

Heritage Assessment

Giles Quarme Architects, October 2021

Garden Barge, King's Cross – Heritage Assessment

Introduction

Giles Quarme Architects have prepared this statement outlining the history of the site of the proposed 'Garden Barge' and the impact this will have on the character of the conservation area and the adjacent historic buildings.

History

Following the arrival of the Grand Junction Canal at Paddington in 1801, a scheme was approved in 1810 to construct a new canal link from Paddington to Limehouse. Construction of the Regent's Canal began in 1811, and was opened in stages between 1815 and 1820. The canal's use for transporting goods across London made it a critical link for railway companies arriving into the capital in the 1840s and 50s. The Great Northern Railway built a new goods yard, with associated basins, immediately to the north of the Regent's Canal in 1851, at the same time as their passenger terminal at King's Cross on Euston Road to the south. A number of industrial buildings associated with this initial phase of the Goods Yard remain, along with historic bridges, walls and other features of archaeological interest.

The canal remained in commercial use until the early 20th century, by which point rail, and increasingly road transport, had rendered it largely redundant. Rail freight declined in the late 20th century. By the 1980s, much of the King's Cross area was derelict or in use for only light industry. The arrival of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link at St Pancras has seen a transformation in the area, from derelict industrial sheds, to high quality office, leisure, residential and cultural uses. As part of the scheme, listed warehouses have been refurbished, and the gas holders to the south of the canal have been demolished or relocated to the north west of their original location. This redevelopment, known as King's Cross, has resulted in the creation of new streets and public squares in what was previously private industrial land. The proposed barge is intended to improve access and engagement of local residents with the redeveloped King's Cross site. The redevelopment of King's Cross, at the same time as a renewed interest in canals for leisure and recreation purposes, have resulted in an increasing number of boats using the Regent's Canal and pedestrians on the towpath. This has, in part, been due to additional canalside infrastructure such as the 'ghat' steps to Granary Square and the opening of Gasholder Park to the west.

Heritage Designations

The site is within the Regent's Canal Conservation Area, designated by Camden Council in 1985 and subsequently extended. The site is within the setting of the unlisted 19th century Fish & Coal Offices, the Grade II listed Granary Building and Eastern Coal Drops, all of which were constructed by the GNR in the early 1850s. All of the listed buildings are set some distance from the proposed location of the barge, and separated from it by Granary Square.

Character, Appearance & Significance of the Conservation Area

The 2008 Conservation Area Assessment mentions the industrial buildings and their 'sense of decay'. Since this was written, the area has been transformed. The site of the gas holders, at the southern end of the site, is now new office buildings. To the north, the land in front of the Granary Building is a popular public square surrounded by historic brick buildings. It is the interplay between the railway buildings and the canal with its associated towpath, bridges and locks that make this section of the conservation area significant. This is enhanced by the varying levels of the canal and the surrounding streetscape. Architecturally, whilst the northern side of the canal retains a number of Victorian buildings, the southern side has been totally redeveloped through the construction of large new office buildings in a variety of materials, but all with a contemporary

architectural language. The scale of these buildings also far exceeds their Victorian counterparts in terms of height and massing.

Proposals

It is proposed to moor a 4m x 18m 'widebeam' barge on the southern towpath, between the Granary Square Bridge and the York Way Bridge. It will be connected to existing services on the adjacent towpath. The barge will be modified to provide a classroom and office, with a number of decks that will have planters installed. These planters will be demountable to enable the barge to fit under bridges when it is moved for maintenance. Additional floating planters will be attached to the rear of the barge. The barge will be used by community groups to learn about ecology, and in particular the role of the Regent's Canal in acting as a wildlife corridor.

Impact of the Proposals on the Designated Heritage Assets

The presence of barges on the Regent's Canal can be considered to enhance the Conservation Area, as it reinforces the canal's original use and visual presence in the area. Furthermore, by attracting groups to the canal it will not only bring activity to the towpath, but also foster engagement with the canal by the local community. Widebeam barges, such as the proposed Garden Barge, are less traditional than the classic 'narrowboat', there are, none the less, designed in a very similar manner and are commonly seen on the Regent's Canal.

Due to the difference in level between the towpath and the surrounding streets, the barge will have a limited visual presence on the surrounding streets. As illustrated in the drawings, it will be below the level of the surrounding streets, even with the additional planters. Given the entirely contemporary architectural context to the southern bank of the canal, and the distance away from any listed buildings, it cannot be considered to cause harm to the Victorian railway architecture that characterises this part of King's Cross.

The planters will give increased prominence when compared with a standard boat, however the impact will be minimal and the ecological and social benefits of the scheme would far outweigh its visual presence. Furthermore, when the boat is moved in the future, it can be easily disconnected from the service supplies and relocated, meaning any impact on the conservation area and surrounding listed buildings is fully reversible.

Overall, any harm to the heritage assets is negligible, and is more than outweighed by the public benefits of the scheme.

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