



MELVILLE DUNBAR, MELVILLE DUNBAR ASSOCIATES: REAL URBAN PLANNING FOR THE SHIRES

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

MELVILLE DUNBAR

First of all, I had better announce that I am a supporter of PPG3. However, I believe, rather like the curate's egg, it is good in parts but in need of amendment. It cannot keep just talking about dwellings. It surely has to mention that dwellings differ in size and we need some clarification in things like bed spaces or habitable rooms. It surely cannot go on talking about 1.5 car parking spaces maximum per dwelling without relating it to context and place. That point is made abundantly clear this morning. There has to be flexibility to make authorities determine the appropriate level of parking, whether it is next to a railway station or whether it is a country village.

We also may need to re-think the imperative which the Secretary of State has placed on it of saying that settlements should not decrease in density towards the edge. I am not advocating a pyramid principle here, but I am saying there are situations where landscape dominant housing has a role to play in making the transition between town and country. That is not just in conservation areas or the special exceptions that one has to plead to get densities below 12 to the acre.

The general thrust of PPG3 is clearly right and long overdue. Land was being used in a profligate way and it has to stop. Like all pendulums, planning has swung or has been told to swing in one direction and it needs perhaps a little correction and a little listening to the market and the common sense views of what people require to make this a successful transition.

This morning I also listened to stories about locking planners and highway engineers in rooms for a week. I hope I am not asked to go into one of those rooms for a week: in the absence of good air, good food and wine, I would have to come out.

Such a situation should not exist. It is now coming up to nearly 30 years since the Essex Design Guide brought out a clear, concise set of highway standards which anybody could translate from the book and onto the drawing board, knowing that they had every chance that those roads would be taken in charge. That document was further reviewed in 1979.

I chaired, as an architect/planner, the Essex branch of highway engineers, county and district, to write the guide, Patricia Gupta, who is in this room, worked on it with me. That document served Essex well until a few years ago, when it has since again been reviewed. There is no shortage of road standards in Essex which any designer can take on to find an abundant range of

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

solutions knowing full well that those will be taken in charge or adopted.

I do not like things being held by people in bottom drawer philosophies or bottom drawer ideas: they should pull them out, have them tested, publish them and allow the industry to get on with designing schemes in such a way that they can bring them in, get them approved and hopefully have them adopted.

It is inefficient, costs money and I do not think it is justified. If the Secretary of State, instead of calling in applications, started calling in some highway standards and, if they are not up to it ensured that new standards are put into either local plans, or the local authority is told to follow DB32.

Quite frankly, we have DB32, we have examples such as Essex, where you have a range of standards. Rural engineers should be concerning themselves mainly with construction or fitness when it comes to land and areas inside residential schemes.

It can be done and I will show you an example that that is the way forward, otherwise you carry on with this great inefficient method of working, resulting in compromise, as you saw this morning. I was extremely saddened to see what had happened out beyond Ely at Highfield. That young architects should come along and be so badly handled that all they have got out of that is going to be a disappointing (by the sound of it) suburban extension. I cannot believe that that is in the interests of the people in that area or the best practise in local government.

Having said all of that, I would like to move on and talk a little about some case studies in Essex. The philosophy underlying the Essex Design Guide proposes that we keep out of the middle zone of suburbia, which is always just below 12 to the acre [1]. You should move it towards the urban zone in the main. There are schemes which are townscape quality, but I want to remind you we also allowed in exceptional cases, small cases, landscape dominant or arcadian schemes to meet what used to be known many years ago as seniorsolariat or the executive. There is a need for it, and I cannot see why it should not be built still today. I am building it elsewhere; I cannot build it in the UK.

Clearly this picture is what the Essex Guide was meant to rebut [2]. I think it is also what PPG3 is meant to be about, namely that you will get car dominated schemes, anywhere type architecture, no privacy at the rear often [3]. Again, it might achieve the minimum density, but clearly it does not fulfil the objectives of PPG3 in terms of design quality.



[1]



[2]



[3]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

The non-frontage access[4], distributor road, lined with rear fencing, fast speeds, 10 metre high columns, no natural policing, unsafe for any woman to walk home at night if she is a nurse or whatever, the complete antithesis of good planning. But still the authorities insist on this type of road going into housing schemes.

The forward visibility display producing two footpaths and a doggish strip of a half moon bit of planting [5], yards of fencing, all costing money. Again, coming about through doctrinaire highway standards.

