

APPLICATION: MA/11/0506 Date: 31 March 2011 Received: 1 April 2011

APPLICANT: Mr A Archer

LOCATION: 1 AND 2 COTTAGE WOOD, CASTLE HILL, THURNHAM, MAIDSTONE, KENT, ME14 3JE

PARISH: Thurnham

PROPOSAL: Alterations to facilitate conversion of two dwellings to a single dwelling, being erection of a porch to the north elevation, erection of a conservatory and balcony to the south elevation, replacement of existing roofs with hipped roof of increased ridge height and featuring solar panels, re-cladding of exterior with brick slips and weatherboarding and alterations to fenestration as shown on drawing numbers 11/0391 received on 31/03/11 & 11/0390A received on 06/09/11.

AGENDA DATE: 22nd September 2011

CASE OFFICER: Angela Welsford

The recommendation for this application is being reported to Committee for decision because:

- it is contrary to views expressed by Thurnham Parish Council;
- Councillor Horne requested determination by Planning Committee if the recommendation is one of approval.

## **1. POLICIES**

- Maidstone Borough-Wide Local Plan 2000: H33, ENV28, ENV31, ENV33, ENV34
- The South East Plan RSS 2009: CC1, CC2, CC4, CC6, C3, C4, NRM11, NRM15
- Government Policy: PPS1, PPS7, PPS22
- Other: Maidstone Local Development Framework, Residential Extensions Supplementary Planning Document 2009.

## **2. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

- 2.1 MA/07/1141 - Demolition of existing two houses and replacement with two four-bedroom detached dwellings – REFUSED, APPEAL DISMISSED
- 2.2 MA/00/1450 - Erection of a two storey side extension to No 1 Cottage Wood, Castle Hill, Thurnham – APPROVED

- 2.3 MA/92/1623 - Erection of a two storey side extension to No 2 Cottage Wood, Castle Hill, Thurnham – APPROVED

### **3. CONSULTATIONS**

- 3.1 THURNHAM PARISH COUNCIL: “although we have no objections to the single dwelling in principal, we do have concerns with regards to its architectural features. We feel that these are inappropriate for the location and out of character with the surrounding area. We believe that the increase in the roof height and the solar panels would have an adverse impact on the AONB. We would wish to see this application determined by the planning committee where our views can be heard.”
- 3.2 COUNCILLOR JOHN HORNE: This site lies within the North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area and the strategic gap between Maidstone and Medway. The retained policies of the Maidstone Borough Wide Local Plan protect this area from inappropriate development.

Again, it must be pointed out that the site lies within the special woodland of the White Horse County Park. This forms the millennium project for the county of Kent by the Kent County Council. It should be noted that contribution to the Park has been made by other authorities. Within the precincts of this country park lie the remains of Thurnham Castle, a listed ancient monument.

English Heritage has additionally underlined the importance of the protection of this landscape and the inherent features.

The special landscape setting and impact of this area was recognised by the Inspector at the recent public inquiry into the KIG road/rail terminal upon land adjacent to Junction 8 of the M.20. He upheld the effect upon the wider landscape of the castle setting.

Again, this area is within the continuum of the other historical ruins adjacent to the A249 in Detling, Thurnham and Stockbury.

It is against that background that the immediate application must be judged.

Whilst there is no objection to the merging of two dwellings, the various additions to the footprint do give concern. There is an increased ridge height; there is the addition of a non rural balcony.

The material question is do these alterations enhance the setting of the Country Park in an environmentally very sensitive part of the county. Again, do the proposed alterations coalesce and merge into a dynamic synergy with the

sculptural and artistic theme of the White Horse Country Park which forms the radius to these two dwellings. I retain concerns in this matter.

Accordingly, if you are minded to approve the plans as submitted then I would wish the application to be called in to the Planning Committee.

#### **4. REPRESENTATIONS**

4.1 NEIGHBOURS: No response received to date.

4.2 CPRE MAIDSTONE: Does not raise objection. The following summarised points are raised:-

- The site is in a very sensitive part of the Borough, strongly protected from inappropriate development;
- The proposal reduces the number of dwellings on site and the additions to the footprint would not overwhelm the existing structure;
- The balcony would be a suburban feature and should be re-examined;
- Although the raised ridge height may appear more imposing, the development will be set against tall trees to the north;
- The improvements to exterior walls, windows and doors should be secured by condition;
- Development should achieve Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

#### **5. CONSIDERATIONS**

##### **5.1 Site and Surroundings**

5.1.1 The application site contains a pair of two storey, semi-detached dwellings and is located in an isolated position on the top of the North Downs. The nearest dwellings to the north and west are at least 200m distant and those to the south are estimated to be approximately half a mile away.

