

Isleham Society – Written Representation regarding the Sunnica Energy Farm Proposal

Executive Summary

This representation will outline the concerns that the Isleham Society has about the Sunnica Energy Farm proposal. It will cover the objections we have to the transformation of our treasured and characteristic Fen Edge landscape and to the impact of the proposal on some of our valued heritage sites. These include the plane crash site and the river Lark and Spurgeon Stone. We are also deeply concerned about the impact that this proposal will have on Isleham village's sense of identity and the relationship that the residents here have with their surroundings.

Introduction

My name is Mark Fletcher and I chair the Isleham Society, a local heritage group. My background is in teaching for over forty years.

The Isleham Society is particularly concerned with the heritage of this area and how to pass it on to future generations. It also sets out to support other groups doing activities which benefit the village community.

We have over 50 paid members, and this figure is increasing. Well over 100 people subscribe to receive the Society's regular information bulletins.

We have a regular program throughout the year of Thursday evening talks with visiting speakers, which are well supported and are included in the membership fee (on average over 40 people attend these talks). We also open the talks up to non-members so as not to exclude anyone who wishes to come along and hear what is being discussed. Non-members pay a small nominal fee to attend the talks on an ad-hoc basis.

As well as arranging talks on local heritage, the Isleham Society is also building up a supplementary program of all kinds of activities, some of them aimed at different age groups. Events in the past year include: a 'Beating the Bounds' walk following footpaths and boundary stones, a family-friendly village tour, a celebration of the village tapestry, two evenings sharing anecdotes of village life, talks on the Romans here, and the Iceni, and we have linked to the Fen Edge Way Cambridge archaeology and geology walking route (www.fenedgetrail.org).

We staged the Isleham Medieval Mystery Play, visited a major local company, have run botany workshops and much else. We have researched and mapped the old pubs and supported the Isleham Gala and nature conservation field work. Projects underway include: recording the memories of older residents; creating a phone box 'Tardis Museum'; making a digital presentation of the village to network with schoolchildren in other countries and researching the historic importance of the now depleted waterways. We hope to involve more families and children in events, and to also arrange more visits to local places of interest.

From the above you can see that there is a lively and pro-active interest in aspects of living in a Fen Edge village set in the remarkable agricultural landscape of wide fields and huge skies. Given the strong community values of this village members of this Society generally have other involvements locally such as Scouts or Mothers' Union or the sports clubs, the Drama Group, the Friends of Isleham Nature Reserve, or activities connected with the three churches, the allotments, and of course the

Primary School and Parish Council. This networking is important to village life, and a key role of the Society is to facilitate this and support other community groups.

Objections to the Sunnica proposal

In addition to concerns about loss of productive farmland (the area has been drained and farmed since Roman times), our members are worried about congestion and potential damage to our narrow country roads, and risks associated with the large battery stores and substations. The feedback from members shows they are particularly worried about the impacts that Sunnica's proposal will have on the heritage of this area as follows:

1) Landscape

Our members object to the Sunnica proposal limiting access to, and marring, cherished historic views. One such is coming out of the village on Beck Rd or Sheldrick's Rd with the Ark in its prominent position and the wonderful views towards Mildenhall, Worlington and Freckenham across those open fields. St Marys Church (Grade 1 listed), the airbase water towers (at Mildenhall), the prominent Lea Farm and silos underpinning the agricultural setting, can all be picked out. Freckenham church tower is also visible to the south-east. This view is especially important as we remember those US AirForce and RAF personnel who lost their lives in the bomber crash (see section 2).

Sunnica plan to put a large area of woodland at the corner of Sheldricks Rd and Beck Rd. This woodland would follow the line of the field in the direction of East Fen Rd, where there would be another large block of woodland and the whole site will be fenced in. This is to be done to try and hide the ugliness and industrial nature of the scheme, but in doing so will sever the far-reaching view. In addition, it would alter the Fen Edge landscape which we value so much, defined by open fields, with sparse vegetation. If we are to retain our identity as a Fen Edge village, we need to preserve the landscape that defines us as such. Fencing, trees and hedgerows in a place that hasn't had these before changes the characteristic of the area. Instead of Fen Edge, it would become an artificial landscape of no defined character. We are proud to be a part of the Fen Edge trail initiative linking Isleham to other Fenland villages along the 5m contour and retaining this landscape is an important essential.



