



Historic England

EAST OF ENGLAND OFFICE

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Direct Dial: -

Our ref: PA01197649

Your ref:

07 July 2023

By email to:

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Dear Mr Bargery,

### **Pre-application advice**

**PRINCESS HELENA COLLEGE, SCHOOL LANE, PRESTON, HITCHIN,  
HERTFORDSHIRE SG4 7RT**

Thank you for your colleague Adrian Parry's initial correspondence of 03 November 2022 and subsequent exchanges, and for consulting Historic England seeking pre-application advice on your proposals for residential development within the disused walled garden at Temple Dinsley in Preston, Hertfordshire.

On the basis of our site visit on 15 February 2023 and the information provided at our virtual meeting on 09 March 2023, we can now offer the following advice.

### **Historic England advice**

#### Significance

Temple Dinsley is a multi-phased designed landscape focussed on a c1714 country house substantially remodelled and enlarged from 1908 by the renowned architect Edwin Lutyens alongside contemporary redevelopment of the formal gardens adjoining it to the west and north, potentially with input from Gertrude Jekyll (although no planting plans are known). This formal core is set within an early 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape park that was further embellished from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and as part of early 20<sup>th</sup> century investment by the estate's owners. From 1935, it became a private girls' school, Princess Helena College, which closed in 2021, resulting in the site's



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being put up for sale. Prior to closure, the College sold the Dower House and adjacent barn and disused walled garden to a private developer, who converted the Dower House into flats.

The main house is listed at grade II\* (NHLE list entry 1307766), attributing more than special interest and representing just 5.8% of all listed buildings. The gardens and parkland are included within the *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest* at grade II\* (NHLE list entry 1000611), which places it within the top 30% of all registered parks and gardens and reflects a level of historic interest and significance that needs to be recognised and used to inform development proposals and management decisions.

The site contains a further four structures of national significance and designated as listed buildings: the gate, gate piers and park wall facing School Lane (grade II); the Piggery by Edwin Lutyens (grade II); the icehouse (grade II); and the Dower House (grade II).

The house and gardens are included within the Preston Conservation Area designated by North Hertfordshire Council in 1970.

Additionally, various structures are recognised as non-designated heritage assets, including: the pumping station and barn in the parkland south of the mansion; the agricultural building in Summerhouse Plantation; the Lodges on the park's southern boundary; the barn at the Dower House; and, of particular relevance to this consultation, the walled garden adjacent to the Dower House.

The walled garden occupies a site in the north of the registered park and garden, running downhill from Preston Road on the upper slopes of a shallow valley. It appears, albeit in a different form, on the 1881 Ordnance Survey map. This illustrates direct access from the enclosures associated with the Dower House, a standard path layout dividing areas of cultivation responding to its irregular shape, and no internal glasshouses of other structures.

By the 1924 Ordnance Survey map, the walled garden had been enlarged with the alignment of the walls more-or-less reflecting their current form. This suggests changes around the time of Lutyens' involvement, when the historic walled enclosures to the west of the main house were redesigned as Arts & Crafts gardens, displacing any productive uses; however, no evidence has come to light of involvement at the walled garden by Lutyens.

Nevertheless, the surviving sections of the SE wall and photographic evidence of the SW wall show that they comprised solid brickwork to a lower height than the other two walls, above which extended brick piers similar to those in the gardens closer to the main house that support timber pergolas. This suggests that someone potentially





considered correlation of design and inter-visibility between the walled garden and other parts of the designed landscape, including: the terraced gardens on the north side of the main house; the east drive as it bends SW towards the main house; and the edge of Summerhouse Plantation on the opposite side of the shallow valley.

Following sale of the estate in 1935, any intensive use of the walled garden ceased, leading to the loss of its layout, cultivation, and maintenance. It sheltered a Scots pine plantation from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century until felling of the trees under licence in 2015/16, after which it has been disused, sitting derelict with the brick walls further deteriorating. Despite its condition, its form, extents, and role as a constituent element of the designed landscape at Temple Dinsley can still be appreciated. Thus, it contributes to the overall significance of the registered park and garden.

### Impacts of the proposed development

This pre-application relates to proposed development within the disused walled garden adjacent to the Dower House, involving erection of a new dwelling house alongside repairs and reconstruction of the walled garden walls, the layout of a new private garden, and new access arrangements off of the Preston Road.

At this early stage, there is insufficient detail about the new structures, the amount of intervention required to the walled garden walls, and the layout and character of the new gardens to assess the level of harm, or the public benefits that the proposed development could deliver.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there would be direct physical and visual impacts to the walled garden caused by: introducing a substantial new structure without precedent into the open space of the walled garden to create a private dwelling; demolishing, rebuilding/replacing and breaching the walled garden walls; and overlaying a new layout as a domestic garden. Although confined to the walled garden and its immediate environs, these changes would be visible from other parts of the designed landscape due to topography and the layout of the park and gardens. As such, this would cause some harm to the overall significance of the registered park and garden.

