

PLANNING STATEMENT

CONCERNING

CHANGE OF USE OF ARABLE LAND TO EQUESTRIAN USE, CONSTRUCTION OF POLO FIELD, LEVELLING OF LAND FOR STICK & BALL AND SCHOOLING FIELDS, 3 X AMERICAN BARNS, 2 X HORSE WALKERS, EXERCISE TRACK, IRRIGATION POND, PUMP HOUSE, SAND TURNOUT CORRALS, HORSE REHABILITATION POOL WITH WASHDOWN AND PLANT BARN, CONVERSION OF EXISTING BARN INTO STAFF DAY FACILITIES, CONSTRUCTION OF PAVILION, CONSTRUCTION OF ESTATE TRACKS, CREATION OF NEW MAIN ACCESS WITH ENTRANCE GATES, CREATION OF OPEN STORAGE YARD AND ASSOCIATED WORKS.

AT

UPPER CULHAM FARM, HENLEY-ON-THAMES, BERKSHIRE, RG10 8NR.

The Design Component

Amount of Development

The following elements are contained in this application.

- 1/ Change of Use of Arable Land to Equestrian Use.
- 2/ Construction of Polo Field.
- 3/ Levelling of land for Stick & Ball and Schooling Fields.
- 4/ American Barns x 3.
- 5/ Horse Walkers x 2.
- 6/ Exercise Track.
- 7/ Irrigation Pond.
- 8/ Pump House.
- 9/ Sand Turnout Corrals.
- 10/ Horse Rehabilitation Pool with Washdown and Plant Barn.
- 11/ Conversion of Existing Barn to Staff Day Facilities.
- 12/ Construction of Pavilion.
- 13/ Construction of Estate Tracks.
- 14/ Creation of New Main Access with Entrance Gates.
- 15/ Creation of Open Storage Yard.
- 16/ Associated Works.

The Layout

The proposed layout is shown on an overall Master Plan that is attached to this application.

The proposed American Barns, Horse Walkers, Horse Swimming Pool and the barn for conversion to staff day facilities are adjacent to the existing equestrian buildings and therefore well related to existing structures.

The Scale

- 2/ Construction of Polo Field is 275m in length and 146m in width with 30m safety zone at each end and 10m safety zone on either side.
- 3/ Levelling of land for Stick & Ball and Schooling Fields the combined area is 275m in length and 292m in width. They are in effect two polo fields.
- 4/ American Barns x 3- each barn is 60m in length and 25.5m in width with a maximum ridge height of 6.833 metres. Each barn has a footprint of 1,530 sq metres.
- 5/ Horse Walkers x 2 – each horse walker has a footprint of 314 sq metres.
- 6/ Exercise Track- the length of the track is 775 metres and is 9 metres in width.

- 7/ Irrigation Pond will have a capacity of 67,298 cubic metres / 67.29m litres.
- 8/ Pump House will have a footprint of 15 sq metres.
- 9/ Sand Turnout Corrals x 12 – each corral will be 6m x 6m.
- 10/ Horse Rehabilitation Pool – 50m in length and 2m in width and Washdown / Plant Barn with a footprint of
- 11/ Conversion of Existing Barn to Staff Day Facilities – this building has a footprint of 144 sq metres.
- 12/ Construction of Pavilion – this single storey building will have a footprint of 144 sq metres.
- 13/ Construction of Estate Tracks will be in total 1,370 metres (1.37km) and 4m in width.
- 14/ Creation of New Main Access with Entrance Gates.
- 15/ Creation of Open Storage Yard – will measure 40m x 40m which means a footprint area of 1,600 sq metres.
- 16/ Parking areas will include general parking with an area of 3,200 sq metres and a Truck parking area of 3,500 sq metres.

Landscaping

The site benefits from having a whole boundary benefitting from a high hedge of native species plants, that was established by the previous owners. There is some internal hedging around the grass turnout paddocks along with trees planted for shade.

There is a bank created adjacent to the existing outdoor arena with trees planted on top, which will be removed, however further tree planting will take place across the whole site to provide shade around the pony lines, create a tree lined driveway and woodland areas around the site.

The Biodiversity Net Gain has a increase of 55.98%, which gives huge habitat and wildlife benefits to the site. The ecologist and landscape architect have worked together to develop the best landscaping with habitat benefits.

