

Berinsfield Neighbourhood Development Plan STATUS OF QUEENFORD LAKES WATER SPORTS CENTRE (BER24)



Aerial view over Queenford Lakes showing the lakes with new causeways

1 Current situation

1.1 Queenford Lakes is an active watersports centre of long-standing (nearing 50 years) which operates year-round as a national 'Centre of Excellence' for water skiing and wakeboarding. It also provides top-class facilities for angling, open-water swimming and jet skiing. It is designated by the BWSW (British Water Ski & Wakeboard) and by the RAF as its 'Home for Sport' in the UK for water skiing and wakeboarding.

1.2 A Berinsfield Angling Syndicate has held fishing rights at Queenford Lakes for over 15 years with the site recording many record-breaking fish in the past some of which made the Guinness Book of Records at the time in 1985 and 1987.



Open-water swimmers limber up



Top water skiers train at Queenford Lakes

1.3 The lakes are also used on a daily basis by Berinsfield-based Williams Performance Tenders (Britain's largest boat-builder by volume) for R&D and water testing.



A Williams tender being tested on Queenford Lake



A record-breaking angling lake

2 Planning History

2.1 The site was acquired by the current landowner in 1990 after Amey Group Ltd (Amey Roadstone Corporation) had finished extracting sand and gravel from the area and had been taken over by Hanson Group. The site benefitted from a number of extant planning consents including permission to infill part of the lake, on-site security accommodation and for use of the site for recreational purposes (M.903/66) in response to an application described in 1966 as **“Use of lagoon for aquatic recreational purposes, to develop the area from which sand and gravel has been worked as a water amenity area”**. There were two conditions attached to the 1966 consent which limited the recreational use to sailing, swimming, angling and use of one powered craft for rescue purposes.



Site access road from Burcot Lane in 1989



Site later used to landfill old WWII concrete runways

2.2 In 1993, the new owner made his first planning application (P93/W0708) described as **“Use by powered craft, for angling and sailing and as a Local Nature Reserve. Stationing of temporary site store, office and changing facilities (Three year temporary period)”**. Objections were received from OCC County Ecologist, Oxfordshire Ornithological Society, BBOWT, CPRE, Dorchester-on-Thames Society and 24 bird watchers on the grounds of loss of the site for over wintering wildfowl interest. Some 56 letters of support for the changes were received from watersport organisations and enthusiasts. SODC refused the application in March 1994 but, on the same day, granted consent for two advertising signs which read “Watersports Centre Now Open”.

2.3 The refusal was quickly followed by a second application proposing to remove the two restrictive conditions from the original 1966 recreational use consent. This time there was no provision for either a local nature reserve or for temporary 3-year use. Again conservation groups objected citing the complete incompatibility of watersports, especially powered craft activities, with the interests for nature conservation and again SODC refused but this time the owner appealed and a Public Inquiry took place over two days on 7/8 March 1995 in the Dorchester Parish Hall.

2.4 On 20th April 1995, the appeal Inspector allowed the appeal and granted planning permission for the removal of both the restrictive conditions attached to the 1966 recreational use consent. In summing up he said *“I have come to the overall conclusion on the main issue that, in the circumstances now prevailing and likely to continue, to remove both conditions 1 and 2 would not give rise to any greater harm to bird life or to the enjoyment of the countryside than could occur within the scope of the permission in its original terms.”*



Causeways under construction in 1998



Main access off Burcot Lane as it looked in 1989

2.5 Since 1995, many more planning consents have been granted on this site including:

- Secure lock-up building
- Deposit inert waste material to create causeways across the lake
- Clubhouses, Offices, Café, Shop, Workshop, Fuel tanks and Storage
- Demolition of existing dwelling and erection of a replacement
- Erection of a water ski judges tower with observation balconies, boat lifts and associated facilities

2.6 The waterbody is now divided by the construction of causeways to form three separate, but inter-linked, areas for watersport recreation.

3 Lake Status as Local Wildlife Site

3.1 Some consultees to the Berinsfield Neighbourhood Development Plan have raised the issue that Queenford Lake Water Sports Centre (BER24) currently has a non-statutory designation as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) due to its previous interest for overwintering birds. This is despite the fact that this former mineral site is used extensively year-round for jet skiing, water skiing, wakeboarding fishing and open-water swimming.

