

6. December, 2016.

Dear Mr. Gran,

The Radcliffe Arms, 31 Walsworth Road, Hitchin SG4 9ST. (16/02888/1)

The Hitchin Society wishes to object in the strongest possible terms to the proposed demolition of the Radcliffe public house, and the subsequent building of houses and flats on its site.

Our objection is set out below under the following headings: change of use from food and drink to residential, the adverse effect it would have on the Conservation Area, and the inappropriate nature of the proposed development.

Change of use from food and drink to residential

The Radcliffe, previously the Radcliffe Arms, has fulfilled an important role for many years in a part of Hitchin which is relatively densely populated, and with no other comparable public house in the area. The present public house was built around 1855 and therefore forms part of a historically important development of Hitchin in the period immediately following the opening of the Great Northern railway in 1850. Subsequent railway developments linked Hitchin with Bedford as part of the Midland mainline to London, and with Cambridge, resulting in a rapid growth in population and in housing development. The public house, originally known as the Nightingale, was built to serve this area of new housing. Renamed the Radcliffe Arms in the late 19th century, it is now trading as The Radcliffe.

The site itself is at an important crossroads dating from well before the mid 19th century housing development, and indeed it is thought that a public house named the Rougely Arms may have existed on the site from 1631 to 1852. Whether or not this is correct, the location of the public house is on an important east-west route leading out of Hitchin, as well as to the station, and at a cross-roads for local north-south journeys. Overall, a key location for a public house serving the local population as well as passing travellers.

In recent times, The Radcliffe has been the subject of significant investment to upgrade its facilities and to establish it as a restaurant with a reputation for quality food and wine, becoming one of Hitchin's best-known "gastropubs". Indeed, it is believed to be the only contender for that description in Hitchin beyond the town centre itself.

It also provides social and meeting facilities available to community and other groups active in that part of Hitchin so that its closure would impact not just on the availability of food and drink but also on access to community space, already in short supply in Hitchin.

A further consequence of the closure of The Radcliffe as a public house and restaurant is the loss of employment opportunities that it currently offers. It is believed that the number of full-time and part-time jobs it creates is significant, and these would all be permanently lost on closure. Although information on the number of jobs involved is not publicly available, the Council would be able to establish such information and to consider the effects of loss of local employment opportunities as part of the decision making on the proposed change of use from food and drink to residential.

We are also concerned that the form detailing the Application for Planning Permission in Section 5 Pre-application Advice mentions that pre-application advice received indicates that "Change of use to residential would be acceptable". We trust this observation in Section 5 is no more than an aspiration on the part of the applicant and does not reflect Council policy determined in advance of the public consultation process.

We are also concerned that a likely argument in favour of change of use might be that the public house and restaurant is no longer economically viable. We would point out that we believe The Radcliffe is now in the ownership of a property development company, and it is unlikely that they would have the same level of skills in running a public house and restaurant compared with a business specialising in such activities. While we are not saying the business has been deliberately run down to pave the way for change of use consent, it is unlikely that the performance of the business will have remained as effective as if it had been in the hands of a pub or restaurant oriented owner.

We trust all these considerations will be taken into account in determining the application for change of use.

Effect on the Conservation Area

We are extremely concerned about the damage to Character Area 6 of the Hitchin Conservation Area which would result from the demolition of The Radcliffe and its replacement by modern buildings. The Radcliffe is a landmark building characteristic of the Conservation Area, and as it occupies one corner of a busy crossroads (now a roundabout) it serves as an anchor point for the wider street scene. It is also specifically designated as a 'Positive Building' on the map of Character Area 6.

Following a review of the Hitchin Conservation Area in 2010 (a review to which the Hitchin Society contributed), the area comprising Benslow Lane, Trevor Road and part of Radcliffe Road and Verulam Road was included in the Conservation Area, in recognition of the quality and consistency of the built environment, and its importance as a historical record of the expansion of Hitchin in the second half of the 19th century. Not only would the loss of the Radcliffe Arms itself have a strongly negative impact on the integrity of the Conservation Area, but given the position it is in at an entry point to the Conservation Area, its demolition would put at risk the retention and conservation of other significant buildings nearby.

The loss of a characteristic and well-known building is, we believe, unacceptable if the Conservation Area is to be protected, and if possible enhanced, for the long-term benefit of Hitchin. We therefore consider that the fundamental purpose of the Conservation area should be respected by the Council, and consent for demolition should be refused.

Nature of the proposed development

Given the importance of the site of the proposed development, the quality of design of both the block of flats and the three terraced houses is particularly disappointing. The block of flats seems totally out of place in the proposed location, with no attempt being made either to respect the scale and style of neighbouring buildings in Walsworth Road, or to create a modern design of inherent quality or worth. The massing of the proposed building on the highly visible corner location, and its dominant side elevation onto Verulam Road, seem particularly unfortunate, and totally unsuited to its position within the Conservation Area.

The three houses facing onto Verulam Road fail to have any resonance with the scale and quality of the period properties in that road, while the strangely asymmetric and irregular appearance of the front elevation is a jarring and unattractive feature.

It is also noted that the details given in the Application for Planning Permission include the use of yellow facing bricks and aluminium-clad timber windows. Both of these would be totally out of place within the Conservation area, and their inclusion within the planning application is evidence of the lack of care and respect for the character of the area.

We also note that this proposed development would increase the housing stock of Hitchin by seven units (3 houses and 4 flats) although there would also be the loss of a one-bedroom flat in the existing public house building. While a net increase of six dwellings might be seen as a contribution towards meeting housing targets, we would draw attention to the emerging Local Plan which has now reached the submission stage. This Plan includes identified housing allocations which would more than meet the objectively measured housing needs of North Hertfordshire, including a contribution to the un-met needs of Luton and Stevenage, through to the year 2031. On this basis, there is no pressing housing need which can possibly justify the demolition of a landmark building in the Conservation Area, nor to the construction of new buildings that do not do justice to their location.

For the reasons set out above, we trust that this application will be refused, and that The Radcliffe will continue to trade as a successful and attractive pub-restaurant for many years to come.

Yours sincerely,