

District Planning Committee – 24 April 2019

P18/S2735/LB – Production and installation of commemorative plaques denoting the use of 6 listed buildings in Thame as filming locations for the Midsomer Murders series

- SODC Officer recommended to refuse permission- The proposed plaques would result in harm to the historic and architectural interests of the individual listed buildings, by identifying the importance of the building as belonging to a fictional person or place. There would be a cumulative impact to the group of listed buildings and their contribution to the historic and architectural interests of the Thame Conservation Area. The application would result in less than substantial harm to the designated heritage assets which is not be outweighed by public benefit.
- **Tony Long spoke on behalf of TTC**
- Questions followed:
 - Cllr Hillier – Why the need for plaques if the walking tours, social media and literature are doing so well?
 - A – Yes walking tours are very successful, but dozens more go around the Town on their own, 10,000 flyers were printed and all have been taken. Received an email from a couple visiting from Australia who had tried to find a building. Highlighting the six buildings with plaques will enhance the visitor experience.
 - Cllr Cooper – Buildings in Henley, Watlington and Wallingford are used in the series. Do they have similar plaques or an interest in installing plaques?
 - A – Result of this application awaited, there is one plaque in Henley.
 - Q – How long will the plaques be insitu? 20-30 years – by that time people will have forgotten the series.
 - A – Tony gave examples of other TV series which have not aired for many years where the series location still attracts visitors.
 - Q – If a building with a plaque was used in a new series would the plaque need to be removed?
 - A – Its easy to remove the plaques and repair made in a matter of minutes. When filming Midsomer a lot of plaques and signs are removed from the building before filming.
 - Q – Cllr Snowden – had consideration been given to making this a temporary application for renewal in 10 years, say?
 - A – If this application is refused the Town Council may consider making a fresh application with the plaques installed for a time limited period.
 - Q – Cllr Hornsby – Why 6 plaques and not the original 12?
 - A – On the previous application for 12 advice was taken from the District Planning Officer that application would be refused, some of the buildings would be difficult to affix a plaque to. In this application the six most appropriate buildings in the centre of town have been chosen.
 - Q – Cllr Hornsby – Why choose buildings in the centre of town? Why not dot the six all over the town to encourage visitors to explore more of the area and visit smaller shops?
 - A – In the original application all 12 sites were located in the centre of town. The six not included in this application would still very much like to be a part of the scheme. The planning officer's advice was to reduce the number of plaques from 12.
- **Helen Johns spoke as the agent for the application**
- **District Ward Member, David Dodds spoke for the application.**
 - Questions followed:
 - Q – Cllr White – how many leaflets had been taken in a year?
 - A – 10,000 produced, paid for by SODC funding, and all had gone.
 - Comment - Cllr Hornsby – Leaflets had a good circulation, placed in outlets around the town and hotels.

- **Discussion:**

Cllr Cooper – would it be possible to make a temporary condition?

Conservation Officer – a time period would not mitigate the harm to the buildings. Not clear why need for plaques, why not removable stickers? Two of the buildings are Grade II* listed the other four are Grade II listed. Members must be entirely comfortable that any harm to the building will be outweighed by public benefit, especially the Grade II* buildings. The impact will be attaching the plaques to the building.

There are no plaques in Bampton or on Highclere Castle to denote the filming of Downton Abbey.

Cllr Hornsby – Morse and Lewis filmed in Oxford – are there any plaques there? Is this a pretty unique application?

Conservation Officer – There are Morse tours and leaflets, also stickers in buildings.

Cllr Cooper – regarding this application would the use of stickers be acceptable?

Conservation Officer – Yes

Question – Is it the cosmetic harm to the building or the attachment of the plaque?

Conservation Officer – This is twofold, association of the plaque with a building that is historic in its own right other than association with Midsomer. Midsomer plaque would draw historic attention away.

Question – in the photographs in the pack some buildings have lots of boards / plaques already attached eg The Swan. Have these all had planning permission?

Planning Officer / Conservation Officer – Yes

Cllr Hillier proposed Refusal – didn't like to see the proliferation of plaques, devalues the blue plaques, transitory characters. Leaflets / stickers / walking tours doing Ok. Don't like the fact that plaques could spread to other towns. Respect the Conservation Officer's view.

Cllr Hornsby – seconded the proposal – Wallingford also have leaflets and many visitors on the Midsomer trail and they find their way around easily. Would feel more kindly towards the application if the plaques were not on main buildings in the centre of town but on little shops / cafés so visitors are encouraged to see more of the town. Opening flood gates to a plethora of plaques in the district.

Cllr White – difficult – signs in Oxford re Morse, plaque on historic site in Italy of the balcony from the scene in Romeo and Juliet.

Cllr Nimmo-Smith – supports the application – see it could spread around the district, it would have its own natural lifetime. Blue plaque to John Fothergill outside the Spread Eagle. Plaques on the Swan / Spread Eagle would not detract from the building.

Cllr Turner – Blue plaques refer to real people, not fictional ones. Have to jump through hoops to have a blue plaque approved.

Noted – CAAC split in their opinion with two in favour and 3 against – not much support from Oxford Historical Society.

On balance it would devalue blue plaque scheme, stickers are adequate.

Cllr Snowden – will set a precedent, Thame is a beautiful place. Prefer stickers in windows.

Cllr Cooper – reluctantly supports the motion, don't believe it would harm the building. NPPF not strong on this. There are so many TV programmes, if plaques approved, why not for others? Would like time limited condition, once time has passed could reverse the plaques. Stickers could be used. Thame are already doing well out of the TV series, would the visitor economy increase as a result of the installation of plaques?

Cllr Hornsby – All the towns in South Oxfordshire are doing well from the series. Could do stickers.

- Committee Members Comments – summary – worried plaques will set a precedent - red plaques will appear all over the District, will devalue Blue plaques, what is the need for plaques when walking tours / leaflets are doing so well? Suggested sticker in window and / or mobile phone app which could be used all over the District (not just Thame), respected the Conservation Officer's recommendation.
- Committee voted 6 for, 1 against (Nimmo-Smith) and 1 abstention (White) to refuse permission.