



The Gardens Trust
70 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6EJ
Phone: (+44/0) 207 608 2409
Email: enquiries@thegardenstrust.org
www.thegardenstrust.org

margiehoffnung@thegardenstrust.org

Research - Conserve - Campaign

20th July 2022

William Fletcher Esq
Maidstone Borough Council
Maidstone House
King Street
Maidstone
Kent ME15 6JQ
planningsupport@midkent.gov.uk
williamfletcher@maidstone.gov.uk

Dear Mr Fletcher,

Ref : 22/502610/FULL & 22/502611/LBC – Phased development comprising the erection of a new self-build detached dwelling and conversion of cattle barn to a pool house, erection of 2 no. detached residential gatehouses, restoration works to listed structures (slype and dovecotes), demolition of two modern barns, restoration of the former Capability Brown landscape, access and other associated works (phasing plan submitted). Abbey Farm, Lower Street, Maidstone, Kent ME17 1TL

Our colleagues in the Kent Gardens Trust (KGT) referred this application to us due to the Capability Brown connection.

We have considered the online documentation and are approaching the proposals in the light of the opportunity they present to restore this unaltered though degraded example of Capability Brown's work. The importance of his involvement is clear from Dr Rutherford's statement of significance : *'The fee is the main indicator of his contribution. At £2,000, it was a considerable sum at the time, indicating that the work was carried out by his work force. If so, when compared with the existing site design and features, this indicates that the likely key features were extensive within the site and were typical of Brown's style. The main identifiable features were apparently the naturalistic lake and land form of the valley flanking it which survive largely unchanged, the south drive, and the remodelling of the Tudor Pigeon house as the Gothic Chapel eyecatcher.'*

KGT's research into Brown sites : *Capability Brown in Kent* (2016) examines his projects in Kent, and as all but Chilham Castle have had a chequered history, this application presents an unparalleled opportunity to redress the neglect at Leeds Abbey. Leeds Abbey is the only Brown landscape in Kent which has been little changed, due to its abandonment within 20 years of its completion. KGT have spoken to John Phibbs (the Brown expert) and in his opinion, it is also possibly Brown's smallest complete commission and thus unique in this way too. Therefore, its preservation is of great importance.

We have looked at the options appraisal, and either doing nothing or just managing the site as it is, will almost certainly lead to what remains eventually becoming lost. We are also not supportive of more extensive development within the site leading to multiple

ownership, and so the final option of a prestigious new house on site is the least worst option. We note the extant planning permission for the Long Barn and would hope that the individual units remain in their current single ownership to avoid splitting up the estate. We have noted the comments by Cllr Gill Fort and Etienne Greet with regard to the unsympathetic materials used in this work and would urge your officers to ensure that a more conservation-oriented approach is taken elsewhere should permission be granted. As long as this is guaranteed, we support the restoration of the Slype, the small/large Dovecotes, the listed walls and the culvert and dam.

We do however, have concerns regarding the phasing sequence. The practicalities for removal of the extensive scrub and woodland on the valley sides to open up designed views, the dredging and restoration of the lake (Brown's key feature) and rectifying the cut and fill to the west of the lake which destroyed the original farm pond, constitutes a large, cumbersome undertaking. We strongly suggest that this should be moved forward to Phase 1, the enabling phase, as once the house has been built, it will become far more difficult to remove all debris and accommodate logging tracks etc. The opening up of views, as detailed in the Statement of Significance (SOS), is crucial to an understanding of Brown's intentions and consequently our support for the project, so we would ask your officers to legally secure all the works to restore the site with a detailed Section 106 Agreement to guarantee that this work is not sidelined.

Dr Rutherford's SOS illustrates Brown views and sightlines. We would like to see provision for the restoration of at least the major ones in the proposals. We would also like to see some acknowledgement of the presence of the former south drive to the east of the lake due to its importance to Brown's design, and its views (SOS p12, 3a) and elevated views from the knoll to the SE of the lake *'to the north past the mansion of the parish church tower and distant North Downs'*. (SOS p12, 3c). The views are described in detail in the SOS pp15-16 with an illustration on p17.

From the landscape drawings submitted, it appears that the landscape restoration has been approached with a light hand which we support, but we would like more details of the proposals as the Landscape Masterplan only gives a very broad picture of what is planned. Without further details it is not possible to understand the thinking behind the creation of a second smaller pond above the lake, which seems historically inappropriate and an unnecessary expense given the sums required for restoration of the whole site and the building of the new house. We concur with our colleagues in the Kent Gardens Trust that a restoration and long-term management plan for the whole site must be provided and secured by a Section 106 Agreement before the application is determined.

We agree in principle that this proposal is pragmatically the least worst option for the site, but in view of the absence of details we would ask to be consulted on any revisions to the proposals and on the S106 agreement, to ensure that the issues we have raised above are satisfactorily resolved.

Yours sincerely,

Margie Hoffnung
Conservation Officer