

SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGENERATION, CULTURE AND ADULT EDUCATION – 4th MARCH 2009

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

THE LEASOWES RESTORATION

PURPOSE

1. To update the Select Committee on the progress of The Leasowes Restoration

BACKGROUND

2. The Leasowes is a designed landscape of international standing. It is listed Grade 1 on the English Heritage 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England' as a result of its cultural status in marking a radical change in the way that landscapes were designed in the mid 18th century.
3. The Leasowes was created by the poet William Shenstone who inherited the land as a working arable farm. Soon after settling at the Leasowes in 1743 he began to transform parts of his farm into a garden which he called his 'ferme ornee', literally meaning an ornamental farm. The garden that Shenstone laid out at the Leasowes worked within the existing landscape, improving the park to blend it in with the rural scenery. Shenstone both used and respected the natural form of the landscape whilst also following the romanticism of the time. He introduced pools, and stone cascades to the natural watercourse that ran through his land and a circuit walk around the park enabled the many visitors to the park to experience the garden as a sequence of views or pictures, described in 1764 by Robert Dodsley's 'A Description of the Leasowes', which gives us a clear picture of how Shenstone's garden would have appeared shortly after his death in 1763.
4. After Shenstone's death the reputation of the Leasowes increased and for a while it became the most visited garden in England. Eminent visitors included Thomas Jefferson, President, Benjamin Franklin and John Wesley.
5. The former Select Committee for Culture and Recreation considered an update report on this project on the 11th March 2004. Following a request made by Halesowen Area Committee at its meeting held on 12th March 2008, this Select Committee considered a detailed investigation of The Leasowes Restoration project at its meeting on the 8th September 2008, which set out a detailed chronology of the events surrounding the restoration project since

Heritage Lottery Funding was secured in 1997. In summary, this investigation reported that of the period from 1997 to date, approximately one and a half year's delay could be attributed to the Council, and beyond that time, delays were attributed to external factors outside of the Council's control. The report also considered that, although there were weaknesses in the management of the project at an early stage, a robust project management regime was in place after 2001.

6. The Select Committee agreed the following recommendations:
 - That the Lead Officer be requested to submit a report, on behalf of the Committee, to a forthcoming meeting of the Cabinet, arising from the consideration given to the report submitted on the investigation into the Leasowes Restoration Project, recommending that arrangements be made to review the Council's present project management arrangements, taking on board any lessons learnt from The Leasowes Project and others taking place since the revised corporate project management arrangements were put in place in 2003/2004.
 - That arrangement be made for a site visit by Members of the Committee to Leasowes Park to view the Phase I improvements of the Leasowes Restoration Project.

Restoration work

7. The contract for the remaining restoration work under what is referred to as Phase 1 was awarded to Alun Griffiths Contractors in April 2008, following a robust quality:price procurement exercise. Members may wish to note that the methodology used to appoint Alun Griffiths Contractors has been upheld as an exemplar by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This contractor was chosen as a result of their significant experience of carrying out civil engineering and landscape works on environmentally sensitive sites where archaeological and heritage matters have to be considered. This contract includes;
 - The restoration of Beechwater Dam and cascade
 - The restoration of the High Cascade, footpaths, bridges, and smaller cascades in Virgil's Grove,
 - The dredging and restoration of Lower Pool
 - Improvements to the main entrance to the park.
8. Work started on site on the 12th May with a contractual completion date of the 6th February 2009, however, despite an adversely wet autumn which caused delay to elements of the work, completion was achieved 6 weeks early on the 17th December 2008. In addition, a separate contract was let in December 2008 to carry out the tree, shrub and aquatic planting, and this work was completed in February 2009.
9. The final account has now been agreed with the contractor, and as a result all project costs at completion have been contained within the approved funding. A summary of the project costs and budgets is shown below;

