

**Professor Khalid Aziz LVO DL FRSA - Statement to SDNP Appeal Enquiry 22nd
October 2024**

I am Khalid Aziz, Chair of Trustees at the charity, Gilbert White's House and the Oates Collections.

Our first significant engagement with the Queens project came shortly after I took over as Chair of Trustees in late 2019. One of our key objectives was to secure the future of the museum against what were already becoming serious headwinds, in common with many other heritage venues. In essence we are trying to preserve and celebrate an 18th century building and its surroundings in a 21st century environment.

In 2019 it was already clear that the museum could not rely on solely on the goodwill of its existing supporter base. It had to broaden its appeal and attract a much wider and bigger audience in keeping with its importance as a museum of national and, indeed, international status

To that end we reengaged with the planning authorities with a view to expanding our activities towards our ambition of sustaining long-term financial stability. In our discussions we were actively encouraged by the then Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park and its Chief Planning Officer to join in with the initial application being made by the appellant in the case currently before you. We took this encouragement in good faith and, in broad terms, reached an arrangement with the putative developer whereby we would be granted, on a peppercorn rent, a lease for the ground floor of the Queens building for 99 years.

Broadly, we had initially two projects in mind. Firstly, to create a Tap Room to sell our popular range of Gilbert White beers brewed in the recently refurbished Gilbert White's Brewhouse and secondly, to develop a learning centre to take pressure off our existing Field Studies Centre. This progressed and planning was granted on this basis, although only on appeal as, despite the applications being recommended for approval by officers, planning committee members narrowly voted against the initial application, by, from memory, just one vote.

With the support of the developer who shouldered much of the structural costs, for which we are grateful, we created our Tap Room, now known as The Jubilee Tap. Since opening it has made a useful contribution to our funding.

Sadly, with the permission being overturned, further development on the next stage of our plans - the study centre - was halted and has stayed that way to the present time, to the detriment of the Museum.

Sadly, Covid, the energy spike following the Ukraine war leading to a cost of living crisis, the recent 10% hike in the Living Wage with allegedly more to come with employer's National Insurance, issues with attracting hospitality staff and the curtailing of grants by cash-strapped local authorities, have all had an adverse effect on our fortunes.

We are not alone in feeling these chill winds. So many heritage venues through the country are struggling to keep their doors open. In Hampshire alone three museums have already had to close their doors in 2024; more remain under threat. For us at Gilbert White, these troubled times are all the more galling as we have, despite these difficulties, since 2019 almost doubled our footfall and increased our turnover by more than two and a half times.

Our sole interest in the Queens project, as Trustees of Gilbert White, has been to secure whatever is best for the future of our charity. Frankly, we are puzzled by some of the statements relating to Gilbert White made in the evidence put before you today. Whilst we understand and respect the fervour held by what is a small but vocal minority of Selborne residents we feel there is no excuse for conjecture, hyperbole and in some cases downright counterfactual statements about our Museum and its enterprises. Indeed, we find it curious that these individuals still profess themselves to be supporters of Gilbert White.

In closing, I should say that such egregious mistruths about our charity must surely serve only to cast doubt on the veracity of other elements of their evidence.

For this reason we ask the Inspector to grant the appeal.