LAND FORMING PART OF BURSTON GARDEN CENTRE, ST ALBANS AL2 7DS

AGRICULTURAL LAND CLASSIFICATION

NOVEMBER 2020

Daniel Baird Soil Consultancy Ltd on behalf of Castleoak Oak Care Developments Ltd

Introduction

1. This report has been prepared for Castleoak Care Developments Ltd by Daniel Baird Soil Consultancy Ltd. It provides an assessment of the agricultural quality and versatility, for agricultural land within the proposed development site, Land forming part of Burston Garden Centre, St Albans, referred to as the Site.
2. A large part of the site area comprises glasshouses and associated sheds from the former horticultural use of the site. Beyond the glasshouses still standing is an area of former polytunnels or removed glasshouse structures. Although the above ground structure has been removed the area is still covered by geotextile matting with a network of upright sprinklers connected to a buried supply. For the purposes of this assessment, the former protected cropping area is not considered agricultural land as extensive land restoration would be required before this land could effectively be placed in arable or livestock management.
3. The Site totals approximately 5.8 hectares in area, with the location and extent shown on the attached plan. Agricultural land within this site area covers approximately 1.2 hectares. This area comprises a single field on the north eastern side of the site. When assessed the land was not in agricultural production and had not been for a significant period of time. Management of the land is limited to flailing to control the establishment of woody perennials, with several areas apparently having been under a dense cover of bramble prior to the recent flailing.
4. This appraisal of agricultural land quality is consistent with the direction given by the National Planning Policy Framework[i] (NPPF) (Department of Communities and Local Government, March 2012). Paragraph 112 states

   "Local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality."

5. The glossary of the NPPF gives the following definition.

   "Best and most versatile agricultural land: Land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification."

6. Accordingly, a detailed assessment of the Site was undertaken in November 2020 using the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) revised guidelines and criteria for Agricultural Land Classification[ii] (ALC) published October 1988.
7. Use of the ALC methodology is also supported by Natural England Technical Advice Note 049[iii] (TIN049) published January 2009. Given the small size of the site additional sample points were added to those on the 100m intersections of the Ordnance Survey national grid.
8. The Site falls within the St Albans City and District Council area. City and District of St. Albans District Local Plan Review, adopted November 1994 (saved policies)[iv]
9. Policy 102: Loss of Agricultural Land, states:

Development which would result in the loss of agricultural land will be assessed against the following criteria:

(i) Land Quality: development resulting in the loss of high quality agricultural land, classified by the Ministry of Agriculture as being of Grade 1, 2 or 3a, will normally be refused. An exception to the policy may be made if there is an overriding need for the development and there is no alternative land of a lower quality which could reasonably be used;

(ii) Farm Economics and Management: where appropriate, the loss of agricultural land will be assessed against its effect on the integrity and viability of a farm holding.

Planning applications for the development of agricultural land must be accompanied by an assessment of the agricultural gradings of the land made by the Ministry of Agriculture, or an independent expert approved by the Council.

10. It should be noted that at the time the local plan policy was written, the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) maintained regional teams of agricultural land quality assessors who surveyed proposed development sites. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), MAFF's successor, does not retain these agricultural land quality assessment teams and does not routinely advise on site specific agricultural land quality issues in connection with development proposals.
11. Policy 102 was saved as directed by the 14 May 2009[v] letter from the Government Office for the East of England.

Agricultural Land Classification Methodology

12. The MAFF ALC system of grading land quality for use in land use planning purposes divides farmland into five grades, with the degree of limitation imposed upon land use by the inherent physical characteristics of climate, site and soils. Grade 1 land is of an excellent quality, whilst Grade 5 land has very severe limitations for agricultural use. The ALC system is designed to be independent of land management so that there is no incentive for poor management of land to facilitate development consent. Best and most versatile agricultural land that through sustained arable cropping has become exhausted, with diminished organic matter degrading the structural stability of the topsoil, is not downgraded in the ALC system.
13. The MAFF revised guidelines and criteria for ALC of October 1988 require that the following factors be investigated:

- Climate: Average Annual Rainfall (AAR) and Accumulated Temperature above 0°C between January and June (AT0)
- Site: Gradient, Micro Relief and Flooding
- Soils: Texture, Structure, Depth, Stoniness, and Chemical Toxicity
- Interactive Factors: Soil Wetness, Soil Droughtiness and Liability to Erosion

Agricultural Land Classification Assessment

Climate

14. Climatological data for ALC are provided for 5km intersections of the National Grid by the Meteorological Office, in collaboration with the National Soil Resources Institute. The data from these points can be interpolated providing climate data for specific sites.

