

Former Camden Horse Hospital: Heritage Assessment

1.0 The Proposals and their Heritage Impacts

1.1 Introduction

This statement should be read in conjunction with Donald Insall Associates' Pre-Application Historic Building Report which explains the legal and policy background, the history and heritage significance of the building and its standing fabric.

The former Horse Hospital is a Grade II* listed building in the Regent Canal Conservation Area in the London Borough of Camden.

The proposals are shown in the drawings submitted with the listed building consent application for the site. They relate to alterations that are required to operate the building as a theatre, following the granting of planning permission for this use. The works include some adjustments to entrance areas, external signage and lighting to one door, the internal levelling of some floors, reconfiguration works to modernised internal areas that have been subdivided in the past, as well as other minor adjustments to the ceiling, the reversible blocking of windows, and a temporary and fully reversible internal stage set.

1.2 External Works and their Impact

External works are contained to signage and lighting in one area. On the rear, north-facing elevation, it is proposed to add hand painted signage to the modern, central wooden door which will give access to the theatre space. The door would be re-painted green rather than black, with the signage painted at eye height. A new wall mounted lantern is proposed west of the door; this would be of a traditional design to appear as a gas lantern (but illuminated electrically).

The impact of these works is not harmful. The signage is discreet and suits the age of the building, and would be applied to modern fabric. It is likely that joinery would historically have been painted dark colours rather than black as it is now, and the new colour scheme for the door is therefore appropriate. The lantern light is sympathetic in design terms and only requires minimal fabric intervention.

1.3 Internal Works and their Impact

1.3.1 Western entrance lobby

In this space, named F02 in Section 3 of this report, it is proposed to create a timber framed partition that would allow separation of the southern toilets to be accessible from the exterior, and northern toilet accessible only from within the building. The partition would also provide some sound protection for the theatre use, and a visual barrier. The partition would be freestanding and cut around the historic timber and metal gates either side of F02. Fixings would only be made into the modern mezzanine ceiling above.

The partition is necessary in order to operate the consented theatre use, and desirable so that lavatories can be provided for guests of the adjoining terrace bar (recently constructed). They are located in an altered space that has modern toilets either side and a modern plasterboard ceiling over. Whilst the proposal is a further change, it has been designed to be reversible, causing no harm to historic fabric. Therefore, the heritage significance of the stables building would be left substantially intact.

1.3.2 Western 1880s interior

In this area which constitutes the western half of the original first floor horse stables, it is proposed to insert a fully reversible stage set which is described below. Otherwise, the windows in this space would require to be covered to create light control for performance purposes. This would include fixing timber screens to the window frames, these panels would be back painted in light grey to avoid a boarded up appearance externally. The roof lights, modern replacements, would be concealed with a temporary timber cover, also painted light grey externally. The modern plasterboard ceiling, presently painted white, would be painted black. Existing air conditioning units would also be painted black. The historic beams which constitute the primary roof structure would hold in place the rigging which would be affixed with pressure clamps, avoiding screws and other intrusive fixings. The surviving historic stable box partitions and other historic fixings and finishes would all remain intact.

Concealing the roof light and windows would alter the appearance of the space, and necessitate some, limited, fixings. This would bring some change which could be seen as harmful, but it is unavoidable to allow performances inside this building, agreed in principle by grant of the recent planning permission. The intrusions into fabric are kept to a minimum, and are substantially reversible. The harm is therefore in our view at the low end of the less than substantial spectrum. Other changes to the modern white colour scheme which is unlikely to reflect the historic colour scheme and other elements which would be painted black, would cause no harm. The rigging would be fixed to avoid harm.

1.3.3 Central 1880s interior

This space is much plainer than the western range and has no horse boxes. The floor in this space is particularly uneven, and it is therefore proposed for safety reasons to install a new timber floor which would be self-supporting and not fixed into the historic floor. Windows would be obscured as described in 1.3.2 above, and rigging would be similar. Again, a black colour scheme is proposed to modern ceiling finishes. The stage set is discussed below. A set of modern flush double doors towards the western range would be replaced with panelled timber doors which would appear more appropriate in their Victorian context.

The temporary floor would obscure the historic floor but cause no damage, and is required so that the space can be used safely. Levelling the existing floor would be more intrusive and result in loss of fabric and patina. Therefore, the proposal is the most appropriate solution, causing at worst very low level less than substantial harm. Other alterations to windows and modern surfaces would impact as described in 1.3.2 above. The replacement of modern doors with a traditional design would be a small heritage benefit.

1.3.4 1890s Interior

The western section of this interior is open plan. It has a modern cement screed floor which is damaged and would be replaced with a new screed. At the eastern end is a series of modern cellular rooms which would be reconfigured to accommodate back of house rooms, with new partitions being in slightly different alignments. Windows would be obscured as described above for the 1880s range, and rigging would be as in the 1880s range too. An air conditioning unit would be relocated to a more westerly area on the ceiling.

This is the most altered of the three internal large volumes, and the changes to the floor, modern partitions and a/c unit would not affect heritage significance. Impacts of the rigging and windows are described above under 1.3.2.