If we are going to build better schemes, clearly we must have something trying to establish regional identity. It is all right being well designed, but is it well designed of the place? Can you tell that it belongs in East Anglia, in Essex or is it something that would look better in the West Country?

If you believe in regionalism and the idea that you should have local identity and character, clearly you must pay some attention not just to building form but to the traditional building material that makes up the palette, the character of an area [6]. That is the palette of Essex. Most of it is local, London stock, golf, painted boarding, render, black boarding, matt flints, pantiles, plain tiles on the better houses. The only import was basically slate, which came in after 1840 with the railways. There was so much of it that it actually makes up part of the scene.

I am now going to show you some case studies. Some are pre-PPG3, some are now being built at the moment and what would the difference be? This is an area at the back of Bradford Street in Braintree [7]. It was reserved for an inner relief road. That road was cancelled, as a result of which Higgins Plc were able to acquire some old garages and land and begin the process of buying land all the way from the entrance to eventually the end



[4]



[5]



[6]



[7]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

of the scheme, including some in-fill sites which faced onto the scheme. The main problem was levels and flood prevention, but all of that is catered for in balancing pits or balancing ponds, if you like, or wet areas beside the river.

That is the scheme [8]. It fits in pretty seriously - this is the objective - into the character of Bradford Street. In particular, it has little fingers or roads or lanes that go back through into the existing street.

This is part of the in-fill onto the street [9]. This is the entrance to the scheme with a mini roundabout created [10]. In case you are worried about my indemnity insurance, I did not do that one! (Laughter) There are apartments round the corner. It is always difficult getting round corners and keeping the townscape going. Little ways through to back courtyards, underparking [11].

This is where the benefit of a more informed range of highway standards comes into play. Any designer here, anybody who builds can immediately say, "I wish I could do that and I would be stopped from doing that." Why? We are talking about the need for evidence. It is nearly 30 years of evidence in Essex. Surveys were done in the late seventies as to the accident rate on existing estates combined to the new estates we had done. It showed little improvement, I have to say, in numbers of accidents, but the accidents were different: there were more bumps and bangs with people reversing, whereas on the wide open fast estates more children were being hurt coming out from between cars. I do not say it reduced the number, but what was happening were so minor that the whole thing was de minimis, quite frankly, and has been blown up out of all proportion to what is required.

Simple road, single footpath, landscape on one side [12].



[12]



[8]



[9]



[10]



[11]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

For your information, the density, excluding the green area, is just over 30. It is 31 or 32.

Little roadways going down off the main road, bringing you back into Bradford Street [14]. You can see the mountable pavement there. Nothing fancy, no interlocking block, very simple stuff, mainly in the architecture in the walls and the layout. Little walkways connecting through between the end of these - call them cul-de-sacs, but supervised by houses looking onto them and whenever there are any trees of any sort try and keep them. That is the feeling of it [15].

As we got up the top of the site it got very tight because it is only wide enough for a road. It had been bought by the county surveyor, by the county council to put a road on, so we can see what we were playing with here [16].

Again, with the benefit of the planning standards and the road standards, we were able, with underparkers and so on, to build a street [17]. We had nothing but planning support on this from the offices of Braintree District Council. We had nothing but support from the highway engineers in terms of discussion of adoption or the work. Most importantly of all, because no architect can operate without a good client, without a patron, and the modern developers are today's patrons, we have an excellent client in Higgins Plc, who saw the scheme through, have made a profit (and that is what we have got to do - make a profit - no fun without profit). When we are making a profit there is more room for some of the detail and things of delight and decoration which make for good schemes.

I know people who live on this scheme are proud of it. We are proud of it.



[17]



[14]



[15]



[16]



The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

This is a linkage for the cycle way back to the school and those are temporary bollards for fire access because it is a cul-de-sac [18]. It is simple traditional detailing of the sort you see in many Essex towns and villages. It is also pre-Part M, because we were able, where we wanted to, just to lift them up a bit, put a few steps up. If ever the road to hell was paved with good intentions, Part M takes the biscuit, in my view.

Another scheme. The centre of Stock, a village near Chelmsford in Essex. Initially acquired by Higgins. One house [19]. Subsequently, in the way of those things, just as we came out of the recession, sold out to Berkeley Homes who, as I recall, acquired an extra piece at the back of a pub. That is the scheme now fitted in [20].

