

Supporting Statement

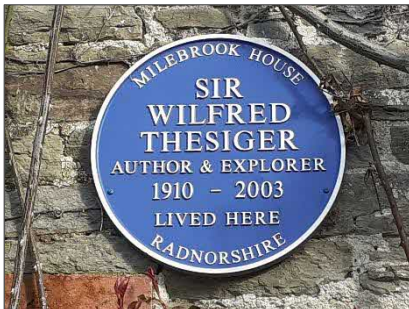
Amanda and Alden Whittaker-Brown make the following statement in support of their planning application for a change of use for Milebrook House from 'Hotel' (C1) to Mixed Use: 'Dwelling House' (C3) with 'Hotel' (C1).

Context and history

Milebrook House was built in 1760 as the Dower House of nearby Stanage Park¹. For almost 230 years it has been a family home occupying a handsome location on the slopes of the Radnor Hills above the River Teme and within a stone's throw of the Welsh and English border.



Achieving a degree of notoriety, the house became the family home of 20th century writer and explorer Sir Wilfred Thesiger (1910 to 2003), celebrated by a blue plaque issued by Radnorshire Council. Thesiger gave refuge to the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, during the Italian invasion of his country in 1936.



In 1986 the house was bought by the respected Marsden family who rescued a building in serious demise and adapted the house into a six-room hotel. In 1996 it was sympathetically extended, adding a further four letting rooms. By 2014, however, the Marsden's had put the business up for sale and it was sold to former London couple James Sheehan and Zoe Carter in late 2018 (the four-year lapse here representing the extent of the challenge of finding new owners with sufficient confidence of managing the small business to reasonable economic outcomes).

Despite a thorough refurbishment and extensive marketing campaigns (including a full re-branding exercise and utilising an array of online portals), the new owners were unable to generate sufficient revenue to support a boutique hotel offering accommodation, dinner, breakfast and a licensed bar.

¹ Known locally as Stanage Castle



A changing hospitality industry - accommodation only lets

The hospitality industry has evolved rapidly in recent years. It is now a more flexible, diverse and multi-faceted offering ranging from bell tents to converted castles. Even before the Coronavirus pandemic there was a steep rise in what has become known as 'The Staycation' (British people choosing to take holidays in the UK).

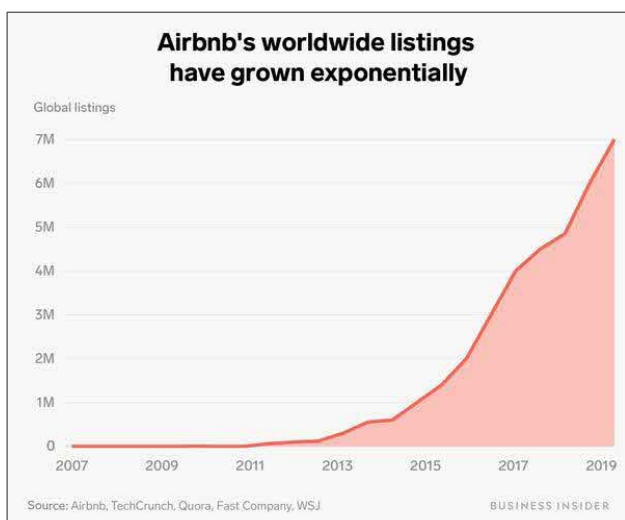


Over the last twenty years or so we have seen a rapid increase in the availability and popularity of 'budget hotels' with chains such as Premier Inn and Travelodge offering clean and consistent overnight rooms at low prices attractive to couples, families and budget business travellers alike.

While these chains offer room-only options, they are commonly attached to a chain 'gastro-pub' where residents are encouraged to eat breakfast and/or dinner. All this works to the detriment of local economies as tourists' money, for accommodation, food and drinks, goes to international conglomerates instead of local businesses. Our proposal would see more expenditure in local towns and villages.

