

Heritage Statement

For The Ambassadors Theatre
West Street, London WC2H 9ND
November 2024



Conversion of offices to bar

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Summary

This Heritage Statement has been prepared in support of a listed building application for the Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London WC2H 9ND. The proposals include internal alterations and fitting-out of the offices at 2nd floor for use as new front of house accommodation. The building is Grade II listed and in the London Borough of Camden [See Appendix 1 for the list description].

The report has been prepared by Mark Price who is a Chartered Town Planner (MRTPI) with a post-graduate diploma in Historic Building Conservation from the Architectural Association (AA) and who is a full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC).

Mark Price is a specialist historic building consultant with over 25 years of experience in the heritage sector. His experience on historic theatres has come from working as Heritage Adviser to the Theatres Trust.

1.2 Context

This Heritage Statement forms part of a listed building application for internal alterations to Ambassadors Theatre, London. Mark Price, Theatre and Heritage, was appointed as heritage consultant in October 2024 by ATG Entertainment. Archaeology is not considered in this report.

1.3 Structure

NOTE: This Heritage Statement is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the history or architectural description of the building or surrounding heritage assets. It summarises the significance of assets as necessary and proportionate in the context of the works currently proposed [compliant with NPPF para 200].

The Statement includes the following:

- Details of the proposal
- History of the assets in context
- Assessment and Statement of Significance
- Relevant policy
- Analysis of the 'impact' of the proposal on the significance and justifications
- Conclusion

The information in this report is based on desk-based and archival research as well as my own conclusion as a heritage expert. A search on the Greater London Historic Environment Record (HER) via the Heritage Gateway was undertaken on 01.10.2024 [for details, see sources].

A list of the archival and secondary sources consulted as well as copyright and any licencing can be found at Section 6.0.

Contents

1.0	Introduction	2
2.0	The heritage assets	3
3.0	Assessment and statement of significance	6
4.0	Relevant policy context	10
5.0	Assessment of proposals	11
6.0	Sources	16
	Appendix 1 list description	

2.0 The heritage assets

2.1 The site

The original plan was to build two theatres on ground lying between Cambridge Circus and Upper St. Martin's Lane. The first, the Ambassadors Theatre, was built and opened before the outbreak of the First World War, while the second, the St. Martin's, was delayed until 1916. The theatres are separated by Tower Court, with Tower Street running behind them, and frontages to West Street. Please compare the OS maps at Figure 1.

Although the two theatres were entirely separate financial enterprises, they had the architect W.G.R. Sprague in common. The lease of certain property on the site of the St. Martin's Theatre has not been acquired at first and the Ambassadors Theatre was forced to be lower than originally intended so as not to interfere with the 'ancient lights' of the other building. Consequently, the stalls of the Ambassadors Theatre are below ground level.

2.2 The Ambassadors Theatre

The Ambassadors Theatre opened on Thursday the 5th June 1913 with a production of the play 'Panthea' by Monckton Hoffe. It was designed by W.G.R. Sprague and built by Kinglerlee and Sons of Oxford, for a syndicate, The Ambassador Theatre Limited, F. Herbert Jay being the managing director and licensee. Mr Durrant Swan took on the lease with Mr F Rolison Littler being the general manager. On 7th June 1913, *The Era* reported on the theatre's opening saying:

'The general scheme of decoration is Louis XVI and the colour scheme of Parma violet ivory, and dull gold is a refreshing change to the warm colours usually selected in decorative schemes. The Auditorium is arranged with a commodious stalls area, behind which is a good roomy pit, and above this level is the dress circle, and forming part of the same tier is the family circle, or upper boxes, sufficiently raised to form another distinct circle.'

The Stage Newspaper also reported on the opening of the Ambassadors Theatre in its 12th June 1913 edition saying: *'This new theatre, which was opened on Thursday by Mr. Durrant Swan with Panthea, a new play from the pen of Monckton Hoffe, stands at the corner of West Street, Shaftesbury Avenue, midway between Cambridge Circus on the one side and Great St. Andrew Street on the other. It is a one-tier house, decorated chiefly in white and gold, with a seating capacity of about 500, there being two rows of stalls and some dozen of pit on the ground floor, and the comparatively spacious and lofty tier above being divided into balcony stalls and upper circle. The stage is large enough to accommodate productions of the drawing-room drama, musical piece, and even romantic drama classes'*.

The decorative scheme included a series of painted Ambassadorial crests which are set within framed and festooned roundels. These crests reflected the arms of countries who send Ambassadors to the Court of St. James.

There has been relatively little intervention to the fabric of the theatre since its construction. This is illustrated in Figure 2 which shows the theatre very much as it survives today.

2.3 The plays and later management

The opening production Panthea only lasted for 15 nights as well as the various entertainments that followed until C.B. Cochran took on the lease in May 1914. Cochran produced the first 'intimate' revue in this country, entitled 'Odds and Ends', on 17th October 1914. This revue was by Harry Grattan, with music by Edward Jones.

In 1919, H.M. Harwood, the businessman and playwright, took on a tenancy which lasted until 1930. He presented many plays of outstanding merit including ' Sylvia's Lovers' and 'A Grain of Mustard Seed'.

In 1932, Sydney Carroll took charge, presenting a revival of 'The Streets of London', by Dion Boucicault. Subsequent successes were scored with 'Children to Bless You and 'Two Bouquets (1936). In 1938, J.W. Pemberton took over the lease of the theatre from Carroll. Pemberton had many successes including lunch and tea ballets by The London Ballet, as nightly air raids made evening entertainment undesirable.

