

**Vastern Court, Vastern Road,
Reading
Statement of Case – Heritage
Appendix K**

**Planning Inspectorate Ref:
APP/E0345/W/21/3289748**

Reading Borough Council

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LICHTFIELDS

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1.0 **Background**

1.1 My name is Nick Bridgland. I am a Heritage Director at Lichfields, the planning and heritage consultancy. I have over 25 years' experience in the field of heritage, working in both the private sector and for national heritage agencies. In my role at Lichfields I provide expert advice on the significance of heritage assets and how this can be managed through the mechanisms of the planning process and heritage protection system. I am a full member of both the Institute for Historic Buildings Conservation and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists.

1.2 I have been involved in this case since the end of January 2022 when I was asked to provide heritage advice to Reading Borough Council on the impact of the proposals which are the subject of this appeal. I have had no involvement in the preparation of earlier heritage advice related to this site.

1.3 This Heritage Statement of Case will address:

- The historic environment context of the development site.
- The legislative and policy context
- The methodology for addressing the impact on heritage
- The shortcomings with the applicant's assessment.
- The heritage impact of the proposals.

2.0 **Historic Environment Context of the Development Site**

2.1 The site contains no heritage assets but because of the height of the proposals there is the potential for the proposals to affect the setting of a large number of heritage assets.

2.2 Within 1km of the site there are 193 listed buildings, 4 conservation areas, 2 scheduled monuments, 2 Registered parks and 11 locally listed buildings. In a dense urban context such as Reading, very few of these would merit full assessment of the impact the proposals may have on their significance; even with a tall building proposal such as this only the closest or those with particular sensitivities are likely to be affected.

3.0 Legislative and Policy context

- 3.1 Listed Building and Conservation Areas are designated under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. S 66 requires Local Planning Authorities 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*”. S.72 requires Local Planning Authorities to pay “*special attention ... to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of [a conservation] area*”
- 3.2 The National Planning Policy Framework reflects these legal requirements in Paragraph 199. “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”. This extends such great weight to all designated heritage assets.
- 3.3 The NPPF defines significance 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*”.
- 3.4 Under Para 200, the NPPF requires 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*”.
- 3.5 Paragraph 202 continues; “*Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use*”.
- 3.6 Paragraph 203 addresses how to manage harm to non-designated heritage assets such as locally listed buildings. “*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*”.
- 3.7 The NPPF’s consideration of harm to heritage assets recognises only two categories: Substantial harm and less than substantial harm. In practice it is recognised that there can be degrees within these categories, particularly within less than substantial harm. As confirmed by caselaw (James Hall and Company Limited v City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, CO/1863/2019), even the lowest levels of harm (often termed negligible harm) require to be addressed against the relevant policies of the NPPF.
- 3.8 The Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) contains a number of policies which respond to heritage concerns of particular relevance to this set of proposals are summarised below:
- 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.
 - EN3: Enhancement of Conservation Areas: The special interest, character and architecture of Conservation Areas will be conserved and enhanced.
 - 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.

- EN5: Protection of Significant Views with Heritage Interest: New development should not harm and where possible should make a positive contribution to views of acknowledged historical significance.
- EN6: New Development in a Historic Context: In areas characterised by heritage assets, the historic environment will inform and shape new development.
- These policies are all compatible with the policies in the NPPF.

3.9 The Local Plan also includes policies for specific areas. Of particular relevance are:

- CR10: Tall Buildings: Tall buildings will meet a number of requirements including *“Conserve and, where possible, enhance the setting of conservation areas and listed buildings”*.
- CR11: Station/River Major Opportunity Area: Development in this area will *“Give careful consideration to the areas of transition to low and medium density residential and conserve and, where possible, enhance listed buildings, conservation areas and historic gardens and their settings”*.

3.10 The Reading Tall Buildings Strategy (2008) identifies 3 area in Reading as having the potential to accommodate tall buildings in including the Station Cluster of which the proposal site forms a part The Strategy predates the NPPF and the current Local Plan but is referred to in the local plan and has informed the policy CR10. It includes as a general principle (Section 6.3) that *“all tall buildings proposals should ... avoid detrimental impacts upon conservation areas and listed buildings”*.

3.11 The Reading Station Area Framework (2010), seeks to set out a comprehensive approach to the area’s future development. It predates the current Local Plan but, as set out in para. 5.4.9 of the Local Plan, this framework still applies. Policy CS33 requires that *“historic features and areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including their settings will be protected and where appropriate enhanced ... Planning permission will only be granted where development has no adverse impact on historic assets and their settings”*.

3.12 Neither the Reading Tall Buildings Strategy nor the Reading Station Area Framework permit the policies of the NPPF or the Local Plan or the legal obligations in relation to listed buildings and conservation area to be set aside.

