

# Dr Sarah Rutherford

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Hounslow TW34DN

VIA E-MAIL

17 November 2020

Dear Mr Baker,

## **Applications to redevelop Homebase and Tesco sites, Great West Road P/2020/3099 & P/2020/3100**

I write in a personal capacity regarding the damaging effect of these developments on two designed landscapes of international significance – Syon Park and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. I have been a professional garden historian and historic environment adviser for over 25 years including as Head of the English Heritage Parks and Gardens Register. I have seen and studied many English Landscape Parks, including Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’s landscapes. I frequently review planning applications on behalf of the Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust to advise the Statutory Consultee, The Gardens Trust, on cases, including a continuous stream relating to Brown’s landscapes. My book on Brown was published by the National Trust in 2016. I am co-author of an authoritative study for The Gardens Trust identifying the risks to the more than 230 surviving Brown landscapes, which found that serious damage has been inflicted on the fabric and setting of many and is a continuing risk.<sup>1</sup>

**I object most strongly to this development because of the damaging effect it will have on the Arcadian landscapes of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which is a World Heritage Site (WHS) and also Grade I Registered, and the Grade I Syon Park which in addition forms part of the buffer zone for the WHS.**

**It causes ‘substantial harm’ to the setting of these heritage assets as follows:**

### **The Artistic Merit and Vulnerability of Syon and Kew**

The English Landscape Park is justly celebrated as Britain’s most important contribution to the visual arts. Lancelot Brown (1716-83) was Britain’s greatest and most prolific designer of this art form. His work is the best of this great British artistic legacy, at the forefront of an artistic and horticultural revolution with significance and resonance worldwide. His own unique legacy is an unparalleled group of at least 230 landscape parks with which he is associated and it has worldwide influence. **Brown’s genius in landscape artistry and engineering is the pinnacle of this quiet revolution and internationally significant. We**

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Sarah Rutherford & Sarah Couch, *Vulnerability Brown Capability Brown’s landscapes at Risk* (2017, for The Gardens Trust).

**should celebrate it, acknowledge its influence and do our best to preserve his legacy.** The tercentenary of his birth was celebrated to great acclaim nationally and internationally in 2016, but professional experience shows clearly that the setting of many of his landscapes have been over many decades, and are still, continually damaged by inappropriate and extensive development, often via an incremental stream of schemes for individual sites. This is despite the added attention and research carried out as a result of that anniversary. The pressure for damaging change to the essential setting of his work is increasing not decreasing, particularly in urban areas.

The two landscapes have been linked design in artistic terms since the early C18. Syon is an outstanding example of a landscape park and garden by Brown, the most important landscape gardener. It marches in tandem with the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, in which Brown laid out a royal landscape park, the two being linked visually across the River Thames and by his contiguous designs in similar style and character. It is the most important such pairing of his work, in which the preservation of the Arcadian character of these two English landscape parks is of the utmost importance. Syon is for this reason included as part of the World Heritage Site Buffer Zone for Kew. Detailed research carried out recently into Brown's involvement at Syon indicates it is of still greater significance, sufficient that **it should form part of the WHS in its own right for its close design links with Brown's work at Kew.**

### **The Effect of the Proposed Development**

In national planning policy, Registered parks and gardens have the same importance as listed buildings, scheduled monuments, and other 'designated heritage assets'. In particular to be acceptable, substantial harm to Grade I and II\* listed buildings/ registered parks and gardens should be 'wholly exceptional'. The Heritage Statement submitted with the application states that 'there will be a minimal effect on the setting of heritage assets further afield, such as ... Syon Park ..., and no effect on the Kew World Heritage Site. The proposed scheme will, on balance, preserve the setting of heritage assets and not cause harm to their heritage significance, and will bring significant public benefits.' (para 5.14) Unfortunately this is untrue and reflects a faulty appraisal which has not understood the significance of the unspoilt setting to the design or recognized the substantial level of damaging visual intrusion into the Arcadian landscape. The development will cause substantial harm.

