

# Village at war with chanting campers

Millionaire in legal bid to close spiritual retreat

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It is supposed to be a place of peace and contemplation, but neighbours of a retreat in the Cotswolds say that their lives are being made a misery by noisy campers.

The objectors include Terry Maher, the former chairman of Dillons bookstores, who lives in a £1 million house bordering the site.

Andy Birtwell, 67, and his wife, Sally, 63, have played host to hundreds of guests since setting up the Holycombe Spiritual Development Centre, on the edge of Whichford, Warwickshire, ten years ago. Relations in the village have soured since the couple won planning permission for a 30-pitch campsite in their grounds.

Although Mr Maher, author of a memoir of life in the book trade called *Against My Better Judgement*, lives 400 yards away, he said that the sound of happy campers was disturbing the tranquillity of his sun terrace, where he likes to have a quiet drink with his wife, Barbara.

Mr Maher, who has lived in the village for 30 years, is taking legal action to have the Birtwells' six-acre campsite closed, saying that it has become the venue of noisy parties and late-night raves.

He is seeking a judicial review of Stratford District Council's decision to grant the Birtwells retrospective planning permission. The disagreement has affected long-standing friendships. He said: "I have been friends with Andy



Visitors to the centre run by Andy and Sally Birtwell, right

and Sally for many, many years and I even persuaded him to buy the land.

"Everything was fine, and we had no opposition to the holistic centre but the campsite is causing noise which is very intrusive to us.

"If we sit on our terrace with a prevailing wind we can hear conversations from the campsite quite clearly, as well as children playing. It does not fit with the atmosphere of a quiet village in the Cotswolds."

Mrs Maher, 70, added: "The Birtwells were good friends and we are sad

that it's come to this."

Bridget Barker, 55, a London solicitor with a house in the village, said that the campsite was a source of "chanting and singing". She also blamed the campers for parking their cars in the village.

The Birtwells

have transformed the site from a scrapyard into a wildlife haven since buying it in 1997. The Holycombe name comes from a "holy" well in a nearby copse.

Mr Birtwell, who runs a water purifying company, said: "Since the complaints in 2011 we have imposed an 11pm noise curfew. Our holistic retreat attracts the sort of people who want to be quiet.

"We reject the idea that it causes traffic disruption. All of the cars park by their tents. None of them parks in the village — it is just a complete fabrication."

His wife said that the retreat was used mostly by middle-aged couples and walkers wanting to "enjoy the countryside in peace and quiet". She said: "The argument is getting ridiculous.

The protesters are claiming that we hold noisy raves here, which is simply not true.

"Most weekends during the summer we have walkers and a few families who want to enjoy the countryside in peace and quiet."

Stratford District Council, which is responding to seven claims for a judicial review, refused to comment while legal proceedings were continuing.

## Hitler not all bad, teacher told pupils

A teacher has been struck off for after telling pupils that "Hitler wasn't all bad — he killed the Jews, the gays and the disabled".

David McNally also told a third-year religious education class at Kilwinning Academy, Ayrshire, in November last year that he would "rather have been a prison warden or a child abuser", the General Teaching Council (GTC) said. The supply teacher was found to be unfit to teach at a GTC hearing yesterday.

The comments were brought to light when pupils complained to their parents, who contacted the school.

Mr McNally did not attend the hearing but accepted that he had made the remarks in his written submission.

He said that he was having a "particularly bad day" and had made the comments in a "general sense". The GTC panel rejected his suggestion.

The Hitler comments were made during a Higher class in which he also asked pupils: "Did you have sex at the weekend?" He also told a third-year class: "I love my mobile phone because I can sit and watch porn on it."

The GTC panel ruled that Mr McNally be struck off the teaching register and cannot reapply for two years. It said: "The panel was of the view that the explanations by the respondent did not reduce their gravity and considered that under any circumstances they were entirely inappropriate."