

Application Name: Knowle, Sidmouth, EX10 8HL, Devon

Number: 472979

Type: New

Heritage Category: Listing

Address:

East Devon District Council, Knowle, Sidmouth, Sidmouth

County	District	District Type	Parish
Devon	East Devon	District Authority	Sidmouth

Recommendation: Reject

Assessment

CONTEXT

We have been asked to assess Knowle, (now the East Devon Council Offices), Station Road, and the surrounding landscape garden for designation. The council has announced it will be vacating the site, and there are concerns for its future. The former Knowle Hotel featured on the proposed list for Sidmouth in the mid-C20 at Grade III, however, it was not included in the official listed building greenback volume for Sidmouth which was published in 1973 and which superseded the proposed list. Also in 1973, parts of the grounds around the offices were designated as Public Open Space. Outline planning permission is being sought to develop parts of the site and is due for determination in November.

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

KNOWLE

The house was originally known as Knowle Cottage. It was built by Lord le Despencer in 1810. It was an extensive cottage ornée-style house with pointed windows, veranda, thatched roof and Gothic dormers. The walls were of flintwork. From the 1820s/30s to 1861 it was the property of Mr T L Fish, a collector of objets d'art. He made improvements to the house and the picturesque garden, adding exotic flora and fauna. The grounds were opened to the public one day a week. The subsequent owner, Mr Thornton, removed the thatched roof and added an extra storey. In the late C19 it was sold and converted into a large hotel which led to further changes including extensive alterations and internal changes which largely obscured the earlier house. All that remains of the original building are fragments of flint walling. The hotel consisted of a south range running west to east. The east end was originally 'L' shaped. It was extended to a 'U' shape in the 1890s and also extended to the west to form a long adjoining wing. The hotel was in use until the 1970s when it was taken over by the East Devon District Council as their main offices. This most recent occupation has led to further alterations, particularly to the north of the hotel range, with infill additions and extensions which have altered the overall plan. The southern range has been rendered and modern uPVC windows have been inserted. Some features, including the C19 veranda on the south elevation still survive. It is understood that despite more recent adaptation the dimensions of the rooms within the C19 hotel were not greatly altered when the building was converted to office space, although it is likely that various internal alterations were made during the change of use. The building retains some

late-C19 decoration including fireplaces with delft tiles, decorated timber door frames, an open-string main staircase, some decorative plaster ceilings, Pugin-style pattern wallpaper and painted columns. However, though these features are attractive additions, they are typical of the late-C19 when advances in manufacturing made such decoration more readily available. The survival of these features is not of sufficient interest to raise the overall significance of the building.

KNOWLE LANDSCAPE GARDEN

The landscape garden is contemporary with the early-C19 Knowle Cottage, with improvements in the mid-C19 by T L Fish. In 1850 it was recorded as being about 11 acres of ground, divided into lawns, gardens and 'conservatories, containing rare and choice specimens of botany'. It consisted of elaborate planting, terraces, lawns, tree-lined paths and avenues, lodges, fountains, garden buildings and a walled garden to the north west. After the house was converted into a hotel in the late C19, parcels of land were sold off and piecemeal development occurred in the C20 on the south-west and north-west areas of the garden. Car parks were also added in the mid- and late C20 to the south-western and north-eastern sides of the house. Most of the conservatories have now gone, as have many of the fountains and other ornaments. Some garden features, which are attributed to Fish, are listed; these are the Gothic summerhouse to the south of the main house and a grotto in the ground of Knowle Grange, a complex of C20 flats, which was constructed on parts of the former garden. The current remains of the gardens consist of the southern terraces and paths and the open fields to the north-east, as well as some plants and mature trees. The original lodge still marks the entrance to The Knowle. In the late C20 the gardens were declared a public open space by the district council and some of the trees have been granted tree preservation orders.

ASSESSMENT

KNOWLE

The Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings (March 2010) state that buildings dating from between 1700 and 1840 and surviving without significant alteration are likely to merit listing. The English Heritage Suburban and Country Houses Selection Guide (April 2011) states that houses built between 1700 and 1840 surviving without substantial alteration will probably warrant listing, although some discretion may be necessary for later, more standard designs. The Commercial and Exchange Building Selection Guide (April 2011) states that selection for designation needs to be very discriminating for buildings that post-date 1840 due to the large numbers which survive and the high degree of standardisation and so a certain amount of selectivity is also needed. When assessing such buildings it is also important to consider the date of the building, rarity, level of alteration (although some amount of internal alteration is expected), signage, authenticity of the surviving fabric, community interest and group value.

Knowle, Station Road, Sidmouth is not recommended for listing for the following principal reasons:

Legibility: the original early-C19 cottage ornée house has been heavily altered, primarily through the conversion of a hotel, to the extent that only fragments of the original building survive;

Lack of architectural interest: though the building retains some attractive internal features and some earlier external building fabric, overall it does not demonstrate the high level of architectural design needed for a hotel building of this date. The earlier parts of the building have later additions of standard office buildings which further detract from this.

Alteration: as a late-C19 hotel which has had various alterations in the C20 through its conversion to offices, it does not display the high level of intactness, architectural quality or innovation necessary to meet the selection criteria for a commercial building of this date. While it is expected that commercial buildings will have undergone internal alterations as part of their continuing adaptation, externally the building has also seen a number of changes which have negatively affected the appearance and proportions of the earlier C19 hotel.

KNOWLE LANDSCAPE, STATION ROAD, SIDMOUTH

The Selection Criteria for Registering Parks and Garden states that sites laid out between 1750 and 1840 are likely to be designated where enough of the layout survives to reflect the original design. Further considerations which may influence selection include: sites which were influential in the development of taste, whether through reputation or reference in literature; sites which are early or representative examples of a style of layout or a type of site, or the work of a designer (amateur or professional) of national importance; sites having an association with significant persons or historic events; and sites with a strong group value with other heritage assets. If a designed landscape has been lost to irreversible development such as housing, then it is unlikely to meet the criteria for inclusion on the Register. The Register is generally concerned with the permanent elements in a landscape such as earthworks, built structures, walks and rides, water features, structural shrubberies, hedges and trees, rather than planting schemes.

The landscape garden at Knowle is not recommended for designation for the following principal reasons:

Alteration: a large part of the original garden has been lost through housing development, particularly on the south, west and north edges of the garden which have led to the loss of large parts of the landscape design;

Lack of survival: the lodge, some mature trees and planting, and some of the garden buildings survive within the grounds, along with parts of the lawns and ground to the east; however, not enough of the original landscape design survives to warrant addition to the national Register.

CONCLUSION

Knowle, formerly known as Knowle Cottage, with its prominent position overlooking the town of Sidmouth, and the remains of its landscape garden, which is now a public space, have clear local interest. However the house and the grounds have been heavily altered in their successive uses. The alterations that have occurred both to the gardens and the house mean that neither meets the criteria for designation in a national context, though they are evidently highly-valued by the local community.