Photo: Fen Edge Landscape Beck Road

Sent: Monday, 18 July 2022 at 18:47:22 BST
Subject: Isleham Society - reminder talk this Thurs and new info about event in August

A reminder that THIS THURSDAY we have (Beeches bar opens 7.15 talk starts 7.45) an introduction to the Fen Edge Way a [long distance](#) trail of short walks between Cambridge and Isleham.

"The Fen Edge Trail - a walk across landscape and time"

A talk by Reg Nicholls of the [Cambridgeshire](#) Geological Society

The Fen Edge Trail takes you from the Lincolnshire border in the northwest of the county to the Suffolk border in the southeast, roughly following the 'edge' of the Fens (including the islands) where the land rises to 5 [metres](#) above sea level (the 5 m contour). We are gradually publishing a series of Walk Guides that take you on easy walks with an average distance of about 5 miles each. The Walk Guides not only provide a map and directions but also describe the landscape, geology, history and wildlife along the route.

STOP PRESS

We are delighted to announce that Saturday 20 August there will be a World Premier of the Isleham Mystery plays. See attachment for background to this remarkable event!



Poster and Email advertising the Isleham Society Fen Edge Trail talk in July

2) Bomber crash

Part of Sunnica East A is directly where the Boeing Superfortress crashed in flames on October 13th, 1949, during a practice bombing flight. All twelve of the crew members were killed but the courage and skill of the pilot steered the plane away from crashing on the village. It was carrying 16 x 500 pound bombs and enough fuel for ten hours flight and the destruction and loss of life would have been horrendous without the sacrifice made by those airmen. This tragic event had a significant impact on residents at the time, which has remained with them over the years. The Isleham Society held a talk about this tragedy a few years ago, researched by local history enthusiasts and with eyewitness recollections. As a result of members' interest (and in line with the sentiment of a number of village residents), a plaque commemorating the crew has been placed in the foyer of the main Community Centre, the Beeches, as the site itself is private.

The crash site has remained broadly as it was at the time and contains buried artefacts. It is also likely to contain human remains because of the massive nature of the explosion. Visitors still come to the site from the USA to pay their respects and the Society considers it important not to damage the site but to preserve it out of respect for the crew and their family. We fear the damage that drilling and piling will do to the buried remains, the disturbance of the site and the restricted views of the site that would ensue from Sunnica's plans, which would dramatically alter the current peaceful setting.

