



# Supporters of Ashton Gardens

10 July 2003

Councillor John Coombes  
C/o Town Hall  
St Annes

Dear Councillor Coombes

## **ASHTON INSTITUTE**

I write following the SOAG meeting of 30 June which considered the questions you had asked regarding the Ashton Institute vis:

- 1. What plans would SOAG have to give it a new lease of life, and have any outside organisations guaranteed funding for the same?*
- 2. Would SOAG consider it acceptable to lose the Institute providing that any financial gain from it would be ploughed back into the gardens and them alone?*

Since receiving your email sent just before the election, we recognise that the future of the Institute has now become central to the submission of the lottery bid, and we devoted much of the time of our meeting of 30 June to considering this matter. We are now convinced it will be pivotal as to whether the lottery grant is provided.

The short answers to your questions are provided below, and I recognise that they may not be the ones you would want to hear. For our part, we found great difficulty in reconciling the advice of heritage experts and our own views on the matter, with the commercial imperatives that weigh so heavily on your shoulders.

Having said that, I should be most obliged if you could also find the time to read the rationale upon which our decisions are based. We recognise and welcome the change of style that you have brought to the Council and we are anxious not to re-create the abrasion and tension that was so much a feature of our relationship with the previous administration. We are especially keen to work with your administration, as one that is willing to help secure the future of the Gardens, and for this reason we have attempted to set out the justifications for our view in the rationale. We hope you find our reasoning understandable and persuasive, but if not, we hope you find it soundly based in logic and genuinely held, without a desire to be prejudiced or in any way obstinate.

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We addressed the issue by posing some specific questions

***Do we agree that the Institute should be demolished if the income spent on the Gardens?***

The answer to this was an overwhelming "no".

Of those voting, I think only one person supported the proposal. Several people felt that, not unlike Lytham's windmill, the fact that an attractive and historically important building of character was no longer used for the purpose for which it was designed, ought not to preclude its intrinsic value being recognised as a building in its own right, and for the way in which it contributes to the setting and character of the area - in this case Ashton Gardens rather than Lytham Green.

In short, even if it remained unused, the prevailing view was that it is important enough as a feature, and to the setting of the Gardens, to be retained as a "shell" like the windmill.

If not, what would we prefer it to be used for?

The group felt that the ideal use for such a building was as a cafe or tea room or for catering generally, or as a Gardens information focus/office.

What other sort of uses would be acceptable to SOAG?

Whilst preferring to have the building used for a community purpose, the group were willing to accept most uses so long as they were compatible and in-keeping with the character of the Gardens - so to that end, commercial uses such as plant sales or floristry would be appropriate if the need to generate an income from it was so important.

As an alternative approach, the group would be happy to look into the idea of using it on the same sort of basis that Lytham Heritage Group use the windmill - to provide interpretive displays of the history of the Gardens (and St Annes generally) to help promote the tourism industry and act as a base for SOAG activities and fundraising for the Gardens.

Do we see it as our job to find someone who will use it, and if so, can we find someone?

The general answer to this was no, SOAG does not see its role as being one to manage the assets and buildings of the Council on their behalf, but given further information (eg the terms of tenure available, acceptable uses etc) we would be happy to work with the Council to try to help find suitable users.

In terms of funding for restoration, we greatly regret the decision of the previous administration to exclude this building from the Heritage Lottery bid, and are convinced that the best chance for its restoration lies in obtaining 90% of the cost in grant aid.

To this end we would welcome an urgent meeting with officers of the Council (and heritage organisations if appropriate) to see what adaptations might be made to the present lottery bid to have the Institute included in the overall scheme, and to see if we are able to effect changes that would minimise the financial impact of such a move.

For example, we believe the plans include the demolition of the present brick cafe building which is alien to the character of the Gardens, and the creation of a new building on the site of the former Ashton Theatre. We wonder if there is scope to reduce the size/extent of the proposed building and to use savings to fund the restoration of the Institute.

Likewise, I do not know if proposals such as the following would be acceptable to HLF and the overseeing heritage bodies but, for example, I wonder if the glasshouse area might be opened up to the Gardens a bit more, and let to a commercial garden centre for plant sales to produce an income to offset the operating costs of the Institute and perhaps provide an accrual fund to help replace the glasshouses in the longer term. I do know our MP Michael Jack has many contacts with the horticultural industry locally, and I know he is interested in seeing the Gardens develop as a centre of horticultural excellence.

I hope that whilst we do not wish to see the Institute demolished, we have demonstrated a willingness to be open and to work with the Council to search for solutions that would both retain the Institute and ameliorate the costs.

Yours sincerely

Fred Moor

### **Rationale for SOAG Views on the Ashton Institute**

Before discussing our own views as a group, we examined what experts had previously said about the Institute.

The Councils own **PLANNING POLICIES** that apply to the Institute and the Gardens include:

**Conservation Areas (Policy EP3)** - which says

*"New development within, or affecting the setting of a designated conservation area will only be permitted where the character and appearance of the area and its setting are appropriately conserved or enhanced .....The introduction of new uses or buildings will not be permitted when these would be prejudicial to the character or appearance of the area.*

*The demolition of buildings or other built elements where this would involve the loss of an historic or visually important element of townscape will not be permitted except where the building is wholly beyond repair or its demolition and re-development would produce substantial benefits for the community which would decisively outweigh the loss resulting from demolition"*

**Historic Parks and Gardens (Policy EP6)** This says:

*"The Council will not permit development within a designated historic park or garden where this would prejudice its quality, character or appearance. Development outside an historic park or garden which would harm its setting will not be permitted"*

The whole of the Gardens and the Institute and Red Cabin Yard are covered by this policy

**Indoor Leisure and Recreation**

The Councils policy on "Indoor Leisure Facilities"(Policy TREC 12/13) says:

*"The Council will seek to retain all existing indoor public and private sport and recreation facilities. Proposals for the redevelopment of such facilities will not be permitted.*

Unless this policy changed as a result of the Inspectors comments, it seems pretty clear. Redevelopment of indoor leisure facilities will not be permitted. It does not say "will not usually be permitted", or give some exceptional or extenuating circumstances. It is a clear and unambiguous "we will not allow" The last use of the Institute was as a youth club, and all its previous uses were for recreational purposes.