A full Landscaping Schedule and Plan is attached to this application undertaken by the Landscape Architect.

A full Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment has been undertaken to consider the development in the wider environment and taking into account the direct neighbours and their field of view to the development.

The assessment shows that out of 42 potential views, the vast majority of the following potential changes are negligible. These include Landscape Magnitude of Change, Effect on Landscape Change, Visual Magnitude of Change and Effect on visual amenity.

The recommendations are preserving and safeguarding the existing green infrastructure, particularly the hedges and trees along the site perimeter with additional boundary plantings.

Appearance

The proposed polo field, stick and ball and schooling field are vast open grass areas.

The proposed American Barns will be of steel frame construction with block work and timber elevations under a grey steel profile roof.

The proposed Horse Walker is of steel frame construction with rubber wall sections under a grey steel profile roof.

The proposed Exercise Track will have a sustainable riding surface which will be sand coloured with a white or brown Duralock fence around the perimeter.

The proposed Irrigation Pond will appear as any other lake with shallow areas planted for wildlife habitat.

The proposed Pump House will be of timber construction with timber elevations under a slate roof.

The proposed Sand Turnout Corrals will be each fenced in timber post and rail fencing with a sand surface.

The proposed Horse Rehabilitation Pool is an outdoor pool, which is basically constructed in the same way as a normal swimming pool but with 6m ramps at either end for the horses to access in and out of the pool. Below is an image similar pool.

The proposed Pavilion will be a single storey hexagonal building.

The proposed Estate Tracks, parking areas and open storage area will be finished with a tarmac surface.

Please see attached Appendix A and B with images of most items above.

The Context Appraisal

An attractive six bedroom brick farmhouse extending to 4,039 sq.ft with planning permission to extend (Planning Number 212908 Wokingham Borough Council).
Immaculately newly built oak framed three bedroom detached house extending to 2,203 sq.ft.

Over 13,000 sq of flexible office space.

Further 8,300 sq ft of storage barns.

Outstanding purpose-built world class equestrian centre built in 2005 including a 24m x 47m indoor arena, 60m x 20m outdoor arena, 19 stables, feed room, tack room and two grooms' flats.

Roof mounted 50kW photovoltaic scheme. CCTV security.

Arable farmland and pasture paddocks.

In all about 175 acres

Involvement

There has been no previous involvement with the local authority.

Evaluation

The estate of 175 acres is currently a mix of world class equestrian facilities, arable farming and converted outbuildings into commercial units which provide a valuable income stream for the management of the estate.

The current equestrian use is for dressage with purpose-built facilities which were developed in 2005. These include a 24m x 47m Indoor Arena, 60m x 20m Outdoor Arena, 19 Internal Stables, feed room, tack room and two grooms' flats. This forms the basis of the proposed equestrian development for a high goal polo team to be based at Upper Culham Farm.

Aerial image of existing equestrian facilities within **Appendix C**

History of Site:

During World War II, Upper Culham Farm, also known as RAF Henley-on-Thames, Crazies Hill, or Crazies Hill Farm, served as a relief landing ground and a location for assembling and testing Supermarine Spitfires. The area, located near Henley-on-Thames in Berkshire, was a crucial part of the war effort, with Spitfires being produced by dispersed manufacturers in the Reading area and then flown to RAF Benson or other locations for deployment.

The site was used to assemble and test [Supermarine Spitfires](#) (produced locally by dispersed manufacturers in the Reading area), and as a Relief Landing Ground for [RAF White Waltham](#) and [RAF Woodley](#). It was built in late 1939 and closed in October 1945.^[2] On 18 August 1944 [No. 529 Squadron RAF](#) moved to RAF Henley-on-Thames from [RAF Halton](#) in Buckinghamshire. This squadron was initially equipped with autogyros but during April 1945 they took delivery of the new American [Sikorsky R-4](#) helicopter (known as the 'Hoverfly I' in British service),^[3] RAF Henley-on-Thames becoming the first RAF air base to host an operational helicopter squadron.

Overall Design Concept:

Whilst it is acknowledged that there is an increase in built form, this has been restricted to being adjacent to the existing built form on site. The highest building on site is the existing indoor arena at 8.38m which is 1.547 metres higher than the proposed American Barns.

