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Dear Mr Shaw

12 February 2024

[National Planning Policy Framework Paragraph 84e Proposal: Erection of a New Dwelling, Woodfold Villa Ribble Valley Borough Council: Application: 3/2022/0988 \[Refusal\]](#)

Thank you for providing an update on the planning application for Woodfold Villa. I was most disheartened to learn the application had been refused, and I feel that an exciting opportunity to raise standards of architecture – for both the site and the borough - has not been recognised by the Council.

I continue to support the proposal for Woodfold Villa, as a new neo-Classical house of outstanding quality, which really should qualify for consent under Para 84e (NPPF, December 2023). I am an experienced architectural historian with a special expertise in the English country house tradition - among other things author of *How to Read a Country House* and architectural editor of *Country Life*, 1998-2007. As an independent consultant, I have also assessed several successful proposals under the predecessors of Para 84e (Para 80e, Para 79, Para 55, PPS7, etc), in a variety of contemporary interpretations of traditional styles. In the case of Woodfold Villa, I have visited the site and the area and written an illustrated statement in support of the proposal, assessing it, after due consideration, to be of exceptional/outstanding design quality.

The local authority officer's report, accompanying the refusal notice, puts aside the criteria for NPPF Para 84e, after only a brief assessment of the issue whether the proposed building is of exceptional quality (a designation already supported by the peer review panel of a national body, TAG). Thus, the thrust of the reasoning for the refusal lies largely in areas of local policy which do not apply in the same way to a Para 84e proposal, which is, by definition, an exceptionality clause. It appears the proposal has merely been considered as a new house in countryside rather than as the example of exemplary architecture that it represents.

So, to return then especially to the issue of the high quality of the proposal, and the ambition of the proposed house as a work of architecture in the spirit required by NPPF Para 84e. This quality lies, I contend, within a recognisable neo-classical tradition which links to the long classical architectural tradition in this part of Lancashire and indeed across England, from the later seventeenth century.

The choice of style for such houses is much debated, but it is clear that style is not defined or prescribed in anyway in the NPPF Para 84e guidance (nor in the guidance of its predecessors), rather, and rightly, it is the order of excellence achieved in any given style or design approach. This provides

a special emphasis on quality, on raising standards of building in local areas, and the degree of appropriateness demonstrated to local building traditions and defining characteristics of local architecture. This always presents an interesting challenge: namely for a design to be both outstanding and to be sensitive and contextual to a place. In my view, the more traditional designs, engaging with the latest technology and up to date approaches to sustainability, often provide some of the best opportunities to reflect local building characteristics and traditions.

Woodfold Villa is imagined as in the spirit of the villa architecture of James Wyatt's nephew, Jeffrey Wyatt (later Sir Jeffrey Wyattville) who had worked for his uncle James, possibly even on Woodfold Hall itself. He was at the height of his reputation in the 1820s. It is suggested a new additional 'entertainment villa' might have been added to the estate by Henry Sudell (the known builder of Woodfold Hall) at around this date, had he not had to sell up his extensive estates.

The chosen style of the proposed house is therefore self-consciously within the well observed neo-classical style of the early nineteenth century, a time when the country house enjoyed perhaps its greatest reputation. Indeed, I would suggest it echoes closely attractive houses designed by Jeffrey Wyattville, namely Dinton Hall, Wiltshire - now known as Philipps House - and Stubton Hall, Lincolnshire.

The design aims at a real refinement in architectural quality, and a generous organisation in plan which reflects the best of the neo-classical country house tradition; this was, after all, as explained in John Martin Robinson's *The Regency Country House*, the era when the pattern of country house life and entertainment reached a form which persisted well into the twentieth century and indeed still informs it today.

The principal front, of five bays with an Ionic portico, is a subtle and harmonious composition, deriving its quality from careful proportions, and a studied neo-classical plainness. It faces north towards the long horizon views. The west elevation is in effect a five-bay core, framed by single bay pavilion style ends with double height bows with three tall sash windows to each bow.

This elevation is elegantly modulated with the glazed in loggia - echoing the open loggia of the G.S. Repton-designed Sheringham Hall - allowing enjoyment of distant views. The loggia's roof, behind a stone parapet with decorative open ironwork panels, forms a balcony for rooms on the first floor.

A third element, fully engaged in the house, but somewhat distinct when seen from the exterior, is an orangery and pool house combined, which echo the plainly detailed but often extensive conservatories which were popular in the early nineteenth century, not only as winter gardens but as homes for

collections of birds - as for instance at Wyatville's Stubton Hall – Wyatville also designed the majestic conservatory at Longleat.

The proposal also includes highly appropriate landscape design which improves the existing condition of the immediate area. The former estate of Woodfold Hall, which still retains its historic mansion house, restored from a shell and divided into many flats, and the other surviving estate ancillary buildings, including the former stables, which have also been sub-divided, extended and turned into residences (the stables close to the house are a new build), is clearly fragmented in character, but still broadly recognisable as a former country estate within a former parkland. A new domestic building of quality and presence following the principles of the original design tradition of Woodfold Hall itself, could only assist in cementing the relationship of the surrounding land and buildings to the Hall, and elevating the significance of the estate once more.

