UPPER COLLEGE FARM, MILL MEADOWS
Foreword

The Upper College Farm/Mill Meadows area Planning Brief has been prepared to:

(i) provide an appraisal of the site, planning requirements and preferred land uses which will assist the Council to maintain firm control in its consideration of planning applications and any enforcement action necessary to prevent future problems in this sensitive Green Belt area.

(ii) guide and assist landowners and developers in preparing proposals which are likely to be acceptable to the Council.
CONTENTS

I BACKGROUND

1. Aims
2. Location and general area
3. Description of the site - land use and character

II DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

4. Site potential
   - Considerations for development.
5. Means of access
   5.1. Vehicular
   5.5. Pedestrian
6. Ground conditions and Enforcement Activity related to restoration
7. Statutory Undertakers involvement
   7.1. Site drainage
   7.5. Electricity Board apparatus
   7.7. Railway line
8. Consultations

III ASSESSMENT OF POSSIBLE REDEVELOPMENT

9. Agriculture/Horticulture
10. Forestry
11. Outdoor Recreation
12. Golf
13. Horse riding
14. Water based activities
15. River Cray Walk
16. Other Open Recreation

Appendix 1 - Site Planning History
   - Gravel Working applications and related information
   - other applications
Appendix 2 - Provisions of Development Plans
Appendix 3 - Local Facilities
Appendix 4 - Road Proposals
Appendix 5 - Statutory Undertakers, etc.
I BACKGROUND

1. Aims

1.1 Whilst the Borough Plan acknowledges that its use is liable to change, the Upper College Farm/Mill Meadows site is within the Green Belt and only uses compatible with this designation would be permitted.

1.2 The Council's principal aims for the future of this area are:

(i) encouragement of an appropriate mixture of agricultural and recreational uses;

(ii) improvement and enhancement of the Green Belt;

(iii) maintenance of the openness of the land.

(iv) avoidance of further environmental problems caused by activities carried out within the site.

2. Location and general area (see Map 1)

2.1 The site covers approximately 95 acres. It is situated on the south side of Bexley Village, designated a Conservation Area in 1971. The site is bounded to the north by the main London to Dartford via Sidcup railway line with houses beyond.

2.2 The western boundary is formed by land owned by the Thames Water Authority (Bexley Pumping Station), and public and private housing. An area of 72 acres extends eastwards from this boundary to the Bexley Cricket Club ground and is known as Upper College Farm.

2.3 An area of some 17½ acres, in part known as Mill Meadows, extends east from the cricket ground to the eastern site boundary, which is located to the rear of a variety of properties which front Bexley High Street.

2.4 In the Upper College Farm area the southern perimeter is bounded by the wooded verges of the River Cray and in part by the A223 North Cray Road. In the Mill Meadows area the southern perimeter is located south of the River Cray and runs along the rear of residential properties which front the North Cray Road.

3. Description of the site - land use and character (see Map 2)
3.1 The site forms a significant area of rural open space within the Green Belt and the Cray Valley area. It is relatively flat, gently sloping to the River Cray, and with nearby Foots Cray and Stable Meadows provides the first effective break to the outward growth of London. No part is more than ¼ mile or so from a built-up area, being close to both Old Bexley and the residential settlements to the north and west.

3.2 Sand and gravel was excavated from Upper College Farm between 1954 and 1979 without satisfactory restoration of the land, except in one area which lies south of the footpath (see Map 3). Just prior to earthworks which started in 1983 most of the site was seen as vacant open land supporting vigorous grass growth, sedges and other herbaceous plants. Only land at the western end was never excavated and still remains of high quality, and is used in the production of market garden produce by a local farmer.

3.3 Two recreation uses straddle the Brief site. One is the Bexley Cricket Club ground, also used by Burnt Ash Hockey Club, and to the south of this is an area of almost 4 acres which was once a worked gravel pit and is now water filled and used by Bexley Police Angling Club. This area is particularly attractive. The pool lies adjacent to the River Cray and is surrounded by quite dense vegetation and is wooded on two sides.

