

Cowbridge Charter Trust

Registered Charity No. 1107225

Town Walls Committee

A PROPOSAL FOR THE REVIVAL

of

OLD HALL GROUNDS

Combining the formal centre with wildlife-friendly garden areas

November 2006

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1. INTRODUCTION

Old Hall Grounds provide a tranquil retreat from the hustle and bustle of Cowbridge High Street. They are much used by Cowbridge residents visiting the Health Centre, the Public Library, as a through route from the South Wall car park or by pedestrians from Town Mill Road. Occasionally small scale public events are held in the garden and, on a fine day, it is very pleasant to place to sit awhile perhaps during the lunch hour.

For many years the grounds have been maintained by the Council, with the main effort being put into the care of the grassed areas, paths and essential tree maintenance. Flower beds in the courtyard area are kept tidy and colourful by Old Hall staff by informal arrangement. However, through lack of funding other areas of the grounds have been neglected, and the walls became overgrown with ivy and hazel.

In 2005, perhaps spurred on by the creation of the adjacent Physic Garden, a group of volunteer members of the Cowbridge Charter Trust realised that the historic walls were under threat of dereliction. With the cooperation and assistance of the Council they removed the majority of vegetation on and close to the walls, exposing the stonework for survey with a view to restoration. It was at this point it was realised that the Grounds themselves would at least need a facelift in order not to look drab in contrast to the new Physic Garden from which there will be an entrance.

At the same time it became evident that some good habitat for wildlife, particularly birds and insects, was being lost. The area cleared for the Physic Garden had become dense young woodland, and the abundant ivy that was on the walls provided cover and food.

This paper, produced by volunteers, proposes a ‘hard centre, soft edges’ approach to a revival of the grounds. The Georgian façade and the surrounding area including the pond would be imaginatively renovated to provide a focus, while at and near the walled perimeter the introduction of planting and other features selected for their wildlife-friendliness would give an informal year-round attractiveness.

Gardens are becoming important refuges and food sources for many species which are in decline. This is thought to be due, at least in part, to changes in farming practices. Old Hall Grounds could become a working demonstration of wildlife gardening, and together with suitable interpretation exhibits, it could develop into a useful educational resource particularly to encourage youngsters and their parents to consider such ideas for their gardens at home.

This proposal is intended only to be the basis for a detailed design, but there are included a number of initial suggestions from the volunteer team and the staff of Old Hall.

2. PLAN OF THE GARDEN

2.1 A focus on Georgian formality

The focus of the garden must be the Georgian Wall and pond area. To some extent this should be reflected in the treatment of the central part of the South Wall by providing a perspective leading to the entrance and restoring the vertical elements lost in the recent clearance (for example by the use of a few pyramidal shaped trees).

The original perspective from the walls gateway to the Georgian front has been lost because of big trees and the path layout.

2.2 Other formal elements

The area between the Library and Health Centre is presently formal, largely paved and grassed. This space, a busy public area, would benefit from a facelift.

The spaces between the Georgian facade and the Old Hall building ('the Courtyard') and extending to the gated entrance from the High Street provide opportunities for imaginative shade planting.

For completeness, the adjacent Physic Garden is formal in layout.

2.3 A balancing informality

By way of gentle contrast, it is proposed that the remaining areas of the garden should tend to informality, for example by introducing curves to new paths and the edges of planting areas, and by informal planting arrangements.

The informality should flow naturally from the southern end of the pond to the South Wall, and to the east, leaving the more formal plantings around the Hall itself.

Informal planting would allow far more scope for developing wildlife friendly garden areas.

2.4 Routes and Paths

Vehicular access to the Physic Garden through the double gates may be required - this presumably would be from the diagonally opposite corner of Old Hall grounds – the route of this may compromise the design. The maximum width and height of vehicles and the preferred route needs to be determined at an early stage. If such a route is required the use of blocks with grass could be considered, being relatively environmentally friendly and having a softer appearance.

A new path should be created running near the east section of the South Wall.

There should be a new path westwards from the small Physic Garden gate. The existing layout of asphalt paths should be tidied-up accordingly, retaining the essential forked north/south access paths.

The paths and paved areas by the Health Centre and Library could be retained but improved by replacing the cement paving slabs with a more attractive surface.

2.5 Built features

The Georgian façade with the courtyard area behind is the most dramatic feature of the grounds. This is in a state of disrepair, with crumbling stonework and flaking rendering. As the focus of the garden it is important that this structure is restored and then maintained in good condition.

For the remainder of the grounds built features such as fences, pergolas, raised beds, seating areas, frames and wires for climbers should be included as necessary. See Appendix 1 for various suggestions.

2.6 Views and viewpoints

Special consideration should be given to the views of the garden from outside each entrance (South wall, Physic Garden, High Street). Some feature or perspective should invite the passer-by into the garden.

Viewed from the road by the South Wall car park, if possible break the line of the Health Centre roof. Consider using climbers to overtop the wall from within the grounds to reduce the starkness of the wall.

From within the garden the approach to the Physic garden entrance should be clear and inviting.

The bastion is a place where people are likely to pause and look around. The view of the grounds along the South wall towards the Physic Garden from this point should be considered in the design.

2.7 Public Events

The revival plan should take into account that the central areas of the grounds are used for public events and consideration should be given to their enhancement for this purpose.

2.8 Existing planting

The design will be constrained by the need to retain certain trees and shrubs. These will need to be identified and marked on the design plan.

3. ADDING THE WILDLIFE INTEREST

3.1 It is proposed that throughout the garden examples of wildlife-friendly planting and habitat should be the main theme. Whilst formality will be the major consideration in the central area, the emphasis should be on softening the outer areas with informal but attractive planting.

