



EXETER CIVIC SOCIETY RESPONSE TO HISTORIC ENGLAND CONSULTATION REPORTS ON THE GROUNDS OF LARKBEARE HOUSE, THE SUMMERHOUSE WITHIN THEM AND THE GARDEN STEPS (3 consultation reports)

We are pleased that Historic England are now consulting on listing the grounds of Larkbeare House (Case Number 1490091), the Summerhouse (Case Number 1490092) and the garden steps (Case Number 1490204). This response addresses all three reports. Some comments are relevant to all three. Those that are relevant to a specific report are listed under that report.

Comments relevant to all three reports

The report on the grounds of Larkbeare House has a very good historical summary, pointing out that the house and grounds were commissioned by John Charles Bowring with the grounds being laid out by James Veitch and Sons. Although omitted, this historical introduction is relevant to the Summerhouse and garden steps reports – the design of the grounds, including the Summerhouse (which although older was clearly incorporated into Veitch’s design) and the steps, being a single aesthetic entity with the house. Having been designed as a single entity, the components should continue to be considered as part of that entity.

The historical summary refers to James Veitch as being a ‘key figure’ in sponsoring plant hunters. It should also be added that he and his firm were the leading nurserymen of mid Victorian England and perhaps more widely across Europe. This is important as there is very good evidence, as given by the Devon Gardens Trust in their response of 16 March to the earlier consultation on the house, that:

‘The pleasure grounds at Larkbeare are almost certainly the only surviving example anywhere in Britain of a villa garden designed and laid out by James Veitch, arguably the most significant nurseryman in mid-nineteenth century Britain, if not Europe.’

As such we consider that they would meet the criteria for listing, along with the house. We note that Veitch’s house at Gras Lawn (referenced as Buckerel Villa in the report but on the register as The Grange, Fleming Way, Exeter – List entry 1380192) is both a more modest house and has lost all its grounds to housing development, with the exception of a few conifers. Larkbeare’s grounds are superior to those at Gras Lawn and arguably so is the house. As it is clear that they formed a single aesthetic entity there is a very strong case for listing both house and grounds, the Summerhouse and steps.

The grounds, including the Summerhouse and steps, form a significant part of the Southernhay and Friars conservation area. They are the only significant extant designed landscape in that area, complete with mature trees dating from the time the landscape was laid out, with some pre-dating it.

Comments specific to the grounds Case Number 1490091

The consultation report lists what remains and what has been lost. But it makes no comment about the balance between the two, which must be an essential part of the assessment. In fact, much more remains than has been lost – a cursory review of the map of the grounds and house makes this abundantly clear. The major part of the grounds remains. And, where there have been changes, such as the car parking provision and other minor changes, they are entirely reversible.

It is correct that some outbuildings have been lost but these were a very much lesser part of the grounds. The kitchen gardens are no longer in use but their areas are still identifiable and, we understand, also the foundations of their walls. And, as Devon Gardens Trust pointed out in their response of 16 March, there are several other nationally listed gardens where the kitchen garden and relevant outbuildings and glasshouses have been lost. Moreover, these elements were functional and, by virtue of their location, not part of the overall aesthetic that Veitch (and Bowring) were seeking to achieve.

The housing development which has replaced the kitchen garden is largely hidden from the house and grounds because of the lie of the land which slopes steeply at that point and is screened by mature trees – unlike at Gras Lawn.

The report identifies the presence of an icehouse and a late nineteenth century wash house which is complete with internal fittings. We have not been able to date the icehouse but it is possible that it could be part of the earlier estate. These buildings (unlike the gate piers) may not be worthy of separate listing but we consider that they should be suitably referenced if the house and grounds are listed.

The final paragraph of the history mentions that the tree coverage remains extensive and includes mature specimens such as holm oak and yew. It should also mention Wellingtonia which appear to be of the same date as the house, and sweet chestnut which predates it.

Finally, on a factual note, para 2 of the history refers to Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker as the first Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Our understanding is that his father, Sir William Jackson Hooker (1785 – 1865) was the first director and Sir Joseph was the second.

Specific comments on the Summerhouse Case Number 1490092)

Our main comment is that the report refers to the Summerhouse as being 'possibly C18'. We do not think there is any doubt about the date of the Summerhouse. The report refers to the structure first appearing in Hayman's 1805 map of Exeter. However, Tozer's Plan of Exeter of 1792 appears to show a structure in the same place as the Summerhouse in the 1805 map. Earlier maps (1744 and 1765) possibly also show the building. There is nothing on maps before these dates. It is perhaps significant that John Baring bought the Great Larkbeare estate in 1737 which included the land on which the Summerhouse was built. Wealth and fashion would have made him a possible commissioner of the Summerhouse. The map evidence and the C18 brickwork identified by the Devon Gardens Trust expert, make us

conclude that the Summerhouse is indeed C18. The Historic Environment Record lists it as such.

The Summerhouse was very clearly incorporated into Veitch's overall design rather than neglected or demolished. Maps from late C19 all show a clear path specifically leading to the Summerhouse.

We continue to consider that the Summerhouse should be listed given its date of construction, its importance to the grounds, not only of Larkbeare House but its predecessors Great and Little Larkbeare, its' siting in the conservation area and the precedents of other listings of similar buildings given in Devon Gardens Trust response of 16 March.

Specific comments on the Garden Steps Case Number 1490204

We were surprised that the steps were not included in the visit made by the Inspector on 21 March to Larkbeare but instead the report relies on other data sources.

As a consequence, the report does not, but should, make clear that the steps are an integral and original part of the overall design. They are therefore worthy of listing in their own right (as the quay wall has been listed) which would be in line with established practice and precedent.

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