We dealt with Chelmsford on this and I am very pleased that Chris Robertson is here today. He is the borough engineer. He was extremely helpful in the sense that we had to get out of a very tight access onto a narrow back lane, so the solution was to slow down the speed in the back lane and introduce a priority traffic system, which is now there. Also to be a bit flexible on sight lines. I have to say it was so flexible I still have not figured out how we got one sight line going over the top of somebody else's garden, but it is built and it works and there are no problems. That is the scheme and that was the slightly odd sight line [21]. There you can see it comes in, [22], a tight turn left, a



[18]



[19]



[20]



[22]



[21]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

couple of gate lodges, into the back, turning ahead, all detached, apart from where the extra bit of land was acquired, where we stuck some together in twos and threes, three bedroomed, and then we added a cart shed here, which existed and which we did up and a pond to finish the job off [23, 24].

I put two things forward. First of all, you see how tight that bit of land is and I was tempted at one stage to just leave it. I thought, "I wonder if I could put on there a really small house?", somebody described it as a glorified dog kennel, but it has been a very, very popular house. In fact, it was the most popular house on the estate: everybody seemed to want it, because it was small and there is nothing like a small house on a good scheme. Here it comes, you can see the character of it. Gate lodges [25]. I hope you notice there is a Velux light there!

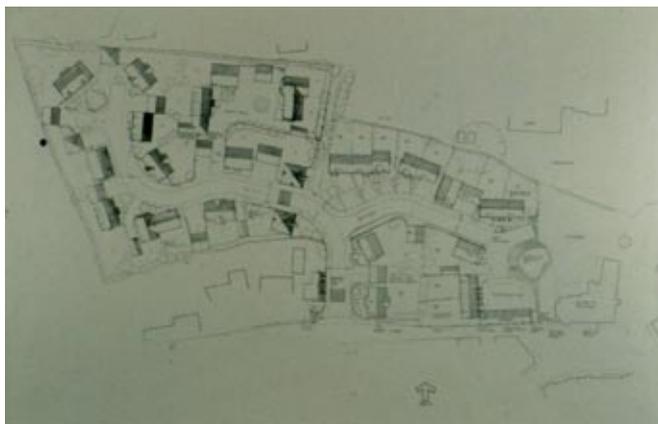
This is the terrace type arrangement, parking at the front [26]. Again the gate lodges [27].



[25]



[23]



[24]



[26]



[27]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

The road is tight [28]. The scheme looks much better now: the landscaping has come on and they really do take care of it. A couple of little properties, one reflecting the other, [30], down a private drive, up to five off a private drive in Essex, unadopted. Five bed on the left and at the end, four bed.

I could not do this today, I suppose, because PPG3 would prevent me having more than 1.5 parking spaces and yet I have got four parking spaces at the end for that five bedder and I have got 1.5 for the shared units and I have got three for the other units. What on earth is wrong with that in the middle of Stock? It's doctrinaire nonsense.

This scheme, by the way, nudges up to about 35/36 to the hectare. We have done everything that is required, used the land efficiently, provided a mixed development for family use, but if somebody was doctrinaire about the parking I could have a problem, which would be a bit of a nonsense.

This is Coggeshall in Essex, where I have my office [31]. This area here came up. It is a Persimmon scheme. Here again we have got street architecture [32], mews courts, underparking, tight streets, but the reason I show it is, again, the splendid attitude of the district council, who said that quality of space is far better than percentage of space, in that we have a little vest pocket park at the back here [33]. This is apartments dressed up like a mill, and these houses are two bedders but they are single aspect and they are only 4.3 metres wide with very small gardens at the back, literally 35 square metres, because they are wide frontage, not very deep.



[28]



[29]



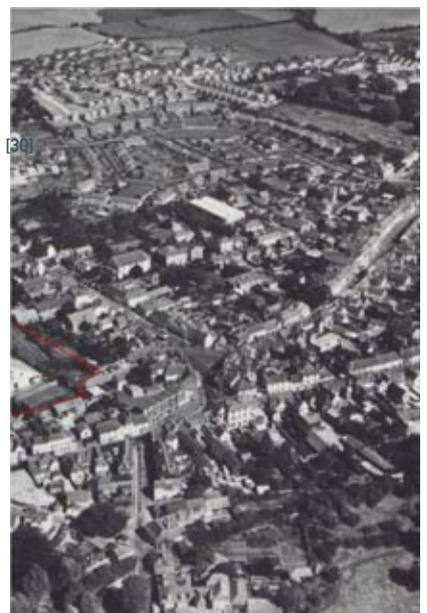
[30]



[32]



[33]



[31]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

But, of course, they have the benefit of looking out onto this and it is an attractive scene. Unless you have flexibility from the planning authority in garden area, content of open space, road standards, how can a designer produce something of this nature? He has got one hand behind his back and two fingers off.

