



Supporters of Ashton Gardens

SOAG exists to protect, preserve, and enhance Ashton Gardens.

30 June 2005

To: Fylde Borough Council
Town Hall
Saint Anne's on the Sea
Lancashire
FY8 1LW

Dear Mr. Bell

LOTTERY SCHEME RE-PRIORITISATION: JUNE 2005

The Supporters of Ashton Gardens strongly support the principle of a Heritage Lottery Grant to restore Ashton Gardens. For several years we have fundraised to enable us to contribute to the scheme.

We recognise that restoration is required because previous Councils have not met their obligations to fund the necessary repairs and maintenance of the gardens infrastructure, and we understand how difficult it is for a small Council like Fylde to restore and repair the gardens without external financial support.

To this end we welcome the possibility of grant aid. Ashton Gardens is widely cherished by our community. Our membership is increasing, and we have already funded or undertaken practical improvements in the Gardens valued at over £6,000. We have recently raised a further £4,000 to contribute to future improvements, and had expected to do this in conjunction with the Council's Lottery bid.

However, we continue to oppose the sale of part of the gardens to pay the Council's 25% match funding. This issue is fundamental to us. Almost 8,000 people signed objections to the land disposal, and in a St Annes-wide referendum via the local free newspaper 94% of 1,000 respondents opposed the sale of any of the gardens. We have consistently proposed working with the Council to identify alternative sources of match funding readily available, and remain happy to do so, but to date, this offer has not been accepted.

Chairman
Fred Moor
18 Sandhurst Avenue
St Annes, Lancashire FY8 2DA
Tel: 01253 728047
chairman@ashtongardens.org.uk

Secretary
Jon Harrison
6 Nateby Close
St Annes, Lancashire, FY8 3PW
Tel: 01253 724298
secretary@ashtongardens.org.uk

Treasurer
Jill Sumner
10 Dorset Road
St Annes, Lancashire FY8 2ED
Tel: 01253 721608
treasurer@ashtongardens.org.uk

We believe this opposition to the disposal demonstrates that our community does not support the lottery bid if it involves the sale of any of the gardens land.

In order to demonstrate support for the scheme itself, the Council has invited a diverse range of more than twenty organisations to see its latest plan and provide a letter of support. As part of this initiative, we were asked - and agreed - to temporarily set aside our difference over the land disposal in order to consider the extent of our support for this third and most recent revision of the lottery bid proposals.

We established a technical sub-committee, including retired architectural, leisure and environmental professionals from within our membership to consider the proposals. We sought access to the costs (or simply the percentage of financial allocations) for the various parts of this Phase 1 bid, but the Council declined to provide this information. We have thus only been able to compare the quantity of work to be undertaken with that previously planned, and could not form a reliable view of the quality of what is now proposed in Phase 1. We believe we could have made a more relevant and worthwhile contribution if the Council had provided the information we had sought.

The Council did provide costing details for its proposed Phase 2 bid - although the costs for buildings were omitted. The technical group worked through the data we received, and their findings were reported to SOAG's Executive Committee who approved this response.

Whilst there remain individual elements of the scheme that we would wish to commend and support, we have substantial concern about the broad direction the proposals are now taking and about many of the detailed arrangements.

In terms of direction, we note and support their designation as 'Gardens'. We recognise that this status differs from that of a park, playing field or recreation ground. We believe the scheme should respect this difference, and focus on their period importance and the reasons the gardens were listed. Thus it should emphasise and celebrate those aspects of the gardens that set them apart from other green areas in Fylde. The direction for the Ashton Gardens should be about horticultural excellence, peace and tranquility, not noise, activity and entertainment.

Most especially, we believe the scheme to restore the gardens should be in keeping with, and respect, the Victorian/Edwardian character of the town. It should not seek to regenerate the Gardens in an alien style or culture, as has happened in the town centre - to the vociferous dismay of more than 80% of St Annes residents, according to the local paper.

Our town has an exceptional demographic profile that is heavily skewed toward over 50 year olds, and we have no doubt that the majority of residents in St Annes expect to see the restored gardens full of floral excellence, with much increased areas of floral bedding schemes, rock garden planting, ornamental shrubs, close mown lawns and the like. We also expected that heritage features such as statuary, planters and other garden furniture, water features, and so on, would be given priority.

Sadly we are unable to find evidence of this direction. The focus in this 'Phase One' bid is toward providing structures, recreation and entertainment areas. Potential for revenue generation seems to drive much of this direction. The minimal horticultural aspects that remain in the ultimate plan are relegated to a future 'Phase Two' scheme, which may or may not happen. We deplore this approach.

