

Note of regret for the musician plucked to join Pink Floyd

By Rowen West-Henzell

MOST musicians would jump at the chance of joining Pink Floyd on a two-year worldwide tour. Especially so if your alternative is to play with a little-known band at a Welsh holiday camp.

So it is a matter of regret to guitar maker Doug Wilkes, that back in 1989, when he was asked by Pink Floyd to be their guitar technician, he chose the latter. The 58-year-old explains that his band, Froghorn, had just signed a contract agreeing to play for six months at the Warner Holiday Camp in Carmarthen. He was also running his own factory on Botteslow Street in Hanley called Wilkes' Guitars — leading him to turn down the rock group's offer and say nothing about it to fellow band members.

He said: "I never mentioned it to them. I just felt that if I went, I would be letting everybody down."

"It would have been foolish and irresponsible because I had the factory and everything. But I should have gone really."

"Looking back in hindsight is easy — you always realise these things after it's too late."

Left-handed as a child and a budding guitarist, Mr Wilkes was frustrated that all the guitars he picked up were right-handed.

He decided to have a go at putting one together himself and realised he was good at it.

He became well-known as a leading instrument builder, supplying many famous musicians in the 1980s, including Dave Gilmore from Pink Floyd. Others included the bands Wang Chung and Big Country, and Steve Howe from Yes.

He also remembers the days when The Smiths, A-Ha, David Essex, Culture Club and many others would stop off and leave instruments in the factory for checks and repairs while they were on tour.

The company employed six people and business was booming until he ran into trouble with patenting applications for one of his inventions — The Answer sliding pick-up system for guitars.

He was trying to market the product abroad, but every time he got a new foreign buyer he had to apply for a new patent if he had not sold to that country before. Mr Wilkes blamed the prices of the applications and the time they took up, for draining his finances and forcing the closure of his factory in 1992. He said: "The business was exploding — but the patent office crippled it."

Now the father-of-two is happy making instruments as a hobby from home, working on personalised electric violins that he carves himself from maple wood. He has made one for Jane Burgess in the shape of her initials and is currently developing instruments for Vanessa Mae and Sharon Corr, of the Irish group The Corrs.

Mr Wilkes also owns a piano made by JRR Tolkien's grandfather, Henry Tolkien, for the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851.

It was passed down through the Tolkien family and was then given to Mr Wilkes by friends.

His band, Hollywood Nites, formerly Froghorn, is still going strong and was recently named the North Midlands Entertainment Band of the Year for the third time.

Mr Wilkes, who sings and plays guitar and synthesisers said: "I feel very honoured to be recognised in the field of entertainers and very flattered."

He will collect the award with his fellow band members Ash Lee, Susan Highley, Sally Rivers and Clare Orp, at the Goldenhill Working Men's Club, Goldenhill, Stoke-on-Trent, on Thursday night.



● Star maker: Doug Wilkes with one of his violins
Picture by Steve Bould

Development plans are in limbo as a moratorium around a flagship renewal project causes delays in other regeneration schemes

Tempers rise as regeneration plans are trapped in red tape

By Deputy Business Editor
David Elks

RESIDENTS living near the derelict former Stoke City Football Club ground are angry.

Angry that they have had to wait almost eight years since the stadium closed to see plans for its redevelopment, and angry that the site has been left to become an eyesore alongside the main A500 into the city.

Now they are also angry because plans to transform the old football ground have been put on hold again, because it does not fit into a £2.3 billion plan to revitalise Stoke-on-Trent's housing stock.

The residents include Jean Parkes, who lives in Lime Street near the former football stadium, who pointed out that an access road to the site from the A500 was currently under construction.

The pensioner said: "No-one here is at all happy about what has happened to the ground."

"We were told that once the new road went in, the problems should be resolved."

"I thought we were waiting for that — but it seems this is not the end of it at all."

Developer St Modwen confirmed that the site is one of three plots which the company faces delays in developing.

The brownfield specialist says the developments are likely to grind to a halt for up to two years, because they come into conflict with a Pathfinder scheme which will see 14,500 ageing properties demolished and the construction of 12,000 new homes.

One of the most prominent sites is the old Victoria Ground in Stoke, which has been derelict since 1997.

The firm, which paid £2 million for the land in 1997, was unable to develop the 16-acre site — which includes the former car park, training pitches and ground — until last year.

This was because no land next to the A500 could be granted planning permission until



● Neglect: the derelict Victoria Ground has been left to become an eyesore

access road from the site was built.

Last August, the company submitted plans including around 90,000 sq ft of offices plus a restaurant on land between the River Trent and the A500.

Up to 150 homes had been earmarked for the western side of the site, but the application still has not yet been decided — eight months later.

Government guidelines say such plans should be decided within eight weeks.

Pauline Joynson, city councillor for the Stoke and Trent Vale Ward, which covers the ground, said she receives weekly calls about the site.

Mrs Joynson said: "Residents are all fed-up to the back teeth with the state of the site and will be upset if now nothing is going to happen."

"Ever since I've been elected people have waited to move it forward."

"I've had calls about clearing up the rubbish, seen people who go out to look at the mess every night, they're just sick and tired of nothing happening to the site."

"When there was the consultation last year over what was planned for the site, people were pleased that things would move on."

Mike Herbert, regional development director for St Modwen

said: "Having put in a planning application, we are now being asked whether this fits into the long-term strategy for the city, and whether we could sit on it for a while."

"It might be 2007 before the issue becomes clear. There is a massive concern that things are grinding to a halt."

A second site which is currently in limbo is Royal Doulton's historic Nile Street works in Burslem, which St Modwen bought for £2.5 million last March.