5.1.2 The site falls within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the North Downs Special Landscape Area, and is designated as part of the Strategic Gap on the Maidstone Borough Wide Local Plan 2000 proposals map. The scarp of the Downs, to the south, is largely open, with fine views, and the White Horse Wood Country Park predominantly surrounds the site. A long, straight, unmade access track leads westwards from Castle Hill serving the pair of cottages, which are set in a generous curtilage.

5.1.3 The existing cottages have rendered walls under a low pitched, slate roof with some applied timber detailing and are in a fairly poor state of repair. They are served by a detached garage to their frontage, plus there are a couple of other single storey outbuildings within the site.

## 5.2 The Proposal

5.2.1 It is proposed to convert the two cottages to a single dwelling, although it should be noted that that, in itself, does not constitute development as the number of residential units on the site would be reduced and the use would not change. Consequently planning permission is not required for this part of the proposal.

5.2.2 However, planning permission is required for the various alterations that would facilitate the conversion. These are as follows:-

*-Erection of a porch to the north elevation.* This would have a footprint of approximately 4m wide by 2.3m deep, and feature a pitched roof with weatherboarding to the gable;

*-Erection of a conservatory and balcony to the south elevation.* The conservatory would have a footprint of approximately 4m deep by 10m wide, and would have fully-glazed elevations on a dwarf brick wall. The balcony would run right across the rear elevation (above the conservatory) and have a depth of approximately 1.6m. It would be constructed from sustainable hardwood on oak posts.

*-Replacement of existing roofs with hipped roof of increased ridge height and featuring solar panels.* The existing roofs have a ridge height of 6.327m. They are in a poor state of repair and have flat sections on top. The proposal would simplify the roof form, resulting in a fully-hipped roof with a ridge height of 7.152m. The overall increase in height would therefore be 0.825m. Two pairs of Baxi Solarflo in-roof solar collector panels would be installed on the southern elevation.

*-Re-cladding of exterior with brick slips and weatherboarding.* The ground floor would be clad with brick slips and the first floor with dark-stained sustainable timber weatherboarding. As well as covering up previous and proposed alterations, this will allow improvements to be made to the insulation value of the walls.

*-Alterations to fenestration.* The window positions and design would be revised to give greater uniformity, and all windows and doors would be replaced in sustainable hardwood.

## **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

### **5.3 Visual Impact**

- 5.3.1 I consider the key issues to relate to the visual impact of the proposals on the character of the building and the resultant impact on the sensitive rural area within which it is set. As mentioned in paragraph 5.2.1, the use of the building as one single dwelling does not require planning permission. The proposals must therefore simply be assessed as extensions/alterations to a domestic rural property.
- 5.3.2 Local Plan Policy H33 deals with extensions to dwellings in the countryside. Its criteria broadly seek to ensure that proposals are well-designed, preserve the original form of the building, are of appropriate scale and generally do not harm the character or appearance of the countryside. Policy ENV33 requires priority to be given to the conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape over other planning considerations in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and Policy ENV34 reinforces this with respect to its scenic quality and distinctive character in Special Landscape Areas. Policy ENV31 precludes proposals which would significantly extend development within the Strategic Gap.
- 5.3.3 The Maidstone Local Development Framework, Residential Extensions Supplementary Planning Document (adopted May 2009) is also relevant. This states that extensions to rural dwellings should be "modest" and sets out three indicators against which proposals should be assessed in this respect – the impact on the character of the countryside; the impact on the form and appearance of the original building; and the scale of the extension.
- 5.3.4 It is my view that the existing building is of unattractive appearance and no architectural merit. It does nothing to enhance the character of the sensitive and important area of countryside within which it is set. The proposed alterations to the walls, windows and roof will give it a more traditional appearance which, although significantly altered, in my opinion, will be an improvement. I do not consider that any harm will arise, in fact, quite the reverse. The conservatory and balcony, though perhaps less traditional elements, are nevertheless lightweight structures that would largely be viewed against the backdrop of the more solid two-storey building, and as such would not appear prominent or harmful. Moreover, although the site is predominantly surrounded by the publicly-accessible White Horse Wood Country Park, the building is set some 50m or more from the northern boundary of this with the applicant's land and views are further interrupted by some mature trees and a large dilapidated outbuilding behind the cottages, and conifer hedge planting along the boundary of the applicant's land.

