



Athena

Cultural Crusader

The case for oaks, not houses

IT'S all very well for the Government to talk boldly about streamlining the planning system as a means of driving forward development. In reality, however, there is a definite need for a much greater degree of nuance. Take a case where public interest can best be served by renewal and protection, as, for example, at Easton Park, formerly one of the great estates of Essex.

Easton Park formed part of the estate of Easton Lodge, home of Daisy, Countess of Warwick, mistress of Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales. She inherited in 1865 at the age of three and lived there until her death in 1938. During that time, she employed Harold Peto to create famous gardens (*COUNTRY LIFE*, November 23, 1907), which, after years of neglect, have

been partially restored and opened to the public. The house itself was mostly demolished in 1950, but much survives in the way of stables, outbuildings, model cottages and lodges, to give an illuminating sense of the old estate.

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As for the park, laid out with radiating avenues of oaks in *patte d'oie* formation, the Countess feared for its future and had the foresight to declare it a nature reserve in 1937. She did not live to see her hopes largely dashed by the Second World War and the building of an airfield on the park, involving the destruction of 10,000 trees. Some evidence of the airfield remains, but, now, the park is mostly in agricultural use, with some quarrying in one corner.

The family sold what remained of the estate to Land Securities in 2004 and plans were drawn up for a development

of 10,000 homes. But this was thrown into doubt earlier this year when Uttlesford District Council, following a change of administration, withdrew the draft Local Plan. At that point, a different idea arose. Uttlesford is surprisingly short of public open space; three-quarters of it consists of nearby Hatfield Forest, which is coming under so much pressure from visitors that the National Trust has had to consider restricting access.

Instead of housing, with all the consequences that would have for local infrastructure and the surrounding countryside, there is instead an opportunity to re-create something of the old park and to provide facilities for outdoor leisure, as well as encouraging what is already a designated Local Wildlife Site with great biodiversity. A promising sign is that Stone Hall, a Grade II*-listed house on the edge of the park where the Countess created another romantic garden, may be bought by a local trust; this would complement plans for the park. There is talk of an airfield museum. Much of the land would continue to be farmed. And many new trees would be planted.

Given the choice of 10,000 oaks or 10,000 houses at Easton Park, Athena would not hesitate to go for the oaks.