



Historic England

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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Direct Dial: 01483 252026

Our ref: PA00484394

24 May 2017

Dear Mr Jackson-Browne

**Pre-application Advice**

**CAVERSHAM PARK, PEPPARD ROAD, CAVERSHAM , READING, RG4 8TZ**

Thank you for showing us around Caversham Park, and providing us with the background behind the BBC's care for and future plans for the estate which is both interesting and informative. We appreciate the desire to deliver a sustainable future for both the organisation and the estate after you cease to occupy the main site.

*The significance of the site as cultural heritage*

As our tour demonstrated the significance of the house derives largely from the architectural quality of its external elevations and the aesthetic value of a small number of elaborately decorated principal rooms on the ground floor, most notably the remarkably tall central hall. Most of the rest of the interior has been altered, with the loss of most of its architectural and historic interest. Likewise, the stables and ancillary buildings have been greatly altered, leaving only the arched entrance block amongst a greatly extended wing and numerous uninspiring ancillary buildings. Again there is considerable scope for imaginative re-consolidation and redevelopment here.

The grade II registered park surrounding the house is an interesting example of an early 18th century formal park and garden by Stephen Switzer, which was adapted by Capability Brown and transformed into a classic 'Brownian' Park in the English Landscape Style, with its remnant ha-ha and parkland planting, while leaving some of the structure of the earlier formal garden and pleasure grounds such as the axial walk, canal, temple and wooded wilderness. The linear form of the house and its formal gardens creates an imposing set piece located to take advantage of the site's topography that still has a significant visual presence from middle and long distance views despite its reduced circumstances and possibly made even more so after the urbanisation of its setting.



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*Threats to the significance of the park*

In general, the principal threats facing estate landscapes face are development and divided ownership as well as suffering from limited or inappropriate management due to pressure on resources and limited understanding of their significance. Due to its urban location and the fragmentation of its ownership and management, Caversham Park has a history of all these threats.

Although the park's associative value with Switzer and Brown, and the design value of the landscape as a designed park and garden is still obvious, development has been already caused considerable damage to the landscape. Sold off piecemeal in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the core of the park and gardens now owned by the BBC are the only area left of what once was an extensive designed landscape and park. The residential development of Caversham Park Village in the 1960/70's reduced and surrounded the park on all sides, with further areas of the south park lost to public amenity space as a cemetery and allotments. Further loss has occurred with a private static caravan park now situated in the walled kitchen gardens and the development of a school on its western edge.

Furthermore, the institutional use of the site has not sustained the integrity of its design value as it developed a municipal landscape of tarmac access roads, large areas of car parking and sports pitches, in addition to various areas of infrastructure and facilities to support the site's use in international communications. However, all of these alterations are easily reversible and the parkland character is mainly retained or could be restored. It was encouraging to see that the visual impact of late-20<sup>th</sup> century development on the earlier formal gardens and pleasure grounds has been largely mitigated by the mature woodland belts and trees and that the structure and the scale of the south park remains intact.

The routine landscape management and maintenance undertaken in the gardens, pleasure grounds and North Park is of a level that maintains the original structure and features, but at present there is no mechanism in place like a Conservation Management Plan to regularly monitor the landscape and inform continual improvement of planned maintenance, or identify the need for repair at an appropriately early stage. The composition of the parkland in the South Park is being managed separately under an agri-environment scheme and is highly vulnerable to inappropriate management through lack of understanding of the historic design intention and change of use.

The reduction in area means the park left is now physically divided by the house and its long axial terrace into separate south and north parks. The different land uses and management regimes being followed are also exacerbating the differences in



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character beyond the original development of the site's single wider parkland landscape and its design over time. There is considerable scope to repair, or if appropriate restore, and then conserve the design value of the park through a detailed management plan.

*New development proposals*

We are of the opinion that the main buildings on the site clearly have a great deal of potential for a large volume conversion and the house could lend itself to a number of new uses, of which multi-occupancy residential, as is currently proposed, is only one possibility. In our view, this is not necessarily the optimum viable use for the building. Dividing the house up into separate residential units would have a major impact on the historic fabric of the building and would reduce the legibility of the plan form. It also raises the question of whether there are enough communal uses to which the surviving state rooms, which need to remain undivided, could be put. Furthermore, extensive car parking provision would be needed and many householders desire private open space which can be personalised, which has an impact on the setting of the building. Therefore institutional or hotel use may well be a better fit. There is ample space to the south of the stables to accommodate additional bedrooms or ancillary functions to make such a use work. We appreciate that any use needs to be commercially viable therefore we suggest that an options appraisal is carried out which looks at a variety of potential uses for the site. If multiple occupancy residential use is indeed the optimum viable use this needs to be clearly demonstrated.

