



Part of the residential scheme at Tolson Farm

THIS MONTH : LOOK AFTER THE PENNIES

Most of you involved in construction will be aware that the government has just introduced another overhaul of planning law, this time aimed at reducing the number of minor planning applications clogging up the system.

The argument is that local authority planning departments spend so much time processing applications for small domestic extensions and conservatories that they are prevented from giving larger applications the attention they deserve within a reasonable timescale.

The government's answer is to increase what householders can do to their homes without the need to make a planning application; an increase in Permitted Development Rights (PDR) as this is known.

So Mr & Mrs Smith can ring a builder and get on with their kitchen extension without the need for drawings and filling in those complicated forms, whilst professional developers get quick decisions on big schemes in less than the two or three years it may take at present. Result: everybody's happy and the world (or our bit of it) is a better place.

Now life is never that simple is it? If you have the time and inclination (or

worst of all, the need) to wade through the detail of the legislation, you will see it is not quite as simple as I've suggested. For the masochists amongst you, go to www.planningportal.gov.uk and follow the leads.

If your home is listed or you live in a conservation area, forget all that, you'll still need planning approval. And even if you don't, there are all sorts of limitations on heights and widths and roof pitches and whether or not you face a road and if your surname starts with a vowel. OK, I made that last bit up, but you get the idea.

Paradoxically, much of the fuss in the general press has been about how this same legislation will make it more difficult to undertake dormer loft conversions. And everybody wants a dormer loft conversion because it is the extension that gives you the greatest increase in the value of your property for the least outlay.

Now, you may say that as an architect I am bound to be against anything that removes the need for clients to pay me to prepare drawings and make planning applications on their behalf. Given that as an office we don't do many loft conversions, and we're not madly keen to work with clients who instruct us just because they can't negotiate the

system on their own (but would like to if they could) I'm not madly bothered about the likely effect on our business.

What I am bothered about is what this means for our built environment, and what happens when it goes wrong. What kind of a message does this send out? Just get on with it and don't worry about what it looks like, because it's only small? I despair at some domestic extensions that clearly have received planning approval; I genuinely cannot imagine what to expect when you don't have to bother with it.



Internal at Tolson Farm



New build at Holmbridge, part of the Fernleigh development



3D visuals for a new build dwelling

In the course of researching this piece I read a quotation in one of our national newspapers from a gentleman representing the Federation of Master Builders on the matter of planning control. As anyone who has read our previous newsletter will know, I have the greatest respect for the talents and abilities of skilled tradespeople. But essentially, we design, they build and we all know where we stand. So when I read that, in this gentleman's view, planners are

"hostile to loft conversions for aesthetic reasons"

it rather confirmed my worst fears. Fancy objecting to something on aesthetic grounds! How unreasonable can you get!

But apart from the affront to my febrile sensitivities, what happens in the following scenario: Mr & Mrs Smith have forked out their hard earned pounds to a small builder, and now have the excrescence, sorry, extension of their dreams. Sometime later they receive

a visit from an enforcement officer who tells them that unfortunately the extension does not fall within PDR rules (see above) and has to come down, or be altered substantially?

Incidentally, isn't it great that the economic crisis is giving us so many small builders who are prepared to work for virtually nothing? I digress....

All in all I think this legislation is part of the good intentions paving the way to hell. I predict tears before bedtime.

On a happier note I am pleased and proud to report that during September a team of nine from One 17 Design completed the 10 kilometre run in aid of Cancer Research at Wentworth Castle, near Barnsley. Four made it into the top twenty, which was pretty good in a field of 500 odd competitors. Yes, there were some really odd ones. Thank you to all those who sponsored us. There is of course still time to make a donation, or better still, organise your own team for the next run. Details at www.cancerresearchuk.org/10k.

