

# 55 Vastern Road Reading

## Heritage Statement

December 2019





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### Contents

1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Understanding	2
3.0 Significance	24
4.0 Assessment of Impacts	29
5.0 Conclusion	35
6.0 Sources	36
Appendix A: Planning Policy	37

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# 1.0 Introduction

This report has been prepared to inform and support the development of proposals by Berkeley Homes for the largely residential redevelopment of the former Scottish & Southern Electricity (SSE) office and industrial depot complex on Vastern Road, Reading. The Site contains no statutorily-listed buildings and is not within a conservation area. However, in May 2017, the building at the eastern end of No. 55 Vastern Road was added to the *List of Locally Important Buildings and Structures*; it is thus regarded as a 'non-designated heritage asset'.

No other built heritage assets have been identified in the vicinity of the Site, and none have been requested for assessment by Reading Borough Council during the pre-application process. This report consequently deals solely with the potential built heritage of the Site (which in practice means No. 55 Vastern Road). Archaeology is dealt with in a separate report by CgMs. The impact of the proposals on the wider townscape is dealt with in the Design & Access Statement and the Townscape & Visual Impact Assessment.

This Heritage Statement provides a baseline assessment of the development of the Site and its surroundings, and evaluates the heritage significance of the locally listed building. It outlines the heritage policy context relating to any potential development of the Site, and considers the potential impacts of the proposed scheme on heritage. This report reflects the feedback received from pre-application meetings with Reading Borough Council, including in November 2018, and in January, March and October 2019.

The report has been prepared by Anthony Hoyte BA(Hons) MA(RCA) MSc IHBC and James Weeks MA, and is based on research and a Site visit made in April 2018.

## 2.0 Understanding

### 2.1 Historical development of the Application Site

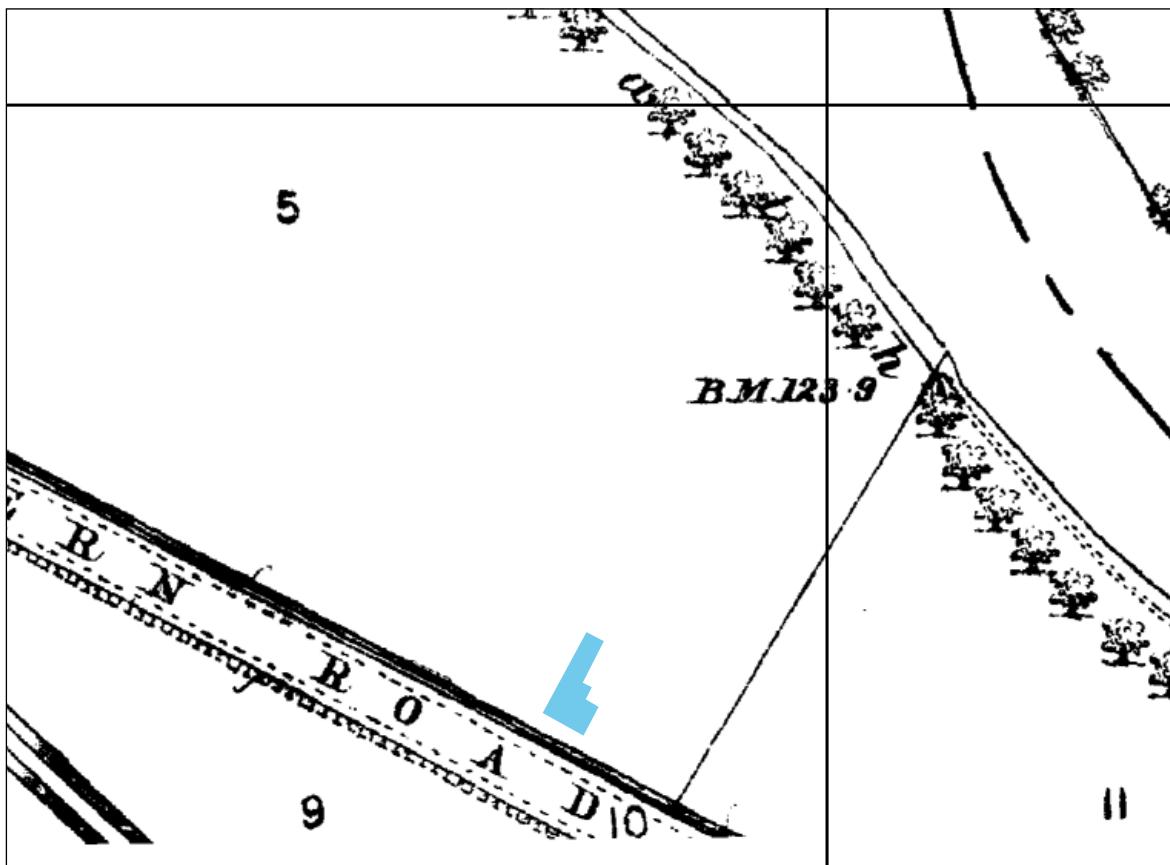
The earliest Ordnance Survey map to show the existing (locally-listed) building at the eastern end of the present No. 55 Vastern Road is the 25 inch edition of 1913, revised in 1910. On this basis, we can deduce that the present building was erected between 1897 (the revision date of both the 6 inch map of 1900 and the 25 inch map of 1899) and 1910.

Comparison of the 1913 OS map with the maps of 1899 and 1900 shows that the building was erected over the entranceway to an 'Electric Works'. Street directories reveal this to be the works of the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd. An extensive historical account of electricity supply in Reading, written approximately twenty years ago by someone who worked at Vastern Road (and which is now held by the SSE Archive), reveals that the original generating station building on the Site was erected in 1894, and was extended in 1898 and 1926. The Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd had been incorporated in 1892, and took over the operations of the Reading Electric Lighting Depot which had been established in 1889 by the Laing, Wharton & Down Construction Syndicate. The directors of the company comprised: Frederick William Albury, an architect; Henry Collins, a solicitor; Joseph Charles Fidler; Lewis W. G. Butler, a banker; and Alfred Day. The company had looked at several sites for their power station before settling on Vastern Road, a site apparently owned by a Mr East.

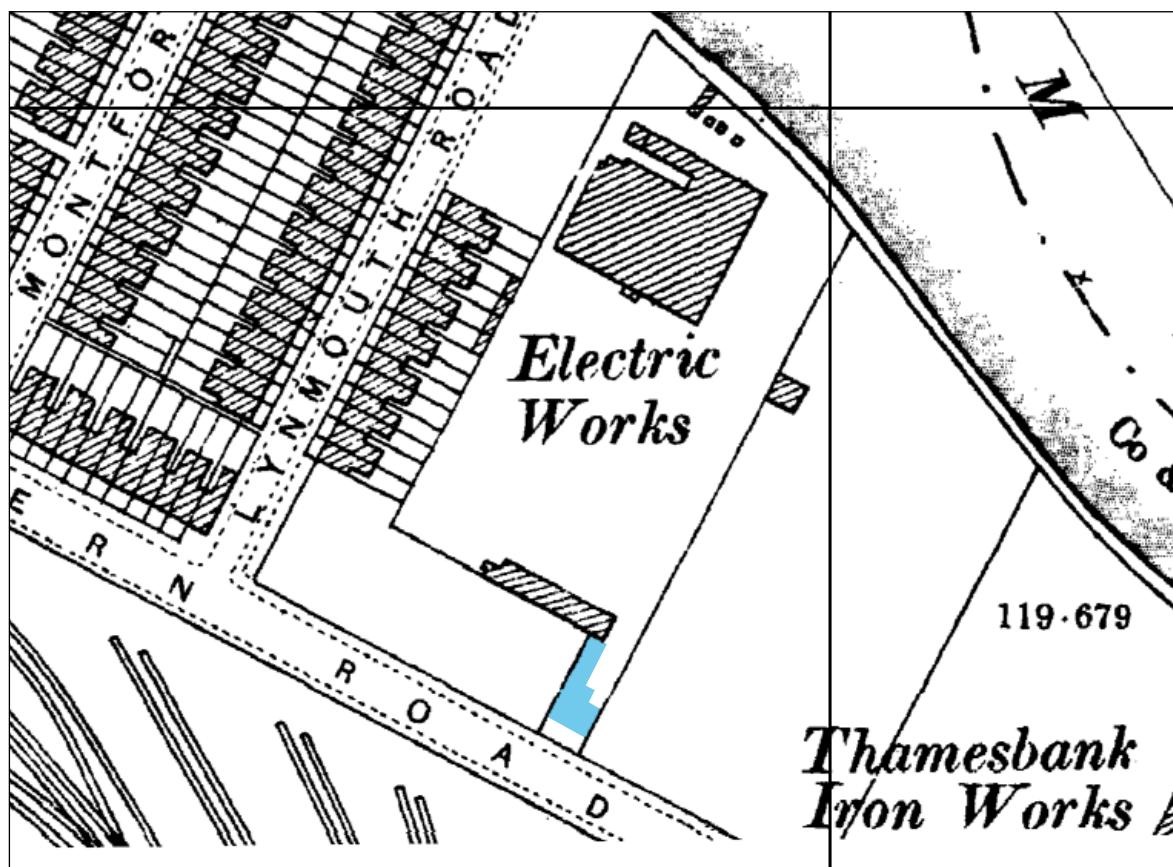
Frederick William Albury (1845-1912) was a partner in the prominent local architectural practice Albury & Brown, and he appears to have been responsible for drawing up and submitting the plans for the new buildings. These were approved in August 1894. By October, it was reported that the foundations were complete.