In 1958, a long lease was taken by Peter Saunders, and the Mousetrap, by Agatha Christie, became the longest stage run in history. It moved to the St. Martin's Theatre after Peter Saunders' lease of the Ambassadors ended in 1974.

Herbert Jay continued to own the theatre and leased it to Ray Cooney until in 1996, the Ambassadors Theatre was bought by the Ambassador Theatre Group. It renamed it The New Ambassadors. In 2007 it was sold again, this time to Stephen Waley Cohen, who already owned St. Martin's Theatre. He reverted to the use of 'the Ambassadors' as the name of the theatre. Ambassador Theatre Group, now called ATG, bought the theatre back from Waley-Cohen in 2018.

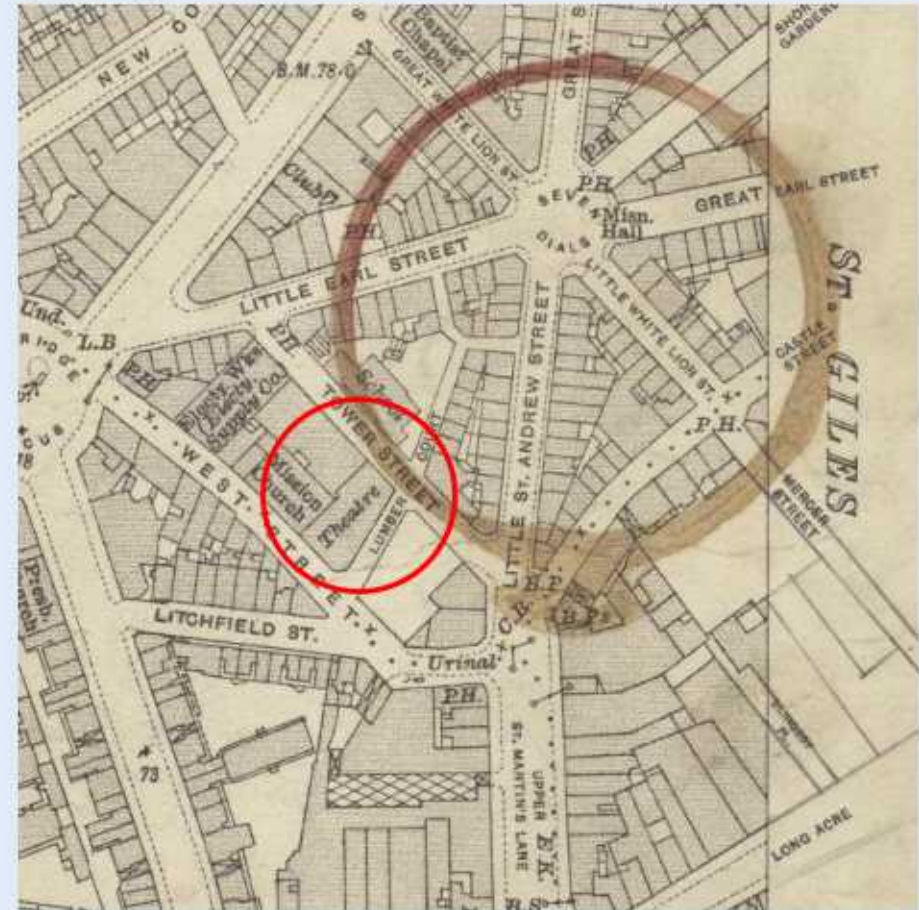
Figure 1

a) OS map published in 1875.



Above: This map shows the site before the Ambassadors Theatre or the St. Martin's had been constructed.

b) OS Map published in 1916.



Above: This map shows the Ambassadors Theatre erected and the site for the St. Martin's Theatre, opposite, vacant, ready for its construction.

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Figure 2

a) Photo of the exterior in c1950.



b) The interior in 1913.



Above: The interior in 1913 from *The Era*, 7 June 1913. It confirms the unaltered auditorium.

RIGHT: The Ambassadors exterior in c1950. Note the second floor to Tower Court has not been constructed. Source: Theatres Trust Archive.

3.0 Assessment of significance

When considering works to a heritage asset it is always necessary to understand in detail the nature and extent of the 'significance' that a heritage place has in society, in order to protect, preserve and conserve the values of that place. (UNESCO, Significance Assessment, 2012)

3.1 Background

An assessment of the 'significance' of a place summarises the cultural and natural heritage values currently attached to it. The interrelation of these values gives expression to the particular character of the place. It explains the relative importance of the heritage values of the place (where appropriate, by reference to criteria for statutory designation), how they relate to its physical fabric, the extent of any uncertainty about its values (particularly in relation to potential for hidden or buried elements), and any tensions between potentially conflicting values that have been identified. (Historic England, Conservation Principles, Paragraph 82)

Annex 2 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) defines a 'heritage asset' as: 'A building, monument, site, place, area, or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest.' It goes on to define the setting of a heritage asset as: 'The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve.'

3.2 Assessment of Significance

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 1), defines listed buildings as 'buildings of special architectural or historic interest'. The significance of a 'heritage asset' such as a listed building is defined in the NPPF (Annex 2) as: 'the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest.' That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic.

3.3 Understanding 'value' and significance

Historic England's Conservation Principles (2008) outlines four different values which contribute to a building's significance, as follows. The significance of the Ambassadors Theatre has been assessed with these in mind.

