

Mr I Hewitt
Chairman, AELTC
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12 May 2021

Dear Mr Hewitt

AELTC's PLANS FOR THE WIMBLEDON PARK GOLF CLUB LAND

The Wimbledon Society wishes to comment on Stage 2 of the AELTC's consultation on their plans for developing the golf course land for tennis use. We are likely to comment again once Stage 3 of the consultation has been released. Involving the public in early discussions around the evolution of the design is welcomed.

The original Capability Brown designed Park was said to cover some 374 hectares. Over the centuries this has reduced to the present 61 hectares, with the AELTC having 30 hectares, the Council 27, and the Wimbledon Club 4 hectares.

Currently, the whole of the Wimbledon Park land is classed as an Historic Park, grade 2*, and is designated as Metropolitan Open Land. Part is also designated as a site of Importance for Nature Conservation. Mostly in the LB Merton, the northern section of the Park lies in the LB Wandsworth.

We commend the AELTC for their stated aims of trying to restore the Capability Brown landscape and opening much of the golf course land to the public for most of the year. However, the plans so far, sadly, do not seem reflect those aims.

We have three major concerns and a number of questions and queries.

A) Our first concern relates to the current status of the golf course as Metropolitan Open Land (MOL). This designation, in the approved London Plan, is regarded as the formal equivalent of Green Belt.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of February 2019, paragraph 145, clearly says that "a local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt". The only exceptions are buildings that facilitate sport use (e.g. changing facilities) "as long as the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt". The proposed new show court could not in any way be described as "preserving the openness".

The Local Plan says that "the Council will protect MOL ...from inappropriate development in accordance with the London Plan and government guidance" (Policy DM O1a).

We do not believe that a permanent structure such as the proposed new show court should be built on MOL. The Society considers that such a proposal would be entirely contrary to the clear planning Policies set out in the NPPF, the London Plan, and the Local Plan, and could not be supported.

If the AELTC has a requirement for a third show court, then it should be built on the Club's existing land west of Church Road even if that means increasing the number of grass courts without permanent structures on the golf course land.

B) Our second concern relates to the need for a vision for the whole of the remaining Capability Brown landscape. The AELTC has not announced what discussions it has had with Merton Council in respect of the public park or with the Wimbledon Club in respect of their land. We hope and expect that the three landowners will cooperate under the leadership of the AELTC in producing a co-ordinated vision for the whole of what now remains of the Brownian landscape.

C) Our third concern relates to the anticipated benefits to the community. The AELTC's presentations have been strong on ambition but light on detail, perhaps understandably so at this stage. But to balance the inevitable disruption to the locality over a number of years, the AELTC needs to demonstrate tangible benefits for the community in terms of public access to the golf course land and periodic access to sporting and other facilities such as the golf club house. We expect that these tangible benefits will be enacted as soon as possible, rather than as an afterthought at the end of the process.

D) Our queries include:

- 1) After the Qualifying Rounds have moved to Wimbledon, do you anticipate that the whole Championships will be accommodated over three weeks: if not, over what period?
- 2) Why are the 38 courts without permanent structures needed? We understand that the Qualifying Rounds at Roehampton use just 16 courts.
- 3) How will the 38 proposed courts without permanent structures be delimited and fenced during the Championship?
- 4) How will they be delimited and fenced outside the Championship?
- 5) What are the intended dimensions of the Show Court: length, width and height?
- 6) What type(s) of community events do you intend to hold at the Show Court: would there be restrictions on noise levels emanating from such events?
- 7) For how many weeks a year do you anticipate that the golf course land will be available to the public?
- 8) What restrictions on public access will there be during those weeks: will there be any admission charge?
- 9) Specifically in respect of the proposed lakeside walk, for how many weeks a year do you anticipate that it will be available to the public: and will there be any admission charge? As this walk appears in part to be on land or over water in the ownership of Merton Council, who will be responsible for its maintenance?
- 10) Is it necessary to introduce meandering footpaths? Capability Brown landscapes had parkland, trees and lakes, but not paths. Would it not be more true to his landscape ideals to allow the public to wander freely?
- 11) Why is it necessary to have so many maintenance buildings dotted around the golf course land? How big will they be and what materials will they be built of? Such structures would appear almost suburban and be entirely contrary to the open-ness, with nature dominating, that forms one of the basic design principles of the Brownian landscape concept.
- 12) Regarding the proposed closure of Church Road during the Championships and the consequential re-routing of the 493 bus, no doubt you have been in discussion with TfL on possible routes. It seems that the alternatives are to re-route the service along existing bus routes such as Parkside to the west or Durnsford Road/Merton Road to the east, which would provide a poor service for many of the regular users in Wimbledon Park and Southfields; or to re-route it along suburban roads closer to the existing route, which would use roads that are not currently bus routes and which could be equally unwelcome. The illustrative diagram of arrivals & parking shows one bus drop-off point on Somerset Road by the southern entrance gates, but no comparable bus drop-off point by the northern gates and no indication of the re-routed bus route.
- 13) Where will the proposed new energy centre be located and how large will it be?
- 14) What will happen to the present golf course club house? There was a suggestion of converting it to community use. If so, and as a sign of the AELTC's support of the local community, such work should be undertaken as a first stage. Its future funding and maintenance would also need to be established.

E) In conclusion, for a major landscape scheme of such importance, not only to a world-class sporting event but also to a great historical asset, one would expect to see two things underpinning the design concept.

Firstly, one would expect to see the landscape input showing the evolution of the Park and how it has changed over the years. For example, we have the maps of Rocque 1746, Haynes 1770, Couris 1787, the OS map of 1889. In addition to the physical changes, there are the more difficult to establish changes to character, and how the Park's nature has evolved (not always sympathetically).

Secondly, such a study should ideally also encompass the lands owned by the Council and the Wimbledon Club. The possibility of mutual benefit from rationalising land boundaries could be explored.

The Society hopes that the insights and deeper understanding garnered from such a study would be the driver for future design and action. Landscape architecture is so important here that it should have a lead role in the creation of an overall design, and not (as unfortunately is so often the case), given merely a supportive or decorative role.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Goodair
Chair, Wimbledon Society Planning & Environment Committee

Please send all correspondence by email to chairmanpc@wimbledonsociety.org.uk

cc: (by email)
Johnny Perkins, AELTC
Chris Lee, Director, Environment & Regeneration, LB Merton
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Christopher Lane, Historic England London & South East Region
Stephen Hammond, MP for Wimbledon
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