

Options For The Land Adjoining Whitehill Burial Ground – “The Paddock”

History

The Parish Council owns a parcel of land (marked in red below) adjacent to the existing burial ground which will ultimately be used as an extension to the burial ground. Its capacity will not be required for several decades and so the land can be put to an alternative use in the interim.

Over the last few years the land has been leased as a paddock to Oppo’s Farm, a community interest company, which helps Veterans and Emergency Services staff who have been diagnosed with PTSD. The land was leased at the charitable rate of £14.05 for the paddock + Water contribution £47.05 p.a.

At the September 2023 Council meeting it was resolved to explore alternative options for the paddock. The lease to Oppo’s Farm reached its term in January, but so as to minimise disruption for the lessee the council has not taken any action to enforce vacation of the land whilst it considers the options. In meetings with Oppo’s Farm they have confirmed that the main community interest work takes place at another site and that they would be able to find land to replace the paddock, given a few months notice.



Options for Consideration

A number of options have been proposed. These include:

- Continuing to lease the land as a paddock
- Creating a community orchard
- Creating a garden of rest
- Creating space for natural burials

Regardless of which option is chosen, it is likely to some work on the boundary will be required as this has fallen into disrepair. Discussions have already taken place with Mend the Gap who may be willing to provide funding for the improvement of the hedgerows.

Continuing to lease the land as a paddock

The main advantage of leasing the land is that the council will earn a rent. This could be either the commercial rent of £360 + Water or the charitable rent of £15 + Water, depending upon the lessee. Additionally, there would likely be no maintenance costs for the land, as these would be covered by the lessee. Finally, should the lessee be a charity or community interest company then there are the benefits to the community that they provide.

If this was the preferred option, the council would be required to advertise the lease at a cost of circa £400 As this is comparatively high compared to the value of the annual lease it would be logical to offer a multi-year lease.

Creating a community orchard

The council has been approached a number of times to identify land available to create a community orchard. As yet no site has been identified. Discussions have taken place with the parties wishing to create an orchard. In their view the paddock is not well suited for the purpose, not least because of its remoteness from the village core.

Creating a garden of rest

A garden of rest, allowing up to 4 containers of ashes and a flat memorial tablet could be created. This would somewhat duplicate what is already available in the cemetery. However, the land could be deliberately maintained to offer a different environment, such as a more natural meadow. The land across the road on Cow Hill has a variety of wild plant species, including a number of varieties of orchid. The Garden of Rest could provide an attractive option for those seeking a more environmentally friendly resting place.

The costs of internment could be used to fund the costs of maintaining the garden of rest. However, there will be some costs associated with the change of use, not least a planning application. The initial costs are estimated to be relatively modest, and would include removal of fencing at the entrance, some seeding and a planning application as a minimum.

Creating a Natural Burial Ground

Going one step further than the garden of rest, the council could provide a natural burial ground. At present, those people wishing to have a natural burial have to do so outside of the Parish. For example, there is a natural burial ground at Henley which has been used by Goring Parishioners who would have preferred to be buried within the Parish. Natural burials are an increasingly popular alternative to cremations due to their lower environmental impact.

Natural burial grounds offer a more environmentally friendly form of burial than the traditional cemetery, creating a natural environment, such a new woodland with shrub borders and wild flowers. Such a proposal is likely to be self-financing through the increased demand for burials in the village and relatively low maintenance cost. I would suggest that burial charges replicate those used for the existing burial area.

If done well the natural burial ground should create a valuable environment with increased biodiversity for future generations to enjoy.

As for the Garden of Rest, there will be some costs associated with the change of use, not least a planning application. The initial costs would be relatively modest, and would be required to remove existing fencing at the entrance, some reseeded/planting, a name plaque and planning permission as a minimum.

Recommendation

Having looked at the options, the one that I would recommend is the creation of a natural burial ground. This is because I believe it would offer a valuable alternative for our parishioners, is unlikely to increase the tax burden and will ultimately create a valuable environment for future generations. If approved we should ask the clerk or burial clerk to undertake further work to finalise the set up costs. We should work with Oppo's Farm to ensure the site is vacated within the next few months.