



THE THOMAS HARDY SOCIETY

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Local Plan Consultation,
Dorset Council,
South Walks House,
Dorchester DT1 1UZ

10th January 2021

Dear Sirs,

Proposed North Dorchester Development – DOR 13

I write on behalf of Thomas Hardy Society, which is an international literary society with over one thousand members, dedicated to the promotion of the works of Thomas Hardy, and the preservation of the countryside, which features so prominently in Hardy's novels and poems. I write to object in the strongest possible terms to this proposed inclusion of this development in the local plan, which if agreed, will, we believe, severely damage the very heart of Hardy's Wessex.

It is true to say that Thomas Hardy often appears to be 'a prophet without honour in his own country'. In other words, that people in West Dorset, and especially in Dorchester, often do not appreciate Thomas Hardy's international status as a literary genius – regarded by many as being of Shakespearean stature. And thus they frequently fail to appreciate Hardy's importance in bringing tourism to West Dorset and significant income to local businesses. People visit West Dorset because of the relatively unspoilt countryside and the fact that Hardy described it so intimately in his novels and poems. Development at this site will just be another nail in the coffin for tourism in West Dorset.

Hardy's Casterbridge (Dorchester) is the central focus of his Wessex – described so clearly in much of his poetry and fiction, most particularly in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where he describes Dorchester as being 'as compact as a box of dominoes', having 'no suburbs in the ordinary sense. Country and town met in a mathematical line'. Although much has changed in the 140 years since this novel was published, this strict division between town and country persists unaltered along the Roman northern boundaries of the town.

In no other county town in England is there just a five-minute walk from urban centre to rural tranquillity. Dorchester is unique and extremely special – to destroy this with a detached urbanisation as is currently proposed is a policy verging on corporate lunacy.

Hardy's description of Casterbridge, from which I've just quoted, is of the view from Stinsford Hill. The town indeed nestles around the Frome and its tributaries – as soon as one climbs a hill in any direction and looks north – the true setting of Dorchester is revealed against its backdrop of ancient unspoilt downland. The proposed development would form a terrible blot on this landscape – ruining the view northwards from Came Down and Maiden Castle, Poundbury Hill-fort (Hardy's Pummery) and the South Dorset Ridgeway; also the view east from Black Down and the Hardy Monument.

Five years ago West Dorset District Council rejected plans to allow a similar large scale development on Conygar Hill (Came Down) to the south-east of Dorchester. This proposal was over-ruled primarily on grounds of its deleterious impact on a sensitive landscape of literary, ecological and historical importance. The North Dorchester proposal would have a far worse impact on the local environment in all these same categories. It is also nonsensical to build a detached extension to a town, ruining the intervening water meadows and in effect linking Charminster and Stinsford in one hideous conurbation.

The population of Stinsford Parish is today no greater than it was in 1840, when Hardy was born there. This proposed development would ruin Hardy's Mellstock – so vividly described in his poetry and early fiction – especially in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Desperate Remedies*. The Hardys' Cottage, Stinsford Church and the Kingston Maurward Estate and the countryside of the whole of Stinsford Parish are sites of literary pilgrimage to which people travel from all over the world. The construction of 'North Dorchester' would therefore constitute an act of the most severe literary, historic and environmental vandalism. If Dorset Council goes ahead with this plan, you will be recorded in environmental and literary history as having criminally neglected your responsibilities.

In coming to any decision, I trust that your council will take note of the recent report from the Office for National Statistics (20th September 2018), in which they admit that they had previously over-estimated population growth by as much as 25% – and suggest a general 25% reduction in the quantity of new housing, for which planning proposals need to be made. Once this filters through into Government housing targets, it is likely that the requirement for planned development on the scale with have shrunk sufficiently to render this whole scheme redundant.

Specifically also, DOR 13 would impact directly on the landscape of one of Hardy's best loved novels *Far from the Madding Crowd* – Waterson Ridge and the adjoining Waterson Manor, and to the west of this, ruin the setting of one of his best known short stories 'The Three Strangers', dramatized by Hardy as 'The Three Wayfarers'; and similarly overshadow

Wolfeton Manor, home of the Trenchard family and the home of one of Hardy's Noble Dames – The Lady Penelope.

To enable your Council to come to an appropriate decision, may I draw your attention to a recent precedent in West Yorkshire, where an application to erect wind turbines in Oxenhope Parish in the heart of Bronte Country was rejected by Bradford City Council on the grounds the turbines would destroy the visual impact of a landscape of international literary importance. The planning authority in Bradford ruled that:

'The proposed development would introduce an incongruous and widely visible vertical element into this sensitive upland landscape, whose historical and literary associations are also central to its wider economic value in tourism terms. The proposed turbine would be seen from a number of vantage points and would result in significant harm to the character of the landscape.'

(The Daily Telegraph 18.2.13).

DOR 13 would be a new conurbation of far greater environmental impact than the proposed wind turbines in Bronte Country. I refer to this case to remind you – and reassure you – that it is wholly appropriate for a planning authority to take literary associations into consideration, especially when dealing with a site of international significance. To the world as a whole Hardy Country is of even greater importance than Bronte Country.

I urge you therefore to go back to the drawing board and absolutely reject any proposal to build on the open countryside to the north of Dorchester.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "A. C. Fincham." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "A" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Anthony Fincham, Chairman of the Thomas Hardy Society.