

QC quotes Sir Philip Sidney to save Elizabethan poet's village

"Beauty can give an edge to the bluntest swords" QC tells court as he represents villagers who accuse a descendant of Sir Philip of behaving in a "feudal" manner by building six affordable homes



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A QC has turned for inspiration to Elizabethan poet and soldier Sir Philip Sidney in a legal battle against plans for a new development in a famously picturesque village.

Residents at Penshurst, Kent, have come to court in a bid to block the building of six affordable homes at Forge Field.

The landowner is Viscount De L'Isle - a descendant of Sir Philip.

He also owns Penshurst Place, one of Britain's grandest stately homes. The villagers accuse him of behaving in a "feudal" manner.

The residents, who have formed the Forge Field Society, are seeking judicial review of Sevenoaks District Council's decision to grant planning permission for the houses on the two acres of green space south-west of Penshurst High Street.

Villagers claim that the development would "forever alter" the character of the historic village, which has more than 30 listed buildings.

James Strachan QC, for the society, said Penshurst had "the great fortune of being one of those relatively rare villages where that sense of history and the intrinsic beauty of the surrounding area can still be experienced today".

He told Mr Justice Lindblom at London's High Court this had been achieved through the preservation of its medieval character and the protection of its rural surroundings.

It benefited from "being watched over" as part of the Green Belt and was an important part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and was a tourist attraction.

Mr Strachan told the judge, who said he knew the village but had not been there for some time, that he probably also knew it had been the home of the great Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney "who no doubt found inspiration in the area for works such as 'Arcadia'".

Asking the judge to quash planning permission for the houses, Mr Strachan said he drew inspiration for his application from Sir Philip's words that "beauty can give an edge to the bluntest swords".

Mr Strachan is arguing that council planners failed properly to apply planning law and misdirected themselves. There had also been a failure to consider alternative sites, he claims, and the "overwhelming" case against development made the decision to grant planning permission "irrational".

The case is being heard over two days.

The residents have written directly to Lord and Lady De L'Isle, urging them to consider selling a different part of their 2,500-acre estate for leaseholds.

Mark Leader, the development director of West Kent Housing Association, has described the Forge Field scheme as a response to a local need for more affordable housing.