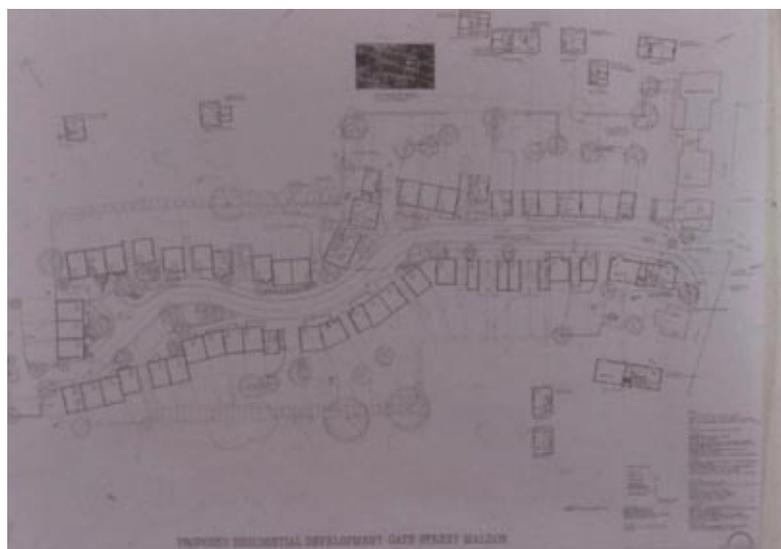
This is one of my favourite schemes. It is in Malden. It is behind the Blue Boar in the town centre [34, 35]. It used to be a former EEV factory belonging to GEC. It came available in the recession and none of the big plcs in the UK was really interested. It went to tender. I know Abbey put a bid in, but I am pretty confident they were not going to build this.

I introduced a company called Dandara from the Isle of Man. They went and had a look at it and so they bought it. They then went off to see Bairstow Eaves, Blackhorse Taylors, who all said to them, "This is going to be a disaster. This can't be done. This is all different." So the industry stood back; they were not interested. And Dandara came over.

We kept the existing lodge in place and, quite frankly, it is a good scheme. It has a nice little street, underparking, apartments at the end with a bit of a Belvedere on, which helps the skyline as you look up. I really like this scheme because when you go there in the summer you see mums sitting out chatting, you see kids cycling in the streets. It is also rather nice to have a scheme where you can walk along to the local pub, walk home, where your children can walk to the local grammar school, comprehensive school. This sold like hot cakes. The industry, locked in its old narrow frame in those days of standard boxed semis on the edge of Malden, were left miles behind.



[35]



[34]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

If you go to Bairstow Eves in Malden now and say you want one of these houses, they will say, "We'll put you on the list" - on the waiting list. So the industry were just not there when it came to it. I am saying that could well be the case still now.

This is the centre of Braintree [36]. This is the East Braintree regeneration area. The station is here. Victorian terraced housing where people worked in Crittalls, Lake and Eridge Foundry and Courtaulds, an area where, quite frankly, the private sector did not go. Recently, however, McCarthy & Stone have done a sheltered housing scheme here and this site was acquired by Redrow.

The only down side of it was that the district council had got hold of some money which they were determined to spend. They decided to build that road. I could not understand why that road was not perfectly adequate. It segregated our site. So we are now left with a road bringing traffic in from Braintree Freeport Designer Village into here, through a set of traffic lights there, just the sort of problem I highlighted to you before. How do you deal with that road in design terms when you have got development to occur on both sides?

This is the scheme [37] and Redrow have been exceptionally good, brave, whatever, but it has paid off. It is a mixed development, 10,000 square foot of quasi commercial to go in there. Townhouses along here, four bed, apartments on the corner, more townhouses, more apartments, more two bed, three bed terraced housing, a little tiny vest pocket park, more housing and, as you can see, it is a root/branch system feeding in to back courts but also, to use their phrase, chauffeur units built above garages to supervise the rear of these courts, all of



[36]



[37]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

it taken in charge up to that point. And along this tongue here money to be provided for a landscaping scheme and cycle track along the railway and also no social housing, 250 units, any money going towards a contribution in relation to that road.

