

Great Barr Hall and Estate – Background Paper for Policy ENV7.

7 December 2016

History

Great Barr Hall and its grounds essentially comprise a country house associated with an 18th century landscape park. The Hall lies in the bottom of a valley with two artificial lakes. The Hall and former grounds are now divided between several different ownerships. Parts or all of them are subject to a number of local and national designations because of their historic building, landscape or nature conservation interest. This note describes both the area that has been the subject of recent planning applications and the wider area outside the historic core. It should be read in association with the site map. The term “site” is used in this note to describe both the wider area and the smaller sections that have been the subject of individual planning applications.

Originally a farm (Nether House) built in the mid 17th century by a tenant of Old Hall (which lies off Crook Lane ½ mile to the north), Nether House was extended, renamed Great Barr Hall and the ornamentation of the landscape begun in the 18th century by the Scott family. Between 1785 and 1797 the Hall was leased to the Galton family and used occasionally for meetings of the Lunar Society (so named because they met on evenings when there was a full moon). The Lunar Society was the unofficial scientific body whose members did much to advance the Industrial Revolution. Landscaping of the park included work by Humphry Repton and John Nash.

Considerable improvements were commissioned in the 1840s, including the conversion of the Hall to its current “Strawberry Hill Gothic” appearance by adding an Ashlar (dressed stone) frontage in place of the original brick. The “chapel” (actually a snooker room), which has been attributed to George Gilbert Scott (no relation to the Great Barr Scott family but was the architect of St Pancras railway station) was later added to the south side of the Hall.

Following the death of the last member of the Scott family in 1909, the house and park were sold to West Bromwich Poor Law Union. Three years later work began on Great Barr Park Colony for Mental Defectives, later renamed St Margaret’s Hospital. The first phase, an elevated horse-shoe of buildings, was designed by the Birmingham architect Gerald McMichael. In the 1990s most of the extensive older hospital buildings were abandoned, although some clinic services continued to be provided from the newer buildings (the Queslett Centre).

Until its gradual decline from the 1970’s onwards, the hospital occupied a number of buildings:

Great Barr Hall: The Hall itself, and an unsympathetic extension to the rear, was used amongst purposes as the pathology department.

Male Homes: This was a group of buildings on the northern part of the site.

Female Homes: This occupied the central part of the site, together with the main hospital buildings, and comprised a number of detached buildings laid out in a formal symmetrical horse shoe pattern with a long straight driveway approaching from the south having as its focus the hospital clock tower at the highest point which stood in front of an area of open space.

Queslett Centre, Nurses Accommodation and Holly Wood: These stood in a wooded setting in the south-east corner of the site. The former dated from the 1970s (?) and was used until about the start of the 21st century as a training centre.

Parkland

The Hall and parkland was laid out with several approaches, some direct and others designed to show off the park. An appreciation of these is necessary to understand the layout of the site. Some of the original entrance lodges remain.

The approach from the north-west was down Sutton's Approach, lined with later 20th century horse chestnuts. This drive was laid out in the 1840s, at the same time Sutton's Bridge (the "Gothic Bridge") being built at the north end of the Upper Lake. The drive enters the grounds off Chapel Lane, the public road past Great Barr church; Chapel Lodge (c 1856) which stood on the west side of the drive has been demolished. Opposite the lodge site, on the north side of Chapel Lane, is Avenue Lodge, a red-brick lodge with blue diaper work of c 1856, probably by Gilbert Scott. Iron gate piers of the same date stand at the end of the Walsall Approach drive of 1797, now a footpath, which runs for 1km west through Merrion's Wood. At the end of that path (on Birmingham Road) is the mid C19 Walsall (or Merrion's) Lodge of 1854 (listed Grade II); it too has iron gate piers to one side.

Sutton's Approach leads to the north side of the Hall and to its west front. From here a rough drive continues south, down the east side of the lakes. The present lodge on the centre of the south side of the park dates from the mid C20. A more important approach from the south was the drive through the woodland above the west side of the lakes, from the mid C19 Handsworth Lodge (on Queslett Road in Sandwell and listed grade II) at the south-west corner of the registered area. Laid out c 1799 the drive survives as a track, but is severed by the M6 motorway.

From the stables on the east side of the Hall the Farm Approach of 1856 leads east past the site of Park Farm (built in 1856 on the east side of the walled garden); it originally ran to Beacon Lodge 500m beyond, now subsumed in the dense suburban housing of the 1960s and 1970s which abuts the east side of the registered area.

In the early C18 there was an ornamented walk to High House, past the west wall of the kitchen garden. This was done away with in the 1790s when Repton and Nash reworked the approaches to the Hall. As well as those noted above a further drive was constructed at that time from the south-east corner of the park, where the Queslett Lodge was built c 1800 (this was at the current main site entrance on Nether Hall Avenue).

Hospital Closure

Following national changes in the treatment of mental health, St Margaret's Hospital gradually fell into disuse and the NHS disposed of various parts of the site as follows:

Great Barr Hall and "Southern Parkland"

This was sold in the 1970s/ early 1980s. The parkland was used for hay production by a tenant farmer (this continued until at least 2013) but the Hall itself was stripped of much of the internal fittings before the owner is believed to have become bankrupt. It was then owned by administrators (HSBC) for at least 10 years.

West Bromwich Albion FC applied for planning permission to use the site and Hall as a training ground (application BC59707P/C). This application was withdrawn in December 2000.

