Revised Heritage Statement for the Improvement to Woodland adjacent to St George's Church, Front Street, East Boldon -ST/0875/23/FUL

This statement is prepared on behalf of the Joint Benefice Council of the Boldons for their proposed development to improve the woodland adjacent to St George's Church, Front Street, East Boldon.

The Site

The site is 0.24 ha in size comprising of woodland in the ownership of the Council. There are 40 trees on site comprising of 21 mature and 15 semi -mature trees. Part of the site has undergrowth of brambles, snowberries and other bushes. There are some spring daffodils and a large amount of summer season cow parsley. A rookery is present in some of the mature trees.

The site has been fenced off with wood palin to the front and side, some of which blew down in the 2021 winter's gales. The western boundary adjoins the driveway to the church and the southern boundary has a vehicle access gate for maintenance.

The site lies immediately to the north of the church and provides a visual and physical barrier to viewing the church from Front Street.

Description of the Proposal

The proposal involves the creation of a no-dig pathway throughout the site to allow access by wheelchairs and prams/ buggies with two access points on to the footway adjoining Front Street. The fence line would be brought back from the edge of the footway by 1 foot. There would also be access from the path to the church driveway. All access points would have barriers to prevent access on to the highway or driveway. Bench seating would be provided in two locations. New low level planting areas are proposed with plants suitable for under tree canopy growth.

Site History

The East Boldon Conservation Area Character Appraisal published in 2006 shows the history of the site in map form.

In 1876 the map shows an "old quarry" along the western boundary of the site. This remained the same in 1898 with the school shown on the adjoining land.

In 1919, the application site is shown as open space with tree planting ,with the land to the south as a field. In 1922 the church was built on this land to the south of the application site.

The East Boldon Neighbourhood Plan, Community Character Statement, 2019 shows a map of 1939 with the application site with its current boundary but extending further east with a small field entrance dividing it from the woodland surrounding the war memorial. The map denotes woodland on the application site.

The Land Registry records that the land, was conveyed to Boldon Urban District Council on the 8th July 1947 by Gordon Durham and Co. Ltd.

The 1947 conveyance included a covenant by the Council for ever to maintain at its own expense the plantations, trees and shrubs, and the fences surrounding the same on the piece of land.

The map of 1959 shows the development of the Gordon Drive housing immediately to the east of the application site and the present day boundary is established.

St George's Church

The East Boldon Conservation Area Character Appraisal describes the church as follows:

"St George's Church is typical of red-brick churches of the 1920s and 30s, adopting a simple, plain Romanesque style with a square bell tower in the style of a campanile. Its buttresses, roundheaded windows, clerestory windows, large circular window are attractive features whilst the later classical porch extension has mock-Georgian timber windows. The church site is set back from the street behind a thick verge of trees, shrubs and a picket fence, retaining some sense of a former field boundary."

East Boldon Neighbourhood Plan Community Character Statement adds:

"A larger adjoining extension in basilican classical style was added in 1934. The original building then acted as the Lady Chapel until 1986 when it was converted to a nursery and ancillary accommodation."

In 2011, the Council adopted the Locally Significant Heritage Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).It sets out objectives for the protection and enhancement of locally heritage assets.

The document describes East Boldon as follows:

East Boldon also retains its historic core, and has seen mainly gradual, organic change with a diverse mix of architectural styles stretching from the 17th century to the present day. Until the middle of the 19th century, East Boldon remained small and rural. Early buildings were in rubble or course squared local magnesian limestone. Substantial change began with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the region and a catalytic development was the construction of Brandling Junction Railway between Newcastle and Sunderland, one of the first ever passenger railways. Consequently the village was used as a commuter settlement, with Victorian and Edwardian buildings introducing warm red brick throughout the village. Whilst there has continued to be much development here in the last few decades, the village has held on to its traditional character and appeal.

St George's Church was included as number 22 for Character Area 3 – The Boldons on the Local List in this document.

Trees in the Conservation Area

There are 40 trees on the application site comprising of 21 mature and 15 semi-mature trees. These trees are protected as they are within the Conservation Area and are within the ownership and control

of the Council. None of the trees are subject to a Tree Preservation Order; however there is a TPO in the garden of Number 8 Gordon Drive.

The East Boldon Conservation Area Management Plan was adopted in 2009 proposed a detailed condition survey of existing trees and hedgerows and outlined a management plan to ensure continued tree coverage.

A full survey of all trees on the application site was undertaken for the Council in 2018, which indicated at that time no trees needed to be removed. The maturity of the woodland provides an important setting to St George's Church.

Policy Context

Development within East Boldon Conservation Area is subject to current Development Plan Core Strategy policies EA1 and EA 4 and Development Management policy DM6.

East Boldon Neighbourhood Plan Policy EB 4: Heritage Assets requires that where a development may impact on a heritage asset that applicants should provide information including any contribution made by their setting.

It goes on to state that development within or affecting the setting of the East Boldon Conservation Area will be supported where it preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the Conservation area and its setting.

One of the key considerations of the Policy EB4 is "Maintaining the spacious character of the area by protecting open space, including gardens and trees from unsympathetic development."

The proposals by the Joint Benefice Council of the Boldons subject to this application would provide an area of open space for users of the church building and residents of the village and visitors. They would also provide enhanced pedestrian access to the church.

