

Rocklands Developments – Tree Removals, New Roads, Car Parks, Caravans and Landslips

The East Hill and Ecclesbourne Glen are part of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve. The Country Park is owned and managed by Hastings Borough Council (HBC). HBC's own website states that:

“The Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve has over 267 hectares of ancient woodland, heathland and grassland together with 3 miles (5km) of dramatic cliffs and coastline. Lying within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, most of the park has been designated a Special Area of Conservation, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is a designated Local Nature Reserve”

The Rocklands Caravan Park sits on the East Hill in a very prominent position between the East Hill and Ecclesbourne Glen. Since 1997 it has been owned by Mr and Mrs Guilliard. It opened in the early 1950s. Since then caravans were installed in 4 separate phases. The 4 planning permissions granted from 1958 to 1978 all include conditions which prevent the removal of trees without obtaining permission from the local authority:

- HS/FA/49/000173 - Formation of caravan site
- HS/FA/58/0048 - Extension of site for a total of 50 caravans
- HS/FA/59/00209 - Use of land for winter storage of caravans
- HS/FA/60/357 - 22 new caravans
- HS/FA/78/00703 - Siting of 10 caravans. These are the 10 caravans that run in a row to the north of the triangular car park. This was the last approved extension of caravans.

The last planning permission (HS/FA/78/00703) for the 10 caravans covers the entire Rocklands site. It stipulates the following conditions:

- 4. No trees on site shall be lopped or felled without consent
- 7 No caravans to be put on amenity area (this is the area to the south east of the 10 caravans)
- 8 Landscaping and tree planting policy to be maintained
- 9 Landscaped area not to be used for car parking

All developments of the caravan park were made with great attention paid to protect landscape quality. Several applications for extending caravans were refused on the grounds that they detract from the policy of protecting landscape quality.

- HS/FA/90/341 - Refusal to site 11 caravans on lower slope
- HS/FA/89/1090 - Refusal to site 6 caravans on lower slope
- HS/FA/75/485
- HS/FA/73/1387
- HS/FA/73/1386

The Caravan Park is licensed by HBC and is inspected on an annual basis. Details of this licence have been requested from HBC.

Up to about 2004/2005 the Rocklands caravan park was well shielded from all sides. It had been like this since it first opened. Rocklands' visual impact on the Country Park was minimal because of good shielding enforced by good planning control. But a series of publically available aerial photos (Google Earth) show that since at least 2004 onwards there has been a progressive and steady process of tree removals on the site. A large number of trees have been removed in several phases over several years. At no time did the owners of the caravan site seek approval before removing them.

These aerial photos show that during this same period car parks were extended, new roads built, the land was terraced and 8 new caravans installed. Rocklands were in the process of preparing the land for a further row of caravans below the 8 that they had already installed. No planning permission was sought for any of these later developments, so they were in breach of previous planning conditions. Despite enquiries from the public, the Planning Department did not investigate these breaches and the fact that planning conditions existed on previous planning permissions was ignored. The new areas of car parking, roads, terracing and caravans are all fully visible across all of Ecclesbourne Glen. HBC Planning have to date now accepted that the installation of caravans, the car park extension and road extensions are a breach of planning conditions. HBC Planning Enforcement has now advised the Rocklands owners to apply for retrospective planning permission for these works. It is to be hoped that the weight of public objections will make sure that these applications will be rejected and that the caravans will then be removed and the extensions to car parks and roads removed.

Despite a landslip in the grounds of Rocklands in early 2013 and the closure of the top footpath due to subsidence Rocklands carried on developing the site on the lower slopes. It is believed that this work was intended to level the land and allow the installation of a further row of caravans. This work was interrupted by the second catastrophic landslip in early 2014. It has been reported that during 2012/2013 many lorries were seen delivering materials and soil to Rocklands. It is believed these materials were used to level the land and create terracing. After the landslip in early 2014 the caravans remain occupied, this was an enormous safety risk for the occupants. This has been raised with HBC but to date there have not been any response. The caravans are now being removed, this is not due to any enforcement action by planning but because the land is moving underneath them. Planning have now recognised that a storage building was built without planning permission and have advised Rocklands to apply for retrospective planning permission.