Evidential (or archaeological) value: Derived from the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.

The Ambassadors Theatre exemplifies the grandeur of *fin-de-siècle* London, with its public houses, restaurants and theatres built on a palatial scale.

Today, the area around Seven Dials has some of the finest interwar theatre buildings, which provide a powerful impression of the glamorous style enjoyed by tourists and theatregoers in the 1930s. It is a style of visual arts, architecture, and product design, that first appeared in France in the 1910s, and flourished in during the 1920s and 1930s. The Ambassadors Theatre, while pre-dating the others, provides a significant contribution.

Historical value: Derived from the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present.

The theatre has historic value as a Edwardian theatre building which was designed as a theatre and continues to function in its original intended use.

It is also of historic value for its association with the prominent and recognised theatre architect, W.G.R. Sprague, who gained, through reading and observation, a fine vocabulary of architectural form and detail which he interpreted with a magnificent flair for theatrical atmosphere. All of Sprague's surviving theatre buildings have been recognised as buildings of architectural and historic interest and are designated heritage assets.

Finally, the Ambassadors has historic value through its association with its owner, The Ambassador Theatre Limited, of which F. Herbert Jay was the managing director. The associations of the theatre with St. Martin's add to its historic value. The two buildings were not conceived of as a pair but as companion buildings.

Aesthetic value: Derived from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.

The building has aesthetic value derived in its attractive principal elevation and corner profile to West Street, which is evocative of its age and function. Internally, the arrangement and detailing of the principal spaces within the theatre are of aesthetic value. The majority of the historic fabric of Sprague's original auditorium remains and it is visually attractive.

Communal value: Derived from the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.

Communal value is based on its extensive performance history. The list features revue, operas, ballet and plays. The theatre will also be remembered by visitors who have returned to the venue many times over the years. They will have cherished memories of performances and kept programmes as souvenirs of their experience. Thus, site and people are connected tangibly.

3.4 Assessment of significance with regard to the Second Floor Level

Bearing these values above in mind, and specifically in relation to the Second Floor Level, the assessment of the significance of the Ambassadors Theatre's fabric is as follows. Its significance is also linked to its provenance, so that original features are generally considered more significant than newer components.

The Ambassadors Theatre has high importance as a unique surviving example of a late Edwardian theatre. Historic England's *Culture and Entertainment Buildings Listing Selection Guide* which states 'Historic England's Culture and Entertainment Buildings Listing Selection Guide states that 'Late nineteenth-century entrepreneurs invested in large new variety theatres that are for many the epitome of Victorian and Edwardian theatres. Surviving examples are generally of the most decorative'.

Its high importance is backed by its entry in *The Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres 1750-1950* which describes the Ambassadors as 'a small theatre on an impossibly small site... a planning tour de force by Sprague (and) possibly his most striking feat of compression, front and back of house'. *The Buildings of England, London 6: Westminster*, also confirms its importance 'The little Ambassadors', 1913, has a pilastered front and a charming, compact interior ornamented with ambassadors' crests'.

The Ambassadors Theatre comes at the end of the boom in theatre building that was fuelled by unprecedented urbanisation and economic prosperity. Unlike the smaller, less ostentatious venues that had come before them, theatres of the Victorian and Edwardian era sported lavish décor.

Its high significance is set out and reflected in its Grade II listing which points out the 'completeness of design: both the Classical style exterior and the interior in Louis XVI style were designed by Sprague and include foyer, circle bar, auditorium and some original backstage features' as well as its 'degree of survival'. This designation is based on a number of factors including the age and architectural merit of the building as well as its historical associations; this value is increased by its inclusion within the Seven Dials Conservation Area. It combines evidential, communal, aesthetic and historic values.

There is no doubt that the Ambassadors Theatre is a **highly significant heritage asset**.

In terms of the second floor level, the front part of the building (facing West Street) was originally two offices and a saloon bar. Sprague's original plan form can be seen at Figure 3. Although the original plan form generally survives as well as the two chimney breasts, some skirting, a cast iron fire surround and window architraves, the offices themselves were not lavish spaces, and therefore are not significant in their own right.

Original bars are usually always significant in theatre buildings, but the second floor has been alerted, most recently in the 1990s, and any noteworthy features pertaining to the former saloon have been lost.

