

HILLTOP FORT 5/10/94 SOLD TO TRUST

THE National Trust is buying the Stroud hilltop fort which was at the centre of a bitter dispute with former owner Joanne Willies-Williams.

The Trust confirmed today it had agreed to buy the landmark Rodborough Fort in a bid to protect the rare plants and wildlife on the surrounding Common.

In due course, the Fort will be re-sold to a "sympathetic owner" who will not re-open the rights of way across the common and endanger the wildlife, said Trust spokesman David Brown today.

Protect

He said successive owners of the Fort had controlled rights of way across the Common for many years - but they had not been used until 1988 when former beauty queen Mrs Willies-Williams brought in diggers to open them up.

This led to the Trust obtaining an injunction to protect the rare orchids and other plants on the common, which is a site of special scientific interest, he said.

Mrs Willies-Williams claims the Trust action thwarted her business plans for the Fort, which included development as a leisure park with log chalets.

She has also had plans to create a zoo and monkey sanctuary in the grounds.

by Citizen Reporter

Mrs Willies-Williams is currently suing the Trust for damages at a private hearing before a High Court judge at Whitminster courthouse, near Gloucester.

In a statement today, the Trust said they had reached agreement for the purchase of the Fort and contracts were about to be exchanged.

"What we are doing is securing the long term protection of Rodborough Common. We intend to reserve the rights of way to the National Trust and then sell the Fort and its grounds to a sympathetic owner.

"By buying the property we will be able to reserve all the rights of way which have been the cause of our problems," said Mr Brown.

Rodborough Fort, which commands spectacular views from a hill above Stroud, was bought by Mrs Willies-Williams in 1988 but was re-possessed by the Halifax Building Society last year.

Mrs Willies-Williams caused a national outcry last year when she revealed she was having her £220,000 mortgage on the fort paid for by the State.

The castle, which has a distinctive tower visible for miles around, was built in 1761.