



Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee
26 August 2025

Fernery at the Acacias London Road – Observations on PL/25/1067

Dear Mishga Marshall

Reading Conservation Area Advisory are pleased to have the opportunity to comment on this application for alterations and repairs to the fernery at The Acacias on London Road.

We support the conservation and refurbishment of the dilapidated fernery. We note that the justifications for the works but are unconvinced that some of the proposed works are desirable or necessary. We would appreciate more clarity as to the applicant's objectives for the future of the fernery.

Summary of observations

- The existing glass and wood structure of the fernery dates from the late 1940s onwards. It is considerably different from the original glass fernery roof in design. It may be possible to establish a more precise date.
- A plan showing the age of elements of the fernery should be produced and of the elements to be replaced.
- A plan showing the current planting should be produced.
- A plan for future planting and operation of the fernery should be prepared.
- Any future work that may be required to the corridor should be explained.

1.Heritage

1.1 The Acacias is Grade II listed and lies within the Kendrick Conservation Area. It is an integral part of the London Road campus of Reading University. According to the Friends of Reading University's heritage leaflet on the Campus it was '...built in 1818 for a local salt merchant, was the family home of George Palmer from 1865 until his death in 1897.' The architect is unknown but the extensions

are attributed to Alfred Waterhouse¹. The fernery is attributed to James Pulham (1820-1898), the second James Pulham², and the interior 'rockery' is made of Pulhamite.

1.2 The Fernery

1.2.1 It is clear from the Design & Access Statement (DAS), Structural Survey and photographic evidence that though the Pulhamite and supporting masonry may be original that the glazing and woodwork, in the main, is not.

1.2.2 Historic photographs of the fernery are included within para 1.7 of the DAS and show a very different structure from that which is in place today. The interior photograph dated late nineteenth or early twentieth century has a raised lantern in the roof and the window frames and glazing are different from those that remain. Reading Library Local Illustrations Collection has an exterior image of the fernery and rear of The Acacias, taken by Sidney Victor White, in a 1905 report on the new University Buildings from the Reading Standard's ['Illustrated Souvenir of Principal Events in Reading & Neighbourhood 1904, 1905 & 1906'](#). The image is taken from almost the same angle as the exterior shot in the DAS which is dated 1944. Consequently, the fernery appears to have undergone very little visible change from its construction in the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War.

1.2.3 William Wood & Sons Ltd whose brackets support the joists and apex of the pitched roof, and winding gear for opening roof lights was a well-known horticultural business. They received a Royal Warrant in 1955 for work at Windsor and remained independent until the late 1960s/1970³. Therefore, although the date of the work cannot be before 1924 as this is when Woods moved to Taplow it is entirely possible for the new fernery roof to have been put in place from the late 1940s onwards. Somewhere in Reading University estate records a more precise date for these works may be found.

1.2.4 A plan showing the approximate age of the elements that make up the fernery would be a great aid to the understanding for the reader. The production of such a plan should be a pre-commencement condition in order to document the age of the elements currently in place.

1.2.5 The DAS states (para 1.8) that (our bold for emphasis) 'Although it is not original, it is important to reinstate it to **provide a protective cover to the Pulhamite rockwork and to maintain an internal environment which allows suitable planting to be reinstated.**' The plants that are currently growing in the fernery, including ferns, should be documented in the same way as the aboriginal study and bat survey. A planting plan for the future should be provided as part of the application.

1.2.6 The Historic England (HE) listing entry ([1113522](#)) for The Acacias which mentions 'Good conservatory at rear with an extensive rockery.' Dates from 1978. At this time, it is not known whether it is the original or current fernery structure that is being referred to.

¹ Friends of the University heritage leaflet and also Sidney Gold, A Biographical Dictionary of Architects at Reading (1999) citing H Godwin Arnold, Victorian Architecture in Reading (1976).

² The Pulham Legacy – 1887–91 - A Tale of Two Ferneries. <https://pulham.org.uk/about/james-pulham-and-son/who-they-were/> and <https://pulham.org.uk/2014/06/04/37-jun-14-1887-91-a-tale-of-two-ferneries/> accessed 25 August 2025.

³ Woods of Taplow, Hitchen and Taplow Society Archive <https://www.taplowsociety.org.uk/twiki/bin/view/Newsletter/Newsletter90WoodsofTaplow> accessed 25 August 2025.

1.3 Condition of Structure

1.3.1 The structure of fernery is in a very poor condition documented with photographs in the August 2025 Structural Survey and the DAS. There are interesting mentions within both documents of features which aside from the masonry and Pulhamite may remain from the building as originally erected in the late nineteenth century.

1.3.2 Drain covers in the floor appeared to ‘...allow access to a pair of pipes ... presumed to have provided the source of heating. These would have maintained the required environment for ferns and tropical plants.’ (para 2.3). The DAS goes on to say that this heating system is not to be reinstated but does not say if heating is to be provided in the fernery.

1.3.3 The sketch on page 15 of the 2025 Structural Survey shows the possibility of an original high level watering system and water channels shown in photographs 23 and 24 on page 30, photograph 27 (page 32) a channel leading to a water pool and photograph 29 (page 33).

1.3.4 A plan of the elements of the fernery that are to be replaced would be a great aid to the understanding for the reader. The production of such a plan should be a pre-commencement condition in order to document the condition of the elements currently in place.

1.4 Further comments on works to be undertaken

1.4.1 We note that pre-application advice was that strong justification was needed for this. As the roof is not original, we do not object to this but are unclear as to why it is really required.

1.4.2 We are not convinced that except as a matter of convenience and for economic reasons that a new hopper and rainwater downpipes etc. are required. See our request in para 1.2.4 on the age of elements of the structure and in 1.3.4 for the elements to be replaced to be documented as a pre-commencement condition.

1.4.3 Any future work that may be required to the corridor leading south from the fernery should be explained.

2. The Plane Tree

The plane tree, protected by a TPO, is an outstanding feature of the garden of The Acacias and we are pleased to see that measures to protect it during these works have been fully documented.

3. Other matters

3.1 The Historic England listing description (1113511) states that the alterations to The Acacias, attributed to Alfred Waterhouse were built for William Isaac Palmer who lived there. There is no evidence that William Isaac Palmer ever lived at the Acacias. It was his elder brother George who lived there from 1865-1897. We will submit a request for a correction to Historic England in due course.

3.2 George Palmer died in 1897 not 1894 (para 1.7). This is corrected later (para 1.8).

3.3 It is not entirely true to say that George Palmer co-founded Huntley & Palmers in 1841 with his cousin Thomas Huntley (para 1.8). ‘Huntleys biscuits’ was founded by Joseph Huntley (senior) with his son Thomas in 1822. Joseph Huntley retired in 1841 and George Palmer joined Thomas Huntley as a partner in an established business which was then known as Huntley & Palmer. This became

Huntley & Palmers when William Isaac and Henry Palmer joined George Palmer in partnership following the death of Thomas Huntley in 1857⁴.

4. Conclusion

Please take our observations into account in arriving at a decision on this application.

Yours sincerely


Chair Reading CAAC
On behalf of Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee
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⁴ Reading Museum website <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/online-exhibitions/huntley-palmers-history/6-people/founding-fathers> (accessed 20 August 2025)