

Chairman's report – Autumn newsletter

As I write this report, the AELTC have submitted their planning application proposals and we are waiting for the plans to be accepted/validated by Merton. The sheer volume of documents is quite extraordinary; one hundred and one in total. The Design and Access statement is 600 pages and the Planning Statement well over 100 pages.

Over the period March – July the AELTC conducted 'Consultations' with local resident groups and stakeholders. The consultations gradually revealed, in drip feed fashion, the extent of their ambitious plans for development of the Golf Course.

Unfortunately, we are having to face this significant and unwanted building intrusion on the protected land of the Golf Course due to the continuing competition between the main Grand Slam tournaments around the world. They vie with each other to be the best and of course the Wimbledon Championship is the only grass court championship. The AELTC claims that they need to expand their facilities to keep up with the others and maintain their claimed reputation as being the best. Apparently the other tournaments have 'qualifying' facilities on the main site and more show courts. At the heart of this is the fact that the AELTC is an exclusive, members-only, club whose main facilities are only used effectively for two weeks every year but generate huge cash flow particularly in the areas of attendance and broadcasting rights.

The overall effect of the proposed plans will be to increase their attendance figures and their overall income. To do this, they intend to effectively rip up a greater part of the Golf Course and build 38 new grass courts, each surrounded by concrete ring beams a metre deep, with extensive meandering roads and hard surface pathways, two substantial maintenance buildings and five other buildings, two player buildings and a new Show Court, 100 feet high to seat 8,000. This amounts to very significant development.

However, an important point is the fact that this is a 'hybrid' application which means that a substantial part of the application seeks permission in principle/outline only and with no accompanying detail. The following is quoted from the Planning Statement:

Detailed planning permission sought for: the provision of 38 grass tennis courts and associated infrastructure, comprising of the re-profiling of the landscape and the removal, retention and replanting of trees; provision of 7 no. satellite maintenance buildings; the provision of a boardwalk around the perimeter of and across Wimbledon Park Lake, improvements to the water quality and amenity value of Wimbledon Park Lake through de-silting and enhancements to the biodiversity of the lake edge; deculverting of Wimbledon Park Lake to better reveal its historic form and alignments; highway works to Church Road; the consolidation of new pedestrian access points at the northern and southern ends of the site; and the creation of a new area of parkland with permissive public access.

Outline planning permission is sought for the erection of new buildings and structures, including an 8,000-seat parkland show court incorporating a qualifying player hub, guest facilities and associated event operational facilities; a central grounds maintenance hub and 2 no. players hubs. All detailed matters relating to these buildings are reserved for future consideration, although their general location, footprint, height, and massing is defined by a set of detailed parameter plans."

This would count as a massive development by any standards but in this case we are talking about heavily protected land. You will probably be aware that the Golf Course is part of the Heritage Wimbledon Park and is Metropolitan Open Land (MOL) (Green Belt) and a Grade II* listed park. The park was landscaped by Lancelot Capability Brown in the late 1700's, and survives as his closest to Central London.

There are three landowners: The AELTC, The Wimbledon Club and the London Borough of Merton. The (Heritage) park has been considered 'at risk' for several years by Historic England by reason of the total lack of a coordinated management plan. Nothing in these proposals seeks to address that. We regard that as a major missed opportunity.

We would have also preferred to see a plan that gave serious consideration to the needs and future ambitions of all three landowners; in particular The Wimbledon Club, whose land sits in the middle of the Golf Course, between the AELTC main site and Wimbledon Park Lake.

We are very concerned about these proposals which will completely transform the majority of the Golf Course into what can only be described as an industrial tennis complex.

We can understand the wish of the AELTC to bring the qualifying tournament onto their recently acquired adjoining property and the reasons. However, the scale of their further ambition and the surprising introduction of a new major Show Court to seat 8,000, would appear to be singularly inappropriate under the planning rules that apply to a property of MOL and Heritage status.

There is another major concern. The parkland was acquired by the London Borough of Merton in 1915. They hold the whole of the Park as a trustee for the public. In 1993 the freehold of the Golf Course was sold to the AELTC. Some of you may remember that this was a very controversial sale and the local community tried very hard to stop it. The Wimbledon Park Residents' Association, Chaired at that time by John Uden, led the movement to discourage the sale but was ultimately unsuccessful. However, as a result of their efforts, various undertakings were made in public and in the press by both the Leader of the Council at that time and the Chairman of the AELTC that they recognised that the land should remain open land and free of any future building. As a result, the Council formally minuted a number of steps to protect it for the future, including extending the Conservation Area, changing their UDP, and emphatically imposing a covenant on the AELTC in the Transfer Deed to that effect.

The following statements were published (presumably to reassure residents) in September 1993 when the freehold of the Golf Course was controversially sold to the All England by Merton Council.

John Currie, All England Chairman: "We completely understand and support everyone's determination to keep the land open and we purchased the land on that basis."