Airbnb

Another transformation in guest accommodation has been the phenomenal rise of the Airbnb model. This concept started in San Francisco in 2007 and has grown to be a widely emulated and highly popular choice for countless millions of travellers all over the world. Airbnb is the web-based platform which allows customers to find a multiplicity of different accommodation types across a wide range of budgets in every corner of the world. Offerings range from 'yurts in secluded fields', through 'a private bedroom in a shared house', includes 'hotel accommodation', and extends to renting 'an entire flat' or even 'a whole country house' on a short-term basis.



The Airbnb concept is popular with tourists because it tends to be:

- Lower cost than hotels (even budget hotel chains)
- Unique and intriguing (all Travelodges are identical inside)
- In desirable and otherwise hard to reach locations (like the stunning Welsh Borders)
- Offer a greater degree of privacy and flexibility than chain accommodation
- Frequently come with a more personal and interactive host than is typically found in a large chain
- Free from ties to any particular food outlet, giving guests the greater freedom of choice, they increasingly demand.

There are many drivers that explain the growing popularity of accommodation-only or B&B stays for tourists. Our research shows that key among these is:

- The recent exponential rise in the demand for 'staycations' leading to hundreds of thousands of British families seeking to enjoy domestic holidays and breaks rather than travelling abroad.
- The emergence of platforms and technologies such as 'Airbnb', 'Booking.com' and online review sites (such as TripAdvisor) giving travellers a greatly expanded array of options for overnight accommodation.
- The more experimental and adventurous spirit of the 'Millennial generation' seeking more independent and unique accommodation around which to centre their travels and adventures.
- The squeeze on family budgets initially felt after the impact of the global downturn of 2008/9 and more recently exacerbated by the emerging impact of Covid-19 and the devastating effect on jobs and incomes this has wrought across the world.

The evidence above points to a future of tourist lodgings that relies increasingly on lower cost, flexible and unique room-only options and sees an inevitable decline in the sustainability of fully serviced hotels, especially (for reasons of economy of scale) the once viable, but now greatly threatened, boutique hotel.

In addition, we have also seen the continuing demise of the 'hotel restaurant', as guests increasingly seek to explore a variety of food options rather than using their hotel's restaurant repeatedly.

Recent times have demonstrated that the plain economics of being able to successfully run and manage a boutique hotel, like Milebrook House, have become untenable.

Where irreversible change is inevitable, adaptation is the only option. As the agricultural industry transformed throughout the 20th century, farmers and landowners creatively diversified to survive. The result has been magnificent for many, with a rise in small companies occupying converted farm buildings, intriguing new leisure and holiday pursuits such as the growth of 'Glamping', and other new industries such as organic food, farm shops and 'experience days' like Quad Biking and Paintballing.

The same is happening in hospitality. New ways of utilising former hotels, while maintaining flows of tourists, will need to be found if this pivotally important industry is to thrive.

Summary

Our plan will return the house to a well-maintained and much-loved family home as it was for 230 years. At the same we have carefully aligned our proposal with the intentions of the Powys Local Development Plan to ensure a continuing (but more modern and flexible) offering of affordable, high-quality tourist accommodation in a location ideally suited to attracting visitors. This will bring sustainability and growth to the local economy and add to the much-needed inward footfall to Mid-Wales. At the same time, we will create flexible work for local people throughout the year.

In this way Milebrook House changes from an unviable boutique hotel to become:

- A provider of tourist accommodation at the gateway to Mid-Wales
- A source of tourist spend in the local area
- An employer in the local community
- A multi-generational home
- A home office

We project that once our plans (including the later addition of Shepherd's Huts) are fully operational, the number of tourists staying at Milebrook annually will actually exceed those achieved in more recent years when the house struggled to operate as a full-service hotel².



We believe this is the most practicable and realistic future for Milebrook, as an important historic house, local landmark, and as a provider of sustainable guest accommodation and tourism in the local economy.

On this basis we respectfully request that the members of Powys Council support our application to re-purpose the overall use of Milebrook House.

² This was the case before the impact of Coronavirus