3.4 The fields to the east of the recreational area lying on both sides of the river are in a number of private ownerships and are used for horse grazing and pasture. This open land area has a pleasant rural character which provides a "countryside type backcloth" to the village.

3.5 Site Planning History is covered in Appendix 1, Provisions of Development Plans in Appendix 2 and Local Facilities in Appendix 3.

II DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

4. Site potential

4.1 In view of the plan policies and Inspector’s report, there will be a presumption against any kind of built development, housing, commercial, industry/warehousing, indoor recreation and other urban uses or urban orientated uses, such as golf driving range or synthetic pitches.
Map 3  Land to which Enforcement Notice issued by the Greater London Council on 1.11.82. relates

-- Planning Brief boundary
4.2 The site, in terms of size, location and its undeveloped open nature, is unique in Bexley and any scheme for the land, whilst being consistent with Green Belt policies, should also retain and enhance the rural and "unsophisticated" landscape of the area and contribute to the beauty of the valley of which it forms a part.

Considerations for development (see Map 4)

5. Means of access

5.1 Vehicular - There are two existing means of site access (marked A and B). Access at A is via a private road which leads from Manor Way and Hurst Road. It adequately serves the current uses in the area, namely the Cricket Club and four private cottages. However, the road is potholed in places, varies in width from about 8 metres to 3 metres and passes through a railway bridge which has sub-standard height (3 metres) and width (3.6 metres). The bridge, therefore, prevents a highway being constructed to adoptable standards and also does not permit access without difficulty for fire appliances, or even moderately high-sided vehicles. Remedial work such as re-surfacing in consultation with private owners and the Council would improve this unadopted access but it would still not be suitable for any significant increase in traffic flow. There would be a presumption against this being used as the major site access.

5.2 Access at B is from the existing roundabout at the northern end of the dual carriageway section of the North Cray Road. This is an adequate permanent access which does not affect the free flow of traffic on the Metropolitan road and should be regarded as the major site access. It would be necessary, however, for the existing permission regarding use of the access to be regularised for any new site use. The unadopted roadway which then crosses the River Cray could be extended and improved on site.

5.3 Access onto site from Riverside Road, an adopted highway, is privately owned by the Thames Water Authority (marked C). This presently provides for only pedestrian needs but could be extended with Thames Water approval to serve as an additional private unadopted vehicular access.

5.4 Different surface materials from those used on adopted roads should be used for any proposed site roads. The layout should be well-designed and as unobtrusive as possible, and any works should be in consultation with this Council. Other road proposals which may affect the site are covered in Appendix 4.
UPPER COLLEGE FARM
MILL MEADOWS

Scale 6 ins to 1 mile
Date April 1984

Based upon the 1 in 10583 Ordnance Survey 1:5000 map with the
permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery
Office Crown copyright reserved

Map 4 Considerations for development

- Boundary of Planning Brief

Access to site via:
A. Manor Way
B. North Cray Road
C. Riverside Road (pedestrians only)

Road Proposals
- Bexley eastern by-pass proposed alignment

Other

Tree Preservation Orders

Public right of way - foot path 146
5.5 Pedestrian - Public footpath 146 crosses Upper College Farm from Riverside Road to Manor Way. The path then continues to the rear of Mill Meadows adjacent to the railway line before passing under a railway bridge and emerges onto Bexley High Street by the Railway Tavern. An important planning requirement is that any works on site should keep this pedestrian access clear. In addition the Chief Works Officer requires that the unmade footpath be kept clear for use by pedestrians and in such a condition that will allow them to pass safely.

6. Ground conditions and Enforcement Activity related to restoration

6.1 Almost the whole site is shown on the Ministry's Agricultural Land Classification Map as land in non-agricultural use. Only 18 acres of the western land is classified as Grade II land. (see Map 2).

