

Report on land at La Jaonerre es Rocques, Rue des Paysans au Val, St Saviour

Property reference: F005310000

Planning Application: FULL / 2017 / 0947

It has been proposed that an area of land known as La Jaonere es Rocques should be developed as a commercial camping site by its owner Mr D Barnes and a proposed development plan has been submitted to the States of Guernsey Planning Service by the owners agent PF&A Ltd.

The land is within the Agricultural Priority Area and Mr A J Rowles, Director of Planning, has requested that Mr Barnes 'commissions a professional study of the land to Demonstrate that it cannot positively contribute to the commercial agricultural use of the APA. In particular, Mr Rowles anticipated that the report should address matters such as the:

1. Condition of the land
2. Size of the site/piece of land
3. Access
4. Topography
5. Drainage
6. Nature of the proposed use and whether the proposed use would allow the long term use of the land for agriculture to remain.

In addition, questions have been asked about the existing use of the land and what the applicant's intention is for his horticultural business that currently uses the site for soil, compost, materials and machinery storage.

The Site – La Jaonerre es Rocques

The land is shown in the 1898 States of Guernsey map as being an area of heath and rough grassland on the St Saviours escarpment. The map identifies a 'Sand Pit' towards the Eastern side of the site. The 1962 States map indicates that a track entered the property adjacent to the road junction on to Rue des Paysans au Val, which looped through the property before crossing adjacent land to the South and providing an access to land North of La Pomare. The full extent of this track was not shown on the States 1979 map but it linked to a track that still connects to a lane North of La Pomare. In each of these three States maps the land at this property was shown as heath or rough grassland but in the HMSO Ministry of Defence map published in 1986 this was shown as 'scrub', which more accurately describes the current situation.

The Size and Condition of the land

The area of land is shown as being 4 verges 12.2 perch on the States of Guernsey map. It is situated on high land inland from the West coast of Guernsey at an elevation of

between the 120 ft (36.5m) and 124ft (37.75m) contours. The highest point on the land is a hougue at 130 ft (39.6m) which is near to the top of the escarpment.

The underlying rock is Granodiorite Gneiss of the Perelle type. This outcrops in the nearby roadside bank and on the property. Within the land area there are a number of excavations where exposed greatly decomposed gneiss rock has been removed. The British Geological Survey's 1986 map indicates that an area to the South and West of this site is a Raised Beach at approximately the 30 metre contour. It is thought that this was laid down when sea levels were considerably higher than at present. The soil type in the areas of the raised beach is sandy and although La Jaonerre es Rocques is not within the known raised beach area it is interesting that the 1898 States map identified a 'sand pit' on the property, suggesting that this area might also have been a remnant of the raised beach.

The Soil and Land Evaluation of Guernsey that was commissioned from UK Consultants ADAS and surveyed in 1988 indicates that the soil over most of the site and the area to the South and West of La Jaonerre es Rocques was shallow loamy soil, which is typical of soil on the escarpment where soil erosion has taken place. This soil was characterised by ADAS in their report as being typically sandy silt loam from 0 – 30 cm depth, sandy silt loam from 30 – 35cm with medium angular stones (decomposed rock) with some soil between them. A small patch in the North East corner of the site was said to be deep loamy soil but when I visited the site recently I saw no evidence of this. The land in this area had been excavated exposing the decomposed gneiss subsoil.

As most of the site at La Jaonerre es Rocque appears to have been quite thick scrub in 1986 (States aerial photograph) it is unlikely that the ADAS soil scientists studied this small area of land in any detail and so it may be posited that the depth of soil that was shown as present on this land in the 1988/89 ADAS maps might be an extrapolation from the surveyed areas of land surrounding it. This suggests that even before the use of the land for wood burning, chipping and composting (as from the early 1990's), the soil at this property was even less deep and more shallow than the land surrounding.

It is likely that this land was much poorer quality than the land surrounding it as, if this were not the case, it is difficult to understand why successive generations of agriculturalists failed to clear the scrub, cultivate the land and crop it with grass for livestock grazing. The fact that this area was left as a rough area of scrub and rough grassland suggests that the land in this location was considered to be of little or no value for farming.

