

Open Letter to the Camphill Village Trust

Dear David Knowles,

27th July 2014

I have long been aware of the tensions created by the need to reconcile Government procedures with the idealism and idiosyncrasies of the Steiner philosophy as embodied in Botton. I respect the former but I revere the latter.

Rumour of developments in the Village have therefore alarmed me greatly and naturally I looked forward to the publicised meeting in Danby Village Hall last Thursday. Having been at one time County Councillor for the district including Botton made me particularly eager to hear both sides of the arguments. Forgive me then if I say that I consider your absence a tactical blunder which left the packed hall questioning your good faith and even suspicious of your contempt for them. You missed not only the valuable opportunity to put your case to the widest audience you may have the chance to address, but also the experience of an extremely powerful expression of appreciation and, yes, love, for the Botton we have all supported for years.

Instead of very necessary dialogue and debate we had an empty chair at the high table and, but only for some of us, copies of an eleventh-hour statement which no one had time to study before the meeting and which apparently your secretary hadn't had time to correct properly - witness typing errors and an incomprehensible sentence. Surely it is one of your many onerous responsibilities to nurture support for Botton among the wider local community and create understanding and co-operation.

Careful study of your statement leaves me puzzled that anyone so apparently out of sympathy with the much-admired practices of Botton should have accepted your office. It would have been more credible and creditable if you had stated frankly that you do not believe that there is any longer a place for a Steiner community in today's materialist world. Then we should all know where we are. Instead you make the astonishing assertion that "these changes do not mean that the Botton Village as it is known and loved is at risk." That remark is either deliberate obfuscation or it betrays remarkable lack of understanding. Assuming the latter I turn my attention to the dialogue you avoided in the hope that some of what follows may do something to bridge the gulf between us.

I do not think you are aware how fundamentally you have departed from the essential character of Botton. This is indicated in small things as well as great: for instance in your choice of terminology. You shun the homely term "villagers" only to use the clumsy circumlocution "people we support," or worse, you resort to the cold, commercial legalism "beneficiaries", which would quite sensibly apply to everyone connected with Botton including us neighbours and customers, for indeed we have all benefited hugely.

You seem to be in confusion between "work" and "not work", a distinction which makes sense in a factory, mine, office or shop but is irrelevant when it comes to family life. But Botton is a family not a factory, indeed it is a family of families, I suggest that if you could think of the Village primarily as a family, and less as a business organisation or a public institution, you would raise less antagonism. If you cannot adjust your mental approach in this way it is because for you work at Botton is paid employment rather than family life, and that is the difference between the Botton you are trying to create and the Botton you fail to see you are destroying.

Perhaps you see the voluntary tradition at Botton as a curious accident, incidental rather than central to the vitality of the community. It has in fact been the creative soul of the village. It is what has bonded the villagers and co-workers as equals in a shared life. It is what drew so many young co-workers to Botton, the challenge to make a sacrifice proving attractive rather than deterrent, just as it filled the monasteries in the Middle Ages. Anyone coming for the money would prefer more money elsewhere. Payment would alter the relationship between villagers and co-workers destroying their equality. The difference between voluntary work and paid employment is colossal and the enforcement of the latter is equivalent to an earthquake

I am far from alone in regarding two of the worst features of today's society as being, first, the rapidly widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, and secondly, the inexorable prioritisation and domination of money considerations in decision making in every sphere of life to the detriment of other human values, religious, social, aesthetic, amongst others. Botton used to be welcomed as a haven from these trends. Can you claim that this is still so on your watch? I think not.

For many years first-time visitors to Botton have been struck by the atmosphere of the place, the sense of joy and purpose and welcome, all the more surprising to them when they were expecting something very different. You must recognise this yourself and prize it, but have you asked yourself how this has been achieved and how it may be affected by the changes you plan? Last Thursday's meeting at Danby recreated an overwhelming Botton atmosphere of unity and joyous enthusiasm such as I have rarely had the good fortune to be part of. I wish you had been there to witness it, not as something for you to distrust but to harness.

Yours sincerely

Giles Heron

PS. All the above are purely personal views such as I might have put to you at Danby.,

Hence the form of an open letter. I hope it is acceptable.