These are historically important gardens, not a theme park, and the more the restoration plan makes them appear to be a recreation ground or an amusement park, the more they will be disrespected as gardens - and thus lose their historic importance, their local cultural significance and their rationale for being listed. We expected sympathetic restoration of period gardens, not regeneration and recreation.

We also deprecate the waste of what we estimate to be £150,000 to move the Ashton Institute, when it can be restored where it is. However, if the building is re-sited, we believe its interim storage should be in proper secure accommodation, not a temporary compound in an uncontrolled yard. Likewise, if it were to be re-erected for use as a cafe or tearoom, the better location would be the site of the existing cafe in the Gardens. We believe that now the Ashton Theatre no longer exists, closing off - or otherwise detracting from - the vista of the War Memorial from the St George's Road entrance by siting a building nearby is wrong in principle, as is the plan to extend the town centre into the gardens by developing an open air entertainment area in matching style, in the St George's Road entrance of the gardens.

In terms of detail, far too much important work has been slipped into 'Phase Two'. Furthermore, measures to cheapen maintenance costs, such as reducing the net area of bedding plants by over 650 square metres represents entirely the wrong direction in our view.

We are also seriously concerned that some key heritage features are not accorded the importance they deserve. For example, we are dismayed that the Ashton Memorial Drinking Fountain in the Rose Garden has been allowed to deteriorate to its present shocking condition, and we note that only £500 is allocated for restoring this feature - and even that is in a future phase. This is nowhere near the sum that will be needed to restore it. We are reliably advised

that a temporary repair (which is not an acceptable long term solution) will exceed £2,000, and the full restoration to its original state will be significantly more.

There are other examples of our concerns in the appendices to this letter.

To conclude, we believe the gardens should be restored with a focus on horticulture and heritage - the reasons they were listed, and the reasons they stand apart from other green areas in Fylde. It should do nothing to increase the risk of their being eligible for de-listing. We heard talk of the Council wanting to create a "Wow" factor. We would prefer an "Aaah" factor.

Our perspective is one of great sadness at the opportunity that will have been missed if this scheme goes ahead as now presented. Being so close to the town centre, these gardens could be the principal attraction of our town, allowing St Annes to retake its position as *the* garden town of the northwest and the only northern seaside resort famous for its floral displays. Their restoration could have been the standard around which community and volunteer groups like SOAG could have rallied. Instead, the reverse is probable.

The several surveys of public opinion we have undertaken all show that the community does not want any of their gardens sold. Our conviction is that the public of our town will not warm to the way their gardens are about to be treated. Even without any prompting from SOAG, we envisage a public outcry - similar to that when the Square was modernised - once the scheme is in progress.

We ask the Council to think again and change its direction. Although we strongly support the principle of a Heritage Lottery Fund bid to restore our gardens, it is with great sadness that we regretfully conclude we are unable to give our support to this latest re-prioritisation of the scheme.

Yours sincerely

Fred Moor
Chairman

Appendix 1

THE ASHTON GARDENS MASTERPLAN IN PRINCIPLE

- We note and support the designation 'Gardens', and that this status differs from that of a park, playing field or recreation ground.
- We believe the scheme should respect this difference, and focus on the reasons the gardens were listed. Thus it should emphasise and focus on those aspects of the gardens that set them apart from other green areas. It should do nothing to increase the risk of their being eligible for de-listing.
- The scheme to restore the gardens should be in keeping with, and respect, the Victorian/Edwardian character of the town. It should not seek to regenerate the Gardens in an alien style, repeating the mistakes of the Square that made it so unpopular with residents.
- We believe that, in general, the aim should be to strive for horticultural excellence, peace and tranquility, not noise and activity. Because the gardens are small in area, active pursuits should be limited to relatively quiet ones such as tennis, bowls etc.
- We strongly support the provision of the play area for toddlers and children. However we do not believe that Grade II listed gardens are the right location to provide facilities for more boisterous teenagers, whose activity needs are better met via provision on the various playing fields and recreation grounds that exist throughout St Annes. Recreational areas are designated for active physical pursuits and are the most appropriate location for the proposed adventure area with its assault course layout of timber structures, rope bridges and the like. Underlying this view are the two forms of recreation (*recreation is literally: the removal of stress and the recreation of energy for life*). One method removes the harmful effects of stress through adrenalin dispersal in strenuous activity. The other uses quiet and relaxation. Both alternatives need to be available but they cannot easily exist side by side. In this context, we believe the historic gardens are a more appropriate setting for the latter.
- Furthermore, the more the restoration plan makes the gardens appear to be a recreation ground, the more they will be disrespected as gardens and thus lose their historic importance and diminish their cultural significance.
- Use for some forms of 'entertainment' is also dubious in principle - especially if it anticipates amplified sound and the like. The area comprises gardens with clear cultural integrity, listed on the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. They should not be made to resemble, or even move toward the direction of, a theme park.