The locally-listed building at the eastern end of No. 55 Vastern Road



Ordnance Survey, 1881; the future site of the locally-listed part of No. 55 marked in blue



Ordnance Survey, 1899 (revised 1897); the future site of the locally-listed part of No. 55 marked in blue

The 1899 and 1900 OS maps show the Electric Works to have comprised a large, roughly-square building located at the northern end of the Application Site, adjacent to the Thames. There was a large chimney at its north-western corner, which later accounts reveal to have been 150 ft tall. There was also a narrow range bounding the south-western side of the Electric Works site. Aerial photographs of 1948 show this to have been arranged over a single storey, and indicate that there was a bay window at its eastern end. The land between this range and Vastern Road appears to have been undeveloped at this time.

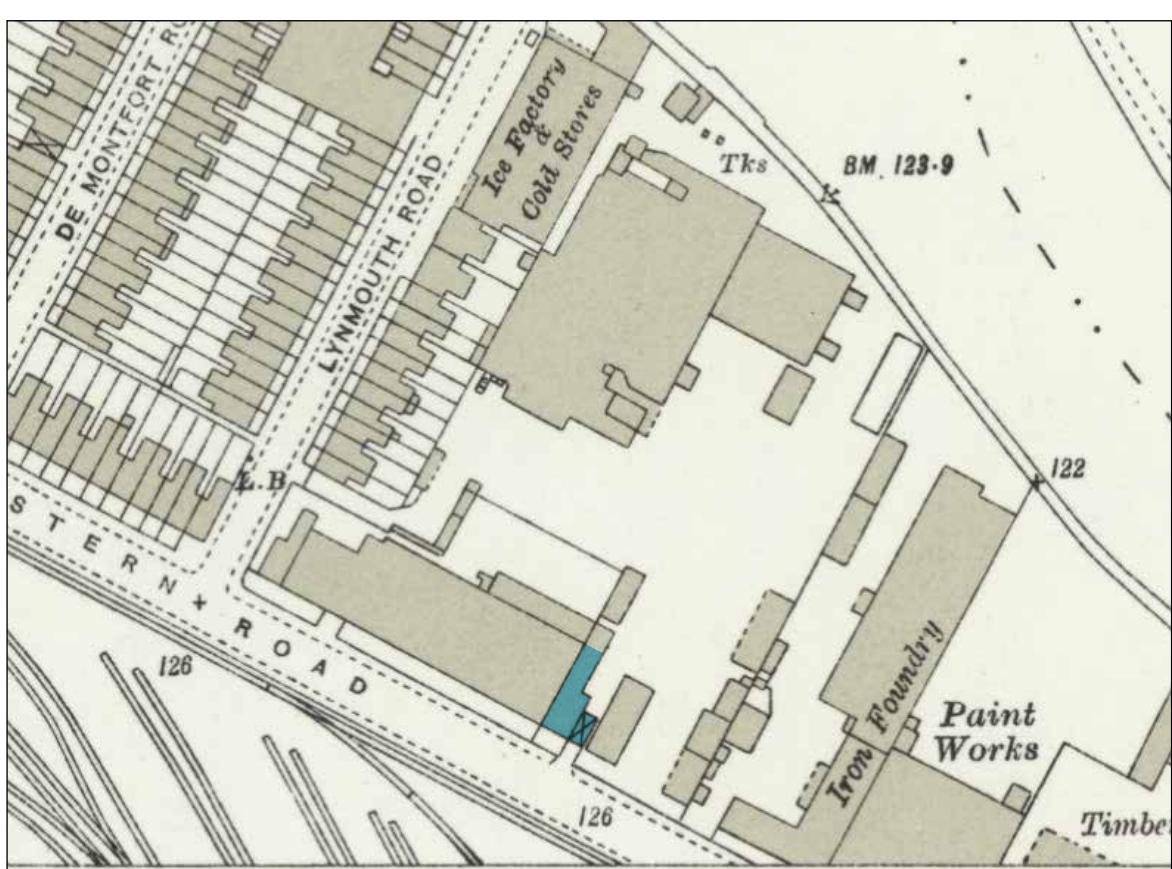
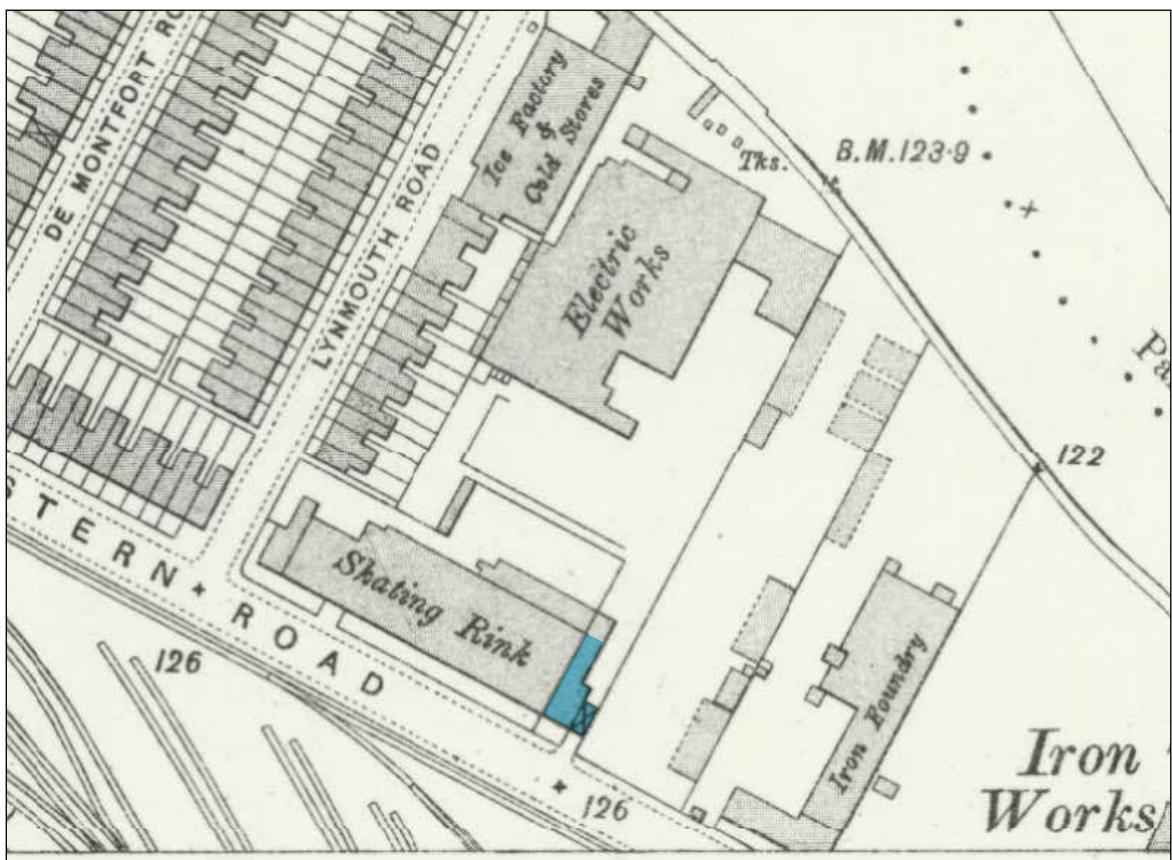
The terraced housing to the west – on Lynmouth and De Montford Roads – was also present by 1897, as too was the Thamesbank Iron Works a little to the east (on the site of the present Covea Insurance offices). To the south across Vastern Road were railway sidings.

