



## A voice in The Wilderness

By Jane Allen

A Suffolk MP's contribution to planning law is set, belatedly, to bear fruit in his own constituency. In 1997 John Gummer, as Secretary of State for the Environment, was responsible for Planning Policy Guidance Note 7 (PPG7), which allowed the construction of a new house on a "virgin" site in the countryside if it was "clearly of the highest quality" and "truly outstanding in terms of architecture and landscape design". This exception to the normal planning rules was inspired by a realisation that whereas the number of large country houses had increased up to the end of the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century there had actually been a net loss.

### 36 losses to Suffolk

Eric Sandby's *Suffolk Houses* lists 36 large country houses destroyed in the last century, in Suffolk alone. Nationwide, some 1500 country houses have gone. At a time when house building seemed to have become much more about quantity than quality, the new guidance presented an opportunity for building houses in the 21st century, with at least the potential to become the National Trust houses of the future.

In fact the PPG7 concession has proved to be something of a damp squib and now the Government is proposing to remove the policy exception.

The Royal Institute of British Architects held an exhibition in September 2003 entitled 'The New English Country House' showing examples of designs for houses which were commissioned in order to take advantage of PPG7. They were a motley bunch of projects.

Seventeen of the 26 had received planning permission but of these, very few had actually been built. In almost all cases the planning application process had involved a long, hard fight, with success only achieved on appeal. This would have piled expense onto what, almost by definition, were already extremely costly projects.

Personally, I found the exhibition dispiriting. Of course the designs must have reflected the personal taste of the families commissioning them, but the two completed houses and 14 others of those displayed were utterly conventional, being heavily derivative Queen Anne/ Georgian or else Lutyens/ Arts and Crafts in style. Really they were just the big brothers or

sisters to countless houses seen in the more affluent London suburbs or, dare I say it, in any development of up-market "executive homes".

### A barmy starfish

Even the more interesting modern designs ranged from the barmy - an RIBA award-winning starfish struggling to emerge from the Cheshire countryside, which has received planning permission but which, with a £20 million price tag, remains to be built - to the boring, 1960s style only too familiar from university campuses and municipal libraries and schools throughout the land.

Almost the last project in the show, the plans for which had only just been submitted to the local planning department, although modern, fell into neither trap. This was a proposal for a house by Paul + O Architects Ltd to be built in John Gummer's own Suffolk Coastal constituency.

The 40-acre wooded site of The Wilderness is at Darsham near Saxmundham.

The architect's model does the house no favours but the drawings showing the house in its wooded setting display the quality of its materials and the ingenuity of its design. The building is raised on a flint plinth with lime washed walls and oak windows and panels with the upper floor overhanging the ground floor-elements which derive from traditional Suffolk building styles and materials, but the house is in no sense a pastiche.

### SPS favourable

The SPS rightly favoured the planning application for The Wilderness, which, despite a recommendation by officers to refuse, and a last-minute objection from the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, was approved by the Suffolk Coastal District Council north area Development Control Panel last month.

In the words of our Director, Richard Ward, "This is a rare opportunity to add to the list of distinctive country houses in the county with a proposal of character designed specifically for the site".

The pity is that it may be the last house to be built under the PPG7 scheme.