The Sentinel reported at the time how the finishing touches were being put to a master plan for the Mother Town.

Mr Herbert said he has since

been told that St Modwen's plans would be affected by the adoption Local Area Framework document — a strategic plan setting out the scope of development across Stoke-on-Trent over the next 10 years.

However, this document will not come into force until March 2007. The whole planning process is complicated further because of an unofficial moratorium introduced by Renew North Staffordshire, affecting all land in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle outside of Cross Heath, Hanley South, Knutton, Meir and Middleport.

Renew director, Hardial Bhogal, last week told Sentinel Sunday that there could be delays in planning.

The city council, as a planning body, is obliged to consult Renew over plans outside its immediate area of early intervention.

If Renew feels an application would conflict with its own strategy, it is able to object. This can lengthen a plan's progress through the planning process. As yet, no developer has legally challenged this process.

However, Mr Bhogal has said an interim planning framework had now been drawn up to address the differences between current planning policies and Renew's own strategy, and could be in force within three months.

A final, and largest, plot of land which St Modwen wants to develop, is 90 acres stretching between parts of the remaining Shelton Bar steelworks site to Middleport.

This proposal is being driven under the banner of Stoke-on-Trent Regeneration, a joint venture between the city council and the developer. However, it too has been delayed.

Mr Herbert explained how the company would continue to develop parts of the steelworks site for which it had permission.

He said: "There is no restriction on land for which we already have permission, but we are down to our last plot."



● Frustrated: city councillor Pauline Joynson, and Mike Herbert, regional development director for St Modwen

The next area of land is the last part of the Corus site up to Middleport.

"What we are being advised by the local authority and Renew is that because they are master-planning, they cannot decide what, if any, proposal should go forward or not."

The purpose of the £2.3 billion housing renewal programme, being spearheaded by Renew North Staffordshire, is to stop the decline in population numbers across the conurbation, created by the lack of ageing housing, which leads to high levels of void properties. In total, there are 7,000 void properties which need addressing.

However, the plans have ground to a halt because of an 11-month delay in getting an application for houses heard by Stoke-on-Trent's planning committee.

This has meant that the listed company is sitting on assets worth £2.5 million, which could be used to further develop the business.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council conceded the Victoria Ground development scheme had been delayed well beyond the Government's eight-week guidelines.

However, it rebutted St Modwen's claims by saying the reason was because of the scale of the project.

A spokesman said: "The reason that we have not determined the application is because of the complexity of the scheme."

"We are consulting with St Modwen on a regular basis, and with other partners including Renew North Staffordshire."

Last week, Sentinel Sunday
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QUOTES of The Week

"IT appears the general attitude is that it is someone else's responsibility to take precautions, forgetting that a vehicle is a lethal object." Norman Wright, of Forsbrook, in a letter to The Sentinel bemoaning poor standards of driving on the region's roads.

"WE'VE had a great number of people ringing up our shops and asking for items with April 8 on. They think the ones with the wrong date could end up being more collectable and valuable."

Gavin Williamson, general manager of Longton-based Aynsley China, after Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles moved the date of their wedding to April 9 because of the Pope's funeral.

"CHOOSING to leave this site to develop naturally was the best thing to have done."

Nigel Evans, of Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, after an old landfill site at Waterhouses used to dispose of inert materials such as rubble was recorded as one of the most bio-diverse in the country.

"WE thought we'd hit somebody because it was dark and we hit it with such a bang. It really is dangerous and anybody hitting that at speed is going to have a bad accident, especially a motorcyclist."

Motorist Don McLean, of Trentham, after a wheel on his car was written off by a pothole in Trentham Road, Butterton, Newcastle.

"TO cover the kind of distance Ray is preparing to undertake even before the Marathon, and in a decontamination suit, defies belief."

D'Arcy Myers, chief executive of the charity Dreams Come True, on champion paramedic Ray Edensor, who is running 200 miles in a decontamination suit before joining the Flora London Marathon.

"THE majority will not be relocating and the directors know that from individual meetings."

Heather Wright, an employee representative at Stone-based Proclad International Pipelines, which is relocating to its head office in Scotland.

"MAXINE Carr was convicted of lying to protect her boyfriend. There are worse cases reported in The Sentinel every week which lead to no reaction whatever."

Stephen Jones, of Bristol University, in a letter to The Sentinel on the hounding of a young woman in Cheadle by vigilantes thinking she is Maxine Carr.

"WHAT is this student going to tell everyone when she gets back home — that we thought she had helped a child killer and then we embarked on what amounted to a witch hunt?" Cheadle deputy mayor Stephen Ellis, on the hounding of South African student Diane Carraro.

"WE Muslims have the answer in our faith of Islam and it is all about people how to find that." Father-of-three Shabir Ahmed, during a march in Cobridge to highlight drug use by Muslims.

"IF he goes he will leave a big hole in Potteries healthcare. It would be a huge loss to sick Stoke children and their parents."

Ex-Port Vale and West Bromwich Albion footballer Kevin Kent, becoming the first parent for years to back controversial paediatrician Professor David Southall who is fighting to save his career after being found guilty of serious professional misconduct.

Warning on fliers

BOGUS charities in Stoke-on-Trent are appealing for items to send to Eastern European countries as part of a money-making scheme.

Fliers urging residents to leave clothing and household goods outside their homes are being circulated throughout the city.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council's consumer protection chief, Peter Devaney, warned that the collections are being organised by commercial operators with items being sold for profit.

He said: "Bogus collections deprive charities of significant sources of revenue. We want people to be alert to the practices of unscrupulous individuals. Check for a registered charity number to make sure that the donations are going to genuine charities."

Anyone who has doubts about a charity leaflet should contact the city council on 01782 232774.