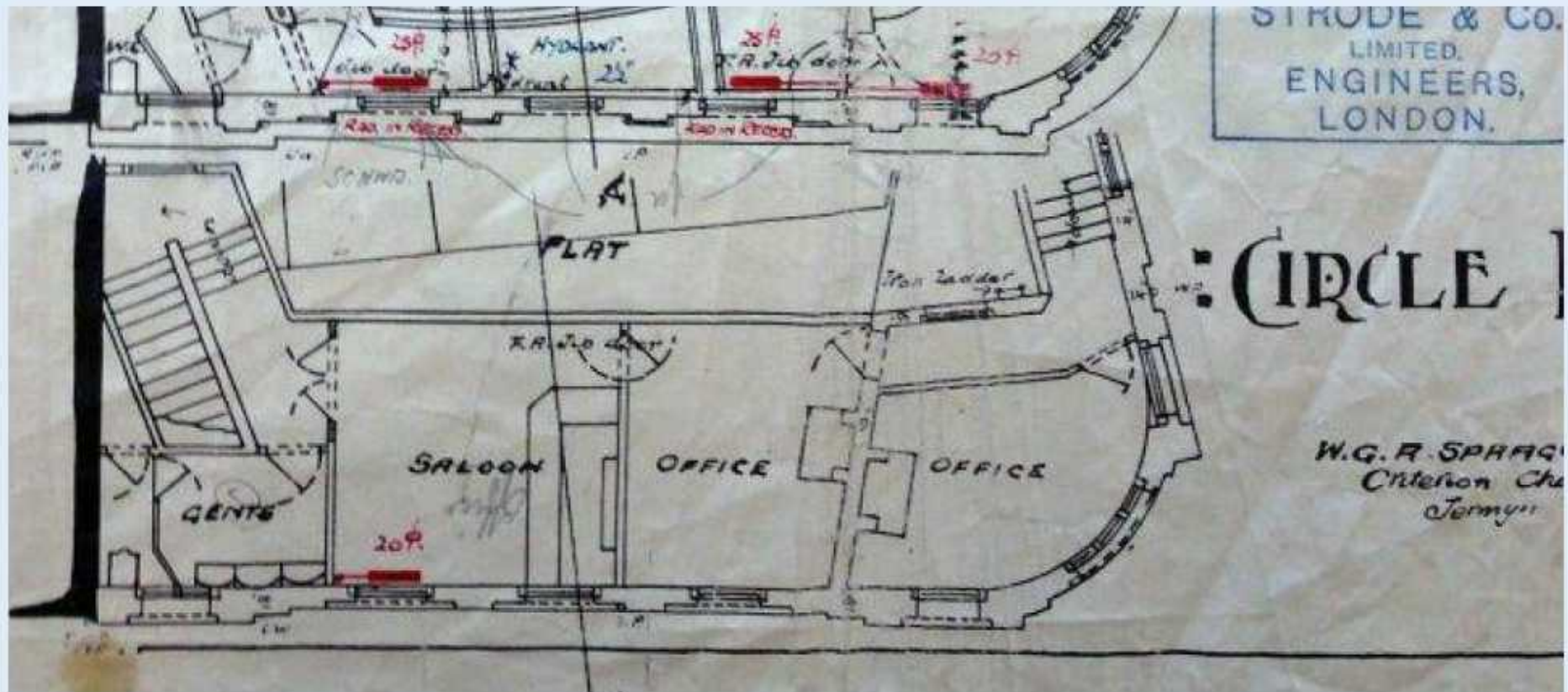
The second floor suite of offices (facing Tower Court) are within a later extension to the building which was constructed in the late 1950s. See the illustration at Figure 2a which shows the elevation without the second floor. This area of the building was not part of Sprague's original design, and whilst designed to match the building, it is not of special interest.

None of these areas could therefore be regarded as of any important significance or value. Much of the fabric to the interior of the building today dates from the 1970s and later fitting out. What remains is of evidential value and no architectural or historic interest.

The Second Floor Level is therefore considered to have **low significance**.

Figure 3

Second floor level in 1913 from Sprague's original circle level plan.



Source: Theatres Trust Archive.

Architects and designers

Significance can be drawn from the architects and designers themselves, who can impart a certain value based on their other work and how successfully they conveyed their ideas and aspirations into a built legacy. The design of the Ambassadors Theatre can be credited to W.G.R Sprague.

William George Robert Sprague (1865 – 1933) was a theatre architect.

Sprague was born in Australia, the son of W.A. Sprague and Dolores Drummond, an English actress who gained fame after her return to London in 1874. At sixteen he was articled to Frank Matcham for four years, then to Walter Emden for another three. He then went into partnership with Bertie Crewe until 1895.

With this fortuitous theatre designing background, he was well trained in the practicalities of theatre architecture, but uninhibited by the fastidiousness of an academic education. Sprague set up on his own and designed a large number of theatres. His extravagant music halls, such as the Newport Lyceum, have all been demolished but his later theatres have mostly survived.

Sprague gained, through reading and observation, a fine vocabulary of architectural form and detail which he interpreted with a magnificent flair for theatrical atmosphere. He once observed that for his frontages he 'liked the Italian Renaissance' but modified and took liberties 'that no architect would ever demur to do so as to get the best effects'.

Although his range was less extensive than Matcham's and less dramatically imaginative – both spatially and decoratively – his control was surer. His integration of balconies, boxes and proscenium arch is masterly and complete. This is best illustrated at the Sheffield Lyceum. Unlike Matcham, his façades are 'at one' with his auditoria. They instantly recognisable as those of a theatre and never obtrude or clash with adjacent buildings, but add a dramatic and well mannered feature to the streetscene.

In 1902, the theatre newspaper *The Era* described him as 'Britain's youngest theatrical designer, with more London houses to his credit than any other man in the same profession'. The *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 December 1933, carries an obituary which states that 'He was the first architect to do away with the columns supporting the circle'.

It is a curious fact about Sprague's eight West End playhouses that four of them appear in architecturally balanced pairs (Gielgud with Queen's and Ivor Novello with Aldwych), while the remaining four, although not paired in an architectural sense, are grouped two and two in close proximity (Wyndham's with Noel Coward, back to back, and Ambassadors with St. Martin's, side by side).



W.G.R. Sprague

Source: *The Sketch*, 20 September 1899.

4.0 Relevant policy context

This section of the report sets out the legislation and planning policy considerations and guidance contained within both national and local planning guidance. It specifically relates to the application site, with a focus on the historic environment.