4.0 Methodology for Addressing Impact

4.1 Historic England has produced three key pieces of guidance which are relevant to the assessment of heritage impact:

- Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment (GPA2) 2015
- The Setting of Heritage Assets (GPA3) 2017
- Tall Buildings (HEAN4) 2015
- Statements of Heritage Significance (HEAN12) 2019

4.2 GPA2 makes it clear that a thorough understanding of the nature, extent and level of significance of each heritage asset is the basis for understanding how a development might affect that significance. Reflecting the definition within the NPPF, Historic England defines “*the significance of a heritage asset [as] the sum of its archaeological, architectural, historic, and artistic interest*”.

4.3 GPA3 recommends the following staged process for addressing issues of setting.

- *Identify which heritage assets and their settings are affected*
- *Assess the degree to which these settings make a contribution to the significance of the heritage asset(s) or allow significance to be appreciated*
- *Assess the effects of the proposed development, whether beneficial or harmful, on that significance or on the ability to appreciate it*
- *Explore ways to maximise enhancement and avoid or minimise harm*
- *Make and document the decision and monitor outcomes*

4.4 The final stage is generally undertaken once consents are in place and works commence.

4.5 For the first step it advises applicants to consider using tools such as a Zone of Theoretical Visibility to inform decisions regarding which heritage assets may be affected by a proposal. It specifically advises that “*the area of assessment for a large or prominent development, such as a tall building in an urban environment or a wind turbine in the countryside or offshore, can often extend for a distance of several kilometres*”.

4.6 HEAN4 builds on the guidance in GPA2 and GPA3 to provide advice for those involved in tall buildings proposals. It goes beyond simple matters of heritage impact, discussing the importance of quality in urban design and architecture. In developing proposals, it advises that early discussion with the local planning authority and Historic England should help to “*identify the zones of visual influence of a proposal, which then help to understand the character of the areas that may be affected and determine which individual heritage assets are likely to be affected (this includes considering recognised views and the settings of heritage assets)*”.

4.7 HEAN12 sets out the purpose and scope of a heritage statement, explaining its place in the development management process but also setting out its fundamental purpose: “*A Statement of Heritage Significance is not an advocacy document, seeking to justify a scheme which has already been designed; it is more an objective analysis of significance, an opportunity to describe what matters and why, in terms of heritage significance*”.

5.0 **Issues with the applicant’s heritage appraisal**

5.1 The application and appeal have been accompanied by three documents prepared by Montague Evans:

- Baseline Study: Built Heritage Statement
- Environmental Statement Chapter 2A Built Heritage.
- Heritage Statement of Case

5.2 The Baseline Study and the Environmental Statement Chapter should be read together since the Baseline Study is referred to as Appendix 2.1a in the ES chapter and they contain cross-references regarding methodology. The Baseline Study seeks to establish the scope of the assessment and set out an understanding of the significance of the relevant heritage assets. The ES Chapter then addresses the impact of the proposals on the significance identified in the Baseline Study.

5.3 An Environmental Statement is designed to protect the environment by ensuring that a local planning authority when deciding whether to grant planning permission for a project, which is likely to have significant effects on the environment, does so in the full knowledge of the likely significant effects, and takes this into account in the decision making process. However, the policy tests for the treatment of designated heritage assets requires careful consideration of all effects. If harm is identified, it still needs to be considered against policy even if the impact is not considered to be significant in ES terms

5.4 The Heritage Statement of Case was prepared on the basis on non-determination and therefore without the benefit of understanding Reading Borough Council’s views on the proposals. It relies heavily on the findings of the Baseline Study and ES Chapter.

Identification of Scope

5.5 The aim of the Baseline Study is that it “*identifies and describes the significance and settings of heritage receptors within the (built) heritage baseline*”. In doing so it sets out to follow Historic England’s guidance on Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment (GPA2) and the Setting of Heritage Assets (GPA3).

5.6 In identifying which assets and their settings are affected, the Baseline Study uses a 500m buffer from the site boundary to limit the potentially large number of heritage assets. This is not based on a Zone of Theoretical Visibility and no consideration was given to the potential for impact beyond this limit despite Historic England’s recommendations in this regard.

5.7 Having identified a list of 43 heritage assets within the 500m buffer, a shortlist of 12 heritage assets were taken forward for full assessment. Reasons are not given for every asset but are given for several prominent assets excluded from further assessment. Typically, the reason given was that the site did not form part of the setting or appreciation of the asset.

Assessment of Significance

5.8 GPA3’s second step then requires an understanding of the contribution that setting makes to the significance of the heritage asset. This logically requires an understanding of the significance of the heritage asset as recommended by GPA2.