6.2. In 1980 an inspection of the site by the Ministry of Agriculture revealed that taking the site as a whole, it could only support a viable agricultural unit after substantial expenditure on treatment and fixed equipment, involving considerable drainage, additional coverage with extra top soil and (in some parts) up to five years management under grass before arable cultivation could take place. At that time the agricultural capability was assessed as "very limited indeed". The Enforcement Notice served in 1983 was for land restoration fit for agriculture as envisaged in the 1954 appeal decisions; to be successful, a costly procedure both in time and money. (See Appendix 1 for details of Planning History including Enforcement action).

6.3 The restored gravel pits in the Mill Meadows locality have potential only for grass growing, grazing and pasture without further treatment. The western part of Upper College Farm, south of the footpath restored first has a fair cover of peaty soil (700-900 mm depth) and should be usable for arable cropping, vegetable growing, etc. This abuts the far western area of high quality undisturbed land which is very suitable for its present use of market garden cropping.

6.4. The remaining part of Upper College Farm forms the Enforcement Notice area and has generally poor soil and is deficient of top soil.

6.5 Since October 1983, very mixed loads of material have been imported onto site for restoration purposes ranging from those which are passable in characteristics for both playing fields and
agricultural purposes through to those which are completely unsuitable. Loads stockpiled south of the footpath towards the river are practically all rubble, concrete, brick and other inert materials.

6.6 In view of the random nature of the tipping of materials, it will be extremely difficult to remove all unsuitable items from the top strata of material ready for surface cultivation. Also, whilst drainage of the area would be feasible with clearance of large lumps of concrete, etc., with so many obstructions in the sub-strata of the soil, the drainage operations will be both difficult to implement and also very expensive.

6.7 Because of similar obstructions in the top soil, preparing this site for use as playing fields or agricultural land would require a vast amount of stone picking on the areas to remove from the surface soil unsuitable material. In the case of playing field use, this unsuitable material would cause a hazard to persons using the area for games and, in the case of agricultural use, the debris which will be brought to the surface every time cultivations were carried out would probably damage equipment and crops.

6.8 In the early years following levelling of the site, it may well be found that individual areas are of low fertility due to particular loads having been of that type when imported to the site. These areas would need to be specially treated with organic materials to upgrade the fertility to a suitable level.

6.9 Flood plain - The site is partly within the flood plain of the River Cray which comes under the jurisdiction of the Southern Water Authority (S.W.A.) for land drainage purposes. Parts of Upper College Farm and Mill Meadows were flooded in September 1968 and August 1977 and the S.W.A. requires that this should be taken into account when considering any future development. It is also a normal requirement of the Authority that there is no building development within the byelaw width of 8 metres, on either side of the river.

7. Statutory Undertakers involvement

7.1 Site drainage - A surface water sewer runs along Manor Way onto the site and discharges into an open ditch adjacent to the cricket ground, which in turn discharges into the River Cray. The ditches adjacent to the river enhance the surface and sub soil water drainage of the relatively flat land. Any development must provide for continuity of land
7.2 The discharge of surface water to soakaways is acceptable to the S.W.A. However, if discharge is to be directly to the River Cray, the rate might necessarily have to be controlled, again in consultation with the S.W.A.

7.3 Surface water drainage of this site, other than land drainage, will probably present problems in terms of sufficient cover over the pipework and sufficient gradient. In this context, raising the general level of the area to produce a gradient towards the river has considerable merit in connection with obtaining good drainage falls.

7.4 Similar problems are likely with foul drainage, with insufficient fall to the Thames Water Authority (T.W.A.) main trunk sewers which run down the Cray Valley. In these circumstances, the drainage solution would involve recourse to a pumped system. The Authority has also stated that this site should be drained strictly in a separated foul and surface water system.

7.5 Electricity Board apparatus - The C.E.G.B. has a 132 kV overhead line crossing the site in spans PM21-25. The Board requires a minimum safety clearance of 3.7 metres from the conductors to any building/structure erected in the vicinity of the overhead line and 6.7 metres where tree planting or landscaping is proposed. Also, any increase in ground levels in the mid area of the line spans should be avoided. The estimated available safe working headrooms directly below the 132 kV lines are shown on Map 4.

