



Fen pumps silenced

Engine houses converted into homes – 14

NEW LIFE FOR RAF AIRBASE

Entrepreneur plans to turn 'ghost town' into eco-friendly village

By RICHARD PARR

Colourful businessman Roger Gawn last night revealed his vision for a former Norfolk RAF station after buying the site in a multi-million pound deal.

The EDP revealed last week that the "ghost town" base, RAF West Raynham, near Fakenham, which includes 172 empty houses, had been sold to a new unidentified owner.

Yesterday the new owner, Mr Gawn, stepped forward and told how he plans to breathe new life into the former base – starting with the refurbishment of 25 former married quarters homes which are to be sold on the open market in two weeks with prices starting at £119,950. They will be sold only to local people.

The site has fallen into disrepair and decay in the last decade, with North Norfolk MP Norman Lamb describing its decline as a "national scandal" at a time when so many local people were desperate for affordable homes.

Now the sale has been completed by Mr Gawn's company, Tamarix Investments.

Mr Gawn told of his plans to transform the 160-acre former air base into a new sustainable eco-friendly village. The site, which is to be known as West Raynham Park, includes a range of aircraft hangars, ancillary buildings, a gymnasium, former officers' mess, which he wants to convert into a top-grade hotel, and a tin-roof church.

Within the past two months an army of mainly Eastern European workers has been working on a

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Sir Paul's surprise visit to Norfolk

■ FULL STORY – Page 16

NEWS DIGEST

Conifers make way for ancient heath

WEST NORFOLK: A 68 hectare conifer plantation is going to be cut down to recreate part of an ancient 300 hectare lowland heathland habitat, thanks to a £250,000 grant. Once recreated, Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Grimston Warren will become part of a living landscape scheme with more than 300 hectares of heathland habitat, wet grassland and valley mire. **Page 17**

New swimming pool in regeneration plan

KING'S LYNN: A masterplan for the regeneration of a large part of King's Lynn town centre could see the town's swimming pool demolished and a new pool built elsewhere. **Page 19**

IN SPORT

Are City close to new manager?



Travellers' site could be allowed

WEST NORFOLK: Council chiefs could hand out planning permission to unauthorised traveller sites in west Norfolk, in a bid to meet government targets for new pitches. **Page 19**

EDP2



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BUSINESSREVIEW

24-page spotlight on the region's businesses



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'I feel very passionate about what I have here'

Massive clean-up operation has been going on for months

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

massive clean-up operation of one section of the old married quarters.

Twenty-five of these two and three-bedroom semi-detached properties are to go on sale on November 10 at 10am and will be sold on a "first come, first served" basis. The first owners are expected to move into the homes in mid-January.

Later phases of the project are to focus on commercial, retail, leisure and support elements, some of which are subject to planning approval.

Elements planned include a new hotel and conference centre, a commercial business park with a business centre, storage facilities and offices, tennis and squash courts, indoor heated swimming pool and health clinics, social club and community centre.

Mr Gawn has experience in property development and restoration. Among his other projects are the St George's Plain development and the former Bethel Hospital, both in Norwich, and ongoing restoration of the 17th-century Grade 1 listed Melton Constable Hall.

Yesterday, as Mr Gawn revealed his plans to the EDP, he could not conceal his excitement at what he hopes to achieve.

"I feel very passionate about what I have here and love the maturity of the trees and the natural surroundings," he said. "I was keen to go on to the site and start the massive clean-up operation which has transformed one area of homes. It is a wonderful opportunity for people to secure one of the properties at such an early stage at very reasonable prices."

He revealed that he has had his eye on the site for some time and would liked to have bought it when it was released by the Ministry of Defence but was unable to go ahead at that time.

"I pursued the new owners and, although I paid more than I would have done, I really could see a vision for its future," he said.

Mr Gawn said he was not daunted by the size of the task he has taken on.

"I am used to big schemes and I like to paint on a big canvas and I understand this sort of thing very well. I am more excited by this scheme at West Raynham than with anything else I have done to date" he said.

More information about the properties being sold on November 10 can be obtained by contacting the West Raynham Park sales office and Humberts of Norwich on 01603 661199.

COMMENT - Page 22



Picture: MATTHEW USHER

'WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY': Roger Gawn (above) plans to redevelop the former RAF West Raynham station.

HOUSING STOCK: Some of the homes at West Raynham, near Fakenham (right).



Highs and lows of controversial property developer

West Raynham Airfield is the latest in a number of high-profile acquisitions made by property developer Roger Gawn.

