

DEVIZES CASTLE:
LADIES' GATE.



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1.0 INTRODUCTION.

- 1.1 The current proposal is for the repair of the Ladies' Gate, which is suffering from serious subsidence, & if not addressed, the gate is at risk of catastrophic structural failure.
- 1.2 This Impact Assessment is intended accompany the application for the repair of the gate; & is not intended to form a stand-alone document, but should be read in conjunction with the Heritage Appraisal that accompanied the original application.

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2.0 BACKGROUND.

- 2.1 The precise date of the *Ladies' Gate* is unclear, but it is clearly depicted & named in the 1883 Sales Particulars. It is absent from the earliest photographs which also omit features such as the Oratory (Heritage Appraisal, figure 20), & it would thus appear to date from the final, & most elaborate phase of works for Robert Leach. All three of Robert Leech's phases have been identified in the Heritage Appraisal as of high significance.
- 2.2 The *Ladies Gate*, unlike some of the other gates, appears to be composed entirely of 19th-century, purpose-carved stone blockwork (whether decorative, or rock-faced rustication), & to contain no genuine Romanesque spolia.
- 2.3 As is apparent both from the extreme lean of the gate, readily visible to the naked eye, & from the modern buttresses built to the west, the gate has suffered from considerable movement leaning to the west, twisting the structure & placing the western face under compression & the eastern under tension; stresses that the gate was never designed or intended to handle, resulting in multiple opening joints & examples of some stones being loose & others cracking under compression.

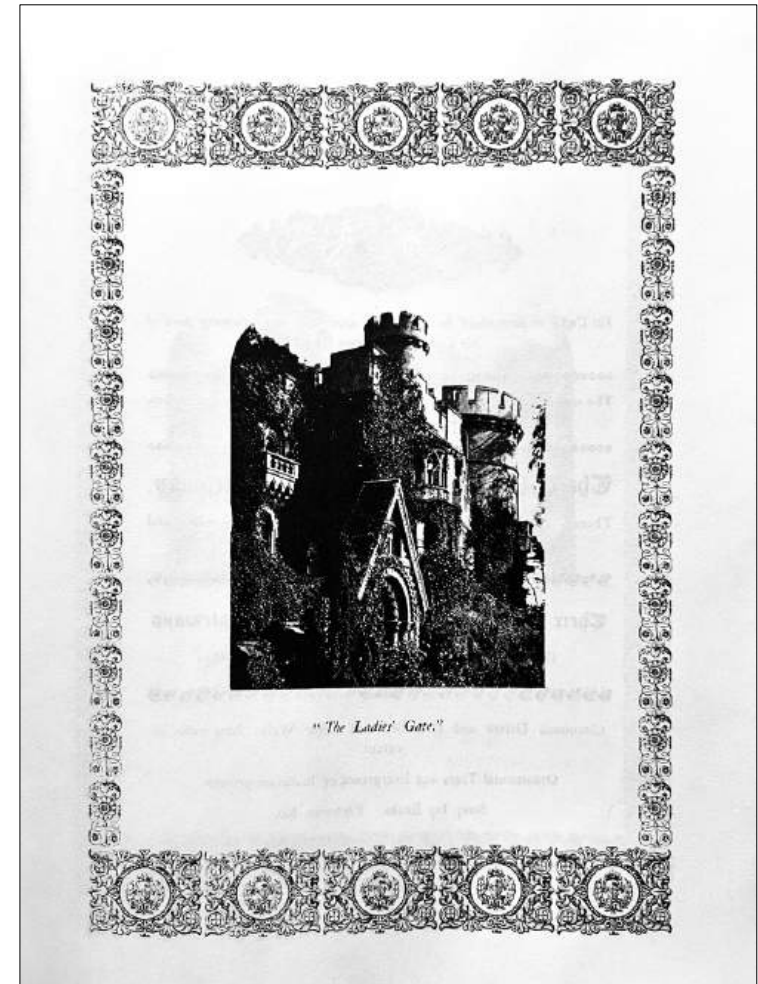


Figure 1 Photograph of the Ladies' Gate from the 1883 Sales Particulars.

