

Objection to Planning Proposal for Howitt Close, NW3 2021/3839/P

The Belsize Society strongly objects to the proposal to add an additional storey to the very attractive and important block of flats at Howitt Close.

The proposal would cause very significant harm to an important building within the Belsize Conservation Area. In the Belsize Conservation Area Statement there are a number of highly relevant statements:

- *Howitt Close is identified in the Belsize Conservation Area Statement as one of the 'BUILDINGS AND GROUPS OF BUILDINGS THAT MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONSERVATION AREA'*
- *A number of buildings are notable because of their value as local landmarks, or as particularly good examples of the local building tradition. Such buildings, whilst not statutorily listed, are nevertheless important local buildings in their own right and make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. The general presumption should therefore be in favour of retaining such buildings. Although not listed, the Government requires that proposals to demolish these buildings should be assessed against the same broad criteria as proposals to demolish listed buildings (PPG15, paragraphs 3.16-3.19).*
- *Howitt Close is listed as one of the unlisted buildings which make a positive contribution to the special character and appearance of the area.*
- *The Belsize Conservation Area retains much of its architectural integrity. Generally, despite the imposition of the motor car into the public realm and the insertion a scattering of buildings from the second half of the 20th century within the Conservation Area, the majority of the area retains the essence of the character and appearance that would have prevailed in the 1930s.*
- *The majority of applications for planning permission within the Belsize Conservation Area involve minor alterations and extensions to existing dwellings. This can have a cumulative impact on elements that contribute to the character and appearance of buildings, streets and areas as a whole. The most noticeable changes within the area often result from one or more of the following:*
 - *Roof extensions - particularly the addition of overly large, inappropriately proportioned dormers, and the addition of mansard roofs*
 - *Alteration to, or replacement of windows, porches, doors, and other features. This includes the use of inappropriately scaled and detailed modern doors and window frames, in unsuitable materials*
 - *Addition or alteration to basements*
 - *Addition of roof terraces or balconies. The key issue being roof terraces with inappropriate railings that are prominent in the street scene*
 - *Addition of external services*
 - *Inappropriate design and materials*
 - *Inappropriate external painting (particularly of brickwork)*
 - *Loss of original features. (The classical ornamentation on the villa development and terraces has been particularly susceptible)*

- *Extensions of excessive bulk, massing or height*
- In the Belsize Conservation Area Statement, London Borough of Camden says:
 - 'Planning permission is required for extensions and alterations at roof level. Roof extensions and alterations, which change the shape and form of the roof, can have a harmful impact on the Conservation Area and are unlikely to be acceptable where:*
 - *It would be detrimental to the form and character of the existing building*
 - *The property forms part of a group or terrace which remains largely, but not completely unimpaired*
 - *The property forms part of a symmetrical composition, the balance of which would be upset*
 - *The roof is prominent, particularly in long views*

Belsize Society believes that the current proposals, which change the shape and form of the roof, will have a harmful impact on the Conservation Area. They are unacceptable because the proposals would be detrimental to the form and character of the existing building, the property forms part of a group or terrace (Howitt Road) which remains largely, but not completely unimpaired, the property forms part of a symmetrical composition, the balance of which would be upset and the roof is prominent, particularly in long views. On this basis Camden should refuse the application.

The proposal will damage a well-preserved, unique 1930s building of considerable architectural merit and significance. The bulking-up of the building by the addition of an extra storey will destroy the architectural integrity of a heritage asset, adversely affect the visual appearance of the neighbourhood and profoundly harm the Conservation Area.

Howitt Close was very carefully designed in 1932 to suit its specific location and, internally and externally, it remains fundamentally undamaged and unaltered by changes since construction. It has maintained its architectural integrity over the best part of a century and is unspoilt by major additions or changes. After surviving intact the second world war, unlike some Howitt Road properties, and escaping infelicitous developments in the post WWII era, it would be deeply ironic if the building were to be desecrated in the 21st century whilst defined as a building making a positive contribution to the special character and appearance of the Belsize Conservation Area, and apparently subject to the protections of a Conservation Area.