- 5.3.5 In terms of scale, whilst both cottages have previously been extended by approximately 60% and the proposals would therefore result in a greater increase above the 50% guideline set out in the adopted residential extensions SPD, it is my view that, due to the lightweight nature and the position of the conservatory and balcony where they would largely be viewed against the backdrop of the more solid two-storey building, the intervening screening and the distances involved, these elements would not result in any material harm to the openness of the countryside. They would not significantly increase the spread of the built form across the site, which was a major concern in relation to the proposal for two detached replacement dwellings which was dismissed at appeal (MA/07/1141). Similarly, given the distance over which public views of the building can be gained, the small increase to the ridge height is not considered significant and again would not harm the openness of the countryside nor render the building obtrusive in the landscape. The porch would be a small addition, subordinately sited in terms of public views of the building, and would not cause any harm.
- 5.3.6 Central Government policy set out in PPS22 actively encourages micro-generation energy installations in the interest of sustainability. There should be a presumption in favour of such development therefore unless it would cause material harm. In my view the proposed solar panels would not have a significant visual impact on the countryside or surrounding area and would not cause material harm. They would not increase the bulk of the building in any way, and would be seen at a distance of approximately 50m or more against the backdrop of the slate roof. They are a type of installation that is becoming more common and would not appear out of keeping with the host dwelling. Due to their small scale and number, I do not consider that they would result in a significant amount of glare such that they would appear obtrusive or harmful to the character of the surrounding countryside.
- 5.3.7 In summary, therefore, it is my view that the visual impact of the proposals would be acceptable. They would significantly improve the appearance, efficiency and sustainability of the building and would not result in any harm to the character of the sensitive countryside setting. The natural beauty, scenic quality and distinctive character of the landscape in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and North Downs Special Landscape Area would be preserved, and the proposals would not significantly extend development within the Strategic Gap. I therefore conclude that the visual impact of the proposals on the host dwelling and the countryside is acceptable.

#### 5.4 **Other Matters**

- 5.4.1 Given that the degree of separation from neighbouring dwellings is in excess of 200m, the proposals would not have a detrimental impact on the residential amenity of their occupiers.

- 5.4.2 There is currently ample parking/turning provision within the site and, furthermore, the number of residential units would be reduced, so, in my view, there are no highways impacts to consider.
- 5.4.3 Given the nature, scale and location of the proposals, it is not considered that there would be any significant loss of habitat for protected species. Indeed, the conservatory and porch would be constructed on areas that are currently respectively occupied by hard-surfaced patios and a shed. I do not therefore consider any ecological measures to be necessary in this case. I do, however, consider the proposal to clad the exterior with natural timber weatherboarding in place of the existing pebble-dashed render to be an enhancement in terms of the ecological value of the building.
- 5.4.4 No part of the development would come beneath the canopy of any of the trees on the site, and it would be sufficiently separated from them to avoid any harm or prejudice to their health or longevity.
- 5.4.5 The Code for Sustainable Homes does not apply to conversions of existing buildings, and consequently this matter cannot be conditioned. However, I understand that one of the applicant's aims is to significantly increase the efficiency and sustainability of the building through the renewable technologies outlined in the Design and Access Statement with a view to exceeding the equivalent of Level 3 of the Code. This is whole-heartedly supported and I consider an informative should be attached to encourage the applicant in this aim.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 I have considered all other relevant planning matters, including any raised as a result of public consultation, and taking all of the above into account, conclude that the proposals comply with Development Plan Policy, the aims of the Council's adopted residential extensions guidelines and Central Government Guidance. Consequently I recommend that Members grant planning permission subject to conditions as set out below.

## **7. RECOMMENDATION**

GRANT PLANNING PERMISSION subject to the following conditions:

1. The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of three years from the date of this permission;

Reason: In accordance with the provisions of Section 91 of the Town and Country

Planning Act 1990 as amended by Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans:

11/0390 received on 31/03/11 and 11/0391A received on 06/09/11;

Reason: To ensure the quality of the development is maintained in accordance with Policies ENV28, ENV33, ENV34 & H33 of the Maidstone Borough Wide Local Plan 2000 and C3 & C4 of The South East Plan RSS 2009.

3. The materials to be used in the construction of the external surfaces of the extension hereby permitted shall be as set out in section 11 of the application form received on 31/03/11 unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority;

Reason: To ensure a satisfactory appearance to the development in accordance with Policies ENV28, ENV33, ENV34 & H33 of the Maidstone Borough-Wide Local Plan 2000 and C3 & C4 of The South East Plan RSS 2009.

### **Informatives set out below**

You are encouraged to aim for this development to achieve the equivalent of at least Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

The proposed development, subject to the conditions stated, is considered to comply with the policies of the Development Plan (Maidstone Borough-Wide Local Plan 2000 and the South East Plan 2009) and there are no overriding material considerations to indicate a refusal of planning consent.