- We deprecate the plan to commercialise more activities in the Gardens.
- We believe that closing off or detracting from the vista of the War Memorial from the St George's Road entrance by siting a building near to it is wrong in principle. The Ashton Theatre predates the memorial and this aspect could not exist at the time the war memorial was built. There is now an opportunity to keep the vista.
- The group maintains implacable opposition to the sale of land in the gardens, and to the waste of £150,000 in moving the Ashton Institute. However, if the building is dismantled, the group believes it should be stored in proper secure accommodation, not in a temporary compound in an uncontrolled yard.
- Likewise, if it is re-erected, the better location would be the site of the existing cafe in the Gardens.
- We do not support the principle of extending the town centre into the gardens by developing an outdoor entertainment area in matching style inside the St George's Road entrance of the gardens. The mistakes made in the square should have been enough to show what local people will think of such a proposal once it is done.

THE ASHTON GARDENS MASTERPLAN - DETAILS

The Phase 1 Scheme

- We are concerned that the priority now reflects regeneration rather than restoration, and that the scheme is no longer one of sympathetic restoration of these historically important gardens.
- We believe the priority is now wrong in that too much of the important work has been slipped into "Phase 2" - a future lottery bid that may or may not happen.
- We are also partly concerned that proper account may not have been taken of the need for logical programming. For example, work to subterranean water pipework and features planned for Phase 2 might impact on pathways already treated in Phase 1, thus damaging work that has already been undertaken.
- We are pleased to see that restoration of the gates and railings on the Clifton Drive and St George's Road frontage remains within the scheme, and trust these are to the same standard as previously planned. We would like to see this provision extended to all areas from which the railings have been removed.
- We have mixed views about the pathways. Previously £350,000 was allocated. This has now been reduced to around £100,000, mostly because the surfacing has been changed from resin-bonded gravel to tarspray and chippings or bitmac. We are concerned that not all the pathways will be treated, and believe all the paths should be repaired to a high standard even if the resin bonded surface is not used.
- We are uncertain about formalising the track that has developed along the top of the embankment south of the Rose Garden. This track gives easy access to the rear of the Ashton Memorial Drinking Fountain, and potentially increases the risk to the monument. It may be better to undertake planting that would discourage access. We are not aware of any significant historic precedent for this track.
- We disagree that the "sloping steps" in the St Georges Square area of the gardens should become a ramp. There are ample ways that pushchairs and wheelchairs can traverse the paths through the gardens, and citing accessibility as the reason, whilst at the same time approving the use of loose gravel for a public right of way elsewhere in the gardens is without logic. If the steps are turned into a ramp, there is a serious risk of injury to pedestrians entering the gardens. Bicycles will undoubtedly use the ramp as a speedway, exiting the slope partially unsighted at almost 90 degrees to the entrance.

- At the steps near to the cafe, there is already a ramp that provides access for prams and the like, so we see no need to convert the adjacent steps to a ramp as well.
- Whilst understanding and supporting the purpose of providing additional lighting in the gardens, we regret the extent to which this has been given priority over other matters in Phase 1. We are also concerned at the use of uplighters at or near ground level. They will be easily damaged and will increase light pollution problems. We are also surprised that it has not proved possible to avoid the need for trenching and cabling by using the more environmentally friendly option of solar or other natural power source. This is a matter we have previously raised.
- We do not support the provision of electricity points along the main drive if this is intended to allow for amplified sound and similar forms of entertainment
- We support the removal of the existing cafe and trust that the proprietor will receive sympathetic treatment during the transition period whilst the new cafe is provided.
- We fundamentally oppose the dismantling and storage of the Ashton Institute. The £150,000 that this move will cost would be better spent on other aspects of the gardens. However if the building is to be re-sited, we believe its interim storage should be in proper secure accommodation, not a temporary compound in an uncontrolled yard.
- If the Institute were to be re-erected for use as a cafe or tearoom, the better location would be the site of the existing cafe in the Gardens. We believe that now the Ashton Theatre no longer exists, closing the vista of the War Memorial from the St George's Road entrance by siting a building nearby is wrong in principle,
- We were surprised to see the restoration and the internal refurbishment of the gate lodges included within the Phase1 scheme, given that we had previously been advised no internal work on them would be charged to the lottery scheme. We cannot support this work being in Phase1 at the expense of other more important items.
- We support the conservation of the War Memorial, but we regret the apparent removal of the six replacement stone planters in the Main drive / War Memorial area that were provided for in each of the previous versions of the scheme.
- We generally understand the need for most of the tree works as shown but recognise this is a potentially emotive subject and urge the council to explain and justify the need for such work to the public well in advance of any contract being let.

