

BRANSCOMBE
(Beer & Branscombe)

06/0365/FUL
(FULL)

05.04.06.

Applicant: Mr Rosenblatt

Location: The Lookout
(Grid Ref: 320573/88183)

Proposal: Erection of summer house

Consultations

County Highway Authority

No comment

Environment Agency

No comment

English Nature

No objections

Representations

9 letters of objection have been received, including a letter from the National Trust, which owns land adjacent to the site.

Summary of Objections

1. Too prominent on the skyline in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty along the World Heritage Coast.
2. Does not meet the accepted definition of the term 'summerhouse'.
3. Ruins the view from the beach up towards the cliff, which is currently unspoilt.
4. The summer house appears to be living accommodation rather than just a summer house.
5. Far larger than the previous building and stands closer to the cliff.
6. Potential for cliff erosion and danger to beach huts and chalets below.
7. Chalet owners could feel overlooked.
8. The lookout building, which was of historic importance to the village, has been knocked down.
9. Original lookout building should be reinstated.
10. Work should not be carried out without first obtaining planning permission.
11. Attraction of the village would be seriously diminished.
12. Owner of the Lookout is not a permanent resident and rarely visits.
13. Out of keeping with the house and negligent of the wider landscape.

Parish/Town Council

'The Parish Council recommends REFUSAL on the following grounds:-

1. The proposed summer house is significantly larger than the building which has been removed by approximately 80%.
2. The orientation of the proposed building has been turned 90° from the original building.
3. The proposed glass frontage will be very visually intrusive in this prominent and sensitive/coastal area, being on the edge of the cliff of the World Heritage Site. It is also in a Coastal Preservation Area and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
4. The Parish Council is disappointed that the building that has been removed was the original Coastguard Lookout and therefore, of some historical interest to the village and surrounding area.
5. We note that the application included the phrase "incidental residential purposes", whereas the original building was not used for residential purposes at all.'

Ward Members

Councillor M Green has submitted written observations in respect of the proposal as follows:-

'Having visited the site since completed I would like to modify my position

1. The Parish Council were very disappointed that Branscombe has lost the original Coastguard Lookout, but it seems that no control existed to prevent its demolition.
2. Scale – I feel that the summer house is in scale with the main building and do not consider it to be out of proportion.
3. It has been constructed tastefully (using most of the original stone) which I think is right and proper on the World Heritage Coast.
4. However, I am still concerned about the reflection from the sun on the large expanse of glass on the seaward, south-facing elevation. Though I note that the glass is under an overhang which helps shade it a bit.

I feel the view from the sea is important on the World Heritage Coast.

I would be prepared to support this application if some way was found to ameliorate this situation.

Suggest either a tasteful, easy to operate wooden shutter system or special glass to prevent reflection.

If the shutter system is a condition then Approve.'

In the event that this application comes to Committee I would reserve my position until I am in full possession of all the relevant facts and arguments for and against.

Comment

The Site and its Surroundings

The Lookout is a substantial detached two storey property that occupies an elevated and visually prominent siting on the east-facing slope of the hillside on West Cliff overlooking Branscombe Mouth (see attached location plan).

The property, and indeed West Cliff and the coastline beyond, together with the Sea Shanty shop and café in the valley bottom below The Lookout, form a much heralded landscape/coastal composition on account of its scenic qualities to which the buildings in their setting contribute significantly.

The importance of the area in landscape terms is reflected in the number of designations that cover it, namely Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty ('AONB'), Coastal Preservation Area ('CPA') and Heritage Coast. In addition, the adjacent cliffs and foreshore are the subject of Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Area of Conservation Interest and, most importantly, World Heritage Site designations.

The area is also the subject of a longstanding 'Article 4 direction' that removes permitted development rights in respect of temporary buildings and uses of land.

The property itself, which has historically been in residential use (with the exception of a period during the 1980s and 1990s when it was used as a guest house), is of stone construction with a hipped slate roof. The building and its extensive curtilage area are cut into the hillside with the latter retained on the eastern and northern boundaries by substantial stone-faced walls.

