

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Current state

After many years of neglect, Witanhurst is in a dire state of disrepair. It is included in the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register. The listed garden structures are particularly far gone and are all noted priority 'A' on the Register, indicating an 'immediate risk of further rapid deterioration of loss of fabric and with no solution agreed.'

1.2 New ownership

Since its sale in the 60's by the Crosfield family there have been many attempts to convert the building to alternative uses, all of which have failed. Now, for the first time since 1970s a single family owner with sufficient funds to undertake appropriate repairs to the house and garden, and use it as a family house, has purchased the property. This is perhaps the only foreseeable opportunity to guarantee the conservation of this important building and its associated garden structures for the future generations. There is now a rare chance of achieving the sympathetic restoration of the house and gardens that is vital to prevent their final demise. Such an opportunity is unlikely to come round again and for the sake of future generations should not be thrown away lightly.

1.3 Landscape Design Statement

This statement accompanies the planning application and Listed Building Application for works to the Orangery, Link and Forecourt only as shown on Balston & Company drawings ref B337/12B & /121A. Further statements relating to applications for the Basement, the South Terraces and the Lower Gardens will follow.



2 SITE ANALYSIS

2.1 History & Current Arrangement

The entrance and forecourt arrangement seen today is the result of piece-meal uncoordinated development during the last century. In 1801, the garden comprised 4 acres and by 1889 it had increased to 11 acres. By 1914 Work had been carried out for Sir Arthur Crosfield by Harold Peto which included The Grand Staircase and terrace, the Tennis pavilion overlooking the tennis lawns, and the Italianate Terraces. Then in 1929 Seeley and Paget worked on the forecourt and lodges. They created a simplified but still awkward area that resulted from changes in the complex land ownership of Parkfield (the original house embodied in Witanhurst), Dorchester House, 43 West Hill and the Grove. The curved wall in front of the main house entrance dates from this time and is likely to function as a screen between the house and the tenants to whom the north wing was let during the latter part of the Crosfield's lives.

2.2 Character

The garden is now considerably smaller than in its heyday, but the house remains extraordinarily large. It therefore hangs over a garden that seems far too small for such a large building. It is laid out on quite steep terrain offering good views particularly to the west towards Hampstead Heath. However, these are frequently blocked by the colonizing trees that have grown up over the last 50 years.

Within the garden are a number of interesting structures by Harold Peto which took advantage of the changes in level and perhaps most successful are the Italianate Terraces to the south-west of the house. The Tennis Pavilion is also a high quality design but the Grand Staircase is perhaps rather less successful in the irregularity of its flank walls and side planters. Both the Italianate Terraces and the Grand Staircase seem to have suffered from alterations to the building layout on the south-west side which appear to have negated former relationships between those structures and the building.

The structures have suffered terribly from the combination of poor materials, worse workmanship and 50 years of neglect. Stone work has spalled, poorly bedded paving has become hazardous, steps have moved and tree seedlings have created havoc. Although this is now more under control, much damage has been done.

None of the planting from Harold Peto's or Percy Cane's work has survived. There are no particularly good individual trees on site except for the occasional sycamore. Several of the larger trees are in poor condition, unbalanced, with limbs missing or diseased. Most remaining are adventitious seedlings. For details see the arboriculturalist's report.

2.3 Landscape and Garden Assets

- Terrain

The strong slopes to the west and north are an important asset. However, they have only been exploited partially and trees block some of the views.

- Views



The long-distance views to the north-west towards Hampstead Heath are particularly good. However, the more depressed views to the middle distance reveal houses in the part of the garden sold off in the 1980s. There are also potentially good middle distance views within the garden where not blocked by trees or overgrown hedges.

- Peto structures

These are of some importance and all are listed Grade II, although the garden itself is not. They seem to be characteristic of Peto's oeuvre and at one time offered some variety around the garden. However, they are all shockingly badly built and their relationships to the building and to each other are puzzling. Perhaps Peto merely left contractors to get on with the construction unsupervised. Quite possibly Peto was insufficiently knowledgeable of the site and its conditions or of the development of the building plans. But they are all listed and work is currently being undertaken to secure the Tennis Pavilion. The Grand staircase and Italianate Terraces have also been cleared of invasive vegetation. Some limited information is available on Peto's planting proposals.

- Location and extent

The extent of the remaining site makes it an important green space in an otherwise mostly urban area. It makes a major contribution to the historic character of Highgate village and its conservation area.