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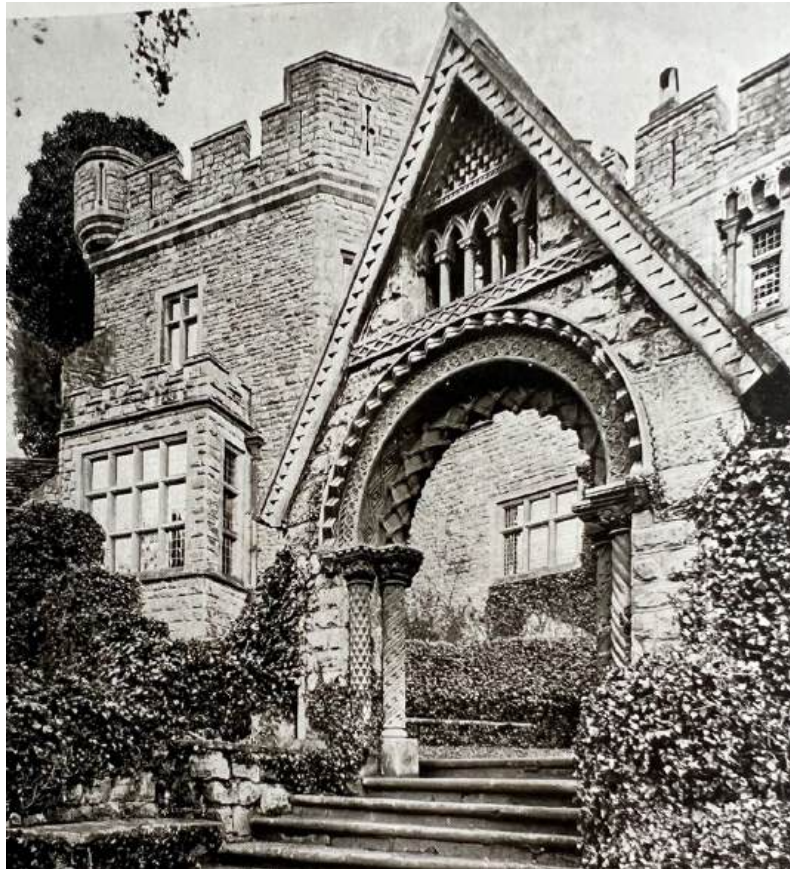


Figure 2 *Ladies' Gate, west face, from the 1914 sales particulars (Historic England Archive, JCO1216).*

- 2.4 This has been assessed & confirmed in the report by Frank Haywood & Associates, which identified that the western side of the gate was built atop the steps, with no meaningful footings.

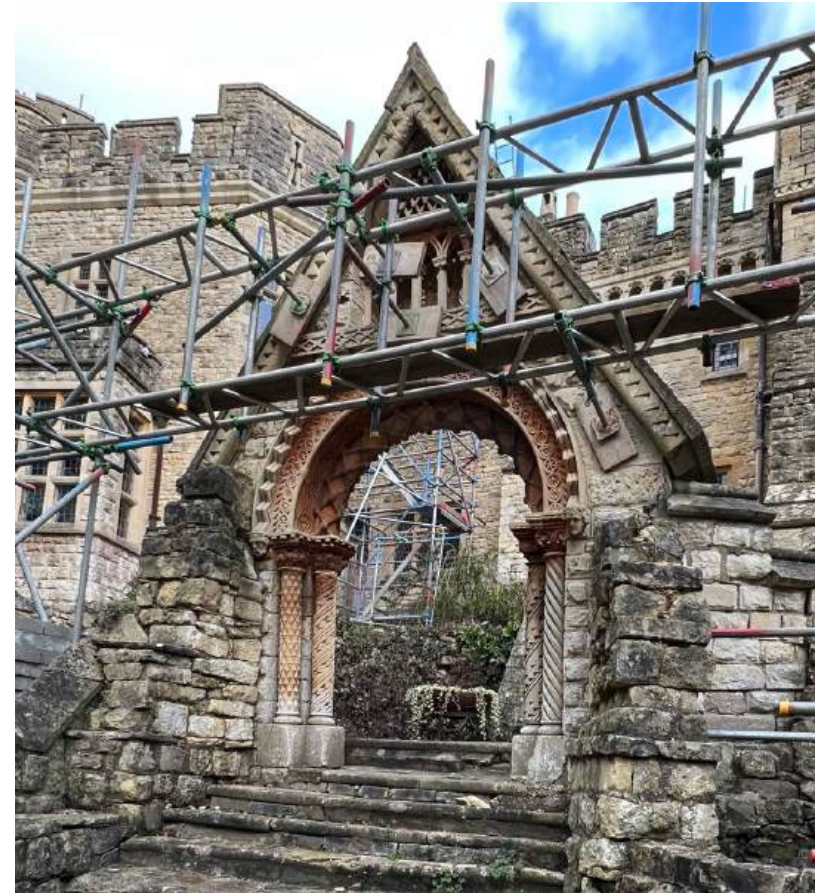


Figure 3 *Ladies' Gate, west face, 2024.*

- 2.5 These steps are slightly earlier, as the photograph reproduced at figure 20 of the Heritage Appraisal shows them, but not the Ladies' Gate. Consequently, the steps were not built to take the weight of the gate, which has thus badly subsided.