4.1 National Policy

Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990

The Ambassadors Theatre is Grade II Listed and is within the Seven Dials Conservation Area [See the list description in Appendix 1]. The primary legislation relating to Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas is set out in the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

National Planning Policy Framework

The National Planning Policy Framework was revised on 20 July 2021 and sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. With regard to the historic environment, the overarching aim of the policy remains in line with the philosophy of the 2012 framework, namely in achieving sustainable development. An environmental objective is to protect and enhance our built and historic environment.

The relevant policy is outlined within Chapter 16, 'Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment'. This chapter reasserts that heritage assets should be conserved in a 'manner appropriate to their significance' (Paragraph 195).

Planning Practice Guidance

Planning Practice Guidance (PPG), Historic environment, advice on enhancing and conserving the historic environment, was updated on 24 June 2021 and is a companion to the NPPF.

4.2 London Plan March 2021

Chapter 7, Heritage and Culture, Policy HC1 (C) Heritage conservation and growth: Development proposals affecting heritage assets, and their settings, should conserve their significance, by being sympathetic to the assets' significance and appreciation within their surroundings. The cumulative impacts of incremental change from development on heritage assets and their settings should also be actively managed. Development proposals should avoid harm and identify enhancement opportunities by integrating heritage considerations early on in the design process.

4.3 Local Authority Heritage Policy

The theatre is situated within the London Borough of Camden and is subject to the **Camden Local Plan** which was adopted on 3 July 2017. Policy considered relevant to this application include the following:

Policy A1 Managing the impact of development. The Council will seek to protect the quality of life of occupiers and neighbours. We will grant permission for development unless this causes unacceptable harm to amenity.

Policy D1 Design. The Council will seek to secure high quality design in development. The Council will require that development:

- D1b. preserves or enhances the historic environment and heritage assets in accordance with Policy D2 Heritage;
- D1c. is sustainable in design and construction, incorporating best practice in resource management and climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- D1e. comprises details and materials that are of high quality.

Policy D2 Heritage. The Council will preserve and, where appropriate, enhance Camden's rich and diverse heritage assets and their settings, including conservation areas, listed buildings, archaeological remains, scheduled ancient monuments and historic parks and gardens and locally listed heritage assets.

Designated heritage assets. The Council will not permit development that results in harm that is less than substantial to the significance of a designated heritage asset unless the public benefits of the proposal convincingly outweigh that harm.

The protection of theatre is contained within Policy C3 Cultural and leisure facilities. The policy notes the importance of theatres to tourism and as part of London's 'theatreland'. At paragraph 4.51 the Local Plan recognises that the 'ability to sustain and build on this success relies on the availability of a wide range of suitable accommodation'.

4.4 Historic England advice

Historic England Advice Note 2 'Making Changes to Heritage Assets' (February 2016)

This document provides advice in relation to aspects of addition and alteration to heritage assets.

Paragraph 43 it states 'The junction between new work and the existing fabric needs particular attention, both for its impact on the significance of the existing asset. Where possible it is preferable for new work to be reversible, so that changes can be undone without harm to historic fabric'.

5.0 Assessment of proposals

The proposals have the potential to affect the character and significance of the listed building. This section considers the impact of the works on the significance of the assets and a statement of justification explaining why the works are desirable or necessary.

The proposal is assessed in terms of its compliance with the relevant statutory duties of the Planning Act 1990, national policy within the NPPF and supporting NPPG, and regional and local planning policy and guidance. The level of detail is considered to be proportionate to the assets' importance and sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance [NPPF 200].

5.1 Summary of proposals

The proposals include internal alterations at the second floor level to provide a new lounge bar and office facilities.

5.2 The design of proposals and justification for the works

The theatre wish to upgrade the building at second floor level to maximise the potential front of house space required to support the needs of theatregoers. The current entrance foyer is minuscule, as are all circulation spaces and the existing bars. Meetings of friends and pre-show chats have to take place outside than within the theatre. On this basis it has carefully reviewed its current bars and found the need for additional accommodation to serve the Circle. It has been found that existing office space could be adapted at second floor level (above the rear of the Circle).

The main alteration proposed will be the removal of two internal walls and chimney breasts located at second floor. The area will then be fitted out with a number of stud walls in order to make the new lounge bar accommodation, a washroom and staff facilities. Another office suite, also at second floor, will have its stud walls reconfigured to provide a new manager's office and hot desks.

A number of modifications to the building are therefore necessary in order to make the building work better and function efficiently both in utility and in comfort. The theatre has looked at other options and locations to accommodate the facilities they require, but this area was considered the most practical and least detrimental to the listed building.

The proposals and the design have been considered taking account of paragraph 137 NPPF which states 'Design quality should be considered throughout the evolution and assessment of individual proposals.' They also accord with the London Plan, Policy HC1(C) Heritage conservation and growth, in particular that 'Development proposals should avoid harm and identify enhancement opportunities by integrating heritage considerations early on in the design process.'

5.3 Impact on heritage asset

There is no harm in the proposals on the character or the appearance of the Seven Dials Conservation Area as all of the proposals are internal.

In terms of the internal alterations, there is negligible harm to the character and integrity of the listed building. This is because the proposals involve the removal of two original walls and their chimney breasts to necessitate the upgraded facilities. The rest of the proposed fitting out and reconfiguration of stud walls at second floor level is not considered harmful given the lesser significance of this part of the theatre.

