47 Denmans Lane
Lindfield
Haywards Heath
West Sussex
RH16 2JN

SDNPA
Submitted by e-mail to: planning@southdowns.gov.uk
FAO: Kelly Porter

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SDNP/23/02187/FUL - WISPERS ST CUTHMANS SCHOOL TOTE LANE STEDHAM MIDHURST WEST SUSSEX GU29 0QL

The Gardens Trust (GT) is a Statutory Consultee with regard to proposed development affecting a site listed by Historic England (HE) on their Register of Parks and Garden. Sussex Gardens Trust (SGT) is a member organisation of the GT and works in partnership with it in respect of the protection and conservation of registered and un-registered sites, and is authorised by the GT to respond on GT's behalf.

The GT has published a guidance document entitled 'The Planning System in England and the Protection of Historic Parks and Gardens'. This explains that parks and gardens are key components of the historic environment, and take many forms. Some are recognised by national designation, listed on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England by Historic England; others are identified as 'non-designated heritage assets,' as is the case for Wispers. These are all 'heritage assets' (having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of their heritage interest) to which national planning policy applies.

SGT has been made aware of this application late on in the planning process, our resources are limited and we rely on volunteers. However, having looked at the designed landscape, reviewed its history, degree of survival and significance, we are compelled to comment.

Summary

The SGT objects to this development on the basis that, despite several studies commissioned by the developers, we feel there is not sufficient understanding of the development of the site (especially before the 1870s), or acknowledgment of the significance of the designed landscape – and particular elements within it. Despite some insertion of modern buildings during the period of its educational use, the current dereliction of those buildings and the general unmaintained nature of the site, it retains a remarkable degree of coherence and legibility. The proposed development of a number of new-build dwellings will destroy that coherence and legibility. Although we appreciate that the development plans have been scaled back somewhat from previous iterations and (seemingly) there are plans to restore elements of the designed landscape, other areas of the garden, hitherto undeveloped, are directly impacted by the development and are proposed as the site for new build.

We have read the *Heritage Setting Assessment* by Pegasus (May 2023) and the *Landscape and Visual Appraisal* by Fyfe and Tinkler (May 2023), have walked the periphery of the site on public rights of way, examined aerial photographs and photographs supplied to us by local residents. Given all we have read and seen – and with the benefit of previous experience – it is our opinion that the landscape is worthy of consideration to be included in Historic England's *Register of Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest*, on the basis of: the quality of the 1870s design (contemporary with the building of the house); the now-confirmed connection with the designer Robert Marnock; the level of survival of that design; the presence of pre-1870 historic trees of certain species that may indicate an earlier designed landscape, hitherto unrecognised; and the positive contributions from the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially the walled kitchen garden.

Evidence suggests this latter feature dates to the 1930s. This it would make it a rarity, as few – if any – walled kitchen gardens were constructed in that period.

Although the designed landscape has undoubtedly suffered during its institutional use, the damage is limited to discrete areas and there are many precedents for other such sites that have been included on the *Register*. The LVA (Fyfe and Tinkler) identifies a large number of extant features and comments on the quality of the design. Had this document not been commissioned by the developer, given its observations and commentary, one might expect it also to have recommended a review by Historic England to decide whether the landscape should be included on the *Register*.

We note that the designed landscape is currently categorised as a non-designated heritage asset, forms the setting for the grade II listed house and structures including the walled kitchen garden, potting shed and bothy should be considered curtiledge listed.

Discussion

For ease of reference, we have grouped our more detailed comments under a number of headings.

Quality and Survival of the Landscape Design

Fyfe and Tinkler are clear on the quality and survival of the designed landscape and, from everything we have seen, we concur with this assessment. In their *Landscape and Visual Appraisal* Fyfe and Tinkler appear to be at odds with the Pegasus report on the 'heritage setting' which deliberately downplays the quality and intactness of the designed landscape. Fyfe and Tinkler wrote: 'The HBA study had concluded (as paraphrased by the SDNPA) that the lack of evidence around the detailed garden design would make its recreation futile and somewhat speculative ; however, it soon became evident that despite years of neglect and having been subsumed / buried, the majority of the underlying 1875 landscape structure was intact. The surveys revealed *an abundance of garden and parkland features dating from the 1870s and in some cases, much earlier,* including trees, shrubberies, lawns, terraces, paths / promenades and viewing platforms / look-out points. Many were in good health / condition and could be reinvigorated / restored relatively easily if required. Research and fieldwork also suggest that remnants of ornamental and functional structures could potentially be discovered' (LVA paragraph 2.1.9, our italics).