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Figure 4 Southern jamb, east side.



Figure 5 Southern jamb, west side.

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- 2.6 This is particularly prominent on the southern pier. On the eastern side, which is being stretched in tension, the inner colonnette no longer bears any weight, & is entirely loose. By contrast, the western face of the southern pier is being crushed in compression, & the plinth of the outermost colonnette has fractured under the pressure. There is also spreading of the arch, visible at the apex where there is splitting of the archivolt.

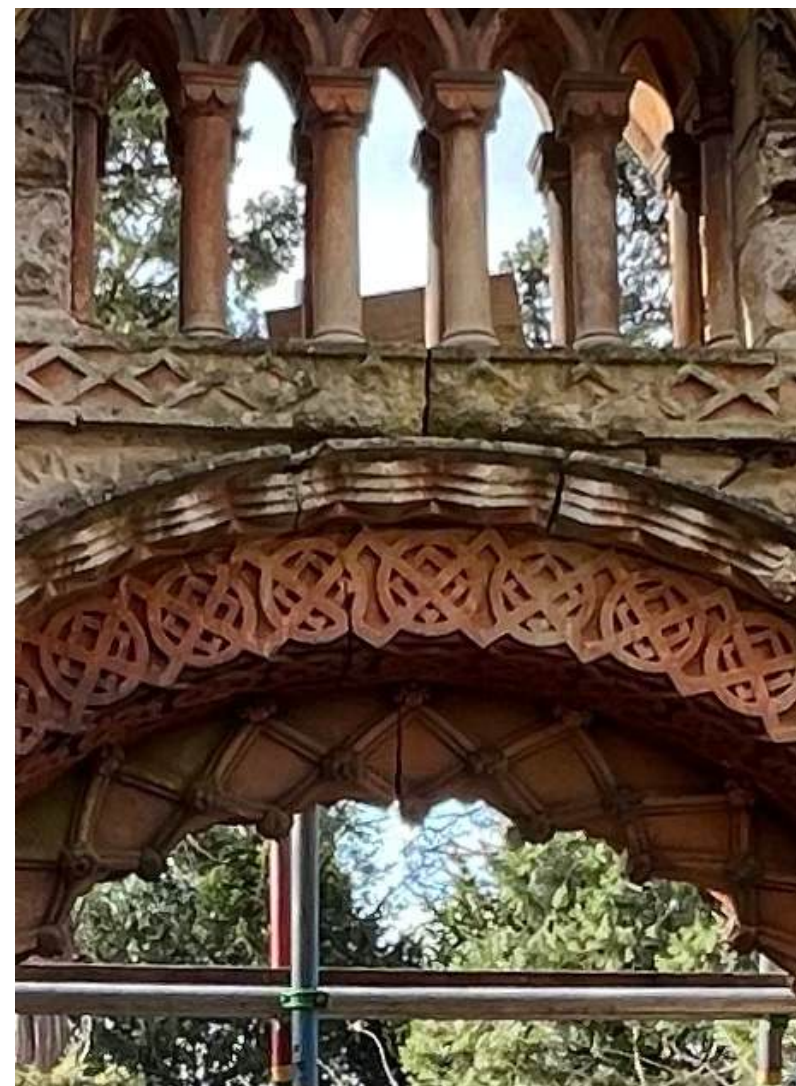


Figure 6 Spreading at the apex of the arch.

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3.0 PROPOSAL.

3.1 The intention is to try to ensure the public/heritage benefit of the long-term stability & survival of the gate, with the minimum level of harm to significance. To this end, four options have been considered:

3.2

OPTION 1: DO NOTHING.

3.3 The engineer's report confirms if no urgent works are undertaken, the gate is likely to continue moving, even with the existing modern buttresses. The current level of movement has already led to damage to decorative stones that are now under compression; this would continue, causing further damage, & probably lead to collapse, which would cause considerable damage to the decorative stonework, as well as to the steps below. Due to safety concerns, the arch would have to be cordoned off, blocking the main historic access from the house to the garden.