1.3.5 Stage set

As in any theatre, there would be temporary stage sets. In the first show that would be hosted in this building, the interior would be fitted to resemble rooms from the Peaky Blinders television series. In the western range this would include loose furniture, some backdrops to elements of wall and props in the horse boxes, and a raised gangway accessed by a circular staircase at the west end. In the central space which has lost its original horse boxes there would be stage set partitions at the north and south end, in the place of the lost horse boxes, again with props and furniture. This set would also include a raised room, Tommy's office, at the east end of the space, built as a self-supporting structure. In the link space between the 1880s and 1890s building would be a self-contained room, Alfie's office, built as the other rooms with reversible partitions. In the main 1890s east room would be a room-within-a-room, the Eden Club, again built as a stage set with reversible partitions and its own floor. The modernised corridor beyond to the east would be finished in wallpaper and carpet with wall mounted light fittings.

The stage set has been designed to avoid permanent and intrusive fixings into the building, and is conceived as a self-supporting kit of parts. Therefore it is anticipated that there would be no loss of historic fabric. The change in appearance to the interior of the building would be temporary and change with every show, but no historic fabric would be lost. The quality of the spaces as semi-industrial interiors would remain and whilst they would no longer read as a horse stable, all stable fittings are already lost in the central and eastern section, whilst in the western section the horse boxes would remain visible, and the roof structure exposed and visually dominant, as in the central room. Therefore, any harm would be small and temporary, but is necessary to implement the consented planning use of the building as a theatre and allow it to be maintained and appreciated.

1.4 Justification of the proposals

The former Camden Horse Hospital has been unsympathetically used as a night club until recently, and is in need of a new use. This use as a theatre space has been given planning permission. The proposals now presented for listed building consent entail the minimum of adjustments that are needed to allow theatrical performances in the building. This includes some signage and lighting externally, and internal changes to block light and create darkness, provide level access within the building, and construct a stage set. Most of the changes would cause no harm and all have been conceived to work sympathetically with the great charm and quality of the historic interior.

When measured against heritage planning law and policy, the proposals are justified as follows:

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 is the legislative basis for decision-making on applications that relate to the historic environment. Sections 16, 66 and 72 of the Act impose statutory duties upon local planning authorities which, with regard to listed buildings, require the planning authority to have 'special regard to the desirability of preserving the listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses' and, in respect of conservation areas, that 'special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area'.

The special interest of the listed building as a former stables which survives with some historic fixtures and fittings would be substantially preserved, and interventions are very largely reversible and designed to showcase rather than diminish the special interest of the listed building. External changes are minimal and would have no noticeable impact on the conservation area or setting of other listed buildings.

The Camden Local Plan has policies that deal with development affecting the historic environment, in particular Policy D2: Heritage, which states that 'The Council will not permit development that results in harm that is less than substantial to the significance of a designated heritage asset unless the public benefits of the proposal convincingly outweigh that harm'.

Harm would be at the very low end of the less than substantial spectrum, and only occur where it is necessary, including where fixings into windows have to be made. The public benefits of providing a long term viable use for the building which is consented in principle would comfortably outweigh this harm.

Policy HC1 Heritage Conservation and Growth of The London Plan (March 2021) stipulates that '(C) Development proposals affecting heritage assets, and their settings, should conserve their significance, by being sympathetic to the assets' significance and appreciation within their surroundings....Development proposals should avoid harm and identify enhancement opportunities by integrating heritage considerations early on in the design process.'

As explained for the planning Act, the proposals would substantially conserve the significance of the building, the setting of nearby listed buildings and of the conservation area. Harm has very largely been avoided and heritage considerations have guided what is proposed.

The National Planning Policy Framework 2021 forms a material consideration and in paragraph 199, requires that:

When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

The Framework goes on to state at paragraph 200 that:

Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting) should require clear and convincing justification.

Where a development proposal will lead to 'less than substantial harm' to the significance of a designated heritage asset, the Framework states, in paragraph 202, that:

...this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

It is clear that great weight has been given to the conservation of the listed building and its conservation area setting. It would be open to the public and fitted with reversible and sympathetic additions which would celebrate the character and quality of the building. Some fixings and other alterations are necessary to create a black box interior which is needed for theatrical performance, but the impact of these interventions would be minimal, causing low level less than substantial harm. This harm is outweighed by the public benefits of making the building accessible to the public and giving it a viable new use.

2.0 Conclusion

The former Horse Hospital building, constructed in 2 phases in the late-19th century, is in need of a new use after ceasing to operate as a night club. It has survived partially intact, including its large three main internal volumes as well as horse boxes in the western section. These internal qualities, and the external appearance of the Victorian envelope, would be preserved in the proposals. The proposals for a theatre use, consented in planning terms already, require some adjustments to the building, including blocking light into the building, levelling some floors, and installing temporary reversible stage sets. All interventions have been designed so as to require minimal intrusive intervention and they sit comfortably in the building, responding to its industrial character. Harm would be minimal and only arise where it is required. Therefore, the proposals comply with Sections 16, 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990; Policy D2 of the local Camden Plan, Policy HC1 of the regional London Plan; and paragraphs 199, 200 and 202 of the NPPF.