

The University of Plymouth and Seale-Hayne

The “Seale-Hayne Agricultural and Technical College” was founded in 1915 under the will of The Right Honourable Charles Seale-Hayne (MP), former Liberal MP for Ashburton from 1885 until his death in 1903. Seale-Hayne was set up as a Charitable Institution by the High Court of Justice and administered by a board of Governors. After a brief spell as a military hospital during world war one, it opened its doors to students in 1919 and flourished in all aspects of Agricultural and Land-Use based education well into the late 1980’s.

Eventually after linking with what was Plymouth Polytechnic, and then becoming part of Polytechnic South-West, Seale Hayne became the Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Land-Use of the University of Plymouth upon the formation of the University in 1992. The University soon claimed that it could not invest in Seale-Hayne unless it owned the freehold of the Seale-Hayne site that still belonged to the original charity. In October 1999, the Charity Commissioners approved a scheme whereby in exchange for an investment into an endowment policy, the University owned the freehold of Charles Seale-Hayne’s charity.

Now, just 3 years later, the University proposes to close Seale-Hayne and has lodged an application to Teignbridge Council for major planning proposals at the Seale-Hayne site. No wonder there is objection!

Academically the University claims that Seale-Hayne is under performing. That it does not achieve the “critical mass” required to form a viable faculty as part of a mainstream University. If we go back just 15 years, Seale-Hayne was at the forefront of land-based education. It outperformed all other similar institutions and with the development of the degree courses in Agriculture and other Rural Sciences, Seale-Hayne was going to be unbeatable. People were queuing up to enrol on courses at Seale-Hayne. But since the inception of The University of Plymouth ten years ago, the University has presided over a decline in performance at Seale-Hayne. With minimal investment, little foresight and scant marketing for courses, interest in study at Seale-Hayne has naturally dwindled amongst prospective students. There has been little support for research (staff and students fight for research funding, most funding coming from commercial sponsorship), yet the buildings and the farm are ideally placed for research. Even without support, Seale-Hayne staff and students have been and are still involved in cutting edge land-use research.

The University must reverse its decision. Huge investment is needed at Seale-Hayne to turn it into a “Centre of Excellence” for Land-Based education and research. It is slap-bang in the middle of the South West, a region dominated by agriculture and rural tourism. Where better? Make Seale-Hayne the **only** place to go for learning about Rural Issues. Invite the Agricultural Economics Unit at Exeter University to use offices at Seale-Hayne. Open the doors to research – academic and commercial. Just today a Veterinary Officer heavily involved in PhD research at De Montford University contacted me. He said that there is money out there looking for a home! Seale-Hayne should be after that money. It should be the first stop for any question about rural issues. Why move a centre for rural education and research into the middle of a city?

Many people have a suspicion as to why. The University of Plymouth stands to make a huge capital gain out of Seale-Hayne. An application to alter the local structure plan and include the site for development as a “cluster village” was lodged with Teignbridge as long ago as February 2002. Amongst other things the plan includes housing, schools, business units and recreational facilities. Some estimates put the value of Seale-Hayne with planning permission at £500m. Not a bad return on the £850,000 paid just three years ago into the Seale-Hayne endowment, in exchange for the freehold of Sir Charles’ original charity. And very useful if you needed to fund new medical schools and the massive building plans for Plymouth, which are needed to allow the expansion of the University, along with the proposed restructure.

The University says that it is not allowing this possible windfall to sway the decision. The restructure is based on academic argument only. How naïve are we supposed to be?

And finally, if the alternative academic proposals and the asset stripping accusations are not enough to change the decision, how about the trust, or the “Gentleman’s Agreement” - the promises of every subsuming body that approached the authorities at Seale-Hayne. The first link with Plymouth Polytechnic, the move into Polytechnic South-West, the transformation into the University of Plymouth and most importantly, the acquisition of the freehold of Sir Charles’ charity’s original property. At every turn in Seale-Hayne’s history, we have been assured that the change is in the best interest of Seale-Hayne. Ensured that each change is the only way to ensure the survival of Seale-Hayne as an institution and the survival of the historic and beautiful buildings and grounds that surround it. If “restructure” goes ahead and Seale-Hayne is allowed to close, the University of Plymouth will have an unenviable scar in its history.

Plymouth University must be congratulated in looking to the future and in trying to position itself at the top of the University league. It is a huge asset to the region. But if it tramples on issues like Seale-Hayne on its way to the top, it will gain little respect from the communities that it aims to serve.

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