That said, there is also potential for a sensitively designed residential scheme, based on a thorough understanding of the significance of the various heritage assets and their settings, to set out a positive strategy for the conservation of the disused walled garden at Temple Dinsley, securing a sustainable future use for this distinct area and delivering meaningful heritage benefits.

### Legislative and Policy Context

When the local authority makes a decision on an application affecting heritage assets, they will be bound by the duties imposed by Sections 16, 66 and 72 of the



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Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Guidance on how to fulfil these duties is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework 2021 (the NPPF).

The NPPF identifies that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations (para. 189). It explains how applicants should describe the significance of heritage assets affected and that the level of detail should be sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance (para. 194).

The NPPF makes clear that when considering the impact of a scheme, any conflict with an asset's conservation should be avoided or minimised (para.195). It sets out the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and for new development to make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness (para. 197).

Great weight should be given to a heritage asset's conservation, and that this should be greater for the most important assets (para.199). The significance of heritage assets can be harmed or lost by their alteration or from development in their setting, and that any level of harm requires a clear and convincing justification (para.200). Any harm should be weighed against the public benefits - including any heritage benefits – that the development would deliver (para.201 and 202).

Local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within conservation areas and in the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance (para. 206). Loss of an element which makes a positive contribution to the significance of a conservation area should be treated either as substantial or less than substantial harm, as appropriate, taking into account the relative significance of the affected element and its contribution to the significance of the conservation area as a whole (para. 207).

The significance of non-designated assets should be taken into account in determining the application, requiring a balanced judgement having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset (paragraph 203).

Historic England's Good Practice Advice Note 'The Setting of Heritage Assets' (2017) advocates taking a staged approach to decisions on the level of contribution which setting and related views make to the significance of heritage assets.

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 (adopted 08/11/2022) recognises the positive contribution of heritage assets of all kinds, with Policy SP13: Historic Environment stating the Council's presumption in favour of the retention, preservation and enhancement of heritage assets and their settings. Additionally, the Preston



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Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2018-2031 (12/2019) forms part of North Hertfordshire's Development Plan and includes numerous policies relevant to the Temple Dinsley site. North Hertfordshire Council will be able to provide detailed comments on local policy matters.

### Historic England position

Accepting that the proposed development remains only at an initial design stage, we can offer the following comments to help steer discussions on the design principles and shape development of the scheme.

#### a) Principle of development

Generally, Historic England has concerns about proposals for development within walled gardens, especially where they form an intrinsic part of highly graded designated heritage assets and/or make positive contributions to the settings of such assets. In most cases, the introduction of new built development without precedent and associated changes of use away from productive cultivation are inherently damaging to the character and interest of a walled garden.

The walled garden is not only a constituent element of the grade II\* registered park and garden but also a non-designated heritage asset in its own right (as identified in the Neighbourhood Plan). Therefore, and proposals for its redevelopment would need to be informed by a clear understanding of its significance and the role that it played (and still plays) within the wider designed landscape, considering both the intended and existing form/function/character and the extent/condition of the surviving fabric.

In this instance, we recognise that, subject to details, there may be potential for a high-quality heritage-led residential scheme of outstanding and innovative design to deliver an appropriate solution for the walled garden's conservation. This would need to be supported by robust evidence to demonstrate that residential is the 'optimum viable use' for the heritage asset, capable of sustaining the asset and avoiding or (where that is not possible) minimising harm to significance.

#### b) Walled garden walls

From observations during the site visit and the content of the follow-on Condition Inspection Report (Priory Heritage, April 2023) produced as part of this pre-application engagement, it is clear that the walled garden walls are in very poor condition. Sections of wall have entirely collapsed and those that remain standing appear to have serious structural issues related to both movement and the physical condition of heavily weathered bricks.



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Historic England would prefer a conservation-led approach of sensitive repair and reconstruction of the existing walls, retaining and re-using as much original fabric as possible, incorporating features such as the arched opening and piers/pergola, and ensuring new/replacement bricks match the original material as closely as possible.

We accept that work to restore the walls may entail considerable amounts of new material and even full rebuild in places (not only the lost sections but also some of the sections still standing). Therefore, there may be a case for using other materials to replace sections of the brick walls as part of the solution for conserving and enhancing the significance of the walled garden and wider registered park and garden. Any such proposals would require a clear and convincing justification in accordance with the NPPF.

### c) New dwelling

A new dwelling represents the biggest change to the character and function of the walled garden, so its location, scale and position in relation to the walls is extremely important. There is potential for a new structure of outstanding and innovative design to sit comfortably within the walled garden.

To achieve this, any new building would need to be positioned against (or as close as possible to) the existing garden walls so as to avoid overly compromising the openness of the walled garden. It would remain low and not exceed a single storey so as to avoid vertical elevations or large areas of roofline projecting above the height of the walled garden as experienced on the approach to Preston along Preston Road. Glazing, at least on elevations facing the wider landscape, would be minimised so as to avoid excessive reflection or light spill in views into the walled garden.