His most notable purchases have been two Grade 1 listed historic buildings: the Custom House at King's Lynn and Melton Constable Hall, the latter being Mr Gawn's home. In the 1980s he prospered during the property boom and was known for being well-connected - his royal connections were such that the Queen Mother, the Prince of Wales and Princess Margaret all visited Melton Constable Hall to witness the progress in the restoration.

However, he has since attracted some

criticism from people who believe that the hall has not been well maintained while in his care. He was responsible for the successful redevelopment of Norwich's Colegate but was subsequently forced into bankruptcy in 1995 after the collapse of his property development empire. It was reported that the insurance giant Norwich Union was owed a multi-million pound sum. He was then temporarily barred from being a company director but the ban has since lapsed. He has associations with 66 businesses registered at Companies House, seven of which have gone into liquidation and others which have long ceased trading.

He is known for his expertise in running businesses from offshore locations. Earlier this year he began working as a consultant to a City of London asset management fund, sourcing properties for the fund to invest in. At the time, Arc Fund Management stated: "The fund is delighted to announce that it has linked up with ARA Investment Management Limited, a company set up by The Jeeves Group, a Liechtenstein-based business with a formidable reputation for discreet professional offshore investment advice to its many clients."

"The link-up will mean that Roger Gawn, the nominated representative of

The Jeeves Group, will assist the management of the fund in sourcing investment opportunities and making strategic investment decisions...

"Roger Gawn has been an active property developer and investor for over 40 years in the UK, Europe and the Middle East.

"Roger's strategy has been to purchase larger sites and properties without planning approval but where he has been able to envisage the true value of the property given the acquisition of planning permission. He has a good track record of obtaining planning permission for his acquisitions and disposing of them at substantial profits."

Travellers 'may shun bus travel'

Passenger groups warned that people would turn their backs on bus travel after some fares in the Norwich area rose by a third yesterday.

First Eastern Counties increased the charge for most single journeys "beyond a short hop" from the city centre to £2 - 33pc more than last week.

Anglian Coaches - which operates services to Norwich from the south of the county and Waveney Valley - also increased its fares by an average of 6pc. Both operators blamed rising costs.

But passenger groups warned that the fare increases ran against the spirit of the government policy on public transport.

The First Eastern rises will see anyone travelling from Norwich city centre beyond the inner ring road to the outskirts and likes of the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital and airport pay at least £2.

By contrast, bus passengers can travel anywhere across Greater London for a single fare of 90p with an Oyster card.

Peter Iddon, managing director of First Eastern Counties, told the EDP that the price increase was "because the cost of most of our supplies has gone up". He said only the price of single fares beyond one zone had increased.

But John Brodribb, Eastern director of STEER, a group which campaigns for better public transport, was worried the price increase would lead to other bus operators in the region increasing their prices.

Blueprint for change in schools

A blueprint for the future of education in Lowestoft was officially unveiled to parents yesterday, with key elements of the wide-ranging proposals shrouded in controversy.

Suffolk County Council's long-standing commitment to abolish middle schools has now been joined by further plans, which signal the biggest shake-up of education for more than three decades.

In a consultation document sent out to families across Lowestoft, education chiefs insist they want to build a world-class education system, but opponents claim the changes, due to start in 2010, will have the opposite effect.

Proposals for the town include: setting up a dedicated centre for 16 to 19-year-olds; building a new high school to the south of Lake Lothing; and the construction of a new primary school at Woods Meadow in Oulton.

Suffolk County Council wants to spend £23m on a new school system.

Parents in the Lowestoft area will be able to register views until January 18, and 30 public meetings will be held. Consultation in Beccles and Bungay will take place next year.

NEWSINBRIEF

Thieves frighten elderly woman

MILDENHALL: An elderly woman discovered two men in her house at Queens Drive. They fled when she screamed. They appeared to have entered through a window and jewellery and cash were later found to have been stolen. The men are described as white, aged in their early 20s, of average build and clean shaven with short dark blond hair. They were wearing military-style clothing. Police are appealing for information about the incident at 7.45pm on Thursday, and are linking the crime with another break-in at a neighbouring house.

Plan could create 40 new jobs

DEREHAM: More than 40 jobs could be created on Dereham Business Park after plans have been submitted to build seven new offices. A full application has been made to Breckland Council by Lydon (UK) plc to develop brownfield land on Hurn Road. The new complex would form part of the growing Dereham Business Park which also includes supermarket giant Tesco that will soon be expanding there.

