

AB09 – PoE – Retreat Farm – Mr Dunningham

Proof of Evidence on Historic Operations by

Timothy Dunningham

Public Inquiry

Retreat Farm

Planning Applications for

P/2017/0805

Demolish glasshouses to Field No. L78. Alter vehicular access onto La Rue de la Frontiere. Construct 1 No. four bedroom single storey house, detached three car garage and swimming pool to car park South of Field No. L78 with associated landscaping and parking. 3D MODEL AVAILABLE. AMENDED DESCRIPTION: Additional plans and documents received in support of submission and in response to representations received. AMENDED PLANS RECEIVED

And

P/2017/1023

Demolish glasshouse and ancillary structures in Field 770. Construct 13 No. two bed and 14 No. three bed self-catering accommodation units and ancillary structures with associated hard and soft landscaping. Change of use of resulting agricultural field to car park, including hardstanding and associated works. Widen La Rue de la Frontiere and alter vehicular access. Construct bus shelter and form footpath to South-West of site. Construct terraced seating area to North of existing café. 3D model available. AMENDED DESCRIPTION: Additional plans and documents received in support of submission and in response to representations received. AMENDED PLANS RECEIVED. Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) submitted. FURTHER AMENDED DESCRIPTION: Additional plans received in response to previous Department for Infrastructure highway comments. FURTHER AMENDED PLANS RECEIVED

At

Retreat Farm, La Rue de La Frontieres St Mary and La Rue de Varvots, St Lawrence

January 2018

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SUMMARY

I have been involved in the horticultural mail order business in Jersey for over 30 years and operated from Retreat Farm for much of that time.

The glasshouse on Field MY770 was past its useful life 20 years ago and is completely beyond being capable of any horticultural use.

The glasshouse on Field L78 is capable of being used for growing bedding plants but my business is the only one that does so in Jersey and we do not need it, nor would we in the future.

The cost of removing the specialist equipment in the glasshouse and trying to make the ground suitable for growing would far outweigh any future value that could be generated.

The cost of growing in glasshouses in the UK is far lower than in Jersey and so there is no economic reason for growing in Jersey for wholesale export to the UK.

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1.0 QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

My name is Timothy Dunningham and I have been involved in the horticultural Mail Order business in Jersey for over 30 years. I was Chief Executive of “Flying Flowers Limited” (later “Flying Brands Limited”) when it purchased Retreat Farm in 1988. It operated from that site until [REDACTED] in 2002. I subsequently started a new business “Jersey Choice Limited” and in 2011 I purchased from Flying Brands a nursery in St Martins and, in 2012, their bedding plant brand “Gardening Direct”.

The business of Flying Flowers, Flying Brands, Jersey Choice and Gardening Direct all involved the mail order of horticultural products (flowers and bedding plants), and, therefore, exports from the Island.

Although I have not been involved with the preparation of the Planning Applications I have agreed at the request of the Applicant to appear as an Expert Witness at the public inquiry, to assist the Inspector with any questions that might arise in connection with the previous use of the Site and confirm its redundancy to my current horticultural business.

The evidence I have prepared in this Proof of Evidence (PoE) is to the best of my knowledge true.

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2.0 SCOPE OF PROOF OF EVIDENCE

This Proof of Evidence relates to the decision made by the Minister for Planning and Environment's to consider the applications for planning permission for Retreat Farm, through a public inquiry process.

In this Proof of Evidence I will:

- Provide evidence to confirm the horticultural use of Retreat Farm;
- Provide an opinion about the lack of any viability of continuing horticultural use at Retreat Farm.

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3.0 HISTORICAL USE OF REREAT FARM FOR HORTICULTURE

The glasshouses at Retreat Farm were built for a very specific horticultural use. Planning permission had been granted in 1975 (reference 3199/l) for a glasshouse unit, and in 1978 for the construction of 98,784 square feet of additional commercial glasshouse with an access track, plant and a boiler house and oil storage tank (for heating the glasshouse interior in those days), reference 3199/K. There were also two existing greenhouses east of these on adjacent land. In 1989 Flying Flowers operated from the site. Flying Flowers was a horticultural mail order business sending flowers that were either grown at Retreat Farm or imported to the island, packaging them and sending the finished product (boxed flowers) to (mostly) UK customers. Local visitors could also visit the site to view operations and buy flowers and were encouraged to do so.

All Flying Flowers' operations were at Retreat Farm. This included offices, staff accommodation, packing and carnation growing. At that time Flying Flowers only operated a flower gift brand and supplemented its own production by importing carnations. The business was very heavily seasonally, and was open to visitors in the summer months. The Christmas period was especially busy and in the 10 days prior to Christmas, operated 24 hours a day and created significant disruption to neighbours. Neighbours complained about noise, traffic movements and vibration from the operation of the boiler. The boxes used were manufactured in the in-house polystyrene plant (in the western glasshouse block).