	£'000	£'000
<u>Project Costs</u>		
Restoration work	828	
Structural Engineers and Other Professional Fees	469	
Project Co-ordination	226	
Other Costs (including contingency)	70	
		1,593
<u>Council Spend Used as Matchfunding</u>		
Wardens Costs (over 6 years)	295	
Maintenance Costs (over 6 years)	140	
		436
Total Costs		2,029
<u>Funded by:-</u>		
HLF Grant		1,307
Section 106 Contribution		265
Liveability		21
Council Matchfunding		436
		2,029

10. During the contract period, considerable efforts were made to ensure that users of and visitors to the park were kept informed of progress, and that the restoration work be used as an opportunity for residents and visitors to learn about its history and value. A regular update which included current construction activity, any path closures and forthcoming events was updated on a weekly basis via site notice boards erected both at entrances to the park and at Halesowen Golf Club, Stourbridge College, Leasowes Park Centre and in the Council's Grounds Maintenance depot. In addition, information notices were posted in the vicinity of construction work so that park users were aware of the purpose of work currently underway.
11. A series of monthly 'open afternoons' with guided walks have been held so that visitors may see the work in progress in an informed and safe manner, and ask questions of the restoration team, wardens and contractor, and these have been very successful. In particular, these tours have effectively demonstrated the scale of the civil engineering works involved and the very real challenges of access, environmental sensitivity and application of 21st century engineering solutions to the recreation of an 18th century landscape. Over 250 visitors have attended these along with other organised tours of the work.
12. In addition, a number of guided schools visits have taken place; the restoration has attracted widespread and positive publicity from both the local press and national professional/trade publications, and has benefited from live radio coverage on 2 occasions. Students from Leasowes Business and Enterprise College have based a project around the production of a DVD and have interviewed visitors, and representatives from the restoration team as part of its production.

13. In accordance with the resolution of this Committee referred to in paragraph 6 above, a number of members of this Committee have been accompanied on site visits to see the work underway
14. The contractor, Alun Griffiths, has registered the site under the Considerate Constructors Scheme, a construction industry initiative aimed at improving the image of construction work. Following two audits the site has been classed as '*a very good site that is considerate*' with high scores received in particular for community liaison activities
15. Taking account of the heritage significance of the site, an archaeological watching brief has been carried out during the construction work, to ensure that any important archaeological remains are identified and appropriate action taken, however, to date, no archaeological remains of significance have been found.
16. Considerable attention has been given to the protection of the natural environment of the site; working methods have been evolved to protect fish and bird life in the pools and watercourses, and plants have been lifted in advance of clearance work and replanting in and around restored features.
17. The Leasowes Operations Team meetings have recommenced with a renewed focus now that the restoration work has commenced. These meetings have in the past been used as a stakeholder group to engage those with an interest in the park, and are currently being held monthly to ensure that the impact of the construction work is minimised and that communication with park users is working effectively. The group is attended by officers from the Directorate of the Urban Environment and representatives from the Friends of The Leasowes, Halesowen Golf Club, Stourbridge College and Alun Griffiths Contractors.

Finance

18. The project has been managed as part of the Culture & Leisure capital programme and as detailed in paragraph 9 has been delivered within the approved budget

Law

19. Under Section 9 & 10 of the Open Spaces Act 1906 the Council is empowered to acquire and maintain land for the purposes of Public Open Space.
20. Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 enables the Council to provide recreation facilities within, or outside of its area, with or without a charge.

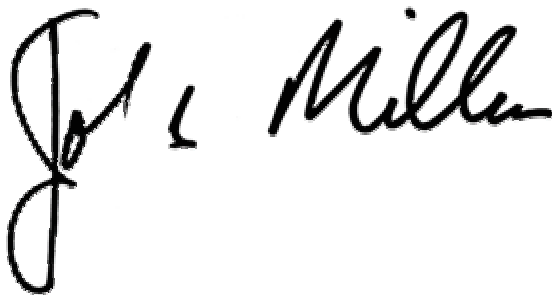
21. Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 enables the Council to do anything that is calculated to facilitate or is conducive to or incidental to the discharge of its functions

Equality Impact

22. Access improvements in Leasowes Park are being carried out with regard to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and in accordance with best practice in improving access to open space

Recommendation

1. It is proposed that the contents of this report be noted



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Background Papers

None