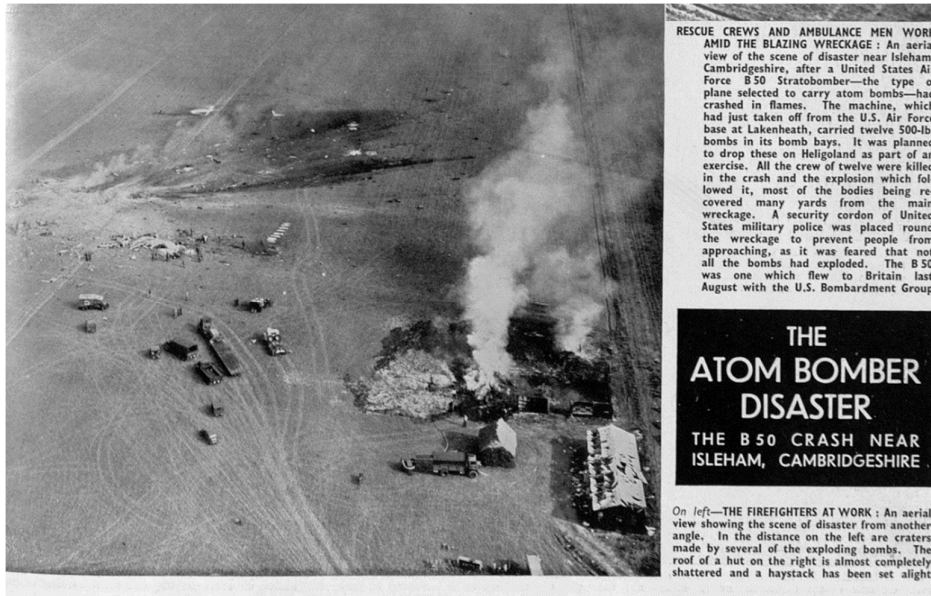


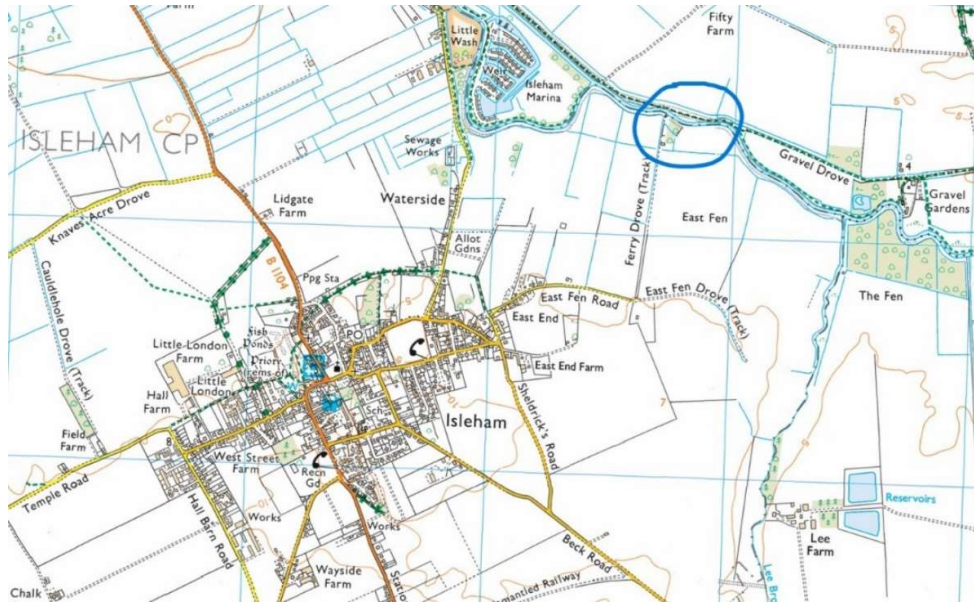
Photo: Bomber crash 1949 – site of explosion. Barn in lower right corner still stands today



Photo: Field of crash site as it is today. The barn in the newspaper photograph can be seen on the right. It is an open, restful place. Precisely as it should be.

3) Charles Spurgeon and Ferry Inn

Another cherished site in Isleham is the banks of the river Lark around the old ferry and the ruins of the Ferry Inn, at the end of Ferry Drove (see map below). This part of the river of course, most famously, is where the great preacher Charles Spurgeon was baptised in 1850. The reputation of the Pound Lane Baptist Chapel in Isleham (founded 1693 and one of the oldest in the country) was such that the fifteen-year-old Spurgeon walked there from Newmarket, before continuing his journey (or 'country tramp' as he called it) to the banks of the Lark in Isleham. He was baptised in the river.

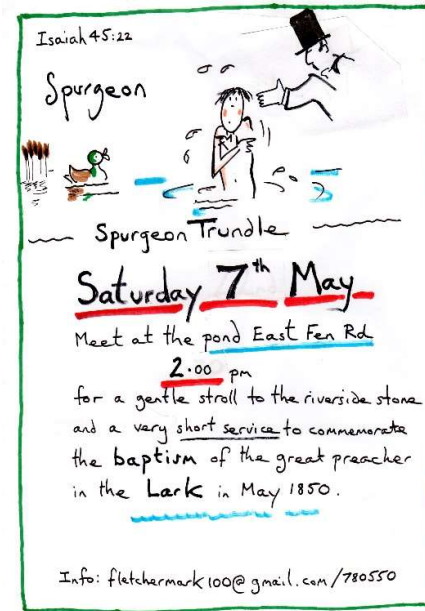


Map: Blue circle marks the area of the river where Spurgeon was baptised. A memorial stone on the south riverbank marks the area.