5.9 This assessment of significance in the Baseline Study has then been undertaken in a summary form. While headings identify elements of the assessment of each asset as “Historic Value” or

“Architectural and Artistic Value” these sections are largely descriptive and shed little light on why a particular asset may be considered significant. In this regard this Baseline Study does not meet HEAN12’s aims for a Statement of Heritage Significance to describe what matters and why.

5.10 The Baseline Study concludes with a table which sets out the level of significance for each asset (High, Medium or Low) which appears to be derived entirely from the asset’s designation status rather than any more detailed assessment of significance.

Assessment of Impact

5.11 The ES Chapter sets out the assessment of impact on the significance of the heritage assets. Following ES methodology, it is necessary to identify the “Sensitivity” of the heritage asset. A table setting out a scale is given before the 12 assets are then accorded a Sensitivity of “Medium” or “Low”. The chapter does not provide its reasoning for each asset.

5.12 The assessment of Completed Development Effects rightly highlights that change within the setting of a heritage, even highly visible change, is not necessarily harmful. However, it fails to explain that an important determining factor in this will be the contribution that setting makes to the significance of a heritage asset. It then accords each heritage asset a degree of impact (ranging from “High” to “Negligible”) which, when considered in the light of their Sensitivity, results in a Scale of Effect ranging from “Minor/Moderate Adverse” to “Negligible Adverse”. A short discussion is provided for the Main Building of Reading General Station and Great Western House but this does not relate back to the assessment of significance set out in the Baseline Study.

5.13 While a “Scale of Effect” has been accorded to the impact on each heritage asset, it is not possible to understand what the effect of the development will actually be on the significance of each these heritage assets.

Summary

5.14 The applicant’s heritage appraisal has failed to follow the guidance which it claims to follow.

- The scoping of the assets is based on an arbitrary 500m buffer rather than a tool such as a Zone of Theoretical Visibility which might have identified the need to look further afield (such as up Duke Street/High Street).
- The shortlisting of 12 heritage assets (and the exclusion of 31) may be reasonable but no reasoning has been provided to explain this.
- The assessment of significance of the 12 assets within scope fails to explain what is significant about them; what matters and why.
- The assessment of impact provides little explanation for its conclusions and, being based on an inadequate assessment of significance, cannot be relied upon.

5.15 Taken at face value, the applicant’s own assessment has identified minor harm to a non-designated heritage asset, minor/medium harm to a Grade II listed building and negligible harm to a further 10 listed buildings (one of them Grade II*)

Table 5.1 Likely Effects drawn from Applicant’s documentation

Heritage Asset	Status	Scale of Effect
Former Town Council Chamber	Grade II*	Negligible Adverse
Main building of Reading General Station	Grade II	Minor/Moderate Adverse
Regent Place	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
29 and 31 Caversham Road	Grade II	Negligible Adverse

Heritage Asset	Status	Scale of Effect
Great Western House	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
13 and 15 Station Road	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
Statue of King Edward VII	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
Reading Museum	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
Former School of Art	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
Concert Hall	Grade II	Negligible Adverse
No 55 Vastern Road	Locally Listed	Minor Adverse
Market Place Conservation Area	Conservation Area	Negligible Adverse

5.16

Since negligible harm is still a degree of harm which needs to be considered in the light of Paragraph 202 of the NPPF, all these harms to designated heritage assets would need to be considered in the planning balance. This would allow the accumulation of low levels of harm to numerous designated assets to be given appropriate weighting.

6.0 **Impact of Proposals**

6.1 As indicated in the Committee Report taken to the Reading Borough Council Planning Applications Committee on 15 February, it is Reading Borough Council's position that these proposals will cause:

- a moderate degree of less than substantial harm to the Main Building of Reading General Station (Grade II)
- a low degree of less than substantial harm to the Market Square/London Street Conservation Area
- a very low degree of less than substantial harm to the Town Council Chamber (Grade II*)

6.2 My evidence will expand on the information provided in that Committee Report to provide a dependable and transparent understanding of the impact of the proposals on Reading's historic environment. It will establish the scope of assets for assessment with greater clarity. It will assess the significance of those assets in line with Historic England guidance and will identify the impact of the proposals on that significance. By doing so this process and the conclusions it reaches will permit a reliable assessment of the heritage arguments against policy.

7.0 **Conclusion**

- 7.1 National policy requires that great weight should be placed on the conservation of heritage assets (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). The Local Plan has clear policies related to the historic environment which are compatible with national policy.
- 7.2 The applicant's appraisal of the heritage impact recognises the guidance of Historic England in setting out a methodology for assessment but has failed to follow this guidance. At each stage of the assessment process (scoping, assessment of significance, identification of impact) there are flaws in the assessment process which mean that the applicant's heritage impact assessment cannot be relied upon.
- 7.3 The proposals will cause harm to a number of designated heritage assets. This harm should be accorded great weight in determining this application.