

Comment on a planning application

Application Details

Application: 18/2977/FUL

Address: Marble Hill HouseMarble Hill ParkRichmond RoadTwickenhamTW1 2NL

Proposal: 1. Marble Hill House: External decoration and repair work (if a window is substantially rotten, partial or full replacement of joinery) and replacement rooflight. 2. Stable Block: External alterations, installation of mechanical plant, timber plant enclosure to the rear and front landscaping (creating an outdoor seating area) to facilitate the refurbishment of the existing café.3. Service Yard: new pedestrian access and associated refuse storage facilities.4. Landscaping: new soft and hard landscaping including restoration of gardens, upgrade of sports pitches and facilities, replacement of seating and new play areas.5. Sports Centre: External ramp for improved access.

Comments Made By

Name: Dr David Jacques

Address: SUGNALL HALL LITTLE SUGNALL LANE LITTLE SUGNALL STAFFORD ST21 6NF

Comments

Type of comment: Support the proposal

Comment: Dear Sir,

I have seen the 3-page cover letter of objection and the 96-page addendum submitted by Love Marble Hill (LMH), their objection that there is a lack of historical evidence for the proposed restoration, and their plea for 'you to reject this application on the basis of National Planning Policy Framework'. These objections stem from a desire that there should be no change at Marble Hill. LMH's method is to undermine the research and reasoning for restoration presented by English Heritage (EH), and to set out alternative scenarios, all devised in order to support their preconceived view that there never was a fine garden attached to Marble Hill House.

LMH has carried out wide data-gathering of its own, and so their objection includes much factual material, a small part of which is fresh and a contribution to our knowledge. The difficulty comes when they offer their own interpretations which are skewed by the above preconception. In academic historical research, the historical data is first considered, followed by interpretations, followed by an argued narrative, rather than the other way round. Furthermore, because historical records are never as complete as the historian might wish, interpretation is a skill acquired through training and long practice, which is why some historians build a strong reputation, whilst others less so.

A word needs to be said about garden history, a sub-field of history in which I have specialised. Unlike buildings, which can remain largely unaltered if just maintained, gardens by their nature are constantly altering through growth and decay. The skill of the gardener is to maintain the overall design in the face of constant change, and if a garden is neglected it will take its own course and the design will gradually dissolve, which is the situation at Marble Hill.

That is not to say that the design cannot be recovered, but historical and archaeological research is needed to establish its form and content. Typically, the 'hard' elements survive better than the planting, but restoration of the hard elements only would produce a lifeless and puzzling outcome. This is why 'conjectural detailing', a specialism of Professor Mark Laird, is employed in order to revive both hard and soft elements (though the degree of conjecture must always be explained to the inquiring visitor).

Such considerations lead to some modifications of the Conservation Principles published by English Heritage in 2008 and which were primarily written for use with buildings. I have, in fact, written a booklet for English Heritage as a supplement to Conservation Principles, though it is awaiting publication.

My qualifications for doing so are a career as a garden historian and conservationist over 35 years. My book on Georgian Gardens was published in 1982, which led to my being commissioned to make a complete survey of the gardens and parks at Hampton Court and Bushy Park for the Department of the Environment. I was then appointed as the first Inspector of Historic Parks and Gardens at English Heritage in 1987, a time that was dominated by replanting after the Great Storms of 1987 and 1990, but also included responsibility for the Register of Parks and Gardens. In 1995 I led the landscape team in the restoration of the Privy Garden at Hampton Court, and in the early 2000s I devised and taught an MA course at the Architectural Association on 'Landscape Conservation and Change'. I have been carrying out 'missions' for the International Council for Monuments and Sites so that they can advise UNESCO on whether properties should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. Last year my much-expanded doctoral thesis on formal gardens was published as Gardens of Court and Country, which has been much acclaimed by reviewers, in which I discuss Marble Hill and its place in English garden history.

[to be continued]