Problems

- Relationship of Building to site

Buildings are always difficult to accommodate on the side of hills without some kind of terracing. The problems are exacerbated where the hill is steep. Here it is compounded by the inexorable growth of Parkfield/Witanhurst in the close of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th. As a result the building is far too large for its supporting hillock, leaving some very steep slopes and much unusable space. This is particularly evident in views from the west. Furthermore the reduction of the site by sale of the ground to the west for housing gives the feeling of a cramped site with the building awkwardly hovering above. Unless an imaginative design takes this major issue into account, the building and its garden will always be at odds.

- Spaces

Piecemeal development frequently results in disjointed spaces. This is particularly true here at Witanhurst. The forecourt is divided by the curved wall which shuts off views of the main elevation. It also prevents any meaningful sense of arrival or welcome. This historical leftover badly detracts from the coherence of the forecourt. The Italianate Terraces do not relate to the Colonnade or the lawn in between. They are totally separate from the Lower Garden which does not relate back to the house and which is divided by an overgrown yew hedge which perhaps at one stage formed a boundary to the Tennis Lawns. The tennis pavilion floats unanchored in the Lower Garden. There is little space to set off the north-west side of the house with no possibility of congregating outside on terraces from some of the major rooms of the house. The



poorly assembled rockwork in this area is particularly inappropriate given its proximity to the principle formal rooms of the house. Furthermore the rocks are badly laid and devoid of planting. The East Garden is isolated and hemmed in by retaining walls but again bears no formal relationship to the house.

- Access

The only approach to the building is through its car park which is distinctly uninviting. It severely diminishes the sense of arrival and the importance of the building. Perhaps even more important is that emergency vehicles are too large to get through the lodge gates, which is a matter of considerable concern not only to the owners but also to the Fire Service. This has to be addressed as a top priority. Having passed through the Car park it is then necessary to circumnavigate the curved wall to arrive in a meanly proportioned slot facing the wrong part of the building. To achieve anything approaching a satisfactory sense of arrival, the curved wall must be removed.

- Deterioration of structures

Poor choice of materials has resulted in stone spalling on important structures such as the columns in the Italianate Terraces. The passage of time has ensured that most of the timber structures like the pergolas have collapsed. Much of the paving and steps have lifted through invasive root action. Even reinforced concrete balusters in the terrace at the bottom of the Grand Staircase are showing their metal rods. Years of neglect have left the structures in a parlous condition which for safety and long term rehabilitation will require extensive rebuilding. All the listed structures are in an advanced state of decay. The fountain and pond from the Italianate Terraces and the four sculptures surrounding the pond have disappeared completely.

The state of deterioration has been fully documented in the 'Historic Landscape Survey' by John Browning Associates (May 2000). In the intervening 9 years, the condition of the structures has become far worse.

- Overgrown planting

Overgrown hedges are a particular problem particularly around the Italianate Terraces, where the boundary hedge is located on what is now adjoining land. This shades out one side which will make the reestablishment of any original planting particularly difficult.

- Lack of planting structure

What remains of any planting structure is generally compromised. Trees long West Hill in particular are at risk because of the problems with the boundary wall. Several area also in poor condition and will at some stage require replacement. Trees elsewhere are in accidental relationships with buildings and spaces and much of the tree cover is now entirely self-sown. Some of the important hedges are now outside the boundary and uncontrolled and on the Lower lawn the former yew hedge is greatly overgrown and relates to a function long gone.

- Impoverished plant palette



Tree types are restricted and lacking in the variety that might be associated with an Edwardian garden. There is very little shrub planting and almost no herbaceous planting remaining. This is quite different from what appears in Peto's planting plans or in photographs of the Grand staircase, for example, taken in the 1930's and 40's.

- Privacy

The poor growth of the limes along West Hill allow views into the site. Also the site is partly exposed along the western boundary where there is relatively new housing.

- Impoverished habitats

The deterioration of the garden has to some extent promoted a wildlife friendly habitat. However, there is a lack of variety in the garden which could be improved, for example, by the introduction of water. There could also be wider variety of native and non-native plants introduced to promote a richer wildlife environment.

3 BRIEF

3.1 Setting of the Listed Building

As noted above the setting of the listed building is greatly compromised by the progressive expansion of the building into a site that has subsequently lost half its land. This is exacerbated by the shape of the terrain and the proximity of steep slopes starting from the foot of the building.

