

## **Report on La Rochelle for the Zimbabwe National Trust**

by Oliver Maurice, Director INTO – 25 November 2010

### **Introduction**

I was invited to visit Zimbabwe National Trust (ZNT) by Lin Goncalves when we first met at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference of National Trusts in Dublin in September 2009. The visit formed part of a tour of some of the African countries where there are members of the International National Trusts Organisation (INTO), namely Ethiopia, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

I subsequently corresponded with Lin who produced a programme for my visit which included the ZNT flagship property, La Rochelle, built by Sir Stephen and Lady Courtauld in 1951, which lies in the Imbeza Valley, Penhalonga, close to the Mozambique border in eastern Zimbabwe.

The visit to La Rochelle took place on 23/24 November and I promised to produce my recommendations following the visit.

What follows is a summary of my thoughts with those recommendations.

### **The Visit**

On arrival at La Rochelle, accompanied by Lin and her husband, Jean Goncalves and John Hyslop, I met with the new Chairman, Bill Johnstone, and members of the local Mutare Committee, a recently formed body which supports the various ZNT properties in the vicinity of that town.

It was a pleasant surprise to find the local schoolchildren from the school on the estate, also owned by ZNT, practising carols in the large lounge for their Christmas nativity play

Following the meeting we were shown round the house, now a hotel, by the lessee, Simon Herring. After lunch we toured the gardens and other facilities and later that afternoon went to Mutare to meet the local committee to give them an early indication of my thoughts

Next morning before breakfast we took a longer walk around what were clearly magnificent gardens in their heyday before leaving for the Rhodes Museum

## **First Impressions**

### **The Hotel**

This gives the impression of faded grandeur, a once fine house which has had insufficient attention for too long. A coat of paint in every room and outside would be a start! However there are some quite severe structural problems that need to be sorted out before that happens, for example the roof of both the Tower and adjoining flat-roofed section and the Fantasy room.

The wiring is ancient as is some of the plumbing and to bring the hotel up to modern standards à la Gordon Adams, one of whose hotels we subsequently visited, a considerable investment of resources will be needed

A decision needs to be taken as to whether the property should continue to be run as a hotel or whether it should be fully furnished with period furniture,(maybe recovered from the Courtauld family who apparently removed it against the wishes in Sir Stephen's will) and opened to the public, or a mixture of the two.

In my view this latter option would be the best in order to maximise the income. For example it ought to be possible to include at least the tower and billiard room, both of which appear to be redundant, as part of the visitor experience. The tower, from the top of which one obtains a magnificent view of the garden, has a middle floor which could be used as a small museum or exhibition area and the top as an information room about the property and the Courtaulds themselves. The remarkable brass banister rail, duly polished, would be an attraction in itself.

The adjacent Billiard room could be used for showing the excellent film of the Courtaulds at La Rochelle, which we watched while there. It would need to be edited down to a maximum of 20 minutes to maintain the visitors' interest

### **The Gardens.**

Although La Rochelle extends to 250 acres, the gardens occupy 65 acres. When the Courtaulds lived there they had no less than 55 gardeners whereas today there are 6. It is not surprising therefore that the gardens have suffered although I was told they were in much better shape than 2 years ago.

In their former glory they were known for the magnificent orchid and azalea collection and the exotic and indigenous arboretum with 637 different tree species. Many of these survive and besides there are also many shrubs and succulent plants.

There are also a number of water features fed by a lake some 2 km away from which

the water is carried along a narrow flume.

## **Initial Thoughts**

It is clear that there needs to be a substantial investment of funds on both the house and the grounds. I was presented with an estimate for initial emergency repairs amounting to \$25000 but my own view is that that is the tip of the iceberg and a figure of at least ten times that amount, and probably nearer twenty, needs to be found to bring the hotel structure and the garden infrastructure back to their former glory.

However, before any funding is sought there needs to be not only a Management Plan drawn up for the property but also a Business Plan. In this context, a Strategic Plan for the whole of the ZNT should ideally be the first priority, into which the Management Plan for La Rochelle would fit, but being realistic, and having been appraised of the countrywide political and financial circumstances as well as ZNT's own precarious financial position and its staff structure, this might have to come later.

The Management Plan, reviewed every 3 years, should encompass:

- a short history of the property
- a Statement of Significance, stating what is special about the property, in other words the unique selling points (USP) which, at all costs, must not be sacrificed;
- a vision for the property, showing how it will be in, say, 10 years time;
- a SWOT analysis showing the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats;
- the aims and objectives to achieve the vision;
- a work programme, reviewed annually, to meet the aims and objectives;
- an estimate of the total costs broken down into the 3 years of the initial plan, updated annually

In drawing up the management plan, and in particular the SWOT analysis, every aspect and potential of the estate needs to be considered including the future of the school premises, the campsite (which I did not see), the cottages, the remaining estate woodland as well, of course, as the main focus, the house and gardens.

