

Subject: Portnacroish: Holy Cross Church

**Plan Reference: Oban, Lorn and the Isles:
Minor Settlements**

17.3.6

**Objectors: 2473/1 (733); 2761/1 (901);
3004/1 (1193); 3386/1 (1635);
3476/1 (1735); 3681/1 (2078); 3727/1 (2140); 3804/1 (2223);
and 3835/1 (2258)**

Procedure: Hearing and Written Submissions

Background

The objection site is a strip of ground comprising the western fifth of the field lying immediately across the A828 trunk road from the Church of the Holy Cross and the St Cross Churchyard at Portnacroish and sloping away from them. It forms part of a larger National Scenic Area designation. The church is listed Category 'B' in Historic Scotland's List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. To the south, views are obtained over Loch Linnhe and the C16th Castle Stalker (Category 'A'), which lies on a rocky outcrop separate from the mainland. In the consultative draft version of the plan, the objection site was shown to be immediately outwith the boundary of the settlement. In the finalised draft version however, the objection site, together with an additional area along the A828 roadside, has been identified as Potential Development Area 5/166 for low density housing. This was subsequently adjusted to become a rectangular area, adjacent to an unclassified road connecting the A828 with the former railway line which runs parallel to it at this point.

Summary of the objections

The objectors pointed out that the area was one of considerable historic and potential archaeological interest and contained one of the most photographed views in Scotland. The actual location of the Battle of Stalcaire (1463) between the Stewarts and MacDougals remained unknown, except that the latter were on the ridge and the former in the castle, so it almost certainly took place on the area in between. It was known that King James IV included the castle in his hunting trips and the site also possibly concealed a burial ground and perhaps even a former lime kiln. All this was currently being researched and such work should not be pre-empted. In any case, the ground contributed to the setting of the castle and should be protected for this reason alone. The area was inhabited by a great variety of wildlife, including otters and sea eagles. There were already several sites identified for development which were more suitable than the objection site, and which should be developed before encroaching on sensitive areas such as this one.

The council had justified its site selection by confirming that it had been led by the landowner, who would also provide much needed car parking for the church, as well as tidying up and clearing out the former mink farm further to the north. However, the objectors considered it perverse to link this matter to the current objection; while it was certainly important to improve the area around the mink farm, its association with the objection site was merely a convenience. Even if part of the road access were to be improved as a result, this would still merely comprise less than one sixth of the access route.

Accordingly, the objection site should be protected, or at least be designated as Countryside Around Settlement until investigation is carried out. With a recent resurgence of interest in Scottish history, it would be unreasonable to threaten what was probably the most important part of the local heritage and one which was also potentially valuable to tourism.

Council's response to the objections

The council considered the key assessments to be a. the possibility of upgrading the mink farm area; and b. whether there would be a significantly adverse effect on the setting of (i) the church; (ii) the castle; and (iii) any battlefield.

As a result of objections, Potential Development Area 5/166 had been reduced in scale to take account of the setting of the church and the recognised potential was now limited to no more than five dwelling houses. As a gain directly related to this development, access opportunities would be opened up to enable the former mink farm (identified as Area for Action 5/8 in the plan) to be redeveloped. Access to this was only possible via the former railway line, as the alternative route left the A828 at a sharp bend and accordingly would not be acceptable. It was necessary to bring the access road up to an adoptable standard and enabling development would be necessary to provide the necessary finance.

The council did not accept that development would compromise the historic landscape setting of the castle, and it pointed out that the community council shared its view. Historic Scotland could not confirm that the objection site was the site of the battle referred to by the objectors and in any case, there was no current protection afforded by Historic Scotland to battlefields.

Conclusions

Although the objection site is shown as part of the settlement of Portnacroish in both the Finalised and Modified versions of the plan, this appears to be merely as a result of its identification as a Potential Development Area; the remainder of the field of which it forms part is identified as Countryside Around Settlement. There are three other Potential Development Areas in the village which have been identified consistently from the consultative draft stage of the plan, so there is no shortage of potential development land in the village.

This site is integral to the shared setting of both the Category 'A' listed castle and the equally historic Category 'B' listed Holy Cross Church, particularly the latter, which despite the mature trees along the main road below it, directly overlooks the site. It is also misleading for the council merely to state that there is no protection afforded by Historic Scotland to battlefields. That body actually states that it is "...working towards a policy for their protection and management," and continues,

"We hope that our policy and the associated consultation process will encourage local authorities to think about regionally and locally important battle sites as well, and consider them as part of their cultural landscape."

With even the possibility that it was the site of an inter-clan skirmish in the C15th, we consider that for this reason alone, the site should not be considered for development.

In these terms, we consider the problem of the mink farm site and the council's current lack of finance to remedy the situation to be parochial, and certainly one that would not justify the invasion of the open aspect opposite the church. While evidently not supporting the objection, we note that the community council has not identified its position. It seems to us that there must be other means open to the landowner and to the council for achieving a remedy to this problem.

On the other hand, we are in no doubt that this is an historic site; it is important to the setting of the castle; it is vital to the setting of the church; it is important to the tourist potential of the village; it lies within a National Scenic Area; and it is of interest itself as a possible battlefield site. We therefore agree with the objectors that there is no justification for the consideration of the objection site as a Potential Development Area; indeed, we consider this to be one of the very last sites in this area which should be proposed for such a purpose. We have taken into account all the other matters raised in connection with these objections but find that they do not outweigh the issues which have led us to our conclusions.

Recommendation

We therefore recommend that Potential Development Area 5/166 be deleted from the plan.