7.6 The Board also requires that ground levels are not altered and no buildings/structures are erected within 6 metres of the pylons at ground level.

7.7 Railway line - British Rail (Southern) state that no building should be constructed within 1.5 metres of their boundary and that all drainage should be directed away from the railway line.

7.8 The Board also requires that some form of high netting, etc., be erected adjacent to the boundary, should any recreation development involving ball games, be located adjacent to the railway.

8. Consultations
8.1 The developer will be responsible for approaching and negotiating with all the appropriate public utility and statutory bodies with regard to obtaining main services and supplies. Addresses for the various authorities are contained in Appendix 5. The information contained in this Brief is provided on the basis of advice currently available, but does not obviate the need for any future user of the land to contact the appropriate authorities.

8.2 It is recommended that after the preparation of preliminary plans (layout, sketches) discussions are held with officers of the Planning Department prior to the submission of a full planning application.

III ASSESSMENT OF POSSIBLE REDEVELOPMENT

In view of the restriction on built development (see paragraph 4.1) on this site, there is only a limited range of uses which would be acceptable: Agriculture/horticulture, Forestry, four various types of outdoor recreation for example golf and water based activities.

9. Agriculture/horticulture

9.1 Any form of development which would cause a loss of the productive Grade II land (approximately 18 acres) on the western edge of Upper College Farm would be resisted. Also, land south of the footpath and west of the Enforcement Notice area (approximately 20 acres) has a good cover of soil and would also be suitable for cropping or grass growing.

9.2 Following MAPP advice, taking the site as a whole, after substantial expenditure on treatment and fixed equipment, it might be able to support a viable agricultural unit adequate to provide a part-time living or be used by an established unit in the neighbourhood. In the light of existing ground conditions and restoration work to date, concentration of agriculture/horticulture and related interests into the western area, with other uses such as recreation over the remainder may be a preferred alternative option. (see paras. 11.1 - 11.9).

9.3 Policy OL.6 requires the siting and design of new farm buildings to complement or enhance the countryside. New planting of trees and hedgerows will be encouraged to help blend any new agricultural buildings into their surroundings. Security against trespass and trampling of crops could be achieved by fencing along the footpath.

9.4 The need for a modest dwelling on a new agricultural unit might arise in order to provide site security,
and avoid losses through trespass and vandalism, but consideration would only be given to such a proposal after the land has been restored satisfactorily and the farming use had been established and a case proven for such a development and supported by the Ministry of Agriculture. This would be the only circumstance in which a new housing unit would be justified (Policy OL.2). Such a new unit should be located close to the main site access, be in a position of good site visibility and yet not intrude unnecessarily into the site's open aspect. The form and size, architectural style, materials, scale and proportions of the new building should be appropriate to a rural environment and have regard to the scale and proportions of nearby buildings (para. 9.12 Bexley Borough Plan). Once again, the planting of trees and hedgerows should be encouraged to blend the new building into its surroundings.

10. Forestry

10.1 If the site was used for forestry, the problems facing agricultural or market garden type crops, of obstructions in the top soil damaging equipment and plants would be less significant. With suitable gradients toward the river and good finishing and grading of the area, drainage should not be such a problem given the choice of suitable species. Also, cultivation need not be such a problem since herbicides could be used to control weeds and this would obviate the need to carry out much surface cultivation with implements.

10.2 If forestry is contemplated, special attention would have to be taken to comply with the C.E.G.B. statutory conditions regarding the overhead lines. Forestry has relatively long term returns, but would not require the high standard of restoration necessary for agricultural or recreation uses.

