



YORKSHIRE GARDENS TRUST

President: The Countess of Harewood

Vice-presidents: Lady Legard, Peter Goodchild, Nick Lane Fox

www.yorkshiregardenstrust.org.uk

York YO24 4EQ

Planning.comments@york.gov.uk

FAO Jonathan Kenyon

4 October 2023

Dear Mr Kenyon

Planning reference 22/02258/LBC (amended) – The Retreat, Heslington Road, York

Thank you for consulting The Gardens Trust (GT) in its role as Statutory Consultee with regard to any proposed development that could affect a site included by Historic England (HE) on their Register of Parks & Gardens. The Yorkshire Gardens Trust (YGT) is a member organisation of the GT and works in partnership with it in respect of the protection and conservation of registered sites and is authorised by the GT to respond on GT's behalf in respect of such consultations.

The Retreat's II* landscape is rightly celebrated today as the prototype for therapeutic landscapes internationally and was so recognised by contemporaries. The Retreat Archive and the contemporary literature on the treatment of mental health records a regular stream of visitors from the UK, the rest of Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth century. The landscape is important today, too, because its layout and functions remain legible on the ground so that, together with the extensive archive, it is possible to read the landscape and its changes over time.

This application seeks to preserve the buildings and landscape of the Retreat by converting them to modern uses, the site being no longer appropriate for the modern treatment of psychiatric patients. YGT's response focuses on the proposals for the RPG, dealing with the buildings only where they are relevant to the site they sit in.

It is apparent from the proposal that the developers understand the significance of the site and the importance of preserving it as far as is possible given the new uses of the buildings, the need for new buildings outside the registered park and garden, and the exigencies of maintenance and climate change. The application uses the extensive archive to good effect to reach an understanding of the landscape and the ways in which features in it altered during the Retreat's more than 200 years of operating as a hospital and as a refuge.

YGT is pleased to support the tenor of the application. The proposals for layout can clearly be traced to the surviving landscape and to historic mapping. The proposals for use acknowledge the private nature of the site as a hospital, and the public nature of the site as an open hospital, welcoming visitors as part of its therapeutic regime and cultural approach to the normalisation of psychiatric illness. The proposals for planting (where they are described) reflect the exigencies of garden maintenance (volunteer gardeners, for example) and climate

change. There is much to celebrate, but there are also serious gaps and flaws in the proposals; we elaborate on both below.

We are dismayed that there is not a single reference to Backhouses, who built the rock garden and probably also provided many of the trees. Backhouses were pre-eminent in narcissi development, bringing into commerce both the Emperor and Empress daffodils, which were very popular in the late Victorian/Edwardian periods. All these three elements of the designed landscape at the Retreat – trees, daffodils and the rockery – require specialist appraisal. Backhouse rock gardens in particular are so precious that losing another would be akin to vandalism. And they can be restored to their glory: Aysgarth and Burnby show what can be done at relatively little cost, while the work at Douneside shows that they can be replanted to enable maintenance without large numbers of gardeners.

There is little doubt (and further research would show) that Backhouses would have played a major role in many other parts of the Retreat gardens and landscape - why would Tuke and his successors have gone anywhere else when they had a pre-eminent, Quaker-run nursery on the doorstep? The Fulford Road nursery site was practically across the road until 1854. James Backhouse, the first nursery specialist in the family, bought Holgate House from the Tukes. He lived there for many years, and he is, of course, buried in the cemetery at the Retreat.

We strongly recommend that further research compares the layout of the borders with the photographs of the Holgate nursery borders – they have much in common with each other – and at the landscape design of the Homestead (the Rowntree home) to put the Retreat landscape in its local, family, Quaker and business context. Similarly, Backhouses often worked with Richardsons of Darlington, one of the key manufacturers, designers and suppliers of glasshouses, so further investigation of the glasshouse foundations is required to preserve a key component of the working garden.

In short, this is a fantastic and almost certainly unique opportunity to restore a landscape and gardens that are important not only for medical history but also for garden history more generally, acknowledging the importance of Quaker spirituality, philosophy, businesses and partnerships in the place where they were developed and practised. We would be pleased to help in this endeavour.

We welcome the reinstatement of the Bedford Pierce rose walk. It's apparent from the archive that Bedford Pierce was a significant, long-serving, popular, sympathetic and inspirational leader of the Retreat, qualities that led the rose walk to be created in his memory. It would be appropriate to see his association with this feature continued.

In other areas the time period to which a feature is to be restored has not been settled upon. We suggest that in at least one of these cases consideration be given to associating the restoration with a long stay patient. The Retreat archive has an unusually large volume of writings by patients (see Patients' Papers here: [The Retreat Archive - Borthwick Catalogue \(york.ac.uk\)](#)), of whom some were well-known in York. Reinstatement to a period associated with one of them, coupled with easily accessible information, would further tie the landscape back to its therapeutic purpose.

On Lamel Hill, may we suggest that consideration be given to recognising the importance of another of the Retreat's staff? John Thurnham, the Retreat's first medical superintendent, excavated the mound and read a paper on his work there to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society in 1848. Thurnham later became the superintendent at the Wiltshire County Asylum, where he worked on the rings at Avebury.

One public activity not considered as a possibility is landscape painting. There are several images made by patients (available online through the Borthwick catalogue), and in the twentieth century there were

watercolour competitions (an example of an entry is on display in the Borthwick searchroom). Perhaps these could be considered as regular public events, bringing people into the private spaces of the landscape as well as the public spaces?

We support the treatment of the airing courts, which seems to us to appropriately echo their original purpose, bringing modern notions of health, and the ways to achieve and maintain it, to bear upon the problem that vexed the Retreat's founders and continues to baffle and confound. The Paradise garden, while not a central Quaker concept, is a neat turn on York's medieval past and its ancient and present debt to the Moslem world.

We share, however, the Georgian Group's concern for the erection of balconies on the south front of the main building. Quite apart from their architectural infelicity and anachronism, they wrongly echo the balconies employed on general, isolation and TB hospitals, such as the nearby former County Hospital building on Monkgate. Further, they suggest the separation of individual apartments, while the original facades emphasise community and cooperation. Balconies, however well disguised their appearance at a distance, and however welcome to the occupiers of the apartments they draw attention to, are not right as a feature on this pioneering psychiatric hospital, and they would detract from the much good work in this proposal.

On the whole, though, we are pleased to support this proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Webb

Chair, YGT

cc. Andrew.Burn@historicengland.org.uk

Yorkshire@historicengland.org.uk

consult@thegardenstrust.org.uk

conservation@thegardenstrust.org.uk