# Seven-year legal battle over water rights and lease disputes at luxury lodges returns to court



A prolonged and costly legal dispute between former Women’s British Open golf champion Vivien Saunders OBE and tenants of luxury lodges on her land in Cambridgeshire has returned to the High Court, underscoring deep divisions that have lasted for seven years and incurred legal costs estimated at around £1 million.

The conflict began in 2018 when Ms Saunders, who also qualified as a solicitor over four decades ago, raised concerns about excessive water bills paid by occupants of 20 log chalets, each valued at around £250,000, at Abbotsley Country Homes, located in St Neots next to her residence at Eynesbury Manor. Ms Saunders accused the tenants of covertly connecting to her water supply without permission. This dispute over water access escalated into serious allegations of multiple lease breaches.

The tenants hold long leases on the land, which was acquired by Ms Saunders and her company Abbotsley Ltd in three stages between 1986 and 1991. The lodges were initially sold under the condition that residents could only reside there for 11 months each year and must maintain their primary residence elsewhere. Other complaints from Ms Saunders’ side include claims that one lodge has been used commercially, some have erected large sheds not permitted by the lease, drilling machinery was employed to create a borehole, and improper insurance coverage was maintained.

The tenants strongly contest allegations of lease violations, asserting the dispute is financially motivated. One lodge owner, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Daily Mail, “It’s monetary – it’s an excuse. By saying people are not adhering to the lease, she can claim the lease… there would be a windfall for her.” Ms Saunders categorically denied this, responding to the Mail, “Knickers. Write that down – K. N. I. C. K. E. R. S. Absolute nonsense, complete and utter nonsense. It’s all about trespass into water pipes.”

Legal submissions revealed the water issue arose after the lodges’ water pipe, which should have been connected directly to the mains supply, was instead improperly linked to Ms Saunders’ supply without her consent. The tenants and the management company Pheasantland, which initially purchased the leasehold head rights before selling to individual owners, claim they had a verbal agreement for water supply billing and had paid water bills dating back to 2011. Tensions worsened when in 2018, Ms Saunders allegedly started imposing a 10 per cent management fee for water use.

The dispute has generated significant antagonism, including incidents that resulted in criminal convictions. Most notably, Ms Saunders was convicted of common assault in 2023 following an incident where she drove her vehicle into lodge owner Jill Beresford-Ambridge, who was using crutches at the time. The conviction was upheld on appeal in late 2023. Ms Saunders described the consequences of the conviction as “disastrous,” telling the Daily Mail, “If I want to play an international golf match in America in two years’ time, I may not be able to go. The whole ramifications of a criminal conviction are disastrous.”

Another tragic dimension of the ongoing disputes was revealed during court proceedings when it emerged that a long-term resident and lodge owner, Neil Warren, took his own life in April 2023 following a separate but related legal battle. Mr Warren had become "obsessed" and fearful due to a High Court injunction preventing residents from photographing or filming neighbouring land. Coroner Caroline Jones ruled his death a suicide and acknowledged the significant impact the litigation had on his mental health, though she distinguished these issues as separate from the inquest itself.

The case now before the court is the latest in a series of hearings contested by both sides, after previous attempts to forcibly repossess leases and evict tenants were dismissed at both first-instance and appeal levels. During today's hearing, Ms Saunders’ barrister Kerry Bretherton KC described the dispute as not only about water but "very serious anti-social behaviour" and a campaign by tenants to have Ms Saunders prosecuted. She added there had been “email after email from lodge owners to the police saying ‘Please prosecute her’,” framing Ms Saunders as more than just a difficult party in the dispute.

Several residents have spoken of the personal toll the dispute has taken on the community. One resident outside court said, “If she takes over the lease, all the shares are worthless and we lose everything... She won’t give up – that’s half the problem. Everyone thinks ‘If she doesn’t win this, is she going to appeal?’ That’s how she wins. She takes people to court and they run out of money.” Another occupant, Carol Berwick, described how she bought what she believed was a peaceful home, stating, “It’s just turned into a nightmare… People have depression and do not talk to their neighbours. They cannot sleep at night.”

Judge Karen Walden-Smith, overseeing the proceedings at Cambridge County Court, acknowledged the high emotions involved. She urged restraint, saying, “Feelings in this case run higher than one would normally expect,” and asked all parties “to stay calm and show a bit of sympathy and empathy,” particularly in light of Mr Warren’s suicide.

Vivien Saunders has been recognised for her contributions to golf, awarded an OBE in 1998, and is known for her political involvement, having stood as a candidate in the 2015 General Election. The resolution of this long-standing dispute remains pending as the case continues in court.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.huntspost.co.uk/news/24620492.vivien-saunders-obe-loses-common-assault-appeal-retrial/> - This piece discusses the outcome of Vivien Saunders OBE's appeal against her common assault conviction, highlighting the retrial at Cambridge Crown Court where she was again found guilty, with dashcam footage from her own vehicle used as evidence.
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7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14664667/Bitter-million-pound-legal-battle-luxury-lodge-residents-former-Womens-British-Open-champion-landowner.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data