Various reports have mentioned that the prolific and long-lived 19th century landscape design Robert Marnock had possibly been associated with the garden at Wispers, but no evidence could be found. Given that Marnock is not a well known name, it seems unlikely his name would be associated with the site without some former connection. However, we have discovered at least one origin of the association comes from a publication of 1910 (so within

living memory of the building of Wispers), a book titled: *Sussex in the Twentieth Century – Contemporary Biographies*, edited by W.T. Pike. Under Alexander Scrimgeour the author included a detailed description of Wispers, which is worth quoting in full:

Wispers, the property of John A Scrimgeour, was built in 1874 by his father, the late Alexander Scrimgeour, from designs by Norman Shaw, and stands at the head of a beautiful wooded valley commanding magnificent views of the West Sussex Downs and the intervening country with the Rother valley in the foreground. The house is a half-timbered building with tall, red chimneys characteristic of Norman Shaw s well-known style and, as it is nearly 400ft above sea level, they can be seen for miles towering above the richly wooded landscape. The residence is approached from Liphook across Redford Common with its wealth of heather, gorse, bracken and holly trees, and from Midhurst by a beautiful winding drive up through the valley, skirted on either side with stately fir, oak, beech and elm trees intermingled with rhododendron, the latter growing to a great height. The terraced garden and lawns sloping to the south were laid out by the late Mr. [Robert] Marnock, a famed Victorian landscape gardener, and is quite a feature of the place.

Fyfe and Tinkler, who have surveyed the surviving landscape, also felt that the landscape demonstrated typical Marnock features: *'The surviving features (and historic maps) of Wispers appear to support this theory. If so, Wispers would have been one of Robert Marnock s later works, although he carried on working right up to his death in 1889. One of the most distinctive features of a Marnock garden is a high-quality lawn, with trees carefully positioned in relation to it. Wispers' lawn, with its distinctive geometric terraces (formerly planted with chamomile) and surrounding ornamental woodland garden, shrubs and trees is an excellent example'* (paragraph 3.10.40). In the following paragraph they continue: *'Hallmarks of Marnock s work were use of natural landforms; managing the effects of light and shade; and achieving the effects found in nature even within an intensively-managed garden. The integration of existing natural elements is exemplified at Wispers through retention of The Leith and its paths, existing trees, maximising the visual drama of the natural topography, and integrating views of the South Downs escarpment and surrounding countryside'* (3.10.41).

Historic England's *Register of Parks and Gardens* includes only eight of Marnock's domestic commissions in intact form with a surviving house, out of a total of 1650 sites. Given his lengthy career, he is arguably an under-represented designer.

Beyond the overlooking of Marnock's contribution and importance, one other overlooked aspect of the site that does not seem to have been assessed in the documentation associated with the planning application is the collection of rhododendrons to the south-west of the house. Given the social circles in which Scrimgeour is likely to have moved and the location of the site at the western end of the Weald, not far from important collections at Leonardslee, Nymans, Wakehurst etc, these could represent an important collection with rare surviving species.

On the periphery of the site we observed a number of historic trees that appear to pre-date the 1870s period. The species and their distribution and relation to other features are distinct from the sort of patterns found in agricultural landscapes, suggesting there may have been an earlier designed landscape, before the 1870s. Fyfe and Tinkler also allude to this in their report: 'The surveys revealed an abundance of garden and parkland features dating from the 1870s and in some cases, much earlier…' (LVA paragraph 2.1.9). It has been assumed that the dwelling pre-dating the 1870s Norman Shaw house was a farmstead. However, we suggest that, given this evidence, more research is needed. The 1872 sale catalogue refers to the site as Woolhouse Farm, but there are many examples of higher status houses which, during the 19th century, were relegated to use as farms. This may not be the case here, but we suggest

that more research is needed into the earlier history of the site, before the 1870s. This directly impacts the treatment of the area called 'the paddock'. (Discussed further below).

Walled Garden, Potting Shed and Bothy

One particular specific element of the designed landscape that we feel has hitherto been overlooked in terms of significance is the walled kitchen garden area. The Pegasus report states that because the walled garden is thought to date to the 1930s, it is therefore of less significance than it would have been had it been of 19th century origin, continuing: 'overall, the walled garden at Wispers is considered to be of very minimal architectural and historic interest in its own right' (p. 89, 7.40). We disagree with this conclusion and have discussed the matter with our colleagues at the Walled Kitchen Garden Network. Walled kitchen gardens built in the 1930s are in fact rare and, moreover, this garden is actually in a remarkably good condition (relatively speaking). There is no attempt in any of the reports associated with this planning application to put this into its historical context. For example, a peach wall with glass canopy is a feature also seen in the walled kitchen garden at Woburn Abbey (the Duke and Duchess of Bedford's principal seat). Also, there is not enough understanding of what was on this site before the present walled garden. The north wall is probably older than the other three walls and late 19th century OS mapping indicates that this was a productive area at that date. Yet this has not been interpreted or discussed in detail.

We note that the walled garden is designated a 'Traditional Orchard PHI site'. The present development plans state that the garden will be restored mainly for wildlife. This is a lost opportunity to restore it as a functional productive garden again, for the use of the residents of the site, which could also be of benefit for wildlife.

However, it is the demolition of the potting shed and the moving of the bothy that most concern us. The detached relationship between the potting shed and the garden, with the shed and bothy on the east side, is an unusual one and is clearly not fully understood. Fyfe and Tinkler state: 'To the east of the walled garden is a long brick-built garden building with a tile roof, known as the potting shed. This structure dates from the same time as the walled garden, and is in a reasonable state of repair. The remains of a greenhouse are located to the south at right angles to the potting shed' (p.91, 3.10.109). Pegasus state that the bothy is assumed to be contemporary with the walled kitchen garden.

