

SW03 / 3759 / F

PROJECT REPORT

Client: Mr A Snell

Project: Proposed New Soft Fruit Packhouse Facility

22 000 2003

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The Farming Business

The present farming business has evolved from the original enterprise started in 1960 by Mr Norman Snell, uncle of the present owners.

The applicants, Mr & Mrs A Snell, trading as A J & C I Snell, took over the business in 1986.

Over the past few years, our clients broadened the crop base on the farm from traditional rotation, by growing increasing areas of specialist vegetables and soft fruit.

In 1991 a horticultural packhouse facility was granted permission at the home farm, at Pencoyd Court.

The crop rotation had broadened by 1995, such that of the 400 acres farmed, 100 acres comprised iceberg lettuce; 50 acres cauliflowers; 15 acres blackcurrants, with 100 acres main crop potatoes, and the balance cereals.

With increasing uncertain returns from the vegetables, potatoes and cereals, our clients at that stage decided to concentrate their efforts on soft fruit production.

It was soon realised during that first year of concentrated fruit production that the existing facility at Pencoyd Court were totally inadequate to meet the requirements of their customers in handling and packing the soft fruit. For the 1996 season, our clients moved the soft fruit packing operations to the rented accommodation they currently occupy at Court Farm, Much Birch. This facility, a former top fruit packhouse, though limited in size, was both more acceptable to their supermarket customers, and more strategically placed to the actual fruit growing areas.

Our clients have developed a close relationship with KG Fruits Ltd who act as marketing agents for soft fruit in the Midlands and Southern Counties to Marks and Spencers, Sainsburys, Tescos and the majority of the other multiples.

The development of our clients business has very much been encouraged by KG Fruits Ltd, not only because the majority of their growing areas have the advantage of near ideal soil type, water resources in winter storage reservoirs and southern aspect, but also, by reason of their proven track record of producing quality soft fruit.

The company joined the Soil Association in 2001, which lead to the conversion of 10 acres of product areas to organic blackcurrants.

The business has continued to expand with demand such that at current date they are the sixth biggest supplier to KG Fruits out of a co-operative grower base of 70 producers.

Paul Dunham Associates

19 Townsend, Soham Cambs. CB7 5DD

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Current Soft Fruit Production

In 2003 the overall land areas in soft fruit production has risen to 315 acres comprising:

<i>115 acres</i>	<i>strawberries</i>
<i>55 acres</i>	<i>raspberries</i>
<i>100 acres</i>	<i>blackcurrants</i>
<i>10 acres</i>	<i>organic blackcurrants</i>
<i>20 acres</i>	<i>blackberries</i>
<i>15 acres</i>	<i>Tayberries</i>

The main production areas local to the site are as shown on drawing 293.402.C5A with a further 35 acres at Ridgeway Cross and Acton Green in Worcestershire.

In 2003 some 700 tonnes of fruit were produced, compared with 563 tonnes in the 2002 season.

The majority of the fruit is prepared for the J. Sainsbury supermarket chain, business that in 2003 exceeded £1,800,000.00 in value.

The Existing Packhouse at Court Farm

The packhouse facility at Court Farm has fulfilled a very important role in enabling the soft fruit enterprise to grow.

However, with the significant business growth to meet customer demands in recent years, with production in 2003 some 25% more than the 2002 season and 50% more than the 2001 season, has meant that this facility can no longer cope.

This has forced our clients to hire off site chill storage facilities and arrange for some product at peak periods to be contract packed elsewhere.

These off site needs have obviously severely hampered both the business management and control of product production standards as well as involving otherwise unnecessary vehicle movement.

The rented premises were originally built, we understand, in the 1960's as an apple packing facility. The premises and associated yards are severely constrained.

The access to Court Farm is difficult, with the highway access also servicing the Church, a dried flower business, a number of private residences, a busy doctors surgery, as well as other farming activities of the landlord at Court Farm.

Page 2 of 6

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The Need

At present whilst our clients main customer, J Sainsbury, are pleased with their product and level of service, this has only been sustainable of late on the known desire to establish a modern packing facility which fully addresses their stringent requirements.

In order to meet these needs, and indeed to account for future needs the facility ideally requires:

- (i) Covered unloading areas, which facilitate the efficient handling of harvested product and relieve the potential damaging effects of the prevailing climatic conditions whether sun, rain or wind.*
- (ii) Facilities that enable rapid cooling from field temperatures to 4-5°C as quickly as possible in order to maximise maintenance of quality and therefore shelf life of the product.*
- (iii) Conditioned holding rooms to allow for peak production periods. Crop maturity is largely driven by sunshine hours and inevitably product needs to be harvested in advance of market demands, which often lag 48 hours behind.
The rooms need to be spacious as product ideally should be stored in a manner which allows for batches on a basis of first in first processed, as well as accounting for product types and also varieties of individual product.*
- (iv) A spacious packing hall is essential, where product grading, selection and packing can be carried out efficiently, in a hygienic environment and with due regard for sufficient manoeuvring space for mechanical handling equipment.
The diverse range of product grown means that multiple packing lines should be provided so that the specific needs of the individual product lines or different packaging modules can be efficiently handled without the need to alter equipment in critical production periods.
In addition dedicated lines for organic product are really a pre-requisite to offset the need to clean down non-organic lines prior to production.*

