



ENGLISH HERITAGE
NORTH WEST REGION

Mr Jim Lester
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Our ref: PA00011988

Your ref:

1 February 2010

Dear Mr Lester

Request for Pre-application Advice

BIRKENHEAD PARK, PARK ROAD EAST, BIRKENHEAD, WIRRAL, CH41 4HD

Thank you for consulting us over the plans for the above site. On the basis of the latest information about the proposals, received by us on 11 November 2009 and detailed below, I offer the following advice.

Summary

Birkenhead Park, a Grade I designated landscape, is internationally significant as a seminal work by Joseph Paxton. It subsequently influenced the design of public parks internationally and, in particular, inspired Frederick Olmstead's layout for Central Park, New York. Birkenhead Park is the only Grade I purpose-designed public park in England.

English Heritage has been invited to comment upon a proposal to construct a new primary school within the Park Road East perimeter of Birkenhead Park. This school would replace two existing local schools which are well below complement, namely Cathcart Street (some 350 metres to the NE of Grand Lodge) and Cole Street (across the road from the Gothic Lodge). The aspiration is to take advantage of the park landscape setting to create a more sympathetic and stimulating environment for educational activities.

In considering these proposals particular attention has been given to the operational



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ENGLISH HERITAGE NORTH WEST REGION

issues associated with school accommodation, in particular those of security, safety, and vehicle management, all of which can have significant implications in terms of their impact upon the landscape. Three site options have been offered for consideration

Option 1

This lies in the south-east corner of the park just north of the entrance drive at the Gothic Lodge (listed Grade II). The site is currently occupied by the Royal Naval Association and the Sea Cadets in an assortment of temporary buildings and the British Legion who are accommodated in a pair of three storey semi-detached houses contemporary with the park. The southern part of this site is undeveloped and unkempt and there is also a small bowling green fronting onto Park Lane East. The occupied land is not within the ownership of Wirral MBC, but the adjacent land to the north and south is in their ownership.

Option 2

This site lies immediately north of the pair of semi-detached houses on site option 1. Its northern part is managed as playing fields; the southern part is rough grassland and the site of a former pair of semi detached houses which were subsequently demolished.

Option 3

This site lies immediately south of Grand Lodge (listed Grade II*) is an open grass area currently used for playing fields and which provides a simple setting for this grandiose classical structure.

English Heritage Advice

English Heritage appreciates the potential educational benefits that a new school would bring to the area and is sympathetic to the aspiration to take advantage of the park landscape setting to create a more sympathetic and stimulating environment for learning. We do, however, have serious concerns relating to all three options centring upon the choice of appropriate building form and operational demands.

Regardless of location, the proposed school would be a single storey structure with an extended footprint which is at odds with the form of the existing buildings surrounding the park, which tend to be taller (three stories high) but with a relatively compact footprint.

There will be a requirement for dropping-off areas close to the school building, secure



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parking spaces for staff and visitors within the school curtilage, and secure areas for play. Since there will be no vehicular access to the school from within the park and with no additional capacity along Park Road East, green space within the park will have to be given up for these purposes.

There will also be a requirement to enclose the school curtilage with a perimeter security fencing of 2.00 - 3.00 metres high, possibly higher if ball play is required. A primary concern of English Heritage is that the introduction of secure fencing will compromise the fundamentally open historic character of this part of the park which was mostly laid out as recreational open space.

We consider that the proposed scale of development combined with the necessary enclosure by security fencing will potentially have an unacceptably damaging effect on the significance of the historic asset. In light of this the three possible options have been considered in detail:

Option 3

Any development in this area would have an unacceptable impact upon the open character of this part of the historic designed landscape and heavily compromise the setting of the Grade II* listed Grand Lodge.

Option 2

This area was designed primarily as recreational open space within the park linking visually with the more intimate and informal spaces and paths around the lake. Development in this area would annexe this significant open space and erode the integrity of Paxton's design.

Option 1

Of the three options, this site is the only one which might be able to accommodate an appropriate building without significant detrimental impact upon the historic landscape asset. Such a building would need to follow a form which would sit comfortably with its neighbours and make a positive contribution to its landscape setting by resolving the shortcomings of this entrance to the park. This would, however, require a radical approach and a purpose built, high quality design rather than the adaptation of "standard" school models. This would necessitate the appointment of an architect with a proven track record in such projects. The problem of resolving the access, parking and security issues still apply in this case.

Recommendation



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Although we appreciate the potential educational benefits that a new school within the Park might bring, we are not persuaded that it would be feasible to achieve the level of successful integration of built structures and landscape required to realise these benefits. Birkenhead Park is a unique and highly significant historic designed landscape and hence it is imperative that the integrity of its design should be maintained. From our discussions with Wirral MBC we understand that it would be feasible to accommodate a new facility within the existing Cathcart Road site, either by new build or possibly through a combination of conversion and new build. English Heritage recommends that the feasibility of that alternative site is investigated further.

For your information I enclose a copy of our recently published position statement on the future of school buildings entitled Refurbishing Historic School Buildings.

The above advice is the response that we would offer if the same proposals were put forward for statutory approvals. Thank you for involving us at the pre-application stage. We would be pleased to offer further advice on the resolution of outstanding matters if this would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Andy Wimble

Regional Landscape Architect

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