3.2 Some possible planting schemes:

Use of the walls – soften the walls by use of climbers using permitted attachments. A variety of climbing plants would provide a tangled web of stems for nesting birds whilst looking colourful and not harming the walls. Use as a backdrop for berried shrubs.

Mixed perennial borders – emphasis on nectar sources and seeds, but visually attractive throughout the year.

Low maintenance dry garden. The new planting should demonstrate the use of Mediterranean –type planting in this area. Again, year-round interest is important.

3.2 cont'd

Wildflower meadow (sunny) and Wildflower orchard (e.g. with crab-apple trees) - possibly sited in the area between the Health Centre and the raised area. The cutting regime(s) of these areas will determine which species of wildflower will flourish.

Scent garden - Close to paths – for example, between the Library and the Health Centre. Good nectar source.

Dry stone walls - Dry stone walls (free standing or retaining) can be an excellent refuge for slow worms, lizards, insects, spiders, frogs and toads.

3.3 The Pond

Improvements to the planting of the pond should include:

- Removal of most of the bog bean which is now dominant.
- Provision of shallow areas for birds to bathe and drink.
- At least one point where frogs, newts etc can readily leave and enter the water
- More variety of pond plants (preferably native) and the provision of one or more shallow areas for marginal plants. Include some tall plants for damsel and dragonfly larvae to climb and to enhance the visual effect.

3.4 Nesting/roosting habitat for birds, insects and bats

- Install nest boxes to suit a variety of bird species in suitable locations
- Similarly, nesting and roosting boxes for bats
- Retain remaining ivy and dense shrubbery where possible. Provide decorative free standing tower frames for ivy to cover.
- Create unobtrusive habitat piles with twigs and small logs.

3.5 Eco-friendly gardening

- Avoid the use of pesticides and herbicides - use other measures.
- Compost clippings and prunings etc (shred if necessary). Aim not to export any waste organic material from the garden. This would require an area set aside out of view, perhaps behind a small hedge. Compost bins are ideal sites for slow-worms etc.
- Weed control by mulching

3.6 Bird feeding station

The possibility of a quiet, enclosed area for bird feeding could be considered. Such an area could be viewed through small windows in a fence for example. The success of this would clearly depend on volunteers to replenish the food supply.

3.7 Interpretation

There should be a permanent display with an explanation of all the aspects of wildlife gardening that have been incorporated. Ideally this would be indoors, perhaps in the Library if space could be found, with leaflets, notices of local events etc. available. Less detailed outdoor display boards could be sited within the courtyard. Unobtrusive signs and labels within the garden should also be considered.

4. Maintenance of the garden

It will be necessary to consider how the garden will be maintained and developed in future years. It seems clear that a 'low maintenance' garden would not enable many of the objectives to be met, while it would not be sensible to design a garden requiring a regime of intensive regular attention. As a community-led project it would be reasonable to assume that there would be enough people in the area to form a 'friends of Old Hall Grounds' volunteer group which would provide care over and above the routine mowing, path maintenance, tree care etc that the Vale Council might be expected to provide. There will need to be close liaison with the Council with regard to its maintenance contractors.

The final design document should indicate the level of maintenance each area and each plant would require. Low-maintenance options should be taken wherever possible.

Should there not be sufficient hands-on gardening volunteers an alternative might be to contract a part time professional gardener directed by a volunteer committee.

Such a group might take on responsibility, for example, for

- Pruning and care of shrubs and herbaceous perennials
- Planting and care of designated beds and other areas
- Assessing the effectiveness of, and developing new, wildlife features
- The pond
- Planting annuals (e.g. scented flowers)
- Interpretation

In either case the question of on-going funding will need to be addressed.

**This proposal was produced by a sub-group of the Walls Committee
comprising:**

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Appendix 1 Some further suggestions for the design.

(The following are some of the ideas put forward to, but not necessarily agreed by, the sub-group, but are noted lest they be forgotten).

- **Georgian façade** – Paint some or all of the rendered surfaces.
- **Georgian façade** – remove, or reduce to minimal height, the hedge between it and the pond to enhance its appearance, particularly as viewed from the South entrance. This would also improve the area for public events.
- **Approach to the South Gate** – formal, with paired symmetrical trees either side, an Italianate effect.
- **Scent Garden** – between Library and Health Centre. Use raised beds and built structures to add a new dimension to the present rather boring layout. Include small highly scented trees.
- **Paved areas by the Health Centre and Library** – provide a more attractive surface than the present cement slabs.
- **West Wall** -A pergola of some sort could be built along the top of the inner wall along the West Wall walk. For safety reasons a fence of some kind may be required along the edge of the raised area
- **South Wall** - A pergola or series of arches with informally trained scented climbers such as honeysuckle and roses covering part or all of the path leading up towards the bastion.

[n.b. pergolas are attractive but are very labour intensive]
- **Gravel paths** – a continuous walls walk - gravel paths along the base of the Physic Garden wall and South Wall extending westward up to the corner bastion, then along the West Wall to the existing steps down.

[n.b. consider maintenance of gravel paths]
- **Courtyard** – native fern collection - possibly sited in containers (botanical interest).
- **Courtyard** – interpretation boards (historical and wildlife themes).
- **Courtyard** - glazed roof over part.
- **Area behind the Library** – use as a bird feeding station and compost site
- **Raised Walkway** – Dry planting bed along top of retaining wall, possibly with miniature fence (~30cm high) along path to encourage people to keep away from edge. Cascading plants along edge.
- **Near the Physic Garden entrance** – Japanese maple (or similar colourful focus of attraction), also visible from High Street and South Wall entrances.
- **By the Physic Garden entrance** – Introductory interpretation board.

Appendix 2 Plan of Old Hall Grounds

