

Coombe Boat House Restoration - A viable option

Update Note for Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee – 6th July 2005

Introduction

At a meeting of the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee held on the 24th of November 2004 a decision was made to defer the funding of the restoration of the Coombe boat house. This was to allow Officers to consider what alternative uses this historic building could be put to after its restoration and report back on these alternative uses.

Project brief.

To investigate future uses of the boat house paying due regard to:

1. Ensuring any project has the support of English Heritage, Rugby Planners, and English Nature.
2. Consultation with possible future partners or users.
3. Finance, income or future expenditure.
4. Feasibility of marketing the boat house to the private sector
5. Impact of renovating a building in a remote area of the Country Park.
6. Could the boat house be dismantled and rebuild elsewhere on the estate

Option 1

Arts and Education studio.

At present approx 6,500 children visit Coombe each year. These young people get involved in a diverse range of activities covering a wide range of curriculum topics (see attached leaflets). Sometimes these activities come into conflict with our other visitors, this manifests itself in various ways, anything from education props and equipment being moved by some of our visitors with a warped sense of humour, to non booked school parties and booked school parties trying to use the same facilities; this is most evident in the bird hide. Sharing this facility with 30 excited young people is hardly conducive to a quiet mornings bird watching!

We have been trying to improve this problem recently by making more use of the West Deer Park. At present, only a small amount of this land is open to the public, and this is only during the months of April to August (*wild flower meadow*). This allows us to give our booked school groups a special experience in an area we know our props will be safe and left undisturbed and the children will not conflict with other park users, this has been very successful over the last year and we are looking to expand on this success.

Our intention would be to extend this usage to include the boathouse. A number of our packages would benefit from having a destination within the park which would form part of a route; particularly "*The making of the Coombe Landscape*", "*Wildlife Ranger*", and "*Focus on Herons*". The distance travelled would be very similar to that required to get to the existing bird hide, but the experience would be very different. The Deer Park is a big open landscape; the views are quite spectacular, whilst the journey to the existing hide is through woodland. We would also be taking our local young people into a historic landscape that is very much part of Coventry's Cultural Heritage, the 1770's boat house has a sense of history both in its position in the landscape and how it is built, this in itself will be a useful teaching aid. I feel that these fits well into our Heritage Strategy p10 The City Councils Role – Our Objectives are to:

- *Make the city's heritage accessible to all as a means of education, inspiration and understanding.*
- *Ensure we make our heritage accessible and appealing to the widest possible audience*
- *Ensure we promote greater involvement in heritage matters.*
- *Help to create a sustainable city through the conservation of the city's green heritage, including the creation of diverse habitats, and the conservation of historic woodlands, green spaces, rivers, canals and open water.*

In providing facilities based on the principle of 'Cradle to the Grave' learning, we would therefore wish to encourage usage of the boathouse studio/hide by people of all ages.

As most of our school activities are during school hours during the week, at other times we would look to hire the facility out to local artists and photography groups/individuals. This would be an inspiring place to get away from it all and get some shots of a lifetime. With a little work, the area immediately around the boathouse could be made to be very attractive to wildlife. This facility could be combined with the Gallery in the Visitor Centre to provide an opportunity to create displays and sell there work, to an existing audience of 400,000 plus annually. I feel this fits well with the Strategic Arts Policy – p3 Commitments and Priorities for the Arts. –

- ***Partnerships: to help extend and develop creative work, audiences and access.***

and our **Heritage Strategy p10 The City Councils Role – Our Objectives are to:**

- *Make the city's heritage accessible to all as a means of education, inspiration and understanding.*
- *Ensure we make our heritage accessible and appealing to the widest possible audience*
- *Ensure we promote greater involvement in heritage matters.*

- *Use the city's heritage to support the City councils objectives and aims of the community plan.*

Para on Stepping out

I have discussed this option with various individuals within the education/arts field. They were all positive. Clare Huby (Arts Development Officer) suggested there could be Arts Council money available to set up the project. This is not likely to fund the restoration, but could assist in the setting up of the Arts element of the project.

The Boat House would have to be adapted to facilitate this option, as there would be insufficient light in the building. Large windows would be required at the front and hide style windows along the eastern side. This work has been estimated to cost an additional 10k, raising the budget for the full restoration to 120k. The additional cost can be met from within the Parks revenue for the current financial year.

Potential Income Generation

This is very difficult to calculate, as I cannot find any similar facilities to benchmark against. I do not see this as being a major money-spinner, more an excellent local facility with a small income potential.

Environmental impact

There would be very little conflict with the Ecological sensitivity of the site as the education groups would be lead in by a Ranger, and the Artists/photographers would access via the Fishery entrance, we would also have a code of conduct as part of the booking process.

Security

This facility would be isolated from the main buildings and whilst the Menagerie complex is in a derelict state, with no residents, there is no doubt it would be vulnerable to vandalism. However security measure could be put into place to minimise this. I hope that the situation with the menagerie buildings might well have resolved itself by the time this report gets to Scrutiny.

Option 2

Restore the boat house to its original use. The park staff, to store maintenance boats, and water management equipment, would then use this facility.

Storage of equipment has been an issue for many years, English Heritage are intransigent when it comes to any more new build on the landscape. We therefore have an opportunity to alleviate some of our problems.

Although this would be a very expensive boatshed we would also be restoring an important historical building.

This facility could be visited as part of our guided walk programme, so there would be some public access.

There would be no income stream.

The issues of isolation are the same as Option 1.

Option 3

Market the boathouse in its current state to the private sector. Having discussed this option with our own property portfolio department, and a friend in the private sector property business, this really is not a viable option. Size, difficult to non-existent access, large cost of getting facilities, planning restrictions, to mention a few.

Option 4

Allow the building to fall down.

If we are serious about our Heritage Strategy this should not be an option. We are also likely to find Rugby, our planning authority, issuing an enforcement order, it is likely that this would be treated negatively by the local press. It would also put considerable pressure on our working relationship.

Future funding opportunities, for further development of the park, almost all of which rely on English Heritage input, would be put into serious jeopardy.

Option 5

To dismantle the boat house and rebuild it elsewhere on the estate.

This was mentioned at our site visit and discounted by the representative from English Heritage at the time. He was of the opinion that this would be detrimental to the historic landscape and that if this option was approved, it may not be considered on costs grounds alone – the costs to do this may double the existing budget!

Conclusion

Of the options considered above, we would recommend Option 1 for the reasons set out. The original cost of the restoration work was estimated at 110k based on a tender figure. The delay due to working up these options will require these works to be re-tendered which may lead to an increase in cost. The revised programme for this work is set out below.

Revised Works Programme

	Milestones (subject to approval on 06.07.2005)	Completion Date
1	Obtain English Heritage approval to alterations to boat house	Dec. '05
2	Obtain Listed Buildings Consent	Dec. '05
3	Re-submit planning application	Dec. '05
4	Tender works	Feb. '06
5	Let contract to successful tenderer	March '06
6	Contract period (to include lead in time)	April to June '06

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Coombe Country Park
21st June 2005