



The Heath & Hampstead Society

The Society examines all Planning Applications and Notices of Intent for tree work relating to Hampstead and Hampstead Heath Fringes, and assesses them for their impact on the Conservation Areas, the local environment and building stability.

To London Borough of Camden, Planning Department

Planning Ref: 2024/4158/P

Address: 82 Fitzjohn's Avenue, NW3 6NP

Case Officer: Brendan Versluys

Date: 23.10.2024

This application has various omissions that make assessing the wall's proposed works or their impact on the trees nearby, difficult to do.

Plans for the proposed re-built wall are presented, however we understand these do not tally with reports in letters sent to neighbours that concrete foundations for the worst affected part of the wall will be 2.6 metres deep. There is no description of the wall re-build method within the application with which to assess it from the trees' point of view.

Our main concern is that if there are any tree roots present, then building deep foundations to this wall will damage or cut through them, as well as provide a further block to groundwater flow. If this were to occur the trees are likely to sustain an infestation with the virulent and nastier form of honey fungus that is present in the immediate area, leading to their death. This has occurred for many trees already in, for example, the garden of Elm Bank which Camden Tree Officers are aware of.

The application contains no arboricultural report on the effect on neighbouring tree roots of the proposed foundations depicted in the plan of piles, wall plates & re-built wall, despite this being required by 'Trees in Relation to Design, Demolition and Construction to Construction – Recommendations' BS 5837 (2012), nor an Arboricultural Method Statement. It is clear from the site plan in the 15 Aug 2023 Arb Report for 2023/3626/P's sign-off of Conditions, that the Root Protection Area for the trees within Elm Bank would be encroached upon by the rebuilt wall to a significant degree. On the plan, the arboricultural consultant indicated an assumption that there were no tree roots crossing Spring Walk, presumably based on Spring Walk's lower level compared to the gardens on either side. The path was clearly cut through here in the past, probably before some of the mature trees present now had existed.

However, the very large sycamore and London plane here are relatively fast growing tree species at the higher end of water use but in gardens that are very sandy and drain very well and fast, even in heavy rain, as noted by the previous owners of 82 Fitzjohn's Avenue and the present owner of Elm Bank. The local geology is a transition zone between the Bagshot Sands and the Claygate Beds which is why groundwater was found at 2 levels in the sole borehole

performed on this site, but also supports the garden owners' observations. It is not impossible that roots will have migrated from the Spring Walk side of these trees down and below the path to follow the condensation and groundwater below the asphalt and then the current wall. As the 'Spring Walk Boundary Wall Report' describes, the weep holes at the wall base were inserted after its construction, its centres 2 metres apart rather than the recommended maximum of 1 metre. The wall is clearly wet at its base as a result of the block to groundwater provided by the wall here and to the use of cement pointing.

The Basement Impact Assessment for 2021/1787/P acknowledges that groundwater runs through the site in a southerly direction i.e. at right angles to the wall in question, and goes on to remark: "...it is recommended that the basement is designed with a water level assumed to be 1.00m below ground level. Consideration should be given to the risk of groundwater and surface water collecting behind the retaining walls within granular horizons."

From these observations it would seem clear that it should be established if tree roots have or have not grown towards the groundwater ponding behind the base of the wall. Evidence has not been provided to show there are definitely no roots here via adequate trial trenches along the pertinent parts of this long wall. An arboricultural method statement would be required for 2024/4158/P if any roots were found or if there are any retained trees or shrubs on the 82 Fitzjohn's Avenue side of the wall.

If plans for all deep concrete foundations have been abandoned and the whole wall will now be entirely on a wall plate over deep – hopefully screw – piling, confirmation from testing is still required to ascertain whether any roots beneath the wall are protected from the weight of the new concrete wall plate and to some extent the wall, and to ensure the method for inserting the piles does not damage tree roots.

We also have some concerns about the final cosmetic outcome for the wall as well as its long-term survival. A 'brand new' looking wall would not be appropriate in this part of the Conservation Area. Even with the proposed use of second-hand bricks to face the wall, the pointing will have a large impact on the survival of bricks and the final impression of the wall.

So-called 'weathered' pointing, is all too frequently used for new walls, unfortunately for some old ones and clearly for sections of this wall in the past. It consists of a thick line of proud cement angled outwards at the bottom to 'encourage water to drip away from the bottom edge', but usually causes rainwater to run around the bottom edge and back into the bricks below where moisture is further trapped by the cement. The spalled bricks here demonstrate that this method of pointing does not work as intended, as well as being ugly.

If the Planning Officer is minded to allow the re-build of the wall, please could the consent be conditioned so that a sample of the brick-work, the capping stones AND the pointing has to be provided for approval before construction, with the involvement of a Conservation Officer.

Pointing should be done with a lime-based material that, as well as protecting the bricks and not blocking the passage of moisture will, if also keyed, improve the cosmetics of the wall while retaining its charm, helping it to blend in with other such tall Hampstead path boundary walls. We would appreciate the new wall gently following the shape and topography of the path rather than being a slave to symmetry.

Dr Vicki Harding, Society Tree Officer, Heath & Hampstead Society Planning Sub-Committee