The real-life Watership Down at Sandleford, just south of Newbury, and the developers' masterplan proposals for 1,500 new homes on the site that have been proposed for more than a decade

Watership Down: 'Fact and fiction'

Dr David Cooper from the SayNoToSandleford campaign group sets out its case against the proposed 1,500-home development at Sandleford Park, ahead of an appeal by the developers against the council's refusal of the housing plan

PRIMROSES are in flower around West Berkshire, making splashes of yellow against the grassy banks of the country lanes. Richard Adams' best selling odyssey, *Watership Down*, begins just as the primroses are over, and spring is turning into summer.

A rabbit warren nestles peacefully in the countryside.

But sensitive Fiver smells blood and terror.

He flees the warren with a handful of friends.

Shortly after they leave, Fiver's prophesy is gruesomely fulfilled.

Men with bulldozers appear and rip the burrows apart.

The remaining rabbits who have not fled are brutally gassed.

The diggers arrive and the concrete entombs them.

Fiction is turning into fact in West Berkshire, and the beautiful and irreplaceable countryside that Adams knew so well is in imminent danger.

Adams' story is strictly faithful to real English countryside, its nature and geography.

The journey made in the book is a real journey across actual countryside, and can still be traced today.

He was a precise observer.

A map in his book traces the exact trajectory of the journey made by the rabbits, as they flee their old warren and seek to find a new one.

Their journey takes them from just south of the town of Newbury, over the Enborne River into Hampshire, through the church yard of Newtown on their way to the hills far to the south.

They finish by establishing a new warren at Watership Down, one of the rolling chalk hills of the North Wessex Downs.

The start of the story, and the scene of the crime, is farmland just to the south of Newbury, called Sandleford.

This journey from Sandleford to Watership Down crosses unspoilt countryside that has changed little since Richard Adams' day.

Sandleford is an area of open fields punctuated by stands of ancient oak trees.

The small stream running through a shallow ravine flows towards the River Enborne, the border between Berkshire and Hampshire.

The warren where the story starts is set on the south west slopes of the ravine.

Almost half a century after the book's publication in 1972, the housing development remains fictional.

But this is not for want of effort by the present day landowners.

Sandleford is a tempting target for housing development.

It is just outside the built-up area of Newbury, and close to the main Basingstoke road.

The junction with the M4 is less than six miles way.

There is ample space to build 2,000 houses.

It is just over two miles from the centre of Newbury, although up a steep hill, which in practice means that virtually all local journeys to and from the development would be by car.

The local council is obliged to at least pay lip service to environmental issues, and when granting planning permission needs to tick boxes such as 'sustainable' and 'affordable'.

In 2010, West Berkshire Council's own assessment showed that Sandleford was not a sustainable site and that brownfield sites, of which there were several potential local options, would be more suitable.

The promoters of the 'Sandleford Park' development fought back.

For two years starting in 2010, the promoters met nine times with West Berkshire's professional planning officers.

By early 2011 the promoters of the Sandleford Park development had convinced the officers that the box marked 'sustainable' could be ticked.

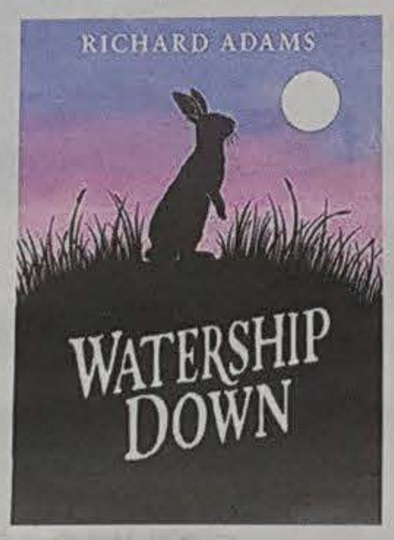
To achieve this, a new criterion was introduced and the assessment revised so it would treat large greenfield developments as per se more sustainable than brownfield sites.

The justification was that such "sites would be of a scale where they are able to implement sustainable [construction] schemes".

They were ready to go public and present Sandleford Park as the leading local candidate for large-scale house building.

On learning this news, some local activists set up a group called SayNoToSandleford (saynotosandleford.org.uk).

I have been the treasurer since its inception, and Peter Norman



its chair and spokesman.

In February 2012, despite a vigorous campaign, the majority Conservative bloc in the local council voted to make the Sandleford Park development the keystone of its 'core strategy' for house building.

