

31 Great James Street WC1N 3HB

Minor Internal and External Basement Alterations - Heritage Statement

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The property is listed in Grade II* as one of 14 terraced houses built between 1720 and 1724. It is located in the south-eastern section of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. It is four storeys over a basement in brick with a plain tiled roof. To the rear is a single storey extension with basement connected to the house via a passageway. The house was extensively refurbished in 2014. The refurbishment work was commended in an award from The Georgian Group.
- 1.2. The application site is therefore clearly a designated heritage asset as defined in Annex2 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 128 of this document requires an assessment of the significance of any heritage assets affected by the proposed works. This should be proportionate to the significance and scale of the works proposed. That is the purpose of this document.
- 1.3. The work proposed is of a minor nature: insertion of a staircase into the lightwell, formation of a small lobby and addition of an internal door.

2. Statutory Constraints

- 2.1. No. 31 Great James Street and attached railings was listed in Grade II* on 24 October 1957. The list description reads as follows: *24/10/57 Nos.26-37 AND 39-40 (Consecutive) and attached railings(Formerly Listed as: GREAT JAMES STREET Nos.26-37, 38, 39 & 40 (Consecutive))GV II* 14 terraced houses. 1720-24. For J Metcalfe. Brown brick, upper storeys with some refacing in multi-coloured, yellow (Nos 28, 34 & 40) and brown stock brick (1st floor and above of No.30). 4 storeys and basements. 3 windows each. Nos 27-38 and 40, good wood architraved door cases with enriched, carved brackets carrying hoods with panelled soffits, most with patterned fanlights and panelled doors. No.27, C20 hood with shaped brackets;No.39, architraved doorcase with pilasters, plain cornice, radial fanlight and panelled door. Red segmental arches and dressings to flush framed windows, No.35 upper storeys with glazing bars. Some frames reeded with roundels. Parapets. Some original lead rainwater heads with lion masks. INTERIORS: mostly having fine panelling. Staircases mostly with twisted balusters, column newels and carved brackets to treads. SUBSIDIARY FEATURES: attached cast-iron railings with urn or torch flambe finials to areas.*
- 2.2. Neighbouring properties on both the east and west sides of Great James Street are also listed in Grade II and Grade II*.
- 2.3. The application site is located within sub-area 10 of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, first designated in 1968. The area was appraised recently and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy was adopted on 18 April 2011. 2.04 Section 3.0 of the Appraisal summarises the special interest of the Area and notes a number of characteristics that are important to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.

3. Recent History of site and Surroundings

- 3.1. Great James Street was originally built as residential but last century many of the buildings became B1 office use, in the main solicitors' offices.
- 3.2. 31 Great James Street had been a solicitors' office since 1970.
- 3.3. In 2014 31 Great James Street was returned to residential use and became a five bedroom family home with a modern one storey kitchen extension to the rear. The conversion was done extremely sympathetically and restored many original features as well as re-instating tuck pointing and six over six windows. The quality of the conversion was recognised by the Georgian Group who awarded a commendation for Restoration of a Georgian Building in an Urban setting in 2015. 31 Great James Street pictured before and after the 2014 restoration below.
- 3.4. The ethos of the restoration was to restore original features to a high standard whilst adding a light modern extension that detracted as little as possible from the original Georgian architecture.



3.5. This century many of the properties have been converted from office to residential. Of the 20 or so buildings on the west side of the street about 13 are either residential or in the process of being converted into residential and ten have external staircases into the front lightwell.

4. Statement of Significance

- 4.1. Central Government Guidance contained within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) paragraph 128 requires applicants to demonstrate an understanding of the significance of any 'heritage asset' which may be affected by a proposed development. It is clear that the amount of detail provided should be 'proportionate to the importance...and no more than is sufficient to understand the impact of the proposal on the significance of the heritage asset.'
 - 4.2. Significance is defined in Annex 2 of the NPPF as the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting.
 - 4.3. English Heritage's document Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance (2008) splits the value which an asset may have into four component parts: Evidential, Historical, Aesthetic and Communal Value. These 'heritage values' are considered to align with the 'heritage interests' identified in the NPPF: 'evidential' value is considered to align with archaeological interest; 'aesthetic' value with architectural and artistic interest; and 'historical' and 'communal' value with historic interest.
 - 4.4. This section considers the overall 'heritage interests' of the assets before analysing in more detail the relative significance of those elements affected by the proposed development.
 - 4.5. **Archaeological Interest – high** Dating back to the early C18 and little altered, the building provides evidence with regard to construction techniques and materials, Georgian plan form, as well as decorative styles and architectural fashions of the period. One of a terrace of Georgian properties, it provides clear evidence for the planning and growth of London in the early decades of the C18.
 - 4.6. **Architectural and Artistic Interest – high** These are interests in the design and general aesthetics of a place and can arise from conscious design or fortuitously from the way the heritage asset has evolved. No.31 is a key part of a terrace of uniform houses.
 - 4.7. **Historic Interest – high** No.31 has a long history of occupation, both as residential and business premises.
 - 4.8. **Front (east) elevation – very high significance** The east elevation is the primary, polite elevation with a formal entrance on to the street. To the front of the building are iron railings separating the pavement from the basement light well which include an original gate. The basement level is painted white to reflect more light into the lower floor.
 - 4.9. **Basement – moderate significance** The front room is very plain with a blocked fireplace with cupboard shelf recesses either side. The room is entered from the stair landing through a Georgian door and architrave and also through a solid front door into the lightwell sitting directly below the main front door under the bridge. In the front wall is a simple plank door to the pavement vaults and new six over six glazed windows.
5. The proposed works are minor and have the propose of simply providing an independent access to the basement for lodgers and visitors without necessarily creating an independent unit- internal doors from front and middle rooms to the rest of the house will remain
 - 5.1. Add an external staircase from the gate in the front railings down into the lightwell to allow independent access to the basement through the original door
 - 5.2. Create a small lobby area by introducing a glass screen and door flush with the bridge