By 1910 (the revision date of the OS map of 1913), the land between Vastern Road and the Electric Works had been developed with a (two-storey) building; the historical account held by the SSE Archive suggests that in 1905 this building was a warehouse used by the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd, but by 1910 it accommodated a Roller-Skating Rink. During the First World War, according to the historical account, it accommodated a food store, and thereafter workshops and warehousing. The building's irregular plan-form, together with aerial photographs of 1948, suggest that it actually comprised two main volumes: a long two-storey range to the east (which by 1948 had a flat roof); and a narrower three-storey element to the west. The 1913 map also shows that there was a second Iron Foundry just to the east (on the site of the present Sovereign House). The main Electric Works buildings had also been extended to the south, and to the east as far as the boundary wall. There was now also a single dwelling at the south-western corner, adjacent to the Skating Rink.

The 1913 OS map suggests that the east end of the present No. 55 Vastern Road was built as a new entrance for the Electric Works, with the eastern side of the building accommodating a carriage arch. This building was almost certainly also designed by Albury's office. The 1913 map shows that the narrow single-storey range that historically bounded the south-western side of the Electric Works site was still present. The building divisions shown on the 1913 map suggest that the erection of the new entrance building involved the truncation of the eastern end of the single-storey range. However, aerial photographs of 1948 indicate that the latter was left in place, and that the new building was extended northwards to abut it.

*Kelly's Directory of Reading* for 1909 gives the occupants of No. 55 as E. Rowley Hill and the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd. The 1912 edition provides the same listing, but adds that E. Rowley Hill was the company's engineer and manager. It seems reasonable to suggest that Hill, who retired in 1915, was provided with on-site accommodation in the entrance building as part of his appointment. In light of these references, the window for the building's construction can be narrowed to 1897-1909. *Kelly's Directory of Reading* for 1928 gives the occupants of No. 55 as John Edwards and the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd. The 1939 edition lists Edwards as the Electric Works Superintendent.

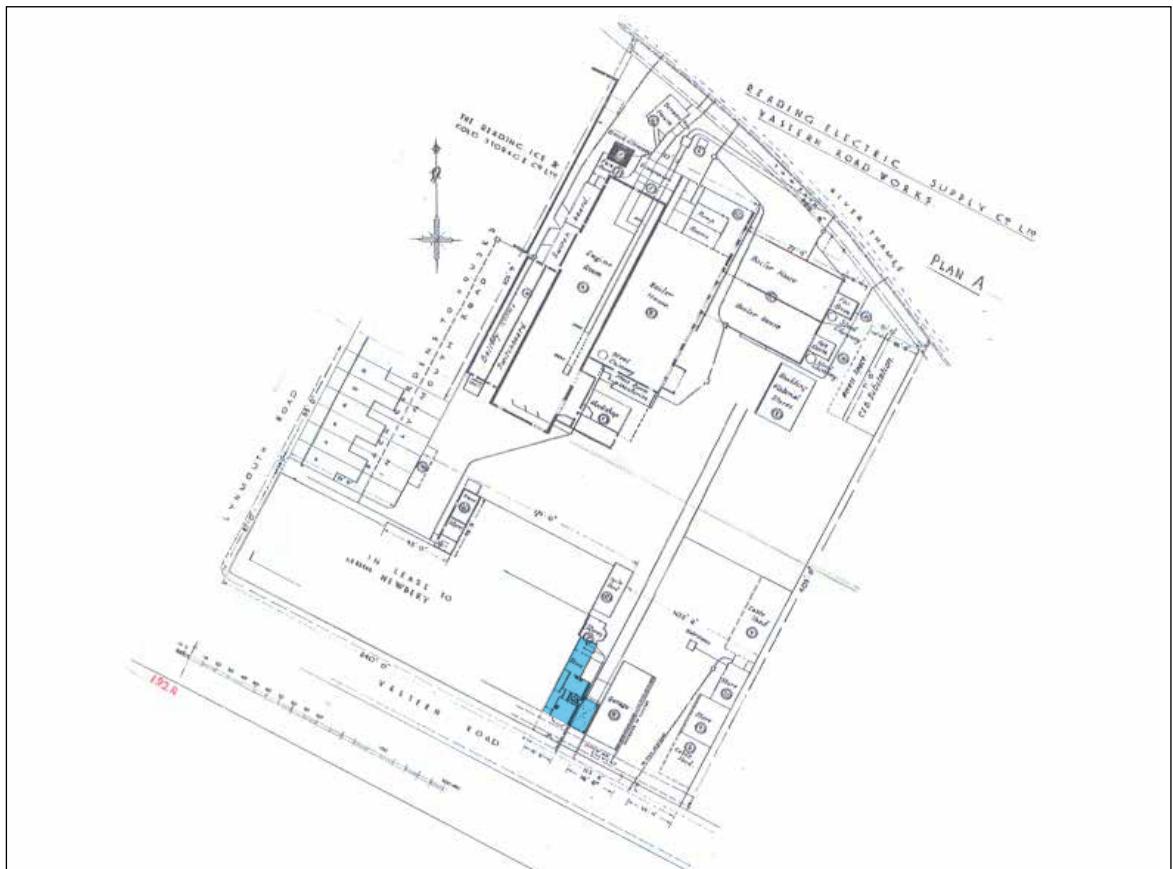
By the time of the 25 inch OS of 1934 (revised in 1932), the Electric Works had undergone further expansion. The boundary wall to the east had been removed, and the land to the east appears to have been subsumed into the Electric Works site.



There was by this time a building abutting the eastern side of the extant entrance building. Aerial photographs of 1948 show this to have been a single-storey shed with large openings to the east. This shed was removed between 1957 and 1962-72.

By 1928, the former Skating Rink had become a Furniture Depository belonging to Arthur Newbery. According to the historical account held by the SSE Archive, the house at its western end was occupied by one of Newbery's employees. One of the 1948 photographs suggests that the Furniture Depository subsequently accommodated a bakery.

The maps of 1913 and 1934 indicate enclosed areas to the front of both the Skating Rink/Depository and the Electric Works entrance building. The aerial photographs of 1948 mentioned above appear to show railings atop a dwarf wall. The Skating Rink/Depository buildings shown in the 1948 photographs appear to accord with the present structures fronting Vastern Road, although both parts have clearly undergone much alteration. In particular, the three-storey element to the west has been re-faced, but the pitched roof of the original structure remains visible.



Site plan, 1932; the locally-listed part of No. 55 marked in blue



© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the south west, 1948



© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the south west, 1948



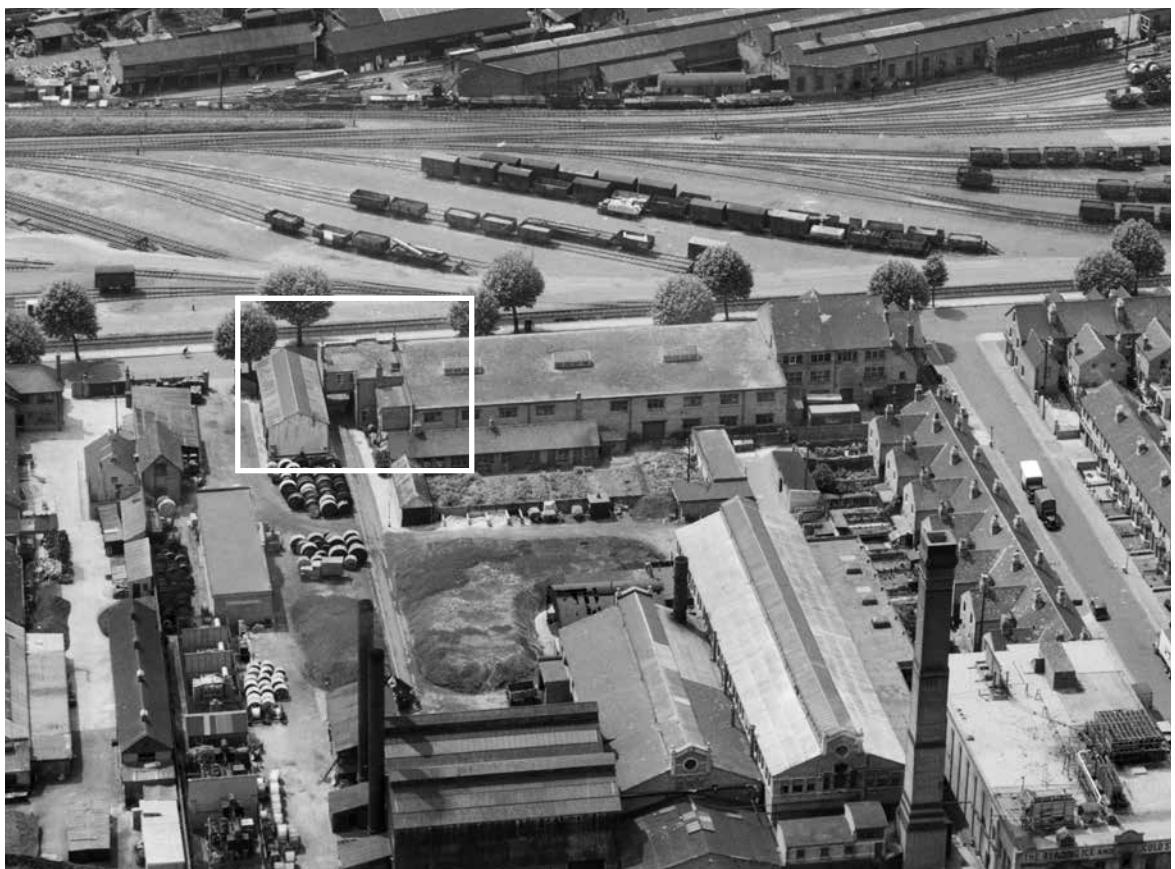
© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the south east, 1948



© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the south east, 1948



© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the north east, 1948



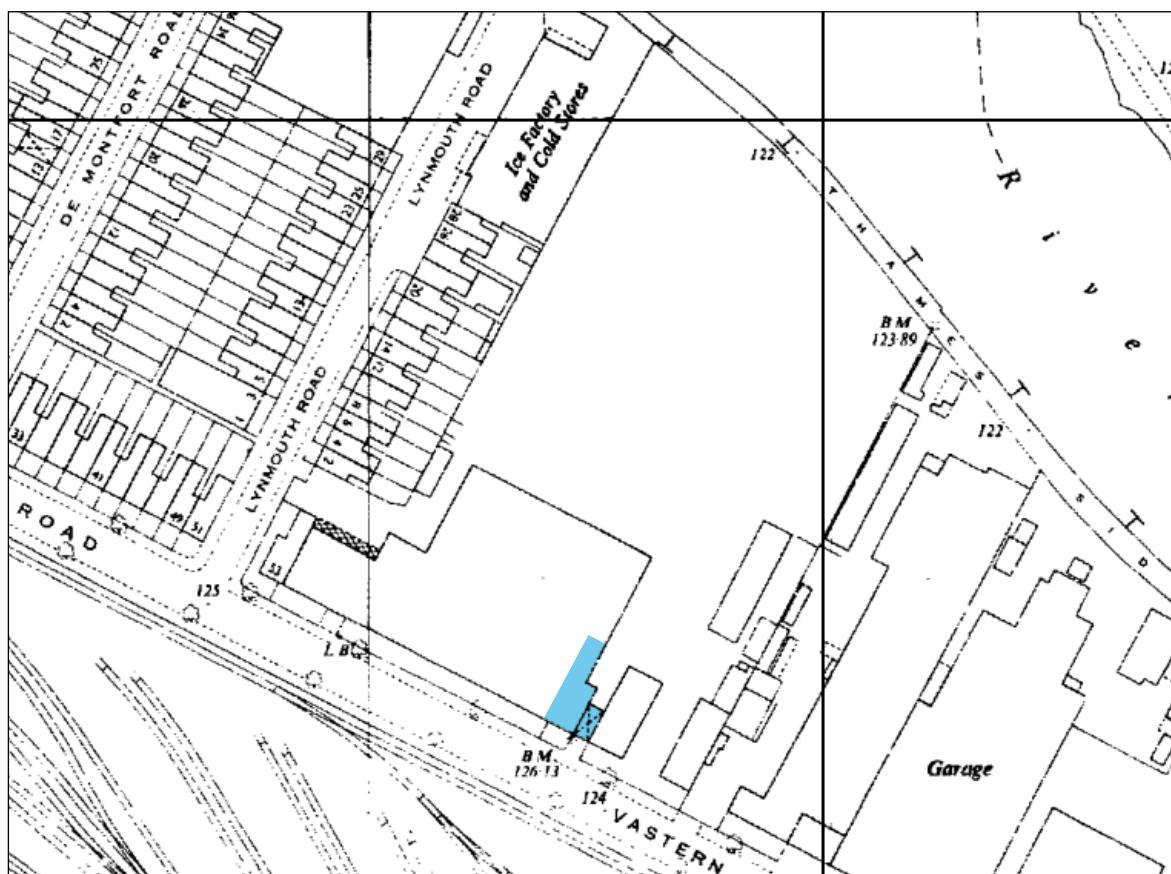
© Historic England

Aerial photograph from the north east, 1948

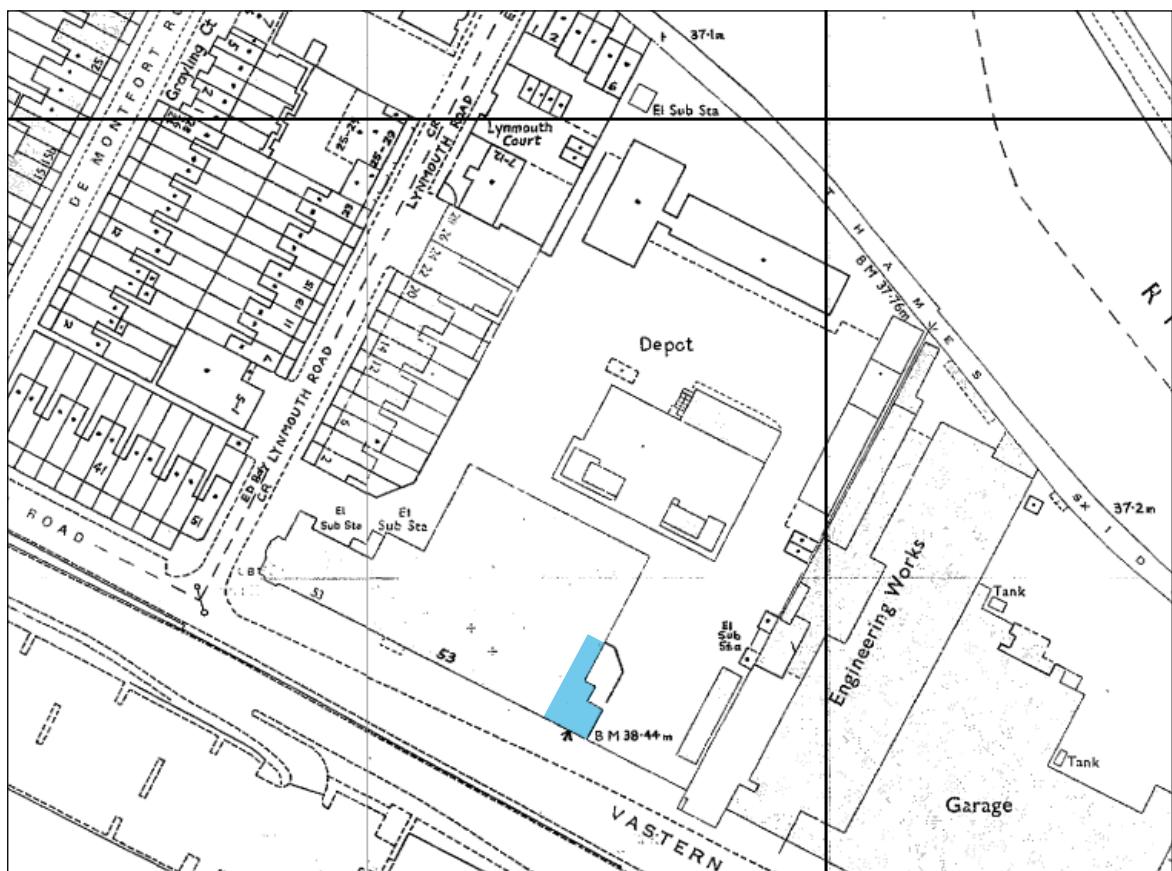
The 1957 OS map does not show the original Electric Works buildings at the northern end of the Application Site, although these are understood to have survived until 1970. By 1957, the narrow single-storey range that historically bounded the south-western side of the Electric Works had been removed, and the former Skating Rink/Depository buildings had been extended northwards to their present extents. These were presumably all now in use by the Southern Electricity Board, which had taken over the site in 1958. The modern architectural treatment of the extension to the north suggests that it has since been rebuilt or very extensively remodelled.

