

## WITNESS STATEMENT

1. I, Roderick James, have prepared this statement to assist the public inquiry into the South Downs National Park Authority's refusal of planning permission for the development of The Queens Hotel, Selborne. I have read the parties Statements of Case, the Statement of Common Ground, and various other documents, including an email written by Erick Chobert to Jo Clay dated August 2017, which I think is of some importance. I also attended the hearing of the 2019 appeal and the High Court hearing last year.

2. I came to live permanently in the village in 1985 and before that was an occasional visitor going back to the late 1970s. Thus I have known it for well over forty years and I remember The Queens when it was run by Mr and Mrs Paton, and latterly by their son David. It was in those days a lively pub and restaurant and some memorable village parties were held in the large single storey extension that fronts the High Street. When David relinquished the tenancy and the new tenants, Erick Chobert and his partner Nick, updated and upgraded the premises my wife and I continued to visit the pub from time to time, which under their management had become a rather more sophisticated and upmarket sort of venue, appreciated by many, with more of an emphasis on wine than on beer. They continued the use of the single storey extension for community functions, as detailed by Mr Chobert in his email. In particular I remember well the exhibition of paintings and photography he refers to. My wife is a painter, and Mr Chobert helped to hang her paintings. He mentions various other parties, functions, and occasions when live music was played, which were held in the same space. All of this shows that The Queens was without doubt at that time a valuable asset to the community. A point worth making is that The Selborne Arms, the other pub in the village, consists of a public bar, a saloon bar, and a covered outside smoking area, and it does not have a room of anything like the proportions of the one at The Queens. Thus The Queens provided, and potentially could still provide, a social facility not available at the other pub.

**3.** Mr Chobert states that the reason their business was not sustainable was the rent of about £5000 per month demanded by Punch Taverns. When you add in the rates of about £8000 per year, not to mention staff wages, utility bills, and the costs of buying in food and drink, it is obvious that the overheads were simply too high to generate a reasonable income. In any event, Punch Taverns eventually put the freehold of the pub up for sale. There was local interest in buying it as a pub, evidenced in documents prepared for earlier planning applications, but the developer offered a considerably higher sum than other offers, because he was hoping to succeed in developing it residentially, thereby generating a profit for him no doubt well in excess of £1 million.

**4.** Thereafter, in order to obtain permission for change of use, the developer purported to undertake an exercise designed to show that The Queens was not viable as a pub. A previous Planning Inspector, following the hearing in 2019 at which she heard evidence and arguments - and at which the developer was represented by counsel - concluded that this exercise had failed to demonstrate any such thing. Not only was the developer only prepared to accept an unrealistically high price, he had further sabotaged the exercise by removing both bars, stripping out the bedrooms and kitchen facilities, and generally running the place down. Accordingly it remains the case today that The Queens has never been shown *not* to be viable as a pub with overnight accommodation.

**5.** I would suggest that, on the contrary, the weight of available evidence proves that it is. The demand for it undoubtedly exists, and the only question concerns its financial viability. But, and this is important, a freehold owner would be in a vastly better position to generate a reasonable profit than tenants like Mr Chobert and his partner Nick, and David Paton before them, because they would have no rent to pay. Those experienced local business people who were interested in buying it, and who I understand have made witness statements for this inquiry, were obviously well aware of that. It follows, I suggest, that it has been shown positively that The Queens is and remains a perfectly viable business proposition in its present use class.

**6.** That then leaves us with the developer's argument that what he is now seeking permission for will be something better for the village than a viable pub with overnight accommodation. We can break this down as follows:

- a taproom, currently open only for three and a half hours three evenings a week, serving a very limited range of drinks, and only beer from a single brewery, without the provision of food. It is surely beyond argument that this is a facility objectively and quantifiably inferior to what The Queens once did and could still provide. Furthermore, the continued existence of this taproom is currently dependent on the involvement of a third party, the Gilbert White museum, which might at any time choose to end its involvement. You do have to wonder how long the tap room would continue to operate were the developer to be successful in his appeal.