This L-shaped building was clearly designed to make optimal use of the space available, but without dominating its prominent position at the junction of Howitt Road and Glenilla Road, with Belsize Park Gardens a stone's throw away. Aesthetically it was designed to blend with the earlier Edwardian terraced housing in the neighbouring streets that predated it, whilst proclaiming its era of construction through its overall form and Art Deco flourishes. The proposal to add a fourth level and mansard roof would destroy the proportions of the building and make Howitt Close, at present perfectly adjusted to its vicinity within streets of terraced Edwardian houses, an over-prominent and jarring presence.

Camden Council in its 12 May 2020 preplanning advice to the applicant acknowledges the architectural skill, integrity and appropriateness of the building in its present form:

"The existing building is constructed as two brick storeys topped with a white roughcast one. This two-plus-one composition, with the use of a pale storey above a darker mass below, combined with the topography of the street which gently declines

towards the site, means that although at three full storeys above ground it technically contains a storey more than the surrounding houses, it does not appear more bulky. In addition, the scale has been carefully designed, with the use of setbacks and tripartite “bay windows”, giving a plot width akin to that of a house, and through the use of domestic materials – red brick and roughcast – as seen on houses across the street. As it stands, it is considered to be a complete composition of considerable charm which, through good design suits its context well.”

The same document goes on to describe the adverse effect of any alterations to the building’s height:

“The site is prominent, being adjacent to a T-junction and addressing a curve in the road. This means that it is visible in long views along Howitt Road from the north-east and along Glenilla Road from the north-west. It is also freestanding, set apart from surrounding buildings, particularly to the south-west, and this means it is highly visible. Any alterations to its height would therefore be visually prominent from various points in the streetscape. The building is terminated with overhanging eaves and a flat roof, a unique feature of the building...

Any extension would also have to be mindful of the prevailing height of surrounding buildings. The relevant streetscape to the building, is less the larger buildings of Belsize Park Gardens as shown in the drawings, but the smaller scale of Howitt Road which the building addresses.”

The Heritage Statement commissioned by the applicant implies that the flat roof of Howitt Close is something of an aberration in Howitt Road but, rather than an aberration, the flat roof should be seen as a conscious choice by the architect to restrict the height of the building. As described by Camden Planning above, at three full storeys above ground the building technically contains a storey more than the surrounding houses (two storeys plus an attic level within mansard roofs) but, due to the flat roof coupled with other design features (such as two brick storeys topped with a white roughcast one – i.e. a pale storey above a darker mass below) described above, it does not appear too tall. But, at three storeys, Howitt Close is already at the maximum height to blend in aesthetically with the neighbourhood.

The applicant’s Heritage Statement downplays the architectural uniqueness of the building and makes no mention of the excellent state of authenticity and preservation of the building. Belsize Society strongly disagrees with the statement in the Heritage Statement that “the addition of the mansard storey would be considered to represent an overall enhancement to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area”. It considers that the flat roof, coupled with the deep eaves, comprise distinctive and attractive features of Howitt Close. The building in its present form is highly valued in the neighbourhood and the addition of a fourth storey and mansard roof would be inflicting substantial harm on a heritage asset. Howitt Close is the only mansion block in its immediate vicinity and the extra storey would add bulk to what is now a well-proportioned and not over-dominant building. The closest visible mansion block to Howitt Close is Sussex House, a short distance away on Glenilla Road, which is singled out in the Conservation Area Statement as a negative feature: “an oppressively large block” and “an overbearing flat block significantly larger than the other buildings in the street”. The proposed works would make Howitt Close into an oppressively large block, significantly larger than the other buildings in the street.

