

Listed building consent application, The Seven Stars, 53 Carey Street, WC2A 2JB Access and design statement for replacement of stair treads and risers

1 Introduction

The pub's establishment date was 1602, according to historical sources (e.g. The London Encyclopaedia, ed. by Ben Weinreb & Christopher Hibbert, 1983). Its earlier name was The League of Seven Stars, after the seven provinces of the Netherlands—its first customers may have been Dutch sailors who settled in the area during a period of peace with Britain in the early 17th century.

The interior and exterior of the pub have finishes from later—usually much later—periods. So it is only when building work is done that its very venerable age becomes apparent. The present applicant, Nathan Silver RIBA, carried out such work in 2001, and further, in 2004 or 2005, under previous listed building consents.

The work during 2001 involved, among other things, opening up the floor structure of the first floor so a steel beam could be placed in its thickness to support a heavy cooker, and elsewhere, creating an opening for a dumbwaiter. Unplaned hardwood joist timbers were found in both openings. They were laid in beds of fill, the precise nature of which was hard to identify, but it may have been packed reeds.

Overall, the building was evidently formed by the connection of two parts whose dates of construction may have been decades apart. The historical evidence of the western part's cellars and internal floor construction clearly confirm an origin in the late Elizabethan period.

2 Access

The configuration of the staircase undoubtedly derives from the building's original date: it is narrow and steeply pitched.

Until the 1990s, it was an exclusively private circulation link between the ground floor drinking area to the publican's lodgings above with a small kitchen. The ground floor bar was longer, and the stair was accessible by staff only from behind the bar. For public lavatories, customers were directed to a male pissoir in Star Yard (now closed, but not demolished). The needs of female customers were ignored. In the 1990s access to the single lavatory on the first floor was allowed if customers asked. They were invited to use the stair by coming round behind the bar.

In the scheme I designed that was carried out in 2001, the bar was slightly shortened to make access to the stair and lavatory facilities possible for customers without their having to be granted permission. A second lavatory for women was added above. The finishes of the staircase were improved, but the narrow and steep stair configuration itself was an essential characteristic of the listed building and it had to remain unchanged. It remains quite manageable for undischabled customers one at a time (the width prevents people passing on the stair). The addition of the dumbwaiter in 2001 made possible the successful function of the kitchen to service the pub.

3 The present condition and this design proposal

The current condition of the stair is now quite poor and probably dangerous. The stair stringers, treads and risers have been repaired and patched ad hoc, and are now unrepairable. The present

timbers are deal, dating back for no more than four or five decades, and of amateur construction. The treads and risers are not rebated in joinery, but put together only with nails. The steps are not of even height or depth, a condition that architects deem to be unsafe and that would certainly be dangerous if the stair wasn't so narrow that holding on to the railing on one side and the wall on the other is mandatory. Even more serious is that the stringers are now broken—weakened from below by sections carelessly removed for pipework. The entire ramshackle stair carcass is falling apart. That would be even more obvious if it wasn't covered (and no doubt now held together) by plastic sheet flooring installed seven or eight years ago.

The owners have therefore adopted a refurbishment brief for the staircase to achieve the following:

- a) Exactly maintain the historic configuration of the staircase, as it is a unique element of the venerable fabric of the pub.
- b) Maintain the surrounding structure of brick wall on one side and columnar posts on the other.
- c) Remove the existing ramshackle stair of plastic-covered deal and replace the treads, risers and stringers with a joinery-made construction of solid wrought oak, fully supported structurally. The replacement will have the same number of treads and risers, but the steps will all be of equal height and depth. The new oak treads will have thin non-slip strips of stainless steel rebated near their noses to reduce wear on the leading edges of the treads, and to provide a safe grip to the ball of the foot for users of the stair.
- d) With the new stair in place, remove the broken plaster on the adjacent north wall. Refinish the wall with panels of oak veneer plywood.
- e) Finish the new treads, risers and ply panelling with dark hard wax so their appearance eventually resembles the wrought oak planks of the ground floor.

As proposed in this listed building application, the above brief will be exactly carried out.

Nathan Silver RIBA
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