There is a track within the property leading from the access road and composting site, through a cutting to what appeared to be a German concrete bunker from the Occupation. Mr Barnes informed me that this was a German searchlight position and shelter. He said that there was a machine gun position at the top of the slope going down to the bunker and that, according to the previous owner, Mr Hugh Lenfesty (one time States Archivist), now deceased, there was another bunker buried in the top right hand corner (the North East corner) of the area that was now used as a 'yard' for the parking of vehicles.

The Agricultural Land Classification of Guernsey that was also carried out in 1988 / 89 classified agricultural land in Guernsey into 5 classes from Grade 1 Excellent to Grade 4 Poor Quality land, based on the degree of limitations of the soil for growing a full range of agricultural crops. Grade 4 land tends to be either shallow soil on an escarpment or very wet soil in a stream valley. This land on the escarpment was classified as Grade 4 Poor Quality land, which is the lowest classification of land in Guernsey, but still suitable for growing agricultural crops of grass. The small area of deep loamy soil that apparently existed in the North East corner of the site in 1988, when the land was surveyed, appeared to have been subsequently removed, exposing the decomposed gneiss subsoil beneath.

When the site was visited recently it was found that most of the land surface had been quite dramatically changed over the years. On entering the site there is a large area of bare land to the right on which equipment is stored and soil, manure and green waste is composted and screened. High banks have been constructed around the composting area within the site and also surrounding the Eastern and Southern part of the site. To the immediate left (East) of the entrance there is an area that has been excavated where an area of decomposed gneiss rock is exposed. Next there is a narrow track and cutting to the entrance to a German bunker as mentioned above. Beyond this is an area of hard standing where vehicles are parked. To the right (West) there is a large open area of bare soil and rock where soil is stacked and material is composted in windrows.

Much of the remainder of the site was covered with scrub. Leading towards the South West there was a track that led around to a small grass field or paddock area. To the North of this open grassland area there was a track leading through the blackthorn scrub to a second excavation where decomposed gneiss was exposed.

Throughout the main area of the site, including the areas that were used as a yard and as areas for the storage and screening of top soil, the soil seemed to have been removed, exposing sub-soil and rock. It was understood that before Mr Barnes rented the site from Mr Lenfesty (which he later purchased in 2009), the site had been used for wood chipping and as a soil composting site. The high banks surrounding the site had apparently been built at this time. Later, during the period when Mr Barnes rented or owned the site, it was understood that the banks surrounding the site had been raised further by the addition of soil and compost scrapped from the composting / soil storage site.

Mr Barnes was questioned about the built up banks surrounding the Eastern and Southern part of the site, that were now considerably higher than the level of the site and the surrounding fields. He said that he understood that a considerable amount of sub-soil had been brought to the site when the German authorities were excavating the nearby Miras Battery. He thought that the obvious concrete blocks, plastic, etc., in part of the surrounding bank were dumped there when La Houquette School was built. He said "As children in the 1970's we would go and play on the piles of rubble on our bikes and I still have friends that recall it as the 'tip at the top of the Val'. He said "At that time there were many unofficial dumping sites around the island and that is precisely

what this site was used for.” He also stated that “On the photograph mentioned by the Planning Department you can easily see the bank of rubble that has blocks and plastic protruding from it. “This has an Elderberry tree growing over the buried material which I would estimate to be 25-30 years old, but is growing in backfill, elevated at least five feet above the original soil level, which (he suggested) would be in keeping with the theory that the area was used for dumping soil from the Miras Battery and from the construction of La Houquette School.” I cannot add to this but certainly the banks around the site that has been used for commercial composting and wood chipping operations is very substantial and well above the height of soil in the surrounding fields.

To the West of the large composting site there is a small area or ‘field’ that is surrounded by blackthorn scrub and by pine trees. It was accessible on a track to the South of the site that appeared to go over a part of the surrounding bank. The soil depth and quality were investigated and soil samples were taken using a soil auger. The soil depth in this area was very variable but shallower on the Northern side of the small field. There was a fine sandy silt loam top-soil in this area that extended down to about 30 cm, below which I struck rock in some places and in others a granular gravel of decomposed gneiss rock. In other parts to the South of this small area I was able to auger down to 60cm before striking rock. Surrounding this area there was very dense blackthorn scrub with some well grown planted trees. This small area of land is the only area within the site that could be described as useful agricultural land.

