



“This cottage is a landmark in Dereham” - fight to save listed building gathers pace

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A campaign to save a listed building in Dereham from demolition is gathering support after a team of historians stepped up the fight to save it.



Church Street cottage, Dereham

JD Wetherspoon, which owns the Romany Rye in Church Street, has applied to Breckland Council to demolish a 17th century cottage in its grounds to extend the garden area.

The vacant cottage, which sits with its white rendered gable end right up to the pavement between the pub and the church, came into the national chain's ownership when it bought the former Phoenix Hotel in 2008 but it has remained empty and started to fall further into disrepair with pigeons taking up residence in the loft area.

Agents Witcomb Project Management, in a design and access statement, said: "This will at least bring the area back into use, and deal with an eyesore in the conservation area."

But the move has horrified members of Dereham Antiquarian Society, a group of volunteers who preserve the town's historic Bishop Bonner's Cottage Museum and its archives.



Church Street cottage, Dereham, (right hand side) in the early 1900s

Church Street cottage, Dereham, (right

Sue Walker White, curator of the museum and chairman the society, said she could not believe the pub would want to destroy such an important piece of Dereham heritage.

"My husband read about it in the Dereham Times and my initial reaction was of horror," she said. "They (JD Wetherspoon) took it on well aware that it was a Grade II listed building in a conservation area and, after a couple of years, are trying to get rid of their responsibility and knock it down."

She said the building had greatly deteriorated since it had been in JD Wetherspoon's ownership as they had pictures of it looking in good condition in 2006.

"If they are not prepared to do right by the building they should give someone else the opportunity and sell it," she said adding it would be an ideal renovation into flats as there was a housing shortage in Dereham, or it could be used as office space.

"A beer garden is a totally uncreative use of their asset," she said. "It should be a privilege to be owners of one of Dereham's oldest buildings."

Mrs Walker White also felt architectural clues may make the cottage older than the owners think.

"It could be closer to the time that Bishop Bonner's Cottage was built in 1502 and you can see plenty of similarities in the construction," she said. "It is vital that a historic buildings expert is able to go in and do a survey before the planners make a decision."

Mrs Walker White has been busy gathering support through social media which is already leading to Breckland planners receiving a number of objections to the plans. Andrew Oakley from Beetley said: “Beer gardens are only used for a few months of the year, it cannot be worth destroying some of Dereham’s history just for Wetherspoon’s to have a beer garden,” while H Simmons from Wendling said: “The building should be properly surveyed and renovated if at all possible.” Mrs C A Heydon from Swanton Morley said: “This cottage is a landmark in Dereham. It is unthinkable that it should be demolished - even in part.”

JD Wetherspoon spokesman Eddie Gershon said the cottage was already in a poor state when the chain bought it.

“It was felt that repair costs were too high and as for converting to housing or offices it was felt that it was too narrow and not the right commercial decision,” he said. “Our aim is to keep some of the cottage walls to make a courtyard and our intention is to build on a successful pub by extending the garden.”

* What do you think? Email kathryn.cross@archant.co.uk.

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