Indeed, it may even be possible to create a structure along the southeast-facing northwest wall, as presented, that, through massing and materiality, could be read effectively as a garden wall in views from other parts of the designed landscape. This could follow an approach similar to the Devon Passivhaus precedent cited in the pre-application pack.

Again, the proposals would require a clear and convincing justification in accordance with the NPPF, including demonstration of options development that sought to first avoid and, where that was not possible, minimise harm to the significance of designated heritage assets.

### d) New domestic garden

The Lutyens gardens at Temple Dinsley are of very high significance and, therefore, every effort should be made to present this phase of the site's development as a





whole as originally intended. We accept, however, that no information has yet come to light revealing any intention or involvement Lutyens may have had in the walled garden. And any physical evidence of past layouts, in the form of garden archaeology, is likely to be limited given post-1935 activity within the walled garden – although you should seek the advice of the County archaeologist on this matter.

Given the absence of solid evidence as to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century layout and character of the gardens, there is scope for introducing a carefully considered, high-quality 21<sup>st</sup> century design. But even within this, there should be scope for reflecting or referencing the structural forms, materials and plants from the Lutyens gardens around the main house.

Generally, any new layout should give an appearance of order and structure, reflecting the function and character of the walled garden's historic productive function. At least in the views from other parts of the park and garden, it should look more managed than wild. It should remain free of excessive new sub-division of the original enclosure, especially if new divisions are visually impermeable, so as to avoid overly compromising the openness of the walled garden.

Careful consideration will need to be given to providing or otherwise allowing for the various elements typical of domestic (family) gardens, such as provision and storage of outdoor furniture, play equipment, garden machinery/tools, refuse bins, vehicle and bicycle parking, etc. Ideally, these should be positioned discreetly so as to avoid visual 'clutter' and not detract from the openness and visual quality of the walled garden, especially in the views from other parts of the park and garden. To further assist this, consideration could also be given to establishing control measures, such as covenants, governing how the garden should be presented and used by future owners.

### e) Access

There may be scope for introducing a new entrance utilising the existing agricultural access in the adjacent field NE of the walled garden. That said, the NE section of wall is characterful, making a positive contribution to the visual experience of approaching Preston along the Preston Road. As such, any new access off of Preston Road running in front of this section of wall would need to be low key, ideally resembling an agricultural track as closely as possible and benefitting from existing vegetation along the field boundary.

If breaching the wall to create a new entrance cannot be avoided, then the location should be informed by the Condition Inspection Report and linked with the strategy for retention, repair and replacement.





Car parking, whether inside or outside of the wall, should be discreet and screened in views from Preston Road and from other parts of the registered park and garden.

Regardless, the proposals would require a clear and convincing justification in accordance with the NPPF, including demonstration of why shared access using the Dower House's entrance is unfeasible.

### Next Steps

Thank you for involving us in discussions as you consider your approach to re-development of the disused walled garden at Temple Dinsley, and for seeking pre-application advice at this early stage.

We very much welcome investment in the site and its sensitive adaption for a sustainable new use. While we have concerns about new development in historic walled gardens, we accept that in this instance there is considerable scope for sensitively designed development to deliver meaningful heritage benefits – from conservation of historic fabric to restoration of the walled garden's historic character and visual quality.

Much will depend on the detail of the scheme as it emerges. We recommend that you consider the advice in this letter and engage us in further consultation alongside North Hertfordshire Council as you develop your proposals.

Furthermore, the Hertfordshire Gardens Trust (HGT) holds information about Temple Dinsley, including a report and restoration proposals produced in 1992 with funding from Historic England (then English Heritage). The latter only touches lightly upon the walled garden, but HGT may still have information that would help to inform your proposals, so we recommend that you seek their advice.

Naturally, regardless of the abovementioned engagement, we would expect any forthcoming planning application to be supported by a detailed heritage statement and heritage impact assessment, and an archaeological desk-based assessment, setting out an understanding of the significance of the heritage assets affected, identifying any harm, and justifying this through necessity and public benefits, as required by the NPPF.

This letter concludes the 'initial' phase of formal pre-application and completes our 'free cycle' of advice. Any further pre-application engagement will need to be offered under our Extended Pre-application advice service which is charged on a cost-recovery basis. Charging will only commence if you formally commission the service from us. For further information about what this means please go to our website: <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/our-planning-services/enhanced-advisory-services/extended-pre-application-advice/>



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Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or wish to discuss the content of our letter in more detail.

Yours sincerely

**Christopher Laine CMLI**

Landscape Architect

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Cc – Neville Doe, Historic England

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Pre-application advice**

**Information provided:**

1. Walled Garden, Princess Helena College, Preston, Hitchin: Location, Description. History & Development, Heritage Significance & Development Proposals (Adrian Parry, Bourne Heritage, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022)
2. The Walled Garden, Preston, Hertfordshire: Presentation for meeting with Historic England – RIBA Stage 2 (Modern Architecture Workshop, 03 March 2023)
3. Condition Inspection Report: Brickwork to Former Kitchen Garden Walls at Dower House, Preston (Priory Heritage, April 2023)



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