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Date: 26 June 2009

For the attention of Neil Hewett

Dear Mr Humphrey

Re: TM/08/03739 – Barons Place Farm, Seven Mile Lane, Mereworth

Thank you for consulting us on the application for new polytunnels on the above farm holding in Mereworth and West Peckham. I would like to take this opportunity to raise a few concerns regarding the implications of this proposal for the historic environment.

Firstly, the environs of the extensive application site is one rich in heritage. Within close proximity to the application area are the nationally important sites of Dukes Place Scheduled Monument and Mereworth Castle listed in the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks and Gardens (Grade II* PG1935). Mereworth Castle, Dukes Place and Yotes Court are Grade I listed buildings and Roydon Hall is Grade II*. Many of these are set within historic parkland included in the Kent Gardens Compendium for Historic Parks and Gardens. In addition to these high status sites, there is evidence for activity here from the prehistoric period onwards and there is potential for archaeological sites to survive in the fields. Mereworth, West Peckham and Wateringbury are all Conservation Areas. The limited nature of intensive development has ensured that these historic villages are set within a landscape which still reflects locally distinctive, possibly medieval but certainly post medieval, character. This diverse and rich historic environment should be a major consideration for large scale development in this area.

Secondly, although the application submission provides consideration of biodiversity issues there is little consideration of the historic environment. This application could have a significant impact on important heritage sites. It is therefore paramount that heritage aspects are considered in detail with clear assessment of the impacts of this development on the archaeology, the historic buildings and the historic landscapes. The application submission seems to acknowledge the importance of views but the focus is on the natural environment with insufficient assessment of views from the historic elements, particularly the parklands.

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The historic environment can be divided into 3 main sections; archaeology, historic buildings and historic landscapes and this application may have direct impacts on all three elements.

Archaeology: there are some indications of activity during the prehistoric period with isolated findings of mesolithic flints (Roydon Hall) and Bronze socketed axe (near Oxon Hoath). There is the occasional Romano-British site such as a possible building (north of Yotes Court). There are many medieval and post medieval sites including important country residences as well as villages and small industrial sites. Mereworth Castle, Roydon Hall and the slightly smaller Dukes Place and Yotes Court, are important medieval complexes with several historic buildings, set within designed landscape, with clear high potential for associated buried archaeology. There are several sites, such as Forge Farm, close to Duke's Place, which suggest medieval and post medieval small scale industrial activity associated with iron working.

The introduction of more polytunnels could have a direct impact on remains buried just below the current ground surface or on above ground earthworks. At present, however, it is not clear where the new polytunnels will go up and what groundworks are involved. It is also not clear what remains survive within the fields targeted for new polytunnels.

Historic buildings: There are clearly nationally important historic buildings in this area, Mereworth Castle, Dukes Place, Roydon Hall, and they all have associated historic outbuildings, barns, stables, gateways etc. In addition there are likely to be many Grade II listed buildings within the Conservation Areas of West Peckham, Mereworth and Watringbury. They all have their individual historic characters and settings but also form part of a locally distinctive, architectural style of building in this part of Kent.

The introduction of more polytunnels could have a direct impact on the setting of key historic buildings. Many of the historic buildings were built within an undeveloped natural looking environment. A dramatic increase in the white plastic of the polytunnels could potentially have a significant, detrimental impact on the historic character of the buildings. There are clear intentions to use screening with natural, tall species hedgerows but there has been no assessment to clarify whether this is sufficiently effective for historic building settings and whether this is reasonable mitigation in view of the nature of the proposal. Blocking views of historic buildings is not always a suitable option.

Historic landscapes: Surrounding Mereworth Castle is a nationally important landscape of medieval and post medieval parkland. The estate of Mereworth Castle lies adjacent to Roydon Hall which also has surviving elements of a medieval and post medieval parkland and designed landscape. When considering formal and designed landscape there needs to be appreciation of the intended views. Views of the designed landscapes to and from the main house, down avenues and rides, from the main routeways past the medieval residences and even views of the surrounding hills are key parts of the historic character of these high status complexes. Yotes Court and Duke's Place also have elements of formal landscaping. These designed landscapes all form a noticeable contrast to the more intricate pattern of small fields, lanes and coppiced woodland which have gradually developed over 100s of years out of small farm holdings and utilisation of this area for small scale industry and horticulture. This complexity of land use is reflected in the Historic Landscape Characterisation Assessment which suggests a full range of types for this area including *pre-1810 parkland, pre-19th century coppices, small rectilinear with wavy boundaries or with straight boundaries, orchards, etc.*

The introduction of more polytunnels could have a significant impact on the appearance of this area and on the historic character of the landscape. The addition of quantities of white plastic will be very

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visible, may “simplify” the rich and diverse historic landscape and could detract from appreciation of a designed landscape view or the setting of a historic building. There is an attempt to address the potential visible aspect of the polytunnels by increasing the height and extent of hedgerows. Blocking views with a hedge may not necessarily be beneficial and may actually prevent key designs of the formal and informal parkland landscape. Lots of additional tall hedgerows would create a more enclosed landscape which again may not necessarily be appropriate for this area.

In summary, the introduction and extension of poly tunnel use in this area needs to be carefully considered. The potential impact on buried archaeology may be minimal but the visible impact on the range of historic buildings and historic landscapes especially could be considerable. I therefore recommend that prior to determination of this application, there needs to be a specialist assessment of the historic environment. There needs to be clear consideration of the historic attributes of this area, particularly the nationally important ones of Mereworth Castle, Dukes Place and Roydon Hall, with detailed assessment of the visual impact of the polytunnels on the historic landscape.

I would be pleased to discuss any of the above further.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Rogers
Senior Archaeological Officer

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