I have already established that the second floor (facing West Street) was originally designed as two offices and a saloon bar. It was fitted out in with new partitions in the 1970s. The offices facing Tower Court were constructed in 1950s. Both areas of the building I have deemed to be of low significance. I have also established that it is necessary for the theatre to have additional bar accommodation at this level of the building.

It is unfortunate that this necessitates the removal of the two walls and the chimney breasts but this would make the building function better and provide much needed front of house facilities. The theatre has considered retaining these features, but their configuration prevents retention and public access. The staff facilities must also remain at this level.

Notwithstanding this, the most significant elements of the rooms (facing West Street) including the broader plan form and window architraves will be retained. The attractive cast iron fire surround will also be retained as a feature, albeit in new location. The area will otherwise be fitted out with lightweight stud partitions, dado and fixtures and fittings in a tasteful manner. New toilets and kitchen services will be installed to the existing service routes and therefore there will be no additional damage to the historic fabric of the building. These works are considered to be lightweight and reversible fitting out.

The works to the offices facing Tower Court are not considered harmful as this section of the building dates to 1950 and is of no architectural or historic interest. In any case, the works in this location are also lightweight and reversible.

5.4 Preserving the significance

All of the proposals concur with Camden's Local Plan Design and Heritage Policies in particular, Policy D2 Heritage because it will preserve Camden's rich and diverse heritage assets.

Whilst this will inevitably mean that there will be intervention within the historic building, it is limited to parts of the structure that have limited significance or low value. In any case, fitting-out will be of sympathetic design. The work will be entirely reversible. Thus, in considering Historic England's Advice Note 2 'Making Changes to Heritage

Assets', the impact of the proposals have been given particular attention as advised by Paragraph 43 that 'where possible it is preferable for new work to be reversible, so that changes can be undone without harm to historic fabric.'

Statutory listing does not exclude all possibility of alteration, but requires that necessary alterations be carried out in a manner that will preserve the special architectural or historic interest that gave rise to the listing. The current scheme looks to adapt and upgrade the building in keeping with its proposed use. Fundamentally, it upholds the special significance of the building, its *raison d'être* for statutory designation.

These alterations will certainly sustain the character and integrity of the heritage asset. Notwithstanding this, I have identified some low harm by the proposals. However, this must necessarily be 'less than substantial' (and at the very low end of the scale). For harm to be substantial, the adverse impact must seriously affect a key element of its special architectural or historic interest. That is not the case here. Nonetheless, there will be substantial public benefits as set out in Section 5.5 by these alterations which in my view would outweigh any low harm.

5.5 Public Benefit

I have already identified that 'less than substantial' harm to the building might be observed given the loss of the plan form and chimney breasts. The proposals therefore need to be weighed against the public benefits of scheme [NPG Historic Environment, Paragraph 020].

The benefits of the proposals are numerous. The new bar will improve the venue's flexibility and enhance its potential to generate income. The works will help enhance the audience experience. It will give a substantial uplift to this area.

Changes are proposed to the building because such front of house facilities are expected by theatregoers. Furthermore, hygiene, ease of access and the creation of a calm attractive environment are always important considerations. The changes are necessary in order to make the building fit for purpose, keeping it in active use.

The proposals will bring about wholesale benefits for the theatre, staff and thus the audience. Fundamentally it will continue to secure the long term future of this Edwardian gem of a theatre. This takes account of Local Plan Policy D2, in that the public benefits of the proposal convincingly outweigh the harm.

5.6 Conclusion

This heritage statement has been prepared in connection with proposals to convert the second floor offices into a lounge bar as well as reconfiguration and fitting out of office and toilet provision at this level.

The Ambassadors Theatre maintains a high level of architectural quality and historical interest. Its history reflects the story of popular stage entertainment. It is also an important component of the world famous concentration of continuously active theatres known as London's Theatreland. Theatreland itself is culturally significant at several levels and it is one of the principal attractions drawing visitors to London.

The proposals have been carefully considered to take account of what remains of special interest to the building and to conserve these elements, thus the character of the building. The works will require the removal of historic fabric to facilitate the lounge bar. However, I have found these features to be of low significance, and the low harm caused, is convincingly outweighed by public benefits of the proposal (as advised by Local Plan Policy D2). The new bar is entirely necessary as the current entrance foyer is minuscule, as are all circulation spaces and the existing bars. Meetings of friends and pre-show chats have to take place outside than within the theatre. The works are therefore considered justified and reasonable.

New works respect the character of the building and replace fixtures and fittings that are not original. The works are also entirely reversible. Mitigation measures include the relocation and installation of the cast iron fire surround (arguably the most interesting surviving feature).

Most importantly it will improve its operation as a working theatre through restoration and adaptation for the benefit of the nation. The protection of theatre is contained within Policy C3, Cultural and leisure facilities. The policy notes the importance of theatres to tourism and as part of London's 'theatreland'. The policy also recognises that such cultural facilities need to provide 'suitable accommodation' if they are to be sustained.

In terms of national policy, for all the reasons stated above, the scheme would further the aims set out in paragraph 203 of the NPPF, which concerns the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to uses consistent with their conservation, as well as the positive contribution that this can make to communities.

In summary, the proposals sustain the significance of the listed building. It is also considered that the proposals accord with the NPPF that relate to heritage assets and the historic environment, while bringing public benefit. Furthermore, they fulfil policy in Camden's Local Plan Policy, the London Plan and Historic England's guidance notes.

This report finds no conservation grounds for refusal of consent.

Image 1.