Until comparatively recently, there existed a modest detached single storey outbuilding – also of stone construction with a slate gabled pitched roof – between the southern end of the main dwelling and the cliff edge that it is believed served as the former ‘lookout post’. However, according to information supplied by the applicant’s agent, it had been rebuilt in the early 1990s and was not therefore the original building. This building was orientated north/south in the same way as the main dwelling.

Access to the site is via a private driveway running up the hill close to the cliff edge from the end of the public highway, which is itself to the east of the Sea Shanty and the Branscombe stream. Private vehicular access also exists to both the Sea Shanty itself and a number of holiday chalets at the foot of the cliffs to the west.

In spite of the very evident character of the building and the traditional materials employed in its construction, The Lookout is not listed as being of special architectural or historic interest. Furthermore, although the subject of the numerous landscape and nature conservation – related designations set out above, the site and surrounding area do not form part of a designated conservation area.

The Proposed Development

Full planning permission is sought respectively for the demolition of the former ‘lookout’ building referred to above (which in itself does not require an express grant of planning permission from the Authority) and the construction of a larger detached summer house building in its place.

The building is broadly T-shaped with the main part of it (i.e. which houses the principal usable space within) orientated west/east. However, there also exists a wing to the building orientated north/south at 90° to this main part which it crosses to form a gable feature on its principal south elevation, which looks out to sea. Both roofs are of pitched form with gables, of identical ridge height and finished with second hand natural slate. The walls of the building are predominantly finished in natural stone although the south elevation features recessed full height glazing and French doors in white pvcu frames, without glazing bars, set behind a pair of wooden columns that are square in section. These support a horizontal timber beam that runs the entire length of this elevation below the roof eaves and which is flush with the end of the side elevation walls of the building. Painted timber bargeboards have been added to the three main gables of the building and along the entire north elevation.

The footprint area of the building, measured externally, is approximately 27.4 square metres with a volume, according to information supplied with the application, of 162 cubic metres. The roof ridge height is 3.8 metres.

The building that it replaces was approximately 12.4 square metres in area with a volume of 90 cubic metres and a roof ridge height of 3.4 metres.

A copy of the submitted site layout, floor plan and elevation details is attached for Members’ information.

An area of replacement timber decking, together with a perimeter timber post and rail fence, has also been constructed between the summer house building and the cliff edge. Although these do not form part of the application for consideration, an investigation into this element of the development is ongoing.

Planning Policy

Devon Structure Plan 2001-2016

- CO1 - (Landscape Character and Local Distinctiveness)
- CO3 - (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty)
- CO5 - (Coastal Preservation Area)
- CO6 - (Quality of New Development)
- CO10 - (Protection of Nature Conservation)

Adopted East Devon Local Plan

- S4 - (Countryside Protection)
- D1 - (Design and Local Distinctiveness)
- EN1 - (Development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty)
- EN7 - (Nationally Important Sites – including Sites of Special Scientific Interest)

Observations/Appraisal

The proposal falls to be considered having regard principally to the impact of the development upon the highly sensitive and heavily designated landscape with in which it is located.

In this regard, in the first instance it is recognised that the building is larger than the previous structure that it has replaced in terms of its footprint area, volume and height, and also its main west/east length due to its orientation overlooking the sea. For these reasons, it is clearly more visually prominent within the surrounding landscape and particularly so from views of the coastline and cliffs from parts of the beach and from out at sea. These views reveal the longer front (south) elevation of the building in place of the much narrower gable end wall of the building that existed previously. It is from these views that the increased bulk of the summer house is most readily apparent.

However, set against this the building is not proportioned any nearer to the cliff edge than the previous structure. This will be evident from the attached copy of a drawing detailing the site layout and elevations of the latter.

