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Dear David Cox,

PL/2025/07553 Footpath improvement works including associated engineering and landscaping works and new benches: Stourhead House and Park, Stourton, Warminster, BA12 6QF

Thank you for consulting the Gardens Trust (GT) in its role as Statutory Consultee on the above application which may have a material impact on the significance of the Stourhead, an historic designed landscape of particular and international significance which is included by Historic England on the Register of Parks and Gardens (RPG) of Special Historic Interest at Grade I. The inclusion of this site on the statutory register requires the greatest weight to be given to its conservation (National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) paragraph 212).

Significance

Stourhead contains an extensive and complex landscape garden and park. Its main phases of development date from the C18, C19, and C20. This includes mid to late C18 works by Henry Hoare II, Henry Flitcroft, and William Privet of Chilmark, late C18 and early C19 works by Richard Colt Hoare, and C20 conservation and restoration work by the National Trust (Register entry 1000471).

Background

We note that The National Trust (NT) set up the Pathway Project to address the problems of maintaining the garden paths from both the pressure of ever-increasing visitor numbers and rainfall levels, particularly on the very popular 18th century circular garden walk around the lake. Whilst the current surface, traditional self-binding gravel, is in keeping with the historic landscape it is unable to cope with the increasing pressure being placed upon it. The steep ground, over which much of the garden is laid out, has historically posed challenges in terms of drainage and erosion, and these are now increasing due to the higher rainfall resulting from climate change. Through the project the NT hopes to be able to identify long-term, sustainable solutions for restoration and maintenance of the path network across the Stourhead landscape, and the GT supports these aims. The project has been informed by considerable historic research including *Historic Development & Significance* report (2022) and *Conservation Statement* (2024) by Judith Teasdale. Plus, extensive internal and external pre-consultation, including with Historic England. One of the main challenges faced by the project is the identification of alternative footpath materials which can withstand erosion pressures both from increased footfall and rainfall. To this end, several potential materials were assessed.

Proposals and Impact

The proposals seek to realign and enhance the main path circuit around the lake while securing its heritage significance and contribution to the RPG overall. They include proposals to both, reduce the width of some path sections where they have become widened and eroded by visitor over time, as well as realign and, in some places, slightly widen existing paths. Some path realignment is necessitated by adjacent mature/historic trees. The proposed realignments would include raising the footpaths over some sections, reducing falls on others and filling in edges. We note that, as a result of assessment of alternative surfacing material, a blended use of surfacing materials is

proposed - such as Breedon Amber Gold for the majority, with areas of resin bonded gravel likely in Daltex Yellow for areas of particularly high wear. New metal edging (untreated steel), timber edging, the use of stone setts and the repair and retention of historic random stone edging also seem appropriate treatments. Raising the level of the existing paths should allow water to discharge more easily and help to protect existing tree roots. However, we note the risks associated with the potential impact of a sealed footpath surface on the character of the historic landscape and welcome the retention of traditional un-bound gravel as surfacing on the flatter sections of footpaths.

The main area of notable change and impact would appear to be in front of the Pantheon (Listed Grade I), where it is proposed to widen the hard standing to create a semi-circle to a maximum width of 7.5m (the present path is 2.4m wide). This would require the slight regrading of the bank beyond which descends to the lake, but other existing historic hardstanding around the building, such as stone slabs, would be retained. The GT accepts the justification for this change as this building is one of the key viewing points across the gardens where visitors naturally congregate. It also provides opportunity for safe manoeuvre of tramper vehicles for less able visitors. Any impact should be localised, and the new hard standing should not be visible in views from the east or northeast. As such this may represent some very minor, less than substantial harm to the significance of the RPG at the very lowest end of the scale but the GT considers this can be justified by the reduced level of erosion of the footpath expected, compared with the current situation, and the improved visitor experience and public benefit.

We understand that path works across the landscape will be phased and those in the area of the main dam in the southwest will be undertaken as part of future works to the dam. As this is likely to be a significant planning application, the Gardens Trust would be grateful to be included in the consultation in due course.

Policy

As the application stands the GT considers the application meets the requirements of NPPF paragraphs 212, 213 and 215: -

212 - Great weight should be given to the asset's conservation: the RPG is unlikely to suffer any loss of, or harm to, the overall significance of the RPG

213 - Any harm to the significance to the RPG can be clearly and convincingly justified

214 - Any harm to the significance to the RPG is outweighed by the public benefit to be derived.

Conclusion

The Gardens Trust considers this application a positive approach by Stourhead to address the considerable wear and tear on the area around the lake resulting from visitor pressure and increasing rainfall levels. Whilst it does represent change, we hope the project is successful and can set a benchmark for similar proposals that might be forthcoming from other NT properties or private estates in the future. We consider Stourhead has invested significant time and money into this and demonstrates they have taken the conservation of the Stourhead RPG seriously. On this basis we therefore support this application.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Allighan BSc (Hons) MSc CMLI
Conservation Officer

cc Wiltshire Gardens Trust