3.2 At some point AFTER the 1995 planning appeal decision allowed unrestricted powerboat use of the water, conservation groups decided to designate Queenford Lakes Watersports Centre as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) in an effort to prevent future development of the site. Although this was a non-statutory designation, the site is currently still listed by Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) as a LWS despite Queenford not meeting the current DEFRA requirements for site selection. Interestingly conservation groups did not and never have designated Dorchester Sailing Club or Orchid & Cemetery Fishing Lakes as an LWS.

3.3 The land owner has now formally applied to have the site deselected due to it not meeting the current DEFRA requirements for site selection. The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Officer working for TVERC and based within OCC offices has stated (via email dated 24.02.2015) that “**There is insufficient information on the bird interest to make a decision as to whether the site meets the criteria for selection as a Local Wildlife Site**” and “**At this time the panel have deferred making a decision due to the lack of information for the bird interest of the site**”. The site owner has also appealed this decision to defer.

3.4 An independent review of the site ecology value against published local wildlife site designation selection criteria was conducted by James Johnston Ecology in January 2014 and the full report can be accessed via the Parish Council website under the neighbourhood planning tab + Queenford Lakes Watersports Centre. See www.berinsfield-pc.gov.uk

3.5 James Johnston states in his report that – “To reach the LWS selection criteria for non-breeding birds, notable species of birds must “frequently” use the lake in moderate numbers. No evidence has been provided by TVERC confirming such frequent use of Queenford lake by notable birds, and it seems very unlikely that notable birds could frequently use this lake, with the un-restricted high levels of year-round powered craft activity that occurs”.

3.6 In his summary, he says – “The past LWS designation is now inappropriate and clearly incompatible with the lawfully consented powered water sports uses of this lake”.

3.7 Contrary to DEFRA recommendations for non-statutory LWS designation:

No formal site survey has ever taken place

Any bird count data that is available is now almost 25 years old

The owner does not support this designation

There is no public access to the site

There is no management plan for the site and thus

The site has no educational value as an LWS.

3.8 TVERC claims that Queenford Lakes Watersports Centre is an integral part of an important suite of lakes in the Dorchester area but no such designation is applied to the nearby Dorchester sailing club or Orchid & Cemetery fishing lakes none of which is used as intensively as Queenford Lakes.

3.9 Furthermore, no reliable up-to-date bird count evidence exists. This would have to have taken place with the prior approval of the landowner and, in any event, would be meaningless without a record of the time it was taken and whether any of the permitted water-based activity was then taking place.

4 Previously-developed Land

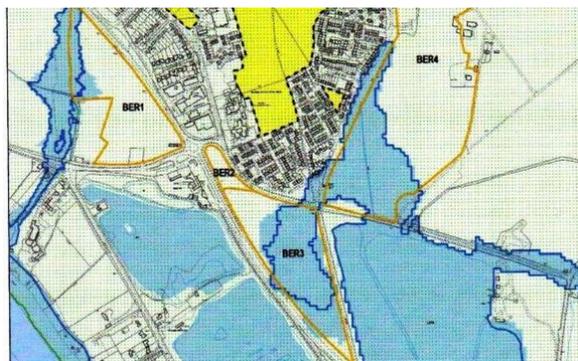
4.1 The NPPF defines previously developed land as “*land which is or was occupied by a permanent structure, including the curtilage of the developed land*” but excludes land which has been “*developed for minerals extraction or waste disposal by landfill purposes where provision for restoration has been made through development control procedures*”. No such “*provision for restoration*” existed as part of ARC’s 1950s planning consents but, in any event, the site has long since been “*occupied by several permanent structures*”.



View from the main gates on Burcot Lane taken in 1989 showing evidence of previously developed land and the same view today

5 Flooding

5.1 According to the Environment Agency, large parts of the BER24 appear on the flood map and are in danger of flooding. Their flood map shows the water-filled areas as being at risk but, whilst water levels do fluctuate from summer to winter, at no time in the past 25 years have these areas got close to bursting their banks or caused any sort of flooding. Curiously, this map also shows just half of the water area of the adjacent Drayton Lake as being at risk of flooding!



According to the Environment Agency, Berinsfield lakes flood whereas Dorchester lakes do not

5.2 However, any development of the Queenford Lakes site will take place on those areas of the site where dry land is shown not to flood and are, in any case, above the AOD levels for neighbouring Dorchester-on-Thames which are shown (using a more accurate modelling technique) to be at no risk of flooding. (See flood map above).

6 Site Development

6.1 The Berinsfield Neighbourhood Development Plan contains details of proposed development at the Queenford Lakes site which will provide employment opportunities for local residents.