Moreover, it is considered that the building has been designed most sympathetically in terms of its visual relationship with the main dwelling. Although featuring gables that do not reflect the hipped roof form of the house, this is identical to the gabled design of the previous building on the site, whilst the north/south dimension of the summer house is identical to that of the previous building also. Furthermore, the use of second hand natural stone and natural slate to match the main dwelling, together with the quality of the construction work itself, has resulted in what is considered to be a very well executed development that, from the main public views of the site from the Coastal Footpath – both above the site on West Cliff and from the opposite hillside – and the public car park adjacent to the Sea Shanty, appears sympathetic to the design and appearance of the dwelling. Although it is recognised that the building is larger than might ordinarily be expected of a domestic summer house and of more robust construction, it is considered that its scale is in itself appropriate given the considerable size of the main dwelling and that the structure is of suitably subordinate proportions in relation to it. Furthermore, it is considered that its form, design and materials are far more sympathetic to the main building than would be the case with a summer house of timber construction, that tends to be more common place.

Whilst recognising the considerable sensitivity of the site in terms of its heavily designated landscape context and the increased size of the summer house in relation to the building that it replaced, it is thought that its siting, design, form and scale are sensitive to both the scale and integrity of the setting of the main dwelling that it serves and the character and appearance of both the landscape and coastline. Although, as stated above, the longer dimension of the south elevation of the building is most readily apparent from views of the site from parts of the beach and the sea, it is seen against the backdrop of the south end elevation wall of the main dwelling and not in isolation. As such, it is not considered that its appearance is unduly visually intrusive or detrimental to the character and appearance of the coast.

In response to the views expressed by the ward member regarding reflection from the glazing in the front of the building, the agents representing the applicant have supplied details of a glazing film that it is proposed to use that has a high glare reduction factor.

The other key issue in the determination of the proposal, reflected in the views of a number of objectors, relates to the impact of the building upon the stability of the adjacent cliff face. In response, the agents have supplied a copy of a structural engineer's report which refers in the main to the adjacent timber decking (which does not form part of the application) between the summer house and the cliff edge. This concludes that there is no evidence to suggest that the introduction of the bored pile foundations on which the decking is constructed has caused any destabilisation of the cliff face or is likely to in the future. Indeed, it is suggested that they actually strengthen the cliff face, thereby improving upon the situation that existed prior to construction. The summer house is set further back from the cliff edge than the decking.

In the circumstances, it is not considered that objection to the development on the grounds of increased risk of danger to occupiers of the holiday chalets or other persons on the beach below the cliff could reasonably be sustained.

With regard to the issue raised by the Parish Council concerning the loss of the previous building on the site, as stated above none of the buildings are listed as being of special architectural or historic interest and no part of the site is within a designated conservation area. As such, whilst its demolition is regrettable, the Authority would have had no control over the removal of this building. Objection to the replacement building could not therefore be supported on the ground of the loss of the structure that it replaces.

The timber decking and balustrading between the summer house and the cliff edge, as already stated, does not form part of the proposal for consideration in view of the agents' belief that a grant of planning permission is not required for these elements. However, this is being investigated as a separate matter.

Conclusion

In concluding it is accepted, given the clear sensitivity of the landscape and coastal context against which the proposal needs to be assessed, that this is a finely balanced case.

However, on balance, it is considered that the size, form, design and appearance of the building are not so excessive, poorly related to the main dwelling or visually intrusive upon the landscape and coast as to be unduly detrimental or to undermine the principal objectives of established policies to protect the landscape character and natural beauty of the area or safeguard its nature conservation value.

Recommendation

APPROVE subject to the following condition:-

1. The building hereby permitted shall be used only in conjunction with, and ancillary to, the use of 'The Lookout' as a single dwelling house and shall not be used as a separate dwelling or for any commercial, industrial or business purpose.
(Reason - The building is unsuitable for independent residential occupation and a commercial use would be detrimental to the character and appearance of the area, which is designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Coastal Preservation Area.)

List of Background Papers

The file containing all letters, consultations, and documents referred to in the report.