Graduate heads volunteer campaign

NORWICH: A UEA graduate is attempting to encourage hundreds of youngsters to give their free time to help others. Janette Cooke, 21, is championing Norwich, one of 20 cities and towns across the UK that have been chosen for a drive aimed at 16 to 24-year-olds. The project, backed by leading charities, will keep Miss Cooke busy over the next seven months. On Saturday, she will be joined by 30 UEA students for a conservation clear-up at Marston Marshes, off Ipswich Road.

Child cyclist hurt in road accident

ASHILL: A four-year-old child has suffered head injuries following an accident in a Norfolk village. The youngster was riding a bike when the collision with a car happened just after 8.30am yesterday at Hale Road in Ashill. The child was taken to the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital with injuries that were not believed to be life threatening.

Teenagers charged with assault

MARTHAM: Four teenagers from the village are to appear at Norwich Crown Court on November 26 to answer charges of causing actual bodily harm. Louis Dougal, 19 and Leon Dougal, 18, both of Bensley Road, Darren Fairbairn, 18, of Woodstock Way and Daryl Pammen, 19, of Damgate Back Lane, are alleged to have attacked Paul Grant in Hembsy on April 11. Yesterday, Yarmouth magistrates granted the men unconditional bail until their hearing at crown court.

Inquest opened on flat death woman

NORWICH: An inquest into the death of a 52-year-old woman whose body was found in her flat at Woodcock Close, Norwich, was opened and adjourned yesterday. Denise Milliken was found by police on October 18 after a neighbour said that she had not been seen.



Picture: MATTHEW USHER

THE PAST: Herbert Wheatley, who was born at the Waldersea Pumping Station and then took over the running of it in the 1950s from his father.

Pump-keeper sees place of birth change for ever

By CHRIS BISHOP

For nearly 200 years it kept the low-lying sea of peat that stretches south of the Nene dry. Now the great pumps of Waldersea are silent and builders are moving in to convert the towering engine houses into homes.

An era ended when the diesel pumps were decommissioned and the network of dykes which collected water to be pumped into the Nene were rerouted to a new automatic electric pumping station.

As well as making Waldersea redundant, it meant people were no longer required to be on site 24 hours a day, keeping a constant weather eye on water levels, fuel supplies and oil pressures.

For four generations, the pumps across the Fens were tended by the Wheatley family, who led an existence straight from the pages of Graham Swift's Waterland.

Herbert Wheatley, now 80, was born at the pumping station in 1927 and lived in the cottage behind it until 2001 when it was bought by the Cambridgeshire Historic Buildings Trust. Before Waldersea, his father - Herbert senior - ran a pumping station on the Forty Foot Drain.

"I started here when I was 17 years old or so, after school. I just drifted in to it I suppose," he said. "I can remember when father had three brothers at pumping stations, so it was in the family really.

"He was born at Floods Ferry, near Benwick, and there have been at least four generations work the pumping stations. That sort of thing went on in those days."

Mr Wheatley said that life was hard for the pump minders and their families but the low-lying landscape - much of it below sea level - would soon flood without them.

"You'd soon get in a muddle," he said. "It was steam when I started, I was a fireman on the boilers. It was hard work but you didn't really think about it.

Pictures: IAN BURT



THE FUTURE: Father and daughter David Housden and Anna Rogers who are restoring the pumping station ready to be turned into homes. Below, the view from the station and Anna Rogers inside the pumping station.



"If you had a heavy rainfall then there would be a lot of work. In 1947 everywhere was flooded, we were continually working for weeks and we had to call for help. It was bad in the 1953 floods too.

"When father retired in 1965 the steam pump had been scrapped and we had the diesels. The diesels made it easier because you had to fire up the boilers on the steam engines."

Mr Wheatley, who now lives at Walpole St Andrew, said he had accepted the property, once remote but now close to the A47, on the

southern outskirts of Wisbech, was being converted into properties.

Property developer David Housden and his daughter Anna Rogers are restoring both the old steam pumping station, built in 1827, and the newer diesel pump house, built in 1953.

The scheme includes a roof-top garden, veranda alongside the drain and possibly a swimming pool.

Mr Housden, who comes from nearby March, admits he is that taken with the property he would love to live in it himself.

"I can't get permission, the wife won't let me," he said. "I've been working on her for the last three years."

He expects the scheme will take at least a year to complete. One of the first jobs is to remove the massive pumps and all the equipment and tackle which goes with them.

Everything from the pair of Ruston diesel engines to the rakes with 12ft handles the pump-keepers used to clear weed and debris are up for sale.

For more information go to www.waterpumpingstation.co.uk