It is a specific Client requirement to create integrated spaces that are functionally useful particularly for family living and large-scale entertaining. Furthermore, they need to help the building sit more comfortably in its site. Such spaces are to be commensurate with the style and grandeur of this large building. The spaces should also help unite and connect with the disparate elements of the garden which currently bear little relationship to each other or to the House.

3.2 Forecourt functions

- Exposure of the Main facade

A prime requirement of the brief is to expose the magnificent facade of the house. It is currently cut off by the curved wall that sits in front of the principal entrance and which is now long redundant. This will help create an appropriate sense of arrival and welcome to this important building.

- Vehicle manoeuvring

The layout needs to allow for the arrival of cars to the principal entrance and their subsequent parking as discreetly as possible. It is likely that several cars could be arriving all at the same time.

- Access for emergency vehicles



A new access must be formed to allow for emergency vehicles, particularly fire tenders, to get on site and manoeuvre. These currently cannot get through the 1929 lodge gates.

- Car parking

Under this application car parking has to be retained at ground level. However, it is kept reasonably clear of the axial view of the house over the circular pool. In the parallel application for the basement, parking will be housed in the basement with access by lift. This will obviate the need for extensive car parking at ground level and the consequent visual clutter.

- Reduction of hard paving

Notwithstanding the need to find spaces for 13 cars at ground level rearrangement of the can free up a considerable area for planting.

- Privacy

In houses of this magnitude privacy and security is of major importance for the kind of Clients who might live in such a building. With increased planting areas better boundary planting should be achieved than hitherto. This should be supplemented with dense inner planting as well.

- Increased biodiversity

As a general intention as well as a private interest, planting should be designed to foster insect and bird life.

3.3 Forecourt character

- Greener

The forecourt is currently overwhelmingly asphalted, and suitable only as a large car park. It is the Client's intention to make this area as green as possible to give a better appearance from the outside, for his own pleasure from inside and to increase biodiversity.

- Planting

The soft landscaping currently is minimal, comprising little more than the boundary planting of limes along Highgate West Hill. The trees along the boundary north of the building were planted later than those to the south, but are of the same species. They have been planted too close together for trees which have not been trained (ie pleached). The result is lanky growth and little foliage at lower levels. The trees therefore provide little screening or privacy for those inside the site, or indeed of views from within to the properties on the opposing side of West Hill.

- Improve spatial relationships

Relationships between the main building, east wing, forecourt and entrance lodges are accidental resulting from the sequence of land acquisition. Consequently the space is



unsatisfactory and further compromised by the redundant curved wall in front of the principle entrance. The design needs to pull these elements into a unified whole around a coherent space.

- Sense of arrival

There is currently no sense of arrival at a significant building principally on account of the curved wall. The design solution needs to address this.

- Welcome

The design should seek to create a sense of welcome and generosity, eliminating the mean space that currently exists between the curved wall and the principle entrance.

4 DESIGN APPROACH

4.1 Conservation

For such an imposing building of some historic importance, it is disappointing that there is so little in the garden of much value. What there is, namely the Listed Peto structures, are seriously degraded. However, for the historical continuity of the site, it is important to nurture these and bring them back into good repair. There is an interesting philosophical question concerning the integrity of the structure and how much repair can be permitted before a point of virtual substitution is reached. But many of the elements of the structures are now so inadequate and dangerous that their replacement becomes inevitable. Also the opportunity should be taken to use materials that are more durable and better worked than those used by Peto or the contractor who actually undertook the work. For example, stone balusters should replace the reinforced concrete ones. Paving and steps should be bedded on adequate load-bearing bases. Timber pergolas should be rebuilt over re-erected stone columns.

Good conservation is about good management of the best of what remains so that it can be made fit for future generations. For Peto's work to last a few more generations, it largely needs to be rebuilt.

4.2 Setting of the Building

As shown above the current setting actually detracts from the dignity of the building. While it may be easier and cheaper to do the minimum to satisfy the functional requirements, here it is of the greatest importance to give the building a setting that matches up to its imposing presence. Part of its problem is that too much has been crammed on the site without ever resolving the relationship of the building to the terrain. There are left-over constructions that detract from the setting even more. In consequence spaces are mean and function badly. Now there is an opportunity to put some of this right which is entirely in the spirit of good conservation. It is important to give the building space to breathe, it must be adequately supported structurally and visually and not forever appearing to fall off its hillock. The entire garden then must be supportive with strong horizontal layering of both hard and soft materials to give the impression of space, strength and generosity.



