

Objection to planning application 2020/5587/T to fell two London Planes at 8 Doughty St

Introduction

I have known 8 and 9 Doughty St and the plane trees at 8 Doughty St for some thirty five years.

For the last 20 years I have been the partner of the resident whose garden the planes grow in, and while being resident outside London, I spend a very significant part of my life at 8 Doughty St in close proximity to the trees.

I have read the objections already lodged and publicly available against the trees being felled, and note and I agree with all aspects of the amenity, environment and biodiversity advantages noted by those objectors.

Instead of repeating this objections, I wish to contribute below on the basis of past experience of working on buildings similar to 4 Doughty Mews. A personal note appears in the summary.

A practical perspective

I have long standing experience of structural renovation of old buildings, including those of similar age, size and construction type as 4 Doughty Mews.

I have been inside 4 Doughty Mews three times to examine the building, back wall and cracking.

I have also spent significant time in the garden of 8 Doughty St and examined the trees and back wall of 4 Doughty Mews in great detail many times.

On my visits to the building I saw nothing that worried me in the cracks in the plasterwork to the back wall of 4 Doughty Mews, especially when

- That plasterwork seems to be incompatible with a lime mortar wall, and
- I see no evidence of the same cracking on the outside of the wall.

Thus I believe that the cracks are cracks in the plasterwork rather than the brick fabric of the wall, and there no structural repairs to perform.

Dr Gobeil, Director of the EES, mentioned to me on first meeting that the cracks in the back wall had been stable for 25 years This coupled with the very limited and minor change in cracks described in the survey indicate that the wall is stable.

(These minor surveyed changes that could have appeared from structural movements response to soil shrinkage in 2018 when "the Met Office declared summer 2018 the joint hottest on record" Wikipedia.)

Thus there is absolutely no urgency to remove the trees or shore up or work on the wall in the very near future.

Clearly though, the buildings at 2-4 Doughty Mews have not had any benefit of any major maintenance programme for some number of years, and a programme of restorative works is needed.

Concerns about the engineer's report supporting the application

I do have concerns about the structural engineer's report submitted by the applicant:

1. The report is incomplete, and identifies that further surveys of the building are needed. The surveyors have not even seen the trees and outside of the wall from the garden of 8 Doughty St, even though two years ago there was a stream of potential purchasers, engineers and arboriculturalists in the garden examining the trees and wall.
2. I am concerned that for a report that claims to motivate removal of veteran trees, no tell tails were used in making measurements of change in cracks over three years. (Tell tails are accurate surveyors' instruments that I have used to monitor building movement across cracks).
3. I saw no evidence of surveyors opening up cracks to see if the cracks were any deeper or more serious than mere plaster cracks. Photographs with the application confirm no survey-related opening up has been performed since my visits.
4. Photographs in the surveyors report make the cracks look worse than they appear when visited. E.g. in plate 8 there is one area of missing plaster. This was removed by an attending engineer in my presence. No evidence was found at that time that there was cracking in the brickwork behind, and no concern was expressed by the engineer (or by me) after he removed the plaster.
5. I disagree with the way in which the engineers present the cracks as Building Research Establishment Category 4 cracks. They are less severe than that.
6. I have not seen any tree-related cracking in the exterior of the wall.
7. Absolutely no consideration was given as to how the trees could be retained in connection with the building, given that ground heave is liable to cause severe damage to the building after trees are removed (confirmed by two arboriculturalists that I have contacted).
8. Instead there was a knee-jerk reaction to trees in close proximity to buildings to "remove the trees". This is short sighted in the light of the need to retain trees to avoid ground heave.

Practical short to medium term recommendations

It is very straight-forward to provide a short to medium term (say up to 20 year) happy relationship between the trees and 4 Doughty Mews.

- On the inside of the wall, remove the current plaster and replaster the wall with a flexible lime mortar.
- On the outside of the wall, remove the inflexible cement based repointing I see there, and repoint with lime mortar.

Engineer's long term recommendations

I understand that nearby architects are in contact with structural engineers who recommend a mini-piling solution and treatment at the base of the rear wall of 4 Doughty Mews to accommodate the trees over the next 100 years.

2-4 Doughty Mews are in need of extensive refurbishment, whether by the current or any subsequent owners. Given the scope of work needed to the buildings, mini-piling will be a reasonably insignificant part of the cost of the overall works — this kind of work will be easy to perform at a time when the buildings are being refurbished.

In summary

Although not a resident at 8 Doughty St, I view myself as extremely lucky to spend time in close to the trees, where I have seen three generations of family members (and friends) enjoy the trees.

I particularly appreciate the fact that children have played and continue to play under and around the trees — often hiding behind or circling the trunks in hide-and-seek or chase games. The trees are of compelling interest to children, e.g., our grandson is totally enamoured with the trees.

Their unnecessary felling would be a great loss to us and to the surrounding community.

If there is anything I can do in the way of stewardship of the trees to retain them for future generations, I will be most happy to do that.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for any further help or information.

Mark van Harmelen.