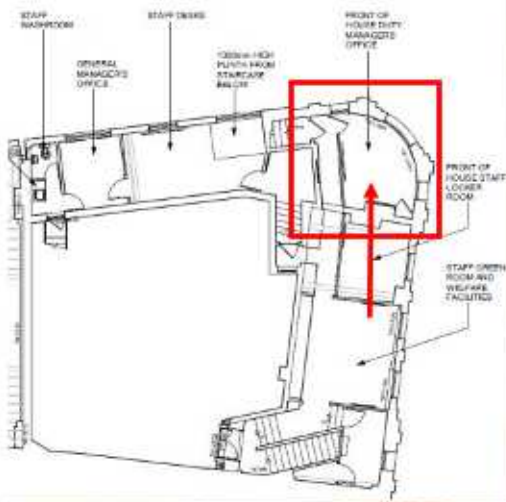


Image 2.

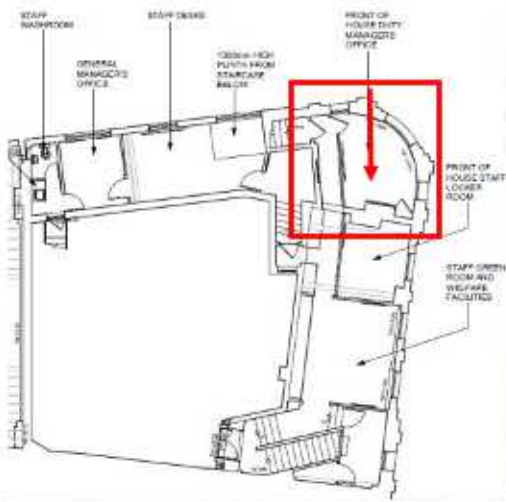


Image 3.

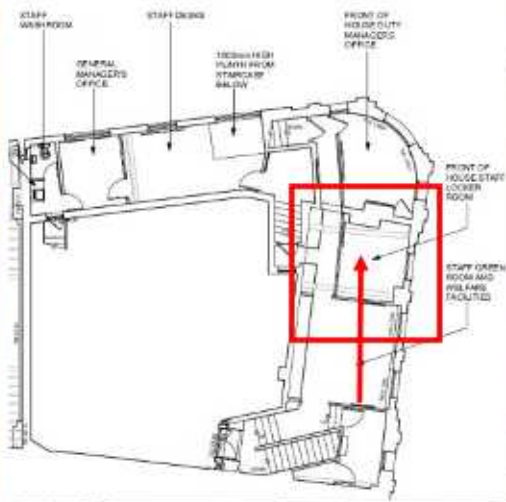
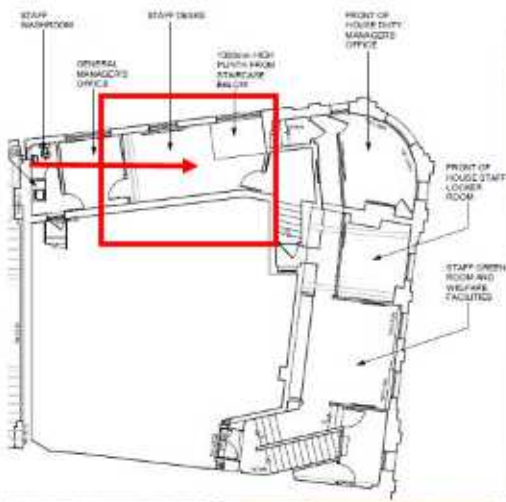


Image 4.



6.0 Sources

Copyright

Mark Price has made use of illustrative material from a variety of sources. What follows can be nothing more than an outline of the permissions that might then be needed.

Sources of information

The information included in the document has been based on various primary and secondary sources including the following:

Greater London Historic Environment Record (HER)/compliance with NPPF para. 200

A search on the Greater London Historic Environment Record (HER) via the Heritage Gateway was undertaken on 01.10.2024. The entry for the property contains the list description and a Historic England research record. HER records are copyright to HER and reproduction of the records have not been illustrated for this report.

The level of detail in this report is considered to be proportionate to the assets' importance and sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance. The relevant historic environment record has been consulted and the heritage assets assessed using appropriate expertise. The report is thus considered compliant with NPPF paragraph 200.

Images

Photos @ Mark Price, Theatre and Heritage

Other images where not credited Theatres Trust Archive/ATG

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Maps

Figure 1a. London (First Editions c1850s) XXXIV. Surveyed: 1870, Published: 1875.

Figure 1b. London (1915- Numbered sheets) V.9. Revised: 1914, Published: 1916.

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Appendix 1

LIST DESCRIPTION

Heritage Category: Listed Building

Grade: II*

List Entry Number: 1379185

Date first listed: 16-Mar-1973, updated 09-Jun-2017

Statutory Address: Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London, WC2H 9ND

County: Greater London Authority

District: Camden (London Borough)

National Grid Reference: TQ3000781007

Details

Theatre, opened in January 1913, designed by W G R Sprague in Classical style with Louis XVI style interiors. The builder was Kingerlee and Sons. The Stalls were re-seated in 1924 and the Circle in 1929 by Sprague and Barton.