The applicant’s Heritage Statement discusses the blocks (Glenloch Court, Wimborne Mansions, Banff House and Moor Court) on the junction of Glenloch and Glenmore Roads,

although these are completely out of sight from Howitt Close and its surroundings. These blocks are four storeys high with flat roofs. The implication is that these blocks are classified as “neutral contributors” to the conservation zone as a result of their flat roofs. In reality it is not the lack of a mansard roof that makes these blocks less attractive and emphasises each building’s bulk and height but the fact that they are four storeys high and tower above the surrounding terraces - as Howitt Close would do with the addition of a fourth storey. Part of the visual unattractiveness of these blocks in their context is because they are disproportionately tall for the width of the streets in which they are located. An extra storey on Howitt Close would have a similar effect at the bottom of Howitt Road: the block would loom above the street making it over-dominant in contrast to its current harmonious presence.

The applicant’s Heritage Statement attempts to downplay the impact of the additional storey on the views towards Howitt Close from the north-east, south and north-west but it does not make it clear that there will be an adverse effect on these views. Howitt Close is already visible for the length of Glenilla Road as far as Belsize Avenue but in its present form it could be taken at a distance for a terrace of houses. It fits perfectly in its setting at present, the height and width of an extra storey would make it over-dominant.

The applicant’s Heritage Statement refers to the “utilitarian style of the western elevation” but this is highly subjective and unjustified. This façade is entirely in harmony with the rest of the building and its slightly simpler design complements the glimpse of the front and view of the eastern wing, which can be seen simultaneously from the north-western approach. Again from the north-east Howitt Close can be seen from a considerable distance up Howitt Road but, as from the north-west approach along Glenilla Road, it could be a view of terraced houses until one approaches fairly close to the mansion block. From Belsize Park Gardens and the southern approach along Glenilla Road, Howitt Close is already a significant presence and an additional storey would harm the streetscape along this stretch of the road.

The statement in the application ‘the existing eaves present an almost unfinished appearance’ is meaningless given that the building was completed in the 1930’s by a highly regarded architect who clearly intended the building to appear as it still does, a beautifully designed block which makes a very positive contribution to the Conservation Area.

Belsize Society notes that the applicant has refined its proposal on three occasions to try to make it less obtrusive. It is clear from the illustrations in the application that it is impossible to make a proposal of this kind acceptable in design terms, the proposed dormers and vast extent of tiling ruin the subtle gentle appearance of the existing building design.

Historic significance of Howitt Close

Howitt Close was constructed between 1932 and 1934. A ‘Notice of new buildings, drainage works, and apparatus in connection therewith’ dated 27 October 1932 was filed with the Borough of Hampstead. This Notice was signed by Henry F Webb & Ash and the same business is shown as the owner of the site/building. Howitt Close first appears in the General Rate book for Belsize Ward made 6 April 1934, which shows that the 46 flats in the building were fully occupied by tenants as at March 1934, by which time the building was owned by London Mayfair & District Properties Ltd.

The applicant’s Heritage Statement incorrectly dates the property (“represents a 1920s addition,” “constructed in a single phase, between 1920 and 1935” and “possibly indicates that the building was constructed in the early 1920s”) and, as such, the statement cannot

interpret correctly either the individual significance of the building or its importance within its historical context.

A construction date between 1932 and 1934 means that Howitt Close was contemporaneous with the (Grade I listed) Isokon flats, located less than half a mile away on the east side of Haverstock Hill. The design of the Isokon flats was developed 1929-1932 and they were officially opened in July 1934, shortly after Howitt Close was first occupied. A huge amount has been written about the Isokon building – a project “to design an apartment building and its interior based on the principle of affordable, communal and well-designed inner-city living... But it was not a working class building – it was aimed at intellectual, working middle class people.” The Howitt Close flats were also intended to provide compact living spaces for the middle classes. The original plans for the building were titled ‘Proposed Block of Small Type Flats.’ Howitt Close had a restaurant from the very beginning in the lower ground floor, with ‘Ash & Fitch’ (presumably the caterers) occupying the restaurant and associated accommodation at April 1934. The famous Isobar restaurant in the Isokon building was not opened until 1937, when the communal kitchen in the block was converted into a restaurant. The impetus behind Howitt Close was similar to that of the Isokon building and, with its contrasting architectural style, it provides context for a modernist building like the Isokon flats. Without good comparable examples like Howitt Close, which remains very close to its 1930s state, the significance of the Isokon flats is diminished.

