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**M.E.Thorne & Co.**

ARCHITECTURAL & ENGINEERING CONSULTANTS

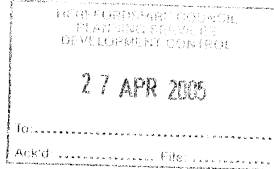
THE RIDGE, BUCKCASTLE HILL, BRIDSTOW, NR. ROSS-ON-WYE, HEREFORDSHIRE. HR9 6QF Telephone / Fax (01989) 563317

Martin E. Thorne BSc C. Eng MICE

Architectural, Town Planning  
Civil & Structural Engineering  
and Surveying Services

26 April 2005

The Planning Officer,  
The Herefordshire Council,  
PO Box 230,  
Blueschool House,  
Hereford HR1 2ZB



Dear Sir/Madam,

**CHANGE OF USE OF WYE VALLEY COUNTRY MANOR FROM HOLIDAY LETTING TO A RETIREMENT CENTRE**

On behalf of Mr Colin Bateman, I enclose an application seeking planning permission to change the use of the 9 no. units of holiday accommodation at Wye Lea Country Manor, from holiday letting to retired persons accommodation. This application comprises the Application Form, Certificate A, a cheque for £265.00 and six copies each of a Site Plan on which the 9 no. existing holiday letting units are highlighted in pink and a Location Plan on which the extent of the site is shown edged in red.

In considering this application, will you kindly note the following:

**The extent of the current application:**

1. The existing Manager's House and the existing Warden's Flat (in the centre of the main block of 6 no. holiday letting units) are excluded from this application, as they are not covered by the restriction that limits the other 9 no. units to holiday letting, as also are the existing Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre buildings, which would be retained as existing.
2. Likewise not included in this application are the additional facilities to the existing Holiday Centre as approved under planning permission DCSE2003/1502/F nor the alterations to the existing Manager's House as approved under planning permission DCSE2003/1859/F. In fact, apart from the provision of the lake, no steps have yet been taken to implement those approvals and, unless the present downward trend in the demand for the sort of facilities available at Wye Lea changes drastically, it is unlikely that they ever will be provided.

**The reason for this application:**

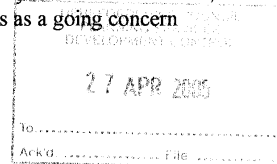
3. At our meetings with Messrs Willmont and Holder on 7 September 2004 and 11 April 2005, Mr Bateman and I stressed to them that the previous successful use of Wye Lea Country Manor as one of the country's leading centres of holiday accommodation, with well fitted units of holiday accommodation, set in extensive landscaped gardens with immediate access to numerous leisure activities, appeared to be unsustainable due to a serious drop in demand since the year 2000, in spite of all efforts made by Mr Bateman to turn this unsatisfactory situation around. I regret to have to tell you that the downward trend in holiday lettings has continued this season and that Mr Bateman sees no alternative other than to seek alternative use for the existing holiday letting units. Hence this application.

**Evidence of the unsustainability of the existing use:**

4. In my letter dated 23 November 2004, I referred to the fact that Mr Bateman's detailed records showed a year on year decline of 28.15% between year ended 31 October 2000 and year ended 31 October 2004. This decline in demand has continued into the current year which shows a 11.8% reduction for the period to 1 April 2005 compared with the same period last year, in spite of every effort being made to prevent this, including (i) the retention of a PR company which submits weekly press releases to all relevant national and local papers and magazines, (ii) the production and distribution of a lavish new brochure, a copy of which was sent to you under cover of my letter dated 30 December 2004, and (iii) his offering various discounted packages, three nights for the price of two, etc., and complete flexibility of when the accommodation might be taken up. None of these efforts have changed the basic decline in demand for the facility which is fully detailed in Mr Bateman's records which can be made available, if required.
5. You may also wish to contact Mr Weightman of Ian Weightman Media Services who works for Hereford Tourism whom Mr Bateman has contacted for advice. Mr Weightman's opinion as a professional in the business was that he was well aware of Wye Lea's high profile in the market place, that Mr Bateman was doing everything right and that he (Mr Weightman) felt that he had nothing useful to suggest additional to what Mr Bateman was already doing.
6. The reasons deduced for this decline and the present unsustainability of the existing holiday letting use are taken to be (i) the low cost of airline flights to holiday destinations abroad where sunshine can be guaranteed, (ii) the fact that VAT is levied at 17½% on tourist facilities in Britain compared with 6% to 8% abroad, which places Mr Bateman's facility at an immediate financial disadvantage, (iii) the fact that many holiday letting cottages in Britain are small scale operations where VAT is not charged at all, (iv) the fact that Wye Lea is a high quality low density development where the laws of economics prevent lower prices being charged and (v) the adverse affect of the internet, which is seen very much as a two edged sword, in spite of the excellent web site that Mr Bateman has commissioned, a pay-per-click campaign and a supplementary 'blog' web site.