The area of the river Lark where Spurgeon was baptised is marked by the “Spurgeon stone,” located next to the ruins of the Ferry Inn and the site of the old ferry. This commemorative stone is located on the southern bank of the Lark (pre-arranged access required to visit this as it is private land) but can easily be seen from the opposite riverbank which is publicly accessible.

The drawbridge ferry was used for decades as the way labourers especially from the East End of Isleham would cross the river in all weathers and walk to long hard days of field work or barge work, and of course the Inn was there to refresh them on the return journey.

Spurgeon’s baptism is still celebrated annually with a walk to the stone and a service in early May, organised by the Isleham Society and supported by the three churches in the village, as well as residents interested in history (the ‘Spurgeon Trundle’). This year’s Spurgeon Trundle was attended by around 28 people.



The Spurgeon Stone and poster advertising this years "Spurgeon Trundle"

Well before Spurgeon's time and even well after that, extraordinary numbers of people would gather to witness the full immersion baptisms in this part of the river Lark. It is reliably recorded that in May 1909 over 4000 came 'by wagon, barge and donkey cart' as twenty-nine believers were baptised by Pastor Samuel Boyce-Newling in the river. The last recorded immersion baptism was around 1972.





River baptisms in the Lark at Isleham attracted huge crowds – as many as 4000 have been recorded. The Ferry inn can be seen in the background of the second photograph.

This riverbank is a highly valued village history point and is marked on the village heritage trail located outside Isleham Priory. The crowds would line each side of the riverbanks, enjoying the baptism but also enjoying the open views across the countryside from this very special spot. Spurgeon himself recounted the setting as being:

“a very quiet spot, half-a-mile from the village, and rarely disturbed by traffic at any time of the year. The river itself is a beautiful stream, dividing Cambridgeshire from Suffolk, and is dear to local anglers.”

Sunnica threatens this unspoiled rural setting – the fields close by (closest point is approx. 200m away) would be filled with solar panels, inverters, an imposing and huge battery compound and a large substation block with 10m high infrastructure. The outlook from the current tranquil, agricultural riverside location would be completely transformed into something highly industrial. The Society members consider this unacceptable.



Isleham village history trail, located outside the 11th century village Priory

Access to heritage sites

Access to various historical sites in and around Isleham, and to the Spurgeon Stone in particular, is already distressingly restricted and the fear amongst members is that the Sunnica proposals are on such a scale that they will further erode the access and identity of these sites. The sense of Isleham being an agriculture-based community turning it instead into an industrial site. Much will be lost if the character of the area changes so dramatically. If our heritage sites are marred, or their setting transformed or amenity restricted or, worse still, covered over and hidden (which could happen in the case of the plane crash site) we are deeply concerned that peoples' emotional attachment to the village will be damaged and the heritage that we as a society strive to keep alive will be eroded.

Sense of place and connection

The population of the Isleham village is growing. People who have moved here often know very little about the agricultural nature of the area and are generally curious, and always fascinated, to find out how things have been in the recent and in the distant past. The Society is passionate about encouraging emotional commitment to this lovely place where we live and to making sure that its character is appreciated by current residents and future generations. This provides a sense of place and encourages people to treasure and care for their environment. It is a Fen Edge village with Roman and Saxon settlements, a wonderful blossoming in the early Middle Ages seen in the angel roof of St Andrew's church, but always for ordinary folk the struggle was to get enough from the land and water to live on.

Ways of trade changed. Barges, and then the railway and then both went. Windmills were a feature of our landscape draining the Fens, peat was a source of fuel.

We are not strangers to the issues of providing food and providing energy. We welcome the fixing of solar panels to the new houses being built here but we do feel that our beautiful and accessible landscape and our agricultural capability needs to be retained.

The Sunnica proposals seem to be at a high price with no benefit to local residents. The consensus amongst Society members is that we would be comfortable accepting an area of solar panel provision, but we cannot accept the total change in the character of Isleham and its surrounds that the vast Sunnica proposals will enforce.

Mark Fletcher

Chairman Isleham Society