It is notable that the business ‘Henry F Webb & Ash’ was the original owner and developer of Howitt Close. There can be no doubt that the Henry F Webb concerned was the architect Henry Frederick Webb (1879-1953) who designed Elm Park Court, Pinner, constructed in 1936 and now Grade II listed. Elm Park Court is considered one of the icons of the form of modernism which took hold in ‘Metro-land’ in the 1930s, a form of modernism which owes more to Art Deco than to the later ‘brutalist’ strand of modernism. Whilst the green and white colour-scheme of Elm Park Court gives it a very distinctive character, its Art Deco heritage is apparent and the development has a number of features in common with Howitt Close. Over and above its intrinsic architectural merit, Howitt Close is significant as another building designed by HF Webb, an architect important to north-west London as the designer of the iconic Grade II-listed Elm Park Court.

In contrast to the well-publicised and dramatic history of the Isokon Building with its celebrity tenants – “Very few pre 1945 tenants do not have a Wikipedia entry” - Howitt Close has had a quiet history, and remarkably little has been written about it. It is understood that it was used as residential accommodation for civil servants at some point and further research could reveal an interesting story of an early example of inner city, partly communal living for the middle classes. In contrast to the Isokon Building, which fell into an appalling state of disrepair under Camden Council’s ownership and required total refurbishment, Howitt Close has remained in a reasonable state of repair over the past 90 years, partly because it lacks some of the structural design faults which contributed to the Isokon’s deterioration. Howitt Close, as a pleasing and highly suitable presence in its location, has been taken for granted over the best part of a century, at least until the threat to the architectural integrity of the building posed by the current planning proposal. It forms a highly valued and important part of the Belsize Conservation Area and should not be altered as proposed. Belsize Society believes that it is only a matter of time before Howitt Close becomes highly valued and rightly appreciated for its distinctive architecture and its well-preserved authenticity, leading to listed status – unless, that is, the current planning proposal succeeds in desecrating the building before then. It is vital that the building is preserved unviolated for posterity.

It would be a breach of the terms and principles of the Belsize Conservation Area if a unique, extremely well-preserved architectural gem like Howitt Close is wantonly desecrated for the sake of a few additional flats.

BELSIZE SOCIETY

The Belsize Society (registered charity 1180842) is an amenity society covering Belsize ward, its adjacent areas and historic environs. The Society has over 500 members. It does not make profits and is non-political. Recently becoming a charitable incorporated organisation, the Society has been a feature of the Belsize area since the 1970s.

Belsize is a vibrant and historic part of London, and the Society seeks to preserve and enhance this. Our activities depend on volunteers. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in the Belsize area, with members living in the area between Lyndhurst and Adelaide Roads from north to south and between Fitzjohns Avenue and the approaches to Fleet Road from west to east.

The Belsize Society's objectives are:

1. To promote for the benefit of the public high standards of architecture, conservation, planning, design, and use of buildings and infrastructure in and/or affecting Belsize Ward, its adjacent areas and its historical environs, and to promote the protection, development, and improvement of features of historic or public interest in that area.
2. To encourage and promote for the public benefit high standards in urban planning, infrastructure, and transport including in the identification of traffic solutions, the maintenance and improvement of streets and public places, the protection of the environment, and improvement of air quality in Belsize Ward, its adjacent areas and its historical environs.
3. To foster interest amongst the public in Belsize Ward, its adjacent areas and its historical environs, and to educate the public in the history, including natural history, and architecture, of the area by organising lectures, visits, and other events.