

Comiston Farm House - threatened with demolition

Comiston Farm House sits in walled grounds at the corner of Pentland View, Pentland Drive and Swan Spring Avenue, in Comiston. To the postie, it is 83 Pentland View, EH10 6PT. To many young people and staff of Social Work Department over the years, it was Pentland View Close Support Unit. To residents of Comiston and children who walk past it daily on the way to school or to the park, it is an essential part of our local heritage, and a place to look out for wildlife.

This much-loved house is now under threat of demolition: a planning application has been lodged to demolish the house, cut down the trees in front of it, (including 2 lovely cedars and 3 lime trees, reckoned to be at least 100 years old), and then build 4 blocks of 4-storey flats on the site - 37 flats in all, with attendant car park space, all squeezed into a little over an acre of ground.

Four storeys will tower above the present house roof level, and over neighbouring properties. This is already an elevated site, so 4 storeys will change the skyline. Such a dense development will also have a huge impact on local road and traffic conditions, increasing the hazards for the children.

Preliminary plans were presented to around 90 residents at a Community Council meeting in April. Residents were appalled at what was proposed, vociferous in raising their many objections, and are determined both to save the farmhouse and to reject such a dense, unsympathetic and inappropriate development. Not only would it mean the loss of a much-loved historic building, a link with Edinburgh's rural and pre-urban past and a significant part of our historical and cultural heritage, the site is on the walk-to-school route to the nearby primary school. This route includes negotiating the junction comprising of 3 roads, the footpath to the local park, and the access gateway to the farmhouse site. This is already potentially hazardous, especially in winter, as all approaches to it (including the foot path to the park) are up or down hill, with bends, blind corners and/or summits, and limited sight lines. Adding extra traffic from such a dense development would make this significantly more dangerous, especially for young children.

Comiston Farm House came into the possession of the City of Edinburgh Council in 1955, when the last of the Comiston Estate was sold off, mostly for housing. After the last tenant of Comiston Farmhouse (George Harwell, founder of Harwells of Colinton), left in 1978, the farmhouse served as a residential facility under CEC Social Work Department, most recently to assist young people in transition who needed short-term placement. It became 'Pentland View Close Support Unit', referring to its purpose rather than its historic name.

Two years ago CEC decided to close the Unit and sell the property. Last April it was advertised for sale as 'An Excellent Redevelopment Opportunity', but apparently only on the commercial development market, not on the housing market. This is not a brownfield site, and the house is not derelict, though it is currently boarded up (for security), and it is in fact in pretty good shape and could easily be a house to live in again. The sale notice included the statement 'Despite its age and character the building [farmhouse] is not listed, nor does it lie within a conservation area. **The Planning Service has determined that the property is a well-proportioned classical villa constructed in stone and of architectural merit and therefore worthy of retention**'. Even so, most of the bids received included demolition of the house. If this house and site had been advertised more appropriately, on the housing market as a prospective residence, it would surely have attracted more potential buyers who would appreciate it and preserve it as a house to be lived in.

The current status of the site and farmhouse is 'sold subject to planning permission' - that is, still owned by the Council unless and until planning is approved. If enough objections are raised so that planning permission is denied, then this proposal could fall.

Historically this is one of rural South Edinburgh's significant farmhouses, most of which have disappeared under housing developments. It is the only early Victorian farmhouse south of Edinburgh. Recent research has revealed copy drawings of the house dated 1859, and it is now considered highly probable that they were by the architect William Notman, who was apprenticed to, then assistant to, William Henry Playfair

The historic footpath of Cockmylane skirts the perimeter wall to the north and west of the house, and was one of the routes regularly walked by Robert Louis Stevenson between Edinburgh and Swanston. In his day the foot path probably passed between the farmhouse and the farm steadings.

Also part of the Comiston Estate, Comiston House (1815) has been sympathetically restored and converted into flats. Its predecessor, Comiston Stables, is currently being restored and converted into a dwelling house. Both of these are Listed buildings.

Several Comiston residents applied to Historic Environment Scotland for the farmhouse to be Listed, but sadly it was not granted. Their standards are very high.

It now so much more important and urgent to challenge the planning application. 'Comments' can be lodged with the Planning Department until June 24; we need lots of responses from supporters and readers of this piece. More information on how to do that can be found elsewhere on this website.

Listed or not, it would surely be tragic, cultural vandalism to permit the demolition of a house in excellent condition and with such a historical, agricultural and architectural heritage.

For more information see www.comistonfarmhouse.com.

To view the planning application, go to the CEC planning portal, <https://citydev-portal.edinburgh.gov.uk> and search for 83 Pentland View or planning reference 16/02397/FUL

Comments can be lodged on the Portal, or sent by post or email to Planning Department at Waverly Court, and must include the name and address of sender and the reference number of the planning application.