

'The rape of Somerset'

"WHAT is going on, effectively, is the rape of Somerset villages. They are being destroyed, they are losing their character, they are being spoilt."

Dr Neil Glendinning is a South Petherton doctor. He also lives in the pretty hamstone village. With his wife, Dr Gillian Glendinning, he is worried about the impact big building developers are having on the village he lives in and others nearby.

"What I do not want to see is all of us, in years to come, suddenly looking around us and seeing the results of the slow, steady, relentless encroachment of building, and wondering how it happened, and when," he said.

Mr and Mrs Glendinning are not the only people to show concern over the way estates are suddenly springing up in villages. But because they have articulated their views, in a letter to the parish council, and because the parish council showed enough concern to do something about it, the issue has become one of immense current importance.

The views people such as the Glendinnings express have not come from a "Little England" mentality. Rather, they show a concern for how people live, the provision of work, and an understanding of how suburbia, once rural, in places such as the Home Counties began.

Last month the Glendinnings told South Petherton Parish Council to explain why they were concerned.

The village had been "found" by the builders, they said, and having managed to buy up and build on several large plots of land the builders were now attempting to obtain as much land as possible on which to build further houses.

This, said the Glendinnings, was rapidly increasing the size of the village and changing its character dramatically.

"Unfortunately the majority of the houses that are being built are not benefiting the Somerset populace. They

are quality homes of a type to attract the retiring population from the Home Counties and are beyond the pocket of younger local working people."

There were other grounds for concern — often the retired people had no family nearby with the effect of producing a severe imbalance in the village population and putting increasing strain on the village services.

The houses, they said, were built close together, having little space or no layout, and were built in a way completely foreign to the village layout.

Sprawling

If it increases any more, the letter warned, the village will become, like Martock, a sprawling, architectural mess — too large to benefit from village life and too small to have the facilities of a town.

"The only people who benefit from this are the speculative builders who have no other interest in the village than to make as big a profit as possible on their building projects. Those who suffer are the inhabitants of South Petherton," the letter closed.

The effects were pronounced. The letter found allies in the parish council and members collaborated on a letter to the planning office at South Somerset District Council.

This pointed out that most villagers were involved at some point in the formation of a local structure plan and plotting a limit, on a map, of development within the village.

Most councillors showed virtually no support for the concept of major residential development anywhere in the village and felt there was a need at the lower end of the housing market to stop young people moving out.

Parish clerk George Smith, who sent the letter on behalf of the council, said that since 1974 recommendations made by the parish council on planning matters have rarely differed from decisions taken by the district council.

What worried the council was the number of recent planning decisions taken at

district level where they differed from the parish council's recommendations.

Now Chief Planning Officer John Clotworthy is to visit the parish council in September to talk about recent developments and the relevance of the structure plan.

The Glendinnings have to back them up statistics gleaned from answers to a questionnaire given to village newcomers. The figures are approximate.

Out of the 340 people moving in to South Petherton from March 1984 to February 1986, 23.5 per cent were in the 60 to 80 age group. By comparison, 684 moved in to Martock in the same period, and only 13.2 per cent were in that age group.

The population of South Petherton village, ignoring Over Stratton, etc, is approximately 2,253. Over one-third of the population, 757, is over 60 years old, with the greatest number of elderly people being in the 70 to 80 age bracket.

Martock, by comparison, has 728 people over 60, less than 22 per cent of the 3,315 population.

Figures themselves only give some idea of the population change but the Glendinnings are more concerned about something else.

Only 39 per cent of those questioned had relations nearby.

"As the population grows we are concerned for those who have retired here with out relations nearby, who may become quickly disabled," said Mrs Glendinning.

The questions are: who will look after them, how will they overcome their isolation, and how much strain will it put on services?

Cynthia Wade is a parish councillor, an active member of many village organisations and a former district nurse.

Dealing with elderly people as she does, Cynthia understood only too well the problems faced by those who retired in the village after an active life in the Home Counties.

"It is fine while there are two of them — the problems come when one dies, or one

or the other is not able to drive anymore," she said.

Personally, Cynthia thought it a mistake to move away, when you were on the point of retirement, to a completely different part of the country where there were no ties.

"There is no doubt that this village needs young people and cheap housing for them. But I understand it is not easy when land is such a high price.

"At the moment the village has a lot of older people on committees and in organisations and, really, we need young people with their enthusiasm and ideas."

Appealing to the young buyer is something many residents of South Petherton are anxious to do, but with homes on many of the new estates starting at £60,000 seems unlikely.

There is concern too about the effect pronounced residential development has on the local industry.

Mr Glendinning feels that plans for new, small industry may be scuppered by the new inhabitants' desire for a residential atmosphere.

"This is a working village and if there isn't an industry, local opportunities, we will lose our young residents," says.

Her views are shared by local tradesman who do not wish to be named. He has three former industrial buildings which looked as if they were now to be made over for residential development.

A plot of land, services nearby or laid out just big enough for one house would cost, he estimates, the region of £23,000.

With builders estimating eight houses to an acre price of land for residential development is high and builders recover costs most obvious way.

"We need cheaper houses. We need them in the region of £35,000 for the young family. At the moment they want to move into a bigger house in South Petherton they are stuck."

Yet again, when people move to the village whether they saw Petherton as a town or a village, 87 per cent say a village. But local people may no longer remain