In 1994, "Gardening Direct", a mail order bedding plant brand was started and the following year the carnation glasshouses on field L78 were demolished and replaced by a new glasshouse for the specialized growing of bedding plants pursuant to planning permission 3199/PA. The utilities from the western glasshouse were piped into this new glasshouse to enable it to be heated also. In this new glasshouse bedding plants could be grown on moveable roller benches, not in the ground and an extensive fixed system of service infrastructure including runners, watering, heating, and so on was

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constructed. Subsequently, the western glasshouse block was also converted to grow bedding plants in the same way. A large part of the glasshouse was also used for packing and staff offices. The box-making element (for boxing up plants for export) was also retained in this glasshouse and remained operational.

After 2002, [REDACTED] the business continued to operate from the Site in the same manner (to my knowledge). Jersey Choice rented Retreat Farm from Flying Brands from July 2012 for a short period until June 2014 and used it for the growing, packing and distribution of bedding plants and associated products locally in Jersey. I am aware that [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] has provided his recollections of how the site was operated when he was employed there (included as **Appendix A**).

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4.0 JERSEY CHOICE

“Jersey Choice” is a horticultural mail order business that specializes in providing (predominantly UK) customers with bedding plants, hanging baskets and other horticultural products. It too benefitted from the favourable climatic and economic conditions provided by the island until 2012. However, since that time, it is now the *only* horticultural mail order business operating from Jersey.

Until 2011 the business operated from two main nurseries located at Grantez Farm in St Ouen and the other at Meadow Springs in St Martin (purchased from Flying Brands that year). Until 2012 mail order businesses in Jersey were able to thrive because of the tax arrangements provided by Low Value Consignment Relief (“LVCR”). These arrangements allowed goods under £17.50 to be exported from the island *without* attracting VAT in the UK. This allowed the horticultural mail order businesses in Jersey to compete with similar UK and European businesses.

Jersey is also not part of the European Union and does not benefit from any EU subsidies. Accordingly, any business that exports goods from the island needs to consider transportation and fuel costs compared with competitors located in the EU.

In April 2012, LVCR was abolished. Later that year Jersey Choice purchased Gardening Direct from Flying Brands. Unfortunately a combination of very poor weather in both 2012 and 2013, the removal of the LVCR and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] resulted in Jersey Choice making substantial losses in 2012 and 2013.

Jersey Choice vacated Retreat Farm in 2014, which it had been renting since 2012, also making a number of staff redundant. The company tried to develop Grantez Farm (which it partly owns) to generate funds to enable it to invest in Jersey Choice and retain that business. However, planning permission was refused. A decision to vacate Retreat Farm had already been made as a cost-cutting measure.

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Since that decision Jersey Choice has now consolidated and has been able to obtain investment from new overseas shareholders. This has allowed the business to become profitable whilst it continues to operate at much smaller scale and in a very limited market place and where it must keep all overheads very low if it is to continue to survive. The business still operates from Grantez Farm and Meadow Springs, locations where there is already sufficient growing capacity for the foreseeable future. If there were to be any future glasshouse requirement, these are likely to be satisfied by growing in the UK and so as to avoid export costs.

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5.0 THE GLASSHOUSES AT RETREAT FARM

Given my knowledge of glasshouse requirements for horticultural mail-order business I have been asked to provide an opinion about the usefulness and the fitness for purpose of the existing glasshouses at Retreat Farm for a continued horticultural or agricultural use.

The glasshouse and associated structures on Field MY770 are well over 40 years old. They are leaking and I understand that some may be collapsing. They were built for a very specific use and, in my opinion, they are not fit for any contemporary horticultural or agricultural activity as currently arranged on the Site. A large amount of the internal area has been concreted and has been used as a packing shed since the 1980's. In particular, the glasshouse were also specifically adapted to grow *bedding* plants and has no viable alternative horticultural or agricultural use. It is too expensive to operate today. The glasshouse is not fit for purpose today.

Similarly, the glasshouse on Field L78 was specifically constructed in 1995 to grow bedding plants and has no viable contemporary alternative horticultural or agricultural use. Whilst the structure is at his time sound, the internal structure (of rolling moveable tables) was created and built-in specifically for growing *bedding* plants and so no crop could be grown in the ground.

As far as I'm aware, no other business in Jersey grows bedding plants and my business (the only one that does) does not need any more capacity, it also having more than sufficient capacity in its current locations.

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6.0 CONCLUSION

The glasshouses and associated structures at Retreat Farm were built for a very specific horticultural use and very much reflect the requirements of the industry sub-sector of their time. That time has now long passed and they are not today fit for purpose. It is difficult to see how they could easily be adapted for another horticultural use.

The glasshouses are also very very large and have considerable areas of internal concrete hardstanding and compacted hardcore floors. There is no requirement for the glasshouses for the use for which they have been constructed. I understand that the costs of removal and reinstatement of the land to agriculture are significant. Such would make a theoretical alternative horticultural or agricultural use impossible to make profitable.

The previous use of the site by horticultural businesses resulted in complaints from neighbours. This is because, as a continuous and commercial operation, it had numerous commercial vehicles visiting the Site 24/7 and also generated a lot of light at night.

Jersey Choice has no need for the Site to maintain its own business.