Photographic evidence

In addition to the States of Guernsey and Ministry of Defence maps indicating that this area had remained as an area of scrub and rough grassland since at least 1898, there is evidence of change shown in the States aerial photographs that are available from Digimap. The 1957 photograph is quite blurred and not very distinct but whereas the surrounding land was fields that were clearly being used for productive agricultural purposes, La Jaonerre es Rocques appears to have been mainly dense scrub but with some small areas that might have been cultivated in the South West and in the North East corners of the site.

These areas of cultivated land were more distinct and visible in the 1962 aerial photograph. By 1979 it appears that most of the land had reverted to scrub but there was a very clear track coming into the site from the Rue des Paysans au Val. The track down to the German fortifications is clearly visible. The 1986 aerial photograph was again quite blurred but seems to support what was seen in the earlier representations. Then in 1990 there appears to have been a big change in the area to the South West of the site (the current area that is mainly cropped with grass in 2017), which had been cleared of scrub and cultivated, apparently with the field immediately to the South and West of the site. There is a clear access from the cultivated agricultural field to the South and the smaller area of cultivated land within the Jaonerre es Rocques site. The track coming into the site from the Val road now seems to loop around to what was later to become the composting area, and there is some evidence that the site has been used for dumping waste materials. The small area of land to the North East is now thick scrub.

By 2009 one can clearly see that a large area of land is being used for composting and that this appears to be surrounded by a substantial bank that is covered with vegetation. The land to the North East is still scrub although there is a small area where dumping seems to have occurred. The small 'field' to the South West of the site appears to be in grass and surrounded with scrub although there is clearly an access to that land from the agricultural field to the South.

Coming up to date, by 2016 the composting site was still of similar dimensions although there was clearly a lot more equipment parked on the site. The small area to the North East had once again been cleared and a track had been opened up from the composting site to provide an internal access to the small 'field' to the South West. The previous entrance from the agricultural field to the South had been closed and there was apparently a significant growth of scrub that prevented access. Therefore, this small area of grassland is now only accessible from the main composting site. As the land to the South and West is no longer in the same ownership this small area of agricultural land is effectively landlocked and is only accessible over the built up bank from the composting site.

Surrounding Land

The land to the East of the site is near the top of the escarpment and is very good quality soil, similar to that found on the plateau. This was assessed in the 1988/9 Soil and Land Evaluation of Guernsey as being Deep Loamy soil over clay and classified as Grade 1 Land. This has had a succession of agricultural crops over the years as shown in the aerial photographs, including potato crops which require high quality stone free land.

To the South and East the fields have been continuously used for agricultural purposes, at least since the 1898 States Map of Guernsey. To the South a large rectangular field has been used by Mr Andrew de Garis, a Dairy farmer from Les Belles, St Saviours, in which he has grown cereals and grass crops in recent years that have included wild flowers, such as corn marigold. South of this below a steep escarpment is La Pomare. The owners of La Pomare have rented out fields for horse grazing both on the escarpment and on the wet meadow fields to the South West of Rue de Pomare, but they have also planted an orchard and a small vineyard on the South facing slopes of the escarpment.

To the East on the sloping escarpment the land was rented by the Luff brothers who farmed at Les Frances, St Saviours until the mid-1990's when they gave up dairy farming. It is believed that this was taken over by Mrs Sue Dorey for horses. Other land in this area was farmed by the Dorey family from their farming base at La Lorier Farm, Rue de Lorier, St Saviours. Since the death of Mr Perrin Dorey and the closure of that farm some 10 years ago, this land has been used by Mrs Dorey for her horses.

Therefore, although these areas have all been classified as Grade 4 agricultural land with significant limitations on the crops that can be successfully grown, they are being successfully used for agricultural purposes, albeit mainly for horses. However, the land

that is subject to this application could not now be used for agricultural purposes, either due to the lack of soil on the site or to the lack of access to the small area of suitable agricultural land in the South West corner of the site. This small area of agricultural grassland within the Jaonerre es Rocques site is so small that it is unlikely to interest any farmer or horse owner unless the scrub was cleared and it was incorporated into the L shaped field to the South and East of it. However, as noted above, this is in different ownership at the present time and this amalgamation of the two fields is unlikely.