You can see the character of the area here [38], very much Victorian. There are also a lot of towers in Braintree. I will not worry you with why that is, but it is mainly to do with an engineer who went off to Italy in the 19th Century who wanted towers everywhere. We tried to make a bit of fun out of that and to reflect that in some of the design. It is now on the way up. It is in a Cobe report 'By Design' as worth a detour. I would not detour for another year until it is finished, but you can see that it is coming on.

This is where you need an engineer who is prepared to be flexible. Front doors onto a main road [39]. You can then face the house outwards, you are not putting back gardens and walls. Again, this is all part of the inner ring road system for Braintree. A tower to go onto that corner where Redrow have their sales office.

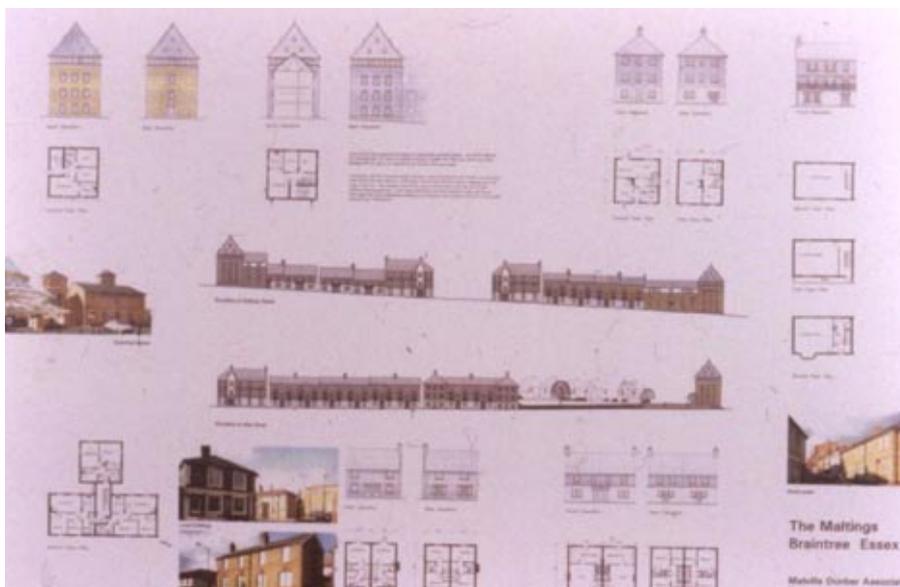
These are some of the apartments going up [40]. Just to give you some idea of the density, which is a mixture of houses and apartments. I know it says in By Design 60, but it is well over 70 to the hectare. Parking, one for one on the apartments, 1.5 to 2 on the townhouses.



[39]



[40]



[38]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

This scheme is in Colchester. This is Magnum Station [41]. Higgins, again, did this arrangement with the borough council whereby the existing Enterprise Centre was demolished, a new Enterprise Centre built, now all constructed, all occupied by small businesses, freeing up this land for development.

This scheme is over 80 to the hectare [42]. It is a mixture of townhouses, as you can see here [43], as a buffer between the existing properties in Magnum Street and then apartments, 50 per cent. parking. It is the first scheme we have been involved in where the parking has got below 1:1.

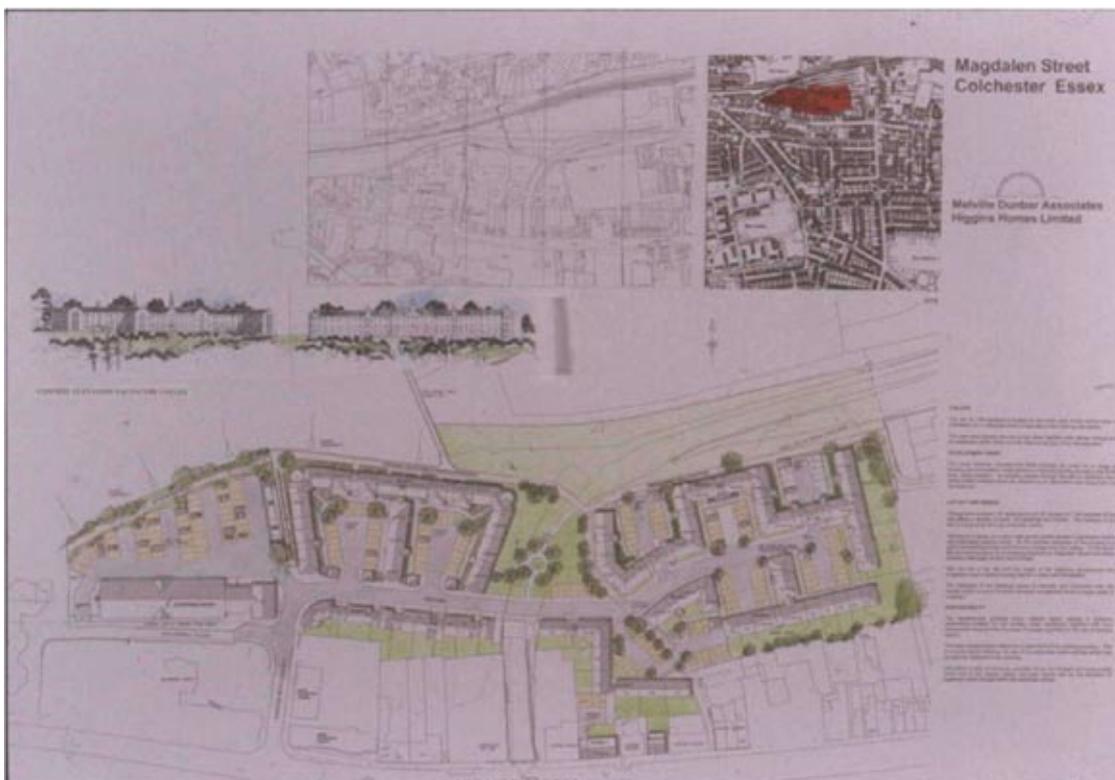
In return, we had to put in an enormous amount of bicycle stores. I do not know whether anyone is going to bike to this scheme. It meant the loss of three apartments - there is that