IMPACT.

3.4 In the immediate future, this option would avoid any harm to the gate, & sustain its significance, although the blocking of the garden access route for safety would harm the historic

circulation routes of the designed setting of the listed building. However, in the future (& potentially the not too-distant future) this option is likely to lead to increased, potentially catastrophic harm to significance with little public/conservation benefit.

OPTION 2: REPAIR EXISTING/CONSOLIDATE AS FOUND.

3.5

The possibility of consolidating the gate in its current form was considered as the minimally intrusive solution. However, excavating sufficient pits to underpin without causing harm to the gate or steps would be problematic, & the current lean of the gate, even if underpinned, would still place considerable strain on the masonry (especially those elements crumbling under compression) & thus this option would leave the gate with such a lean to the west that catastrophic structural failure would still be possible, & the gate would still probably have to be cordoned off for safety..

IMPACT.

3.6

Consequently, this option, even if practically possible, would entail little harm to significance of the gate itself, although the blocking of the main circulation route of the garden would still

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harm the setting & significance of the house, & by failing to ensure the long-term stability & survival of the gate, would similarly have little public/heritage benefit.

OPTION 3: JACK-UP THE GATE & UNDERPIN.

- 3.7 The engineer's report identifies the practical difficulties of this option, due to the presence of the historic steps. Furthermore, the gate has settled into its current position, with open joints, & cracking & loose stones & spreading of the voussoirs of the arch. Attempting to jack up the arch in one piece is likely to put considerable further pressure & stress on the stonework & joints which have settled into their current positions, & the probability is that this would cause considerable further damage to the finely-carved & detailed stone blocks.

IMPACT.

- 3.8 Consequently, even were this option to be reasonably possible, the benefits of initially retaining as much of the fabric *in situ* as possible is likely to be outweighed by the greater level of harm from damage to the historic stones, & from the potentially greater level of stone replacement to which this would lead.

OPTION 4: RECORD, DISMANTLE & RE-ERECT ON NEW FOUNDATIONS.

- 3.9 The final option is to thoroughly record the gate & every block of stone, then very carefully dismantle it block-by-block. New footings could then be erected, & the gate would then be pieced back together in its correct, vertical position. This would restore the gate to its historic form, & would re-balance the centre of gravity, removing the excessive pressure on the stones to the west & closing the joints to the east. It would also allow the 20th-century buttresses to the west, which obscure some of the historic detail, to be removed.

IMPACT.

- 3.10 This option would be the most physically disruptive to the gate as a whole, but would be the most benign to the stone blocks themselves which could be conserved & repaired individually as required, & then reinstated in the re-erected gate with the correct stresses, vertical & the pressure of the arch itself, but with none of the harmful compression & tension stresses of the gate twisting to the west. This would have the considerable public/heritage benefit of securing the long-term stability & survival of the gate, & of restoring its intended appearance with the removal of the cluttering modern buttresses.

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4.0 CONCLUSION.

4.1 The current condition of the Ladies' Gate is parlous, & without some intervention, collapse is likely, & the main access route from the house to the garden has to be blocked for safety. Of the four options considered, the one that presents the most realistic way of stabilising the gate on footings that are secure & stable, without causing further harm to the decorative stonework itself, is the option of recording, dismantling & then re-erecting the gate. This would minimise the immediate risk of harm or damage to the decorative stonework, & would provide the considerable public/heritage benefit of removing the danger of collapse; there would also be the added benefit of removing the clumsy modern buttresses to restore the gate to its historic design, & allowing it function as the main circulation route between the house & its designed garden.

4.2 Consequently, this is the option that would, overall, best preserve the special interest & sustain the significance of the

Ladies' Gate, & its contribution to Devizes Castle as a whole, thereby preserving its special interest & sustaining its significance. As such the proposals would accord with National Policy as stated in Section 16 of the NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK, & local policy as laid out in the WILTSHIRE LOCAL PLAN, particularly Core Policy 58 (Conservation of the Historic Environment), & it is hoped that the proposals will be welcomed & supported.

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Justin Ayton was English Heritage's Historic Buildings Inspector for Bristol & Gloucestershire from 2004 until early 2013, before which he was a Conservation & Design Officer for the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea; Justin received a degree in History of Art & Heritage Management from the University of Buckingham in 1997, & an M.A. in Architectural History from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1998.



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