

# Waverley Councillors display a shaky hold on truth.

## INNACCURACIES AND UNFOUNDED CLAIMS IN COUNCILLORS' COMMENTS

Recorded at the LISTED BUILDING CONSENT APPLICATION WA/2014/1926 FOR DEMOLITION OF THE REDGRAVE THEATRE AT BRIGHTWELLS, FARNHAM as discussed at the Waverley Borough Council Joint Planning Committee 26 January 2015.

For more see website [www.farnhamtheatre.co.uk](http://www.farnhamtheatre.co.uk)

The following comments were taken from the publicly available online webcast of that meeting, recorded during the course of the meeting. The four digit numbers refer to the point on the recording at which particular comments were made.

### Cllr. Richard Gates: 36.15

1. At 36.15 Cllr. Gates stated: *"In nearly 18 years not one single remotely credible scheme has been submitted for the re-use of the theatre space"*.

#### FACTS:

In May 2006 Farnham Theatre Association presented to Waverley Borough Council a Theatre Report and Business Study for the re-use of the theatre without relying on Council funding and which would be guaranteed against default

This documentation was accepted by Waverley as being so substantial it could not be ignored, and would be used to support Waverley's policy for theatre at the Maltings, but that no officer time was to be allowed for assessment of its viability for the Redgrave. Cllr. Gates has no evidence that this plan was not credible.

See WBC Archives for 2006 Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny 32 May Agenda Item 7 and Minutes. The Theatre Report is extant and it is referred to (but misquoted) in the Crest Nicholson Design and Access Statement 2014 Chapter 7. Justification of the Works.

### Cllr. Michael Goodridge MBE: 36.25

2. Cllr Goodridge says he was surprised that permission was given originally for the theatre to be attached to Grade II Listed Brightwell House.

#### FACTS

- a) In 1967 Farnham Urban District Council gave permission for the theatre to be attached to Brightwell House to secure the future of Brightwell House before it was listed. The house was unwanted by FUDC, in need of renovation and likely to be demolished if put on the open market. The Grade II Listing followed in 1972 to ensure that no further demolition would occur and the document dated 29.12.72 begins "House, later incorporated into theatre."
- b) In 2001 Waverley applied to English Heritage to have Brightwell House de-listed to offer "an unencumbered site" for developers. See the Farnham Herald. 17.08.01

*“The plan comes in the form of a recommendation to de-list Brightwell House, which adjoins the theatre. It was approved by the Conservative majority, and will go before the executive on 28 August.”*

### **Waverley Executive 28 August 2001 Minutes**

#### **130. CALL-IN REPORT OF THE EAST STREET SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP**

(Appendix R)

*“RESOLVED that the Committee supports the proposal to de-list but requests that any developer should recognise the significance of the remaining parts of Brightwells House and its surroundings and settings; and that they be required to produce a design which is of high quality and sensitive to the settings and surroundings, including the flower gardens, lawns and Cedars of Lebanon.”*

A document “Redgrave Theatre Farnham: Assessment of Listing Status” was subsequently issued by architects Carden and Godfrey which concluded that “**there are sound reasons for having the listing status removed**” and this was submitted by WBC to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

If it was WBC's hope that this would remove the Grade II listing, this attempt failed. The Listing was actually strengthened in 2002.

3. Cllr. Goodridge approved the present application as **Brightwell House would not “be dwarfed” as it was by the theatre extension.**

‘To be dwarfed by something.’ OED “Cause to seem small or insignificant in comparison”.

#### **FACT**

Crest Nicholson's proposed buildings would tower over Brightwell House and make the house seem small and insignificant, a point criticised by English Heritage in its response to this application. The Redgrave Theatre roof level was designed discreetly below that of the house and gives visual priority to the house from the south. English Heritage has not criticised the theatre extension, but has left the decision of its future to be taken by the Local Authority because the buildings are only Grade II, not Grade II\*

### **Cllr. Nicholas Holder 39.20 – 41.42**

4. Cllr Holder's irrelevant reminiscences of the Castle Theatre disparage the theatre. He describes his visit to the Castle in the 1050s, remembering “**the smell of stale tobacco, torn seat covers and popcorn containers on the floor**”

#### **FACT**

Smoking was never allowed at the Castle Theatre as it was known to be a fire risk and bad for the voice. Popcorn was never on sale there.

5. At **40.00** He gives an account of “**Five theatre companies being asked to take over the Redgrave...and all failing**”

#### **FACT**

There were only ever two theatre companies at the Redgrave – the Farnham Repertory Theatre Company (FRTC)1974 – 1995 and the Farnham Theatre Productions Company (FTPC)1996-8. The only company to go bankrupt was the FTPC which had no business plan and was installed on the recommendation of the Arts Council South East and backed by Waverley Borough Council in 1997.

[See documents at Surrey History Centre Woking].