The fenced enclosure to the north of the extended former Skating Rink/Depository buildings, containing transformers etc., was erected between 1957 and 1962-72. The transformers to the east are more recent.

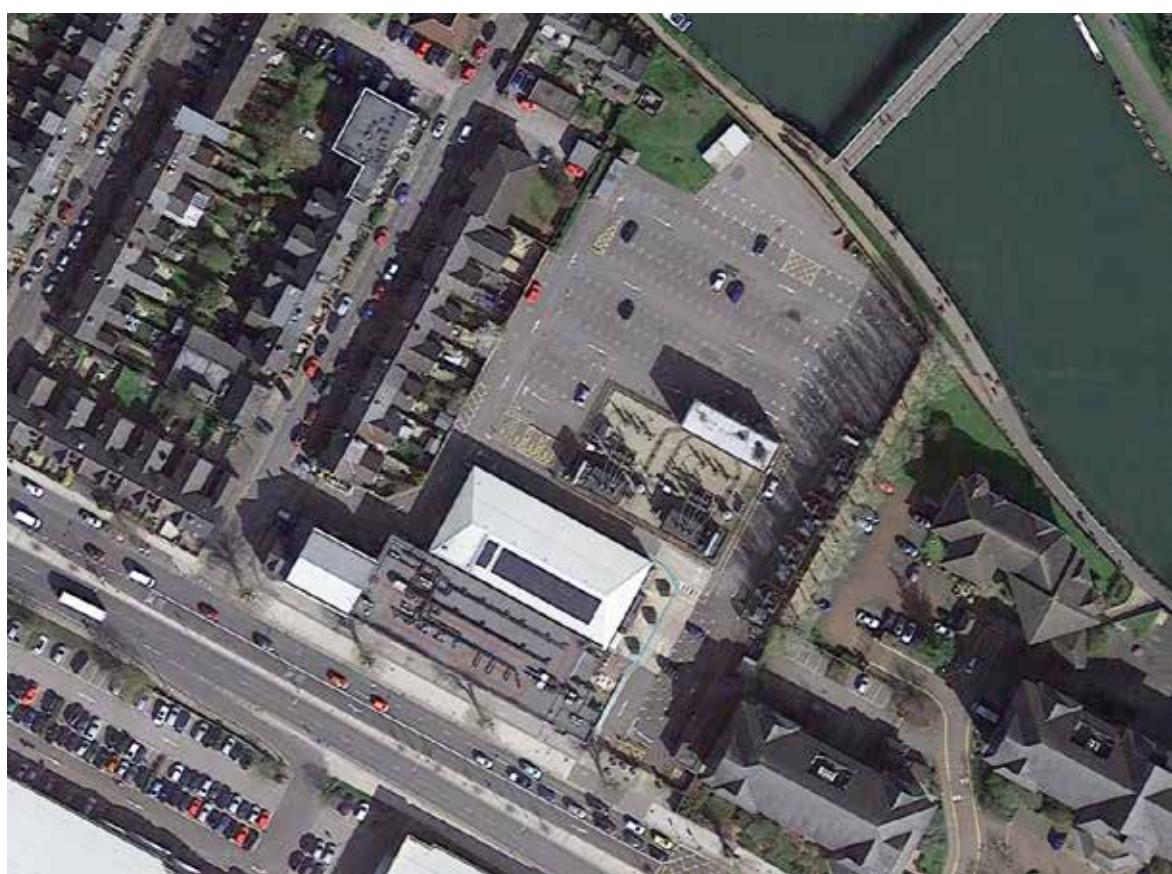
A building was erected across the northern end of the Application Site (on the site of the original Electric Works buildings) between 1972 and 1979-90, but this had gone again by 2003.



Ordnance Survey, 1957; the locally-listed part of No. 55 marked in blue



Ordnance Survey, 1979-90; the locally-listed part of No. 55 marked in blue



Aerial photograph, 2017

Google



The two-storey part of the former Skating Rink/Repository building viewed from the south east



The remodelled three-storey part of the former Skating Rink/Repository building viewed from the north west



The rear of the remodelled two- and three-storey parts of the former Skating Rink/Repository building viewed from Lynmouth Road to the north west, with the later extension to the left



The modern extension erected in place of the narrow range that historically bounded the south-western side of the Electric Works site, with the rear of the locally-listed building to the left



View north-westwards between the north-eastern elevation of the modern extension and some of the fenced transformers, towards the rear of the terrace on the eastern side of Lynmouth Road



View northwards across the Application Site

## 2.2 Historical development of the locally listed building

As noted above, the (now locally-listed) building at the eastern end of the present No. 55 Vastern Road was apparently designed by F. W. Albury's office and erected between 1897 and 1909, and provided the main entrance to the Electric Works site through the carriage arch in its eastern side. It accommodated a dwelling for the site manager/superintendent on its upper floor.

The general form of the building reflects its supposed original arrangement, but there have been numerous alterations.

The building comprises a two-storey volume fronting Vastern Road, the eastern side of which historically accommodated an open carriage entrance at ground level with accommodation above. To the rear, the western side of the building projects further. Beyond this projection is a narrower and slightly-lower two-storey range, the northern end of which steps down to a single storey.

The building is constructed of red/orange brick laid in Flemish bond with a liberal use of stone dressings particularly to the southern elevation. The jambs of the carriage entrance and the external corner of the rear projection are in hard grey/blue brick to protect them from vehicular damage.



The front elevation of the locally-listed part of No. 55



The rear of the locally-listed building viewed from the east



The rear of the principal volume viewed from the north east



The eastern side of the narrower and slightly-lower rear range

There is a small open lightwell running the full height of the building in the western side of the two-storey element suggesting that it was built at the same time or soon after the Skating Rink building to the west. This lightwell now accommodates air-conditioning risers for the offices, but two window openings are visible in its eastern side.



View up the internal lightwell

Historically, there appear to have been two external doors to the south: the present pedimented 'front door' to the left; and a doorway in the centre of the present bay window. The latter doorway has been fitted with uPVC windows above a rendered panel, but the reveals of the opening and the stone threshold of the doorway survive, as does the stone mullion of its overlight. The recess to the pedimented doorway to the left retains its historic floor tiles, but the present door is modern. Both doorways, and the open carriage entrance, are visible in one of the aerial photographs of 1948, which appears also to show a gate serving the doorways in the boundary wall/railings.



The former doorway in the centre of the bay window has been infilled with uPVC windows over a rendered panel, but the reveals of the opening, the stone threshold and the stone mullion of the overlight survive



The recess to the pedimented doorway retains its historic floor tiles



The blocked carriage opening to the south



The blocked carriage opening to the south

Between the editions of 1957 and 1962-72, Ordnance Survey maps ceased to show the hatchmark of the carriage entrance. It was presumably during this period, therefore, that the carriage openings were blocked up, that to the south with rendered masonry, that to the north with timber cladding perhaps over a stud wall with inserted door and window openings. The imposts and arch of the opening to the south are visible internally. The fire-escape stair against the eastern side of the rear projection also appears to have been inserted between 1957 and 1962-72. The railing around the roof parapet probably date from the same phase of works. All of the external doors and windows are late 20th century replacements.



The inside face of the southern carriage opening



The fire-escape stair

Internally, the building has been interconnected with the building to the west and lost its staircase, but we might speculate that the pedimented doorway provided access to the original staircase and the site manager/superintendent's dwelling, whilst the door in the bay provided access to the entrance 'lodge' or site office. The latter – the ground-floor room behind the bay window – retains Edwardian timber-framed windows on its eastern side. These historically looked into the carriage entrance. The room retains its corner 'chimneybreast' but the fireplace itself has been blocked up. There was probably historically a wall extending south-eastwards from the chimneybreast, but this has been lost. Elements of the room's cornice, skirting and tongue-and-groove dado panelling are probably historic. North of this room, the doorways off the corridor (presumably the location of the staircase) have undergone some alteration, although the doorframe to the room on the northern side of the corridor may be historic. All the doors are modern. The room on the northern side of the corridor, now a WC, retains some probably-historic cornicing, and the high-level window opening to the internal lightwell is visible, but otherwise it has a modern character. There may historically have been a fireplace in the room's north-western corner.