- a field studies centre in the single storey extension which once hosted the various community functions described earlier. The village already has a field studies centre, a handsome and spacious one in the grounds of The Wakes. Presumably it is not in full time use as such since it is available for weddings, private parties etc. It is not clear why we need two field studies centres, and yet do not need two pubs, even if they cater for different markets. In any event this field studies centre too is dependent on the continued involvement of the Museum. In this connection it is rather worrying that the evidence the developer intends to put before this enquiry does not contain any statement from the Museum that it is committed to either the field studies centre or the taproom. It seems that an act of faith is required to believe that these two purported additional benefits to the village will actually accrue.

- the self-catering "aparthotel suites." What the village and the South Down National Park actually need are serviced rooms for overnight visitor accommodation, ie with facilities for breakfast and perhaps dinner. Wedding and family party guests who have come from a little distance want somewhere to stay for a night or two, preferably within walking distance of the venue; tourists likewise seek overnight accommodation. The website for The Queens currently states that the apartments are only available for a minimum of four nights, and much longer stays of 28 days plus are welcomed. Such customers would not be visitors at all but rather temporary, or in time perhaps even permanent residents. A new block is to be built, for more of these self-contained, self-catering aparthotel suites. Since the service and therefore the hotel element appears to be conspicuous by its absence, perhaps a shorter and better term for them would be

“flats.” Again, one does not have to be unduly cynical to wonder how much longer The Queens will be offering any form of short term accommodation were the developer to be successful in his appeal.

However in addition to these alleged benefits we are also to get:

- A whole new house, extending the current barn to the rear, which therefore will require the current car park to be moved into the garden, thereby destroying the green space and compromising the countryside edge.

- A car park replacing the rest of that green space with tarmac, concrete - and of course parked cars.

- An additional new building in the shape of the newly built block for the aparthotel suites.

7. That brings me to Refusal Reason 2, which relates to the overdevelopment of the site and its detrimental impact on the landscape character of the area and of the Conservation Area. In many ways the village has changed little since I first came here. The National Trust continues to preserve the historic landscape on either side of the village, the Short and Long Lythes, the Hanger and the Common. Old photographs and lithographs show that the centre of the Conservation Area around The Queens has changed little since the year 1900, and nearly all the old buildings are still there. The village thus preserves at its heart the appearance of Gilbert White’s “*one single straggling street...running parallel with The Hanger,*” which dates back to Anglo-Saxon times. At the far end of the street coming from Alton, a few new houses have been built, and others down Gracious Street and its other tributaries, but the centre of the village is still much as Gilbert White would have known it.

8. Particularly detrimental to the historic ensemble of the village and its surrounding countryside would be the replacement of the green space behind the pub, once its garden, with the new buildings and the car park, which would be contrary to the linear nature of the village settlement. Having removed the hedge and trees at the bottom of the garden - which the previous Planning Inspector failed to notice, and which led to the successful High Court appeal -

the developer has made play of replacing them by planting other trees in a purported effort to screen the proposed development from view. This serves only to acknowledge that it *needs* screening, and unless screened would have a detrimental effect on the landscape. Of course for the half of the year when the trees and hedge are without their leaves they will be of little use as screening anyway. Moreover, the view as you walk up to the village from Huckers Lane will be adversely affected at all seasons, especially since the proposal involves the removal of the mature hedge on the Queens side of Huckers Lane.

**9.** When you enter the village from either direction a sign tells you that you are entering "*Selborne: The Home of Gilbert White.*" If the village is to live up to that description it should surely continue to be a place that Gilbert White would have felt at home in. I challenge the assertion Mr Macklin makes in his proof - without adducing any evidence - that the majority of this village wish to see his appeal allowed. Similar unsupported assertions are made in one or two of the letters of support. However, and insofar as this issue has any relevance, the only objective and up to date measure of the proportion for and against can be found in the documents in the present appeal: 23 individuals are in favour and 35 are against.