**Possible alternative owners for the existing business:**

7. At our meetings with Messrs Willmont and Holder, the point was made that we need not only to point out the unsustainability of the existing use but also to satisfy the LPA (i) that no-one else was interested in taking over the existing business and (ii) that we have sought all possible commercial alternatives before seeking the current change of use.
8. Mr Bateman has rejected the suggestion that Wye Lea be placed on the Council's Property Register because of his fear of the adverse publicity this would generate but has instructed John Goodwin, Chartered Surveyor, of Ledbury to market Wye Lea for him as a going concern. To date Mr Goodwin's efforts have been without tangible result and I enclose a copy of his letter dated 14 April 2005 which confirms this. Mr Bateman has also contacted Holiday Property Bond to see if they would be interested in taking Wye Lea over but that approach has also been unsuccessful.
9. In this context it is also a fact that Mr and Mrs Bateman run the existing business themselves, thus keeping overheads as low as is conceivably possible, and it is no doubt a consideration of anyone considering purchasing the business as a going concern that overheads would rise immediately if managerial staff had to be employed to run it. In short, the return that could be anticipated from anyone buying the business as a going concern would not justify the investment.



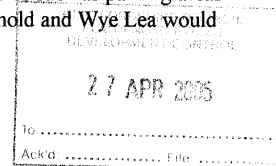
10. I trust that the above detailed information provides you with the information required to prove not only that the present use of Wye Lea is unsustainable but also that, in the present economic circumstances, it is not a viable commercial proposition to any one else.

**Alternative uses:**

11. In addition to the current proposal to convert the existing holiday letting units into units of accommodation for retired persons, Mr Bateman has considered (i) taking the present holiday use 'down market', (ii) developing the existing holiday letting use as a conference centre or similar and (iii) selling the individual units on the open market as holiday cottages.
12. At our meetings with Messrs Willmont and Holder it was accepted, I believe, that the original objections to developing Wye Lea for holiday use would very much be upheld and justified if, indeed, the present very acceptable and environment enhancing use of this high quality low volume development were to be changed to low quality high volume, since this would inevitably lead to greater traffic using the site and inevitable pressures for noisier and more intrusive facilities on the site. We do not believe, therefore, that 'going down market' is a viable option on this site in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
13. The concept of a conference centre of some sort is attractive but fails to stand up to detailed consideration. Firstly, the existing accommodation is all cottage style, aimed at self catering with one or more generally double bedrooms using a common bathroom, and is thus totally unsuitable for conference centre use which demands mainly single bedrooms with en-suite facilities throughout. Secondly, there is at present no conference suite with its attendant dining and toilet facilities. In short, the existing holiday letting units are not practicable in terms of accommodating the numbers required to make the conference centre concept viable nor are there any associated conference facilities.
14. Selling the individual units on the open market as holiday cottages is also superficially attractive and would, of course, involve no change of use. However, experience elsewhere, notably on a site in Cornwall that Mr Bateman knows well, proves that this is impracticable and leads to a deterioration in the amenity quality of the site because of lack of control over the people using the site and the maintenance of the individual units and their surroundings. It is Mr Bateman's over-riding concern to maintain the present high quality of the Wye Lea site in the interest of both local people and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in which it is set, which has convinced him that the proposed change of use to retired persons accommodation is the best alternative.

**Change of use to retired persons accommodation:**

15. In considering the proposed change of use from holiday letting units to units of accommodation for retired persons, we would draw your attention to the fact that this alternative use would have the obvious immediate advantage of not changing the actual day-to-day use of the site to any appreciable extent in terms of traffic generation or noise or disturbance to neighbours, all of which are material considerations. Thus, we submit that this use is not only the only viable alternative but also a positively attractive alternative, particularly suited to this sensitive site.
16. We would also emphasise that this is not an application for new dwellings in the open countryside where existing planning policies would suggest automatic refusal but rather a specific application to meet a specific social need, namely that for retired persons to live in peace and security. Furthermore, because of the need to maintain both the existing landscaped grounds around the dwelling units and common features such as parking areas and the sewage treatment plant, the units would not be sold freehold and Wye Lea would



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remain as a unit under single ownership, with the dwelling units leased or rented to their occupiers who would pay a ground rent towards the upkeep of these common facilities.

17. To ensure that these proposals are maintained into the future, we believe that it is appropriate for the currently sought planning permission to be linked to a Section 106 Agreement which would limit the occupation of the dwelling units to retired persons and their carers and I would confirm Mr Bateman's willingness to enter into such an Agreement if appropriate.

**Generally:**

18. As a final comment in support of this application, may I quote Mr Willmont's comment that it would be *'disastrous if the present properly serviced buildings remained empty'* and express the hope that we have provided you with all the information you require to approve this application. Nevertheless, if you have any queries or require further information of any kind, would you please contact me for further discussion as appropriate.

Yours faithfully,



Martin Thorne