Regarding the location of the proposed site, there can be little doubt that while the existing general character is of unexceptional agricultural land, while the presence of the belts of woodland, visible out buildings, stone walls and gate piers, and the eider historical context, all belong to an area which is part of a former landed estate. In this context, new planting and maintenance and a new house of presence is an opportunity to enhance the immediate setting.

The proposed house could, in Reptonian spirit, enjoy views over the established countryside and the benefit of the mature belt of trees and more, and in turn contribute to the views of people passing through this area, echoing the tradition of successful citizens of Blackburn building notable houses in this area which served both as private residences and a built narrative of the industry and opportunities of the district.

The imagined narrative of the pleasure pavilion cited by the designer is self-evidently not a piece of misunderstood history, rather a suggestive imagining which is part of the creative path towards this unusual and ambitious proposal to create a notable new neo-classical house in the long tradition. This is a tradition kept alive through the twentieth century (see John Martin Robinson *The Last Country Houses*, and my own books *The Country House Ideal* and *Henbury Hall - An Extraordinary House*), although little covered in architectural journals.

One might just as easily have argued by analogy that such a house could have been a dower house to the estate, or a house for the principal heir or heiress and their family. These are the reasons why an additional building of presence may well have been added. A study of the historic map evidence clearly shows a 'triangle' of land with an avenue of trees providing a visual and physical link and a natural addition to the parkland if the whole were being managed as a unit - as it once was.

As noted, I have visited and assessing the site itself, reviewing the proposal, and looked at the local area and architecture of note within the local area, as well as looking at the history of local country houses of distinction and local building traditions, the latter specifically cited in NPPF Para 84e policy, and its predecessors, as issues of direct relevance and significance. Having reviewed all this material, the officer's report, and the new-supporting material, I remain of the opinion that what is proposed is of a very high order of design quality, and it should qualify under NPPF Para 84e. Its realisation should stimulate interest in high quality design in the classical tradition in the region, and, given the high level of skill required to execute such a house, that it would also stimulate interest in craft, and designing and building with natural materials, such as locally quarried stone.

The officer's report acknowledges the high quality and the attraction of the proposed building (p.14, report accompanying decision); however, the argument (p.15, report accompanying decision) that the social circumstances of the country house are different today, and therefore a new house designed to look and feel like a traditional country house is inappropriate, seems a circular one to me. The social circumstances of all building types are in continual flux, and governed by opportunity and personal taste (the history of much of the best of British architecture is one of constant revivals and re-inventions of architectural and landscape styles); furthermore, the very fact that social circumstances have changed is what makes this proposed house so interesting, given modern technology and environmental management, it does not require the panoply of actual supporting buildings which a Regency country house of similar scale would have.

To take the issue of design quality alone, the proposal is for an elegant, well-proportioned building, within the classical tradition, that can be related to a tradition of major classical country retreats built by merchants and industrialists, including a number which have been demolished through the twentieth century. The volume and scale of the proposed building follows the proportions fitting for its style, governed by the relationship of parts.

The house has been designed to be of ambitious scale and presence but at the same time it has been demonstrated by Shaw and Jagger, that when built, it would be considerably less in scale or footprint than the original Woodfold Hall, the original principal house of the estate. The proposed house will therefore respect the hierarchy of the original buildings of Woodfold Hall and the significance of that principal estate house being accompanied by a series of ancillary buildings of differing scales. Also, the seventeen acres subject to this application are to be landscaped in the Reptonian manner which is entirely suitable to a neo-classical house, and which will not only be of merit in itself but also restore something of the lost parkland of the Woodfold Hall estate.

Woodfold Villa has been designed to evoke the long tradition of fine house architecture of the region, and indeed to bring back something of this lost tradition to the area. In addition to the converted Woodfold Hall (once itself a shell), there were others classical houses locally such as Beardwood Hall, New Beardwood Hall, Pleasington Hall, Troy, Witton Park, Clayton Hall (all demolished) and Fenniscowles Hall (ruined), as set out in an extensive gazetteer prepared by Shaw and Jagger.

The story of classical continuity and renewal of the classical tradition in British architecture, is a deep and interesting one and can be seen in all parts of England. Locally, there are such notable mid-century examples of this as Lutyens' refined Gledstone Hall near Skipton in 1925-27, only some 20 miles away from site, and before that, Lutyens' imaginative and complex 'mannerist' house, Heathcote in Ilkley, built in 1906-1908, only some 30 miles away. Shaw and Jagger are to be commended for bold proposal in this tradition, which creates a pleasing formal principal elevation, but more adventurous and intriguing side elevations, and which extends the pleasure pavilion metaphor in neo-classical architectural form, as a recognition of the changing role of such buildings.

Thus, a good argument can be made to show how the current proposal brings back a high-quality classical design into an area once defined by a series of fine country houses many of which had been demolished or ruined, thereby enhancing a broader cultural story of the Blackburn area. Through the high quality of the design and the level of craft skill required, this proposal could help to raise local building standards. The current setting does not have a particularly strong character and so the proposed house and new landscaping will inevitably lift the quality, character, and significance of the otherwise modest pastureland.

In conclusion, I continue to support the application to appeal against refusal and would be happy to offer further support through the appeal process if it would assist in the understanding of the significance of the proposed architecture.

Yours sincerely

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