So, it seemed to us that the Councils own planning rules imply that it should not be redeveloped. They say the nature of its use should not be changed from recreation, and that its should not be demolished unless in exceptional circumstances.

We then looked at the views of **ENGLISH HERITAGE** who advise the Government on important historic features.

When they were asked for an opinion relative to the Safeway plans, they said  
*"Whilst I understand the difficulties being faced by St Anne's town centre and the importance you place upon this development by way of attracting capital investment, I am convinced that the regenerative potential of the site could be unlocked for the intended use without demolishing the Ashton Institute building".*

They went on to say

*"In the present circumstances, English Heritage would be minded to repeat your consultant's own concerns in any advice we were asked to provide to the Heritage Lottery Fund in connection with your parks bid. I would be grateful if you would explain this to members of your Leisure and Property Committees as well as to your Planning Committee on 28th March. I understand that this will come as a disappointment, but the opportunity of a financial solution not only to the park's restoration but to the repair of structures within it, such as the Ashton Institute, makes the disposal of buildings and land within the park for development purposes to be prejudicial and premature to this process".*

Then we looked at what the **GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY** had said (They oversee Listed Gardens). In their response to the planning consultation for Safeway (which arrived a day after the planning agenda closed and was not seen by members), they said:

*"We therefore object strongly to its demolition, on the grounds that demolition would result in the loss of a building which makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area"*

The concluding paragraph of their letter is:

*"Finally we would urge that - having commendably recognised the huge damage of the original supermarket scheme, and the prejudicial impact this would have on the possibility of grant aid for restoration of the park - the Council must now ensure that no "lesser" damage to the park is allowed which could prejudice its case as a worthy recipient of grant-aid for the park. We would therefore strongly advise against giving consent for demolition of one of the park's principal buildings"*

Then we considered what the funding body itself - the **HERITAGE LOTTERY FUND** - had said about the building. There is a view that believes their stated position no longer applies, but I have never seen a written retraction of their requirement, which said

*"HLF require an assurance that no part of Ashton Gardens will be sold or otherwise disposed of by Fylde Borough Council for commercial or other development. Please clarify the current status of the Safeway, in addition to any other, development*

*proposal.* "

The local **CIVIC SOCIETY** expressed a view:

*"It is quite incredible that this demolition should even be considered at this particular time. The historic and amenity value of this park, and of the promenade gardens is just beginning to be appreciated. The demolition of this building could - and should - seriously affect the award of any grants for the park as a whole."*

The **COUNCILS** expert **CONSULTANTS** engaged to research the history of the Gardens and prepare the management plan said

*"[The Ashton Institute] makes an important contribution to the historic character of the gardens and to [the reasons for] its Grade II listing"*

*"[the park] retains most of its original features and is a representative example of public parks of the period"* (which is the main reason for its being listed)

On the development plans they said *"both of these proposals place a higher emphasis on the expansion of the commercial centre of St Annes than on its cultural and historic heritage recognised by this document [the document that listed the Gardens] and the Department of National Heritage [now the Department of Culture]"*

They concluded

*"The denial of planning permission to develop on any area of this garden must be seen as a key to the retention and restoration of the historic character of the gardens. This relates not only to the change in boundary that would result from such development and loss of land, but to the irreversible change that would result from demolishing an original and public building, such as the Ashton Institute and its replacement with privately owned hard space or buildings".*

Having considered these views - essentially as laymen - we discussed how we felt as individuals about the proposals and questions you had put.

Whilst it was perhaps less eloquent, the views of the individuals in SOAG were broadly the same - the Institute is part of the history of the town. It was the very first social facility that the town had. It was a mimic of the bungalow that Lord Ashton himself had owned in St Annes on "The Hill" (approximately where Councillor Jealous now lives). One of our members has a photograph of it with much more architectural embellishment than it presently has. Some of our members have children that grew up enjoying the recreational and social facilities of the Institute. "It is a building worthwhile preserving in its own right", and so on.

We had quotes such as *"As you come round the corner by the bowling greens you couldn't have a more typical sight for a park"* and others that said *"So much of the town is being destroyed we can't let this go as well"* and *"When you compare it with the brick monstrosity which is so out of character, and stands out like a sore thumb, there just is no comparison"*.

We noted a letter from a local architect (Mr Barnes) who has recently written to the Council about the building and copied the letter to us, saying what an important building it is to conserve as a building.

We also noted that, of the twenty or more issues put to them, the single greatest concern of all the 200-odd residents attending the public meeting about concerns in St Annes last July was that *"No part of Ashton Gardens should be sold or otherwise disposed of."*

So for all these reasons - the Council's own planning policies, the views of external experts, our own views, and the views of the public so far as we have been able to detect, we came to the view that: demolition should not be supported; ideally a use compatible with the Gardens should be sought; but if not, it should still be retained as part of the setting of the Ashton Gardens, and part of the reason why they are singled out for listing on the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.