Lakeside housing at the award-winning development in Watermead, Aylesbury

6.2 There is interest from hoteliers who see the future development of Culham and the proximity to Oxford, Abingdon and Wallingford as an opportunity to meet growing demand at the lakes in Berinsfield (see letter from Four Pillars Hotel Group – Appendix 1).

6.3 Berinsfield's biggest employer and the UK's largest manufacturer of boats, Williams Performance Tenders Limited, is currently based in the Vogue Industrial Estate. Their lease expires in six years' time and the company has expressed an interest in re-locating to the lakes. (see letter from Williams Performance Tenders – Appendix 2).



The popular waterside café at Benson



lakeside café at Watermead, Aylesbury

6.4 There is also an opportunity to create a lakefront café with increased public access together with a number of lakefront eco-homes - possibly for self-build. Recent village consultations have supported these proposals and the landowner is now working with the Berinsfield Parish Council and others to turn this vision into a reality.

6.5 You can contact the owner or operators of Queenford Lakes Watersports Centre to discuss plans for this site or any other aspect of the information contained in this response via email - queenford_ski@msn.com

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Lake Estates
June 2015

APPENDIX 1
Letter from Four Pillars Hotels
27.02.2012

Four Pillars Hotels
Olney House
Ducklington Lane
Witney
OX28 4EX

T: 01993 700100
F: 01993 700101
E: reception@four-pillars.co.uk
W: www.four-pillars.co.uk



CH/MB

27th February 2012

To whom it may concern

Four Pillars Hotel Group has been in discussion with the owners of Queenford Lakes Water Sports Centre near Berinsfield regarding their plans to redevelop the former mineral site to include a 120 bedroom resort hotel. We have had input into the size, position, proximity to essential services and facilities, which we believe to be the key factors affecting the long term success of a resort operation in this location.

Four Pillars Hotels understand the hotel market in Oxfordshire very well as we already operate four successful hotels within the county as well as our two resort properties in Gloucestershire, the Cotswold Water Park and Tortworth Court.

We estimate that a hotel of the size planned would create in the region of 85 new jobs locally and would generate considerable tourism benefits for South Oxfordshire and the surrounding area.

Queenford Lakes is well served by road, rail and air with sufficient gas, electricity and water supplies being available on, under or close to the site. Four Pillars Hotels have seen the proposed sketch layout for the lakes and supports the redevelopment of this brownfield site and the planned redevelopment of Culham along with the regeneration of Berinsfield.

Charles Holmes
Chief Executive

With us, you're at home
Four Pillars Hotels

Four Pillars Hotels Limited
Registered & Head Office: Olney House,
Ducklington Lane, Witney,
Oxfordshire, OX28 4EX
Registered in England No: 1303927

Reservations: 0845 850 88 55

Online Bookings: www.four-pillars.co.uk

Email: sales@four-pillars.co.uk

APPENDIX 2
Letter from Williams Performance Tenders
29.05.2014



29/5/2014

Dear Neighbourhood Planning Group,

Williams Performance Tenders supports the work you are doing in preparing a neighbourhood development plan for Berinsfield.

We manufacture boats via a factory premises we rent in Vogue Business Park and we have done so since 2005. We currently employ 45 staff many of who live in the village, and are running an apprenticeship scheme (supported by EAG) for young people who live locally. In addition to our main factory premises, we lease storage space at Queenford Farm as well as buildings and one of the lakes at the Queenford Lakes water sports centre for our R&D and boat testing.

Since our business started we have built over 5000 boats in Berinsfield, this makes Williams the UK's largest manufacturer of boats by volume. We test nearly all our boats on the lake to the south of the village before being packed up for shipping, and this necessitates us trailering boats daily up and down Fane Drive. We also ship boats directly from our factory every day which means a number of articulated lorries regularly using Fane Drive.

Our long term aspiration would be to move our manufacturing operations next to the lake so that we could water test our craft straight from the factory. We support any Neighbourhood Planning proposals which help us achieve our strategic aims and to grow our business locally, and we place considerable value on the water access we currently benefit from and which we believe is so essential to our business. Current forecasts are that we will need to employ another 20 staff by 2017.

We have read the text within the draft Scoping Report currently under consultation and we would correct only a minor point which is we now employ 45 staff not just the 38 referred to on page 15.

Please keep us informed of progress.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mathew Hornsby", written in a cursive style.

Mathew Hornsby
Director

Vogue Business Park, Berinsfield, Oxon OX10 7LN United Kingdom
T: +44 (0)1865 341134 F: +44(0)1865 341234 W: www.williamsjettenders.com