Page 3 of 6

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- (v) *Adequate finished product high humidity chill storage to enable product to be held at optimum environmental conditions prior to dispatch. It is important that sufficient space is available at peak production periods for product to be accessible for dispatch on a first in first out basis as well as facilitating collation of product batches to particular distribution depots.*
- (vi) *The proposed lorry docking facilities will enable the 'cool chain' care of the product to be fully exercised to optimise maintenance of product dispatch temperatures.*
- (vii) *Staff amenities with adequate staff canteen facilities, utilities and locker rooms as well as hygiene stations.*
- (viii) *Administration and quality control areas should be in easy contact with production areas, but obviously separated for reasons of hygiene.*
- (ix) *Adequate external areas for handling of traffic from both harvested product, and packed product in articulated refrigeration vehicles particularly at peak times. It is important to realise that even at peak periods in June the daily dispatched product in 2003 was handled by three to four refrigerated vehicles.*
- (x) *The site should have an adequate space to house in a 'quiet' aspect to accommodate equipment associated with fieldwork and harvested product transport.*
- (xi) *Adequate staff and visitor parking areas.*
It has been, and will be, our clients policy to provide shuttle transport to transport seasonal and casual workers from the campsites to field and packhouse locations, and also to provide a local pick-up service for local labour from Ross-on-Wye and Hereford areas.
This policy clearly gives our clients a more definite control of labour movements as well as reducing the number of individual private vehicles attending site.
In addition, the site at Windmill Hill is well serviced by a public bus service with a bus stop adjacent to the site.
- (xii) *In summary, the site should best maximise operational efficiencies, and afford ease of access for the necessary traffic movements, whilst portraying a clean unencumbered image.*

Page 4 of 6

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Alternative Sites Considered

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Refer to drawing 293.402.C13 for relative locations of the alternative sites listed below.

1. *Court Farm*

With the co-operation of the landlord, development of modern facilities in the area of the existing site. Utilisation or conversion of the existing facilities is not really a practical or viable option as the site is quite constrained.

Our clients are also conscious that no relief to the traffic movement on the access road would be possible.

2. *Pencoyd Court*

The existing building would need to be substantially uprated and extended to provide the ideal facility. Whilst this is by no means impractical in itself, the site is more remote than alternatives to the growing area, is remote from the A49, and is only accessed by the relatively narrow country lanes not really suited to larger vehicle movements.

3. *Windmill Hill*

The Windmill Hill site, from our clients view point, appears to offer only advantages in:

(i) *Proximity to the main growing areas*

Other lands adjacent to this site are likely to be available to our clients, which appeals to them, as they have available the necessary water for irrigation from the winter storage reservoir

(ii) *Ease of access, without nuisance to others, to the A49 trunk road and to the M50 at Ross-on-Wye.*

A copy of transport assessment undertaken by Messrs White Young Green Planning is enclosed.

(iii) *Opportunity to create a development which both fulfils the various needs described, but occupies a relatively quiet location.*

(iv) *The proposal would be cut into the sloping nature of the site to create both a quieter level area for the main development and potentially a reduced level area to access the lorry docking facility.*

With the benefit of the new access from the A49 the floor levels of the proposal and surrounding yards and infrastructure have been able to be further reduced (by some 800mm) compared to the original proposals previously considered by the Authority.

Page 5 of 6

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- (v) *With the benefit of the existing tree screens, the proposed development is considered to afford minimal intrusion in the landscape*
- (vi) *The construction of the new entrance will provide the additional benefit of improved vision to users of the A49 and those emerging from Netherton Lane.
The existing ground levels within the new vision splays are proposed to be raised to levels approximating to existing verge levels.
It is also proposed to install a low (max. 1000 high) post and rail fence worth low hedge planted on the field side min 1000 behind the vision lines.*
- (vii) *Whilst the development proposed is a significant undertaking financially there is every indication that the proposals on this site could attract the benefit of European Funding.*

4. Other Rural Locations

Research revealed that no suitable farmsteads of potential exist in the area that are either available or in a practical location both in terms of the growing area and ease of access to trunk roads.

Conclusion

- 1. *The site on Windmill Hill is very much the favoured option of both our clients and their supermarket customers*
- 2. *The development, if permitted, would relieve the problems of the existing access to Court Farm or potential access to Pencoyd Farm*
- 3. *The development would enable our clients to continue to expand their soft fruit business particularly in respect of the organic and other specialist products.*
- 4. *The development, if permitted, will afford our clients the opportunity to exploit opportunities to expand the yearly production periods, which in turn will enable them to offer increased permanent employment opportunities.
It is fully expected that the facility will create at least 10 full time job opportunities as well as the additional seasonal and casual needs.*
- 5. *The proposal, whilst respecting it is a green field development, offers a relatively quiet location that minimises visual impact, whilst offering the opportunity to incorporate all facets needed for a modern packhouse facility and associated infrastructure.*

Page 6 of 6

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