The driving force behind the design concept has been to keep the openness of the landholding in line with the NPPF policy for the Green Belt.

With the history of the farm going back to the Second World War, as an airfield as described above under the sub section of History of Site, the land was laid out as grass airstrips. The proposed polo facility design, this acknowledges the history of the site.

The pavilion being a circular single storey building is a feature that would have been seen on an airfield. There is believed to be an original building on the field adjacent at Ashley Place.

The proposed design is thus consistent with the historic interest.

We feel that we have achieved the aim of the design as described above.

Unfortunately, sites of this size are nowadays unviable as small family farms and they can be viably farmed only by contracting out to a larger operator. Equestrian use maintains the integrity of the single estate, without the need to break it up, and generates significant economic benefits.

The proposed polo facility would retain the existing commercial units, retain the use of the existing equestrian development on site, return the land to grassland and bring both economic and employment benefits to the area.

Proposed Equestrian Facilities:

- **Polo field** - is a full-sized field, which will be irrigated and have full drainage to provide the best playing surface available. The standard of polo field is ever increasing as technology improves and the welfare of the horses becomes the most important concern when it comes to the ground conditions for playing.
- **American Barns x 3** - each to stable 52 horses with tack rooms, feed rooms, storerooms and toilet block. These are traditional in their construction which enables good barn ventilation. This is very important when designing stable barns for the horse's welfare.
- **Stick and Ball field and Grass Schooling field**, these are required because with over 150 horses on site there needs to be areas which are designated for stick and ball practice or general schooling of the horses to keep them in peak condition and trained to a high standard. They need to be large flat grassed areas to allow a number of horses to be trained at any one time. Also, they need to be irrigated, so that they can be used all through the summer months even when the ground would be potentially too hard.
- **Exercise Track** – is 775m by 9m with a sustainable riding surface by Novino which won the Most Sustainable Award at the London Horse Show, 2024. This size enables horses to be exercised as sets in the morning and afternoon. A set can be a groom riding one horse and leading anything from 2 to 4 horses each. Depending upon the horses playing schedule, they will be cantering or walking which means that the track needs to be wide enough to allow a set of 5 horses to pass if some are doing cantering work and others are just walking.

- **Horse Walkers** – the walkers will be round and be able to hold 8 horses at a time. This is good additional exercise and is controlled exercise for a horse which is returning from injury or for additional daily exercise.
- **Horse Rehabilitation Pool** – this is an increasing method of exercise for horses in general work, horses that benefit from less intensive work on the ground because of issue with their legs or as a rehabilitation tool for an injured horse. These pools are used a lot in racing in this country and in polo in Argentina.
- **Sand Corrals** – these give horses some much needed downtime during the season, when they can relax and recover from a few days of polo in a busy period.
- **Irrigation Pond** – this pond will provide the water storage for the irrigation water to the polo field, the practice areas and exercise track. It will be constructed with shallow areas that are planted with aqua plants which provide a good wildlife habitat area. Additionally, this will provide water for the extensive tree planting proposed under the Biodiversity Net Gain.
- **Pump House** – this small building houses the pumps and plant that pumps the water from the irrigation pond to the required fields.
- **Conversion of Existing Barn to Staff Day Facilities** – this converted existing barn will provide the everyday welfare staff facilities that are required by employment regulations.
- **Construction of Pavilion** – will provide a pavilion for the polo field which will include changing rooms, shower facilities and toilets for teams playing and an entertainment area for private use.
- **Construction of Estate Tracks** – these internal tracks provide safe and easy access around the farm for the irrigation machinery, field maintenance equipment and most importantly for horseboxes.
- **Creation of New Main Access with Entrance Gates** – this new access onto the A4130 will mean that all the equestrian development traffic will avoid using Culham Lane and will improve road safety at the junction of Culham Lane and the A4130. The new access will provide good visibility and safe access out onto the A4130. The entrance gates will have brick piers to provide the support for a timber single sliding gate which gives the most secure option. The gate will be operated by a key fob for staff and an entry system for visitors.
- **Creation of Open Storage Yard** – this open yard area will store the sand and divot mix mainly required for the polo field but also the practice areas to ensure the ground conditions are good and well maintained for the horses.