Access, Topography and Drainage

These questions have been largely dealt with in the foregoing comments. Whilst the size of the whole site is 4 verges 12.2 perch, only a very small area of that has been used for agricultural purposes. Since the latest change in ownership in 2009 this could only be accessed through what is now the main composting site and so this area is effectively land-locked.

It is understood that Mr Barnes has used the area of land at La Jaonerre es Rocques for its current use since 2002, when he rented the property from Mr Lenfesty. Beofre that it is understood that his brother, Mr Marcus Barnes used the site for about 10 years for his tree surgery / wood chipping business.

The topography is as explained in the comments about land quality. The site is near the top of the St Saviours escarpment which has meant that over many years there has been a natural erosion of soil down the slope from the top of the hill, which has resulted in the shallow soils that are typical in this area of moderately and steeply sloping land.

Drainage through the soil should be very good on this site. The soil that does exist is free draining and the sub-soil of decomposed gneiss will not impede the drainage of rainwater from the site.

Nature of the proposed use and whether the proposed use would allow the long term use of the land for agriculture to remain.

It is understood that the draft plans that were submitted to the Planning Service by PF&A Ltd on behalf of Mr Barnes detailed permanent holiday dwellings that had plumbed in water and sewage services. It is understood that Mr Barnes now wishes to revise those plans and would only wish to use the small grass area (field) to the South West of the site during the summer months for non-permanent accommodation and he would no longer wish to install sewage and other services to the individual camping sites. It is understood that in his revised proposals these would be temporary camping structures that would be removed each year. As such there would be no requirement to apply for a 'change of use' of this area of agricultural land. The land would remain as agricultural grassland and could return to agricultural use when not required during the tourist season.

As far as we are aware the remainder of the site has not been used for agricultural purposes. In recent years this area has been used as a composting site and as a base for Mr Barnes horticultural, gardening and landscaping business. Prior to that the whole site seems to have been scrub or rough grassland. Therefore, although it might have been classed as agricultural land there has been no active agricultural or farming activity on this area of land. As such, there could be no good reason for this area of land to be retained for agricultural use as it is clear that it has not been used for productive agriculture in the past.

The existing horticultural business based at La Jaonerre es Rocques.

Mr Barnes has stated that it would be his intention to discontinue his existing horticultural business that uses this site if permission was granted to develop the area for his intended tourism business. He has stated that as a consequence he would not need to seek or obtain another site from which to undertake his horticultural landscaping business.

Conclusions

Most of the land on this site has not been used for agricultural purposes within living memory. It appears that since 1898, when the States of Guernsey map was produced, most of the area has been scrub or rough grassland.

It is understood that the current use of the land has been very similar since 2002 when Mr Danny Barnes took over the tenancy of La Jaonerre Rocques from his brother.

A small area of land to the South West of the site that is accessed from the main composting area, has been used for agricultural purposes in the fairly recent past, but it is a very small area and there is no readily available access to this area of grassland, which due to the shallow nature of the soil is likely to readily dry out during the summer months and be non-productive. It is understood that Mr Barnes would not wish to change the use of this area of agricultural land and his intention would be to retain it in agricultural use in the long term, but he is seeking permission to use the land for temporary tourist accommodation during the summer months. It is understood that he no longer wishes to create permanent bases (or units of tourist accommodation) on this land or to connect each of the accommodation sites to permanent services.

It is very unlikely that the area of land at La Jaonerre es Rocques has any significance for agriculture. A change of use of the areas of La Jaonerre es Rocques that have been used as a composting site, etc., for Mr Barnes business in recent years is unlikely to cause any loss to farming or agriculture. It has not been used for agriculture in the past and most probably could not be used for agriculture in the future unless the site was levelled and a large quantity of soil was imported. The areas of scrub provide a beneficial site for wildlife biodiversity and nature conservation and it is understood that this will be retained.

It is most unlikely that this area of land could positively contribute to the commercial agricultural use of the Agricultural Priority Area.

Dr Andrew Casebow
26 October, 2017.

N.B. In 1988 Andrew Casebow was a consultant working for ADAS as a Senior Agricultural Adviser in Guernsey. He was in the Island on a 4 year secondment from the consultancy firm ADAS, which was a part of the UK Ministry of Agriculture. As part of his role in Guernsey he was responsible for the commissioning and local management of the 'Soil and Land Evaluation of Guernsey' project.