Rival developers who had hoped their proposals would be chosen instead appealed and a planning inquiry followed.

In May 2012 the council's decision was endorsed by this inquiry.

All that remained was for the council to formally approve the detailed plans so the building could begin.

The expectation was that the first 100 homes would be built by 2016.

Our campaign was hard fought, but ultimately achieved little, with one exception.

We had pushed the 'Watership Down' angle as strongly as possible, attracting attention from around the world.

The late Richard Adams himself, by this time aged over 90, travelled to Newbury to support us.

Such was the outcry that the council leader made the bizarre promise in a television interview that there would be no houses built over the site of the original rabbit warren, which would remain a sanctuary.

We didn't like to explain that the bunnies were fictional.

However instead of a 2,000-house estate being built, something strange and rather wonderful happened. The entire development unravelled.

A lynchpin of the planning inquiry was the unlikely assertion by the developers that it was practical to access the site from one narrow and often congested road.

Planning inquiries accept such assumptions at face value, on the basis that they are 'reserved matters' which can be sorted in the fullness of time.

When the developers finally unveiled a detailed access plan, it turned out that it would bring the whole of south Newbury to a grinding halt.

The local council, who up to this point had been enthusiastic proponents of the Sandleford Park development, baulked and stasis ensued.

To the present day, nine years after the council had bulldozed the outline permission through, detailed planning permission had still not been granted, and not a brick had been laid.

In January 2021 Bloor Homes, the would-be developer for the eastern part of the site, grew tired of multiple rejections from the local council, so lodged an appeal with the Secretary of State to build 1,000 houses on part of the site.

This appeal will begin on May 5.

The process has been 'called in' by Secretary of State Robert Jenrick, who will now be able to personally influence the decision.

This is a man who, even in a Government riddled with cronyism, is remarkable in that he has actually admitted to performing acts that were "unlawful by reason of apparent bias".

The fact that John Bloor, owner of Bloor Homes, donated £962,000 to the 2019 Conservative election campaign, does not inspire confidence that Jenrick's "apparent bias" will be any less "apparent" or "biased" when this decision is made.

As every bunny rabbit needs to understand, the development of rural land such as Sandleford is driven by a simple business proposition.

In West Berkshire an acre of productive farmland can be purchased for about £7,000.

Working a farm turns a decent profit, and is a perfectly good business.

But land around market towns is rarely owned by those who are interested in farming.

Throughout the South of England the fringes of market towns have been systematically bought up by land speculators who bank on far richer rewards.

If they can get planning permission to turn an acre into residential land, its value will shoot up to over £700,000.

The key to this profit bonanza is a piece of paper granting planning permission.

In the case of Sandleford, about 100 acres are scheduled for development, so if the planning authority signs on the dotted line the landowners will make a profit in the region of £70m.

The technical term for this dramatic price increase is 'value uplift'.

In the public imagination, housing developers are seen as the villains, but this lets the real villains off the hook.

The really big prize goes to the landowners, and comprises millions of pounds for doing nothing more constructive than getting a signature on a planning permit.

The rewards for this game are so great that land ownership in the UK is now globalised and is immensely attractive for foreign investors, such as Russian mafia bosses, African dictators and Arab oil billionaires, who, having become rich through corruption in their own countries, make their wealth secure by investing in the UK.

This pushes up land prices and finances a strong pro-development lobby.

In deference to their large offshore donors, successive Conservative governments have made it more and more difficult to mount local opposition to large developments.

Land speculators, both foreign and home grown, are making tax-free fortunes by exploiting our countryside.

The money involved is huge.

County towns throughout Southern England are threatened by property speculators placing pressure on local councils.

If the local authorities dare to resist, property developers can always call on their chums in Westminster.

Deface a mediocre statue of some wealthy slave owner and you will get 10 years in prison.

Deface our precious and irreplaceable countryside and you will end up with government ministers fawning on your every word.

It really doesn't need to be like this.

In the last decade, the Government has invested billions of pounds on building infrastructure in the South.

Meanwhile, the North is neglected, served by ancient Pacer diesel trains that slowly rattle from one dilapidated station to another.

The solution is clear: Spend on infrastructure in the North, and make the North a desirable place to live and build houses.

The South is already overdeveloped.

The Government talks about levelling up the North, while doing nothing to achieve this.

By this autumn, as the leaves of the ancient oak trees in Sandleford start to colour, we will know the decision of the Secretary of State.

The planning notices gleam orange in the sun. Any rabbits would do well to think of moving.