

Dear Sirs

I wonder whether you might be willing to lobby or at least write to Sir Howard Davies at the Airports Commission, as well as Kent County Council, assuming that you might support us in our cause to try and ensure that a second runway is not created at Gatwick Airport.

Clearly I do not wish to publicise the fact, as it might potentially damage our visitor numbers, but we are already partially blighted by the current runway. At busy times, aeroplanes fly over Hever Castle every two minutes and it is indeed a regular complaint from visitors who seek rural tranquillity. Strictly speaking, legislation covering Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty allows them to be protected from low-flying aircraft, but we are not.

With the Airports Commission on aeroplane movements (particularly in the South East) in play, it is important we do all we can to influence those in power to give heritage a bit more protection. Here at Hever Castle there are few planes that fly either to the north or south of us, with the vast majority flying directly overhead. This is principally because they built the runway in direct line with the Castle. However, if the aeroplanes were to join the ILS (Instrument Landing System) slightly to the west of Hever Castle, effectively joining it one mile further in, the impact of aircraft noise on Hever Castle would be significantly reduced. This would presumably also reduce the amount of planes flying over Tunbridge Wells. The residents of Mark Beech and Cowden would probably be subjected to more aircraft noise than they currently are, but as horrible as it is for anyone to be subjected to this noise, they do have the option of moving house if necessary. A heritage attraction does not have that option and if a second runway is built, we would potentially have low-flying aircraft over us every minute.

People who visit Hever Castle, particularly from towns, especially London, expect a rural attraction to afford them peace and tranquillity (especially one within an AONB). Fortunately when we have east winds, there are no low-flying aeroplanes, as they take a different route, and our visitors enjoy peace and tranquillity and hopefully tell others. The difficulty is that we also get west winds and that is when the aeroplanes fly overhead and in this competitive world, particularly with more visitor attractions being built and the new Warner Brothers attraction due to be built in the north of Kent, we need to exploit every advantage possible. If we become associated with aircraft noise, it will be very difficult to persuade people to visit us.

We believe that a second runway would almost certainly spell the end for Hever Castle as a visitor attraction. We currently employ 60 full-time staff ourselves, plus another 130 seasonal staff, and the catering company which operates on-site also has around 100 staff on their books. We support a vast number of local businesses in West Kent and all of this is threatened if we cannot persuade the 'powers that be' to move the flight path slightly away from the Castle, or at least ensure that no second runway is built.

When I asked Gatwick Airport management why the planes do not fly slightly to the south of us, they said that there were simply too many aeroplanes flying in airspace above the South East to make this possible, with Gatwick, Heathrow, Stansted and City Airports all impacting upon our air space. I am not entirely certain that their reasoning is plausible, especially considering that they are pushing for a second runway and I understand from some quarters that they are expecting to treble their air traffic. How can they do that if there is not enough space to move flight paths one mile to the south of Hever Castle? Is it because they are worried that it might compromise a second runway?

At any rate, I would ask you to do all you can to encourage the 'powers that be' to avoid Hever Castle. It is the most visited tourist attraction that I am aware of in West Kent. We typically have

well in excess of 250,000 visitors per year and have, in the past, had over 300,000 visitors. Ironically, since they narrowed the approach to the airport, our visitor numbers have dropped, maybe for other reasons as well, but it is almost certainly a contributory factor.

It is not entirely clear why Kent County Council is so supportive of Gatwick, as I cannot imagine it supports any jobs in Kent, whereas the 'Boris Island' scenario would provide a great many jobs in Kent, particularly the Medway Towns. It would also reduce the impact on the residents of Kent, as the aircraft noise rarely travels to the north or south of the airport; it is those underneath the flight path (to the east and west) who are affected. It would further make Kent a sought-after location for businesses and tourists.

Thank you for reading my letter. Any support you can give us would be hugely appreciated.

Yours faithfully

Duncan Leslie MRICS  
Chief Executive