[41]



[42]



[43]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

many bicycle stores to compensate for the reduced parking on these apartments.

There is also a provision of a cycle track down at the station and I am hopeful that the borough council's car park at the back of the Enterprise Centre - that we can persuade them to make it available after, say, six and at weekends, because I personally have reservations about where the 50 per cent. will go. Sales are very good, by the way, very good. As usual, there seems to be nowadays a few investors buying as well as first time purchasers.

These are the little townhouses [44], looking a bit raw at the moment. They are literally under construction, so give the landscape a chance. These are the apartments. This is very much street stuff. That was the vision we had for the view when seen across the wide sweep of parkland below it or landscape below, across the railway line [45]. This is 200 metres long. There it is, emerging [46]. Would a scheme like this have been possible before PPG3? I do not think so because of the car parking requirement. It would not have been as dense. Is it a



[44]



[45]



[46]

The Road Ahead, Velux training centre, 4 December 2002

product of PPG3? No. I think it is also a product of the money supply, the fact that if there is money about at the lowest base rates ever and there is the demographics of need, this is the response to it, right in the middle where you can walk into the shops, get on the train and do all those things. So it is not just PPG3, it is a market led thing as well, because nobody would be doing it if it was not selling.

So finally I had a point to make about intervention by the Secretary of State. As you know, the Secretary of State is proposing to call in schemes below 30 to the hectare in the south-east.

Some years ago I managed to go to Aberystwyth to talk to the Inspectorate. They used to have a summer school there. That was a rather nice privilege, because you got to hear one or two stories from the Inspectorate about cases that we would not normally find in the journals. We were having a drink one night, a couple of us, down at the Railwaymen's Club in Aberystwyth, the only place you could get a drink on a Sunday. We were talking about cases and one of them said to me he had an interesting case whereby a domestic extension, a bedroom with a bathroom on, had been refused by the planning authority. It was just over the limit. When he got to the inquiry it was a full inquiry. Nobody was there. There were no objectors, apart from a very small man with spectacles on and two very large women, one of whom had a hat pinned to her head, an enormous woman. Every time he looked towards the man the man kept shaking his head, shaking his head, through the whole of this rather unusual case.

When they got out, he said, "Can I have a lift to the site?" He had a lift to the site. He said, "You can't talk to me. You realise you can't talk to me", but the man insisted he took him to the site. As soon as he got in the car, he said, "If you approve this extension, I'll kill myself, I'll kill myself." He said, "You've applied for it." "I haven't", he said, "it's the wife, she's made me apply for it. It's for the mother-in-law next to her." He said, "You can't tell me that." When he got back, he thought, "I can't approve this extension, this man will kill himself." So what he did, he made up some reasons about detriment to the street scene, loss of privacy etc. etc. Thought, "That's done it. Happy days are here."

Guess what happened.

In those days the Secretary of State used to pull one in 20 applications out just to make sure they were right. So he called this one out and approved it. (Laughter) So just remember that when Prescott is intervening: anything can happen. Thank you.