Consideration will need to be given to the 'market'; who is the target audience? There is a great opportunity to diversify so that the property has more to offer not only to the general public but also to special interest groups (see Appendix for some initial ideas)

The Business Plan should be aimed primarily at potential funders and should be a synopsis of the Management Plan as well as covering the specific area or areas for which funding is being sought from that source. In other words if the funders are only

interested in gardens then do not include the funds needed for the house.

In order to assess the costs of the work it would be worth appointing an architect to carry out the first quinquennial survey of La Rochelle and ideally a structural engineer to assess the cost of the necessary work to restore all the water features.

A specialist gardens adviser could usefully spend time at the property to produce a detailed report on what needs to be done to bring the gardens and arboretum back to their former glory

In the longer term, self-guided trail leaflets with a map of the paths and optional short, medium or long walks should be available. Waymarking should be installed with different colours representing the different routes. Wood blocks with numbers routed into them, which would correspond to those in the trail leaflet, identifying specific trees and shrubs should be situated adjacent to the respective species.

### **The Broader Picture**

It was very encouraging to meet the Chairmen and members of both the Harare and Mutare Committees. Their enthusiasm remains undiminished despite the appalling financial and political constraints that have been imposed in the last few years. There is an undoubted sense of optimism that the future for Zimbabwe is brighter than the immediate past.

The recent formation of the Mutare Committee has clearly been of benefit to the morale of the staff at La Rochelle knowing that there is a 'presence' closer at hand than previously

However what also became apparent is that it is not feasible for committees to run properties on the scale of La Rochelle, nor indeed the whole portfolio, when most members are fully occupied with their own businesses and in many cases a long way from the properties. They simply cannot be expected to give it the time that is necessary.

I believe that as soon as is financially practical, a Director of the ZNT should be appointed, working initially part-time, say 2-3 days a week until more funds become available through his or her own efforts, whose responsibilities would include drawing up the Strategic Plan for ZNT, overseeing staff, ensuring the maintenance of high standards of presentation and marketing all the properties, submitting funding applications and recruitment of new members.

The drawing together of a management plan would normally be carried out by a property manager and given the necessary resources this is an appointment that I would recommend as top priority, the rôle to cover not just La Rochelle but also the other properties in the Mutare and Nyanga areas.

## **How can INTO help?**

From these early thoughts above it is clear that what ZNT requires is not only funds but expertise in a number of different areas.

On the funding side INTO can certainly offer advice as to potential funders and may be able to assist in drawing up some proposals using our in-house expertise. We may also be able to help with an approach to the Courtauld family, based in Jersey, and the Courtauld Trust.

The appointment of a Director to run the organisation should be considered as a high priority and in the short term it may be possible to fill both this position and that of a property manager through secondments from, say, the National Trust in England, Wales and Northern Ireland or 6 month sabbaticals. I have already written to Dame Fiona Reynolds, the Director General of the National Trust, to sound her out about both positions

An alternative option might be some kind of partnership arrangement with English Heritage, owners of Eltham Place, the Coutauld's former London home, with whom correspondence has already been exchanged. Both options we will explore

## **Postscript**

My thanks are due to Tim Tanser, Chairman of the ZNT, Bill Johnstone, Chairman of the Mutare Committee and all their respective members for the warmth of the welcome extended to me. Particular thanks are also due to Lin and Jean Goncalves for their generous hospitality and for driving me across and around the country!

It has been an unforgettable trip and I will take home many very happy memories. I hope to return in the fullness of time to witness the progress that will surely come about when the overall political and financial environment improves.

My best wishes to you all for an exciting future!

Oliver Maurice

### Points for consideration in optimising the visitor experience

- Croquet on the lawn
- Childrens' playground – the next generation of supporters!
- Butterfly garden (on the old football pitch – now ploughed up)
- Sculpture trail – stone sculptures from the Harare National Gallery (established by the Courtaulds)
- Cater for special interest groups such as orchid lovers, ornithologists, entymologists, natural history groups
- greatly improved plant sales and a genuine sale at an appropriate time in the season, widely advertised and for which La Rochelle could become famous
- holiday cottages refurbished and properly marketed
- ZNT functions at the hotel in conjunction with the lessee; musical evenings in the lounge (as the Courtaulds had); annual snooker competition
- guided walks with the estate manager or head gardener
- sound archive recordings; for example to have Darrel Plowes memories of his various social evenings at La Rochelle with the Courtaulds on tape would be very valuable as an addition to the film.