

Community Services

Cogges Manor Farm Museum

Cogges Bulletin 10 - November 2008

NEWS

- Cogges Manor Farm Museum has been highly commended in the SE Tourist Board's small visitor attractions section Tourism ExSEllence awards – one of just 4 awards in this category covering the whole of the South East England region.. Congratulations to all the staff who have worked very well this year to achieve such success. And thank you West Oxfordshire District Council for encouraging us to apply!
- £1000 anonymous donation! Thank you very much!
- Scarecrow Weekend - 15 scarecrows were made for this popular weekend; some by the Witney Fire Station, others by the 7th Witney Brownies and the Blake School. The 'figures' included a burglar, secretary, fireman, brownie, milkmaid, cool dude, and more traditional scarecrows. There was also a demonstration session - making one for the walled garden next year.

2008 season

- Visitor numbers have topped 30,000 this year – that is a 20% increase on the previous year; school visits are up by over 30%. Season tickets have been amazingly popular – over 650 sold, and 6780 season ticket uses recorded. Thank you for visiting and for your support – and please come back next year.
- Advent Weekend on 6 and 7 December is the highlight of Cogges year and the start of Christmas festivities – an event not to be missed. Activities this year include the traditional Mummings' Play, the Nativity, and, of course, Father Christmas!

COGGES and the FUTURE

The Cogges Project Board met on 23 October to receive the Options Appraisal on the future proposals for Cogges prepared by an external consultant. The chairman of the Board and other Board members met with the Cogges Trustees on 3 November to discuss the recommendations in the Appraisal document.

THE PUBLIC MEETING

- 1) On 4 November David Bond, acting chairman of the Cogges Trust, chaired a Public Meeting in Cogges Church when the recommendations were made public. John Jackson, Director for Social and Community Services (and chairman of the Cogges Project Board) spoke as follows:

Background

- 2) Last year, the County Council carried out a fundamental service review of its Cultural Services. That review concluded that, given the resources available, it was not possible to justify maintaining Cogges Manor Farm Museum as a visitor attraction and educational facility at a net cost to the County Council. The Council decided to maintain funding for Cogges for 2008/9 at the current level (£240,000), but to reduce funding over the following two years to £160,000 in 2009/10, to £80,000 in 2010/11 and to zero in 2011/12. At the same time the Council wanted to seek a long term sustainable future for Cogges, retaining public access to much of the site and a level of heritage education/interpretation.

The Project Board

- 3) In reflection of its commitment to achieving a sustainable future for Cogges, we decided to treat the work as a formal project. I have acted as Project Sponsor. The Project Board, which I have chaired, was established in February 2008. It has met monthly. Membership has included two members of the Cabinet, 2 Cogges Trust representatives, Oxford Preservation Trust (to benefit from their experience of developing the Oxford Castle site) and West Oxfordshire District Council.
- 4) The Board identified clear **objectives** for its work:
 - a) To seek a long term sustainable future for the Museum, retaining public access to much of the site and a level of heritage education/interpretation in such a way to meet the financial plan set out by the County Council.
 - b) To work with the Cogges Trust to seek external funding, grant aid, sponsorship and to maximise income potential.
 - c) To identify possible commercial partners/providers to achieve necessary investment and increased income from compatible commercial uses.

Public interest and support

- 5) Initiated by this Trust, a public meeting was held in Cogges Church in February 2008. The meeting was attended by 180 people. Subsequently a database of people interested in the future of Cogges has been created and a

monthly Bulletin has been distributed to them (and members of the Council) in order to inform them about the work of the Board.

Conservation – recognizing the heritage importance of the site

- 6) On the advice and recommendation of English Heritage, the Board commissioned a Conservation Statement. The Statement provides an overview of the historic significance of Cogges; it reinforces its status as a monument of national importance, and the duty of care on the Council to continue to maintain it to the highest standards. Compliance with the Statement has been stated explicitly as an objective for any future use of the site. In their response to the Statement, English Heritage has indicated its proposal to raise the listing status of the Cogges Manor House from Grade II* to Grade I. This represents a reorganization of the listing criteria, rather than implying any further constraints on the use of the building.

(The Statement has been published on the County Council's website)

Proposals

- 7) Publicity surrounding the Council's decision making process prompted a number of external organizations and individuals to come forward with ideas for operating Cogges in future. All of these ideas have been welcomed and considered by the Board. Officers have worked with and advised individuals about their ideas and this work has led to a joint proposal by the Cogges Community Enterprise Group. Letters inviting proposals from other 'heritage' operators were sent out in order to seek the widest possible exposure.
- 8) Two commercial heritage/environmental operators have submitted formal proposals and business plans.
- 9) In order to evaluate these proposals thoroughly and objectively the Board commissioned an external consultant to carry out a full options appraisal. The full report contains detailed business plans and other information relating to the businesses involved and has therefore been kept confidential for reasons of commercial sensitivity. (Cogges Trustees have been sent copies on the same confidential basis.)
- 10) The options appraisal reviews four options:

a) Commercial company

This proposal aims to refresh the heritage interpretation and increase marketing significantly with a target of attracting 40,000 visitors in year 1, rising to 100,000 by year 4. The business plan also relies on being able to use the barns and other buildings for weddings and corporate functions.