The Farnham Repertory Theatre Company employed 6 artistic directors between 1974 and 1994. The first four enjoyed huge successes with comments recorded in Hansard in 7 March 1988 that: “*the Redgrave is a*

*model for other theatres”.*

6. Cllr Holder states that the result of ‘5 different theatre companies failing’, “***since then the Redgrave Theatre has stood idle and neglected”.***

#### **FACT**

**Waverley Borough Council has refused entry to the Redgrave Theatre to everyone wanting to use the theatre premises since it closed and it is entirely responsible for the neglect of this listed building.**

The Farnham Repertory Theatre Trust left money to Waverley Borough Council for the building repairs in 1998, but this was put in the General Fund and not used for repairs. Winterwatch, a winter home for vagrants occupied Brightwell House between 2000 and 2005 during which time the buildings were vandalised, flooded, a valuable marble fireplace stolen and skylights left open and unsecured, allowing water penetration over several years. (See Farnham Buildings Preservation Trust Surveyor’s Report on Brightwell House 2007).

7. At **40.08 - 41.42** Cllr. Holder makes several irrelevant and unfounded claims about the operation of other theatres. For example, information about West End productions and repertory theatres is irrelevant as there are no plans for a revived Redgrave to be programmed in these ways. No source is given for the costs he attributes to theatre productions and his figures are therefore meaningless. His information about the programming at the Yvonne Arnaud at Guildford is wrong as can be seen on their website.
8. **Cllr Holder does “not believe the Redgrave has a future but that 250 or so residents in Farnham believe it has”.**

#### **FACTS**

341 Objections were made to this time extension application. However, there have been 7,925 objections against six Listed Building Consent applications for demolition of the Redgrave Theatre since 2006.

### **Cllr. Stefan Reynolds 56.36**

9. Cllr Reynolds stated that **WBC had spent £1.5 million on the Redgrave and that it still had failed to attract people –“it was not a viable entity.”**

#### **FACTS**

On the 7 March 1988, In reply to Virginia Bottomley, MP, the Minister for the Arts, Mr. Luce was reported in Hansard saying that the Redgrave was: “the most prolific of all repertory theatres in Britain...and it has achieved business sponsorship incentive awards over the last two or three years. It is a very fine model for other theatres.” This could not have been said of a theatre which did not attract people.

Unfortunately, by 1998 the Redgrave was not a viable entity under the management company approved by WBC in 1996 and which had failed to supply the Council with its business plan (see WBC letter 28.04.1998 at the Surrey History Centre). The decline in the fortunes of regional theatres was national and the Independent Newspaper of 19.11.94 records that the Salisbury Playhouse, the Cheltenham Everyman, the Farnham Redgrave, the Exeter Northcott, the Harrogate Theatre, Birmingham Rep. the Liverpool Playhouse and the RSC were all in severe financial difficulties. **The Redgrave is the only one of these not to have survived.**

Until the mid 1990s, the Redgrave Theatre appeared to have operated without regular subsidy from Waverley according to figures given to FTA by Paul Wenham on 28 August, 2008. FTA had asked Waverley’s Finance Director for the total sums the Council had put in year on year in capital funding and revenue funding. The

figures given to FTA amounted to **£604,173**. **Cllr. Reynolds needs to substantiate his claim that Waverley had put in £1.5 million.**

More figures from Waverley to balance the account: the Council has received a rental **income totalling £704,982.88** to date from the site of the Castle Theatre.

#### **FACT**

In May 2010 Mr. Reynold's publication 'Round & About' Farnham and Villages, it is written: *"I HAVE LONG THOUGHT IT A BIT OF A SCANDAL THAT THE REDGRAVE THEATRE IN FARNHAM REMAINS CLOSED AND BOARDED UP. Something is wrong somewhere when a relatively prosperous area like Farnham cannot support its own professional theatre. I know it costs huge amounts to run and grants from Government bodies continue to drop but surely something can be done. Well, the Farnham Theatre Association exists to help the cause. They intend to establish a regional professional theatre in Farnham and reopen the purpose-built and much praised Redgrave Theatre. They have built up tremendous support from theatre professionals and more importantly from the local public so I really do wish them well."*

NOTE: Cllr Reynolds has requested that we remove the above Round & About reference as he says he did not write it. However, as Editor and Publisher of that magazine at the time, he must take responsibility for all that appears within it.

#### **Cllr. Mulliner 51.11 and Cllr. Jim Edwards 57.55**

10. "These proposals could have come forward anytime over the last 18 years – why now?"
11. "We have had 18 years to provide a viable business plan (for the theatre) and we have seen nothing yet?"

#### **FACTS**

Cllr. Edwards has no evidence to support his opinion that there have been no viable business plans for the Redgrave. The viability of the 2006 Farnham Theatre Association Theatre Report and Business Study has never been assessed by Waverley Borough Council. The contract with the developer Crest Nicholson Sainsbury which aims to demolish the theatre, has been used as a reason to prevent this from happening.

The current interest in the Redgrave Theatre by Mr Andrew Welch and by Curzon Cinemas is fortuitous and entirely co-incidental, but which will bring forth a new business proposal as part of an alternative scheme for Brightwells, prompted by the uncertainty surrounding the Crest Nicholson Sainsbury scheme.

---

AC/18/03/15 v7