It is believed that many of these developments at Rocklands also contravene the conditions of the Caravan Park Licence. Details of the licence have been requested from HBC. Planning now claim that the site licence allows Rocklands to develop the car parks and roads without seeking planning permission. This claim will be investigated once the licence agreement has been made available. However it is certain that this does not allow them to breach previous planning conditions which prevented such developments on the lower slopes. Planning have acknowledged that the building of roads without adequate drainage is a breach of the caravan site licence and this is under investigation by Planning. It is suspected that the works at Rocklands also contravene other conditions of the licence.

Members of the public and Amber Rudd MP are on record as having sent enquiries to the Planning Department about tree removals. Planning's consistent response was that no Tree Protection Orders were in place, that this was not a planning issue and therefore the landowner could remove trees as required. But this was not an accurate response as planning conditions did in fact apply. For unknown reasons these conditions were ignored by the Planning Department. Planning did not follow up and investigate tree removals, neither did they consider putting TPOs on the trees or consult with Country park management. As a consequence the gradual and steady removal of screening from the Rocklands site continued unchallenged. The removal of screening from the Rocklands site has now transformed Ecclesbourne Glen, so that many buildings are visible and rows of caravans can be seen from across the Glen. This removal of trees has opened up wonderful sea views for the buildings and caravans at Rocklands, which can only increase the commercial value of Rocklands, but the effect on the Glen is intrusive to put it mildly. HBC planning now accept that tree removals are a breach of previous planning conditions. However HBC planning's response was to state that it does not have any evidence of tree removals and that the owners claim that only bushes have been removed. Planning now (early June 2014) state that Rocklands admit that trees have been removed. Planning now state that it would be impossible to know what trees have been removed over the last 40 years. No enforcement action has been taken to date.

A body of evidence has been collected to prove that many trees have been felled, lopped or topped. This evidence includes aerial photos, data from the national tree database, other photos and eye witness accounts. To date planning have not accepted this as evidence for tree removals or even looked at this evidence.. No enforcement action has been taken. . It is suspected that the tree removals at Rocklands could also contravene conditions of the caravan park licence.

Aerial photos show that by July 2013 there had been a landslip within the grounds of Rocklands. In early 2013 (a year before the large landslip) slightly further to the east within the country park a landslip closed the public footpath that runs parallel to the southern borders of Rocklands. Both these landslips started just below the developments in Rocklands. Despite these two warning landslips the developments in Rocklands continued. The planning department were aware of both of these landslips but did not investigate the causes. It is believed that no investigations were made by HBC into the safety implications for residents of Rocklands or the use of adjacent paths by visitors to Ecclesbourne Glen.

A new development in the South West corner of Rocklands was granted final planning permission on the 21/01/2014. The planning department did not request that an investigation into the stability of the land be carried out despite being aware of two landslips close by. This new development has caused great controversy. Many local people cannot understand how such a development was allowed in such a sensitive area. A previous near identical application was rejected on the 19/07/2012 on the grounds that it would be detrimental to this part of the High Weald AONB and contrary to local development policies. The subsequent successful application did not even go before the planning board for approval and the decision was delegated to a planning officer.

Early in November 2013 the construction of the new two-storey building began in the South West corner of Rocklands. It replaces a smaller single storey building which was previously invisible from the Country Park as it was shielded by mature bushes and trees. The new two-storey building dominates the skyline and mars the views from the East Hill and Ecclesbourne Glen. It is fully visible from all sides as all the trees and bushes have been removed. The removal of these trees and bushes contravenes condition 5 of its planning permission which stipulated that additional screening must be planted. These tree removals also breach conditions from previous planning permissions. HBC planning are working with the owners to agree a tree replanting scheme. However the damage has been done and it will take many years for any replanting to grow. No enforcement action has been taken to ensure that adequate screening is put back. In early June Rocklands planted a few holly bushes around the building. These bushes are about 60 to 80cm high and are absolutely inadequate and can never shield the building

The clearance of screening and construction started several months before planning permission was granted. All screening trees and bushes were removed from around the building before the screening conditions were agreed. The screening conditions specified that increased screening should be planted. Rocklands are in breach of this condition as they removed all screening. If planning had intervened at this point then this development could have been stopped, no enforcement action was taken at this stage. To date no enforcement action has been taken by planning.

