

6 July 2007

The Snowdown Colliery Project – The Community's Aspirations for the Snowdown Colliery

1. Summary

Snowdown Colliery is a group of buildings, standing on approximately 41 hectares (100 acres) of land in the Kent countryside, which is scheduled for demolition and redevelopment as an industrial estate. Local residents have formed the Snowdown and Kent Coalfield Heritage Group (SKaCH) to prepare an alternative scheme for the site and has commissioned a team of experts to prepare a study of the feasibility of finding new uses for the buildings.

2. Background

Snowdown Colliery is the last vestiges of a coalmine in Kent standing roughly midway between Dover and Canterbury and close to the village of Aylesham which was built to house the families of some 650 miners. The mine dates from 1907 when the first shaft was sunk and it remained productive until it was closed in 1987. The twenty surviving buildings date from various times in the first half of the 20th Century and, being of robust construction, have resisted the best efforts of nature to reclaim them. Since the buildings of Kent's other coal mines have been almost totally demolished Snowdown is unique and two of the buildings have recently been listed Grade 2 by English Heritage. The freehold of the land, which includes substantial open space used as waste tips and marshalling yards, on which the buildings stand is in private hands and a long lease is held by the Coal Authority (the body which acts as residuary authority for the coal interest on behalf of the DTI).

The South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) is charged with finding a new use for the site with a view to creating employment and has prepared a scheme for developing it as an industrial estate. However a group of local people has developed the view that the colliery might lend itself to refurbishment and adaptation to provide educational, social and cultural facilities for both a local and a visiting public, whilst creating employment and training opportunities in the furtherance of SEEDA's remit. SKaCH (Snowdown and Kent Coalfield Heritage Group) has been formed by the residents to pursue these aims. SKaCH is in the process of registering as a Company Limited by the Guarantee of its Members and has applied for registration as a charity with the normal wide range of powers in pursuit of its objectives.

3. SKaCH's Objectives

SKaCH has five objectives in mind for the site

1. The restoration of the buildings and their development for new uses
2. The celebration of mining in the Kent Coalfield
3. The creation of economic activity and the employment that goes with it
4. The making of opportunities for education and training for the local community
5. The making of opportunities for fun for the local and wider communities

4. New Uses for Snowdown Colliery

SKaCH has been stimulated by many successful projects to convert industrial buildings to post industrial uses. The Maltings at Snape (brewery maltings converted to concert hall, arts and crafts education centre, nature studies, retail), Saltaire (textile mill to art gallery, retail, catering and offices), Gloucester Docks (warehouses and canal buildings to museum, studios, residential, retail, office with major education facilities to come), Bristol Waterfront (warehouses and shipyard to museums, art gallery, cinema, retail, education), Birmingham (factories, warehouses and school to art gallery, artists' studios, restaurants, offices and chamber scale concert hall) are but a few examples where repair and remodelling of hitherto redundant buildings have provided a new purpose, new activities, public amenities, restoration of the landscape and opportunities for employment.

At June 2007, there are two driving imperatives for the project:

1. The restoration of the surviving buildings of Snowdown Colliery; and
2. The need, articulated by the local community, to mark 80 years' of coalmining in the Kent Coalfield.

SKaCH believes, as a preliminary position, that the heart of the project should be a museum devoted to the history and development of energy ranging from the early use of wind and water, the use and development of fossil fuels, through nuclear power to the modern quest for renewable sources, with a particular focus on mining as practised in the Kent Coalfield. The museum itself should be a visible example of environmentally conscious design, and should be able to offer both a serious contribution to the formal and informal education of all age groups as well as an entertaining day out. SKaCH is conscious that the capacity to house other cultural and social activities may be essential both to appeal to the widest public and to contribute to a viable project and it is therefore encouraging all concerned to consider the fullest potential of the Snowdown site.

Additional uses for the site:

1. The Teaching and Practise of Building Crafts

The local community is substantially based on the villages built to house those who worked at the Kent Coalfield, so it is a reasonable assumption that the in-house building skills employed in the mines are still available in the community. The aim of SKaCH is to revive those skills to enable the buildings to be restored on a self-build basis providing employment and training opportunities and giving the community the opportunity for ownership of the project which is essential to a successful outcome. Since the Government has ambitions for a huge expansion of house building in the region a pool of craft skills could be created which would provide an opportunity to develop a serious training programme for young people in the local community. Buildings on the site could provide workshop facilities for such a training programme as well as opportunities on an adult education basis for courses for those who wish to build and maintain their own property. This would also provide the skills necessary for the maintenance and operation of the site. An emphasis on the heavier building trades would not preclude those who might wish to develop skills in such crafts as furniture making or decoration. A workshop might be devoted to the restoration of unwanted furniture and small domestic appliances for recycling.

2. The Teaching and Practise of Horticulture and Woodland Management

The land around the colliery buildings, notwithstanding the presence of mining waste, has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for natural revival, with much evidence of self-seeded trees, shrubs and grasses and a variety of wild life. Woodland for coppicing would be entirely in keeping with the Snowdown concept in providing: material for rural crafts; charcoal for fuel (particularly for a café kitchen); a means of capturing carbon; wildlife habitat; walking and cycle trails and even a cable car built on the tradition of ropes and pulleys that is central to the mining industry. The management of woodland might sit very comfortably with the management of a horticultural strand, with a particular emphasis on growing plants

that are suitable for the increasingly arid climate that is a predicted consequence of rising temperatures and for demonstrating techniques for growing both food and decorative plants with minimal ecological impact. Alongside an 'eco-garden' a shop could be developed for the sale of plants grown on site and locally farmed produce.

