

## **Notes of a meeting of the Knowle Park and Gardens Working Group Held in Knowle Gardens 4pm on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

Present: Councillors Ian Barlow, Kevin Walker and Kelvin Dent, Ed Dolphin

Also: Dianne Long (Devon Gardens Trust) and Sue Dent (Volunteer)

Apologies: Di Fuller, Ben Cruickshank

### **1) Background.**

On 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021, the Environment Committee set up a Working Group to look at progressing a Management Plan for the Knowle. The members are Councillors Ian Barlow and Kelvin Dent together with Ed Dolphin and Di Fuller. The Committee also suggested establishing a group of volunteers to be known as Friends of the Knowle.

On 26<sup>th</sup> April 2023, Ed Dolphin reported to the Environment Committee that it was proposed to designate three main areas in the Knowle: the Car-park and Arena (for which the Tourism and Economy Committee is responsible), the Wild Gardens in the southern corner of the Park (where ground maintenance would be minimal), and the Formal Gardens which would be gradually restored.

In December 2023, the Knowle Park and Gardens were gifted by East Devon District Council to Sidmouth Town Council along with a one-off payment of £50k towards future maintenance.

On 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024, the Environment Committee noted that Councillor Walker had joined the Friends of the Knowle as the Council's representative. In consultation with the Chair, it is now suggested that Councillor Walker should be included as a member of the Working Group referred to above.

### **2) Update.**

Kelvin reported that at a meeting including the Town Clerk, it was agreed that the Town Council's independent contractor, Ben Cruickshank, would work to maintain the Knowle (grass and hedge cutting, removing invasive species etc) on Fridays. Two Friday sessions had been completed to date by Ben together with a small group of volunteers.

Members of the Working Group remarked on the noticeable improvement to the garden, particularly the state of the footpath.

Kelvin also reported that he was awaiting quotes from Insurance Brokers for public liability and personal accident cover as a prelude to setting up the Friends of the Knowle. A risk assessment would also need to be carried out.

### **3) Devon Gardens Trust**

Members of the Working Group welcomed Dr Dianne Long, the Chair of Devon Gardens Trust's Conservation Committee who had been invited to give advice on the future development of the Formal Garden. Dianne made a number of suggestions, both at the meeting on site and in a subsequent e-mail. These are set out below.

### **4) Suggestions from the Devon Gardens Trust.**

- 1) Establish a long-term aim or vision. For example, do the Working Group wish to restore the gardens to give an impression of how they were in their hey-day as a setting for a marine villa with specimen plants including exotic and more recent additions, whilst ensuring that the gardens are sustainable?
- 2) Identify the aims of the conservation work. These could include, for example:
  - i) to open up the views especially looking toward the sea from the top of the garden
  - ii) to establish more paths to facilitate access throughout the garden
  - iii) to introduce areas of colour amongst the green
  - iv) to enhance appreciation of individual trees by removing invading shrubs
- 3) A map of the trees already exists. However, a large-scale plan (A2 or A1 size) should be drawn up showing the existing shrubs as well. Ideally, this should be 1:50 or 1:100. Ed kindly volunteered to prepare a plan.
- 4) The Working Group should then start to decide which shrubs are worthy of retention and which should be removed because of their condition or overcrowding. Generally, dead and diseased specimens should be removed and laurel and rhododendron ponticum removed or reduced. The rhododendron ponticum harbours phytophthora fungus which not only harms the shrubs themselves but can affect other species including other Rhododendrons, Viburnums and Larch. The laurels have grown higher and wider than envisaged when they were originally planted and could be reduced to a "laurel lawn".
- 5) In considering which shrubs to retain, the historic context of the garden should be borne in mind and the extent to which it is practical to return to that state.

- 6) The Working Group should devise a staged approach to improving the garden and decide which areas to prioritize. Improvements should be manageable and sustainable.
- 7) Several trees, including the monkey-puzzle tree, would benefit from a crown lift and the removal of dead branches
- 8) Consider health and safety requirements and remedy obvious risks eg exposed metal cables attached to the fallen limb of a Monterey Pine tree.
- 9) Consider the entrance to the garden and how it could be made more attractive eg a lovely tree or a group of planting which could be glimpsed from outside and draw people further in.
- 10) The local community, through the Friends of the Knowle, together with special interest groups such as the Arboretum and the Biodiversity Group should be involved in the planning and decision making.
- 11) An interpretation board would be highly desirable in order to explain to local residents and visitors what work was being undertaken, by whom and for what reason. The board could also refer to fauna and flora in the garden.
- 12) Wider use of the garden by the General Public should be encouraged by means of themed events
- 13) The provision of benches and trees should be part of a long-term plan. A policy should be drawn up for the dedication of trees and benches by members of the public so that benches of a particular design or trees of particular species could be dedicated for a specified period. There may be other opportunities for sponsorship eg bulbs, birdboxes.
- 14) Engage in due course with McCarthy Stone to the mutual benefit in particular with regard to planting on the top terrace.
- 15) Ask EDDC's Conservation Officer about the condition of the Summerhouse and removing ivy and other weeds. As the Summerhouse is a listed building the advice of Historic England may also be required.
- 16) Restore the shells in the panels of the Summerhouse if possible and, if not, Historic England might be happy to consider having painted panels that would give the impression of shell-work. This could be an educational or an artist-in-residence project.
- 17) Plan to prune the yew tree by the Summerhouse. Combined with clearing the Summerhouse, this would revive this area which could be used for events and draw people into the garden.
- 18) Before building work begins, ask McCarthy Stone to erect a hoarding which could include some interpretation about the gardens and make them more attractive, even while work is underway.
- 19) Check if a Friends of the Knowle group can legally apply for grants.

20) Ensure that the Public are kept informed well ahead of any work, especially the removal of any large trees or shrubs and explain why.

#### **5) Recommendations.**

- 1) To confirm Councillor Walker's membership of the Working Group
- 2) To note the report and to ask the Working Group to proceed to prepare a Management Plan for the Knowle Park and Gardens for approval by the Environment Committee in due course.