4.3 Spatial design

Good spaces can be achieved to relate well to the building without disrupting the listed structures. Indeed they will be designed to reinforce them so that they function logically and connect well to the house and to each other. The hierarchy and connectivity between spaces is fundamental to the overall design. Spaces throughout the garden need to support both the building and the listed structures. It is essential to achieve a coherent unity of sufficient power to match the house.

4.4 Planting

As shown, the planting is wholly deficient for a house of the character of Witanhurst. There is a little information about what Peto used in his part of the works but nothing about any other area. But typically the Edwardian house was richly planted and currently the gardens look sad and colourless. There is clearly an opportunity to plant with more brio which would be entirely in keeping with the building and its spaces. More trees and hedges could provide a coherent structure while more flowering shrubs, herbaceous and bulbs are needed to light up the gardens throughout the year. Where appropriate a Peto palette could be used, but, as in the case of the Italianate Terraces, it may need adaptation to deal with changed environmental circumstances.

It is intended to use semi-mature trees and hedging wherever possible provided it is consistent with good horticultural practice.

4.5 Contribution to the Highgate Conservation area

It is recognized that the garden already makes a large-scale contribution to the Conservation area. It is important that this contribution is maintained and enhanced. This can be achieved with extensive new tree and hedge planting together with large areas of herbaceous planting in the open and beneath trees supplemented by wide sweeps of bulbs. Mown grass, which is maintenance heavy and ecologically poor, should be kept to a minimum within tightly constrained areas. A framework should be provided by trees and hedges in conjunction with high quality paths and edging that contrasts organic freedom with structural restraint. In this way both hard and soft landscaping can provide a rational visual support to the building on its hill. And in doing so it will contribute so much more to the Conservation area than the moribund landscape currently surrounding the house.

5 PROPOSALS

The proposed arrangement for the forecourt in the Orangery Application is shown on Balston & Company drawings ref B337/120B & /121A.

5.1 Forecourt

- 5.2 The forecourt to the building is enlarged by extending the existing paving design of circular stone bands with pebble infill across the full width of the façade. It thus extends over the area formerly occupied by the north wing. It thereby makes a consistently patterned sub-space across the whole length of the façade. This is essential for the unity and dignity of the elevation.



- 5.3 Clipped yew hedges form semi-circular 'bookends' between the building and lodges, providing enclosure and adding a softening element to balance the hard landscape. They work closely with the architectural design. They frame inward views emphasizing the breadth and symmetry of the elevation. They add a degree of privacy from overlooking houses to the south-east. They successfully contain the sub-space immediately in front of the building while allowing a strong connection with the greater space of the forecourt. Their plan shape also works with the awkward overall shape of the forecourt.
- 5.4 The curved wall and wing are removed, allowing the introduction of a raised circular pool incorporating planters. The pool acts as an aid to vehicle manoeuvring, a focus for the forecourt and will present reflections of the building. The reflections further underscore the importance of this elevation. The planting on its perimeter helps give depth to the space and resolve the relationship with the canted north boundary. The location of the pool clearly defines the regular sub-space in front of the house while keeping the less regular trapezium of the outer forecourt at a distance. The radius of the pool is sufficient for fire tenders to turn round. The inclusion of the pool is a major element in the redesign of the forecourt which brings unity and an element of drama entirely appropriate to the grandeur of the house.
- 5.5 The north lodge gate will become the main entrance/exit for visitors to the property, with circulation around the pool and exit via the same gate. The south lodge gate becomes a secondary access for staff and to the car lift, when installed.
- 5.6 Emergency vehicle access is provided directly off Highgate West Hill. A short section of reinforced grass paving allows vehicles to progress around into the forecourt. This access is fundamental to the success of the scheme.
- 5.7 Car parking is arranged on either side of the approach from the North Lodge to the Circular Pool. It is screened by shrub planting to the south-east.
- 5.8 The reduction of approximately 30% in the area of paving results in generous areas of shrub planting, providing screening, privacy and greatly improving the character of the space. The tree planting can help achieve a sense of unity within the space.
- 5.9 There will be a significant overall benefit to wildlife resulting from the reduction in paving and increase in planted area. Further, the increase in planting will be of major benefit locally, to the conservation area and to this part of London generally.

