

Open letter concerning the forthcoming Biggin Hill Memorial Museum

We, the trustees of Biggin Hill Memorial Museum, wish to correct the latest misinformation circulating in the local press regarding the history of, and plans for, the Biggin Hill Memorial Museum.

The Museum Trust is aware that this unverified and misleading information may cause distress and anxiety over the scheme which is unwarranted, and which distracts from the whole purpose of the project: providing a sustainable future for St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance that remembers the Few and honours the Many. Should readers require any further clarification beyond the information contained in this letter, we encourage you to contact us via email.

For over thirty years groups, independent of the local authority, have unsuccessfully tried to develop and deliver a museum scheme at Biggin Hill. The Biggin Hill Memorial Museum Trust is a registered charity and was formed in April 2015 to develop a scheme after the RAF announced their intention to withdraw funding for St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance. Since then, the Trust has worked with Bromley Council and various partner organisations to realise this long held aspiration. For the first time, all the necessary funding and consents have been secured to deliver a new museum on the site of St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance, and a sustainable business plan is in place to ensure that the Chapel remains open to the public in perpetuity. In November, the museum and Chapel will celebrate this success by opening its doors to visitors.

Given that there has been a long held collective view that there should be a memorial museum at Biggin Hill, it is of concern that a number of individuals continue to seek to spread misinformation and confusion, significantly detracting from what should be a scheme to celebrate as we remember the role Biggin Hill played, particularly with regard to the Battle of Britain. The motives behind those seeking to undermine the scheme are far from clear, increasingly so, as the building works move closer to completion.

No one would dispute the need to provide a solution which safeguards the future of St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance, nor of the need for a museum to protect and showcase Biggin Hill's RAF heritage. This letter now addresses four mistruths which have been purposely circulated in order to generate concern and confusion amongst the community.

Firstly, it has been stated that the bricks used to build the memorial museum originate from Germany. This is untrue. The bricks are manufactured in the Netherlands. They were chosen after public consultation at which time several options were presented and discussed. The Chapel, which is a memorial to airmen who served and lost their lives flying from the Biggin Hill sector honours, amongst many, the contribution of the Netherlands. As such, the choice of brick not only fulfils the recommendations of Historic England but also honours our wartime links with our European allies. No offer of free bricks by British manufacturers was made to the Trust or the Council during the pre-construction phase as has been suggested.

Secondly, there are reports which imply that trees which have been dedicated to loved ones have been removed from the Chapel. The Trust has not removed any memorial trees/shrubs nor any memorial plaques, indeed volunteers have been able to take cuttings from the plants being removed. The landscape scheme which has been shown in all visualisations is that which was scrutinised by the planning authority and given planning consent. There has been no deception or alteration of plans. The garden of remembrance will remain untouched save for

some minor improvements to aid accessibility for wheelchair users. We have been particularly criticised about the removal of the two Irish Yew trees. The removal of these two trees was supported by all of the specialist advisors on the basis that this would protect the structural integrity of the Chapel in the long-term. We would encourage people to remember that the image being circulated showing the removal of planting depicts a building site and not the finished scheme. This will reset the Chapel into its immediate environment and enable it to be seen in the way that the Chapel was originally conceived, returning it to the original planned setting as evidenced from historic photographs.

Thirdly the scheme is being delivered in two phases; this was always the agreed intention. The first phase builds the new museum exhibition space, café and shop, and completes conservation work to St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance. The Trust is now fundraising for the second phase which will complete the scheme, providing an additional resource in the form of an education centre and building a memorial wall. This two-phase approach has always been made clear and ensures that the funding already secured is directed at ensuring a sustainable future is ensured within the time constraints caused by the withdrawal of funding from the Chapel. The second phase of works would provide additional benefit to the site but is not essential to its ongoing sustainability.

Lastly, there have been accusations made that the proposed scheme would require the demolition of the Chapel's 'vestry'. The Chapel did have an annex building, attached to the original Chapel building, which has since been removed. This was not a public space and was built in 1990 to house a kitchen, office and storage area. The annex was removed to restore the historic building back to its original cruciform design as fundraised for by Sir Winston Churchill. The removal of the 1990 addition from the Grade II listed Chapel is supported by Historic England. You can view a new visualisation of the scheme on our website. It shows the buildings and landscaping, designed by our award-winning architect, Robin Lee, which return the clear and unrestricted views of the Chapel from the west as originally devised in 1951.

The scheme is now well underway, with the roof being installed in the next few weeks. The project enjoys enormous support from national lending organisations as well as individual lenders and donors, including many veterans and their families. It would be unfortunate if these successes and gestures of support and generosity were undermined by the negativity generated by a small and unauthorised critical voice that continues to circulate these mistruths.

The museum team have assembled an exceptional collection of objects and stories, nearly all of which are founded on relationships developed directly with veterans and those whose stories we represent. As such, the museum will tell the story of RAF Biggin Hill's RAF heritage through a unique and truly personal experience.

The project has been made possible by the generosity of our lenders, donors and by people sharing their own first-hand experiences of war. We continue to be supported behind the scenes by specialists including former Trustee and Executive Head of Charles Darwin School, Sunil Chotai.

Organisations and individuals have given over £5.3million to allow Phase One of this scheme to become a reality, while we continue to receive generous donations towards developing Phase Two. Many local volunteers have given countless hours of their time to help develop the project, through undertaking research and supporting at events. As a Trust we are

honoured and humbled to be part of this project and proud of the achievements of all involved to date.

If you would like to get involved or find out more about this exciting project, we would love to hear from you, please visit: www.bhmm.org.uk or email hello@bhmm.org.uk. You can also join our museum journey by following us on our social media platforms. All press and image enquiries should be addressed to Jemma Johnson-Davey: j.johnson-davey@bhmm.org.uk