With the proposed demolition of the potting shed and the relocation of the bothy, the legibility of this important part of the functional history of the site will be lost. Without its relationship to the walled kitchen garden, to the potting shed and to the functional, productive area of the garden, and out of context, the bothy becomes a meaningless structure.

The walled kitchen garden, potting shed, bothy and the whole formally productive area in the angle between Tote Lane and the present east drive to the house, should be considered as the entity they were historically. We note the bothy and potting shed are categorised into a separate area in the Fyfe and Tinkler report (p. 66). This is, in our opinion, wrong and likely to have been motivated by the development plans, rather than the history of the site.

These back-of-house areas have importance as part of the social history of a site and this relationship is an unusual one and should be preserved.

The scale of the new building on the site of the now-to-be-demolished potting shed does not reflect the footprint or scale of the existing potting shed and necessitates the removal of the bothy. By increasing the footprint to something more like three times the size of the present

potting shed, it will make a nonsense of even trying to replicate the potting shed. The associated new outbuilding to its south adds to the development of buildings in this once functional garden area, further eroding its integrity and legibility.

In our opinion the walled kitchen garden walls, the potting shed and the bothy should all be considered curtiledge listed and treated as such, therefore not demolished.

The Paddock

As stated above, there is tentative evidence to suggest an older layer of history to the designed landscape at Wispers – calling into question the interpretation of the earlier dwelling purely as a farm. Fyfe and Tinkler significantly also use the phrase 'presumed to be a farm' in their LVA (3.10.12, p. 56). Against this background, we consider that the history and significance of the area now being called 'the paddock' has not been fully understood. We note that historic OS maps show that this area is levelled at its northern end, suggesting landscaping. Earlier historic mapping (1816, 1872) also shows it was clearly a garden area during the previous incarnation of the site. This background has an impact of the appropriateness of the proposed development of the paddock, not just in the use of the area for housing, the scale of that use, but also the style. We would therefore call into question the rationale of building a new farmstead type development on this previously undeveloped former garden section of the site.

Restoration and Future Management

Fyfe and Tinkler have observed a high degree of survival of features of the historic designed landscape. 'Despite its neglect in recent decades, and the introduction of some incongruous features, many of the most important features within the original design survive, including the driveway, lawns, and the south-western and northern edges of the ornamental woodland garden. Other features such as paths are lost but their former positions known' (3.10.43). This, along with our own observations, suggests that there is great potential for restoration of the 1870s landscape and later features that contribute to the significance of the setting, such as the walled kitchen garden. The impact of negative elements such as the derelict classroom blocks is relatively limited in area and is reversible. Despite these negative factors the designed landscape has an integrity and high level of legibility. Moreover, it is important as the setting to the listed building and as a non-designated heritage asset. In our experience, although a developer might submit plans for the restoration of the landscape, in reality this is seldom achieved, especially in areas not immediately surrounding the house. We feel that, at the very least, a Conservation Management Plan should be written for the historic designed landscape. This should include prescriptions for management of all the areas, including those at more of a distance from the house, to ensure that they are both restored and then maintained – to prevent them slipping back into neglect.

Fragmentation

Although, as stated above, there is great potential for the restoration of almost all the design of the 1870s, this current planning application entails the building of new houses on the paddock and the present site of the potting shed. These would immediately lead to a fragmentation of the ownership of the site. This would also lead to differing degrees and styles of management for a reasonable percentage of the site, thus destroying the coherence, integrity and legibility that the site (despite its recent history of unsympathetic development and latterly elements dereliction) currently retains.

We are further concerned that granting permission for this development, with the principle of new build on garden areas sets a dangerous precedent for other such sites within the

South Downs National Park – where the value of landscape, including designed landscape, should be of upmost importance.

Given the level of intactness of the significant 1870s landscape design by Marnock, reversion to a private dwelling in the hands of an owner who was willing to restore the house and the landscape would clearly be the best outcome for this site in heritage terms, dealing with all the issues we have outlined above. We understand there has been much debate about conservation deficit, so we question whether any attempts to actually market the site to this effect have been carried out.

Conclusion

The Sussex Gardens Trust is concerned that the importance of this site in garden history terms has been not fully understood and has downplayed in application documentation. We feel it has enough significance to warrant a review for inclusion on the *Register of Parks and Gardens*. A full Conservation Management Plan should be compiled by a specialist consultant, building on the solid report written by Fyfe and Tinkler and objectively addressing the conservation needs of the site and each of the areas within it. We object to the insertion of new build into garden areas that are currently undeveloped. Given that the applicant argues that the development is necessary to facilitate the restoration of the house, the Sussex Gardens Trust is of the opinion that no approval of this planning application should be made without the applicant actively seeking to market the house as a single, private dwelling.

Kind regards

Jim Stockwell
Trustee
On behalf of
Sussex Gardens Trust