Reasons for Designation

Ambassadors Theatre is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * Architectural interest: as a 1913 theatre designed by W G R Sprague, one of the most important late C19 and early C20 theatre architects; * Completeness of design: both the Classical style exterior and the interior in Louis XVI style were designed by Sprague and include foyer, circle bar, auditorium and some original backstage features; * Degree of survival: both exterior and interior are little altered; * Historical interest: the theatre saw the West End debut of many famous artists including Ivor Novello, Hermione Gingold, Paul Robeson, Margaret Lockwood and Vivien Leigh and it was the original home of 'The Mousetrap', the world's longest running show; * Group value: adjoins St Martin's Theatre of 1916, also by Sprague (Grade II) and 24 West Street (Grade II).

History

The Ambassadors Theatre was designed by the theatre architect W G R Sprague (1865-1933) and opened on 5 June 1913. Sprague (1865-1933) was one of the three leading theatre architects of the period 1890-1914 and designed more than thirty theatres during his career, including eight in London's West End

A new theatre had been proposed for this site in 1898-9 but had been twice rejected because of the narrowness of the surrounding streets, particularly Tower Court. In

1912 Sprague applied on behalf of Herbert Jay to build 'a comparatively small theatre' for 506 seated patrons and 40 standing, mainly for amateur productions. He argued that although the streets were narrower than normally allowed for access to a theatre there would be access to the site on three sides if the narrow Tower Court, only 13 feet wide, was included. Permission was granted on condition that Tower Court was widened to 20 feet, which made a restricted site even smaller. The height of the theatre was restricted by Ancient Lights acquired by neighbouring properties.

Sprague's plans, which included the interior decorative scheme, date from April 1912. An additional floor of dressing rooms was added during construction and the theatre opened on 5 June 1913. The auditorium was described in contemporary accounts as in Louis XVI style with ambassadorial crests and a colour scheme of Parma violet, ivory and gold.

A sprinkler system was added in January 1914. The stalls seats were replaced in 1924 and the circle seats in 1929 by Sprague and Barton. Apart from re-decoration the auditorium remains virtually intact. The theatre can currently seat 408.

From the start it was used for professional performances, specialising in small ensemble pieces and also revues, which were pioneered here by Charles B Cochran in 1914, and ran through the Second World War. Performers who made their West End debut in plays here included Ivor Novello and Hermione Gingold (both 1921), Paul Robeson (1925), Margaret Lockwood (1934) and Vivien Leigh (1935). In 1952 'The Mousetrap' opened here and remained until 1974 when it transferred to St Martin's Theatre next door. The building was also in occasional cinema use.

Details

Theatre, opened in January 1913, designed by W G R Sprague in Classical style with Louis XVI style interiors. The builder was Kingerlee and Sons. The Stalls were re-seated in 1924 and the Circle in 1929 by Sprague and Barton.

MATERIALS: the frontage to West Street and the corner to Tower Court is stuccoed, the remainder of brick in English bond. There is a metal and glazed canopy to West Street and the corner with Tower Court. The roof is concealed by a parapet.

PLAN: a splayed almost triangular site with a circular foyer at the corner of West Street and Tower Court, a circular bar above and stairs leading off. The auditorium comprises stalls and circle, the proscenium arch is 24 feet 6 inches wide with a box each side, and the stage depth is 20 feet 6 inches. The stairs, offices and lavatories adjoin Tower Court. There are three storeys of dressing rooms behind the stage along Tower Street.

EXTERIOR: the West Street elevation is of three storeys and five bays with a balustraded parapet with ball finials and a deep moulded cornice. The central three bays are separated by pilasters and have deeply recessed flat-arched casement windows. The slightly advanced end bays have channelled pilasters under segmental pediments, circular openings on the second floor and flat-arched casements to the first floor. The ground floor has a continuous metal and glazed canopy, deep moulded cornice and alternate mahogany double doors and casement windows. The curved corner between West Street and Tower Court has mahogany half-glazed doors and triple casement windows above flanked by pilasters. The stuccoed southern bay of the Tower Court elevation is identical to the southern bay on West Street.

The remainder of the Tower Court elevation is in brick and plainer, the southern end of three storeys and a semi-basement with three elliptical-headed windows, the central part of two storeys with two elliptical-headed windows and a tall opening for loading scenery, and the northern part of three storeys with two elliptical-headed casement windows and a narrow stage door.

The Tower Street elevation has a taller three storey southern bay with an elliptical-headed casement on each floor and a lower three storey and semi-basement section of four bays with elliptical-headed windows and an elliptical-headed fire door.

INTERIOR: the interior plaster decoration is in Louis XVI style. Public areas have mahogany doors. The circular foyer has pilasters below a decorative plastered ceiling. The circle bar above is similar. The auditorium has a circular high relief decorated plaster ceiling with central chandelier, a panelled border with roundels and a deep cove penetrated by arches springing from fluted Ionic pilasters. The richly framed and festooned roundels have coloured armorial decorations in the arch tympana. The Circle has a horseshoe-curved balcony front with panelled and festooned plasterwork decoration, and there is a narrower section raised up at the back with a smaller similar balcony. Its ceiling has large fielded panels. The Stalls side walls have oval decorations with festoons, containing looking glasses, but, according to an old photograph in the Metropolitan Archives, originally held paintings. The flat basket-arched proscenium arch is crowned by three armorial decorations, flanked by fluted Ionic pilasters and tall single splayed round-headed boxes with urn decoration above and closed balustrading below.

Original stage machinery includes two fly floors and the traditional system of hemp flying, although the ropes, flying bars and pulley blocks have been replaced. There is a timber gridiron for suspending scenery with a now rarely surviving but disused single drum and shaft mechanism.