The new building has not been built in accordance with the approved plans. The depth, length and area of the balconies are considerably greater than in the approved plans. The enlarged balconies encroach to the very edges of the site and might help explain why all screening was removed as the existing vegetation would have prevented balconies of this size. There is a window on the first floor north east elevation that was not in the approved plans. The ground floor bedroom 2 has increased in width by 1.6 meters. Retrospective planning permission has been sought for these revisions. Given this it is possible that other key dimensions of the build are not according to approved plans. Planning were requested to check these but have declined to do so stating that they were within reasonable tolerances.

Rocklands applied for retrospective planning permission for the changes in mid May 2014. This application has attracted over 370 objection as of 05/06/2014. It is believed that no other application has attracted so many objections. This reflects the level of opposition to these developments at Rocklands. If people had been aware of the original application to build then it is certain this would have attracted the same level of opposition and the building would never have been built.

This new building will have wonderful views over the sea, East Hill and Country Park, and it has no doubt increased the desirability and commercial value of the site for the owners of Rocklands, but at the expense of the ratepayers and residents who love and use the Park every day. A policy of planting fast growing trees around the periphery of this development would be a small first step in screening this obtrusive building. The only way to guarantee that this building does not destroy the beauty of our Country Park is to have it removed. Campaigners have recommended to HBC that the original permission should be revoked and the building removed.

A catastrophic landslip occurred in February/March 2014. The landslip started within the lower grounds of Rocklands directly below the end of the new road and the new terracing for caravans. This landslip has destroyed a large swathe of woodland in Ecclesbourne Glen. The western and central parts of the Glen are currently closed because three footpaths are impassable and the land is still considered to be unstable. These parts of the glen will remain closed until at least October 2014, but judging from previous notices, that forecast could be extended interminably. Public statements from HBC attribute the landslip solely to heavy winter rains and make no reference to the Rocklands developments.

There is currently an HBC sponsored technical survey being carried out into the causes of the landslip. The results should be available very soon. It is to be hoped that this survey will assess the impact of the Rocklands developments on the slopes just above the landslip. Many local people are suspicious that the large scale disruption of drainage patterns caused by tree removals, car park extensions, road building and terracing at Rocklands are the underlying cause of the landslip. The fact that there have been no landslips in any other parts of the Country Park (which share the same geology as Ecclesbourne Glen) strongly reinforces these suspicions. Once that report comes in we will be investigating and conducting a similar correspondence with HBC and ESCC on that issue, as we have to date mainly concentrated on the new building and other developments.

What is very difficult to understand is how Rocklands have been able to carry out such large-scale developments in such a sensitive area, and that HBC as owner and manager of the Country Park were clearly aware of these developments yet appear to have taken no action to prevent them. HBC Planning Department was certainly aware of the developments but seem to have decided not to consider any of them as planning issues. The caravan site is inspected once a year by HBC and yet the inspectors did not appear to notice any of the massive developments that were taking place. It is hard to see how Ecclesbourne Glen and the East Hill can be restored to their former beauty. Any tree-planting programme would take many years, but would at least be a start, and removal of the fallen mud and many trees will take many man-hours and therefore great cost.

The glen remains closed until at least October. The people of Hastings have had a wonderful natural asset stolen from them. It is to be expected that the destruction of Ecclesbourne Glen and the closure of several footpaths will have a negative impact on tourism in the town. The only clear winners in this sorry story are the owners of Rocklands who now benefit from having very marketable open views in all directions seawards.

Chris Hurrell on behalf of Save Ecclesbourne Glen – 06/06/2014

Landslip Survey

The landslip survey has finally been released by HBC on the 04/06/2014. This document will be updated to reflect this once it has been fully analysed.