Table 1: Land Forming Part of Burston Garden Centre, St Albans

Reference Point:	TL 1370 0365
Altitude (m)	80
Average Annual Rainfall AAR (mm)	684
Accumulated Temperature AT0 (day degrees)	1409
Moisture Deficit for wheat (mm)	108
Moisture Deficit for potatoes (mm)	100
Field Capacity Duration (days)	143

15. The main parameters used in the assessment of an overall climatic limitation are AAR as a measure of overall wetness, and AT0 as a measure of the warmth of a site in the growing season. There is no overall climate limitation on ALC grade for this site. Rainfall is relatively low for this site, which will influence the interactive limitations of soil wetness and soil droughtiness.

The Site

16. The site lies between approximately 80m above ordnance datum and is level. No water courses cross the Site. There are no overall limitations on ALC grade due to flood risk, gradient or micro relief.

Soils and Parent Materials

17. The British Geological Survey Geology of Britain Viewer[vi] shows the Site to be within an area mapped as the Lewes Nodular Chalk Formation and the Seaford Chalk Formation. This is overlain by a superficial deposit of the Lowestoft Formation – a diamicton deposit created by the action of ice and meltwater. Detailed survey of the Site found clay loam soils consistent with the mapped superficial geology.
18. Parts of the site showed evidence of disturbance, with low mounded areas where subsoil material appeared to have been tipped on the surface, and other areas

with a surface covering of what appeared to be discarded growing media such as horticultural peat.

Interactive Factors

19. In areas without apparent disturbance, the soil profile consists of a medium clay loam topsoil over a heavy clay loam subsoil. An inspection pit showed this subsoil to have a moderately developed, firm and very coarse angular blocky structure with gleying evident on the structure surfaces. This subsoil is slowly permeable, limiting the drainage of excess rainfall down through the soil profile leaving the topsoil wet for an extended period of time.

<u>Agricultural Land Classification of Land Forming Part of Burston Garden Centre, St Albans.</u>

20. As shown on the attached ALC Grade Distribution plan, detailed ALC survey of land within the Site found agricultural land in ALC Grade 3b.

Table 2 – ALC Grade Distribution

ALC Grade	Area (ha)	%
3b	1.2	20.7
Non Agricultural	4.6	79.3
Total	**5.8**	**100.0**

21. Soil wetness is the dominant limiting factor for agricultural land quality at the Site. The combination of the site rainfall, impeded drainage down through the subsoil and clay content of the topsoil limits opportunities for cultivation and animal stocking density without excessive smearing, rutting and poaching of the soil. These physical degradation further impedes drainage and crop growth, and is difficult and time consuming to remediate. Soil wetness and workability limits the land to Grade 3b.
22. Non agricultural land comprises access tracks, hard standing, buildings, glasshouses and bases of former glasshouse/polytunnel structures. A narrow hardcore track along the north eastern edge of the agricultural land has not been mapped out as Non Agricultural owing to its width and the scale of survey.
23. As the Site does not contain best and most versatile agricultural land, planning guidance aimed at conserving such land is not applicable.

Practicalities of Future Agricultural Use

24. The Grade 3b area of agricultural land within the site has clearly not been in productive agricultural use for some time. At present the site is flailed to control the spread of woody perennials such as the brambles found across the site. When surveyed a bonfire pile was on the agricultural land, comprising mostly of broken pallets and other timber waste. Other material had also been disposed of on the agricultural land including subsoil and potting compost/peat.
25. Vehicular access to the agricultural land is only possible from the A405 dual carriageway, either passing through the garden centre car park, storage sheds and derelict glasshouses, or along the access tracks for the three residential properties to the north of the site. Agricultural management of this land would therefore involve livestock wagons or large arable equipment (tractors with cultivators, seed drill, combine harvester and grain trailer) to negotiate constricted access and enter and leave via the dual carriageway. It is simply not tenable that such a small area of fragmented Grade 3b land would be an economic addition to a commercial farm business.