East Boldon Neighbourhood Plan also allocates the application site as Local Green Space under Policy EB16. A Local Green Space and protected Open Space Background Paper was prepared which shows the reason why the site is of particular importance to the local Community.

Impact of the proposal on the Conservation Area and Heritage Assets

The National Planning Policy Framework 2023 (NPPF) requires Local Planning Authorities to consider the potential impacts of development proposals on the significance of designated heritage assets. This involves assessing whether any harm to the asset results from the development proposal.

The Historic Environment Officer states that the proposed development would alter the character and appearance of East Boldon Conservation Area by removing a traditional timber fence and installing a knee rail, and introducing an element of hard landscaping to an area that has traditional been woodland. They state that this would amount to 'less than substantial harm' which can only be justified

if it delivers the economic, social and environmental objectives of sustainable development described in the National Planning Policy Framework.

The timber knee rail fencing proposed seeks to replicate the detail used at Rectory Bank, the Western Gateway into the Boldons, and employed recently by the Council in Grange Park and many locations throughout South Tyneside. This type of fencing is also prevalent in other local conservation areas such Cleadon and Whitburn.

The specification allows for flexibility as the position of posts can be located to avoid damaging tree root systems.

The proposed design lends itself to the incorporation of a timber toe board so that existing soil levels can be retained, thereby preventing root damage, and ensuring that vegetation is not washed onto the public footpath. Small openings would be placed in the toe board to act as “hedgehog highways”.

Currently the existing shoulder height military pale timber fencing, which sits along two thirds of the boundary with the busy A184 road (part of the site has been open for several years), has the effect of pushing passing pedestrians toward the road. The use of a lower height fence as proposed would ameliorate this effect. This is especially important given the use of the path as a major route to the adjoining infant school.

The use of timber, which is a more sustainable, environmentally friendly, and less costly material than galvanized and powder coated metal fencing, is an important consideration given the Councils commitment to the environment and its state of finances. It is also thought that this traditional design, used in other similar areas in South Tyneside, would be best suited to the constraints of the Conservation Area and would help give some consistency to the treatment of the gateways into the Boldons.

The proposal to create a communal area with no-dig pathway and associated planting and landscaping does seek to provide the wider public benefits described in the NPPF.

St Georges Church provides a community hub for the village hosting community events as well as religious services. It also has meeting facilities used by local groups. The proposed development would provide additional pedestrian access to the entrance to the church. It would also enhance the immediate setting of the building providing a more welcoming environment, and creating a space for wedding and christening photographs etc. to be taken.

The proposed communal area with its no-dig pathway and seating would provide residents the opportunity to enjoy the open space in a similar way to the nearby Grange Park. With regard to the seating, the proposal includes the installation of Woodscape Type 2 backless benches and Woodscape Type 2 circular tree seats, manufactured from high-quality timber-appearance composite materials.

Composite seating of a similar appearance and specification has been successfully installed at Grange Park, located in close proximity to the application site. Grange Park forms part of the same wider village context and is experienced by residents and visitors as a comparable public open space. The use of

composite seating within Grange Park has not resulted in harm to the character or appearance of the surrounding environment and has become an accepted element of the local public realm.







This established precedent demonstrates that the use of timber-effect composite seating is already part of the local landscape vocabulary and is therefore not visually intrusive or alien within East Boldon.

The proposed Woodscape Type 2 seating has been selected specifically for its simple, understated form and natural timber-like finish, which closely resembles traditional timber seating. The design avoids excessive ornamentation or overtly contemporary detailing, ensuring that it does not compete visually with the historic fabric of St George's Church or its setting.

The seating is modest in scale, reversible in nature, and does not involve ground disturbance beyond minor fixings. It does not affect historic fabric and does not interrupt key views of St George's Church. As such, the proposal results in no harm to the significance or setting of the listed building.

On the contrary, the provision of high-quality seating encourages respectful enjoyment of the woodland and enhances public appreciation of the church's setting, contributing positively to the experience of the heritage asset.

The woodland location provides a natural backdrop, and the muted tones of the seating will allow it to sit comfortably within the landscape, reinforcing the informal, contemplative character of the space rather than detracting from it.

The proposals will open up views of this woodland and wildflower planting area, together with views of the architecturally significant church building, a local heritage asset. This will greatly improve the visual impact of the building and the woodland area on the street scene and the conservation area, from the adjoining public footpaths and roads. It will also provide substantial social, wellbeing / mental health and environmental benefits to the local community.

In view of this, it is considered that the proposed development does deliver the economic, social and environmental benefits required.

At present the area adjoining the church is poorly maintained and does not enhance the setting of the conservation area or the locally listed heritage asset. It has been a location for anti social activities in the past. These have been exacerbated by the 'screening' effect provided by the high palin fence & the high / dense undergrowth. The site also suffers from constant littering, particularly cans, bottles & takeaway containers.

Conclusion

The proposals by the Joint Benefic Council of the Boldons will create an area of public open space at the centre of East Boldon Conservation Area. It will enhance the setting of St George's Church and improve access to the building.

The proposals meet the requirements of the heritage policies in the current Development Plan and East Boldon Neighbourhood Plan.