The Edwardian windows that historically looked into the carriage entrance



The entrance 'lodge' or site office looking south west: the room retains its corner 'chimneybreast', and elements of the room's cornice, skirting and tongue-and-groove dado panelling are probably historic



Evidence of reconfigured doorways in the corridor



The room on the northern side of the corridor



The high-level window opening to the internal lightwell

All of the internal walls within the former carriage entrance are modern insertions.

The original function of the narrow two-storey range to the north is not clear, but it is thought not to have been connected internally with the principal volume at ground level. It was not possible to access this space, but all the doors and windows in its eastern side are modern.

The first-floor level is thought to have been an entirely domestic preserve, and the front room with bay window was presumably the sitting room. It has been completely fitted-out with modern shelving, but the window and door surrounds, cornice, picture rail and skirting appear historic. The chimneybreast is largely obscured by shelving, and it is not known whether the fireplace survives behind.

The plan-form of the rooms to the north appears to have undergone some alteration, and there are few surviving historic features. The doorframe of the opening through to the room in the narrow rear projection – at a slightly lower level – appears historic, as does the picture rail.

The volume over the carriage entrance probably originally accommodated a single room, but it has subsequently been subdivided. The inserted wall cuts through an arched recess that may have accommodated a grate or a small range; certainly, there is a (truncated) chimneystack above.

The entrance building was added to the *List of Locally Important Buildings and Structures* in May 2017.



View over the subdivided northern end of the now-enclosed carriage entrance



The window and door surrounds, cornice, picture rail and skirting in the first-floor room with the bay window appear historic



The chimneybreast is largely obscured by shelving, and it is not known whether the fireplace survives behind



The cut-through arched recess in the subdivided volume over the carriage entrance

# 3.0 Significance

## 3.1 Background

Significance is at the heart of the planning process, and is defined in the *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, revised February 2019)* as:

*The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. The interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting.*

A heritage asset is defined as:

*A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).*

The entrance building at the eastern end of No. 55 Vastern Road was added to the List of Locally Important Buildings and Structures in May 2017. It is thus it is regarded as a 'non-designated heritage asset'.

The Council's criteria for the inclusion of buildings on the Local List are set out in the Council's *Sites and Detailed Policies Document, 2012 (altered 2015)*, as follows:

### **Criteria for locally listing buildings and structures.**

#### **Exclusions**

*Buildings and structures will not be considered for the Local List when they are already part of a Conservation Area, Scheduled Monument, or subject to an Article 4 direction relating to historical or architectural interest.*

#### **Selection for the Local List**

*For any building, structure or group of buildings to be included in the Local List it must clearly meet the relevant age and integrity criteria:*

- (a) *pre-1840: Any building, structure or group of buildings where its/ their style, form and construction are easily identifiable.*
- (b) *1840 - 1913: Any building, structure or group of buildings that is/are substantially complete and unaltered and of definite significance.*
- (c) *1914 - 1939: Any building, structure or group of buildings that is/are substantially complete and unaltered and of a high level of significance.*
- (d) *post 1939: Any building, structure or group of buildings that is/are of exceptional significance and wholly complete and unaffected by inappropriate changes.*

*In addition it must also be shown that it contributes to the character of an area and is valued by local people in accordance with at least one of the criteria detailed below:*

### **Historic interest**

- (a) *Historical Association*
  - i. *The building or structure has a well authenticated historical association with a notable person(s) or event.*
  - ii. *The building or structure has a prolonged and direct association with figures or events of local interest.*
- (b) *Social Importance*

*The building or structure has played an influential role in the development of an area or the life of one of Reading's communities. Such buildings/structures may include places of worship, schools, community buildings, places of employment, public houses and memorials which formed a focal point or played a key social role.*
- (c) *Industrial Importance*

*The building or structure clearly relates to traditional or historic industrial processes or important businesses or the products of such industrial processes or businesses in the history of Reading or are intact industrial structures, for example bridges.*

### **Architectural interest**

- (a) *Sense of place*
  - i. *The building or structure is representative of a style that is characteristic of Reading.*
- (b) *Innovation and Virtuosity*
  - i. *The building or structure has a noteworthy quality of workmanship and materials.*
  - ii. *The building or structure is the work of a notable local/national architect/engineer/builder.*
  - iii. *The building or structure shows innovation in materials, technique, architectural style or engineering.*
- (c) *Group Value*
  - i. *The buildings/structures form a group which as a whole has a unified architectural or historic value to the local area.*
  - ii. *The buildings/structures are an example of deliberate town planning from before 1947.*

### **Townscape Value**

*The buildings/structures have prominence and a landmark quality that is fundamental to the sense of place of a particular locality.*

Representations were made in July 2017 on behalf of the building's owner, Scottish & Southern Electricity Plc, that the building did not meet these criteria, and thus that it should be removed from the Local List. In November 2017, the Council responded, disagreeing that the criteria were not met and stating that the building would remain on the Local List.

It is not the purpose of this document to re-open the debate about whether the building should remain on the Local List. Rather, it is to provide a baseline assessment of the building's significance against which the impact of the proposed scheme can be assessed.

## **3.2 Assessment of significance**

As detailed in Chapter 2.0, the building was erected between 1897 and 1909, and provided the main entrance to the Electric Works site through the carriage arch in its eastern side. The Electric Works was established on the site in 1894. Whilst not part of the original construction

phase, it is reasonable to assume that the entrance 'lodge'/manager's dwelling was envisaged from the outset.

The building was almost certainly designed by the office of the prominent local architect F. W. Albury, who was one of the directors of the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd. The main Electric Works buildings were demolished in c.1970, and the entrance building is thus the only surviving element from the 'original' layout.

The entrance building was not historically associated with the adjacent building to the west. As detailed in Chapter 2.0, this is understood to have been in use as a warehouse by 1905, although by 1910 it accommodated a Roller-Skating Rink; it has been very substantially remodelled. The entrance building was not associated with the adjacent iron foundry to the south east or with the development of electric tramways in the town.

### 3.2.1 Fabric

The front block is of some inherent architectural interest. The Vastern Road elevation in particular is of some aesthetic value through its relatively high-quality design and workmanship, and its materials, which are characteristic of Reading's development at this time. This elevation is typical of the relatively high quality commercial / public buildings common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, albeit somewhat derivative and generic in design. Notwithstanding that, its aesthetic value is undoubtedly much compromised by the infilling of the carriage arch, the clumsy replacement of the door in the bay with a window, the modern front door, the very insensitive uPVC fenestration, surface-mounted wiring and conduits, and (when viewed from across the street) the railing around the roof parapet.

The flank elevation to the east is of negligible heritage value. Its blank nature is probably indicative of an expectation that buildings would subsequently be erected against it, indeed there was a shed present here for a period during the mid 20th century. As above, the railing around the roof parapet detracts. So too does the truncated chimneystack, and the surface-mounted wiring conduits, signage and CCTV camera. These elements would not warrant local listing on their own merits, and undoubtedly diminish the building's heritage value.

The rear of the principal volume and the narrow range that extends from it were intended to be seen only by those entering the Electric Works, and – despite the stone dressings to the windows – they have a very subsidiary character when compared to the building's 'public face'. The limited aesthetic value of these areas is further diminished by the particularly insensitive infilling of the northern side of the carriage entrance, the unsympathetic inserted doorway with concrete lintel, the clumsy and insensitive uPVC fenestration throughout, the railing around the roof parapet, the fire-escape stair, and some plastic rainwater and soil pipes, as well as a plethora of surface-mounted paraphernalia such as lights, signage, CCTV cameras, and a photovoltaic panel. Certainly, these rear parts do not have the significance of the front block and would not in themselves be worthy of local listing.

Whilst local listing introduces no additional controls over interior works, we would note in passing that the building retains some historic internal features typical of their period, with a minor aesthetic and historical value illustrating the building's role as the site manager/superintendent's dwelling. That said, the historic plan-form has been altered in places and

the building has lost its staircase. Of some note for illustrating the supervisory role of the original occupants are the Edwardian timber-framed windows that historically looked into the carriage entrance. Several spaces retain elements of historic cornicing and joinery, but they are both incomplete and entirely generic to buildings of this period such that their heritage value is limited.