11. Outdoor Recreation (see Map 5)

11.1 In recent years the importance of the Green Belt for recreation has been increasingly recognised. The potential recreational development was emphasised in the Sports Council's Regional Recreation Strategy and the Standing Conference on London and South-East Regional Planning (SCRLERP) 1979. The GLDP (1976) para. 9.13 also stated that:

"It is an important function of the Green Belt particularly within Greater London to serve public recreational uses."

and lists in Para. 9.16 "predominantly open-air recreational facilities for which adequate provision
cannot be made within the urban area" as being a general use which would be acceptable in the Green Belt.

11.2 Currently, there is a shortfall of provision to meet such recognised recreational needs. In 1977 the Greater London and South East Council for Sports and Recreation identified a shortfall of pitches and eighteen-hole golf courses in this Borough, and a shortfall of 11 (9 hole) golf courses serving South East London.

11.3 Private sports clubs in the area have already shown some interest in acquiring areas of land on Upper College Farm for sports pitch uses. These would best be located north of the C.E.G.B. overhead lines for safety reasons, and away from the river in order to achieve a satisfactory layout, i.e. a clustering of pitches rather than a haphazard arrangement. A possible location of recreation uses is shown on Map 6.

11.4 Any open recreation uses should only be encouraged where they enhance the rural nature of the area. Any sports pitch provision or similar development, e.g. bowling green, archery field, etc., should therefore provide tree planting and landscaping on the periphery, in the vein of the adjoining cricket pitch.

11.5 High quality restoration is required for the viability of sports turf. Unsuitable material at present in the surface soil would have to be picked out in order for drainage channels to be constructed and in order to prevent surface hazards. The construction of pitches or greens in this location, though relatively expensive, would be quite possible. A gradient of 1:60 maximum is recommended for the construction of sports pitches by this Council.

11.6 Buildings associated with sports pitches and other activities of a predominantly open nature, such as changing rooms and toilets, are acceptable in the Green Belt, although any other permanent associated developments, such as spectator stands, would be opposed on this site. Policy OL.8 (A) requires that any buildings in such a location complement or enhance the countryside - always incorporating suitable landscaping. For the sports pitches envisaged, some club facilities and changing rooms are already provided at Bexley Cricket Club and would continue to be so. However, additional facilities would be required for this club and other clubs' needs. Preference would be given to a joint usage of facilities and the erection of one building rather
than many dotted around the site. Management of such a building could be carried out by a joint committee of members from the various clubs with pitches on site.

11.7 Size of the overall development would be limited to that considered necessary by the Council for the provision of required facilities. In order to minimise any effect on the appearance of the site, it should be located in the natural bend in the River Cray at 'X' (on Map 6) which is also suitably located adjacent to the main site access.

11.8 Car parking can be a discordant feature in an open setting and should be as sensitively designed as building development, also with associated landscaping. Car parking areas of the more informal types, such as grascrete, would be preferred to an area of visually intrusive tarmac. Car parking areas should be limited to a total cover of approximately one acre which would provide ample spaces - one for each player and spectators, and extend from the site access to the lake and around the club building. Private unadopted access should be provided to the club building and could be extended in the west for other land uses.

11.9 The Mill Meadows area, being in a variety of ownerships, not really of sufficient size after considering drainage problems due to the River Cray running through, lack of good accesses and the Southern By-Pass being a future possibility, is more suitable as an informal open space fulfilling an important role as a "countryside" backcloth to Bexley Village than of value for formal sports pitches. It would provide though a highly desirable section of the River Cray walk linking Bexley Village with the proposed sports activities in Upper College Farm.

12. Golf (see Map 6)

12.1 Provision of a golf course would be an alternative and suitable use for this site. The Upper College Farm area alone is sufficient for a nine-hole regulation course which requires 50-85 acres or a par-three course (eighteen holes) which needs only 30-45 acres. A pitch and putt course is a third alternative needing only 8 acres and could be accommodated as described for other open recreational uses. If the Mill Meadows area were also to be incorporated in a golf course, then an eighteen-hole regulation course is possible. Access for golfers through from Upper College Farm, however, would have to be made and this could be via part of the River Cray walk. No fairways should however be located in this vicinity (see paras 15.1 - 15.5).