[i] National Planning Policy Framework. Department for Communities and Local Government, March 2012 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2

[ii] Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales: Revised guidelines and criteria for grading the quality of agricultural land. Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, October 1988. http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/land-use/documents/alc-guidelines-1988.pdf

[iii] Agricultural Land Classification: protecting the best and most versatile agricultural land (TIN049). Natural England, January 2009. http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35012

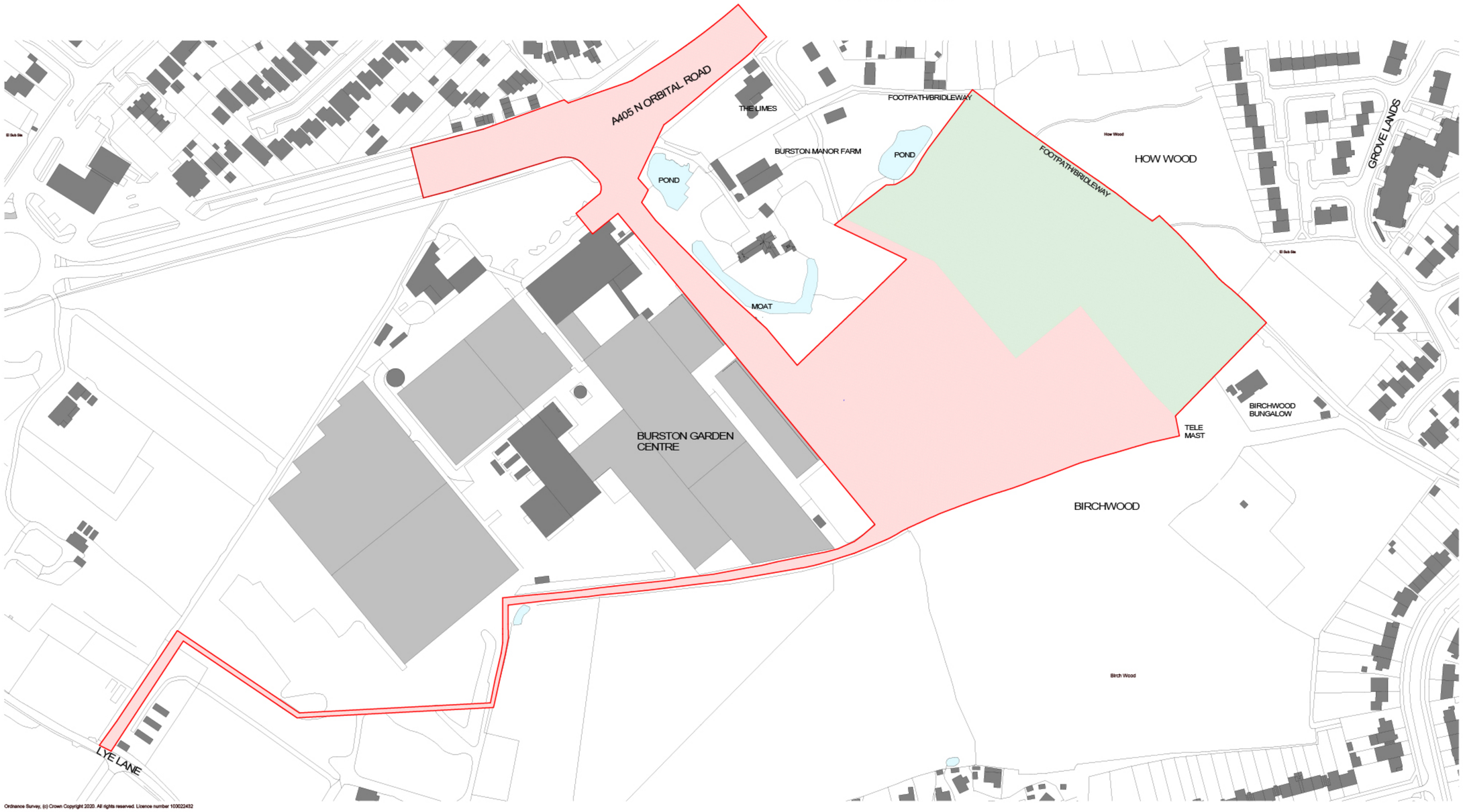
[iv] City and District of St. Albans District Local Plan Review, adopted November 1994 (saved policies) http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/planning/Planningpolicy/currentadoptedlocalplan.aspx

[v] List of Saved Planning Policies, Government Office of the East of England. 14 May 2009 http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/Saved%20Policies%2C%20Direction%20and%20Correction_tcm15-9515.pdf

[vi] British Geological Survey Geology of Britain viewer. http://www.bgs.ac.uk/data/mapViewers/home.html?src=topNav

Agricultural Land Classification

Grade Distribution



Grade 3B

Non agricultural