The building's historic fabric derives some associative historical value from its authorship by the office of F. W. Albury, a prominent local architect who had links to the nationally-important Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse (1830-1905). Albury was responsible for several prominent local buildings including Battle Library, Oxford Road (listed at Grade II) and Walter Parsons' Corn Stores, Forbury Road (Grade II). He was also an antiquarian and wrote about the history of Reading Abbey. Albury was clearly also instrumental in the establishment, development and management of the Electric Works. The building undoubtedly has a degree of historical value as the only surviving element from the Works' 'original' layout.

### 3.2.2 Setting

When first constructed, the building provided the only means of access into the Electric Works site. This fundamental aspect of its setting was lost with the relocation of the access further east, the closing up of the vehicular entrance, and the demolition of all the other 'original' buildings of the Electric Works. The only aspect of the building's historic setting that survives is the road edge and pavement along Vastern Road itself – the roadside location therefore makes some contribution to the significance of the building as a whole, through allowing its original 'gatehouse' role to be appreciated, although its present 'ring-road' character in many ways detracts.

When first constructed, the area in front of the western side of the building – and in front of the adjacent Skating Rink/Depository building – was enclosed by walls/railings. The loss of these enclosed areas changed the way the buildings interacted with Vastern Road, to the detriment of the entrance building's setting. That said, the set-back nature of the buildings here is an important characteristic of this part of Vastern Road.

As noted above, the rear of the principal volume and the narrow range that extends from it are of low aesthetic value relative to the Vastern Road elevation. It follows that views of these parts of the building are of less value than views of the front. The setting of the building to the north, including the later electrical installations on the Application Site, is not considered to contribute notably to its significance.

The terraced houses on Lynmouth and De Montford Roads are broadly contemporaneous with the development of the Electric Works, and form part of the wider historic setting of the locally listed building. However, there are few opportunities to read these buildings together in the same view. Rather, the entrance building's wider setting is characterised predominantly by elements that can be said to detract from its significance: the substantially-remodelled Skating Rink/Repository building to the west, the 3 to 5-storey Sovereign House, Covea Insurance and Thames Water offices to the east, the low-quality retail park opposite, and the widened and heavily-trafficked thoroughfare of Vastern Road.

### 3.2.3 Summary of significance

In summary, the building's significance derives primarily from the inherent aesthetic value of the Vastern Road frontage, which also has some historical value for illustrating the building's original role (which remains legible) as the gateway to the works of the Reading Electric Supply Co. Ltd – despite the loss of the principal buildings of the Works. The rear parts of the building are of very limited interest in light of their ancillary nature and largely utilitarian design. The setting of the building has greatly changed and does not generally contribute to its significance, except that the position of the pavement and roadway help to explain the building's original role as an entrance to the site.

# 4.0 Assessment of Impacts

## 4.1 The Proposed Scheme

The proposals are for the comprehensive redevelopment of the Site. They would comprise the removal of all existing structures including 55 Vastern Road, and their replacement with a residential-led mixed use scheme with flats in several large blocks. The proposals also include a linear landscaped space running through the Site, delivering on the long-held aspiration to connect the Thames pedestrian brick and riverside path to Vastern Road and on to the railway station.

The scheme is described in detail in the Architect's submission. Its impact on the heritage of the Site is considered below.

## 4.2 The relative significance of 55 Vastern Road

### 4.2.1 Summary of significance

55 Vastern Road has a degree of local significance as explained in Chapter 3.0 of this report. This can be summarised as:

- Historic interest relating to:
  - the authorship of the local practice of Albury & Brown which was also responsible for other commercial buildings in the town, some of which are of sufficient quality to have been listed. This interest resides mainly in the front façade.
  - the building's illustrative value as the former entrance to the town's Electric Works, which was important to Reading's development in the early 20th century.
  - the arrangement of the superintendent's dwelling above the gate-lodge office, as shown by the two front doors (one now lost) in the narrow front façade.
- Architectural interest of the front façade as an example of the typical 'Flemish Renaissance'-influenced commercial style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, forming part of Reading's expansion in that period.

Notwithstanding this, the building's acknowledged local significance for its overall architectural and historical interest is somewhat limited, for the following principal reasons:

- its architectural expression is restricted to the front façade only, with other parts being utilitarian in character.
- detracting modern alterations to the exterior, including: the loss of the original main front door in the bow-fronted bay; the replacement of the original windows with poor-quality uPVC units; the replacement of original exterior doors with unattractive modern doors and windows; the blocking of the carriage entrance and conversion into a room with unattractive exterior walls to both north and south; and the modern external fire escape stair.

- detracting modern alterations to the interior, including the loss of the original staircase, internal doors, other aspects of original plan form, and the blocking or removal of fireplaces.

#### 4.2.2 Comparison of significance with No. 3 Craven Road

It may be useful to compare the significance of 55 Vastern Road with that of the locally listed building at 3 Craven Road, where a recent Application (171954/FUL) for redevelopment was refused consent – a decision subsequently upheld at Appeal (APP/E0345/W/18/3198514).

Both have been attributed to noted local architects responsible for various buildings in Reading – No. 3 Craven Road was the home of Joseph Morris who is believed to have remodelled the pre-existing house in around 1895 (including adding a porch and bathrooms). Morris designed various local churches, factories, offices and housing for the Huntley & Palmer biscuit company, and extensions to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. As No. 3 Craven Road is substantially complete (albeit with reversible partitions internally), and has definite associations with Morris as the leading local architect in late 19th century Reading, it meets the criteria for local listing.

The Inspector decided at Appeal that, in view of No. 3 Craven Road's architectural quality and strong association with Joseph Morris, the harm caused by its loss was not outweighed by the public benefits contained within the proposed scheme.

Importantly, No. 3 Craven Road was designed in the round as a freestanding house with architectural elevations addressing views from each direction. It retains many original features including its windows, doors, and staircase. It has particular associational value as the home of (and partly built by) Reading's most important architect of the period, who built extensively in and around the town – indeed the Appeal Inspector concluded that the house had 'unique links' with Joseph Morris.

By contrast, the design of No. 55 Vastern Road is largely restricted to the street façade, with a utilitarian building behind – it thus has a lesser architectural authenticity and quality compared to No. 3 Craven Road. It has also lost many of its original features including windows, doors, and staircase, and has lost its role as the entrance to the Electric Works. Although the building was almost certainly designed in the office of Albury & Brown, the identity of the project architect is not known.

The criteria for inclusion on Reading Borough Council's Local List, for a building of the period 1840-1913, include that it should be 'substantially complete and unaltered and of definite significance'. Whilst No. 3 Craven Road appears to meet this criterion easily, No. 55 Vastern Road has seen a fair amount of alteration and loss of original fabric, and so has a reduced value in these terms.

## 4.3 Policy considerations

### 4.3.1 Local Policy

With regard to locally listed buildings, the *Core Strategy 2008* (with further alterations January 2015) has now been superseded by the new *Local Plan* (adopted November 2019). The current local heritage policies that are relevant for this scheme are EN1 and EN4:

#### ***EN1: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment***

*Historic features, areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including their settings will be protected and where possible enhanced. This will include:*

- *Listed Buildings;*
- *Conservation Areas;*
- *Scheduled Monuments;*
- *Historic parks and gardens; and*
- *Other features with local or national significance, such as sites and features of archaeological importance, and assets on the Local List.*

*All proposals will be expected to protect and where possible enhance the significance of heritage assets and their settings, the historic character and local distinctiveness of the area in which they are located. Proposals should seek to avoid harm in the first instance. Any harm to or loss of a heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification, usually in the form of public benefits.*

...

#### ***EN4: Locally Important Heritage Assets***

*Development proposals that affect locally important heritage assets will demonstrate that development conserves architectural, archaeological or historical significance which may include the appearance, character and setting of the asset.*

*Planning permission may be granted in cases where a proposal could result in harm to or loss of a locally important heritage asset only where it can be demonstrated that the benefits of the development significantly outweigh the asset's significance. Where it is accepted by the Local Planning Authority that retention is not important, recording of the heritage asset should be undertaken and submitted alongside development proposals. Replacement buildings should draw upon heritage elements of the previous design, incorporating historical qualities that made the previous building significant. This may include appearance, scale and architectural quality.*

### 4.3.2 National Policy

The *National Planning Policy Framework* (2019) provides the national context within which the local policy should be interpreted. In paragraph 197 it sets out that:

*The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.*

Thus it is clear that both local and national policy do allow for the potential loss of a locally-listed building, provided that the harm caused by that is outweighed by the public benefits of the scheme. With regard to the *NPPF* this was fully considered in the Appeal for Nos. 3-5

Craven Road where the Inspector rejected the suitability of the scheme proposed only by reason of it delivering insufficient public benefits, and not for any matter of principle.

