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Riverside flats: now minister decides

Residents fire final salvo.

Council offers no opposition.

Final shots have been fired in local residents' year-old battle against the erection of three seven-storey blocks of luxury flats on the beautiful stretch of riverside at Albany Park Road, Kingston.

Their strenuous efforts to stop this development came to a head at a two-day inquiry this week. Now they anxiously await the Minister of Housing's verdict, and wonder to what extent the even tenor of life on this quiet backwater will be affected.

Over 500 people in the area view with apprehension the building of these flats, which they think will mar the beauty of the riverside, and bring in their train a great deal of noise consistent with the comings and goings of cars and tradesmen's vehicles, besides giving a sense of "claustrophobia".

That is their viewpoint, but the developers think otherwise. Attracted by life and work in London, people are flocking to the suburbs. They must have somewhere to live, so that high density population in certain areas is inevitable.

They and local authorities believe that this site is appropriate to building up instead of out, and furthermore think that the buildings will fit in the riverside scene, blending with the lofty trees, and also adding their own imposing attraction.

Mr. J. Ramsey Willis represented the developers, George Wimpey and Co. Mr. A. N. Munday represented Surrey County Council, and Mr. Nigel Bridge appeared on behalf of a large number of objectors, at the inquiry at County Hall on Tuesday and Wednesday, which was conducted by Mr. R. G. M. Chase

Not Tall

The history of this "battle" shows that residents recognise that there must be some development on the site, and their main objection is to its degree.

Buildings must go up, but they should not be tall buildings, was the essence of their case. Mr Ramsey Willis took this point in his opening statement and stated that high buildings were the logical outcome of such a site, bearing in mind the trend towards high density populations in suburban areas.

"This is an example of just the sort of problem where there are green fields round about which must be preserved at all costs and yet high density of population must also be borne in mind", he said.

"When houses such as have been on this site go into the market, the sites must be developed but more intensively than before, and there should be no question of waste of land. This is an obvious case for high density and tall buildings."

"No washing"

He frankly admitted that the appearance of the riverside would be altered, but the 82ft cedar trees, the beeches, elms and other trees would be in a modern setting.

"The riverside wall and walk would be retained, and also the open character of this reach of the Thames highlighted by the trees and beautiful gardens, would be preserved", he said, adding that the swimming pool would be kept and the gardens planted.

Another feature of the flats would be the absence of laundry flapping in the wind. "This is a small domestic point which could be offensive, but the display of laundry will be controlled by a covenant in the lease prohibiting this. Drying will have to be done, if it is done at all, within the flats".

“The appearance of the riverside will be altered to advantage in a modern setting” said Mr Ramsey Willis, adding, “The present houses have not made a notable contribution to the architectural charm of this reach.”

Mr. E.V. Collins, Wimpey’s chief architect, who designed the flats, told the inquiry that when the site was first inspected it was obvious that the redevelopment should be of such a nature that the existing open garden appearance should be retained. It was accepted without question that the fine mature trees on the river frontage, which have through time become identified with this part of the Thames, should remain.

The density accepted for the area was 75 people an acre, but on that basis three-storey buildings would use up too much space, and only a few people would have a view.

A slab block would blank off the depth of the site, and present only a mass building to the river. The best results could be obtained by the proposed three blocks.

These would provide 90 flats in seven-storey blocks, plus a penthouse on each block containing two flats.

Dealing with Albany Park Road site, he said that provision had been made for erecting 90 car ports. It was planned to demolish the existing wall, build another backing onto one section of the car ports, and to fill in the space with a bank of raised earth, on which shrubbery would be planted.

Car ports

Asked by Mr Mundy about the fact that the car ports would extend beyond the building line, Mr Collins said that as present planned this would be the case, but the developers were open to discussion with regard to erecting the car ports to conform to the building line.

Mr Mundy: If this application is successful has the company in mind developing to the north in similar fashion? – Yes

Development of this sort may well have an effect on provision of local authority services and also on education? – Yes

Mr. Mundy told Mr. Chase that when the application came before the county council it had already been considered by Kingston Corporation and the riverside area planning sub-committee, and by Barnes, Richmond, Surbiton and Esher Councils. “None of these raised objections so they must have been conscious of the effect of such development along the river frontage”.

The county council felt that the application should be approved in principle because the site was in the residential area of the Development Plan.

Four storeys

Dr Thomas Sharp, the nationally famous planning consultant and landscape architect, said the proposed density of 75 was too high, and he thought that a density of 50 would be more appropriate, which would bring down the height of the buildings to four storeys.

One disadvantage of the present scheme was that people on the river looking at the flats from an angle would see them not separately but as a solid wall. People in Albany Park Road would be given a sense of claustrophobia.

Mr. Stewart Bates, a barrister, of 26, Albany Park Road, who has taken a leading part on behalf of local objectors, said that it had always been realised that some development was inevitable, but it was a question of degree.

Referring to the top of the wall which it was proposed to build in Albany Park Road, “It would look for all the world like the top of a public lavatory.”

Aesthetic note: Mrs. Helena Morrell, better known as Helena Grose, also spoke at the inquiry on behalf of a group of authors, dramatists, poets, scenarists and essayists, who meet at her house in Lower Road for collaboration in plays and for “general relaxation in this beauty spot by the river”.