- We believe another look may be needed at the bridge structures. In our view, more work may be required than sealing the deck edges. There appears to be evidence of spalling of the concrete 'timberwork', and the 'pointing' needed beneath the bridges may be evidence of structural instability.

The Phase 2 Proposals

We note that these are proposals for a future bid, and we regret that so much of the work we regard as being of the greatest importance has been allowed to slip into this phase. We believe much of this work is far more important than the creation of activity areas, entertainment spaces and so on.

- We have some small concerns about the creation of a tall hedge on the western side of the No 2 Green. The shade that this will create, coupled with the shade that will be cast by the four storey building adjacent on the south side, means the maintenance of the area as a bowling green will become increasingly difficult.
- We welcome the restoration of the entrances and gateposts, and trust that although they are not mentioned specifically, the rose garden entrance posts are to have their globes replaced.
- We fully support the restoration of the boundary wall in the area of the Japanese style planting.
- We fully support the development of the playground for the toddler to children age range, although we are saddened to see the planned expenditure is less than originally proposed. We hope this does not reflect a reduction in quality or quantity.
- We do not agree that the investigation of water features and the consequent remedial works should be left until Phase 2 of the works.
- We are pleased to see the planned restoration or replacement of the water feature and statuary in the centre of the rose garden. However we again deprecate the allocation of this work to Phase 2.
- We are dismayed to see the Ashton Memorial drinking fountain has not already been repaired. In 2001, it required only £200 spending on it. The present bid assumes an entirely insufficient £500. We have expert opinion and contractor costings that the remedial work on the side pillars alone will cost in the region of £2000 to £4,000. Such temporary measures are inadequate in the longer term, and full restoration including the wing walls is likely to be significantly more. There are already signs of structural damage getting worse. Delaying the full restoration of this monument - the very heart of Lord Ashton's generosity to St Annes - to Phase 2 is entirely unacceptable to us.

- We note the extensive use of shrub planting and trust that this will not detract from the restoration of Pullen's nationally recognised rock garden, and that this will be restored with plants appropriate to the original design.
- We note that the original scheme planned to remove 15 litter bins, and replace them with 20. We note that the new proposals plan to remove 7 and replace them with 5. We trust the revision is because of replacements already made, and that the overall provision will not significantly differ from that prevailing before the replacement programme started. Likewise with the bench seating provision. We welcome the quality and the unification of style that the new furniture provides.
- We feel unable to comment on the signage until more details are available.
- Whilst recognising that the needs of the bowling clubs must be taken into account, we are surprised at the proposals to site a new ladies pavilion on the opposite side of No 1 bowling green. We question whether the lower ground level could give problems with drainage. We also wonder about the ability to easily manage the traditional hospitality facilities for the men's teams at this distance. We welcome and support the restoration of the men's pavilion in style with the Institute.
- We entirely disagree with the proposed net reduction in bedding plants of over 650 square metres. In our view this is entirely the wrong direction and symptomatic of the wider problem posed by this re-prioritisation. These are important Gardens. They should have large areas of high visibility ornamental plantings and quality close mown lawns. The area of bedding should be significantly increased, not reduced. If a "wow factor" is required, one needs look no further. However, we believe the aim should be an "aaah" factor.
- We are concerned that there is not enough detail to make informed comment on the proposed "Winter Gardens". The term sounds superficially attractive, but could encompass anything from Kew's magnificent Palm House to a cafe extension with a few pot plants dotted here and there. We are not encouraged by the suggestion that such a building would need to have a "sound business case attached to it". We deprecate the Council's intention to further commercialise the facilities in the Gardens. We are also concerned that a structure made of glass in this location is literally a stone's throw from the main road. We understand the use of polycarbonate strength glazing could obviate this problem. However, we are more attracted to the original Scott Wilson proposal to repair the existing greenhouses, workshop and the (then)

existing exhibition centre as a cost of £18,800. This represents better value, and provides a bigger, more secure glazed area.