having to send out paper letters giving updates.

Natasha Davidson-Houston

20 January 2020