3. The Development of Commercial Start-Up and Development Facilities

Buildings could be converted into workshops, offices and storage for small enterprises looking for their first base. Such enterprises would need to have commercial ambitions that are not unsympathetic to the Snowdown concept. There may also be scope for adding new buildings to the site to provide for expansion of successful enterprises and to increase the options for diversity of commercial activity. The immediately adjacent railway station, proximity to the countryside and a culturally active site might well be attractive to creative industries, particularly those devoted to dealing with global warming. New buildings would need to be architecturally sympathetic to Snowdown and would need to contribute to the carbon-positive concept.

5. The Teaching and Practise of Performing Arts

The suitability for some of the buildings for conversion to performing arts suggests that these should be central to the project, providing facilities for active participants as well as for audiences. A programme of use by amateur groups, particularly drawing on the Brass Band and Male Voice Choir traditions of the mining communities, together with an annual Aylesham Community Play, could be interspersed with visits by professional performers. Snowdown might be developed as an outpost of the Canterbury Festival as well as a focus for developing a festival in Dover, given the existence of a frequent rail service to both. The presence of performing facilities on the site would enable a year round programme of education and recreation activities for all age groups to be developed.

6. The Teaching and Practise of Visual Arts

Some buildings would easily convert to studios for renting out to artists and it is envisaged that they would spend a portion of their time regularly teaching their skills to the local community. Sites for the exhibition and sale of sculpture could be set up on the land surrounding the site and smaller works could be exhibited inside the buildings. While SKaCH, given the history of the site, would like to see the facilities used by artists who work on an industrial scale in timber, stone, metal, clay and glass, this would not preclude the practise and teaching of fine art skills.

7. Provision of Meeting and Hospitality Facilities

A café drawing on locally farmed produce will provide refreshments to visitors to the whole site during appropriate hours. Since performance spaces, if sympathetically designed, may also serve for meetings, exhibitions, lectures, social events and the like, the café should also provide the nucleus of a catering operation to support such events.

5. The Buildings and their potential

While SKaCH will welcome the observations of the Feasibility Study on the potential of each building for new use, the following is the starting point of the Feasibility Study Team:

1. Building No 10 – No 3 Winder House and Power House. This building, 43.5 m long x 15m wide x approx 15m high, might lend itself readily to conversion to a simple auditorium, seating 500-600, and capable of housing lectures, demonstrations, concerts, simple theatrical (plays, opera, dance, entertainment) performances, meetings, temporary exhibitions and social events. The adjacent Buildings No 11 – Lamp Room and No 12 – Pump House could provide supporting public and backstage facilities.

2. Building No 2 – No 2 (Koepe) Winder House. This building 27m long x 16.5m wide x approx 16m high max and divided into two cells would make an excellent Energy Museum which would be appropriate given its significance as coalfield heritage. Alternatively the two spaces would make a fine pair of music studios to be used in conjunction with Building No 10. The larger of the two spaces would make an excellent circus arena. The adjacent Building No 1 – Fan House 17.5m x 16.5 m x approx 12m high at its maximum could possibly be adapted to provide supporting facilities. These two buildings are Listed Grade 2.

3. Buildings No 14 - Archives, No15 - Housing Department, No16 - Locomotive Shed. These buildings (135 sq m footprint of mixed heights) grouped as they are around an open area in the south west corner of the site and closest to the railway station with the possibility of pedestrian access, might provide an alternative location for an indoor and outdoor Energy Exhibition or a group of buildings ancillary to the operation of the principal facilities.

4. Buildings Nos 17-20 – Stores and Workshops. These buildings, with an aggregate footprint of 1575 sqm and a height to the ridge equivalent to three storeys could provide suitable accommodation for arts and craft studios and for maintenance operations.

5. Building No 6 – Office. This building, 17.5 m x 16.5m and single storey, could provide a café and kitchen as well as a base for the catering operation.

6. Buildings Nos 7-9 – Offices. These buildings, with an aggregate footprint of 510 sq m most of it two storeys high, would provide administrative accommodation for the project

7. Building No 4 – Vehicle Repair Shop. This building, 16.5m x 8 m and at least two storeys high might provide a base for horticultural operations.

8. Building No 3 – Explosives Store. This building, 14 m x 5 m is already earmarked for conversion to a hibernaculum.

6. A Feasibility Study to Test the Concept

SEEDA agreed that SKaCH should produce a feasibility study to test the suitability of the buildings of Snowdown Colliery for new uses to provide employment, training and amenities for the immediate and wider communities. The study will address the practical and financial implications of any capital project that emerges and will also consider its economic viability in income and expenditure terms, since SKaCH is under no illusion that these considerations might constrain its wide ranging ambitions. On the advice of Judith Martin, Project Organiser of the Industrial Buildings Preservation Trust which recently obtained heritage listing for No 3 Winding House and the Fan House, SKaCH appointed Richard York, an arts administrator experienced in commissioning the design, construction and management of arts buildings, to design a feasibility study and to make proposals for the skills required to carry it out.

7. Timescale

SEEDA has given SKaCH a three month period for the preparation of a feasibility study and work commenced on 25 June 2007. A timescale is shown at Appendix 1.

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