Tony Colman, Merton Council Leader: "Respecting the wishes of local people, this Council is resolute that the land will be retained as open space. All England has bought the land knowing this is our policy and is aware that we would not allow development of the site."

I recently wrote a letter to the current Chairman of the AELTC, Ian Hewitt, on several matters and pointed out the assurances made in 1993. This was the relevant part of his reply:

“As to the assurances made in 1993, I am sure you can appreciate that the requirements of the club and the community have developed in the resulting 28 years and that the AELTC has needed to work to ensure that The Championships remain a preeminent tennis tournament and continue delivering significant and improved socioeconomic benefits to the local area. It has been our stated aim for many years that purchasing the golf course and especially the freehold was done with the intention of moving our Qualifying event onsite, but our proposals also mean that Wimbledon Park will be as open as it is now in terms of verified views and will in fact, through the creation and opening up of parkland previously occupied solely by a private golf course, be substantially more openly accessible to the public in the future.”

You may also remember the incident in 2014 when Ben Ellery of the Mail on Sunday wrote an article about an interview with the then Chairman Philip Brook about massive AELTC plans for the future of the Golf Course. The article was accompanied by a detailed plan showing the myriad of buildings that would occupy the site. This was quickly refuted by the AELTC in the following statement:

“The All England Lawn Tennis Club would like to make it clear that the story in the Mail on Sunday (23.6.14) which made claims about a "massive expansion" of the Club on to Wimbledon Park Golf Club was wholly inaccurate and a complete fabrication.

“The Club’s vision for the future is published in the Wimbledon Master Plan and we will continue to be open and transparent about our intentions in liaison with the relevant authorities and our neighbours.”

Clearly the existence of a Covenant in the Transfer Deed, willingly entered into by the AELTC in 1993, seems to have presented no obstacle to their ambitions either then or now.

Fortunately, due to care taken by our predecessors, we do have an excellent archive of relevant documents including a copy of the sale Transfer document, press comments and Council minutes from 1993.

We are also concerned that Merton are seeking to introduce into the latest draft Local Plan a broad acceptance of whatever the AELTC want to do on the Golf Course. This appears to overlook the MOL, Heritage and Conservation status of the Golf Course, Merton’s obligations as trustee of parks and all the advice in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), so we are making final submissions this month to the Inspector charged with reviewing it.

Subsequent to the sale of the Golf Course in 1993, the Wimbledon Park Golf Club continued with a lease until 2018 when the balance of the lease was bought by the AELTC for circa £65m.

It is clear that the AELTC intends to argue that their proposals are compatible with the NPPF and other planning rules on MOL and that any harm is outweighed by the benefits, despite the Grade II* listing being protected by the “wholly exceptional” rule in the NPPF. So far they have made rather vague statements about ‘Community benefits’ and access to the new grass courts. Clearly they consider that the offer of part of the Golf Course as new parkland with ‘permissive access’ will swing the argument for them. However, unless this parkland is enshrined in a way which makes it permanent public park, it is unlikely this will suffice.

They also appear bent on ignoring the obligation they accepted in the covenant in the original sale deed. Maybe this has already been discussed between LBM and themselves. We do not know, but the public for whom Merton are trustees, expect and require Merton to enforce the covenant against building.

But LBM are trustees of the Park for the public, and also the planning authority. This seems to us to put them in a very conflicted position. AELTC business rates to Merton are around £5m and the AELTC have recently offered to assist LBM with the de-silting of the park lake which is likely to be several million pounds. As LBM do not appear to have that sort of money we assume that the AELTC will be picking up the major part of the cost.

We will be doing our best to highlight the position as we see it both in regard to the planning rules that apply to MOL and also the undertakings given at the time of the sale and the covenant in the Transfer deed.

We are not underestimating the task of taking on the reputation and power of the AELTC but think our case is very strong. We have strong local support from and are working in cooperation with The Wimbledon Society and all the other local Residents' associations; these are an umbrella group of RAs covering Wimbledon Park and Southfields, The Wimbledon Union of RAs, Parkside RA and Belvedere Estate RA. We have also been in discussions with The Capability Brown Society and Friends of Wimbledon Park. We are aware that we might be seen to the outside world as simply a typically well-heeled, local 'nimby' group. In fact, our aim is to uphold the Open Space and Heritage designation of the Park, and achieve a balanced and fair community use of the public parts. In addition to approaching Historic England, who appear to be one of the major formal Consultees, who will express their views to Merton, we have approached other well-known national organisations who we feel might offer guidance and support.

We hope to at least match the energy and tenacity of our predecessors back in 1993 who campaigned to stop the sale of the Golf Course at that time. They knew the real value of the land to our community for the future. Sadly, the Council at the time were more interested in money.

We believe that most local residents will support us in opposing these plans. We will keep you posted on progress and advise what you personally can do to help.