Although the north park has become separated and lost its original formal landscape features with a piecemeal landscape of small to medium ornamental trees in addition to more mature parkland specimens an appropriate space has been retained to experience (or restore) the formal approach to the house front. What was very interesting from our site visit is how little visual impact the surrounding housing still has on the park and house itself when the trees are in leaf.

In our view, building houses on the northern part of the registered park would entail a high degree of harm to the significance of the park and also harm the significance of the house itself through damage to its setting. While the northern part of the park has been severely truncated by the building of the Caversham Park housing estate and modern planting, this northern area still reads as a landscape. The west drive remains intact as the main approach to the house with its lodge and the approach to the house remains open and unencumbered by buildings other than those obviously ancillary to the main house. Boundary planting effectively screens the modern estate from view, at least in summer. Caversham Park still feels like a country house, a building that stands on its own in generous grounds with a grand entrance. Building houses around the perimeter of this part of the park would dramatically change its character. It would



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create further loss of the parkland with more fragmentation of the park and the house would feel hemmed in by buildings. It would lose much of its grandeur and dignity, hence our assessment of a high level of harm to significance.

We therefore suggest that the approach taken should focus on the conversion of the house to a new use and the redevelopment of the area around and to the west of the stables (although appreciating and not harming the sensitivity of the adjacent long axis and formal gardens). This could use the significant existing footprint within the house and stables, but which also provide the opportunity and benefit of replacing the more harmful additions, alterations and buildings with high-quality new build. Again an options appraisal can guide the best form of redevelopment including the form of any new build.

If the current proposals tabled were brought forward as a planning application they would need to be assessed against the guidance set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Paragraph 132 of this document the requires any harm to a designated heritage asset (which includes listed buildings and registered parks) to be clearly and convincingly justified. We find it difficult to see the justification for the harm that building in this area would entail as, unless an argument for enabling development is being made (and as far as we understand matters this is not the case), building on this area is not necessary to secure the future and sustaining the house and garden. Paragraph 134 of the Framework requires harm to a designated heritage asset to be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The primary public benefit being claimed is the provision of more housing. While it would be for Reading Borough Council, as the local planning authority, to weigh the merits against the harm we would advise them that at appeal Planning Inspectors have tended to find against developments which attempt to justify harming a designated heritage asset on the grounds of meeting housing need, even where the benefits of providing housing in a given local authority area are considered substantial (for instance Planning Inspectorate APP/2280/W/15/3012034, Land North of Moor St, Rainham). This is because the housing provided is not tied to this particular site and could be delivered in other, less harmful, locations. We therefore suggest that any new build that increases the footprint of development and fragmentation of the park outside areas which have already been developed by the main house is not acceptable and that this element of the proposal is not pursued.

While we are supportive of the aspiration to leave the land to the south undeveloped by building, the future use and management of this area will need careful thought. In our view giving over the southern part of the site for recreational use, as is currently proposed, creates risks that can harm the last area of parkland left untouched by development. If this involved creating public access or recreational facilities this could have a serious impact on the significance of this space. Lighting, paths, artificial



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pitches, fencing, car parking, signage and pavilions would all have a marked visual and landscape impact on the surviving parkland character and structure of the space and we would encourage the current agricultural use to be sustained as the most appropriate use.

As discussed on site we suggest that a conservation management plan that looks at the entire registered area is commissioned by the BBC to inform all involved in making decisions about the future of the house and landscape both now, and when it is sold in the future. This would set out why the building and the landscape in which it stands is significant, how decisions have been taken that look at potential issues that threaten this significance and outline potential ways of removing harmful elements while improving the condition of the estate. Such a plan should aim to understand historic place and think creatively about the best practical means of conserving it rather than justifying a particular scheme.

**Next Steps**

From our discussions, we believe this latest proposed change in ownership and use is making it highly vulnerable to the threats of development once again and we are looking at placing it on our Heritage at Risk Register. This should be seen as a positive move as the Register identifies priority sites where we invest time and resources in working together with owners to address the problems faced.

We suggest that any development proposals omit the new residential development element in the northern parts of the grounds and an options appraisal is undertaken to explore the best use for the house and stables area. We also recommend that a conservation plan is prepared which sets out a positive strategy for conserving, sustainably managing, and if possible restoring, the park and its features.

As you may be aware Historic England can now only give up to 15 hours of free pre-application advice. Further advice can be commissioned for a modest fee and any future site visit to discuss development proposals would need to be dealt with as part of our paid for service. We can also continue to give free advice on proposals that would address the issues that lead to the park being considered 'at risk' if it is placed on the register.

Yours sincerely



Richard Peats  
Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas



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E-mail: richard.peats@HistoricEngland.org.uk

cc: Susanna Bedford, Reading Borough Council

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**Pre-application Advice**

**Information Provided**

Turley Heritage - Pre-Application Heritage Statement, Caversham Park

OWAL Architects - Caversham Park Vision Document, Rev B - March 2017, proposed site plan

Lamber Smith Hampton, Planning Statement



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