The company currently operates a number of other heritage attractions. The bid assumes that the County Council will 'make good the site' investing up to £1.5 million capital.

b) Commercial company B

Similarly this proposal will enhance the heritage interpretation of the museum; create free entry to parts of the site; create an extensive new indoor children's play facility (with an admission fee); increase marketing and introduce a local membership scheme; and expand the education programme. The company currently operates a large scale environmental centre in the Midlands attracting 220,000 visitors per year. The business plan assumes a subsidy of £480,000 over three years.

c) Cogges Community Enterprise Group

This proposal includes free entry to the site, year round opening, heritage interpretation and using the garden and farm to demonstrate sustainable living. The site is envisaged as a local food hub, with outlets for local producers, a farm shop and café. The Manor House would be used for art and craft exhibitions, and one of the barns as a theatre. The Community Enterprise Group emerged from a large number of individuals who met to consider ideas for the future of Cogges earlier in the year. Although as a group they have no track record of managing a site, individually they have many skills and attributes. The Group has considerable fund raising expertise and as a Community Group it is most likely to be successful at raising money externally. The business plan assumes revenue support of £240,000 over two years, followed by £50,000 pa thereafter.

d) Mothballing the site

This option involves closing Cogges entirely and simply maintaining the site. The cost of security, minimum staffing, and basic maintenance would be £55,000 per year.

- 11) The Options Appraisal report goes on to suggest that the Council could devolve the management of Cogges to a new independent charitable trust (the current trust has no executive powers); and that new trust should be tasked with developing and implementing the vision of the Cogges Community Enterprise Group. The Board of Governors of such a trust would require a range of skills including management, human resources, accountancy, retail, training and heritage. A trust would benefit from the fiscal advantages of charitable status and create new opportunities for sponsorship and external funding. The report suggests that the trust would require a minimum of £160,000 pa subsidy for a minimum of two years; however this option is likely to require less capital investment than option (a).

12) RECOMMENDATIONS that will be put to the County Council's Cabinet on 25th November:

- a) to instruct officers to establish a new charitable trust to manage Cogges Manor Farm Museum (including employment of staff and service delivery). That trust to be tasked with developing and implementing the vision of the Cogges Community Enterprise Group.**
- b) to instruct officers to draw up a legal agreement between the Trust and Council, for a minimum of three years (from 2010), detailing what is expected from both organisations. The Council will remain the owner of the heritage asset (land, buildings and collections).**
- c) to recommend to Council in setting its budget the allocation of additional financial support to the Trust for 2010/11 (£80,000) and 2011/12 (£160,000).**
- d) to include an allocation of £150,000 in its recommended capital programme as matching funding towards the necessary capital work at Cogges in support of an application for external funding in 2010/11.**

13) Martyn Brown explained plans for the 2009 Season

- Given the delay in reporting to Cabinet on the future proposals for Cogges it is not feasible to transfer Cogges to a new operator for 2009. So it has been agreed that the County Museums Service will continue to manage Cogges through 2009 until the transfer takes place. As was announced in February 2008, the financial support for Cogges for 2009/10 will be 1/3 less than that for the current year – so some difficult decisions have been taken about how to manage the site with less funding.
- 80% of visitors to Cogges come between Easter and the end of August; so it has been agreed to open Cogges fully as usual for that period, but then to close the site down. This will give an opportunity for the new operators to start any capital work or other improvements early in order to be ready for the 2010 season.
- We are beginning to plan a full programme of events, activities, and exhibitions – so we hope for your continued support.

Cogges farm and animals

- In order to save the cost of staff (7 days a week to care for the stock) when the museum is closed to the public over the winter we have planned to move

all the animals off site. We are very grateful to a number of people who have offered to care for the animals until we are ready to take them back for the start of next season. We took the difficult decision to sell the sheep flock – the sheep spend most of their time in the fields by the river and are therefore not seen by many visitors. We plan to bring lambs in for Easter and sheep for shearing so that we can continue to mark the agricultural calendar with appropriate events.

- Pigs - contrary to the Witney Gazette – the pigs are still at Cogges and will remain until after Advent. Rodney & Damson were due to be 'retired' at the end of this season anyway as they are no longer fertile, 'Countess' has a new home to go to; and we aim to bring some new pigs in for next season.
- We are selling some of the cattle, but retained our friendly milking cow and her 'companion' – so they will be back next year for demonstrations of hand-milking. We hope to be able to stock the fields with other cattle.
- So we should have a good range of livestock on the farm next year (including the popular goats, purchased with a grant from Waitrose earlier this year) – certainly the farmyard and small animals will be as plentiful as ever.

DISCUSSION

- 14) Discussion followed the presentations and particularly raised issues about the governance of Cogges in future and the relationships between the Council and the new Trust and the Community Enterprise Group. These matters are now top priority to be resolved.

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