## 4.4 Pre-Application discussions with Council Officers

Proposals for the redevelopment of the Site were presented to Reading Borough Council's planning and conservation officers at a number of pre-application meetings, including those held on 21 November 2018, 29 January 2019, 27 March 2019, and 3 October 2019. The design and supporting information was revised notably between each of these meetings in response to the feedback received, as described below.

### 4.4.1 First pre-application meeting

Feedback from the first pre-application meeting was summarised in the Council's letter of 5 December 2018. The conservation officer noted that 55 Vastern Road is locally listed, and so its conservation has a degree of weight in the decision-making process. Demolition of No. 55 would not be supported unless full and comprehensive justification could be provided. Sight of the detailed draft heritage assessment of the building was requested, alongside a feasibility study of options for its potential retention within the proposed scheme.

### 4.4.2 Second pre-application meeting

In line with these requests, the initial draft version of this report was submitted prior to the second pre-application meeting, together with an expanded architects' submission considering the potential options for retaining and adapting 55 Vastern Road. The conservation officer noted the contents of the Initial Heritage Statement and confirmed that the key aspect of the locally listed building was the front façade to Vastern Road; he noted the rear parts were not of notable value whilst the interiors were not subject to heritage control. In considering the proposals, the conservation officer suggested that in view of the – now-superseded – policy CS33 of the old *Local Plan*, the scheme should aim to retain at least the façade of the locally listed building. He was also prepared to consider the merits of relocating the façade to another part of the development, as long as it could remain part of the wider 'street scene'. The reuse of smaller individual elements of the existing façade within the new development was felt to be unlikely to be successful, however.

Although the conservation officer noted that the old *Local Plan* policy CS33 meant he would object to the demolition of No. 55, it was accepted that the public benefits of the scheme might potentially override any heritage objection under the provisions of Paragraph 197 of the *NPPF* (this is of course now also the position of the current *Local Plan* policies EN1 and EN4). Whether the scheme offered sufficient public benefits was noted to be a matter for the planning officer, who stated that the designs would need to be developed further before he could give an informed view on that issue.

The meeting concluded with a request from officers that the various options for retention and relocation of No. 55 be further explored, to establish their feasibility and knock-on impacts on the wider scheme and the surrounding townscape. Additional design development, and expanded accompanying explanatory narrative to justify the scheme, was also requested.

#### 4.4.3 Third pre-application meeting

This meeting reviewed the further information supplied in response to earlier requests. As summarised in the feedback letter dated 11 April 2019, the planning and conservation officers noted that the demolition of the locally listed building would be regarded as harmful and thus would not satisfy the – now-superseded – *Local Plan* policy CS33. However they also reiterated the previous advice that the public benefits of the scheme might be held to outweigh that harm, if the application submission could demonstrate that would be the case.

#### 4.4.4 Fifth pre-application meeting

Prior to this meeting the scheme was significantly re-appraised and a new approach to the architecture and landscape was presented for discussion. With regard to heritage the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road continued to be proposed for removal to allow the layout and accommodation provided on the Site to be optimised. Feedback following this meeting confirmed that the loss of 55 Vastern Road would, as before, be assessed as part of the wider ‘planning balance’ to determine whether the benefits would outweigh the harm. The feedback noted that the previous scheme’s design references to the architecture of 55 Vastern Road were no longer included in the proposal; however it also noted elsewhere – with approval – that the new design was now heavily informed by references to the historic industrial use of the wider Site.

### 4.5 Assessment of Impacts

The proposals put forward for the Site include comprehensive redevelopment, with largely residential buildings and areas of hard and soft landscaping. This would involve the demolition of 55 Vastern Road, causing the total loss of the non-designated heritage asset.

The accompanying Architect’s submission describes the studies undertaken to establish whether the retention or relocation of No. 55 (in whole or in part) would allow a suitable scheme to be developed for this Site, bearing in mind other constraints and the wider ‘planning balance’ of any scheme. The difficulties of retaining the existing building in some form or other, as part of a workable scheme, are explained in the Architect’s and Planning Consultant’s statements. These difficulties have led to the conclusion that No. 55 cannot be meaningfully retained.

Reading Borough Council’s *Local Plan* policies EN1 and EN4 provide that where a scheme includes harm to, or loss of, a locally listed building, consent can be granted provided there is sufficient justification, usually in the form of public benefits that outweigh the harm. There is a similar requirement in paragraph 197 of the *NPPF*.

In heritage terms, as explained above, 55 Vastern Road has a certain local value, but it does not possess the same level of importance as some locally listed buildings – for instance No. 3 Craven Road. In this context, it has been accepted by Reading Borough Council’s officers during the pre-application discussions that the loss of 55 Vastern Road could be acceptable, provided that sufficient public benefits are provided by the new scheme.

The public benefits of the proposals are described by the Architect and Planning Consultant in their accompanying submissions. Clearly the scheme would deliver the much-needed regeneration of a redundant town centre site, and the creation of an important new pedestrian

route through the town towards the railway station. It would also provide a number of new dwellings in a sustainable location. Notably, in the context of *Local Plan* policy EN4, the scheme would include a group of high quality new buildings that reflect the industrial heritage of this Site and highlight the importance of the former Reading Electric Supply Co. In this way the new scheme would reinforce the communal value of the Site, and its associations with a notable part of Reading's history.

Given these benefits, the limited significance of 55 Vastern Road, and the balance of harm and benefits, the loss of the locally listed building would be acceptable under the *Local Plan* policies EN1 and EN4, as well as paragraph 197 of the *NPPF*.

## 5.0 Conclusion

In developing proposals for the redevelopment of the former Scottish & Southern Electricity (SSE) office and industrial depot complex on Vastern Road, Reading, consideration was given to the retention of the locally-listed No. 55, but, ultimately, as explained in the accompanying Architect's and Planning Consultant's submissions, this was not felt to be consistent with a workable scheme. Consequently, it is proposed that the non-designated heritage asset would be removed to allow for an improved development scheme for the Site.

As acknowledged by Reading Borough Council's officers during pre-application discussions, the existing planning policy context would allow for the loss of No. 55 Vastern Road, provided that sufficient public benefits are provided by the new scheme.

The public benefits of the proposals are described by the Planning Consultant in their accompanying submission. In view of these public benefits, the information in this Heritage Statement and in the Architect's submission, and the policy context explained above, the balance of harm and benefits would allow the loss of the locally listed building.

# 6.0 Sources

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<https://britainfromabove.org.uk>

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# Appendix A: Planning Policy

## A.1 National heritage policies

### A.1.1 National Planning Policy Framework

National heritage policy is contained within section 16 of the *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF, revised February 2019). The relevant sections of the NPPF are as follows:

190. *Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this assessment into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage asset, to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal.*
192. *In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:*
  - a) *the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;*
  - b) *the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and*
  - c) *the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.*
197. *The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.*

## A.2 Local heritage policies

### A.2.1 Local Plan

Planning policy for the borough is provided by the new *Local Plan* (November 2019). The following policies are relevant to the heritage issues on this Site:

#### **EN1: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment**

*Historic features, areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including their settings will be protected and where possible enhanced. This will include:*

- *Listed Buildings;*
- *Conservation Areas;*
- *Scheduled Monuments;*
- *Historic parks and gardens; and*
- *Other features with local or national significance, such as sites and features of archaeological importance, and assets on the Local List.*

*All proposals will be expected to protect and where possible enhance the significance of heritage assets and their settings, the historic character and local distinctiveness of the area in which they*

*are located. Proposals should seek to avoid harm in the first instance. Any harm to or loss of a heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification, usually in the form of public benefits.*

...

***EN4: Locally Important Heritage Assets***

*Development proposals that affect locally important heritage assets will demonstrate that development conserves architectural, archaeological or historical significance which may include the appearance, character and setting of the asset.*

*Planning permission may be granted in cases where a proposal could result in harm to or loss of a locally important heritage asset only where it can be demonstrated that the benefits of the development significantly outweigh the asset's significance. Where it is accepted by the Local Planning Authority that retention is not important, recording of the heritage asset should be undertaken and submitted alongside development proposals. Replacement buildings should draw upon heritage elements of the previous design, incorporating historical qualities that made the previous building significant. This may include appearance, scale and architectural quality.*



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