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Conservation Response.

Date: 19/12/2022.

Application ref: SMD/2022/0556.

Case Officer: Jo Gregory.

Proposal: 'Removal of existing structures and construction of a new building to house indoor attraction, associated ground works, infrastructure and landscaping'.

Dear Jo,

Alton Towers, Farley Lane, Farley, Staffordshire, ST10 4DB.

Whilst I don't have an issue with a new attraction at the theme park, I have a number of concerns regarding this current scheme.

Firstly; the chosen location for the proposed attraction is at the highest point of the site surrounded by the Grade I Registered Park and Garden. Despite being regarded as the back of the theme park itself, it is quite a central area in Alton and Farley Conservation Area, and a fronting location to the village of Alton. Whilst on site visit (12/12/2022) it was seen from the proposed location that extensive views across the village were revealed, partly due to the time of year and due to the lay of the land atop the hillside. The proposal mentions trees that may be lost from the Conservation Area will be planted elsewhere, but to what impact will new planting and ground disturbance have on the Scheduled Ancient Monument in the immediate vicinity. The rate of regaining full coverage will be a long term task.

The Grade I RPG at Alton Towers is a rare and quite ostentatious heritage asset. Only 9% of registered sites hold this grading. Its contents surround the proposed site, and the proposed scheme sees a large building to house a new attraction around 71m x 51m sited in a portion *not* included in the RPG. Despite this, the excluded portion is recognised instead as being within or a part of, the setting of the RPG. I am finding it difficult to see how this quite large building will be neutral and therefore sensitive and preserving significance. Views around the gardens and into the RPG form part of some of its greatest features, though marginally framed now by mature trees and shrubs – nonetheless this is not completely lost.

I understand the reuse of the existing hardscaping is logical, though impact from this current use as general storage though cluttered, is very minimal to none, as it cannot be seen and does not produce a potential risk of noise from thrill seekers/park visitors. It is understood a former ride was once at this location, though the former ride was open-topped and not contained in a large building and therefore was marginally transparent. I'm not sure a thorough exploration of other locations for the new attraction were undertaken in order to come to a well rounded decision that this area is the best suited for the large building. From preliminary investigation, larger attractions have in the past been focused at the core of the site and set back away from the Abbey Wood.

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This 'buffer zone' of trees of Abbey Wood at the southern portion of the theme park successfully separates the two major elements of the theme park itself, and Alton village. It is quite extraordinary that it conceals the fact there is a theme park in a Conservation Area at all, in regard to both noise and visual impact. This relationship should be approached with care and caution if the topography and natural environment is to continue to work in favour of keeping the theme park discreet and undetected. I am concerned the proposal could exacerbate potential for a gradual enveloping of the natural environment here in the future, the repercussions of which have the potential to begin to impact the character of Conservation Area and its remote rural qualities.

Second; potential impact on the heritage asset/s do seem to have been assessed. Though it is surprising that no mention of any kind of repair, integration or proposed use of the Flag Tower have been acknowledged in the proposal despite the proposed scheme coming an estimated 100m or so of the folly building. There is a precedent for heritage investment and proactive conservation that run comfortably in parallel with proposals at the theme park that would be pertinent to retain. Something that is also noted in the Churnet Valley Master Plan Concept Statement for the resort.

From a heritage perspective, the context and setting in the immediate vicinity has indeed been diluted somewhat. However it is not completely beyond the point where this setting cannot be either reinstated or further exacerbation mitigated. It was noted that the Flag Tower was said as 'already' isolated from much of the site, though this is not really acknowledging the fact that folly structures in large parkland and grounds were consciously designed and built at slightly far reaching areas. The Flag Tower is still part of the site and collection of heritage assets at Alton Towers Mansion, but the general consensus from the scheme is that any opportunity to address or deal with the Flag Tower seems to have been determined to be a lost cause. I am concerned it will remain functionally derelict and without use much alike some of its counterparts.

To conclude, as before, the matter lies in the specific proposed location for the new attraction, not the attraction itself. It may be conducive to continue to explore more suitable areas for the building and its scale. In addition, I would be keen to ensure some up to date care is given to any relevant heritage assets due to an amount time passing as a result of the COVID Pandemic.

Kind regards

Miss E Holland.
Conservation Officer.

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