The visual effect of the proposed development would damage to an unacceptable degree the historic setting of these internationally significant 'Capability' Brown designs which together are recognised as a unique contiguous pairing of his outstanding design skills. Specifically, these landscapes were designed and united visually by Brown across the river with a typical prestigious parkland character based on a rural grazed ornamental grass sward with scattered trees and clumps, threaded through by drives to the house. At Syon the character of the parkland and associated views in such a sensitive design would be compromised by the alien appearance of the proposed development, together with the setting of the Grade I listed Syon House. At Kew the riverside views would be compromised in the views to Syon which forms the critical backdrop and 'borrowed landscape' of the royal landscape. Of the two development sites that on the Homebase site will be the more damaging, being taller.

The appearance of modern buildings in any form above the skyline of trees will damage views from various key places in Syon Park and Kew Gardens as they protrude above the Syon landscape. The TVIAs indicate the considerable and disruptive appearance of the development above the tree belt seen from the south drive of Syon and doubtless it will be visible from other places.<sup>2</sup> This will compound the existing serious damage in views to the north particularly by the 'Kew Eye' next to the M4 and the GSK building close to the development site. Similarly serious damage will be caused to the Kew setting as the development will also be visible from seminal views from Kew riverside opposite Syon House, in views of the house with its mature planted Brown backdrop from the Syon Vista and from the Isleworth Ferry gate (see photograph below). Worryingly, this has not been identified in the TVIAs.

### **The Undamaged Nature of the Westerly Views**

This precious Arcadian setting has been compromised to a considerable degree to the north of Syon and to the north-west of Kew by tall developments between the river and the M4 including as noted above the 'Kew Eye'. These were built incrementally and without design sensitivity or coherence, and the setting of both landscapes is likely to be further damaged as a result of pending applications.

Miraculously the westerly setting of both landscapes in this unique and unspoilt half mile stretch of the Arcadian Thames has not been compromised to any great degree in this way – yet (see photos below). The undamaged nature of the westerly views from the Kew WHS is particularly sensitive at the riverside end of the Syon Vista and from the environs of the nearby Isleworth Ferry Gate when looking across the river at Syon House: the Arcadian view is of Syon House and the tree belt beyond with a glimpse of the Gillette tower within the tree belt which can be read as a more distant quasi church tower. The proposed scheme will be seen above the tree belt to the right flanking the Gillette tower and will be clearly visible.

The proposed development is the bellweather and herald of a trend of large-scale schemes along the Great West Road corridor which if allowed to impinge will cumulatively and still further damage these as yet largely undamaged historic views and the Arcadian character that is so important to their design. This is the opportunity to establish a precedent that future buildings must not be visible from Syon or Kew which ensures the long term safety of this key aspect of their Arcadian landscapes and our cultural heritage.

### **The Opportunity to Resist an Unacceptably Damaging Precedent**

I urge the Council to take a robust approach to ensure rigorously that this and future developments are not visible in the historic views of both Syon and Kew. If this development is visible it sets a harmful precedent for all those hopeful developers that follow it to argue for buildings which are as tall, and like the setting north of Syon will cumulatively create still greater harm and destroy what remains of the vulnerable illusion of Arcadia which is enjoyed by millions of visitors to both Syon and Kew. The present proposal may well be the catalyst for ICOMOS to consider putting the Kew WHS on their at risk list given the

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<sup>2</sup> Homebase TVIA 20 P\_2020\_3099, views 13-15. Tesco TVIA 20 P\_2020\_3100, views 14-15.

cumulative damage occurring to the setting and views. We are stewards of our precious and fragile heritage for future generations, and we have the responsibility not to squander it for the financial benefit of those who have no stake in the damage they inflict.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, if this development is approved then:

1. The international significance of the two landscapes will be compromised by the substantial harm caused by an ill-judged and insensitive intervention in the setting which future generations will deplore.
2. It will set an unacceptable precedent for further damaging development in a vulnerable part of their setting which has not yet been greatly harmed.
3. There is a substantial likelihood of the Kew WHS being put on the ICOMOS At Risk list of WHS.

**For these reasons I urge you to refuse this application.**

Yours faithfully,



Dr Sarah Rutherford

c.c.

ICOMOS UK and ICOMOS Headquarters, Paris

The Gardens Trust

The Georgian Group

London Parks and Gardens Trust

The Isleworth Society

### **Key Views from Kew**

The following views from Kew's Syon Vista towards Syon house show the largely undamaged Arcadian character west of Syon Park. Arrows indicate the position of the Gillette tower. The proposed developments will flank this above the tree line. The view from the Listed Isleworth Ferry Gate nearby to the left (south) is similar.