- 5.3. Narrow the northerly pavement vault opening and remove the plank door so that the vault can be stepped into from the glassed-in lobby area
 - 5.4. Reinststate the original curved arch supporting the bridge
 - 5.5. Introduce an internal door between the front and middle rooms mirroring such doors on the first and second floors
 - 5.6. Sympathetically enclose electricity metres and other utilitarian features.
6. Impact of the work on the building's significance
- 6.1. The work will have no effect on the appearance of the house from the street except if one were to look directly down into the lightwell
 - 6.2. The new staircase will make use of the original gate pictured below



- 6.3. Of the twenty or so properties on the west side of the street at least ten have stairs down to the basement and, given the existence of an original gate in the railings it is likely that there were once stairs down into the basement. The proposed stairs will be the minimum possible width and maximum possible steepness to avoid them blocking light into the basement or preventing the south vault door from opening. The existing bridge to the front door has been strengthened with a solid horizontal concrete block and the gap above filled in. It is proposed that this be removed and the original arch re-instated to match the neighbouring property- pictured below. Thus the aim here is to enhance the significance of the building by reinstating original Georgian features.



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- 6.4. So as not to detract from the arch or the original basement front door, a glass screen is proposed to create the lobby. Alternative glazed Georgian style door has been considered but rejected in favour of a minimal glass screen for the following reasons i) Glass will avoid a blocked off heavy look - lightness is required to allow the arch to speak for itself; ii) It is in line with SPAB's (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) philosophy that new additions to old buildings should be an honest statement of 'today'; iii) It will allow original features such as Georgian brickwork and the solid front door to be seen and not interfered with, our aim is to avoid blocking the view of the extremely fine original front door which would be unavoidable if a more traditional door was used; iv) It is consistent and coherent with the approach used at the rear of the house where the modern kitchen extension is entirely glass-walled. In addition, it will allow light into the otherwise windowless vault room.



View towards basement front door Vault room door to be narrowed Basement front door



Example of suggested screen allowing original features to remain prominent

- 6.5. The removal and narrowing of the pavement vault room door is not damaging to the significance of the building. The plank door is not original and cannot be viewed from the street. The suggested glass infill panel will allow a view of the original door jamb and brickwork thus again offering a light touch intervention that interferes as little as possible with and partially enhances the original building. If a more traditional lobby door was inserted, the narrowing of the vault door would have to be done with studwork and plasterboard masking the original vault door jamb and brickwork.
- 6.6. The aim of the glass screen is to offer a very light touch and thus to allow original features to stand out. It will be done in such a way that it would be relatively easy to reverse.
- 6.7. The insertion of an internal door between the front and middle rooms is consistent with the location of doors on the first and second floors. The proposed new door will match the existing internal door into the room, pictured below. Given that the only original features in the basement are doors that the current owners of 31 Great James Street re-used from other areas of the house, the basement interior is of limited historical significance and the insertion of this door will have no impact on the historical significance of the building.



7. Conclusion

- 7.1. Minor external and internal alterations are proposed to allow separate access to basement.
- 7.2. The basement is of limited historical significance
- 7.3. The changes will not materially alter the appearance of the historically significant façade as they are all below street level
- 7.4. Inserting stairs makes use of a pre-existing gate and is in line with the majority of basements in the street
- 7.5. Reintroducing the arch under the bridge enhances the historical significance of the building and by filling in in a minimal way, views and integrity of original architecture are preserved
- 7.6. In part the changes will enhance the historical fabric such as reintroducing the arch. Elsewhere they will interfere with it as minimally as possible and will be done with such a light touch that they will be reversible.