

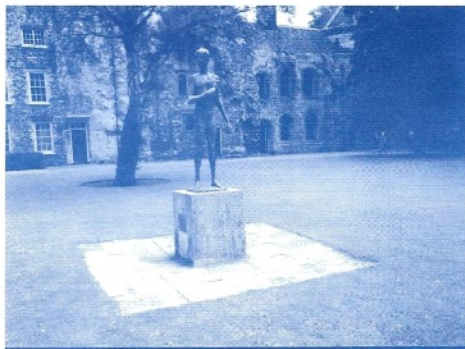
The Bury Society

The Newsletter of the Bury St. Edmunds Society
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WEST FRONT PLANS - BACK TO SQUARE ONE

by Susan Sollohub



The developer told he cannot go ahead with restoring the West Front on the Buildings at Risk Register, has vowed that he will not give up and walk away.

The once-in-a-lifetime venture for developer Mike Spenser-Morris of NHP Development Ltd, Newmarket, has been turned down.

A listed building application was rejected by the owner, St Edmundsbury Borough Council, which means that the work cannot go ahead.

The Bury Society has fought tirelessly for the houses in the ruins to be restored. It had hoped that the latest scheme to save the decaying Grade 1 listed building would create a fitting finale to the sorry saga.

Society chairman David Rees said he was devastated by the decision. "It is very sad that internal structures that won't be seen are having priority at the expense of the future of the historic property. There has to be a balance between maintenance of the old and insertion of the new."

"I don't think the borough and English Heritage have gone far enough in reaching a compromise."

The chairman said an elaborate record of the present fabric had been made.

Although there were reasons why officers ruled on the listed building application, Mr Rees said that in this very important case the issues should have been debated in public by the relevant borough committee.

The developer sought consent for four homes, complete with en suite bathrooms in the atmospheric remains of the famous Benedictine Abbey. Building work was scheduled for this summer or autumn.

Mr Spenser-Morris said he would consider options including seeking withdrawal of the decision or appealing against it which was his right as an applicant.

Mr Spenser-Morris could also submit a fresh listed building application for the work.

He said he was particularly concerned by the borough's decision for officers to rule on the submission under delegated powers. St Edmundsbury councillors should have had the chance to debate the application at a full planning and control committee meeting. The council owns the buildings, which have been decaying for more than 20 years as various schemes have fallen through.

This time proposed changes to the interior fabric have led to stalemate. The developer says English Heritage's demands lack common-sense and logic and that he has no intention of ruining historic features.

Both St Edmundsbury and English Heritage reveal serious concerns about several key elements of the proposals put forward by NHP Development in its listed building application.

"Both had made clear from the start of negotiations with the developer that the West Front was an extremely special Grade 1 listed building.

"The conversion of this unique building into homes fit for the 21st century demands understanding, care and delicacy if its unique qualities are to be maintained"

The authorities blame NHP's intention to use 'inappropriate modern materials and techniques' for the decision.

Despite lengthy negotiations, the borough's view, backed by English Heritage, was that this insistence on such means of repair would also result in further loss of historic material and create possible long term problems for the future of the building.

The statement stresses that the West Front is not just significant for its medieval fabric but also for the remarkable survival of the later houses incorporated since the end of the Middle Ages including the Victorian period. The developer had proposed the demolition of internal walls and the stripping out of substantially complete historic interiors.

Mr Spenser-Morris denies these allegations.

"Removing elements of its 17th, 18th and 19th century history, and preserving one part of its history at the expense of others, would damage its special architectural and historic interest," adds the bodies' statement.

The fate of the West Front, raised in the House of Lords some three decades ago, is now once more uncertain.

The council says it will now look to the future and start exploring other ways of restoring the unique building.

Meanwhile, the authority will weatherproof and protect the West Front as it faces yet another winter. It will have the advantage this time of preliminary work carried out by NHP in preparation for starting the restoration.