This is a long-term commitment by the applicant for the next 20 years and wishes to establish the polo facility for his high goal debut in 2027. There are no high goal polo facilities available in the Berkshire area. They are either currently owned by a team owner or the facilities are leased to a team owner. Also, there are few properties with the ground levels and scope to allow for a polo facility of this quality and standard. A polo field takes 12 acres of land.

Additionally, many of the existing high goals farms were developed over twenty years ago and are in need of updating to modern facilities that are expected for such world class teams competing at the top level. This issue is increasingly driving new team owners to invest in building new modern facilities that give the very best welfare for the horses and at the same time investing in the local area through the local economy and employment for many years.

These equestrian facilities provide much needed income to the local economy and the anticipated spend into the local economy by the polo team will be in the region of over £2m per annum. As an equestrian specialist we have over the years shown that equestrian facilities in show jumping, polo and racing are very important contributors to local communities in both income and employment. They often make the largest contribution as a single body to the local community.

This polo facility will support many direct and indirect jobs in the local area, and below are some examples of jobs that would be supported by this development.

Direct employment:

- Polo manager.
- Grooms.
- Farriers.
- Vets.
- Groundsmen.
- Maintenance staff.
- Administration staff.

Indirect employment:

- Local shops.
- Hospitality venues.
- Garages, both fuel and vehicle maintenance.
- Hay supplier.
- Bedding supplier.
- Feed merchant.
- Rehabilitation Pool maintenance.

- Saddlers.
- Fencing contractor and suppliers.
- Hedge cutting contractor.
- Retaining on site rural business units.

The applicant is based in London but will divide his time between London and the farm during the summer. He will live in the cottage on site that overlooks the farm. The applicant is in a favourable position that allows him to devote a lot of his time to the game, through training, playing practices, tournament polo and investing in better quality horses each year. He is one of the few that takes the management of such an organisation seriously and has created a good team around him to achieve the goals he has set for the Mirror Polo Team.

It is useful to outline the applicant's start in the game, progress through the last two seasons and the future aims.

The Mirror Polo Team and team principal, Sarkis Gabrelian polo biography.

1st February 2023:

Took first polo lesson as a complete non-rider

1st February 2023 – June 2023:

Trained with Cool Hooves Polo Ltd

20th June 2023:

Joined first polo club The Royal County of Berkshire (RCBPC)

Continued training with Cool Hooves Polo and playing at Club

July & August 2023:

Purchased first 10 polo ponies

September 2023:

Created his own team, The Mirror Polo Team

Competed first 3 Tournaments:

Winkfield Park 4 Goal- runner up

RCBPC. Garry Pascoe Trophy, 4 Goal- Winner

RCBPC. The John Horton Trophy, 4 Goal – Winner

October 2023:

Employs team manager to:

Prepare for 2024 summer season

Organise further horse purchases

Prepare for overseas polo in winter

Appoint team players for 2024 season

Start looking for own polo property

October – November 2023:

Three week training trip to La Aquada polo club, Argentina playing 8 to 15 goal practice games

Purchased 4 ponies (total 14)

End November 2023 - December 2023:

Played arena polo at RCBPC

January 2024:

Four week training trip to Dubai playing 12-20 goal practice games

Took first viewing of Culham Farm.

February 2024:

Played arena polo at RCBPC

Three week training trip to Wellington, Florida, USA played 12 to 20 goal practice games

March 2024:

Three week training trip with The Mirror Polo Team players

to La Aquada polo club, Argentina for team training and tournament practice

Purchased 8 horses (total 22)

April - September 2024:

Playing member of RCBPC

Joined as playing member of Guards Polo Club, Windsor

Tournaments competed:

Gerald Balding Trophy, 8 goal, Cirencester Polo Club- Runner up

Pemberton & Clark Trophy, RCBPC, 8 Goal – Runner up

Archie David Cup, Guards Polo Club, 8 Goal Subsidiary Final - Runner up

Roberts Cup, Guards Polo Club, 6 Goal – Winner

Julian & Howard Hipwood Trophy, RCBPC, 8 Goal – Semi Finalist

Holden White Trophy, Cowdray Park Polo Club, 8 Goal - Subsidiary Winner

Duke of Wellington Trophy, Guards Polo Club, 12 Goal – Winner

Roehampton Cup, Ham Polo Club, 6 Goal – Winner

Cottingham Cup, Guards Polo Club, 6 Goal – Winner

October 2024:

2 week training trip to Dubai

November 2024:

Playing arena polo at RCBPC

December 2024 – January 2025:

4 week training trip to Dubai

February 2025 to March 2025:

4 week training trip to Argentina plus horse purchasing further 8 ponies (total 30)

End March to early April 2025:

Final 2 week training trip to Dubai

April 2025 Summer competitive season starts in UK:

Playing at Guards Polo Club, Windsor

Tournaments to be competed:

4 x 6 Goal

3 x 8 Goal

2 x 10 Goal

4 x 12 Goal

1 x 15 Goal

1x 16 Goal

SUMMARY AND FORWARD PLAN:

UK Season 23 started low goal polo up to 4 goal

UK Season 24 Played 6 to 12 goal polo

UK season 25 Playing 8 to 16 goal

UK season 26 Intention to play 15 to 18 goal

UK Season 27 Intention to play high goal polo 18 to 22 goals

Foreword by Phil Meadows, The Mirror Polo Team Manager:

The Mirror Polo Team has and is making considered and measured approach to polo over the first 5 years, the goal to be playing at the highest UK level by 2027. In only a short time the team owner has shown his commitment and passion to the sport and all it involves. He is dedicated to making a long term commitment to the team and his polo future.

The ambition of the team owner is to create a world class polo facility at Upper Culham Farm where his team and their ponies will have a centre of excellence for both pony and team preparation to compete for many years in the UK polo season at the highest level.

External consultants commissioned for this application:

Ecology – a full ecology survey has been undertaken and Biodiversity Net Gain calculations done for the whole site, which has meant a large increase in biodiversity onsite.

Arboricultural – a full tree survey including the hedges has been undertaken and apart from some more recently planted trees and a section of roadside hedge, all trees and hedging are to be retained.

Highways – a Transport Statement is included, supported by an ATC speed survey on the A4130 for the new access.

Drainage – a Flood Risk Assessment and Drainage Strategy has been undertaken working with White Horse Contractors, who have designed the irrigation pond and system.

Archaeology – an archaeological desk-based assessment has been undertaken.

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment – a full assessment has been undertaken, which has considered all the potential view points into the site.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) seeks a presumption in favour of sustainable development and requires that the roles of the environment, social and economy are balanced. Developments need to consider the access and availability of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation, and should plan for both quantitative and qualitative improvements to open space, sports and recreation facilities.

The NPPF further sets out the consideration of development within the Green Belt and the importance of its preservation. Paragraph 154 identifies that the provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation(as in this case) will not be inappropriate as long as openness is preserved and there is no conflict with Green Belt purposes.

Equestrianism plays a significant role in supporting rural economies via direct or indirect use of goods and services. Also, it supports rural employment not just equine jobs but also agriculture, local shops and services. The equine industry is worth a total of £7bn via goods and services to the UK economy. (Source – British Horse Industry Confederation).

The British Equestrian Federation produced a report called " Facilities Strategy for Equestrian Sport and Recreation" which lays out certain requirements that are currently lacking in the UK. Continued investment primarily by private individuals with a passion for equestrian sport needs to be supported.

While elite performance and results are generally encouraging, the provision of high quality training facilities is currently not keeping pace and to retain current team owners and encourage new entrants to the sport of polo, modern training facilities are key. Across the board in equestrian sport from show jumping, dressage, racing and polo, new modern facilities are the key to the sports surviving in the UK.

Access Design Philosophy on the Scheme

There is a transport statement attached to this application. Which includes an ATC Speed Survey and trip generation figures. The proposed new main access off the A4130 takes the construction and equestrian traffic completely away from Culham Lane. This improves highway safety along Culham Lane and at the junction with the A4130.

The site is on level ground for easy access by the disabled.

Conclusions

This is a positive proposal utilising and building on an existing well established equestrian facility which would secure the future of the property as a whole.

The local planning authority is urged to support this application for a new long term polo facility. It would benefit from the support of the applicant, who has invested both time and funds into the sport in the UK and who is committed to the local area.