Bovis obtained planning permission in 2002 to convert the Hall to 11 apartments (BC63007P/C), as part of a package of applications for planning permission, listed building

and conservation area consent both for this part of the site and the St Margaret's Hospital area, the latter of which they were to subsequently acquire from the NHS.

The Hall and parkland were acquired from the administrators in 2004 by Manor Building Preservation Trust (MBPT) following the grant of planning permission to Bovis.. MBPT subsequently sold the site to the current owners, BCG Lakes Ltd, in 2014 (sale dates are approximate). The site is still remains vacant and is the subject of current application 13/1567/FL to use the Hall as a hotel, wedding/ conference centre/ restaurant, erect 2 "gatehouse lodges" and 57 other dwellings.

St Margaret's Hospital ("Nether Hall Park"), Male Homes and Walled Garden

Bovis were the prospective purchasers by 2002. They submitted proposals in various permutations for up to 650 homes, to include housing on the Male Homes site that would act as "enabling development" to fund the restoration of the Hall, although the Hall and Southern Parkland lay outside the area they intended to buy. However, Bovis obtained legal advice which confirmed that enabling development could not be used to fund works on land own by a third party. The applications for these additional proposals were withdrawn or refused.

Planning permission for 446 homes (application 02/2417/OL/E2) was granted by the Secretary of State on appeal in 2004 (the Council refused permission on highway grounds). This development was completed in early 2016.

The housing development has involved redeveloping the footprint of the Female Homes. The Female Homes sites had some gaps in the formal arrangement of buildings but these have been taken up by floorspace transferred from the Male Homes site. The housing development uses about 85% of the former combined footprint of the Male and Female Homes.

The Bovis development includes a landscape masterplan that indicates restoring the natural contours of the Male Homes site, as well as the Gothic Bridge and Walled Garden. These works have been subsequently amended. Application 16/0659 to allow the use of the Walled Garden as allotments was granted by Planning Committee on 1st September 2016 subject to the section 229A agreement (similar to a section 106 but used where land is sold by the Secretary of State) being varied. Application 14/0822/FL to amend landscaping and levels is currently awaiting determination.

Keepers Cottage

There is a lapsed planning permission (09/0381/FL) to rebuild a 1920's house at the Queslett Road entrance that was destroyed by arson when the site was vacant.

Holly Wood

Current application (16/0516) for 5 detached houses on the site of hospital buildings demolished between 2009 and 2013. Site is currently owned by Bovis.

Queslett Centre

Site is owned by the Council but has planning permission for 7 detached houses (15/1364). The sale has been delayed (since an earlier permission in 2010) because of a dispute over access rights.

Nurses Accommodation

Believed to have been recently sold by NHS. Current planning application for 14 houses (15/0135/OL)

42 Park Farm Road

In order to encourage pedestrian/ cycle access, and help to address the highway concerns that led to the refusal of their application 02/2417/OL/E2 in 2003, Bovis acquired and demolished a house to construct a cycle and footpath. This provided more direct access to shops and schools than the vehicle access from Queslett Road.

A bus service was also subsidised for 5 years (this has subsequently ceased due to lack of use)

1 and 2 Suttons Drive

This is a pair of building with the appearance of houses that remain in use were used as residential accommodation for patients by the NHS. There is a current application (16/1747) for Alterations to facades with a new entrance area, external works to increase parking numbers and timber rear cabins to be added to the rear.

Site Designations and Constraints

Various designations and constraints apply to the whole of parts of the site as follows:

Planning Policy

The whole of the site is within the Green Belt and Great Barr Conservation Area.

Historic Designations

Great Barr Hall is a Grade II Listed Building (it was formerly Grade II* but was downgraded by Historic England in September 2016). Much of the site is a Grade II Registered Parkland. The latter also includes Merrions Wood (outside the site to the north-west, but part of the historic approach to the Hall). Merrions Wood is owned by a trust but administered by the Council. Land in Sandwell off Queslett Road is also part of the Registered Parkland.

St Margaret's Church and Old Hall (both outside but adjacent to the site) are also Grade II Listed Buildings).

Natural Environment

Three areas within the Registered Parkland are Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). These comprise St Margaret's Hospital Grounds (the two lakes and adjacent woodland, part of which, Gilberts Wood, is believed to be ancient), The Duckery (ancient semi-natural woodland on Chapel Lane at the north of the site) and most of Merrions Wood (ancient semi-natural woodland).

Several parts are also Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs).

Much of the woodland and individual trees are the subject of Tree Preservation Orders.

Previous site surveys have identified the possible presence of various protected species, including Great Crested Newts and various species of bat.

Constraints

The lakes and watercourse to the north of the Gothic Bridge are in a flood zone. The lakes are held in place by earth dams so the site owners may have responsibilities under the Reservoirs Act (these responsibilities used to depend on the size of the water body – the lakes may have been just below a size threshold but this may have changed). A recent press article suggested that the Environment Agency have served notice on the site owners.

Noise and poor air quality as a result of the proximity of the motorway acts as a constraint on development on parts of the site.

There are electricity pylons and power lines across the north-west corner of the site that would constrain the possible construction of housing as part of any enabling development in this area. There are also two pools (both of them SLINCs) in this area.

Other Issues

The isolated and disused nature of much of the site has attracted criminal and anti-social behaviour for many years. These include motorcycle scrambling, unauthorised fishing, swimming, shooting, arson and children playing in the Hall and other potentially unsafe areas.

6 December 2016

