

Case Name: BPN: 55 Vastern Road, Reading

Case Number: 1479470

Background

We are assessing 55 Vastern Road for listing following the serving of a Building Preservation Notice (BPN) by Reading Borough Council on that part of the building identified as a locally listed building (reference LL8), described as the 'Entrance Building, part of Scottish and Southern Energy, 55 Vastern Road'.

The BPN is due to expire on 21 April 2022.

Asset(s) under Assessment

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

Annex	List Entry Number	Name	Heritage Category	HE Recommendation
1	1480267	55 Vastern Road	Listing	Do not add to List

Visits

Date	Visit Type
19 January 2022	Full inspection

Context

There is an appeal against the determination of a planning application for the redevelopment of the site which would have resulted in the demolition of the locally listed building, (reference APP/E0345/W/21/3276463). At the time of writing our advice (24 February 2022) there is no decision on the appeal.

The locally listed building does not stand in a conservation area nor is it located close to listed buildings. It is attached to a long range built as a store in 1903, later converted into a skating rink, and then offices. This range is not being assessed for listing but is referenced in the history section.

Assessment

CONSULTATION

The owner and their heritage consultant, the local authority and the Historic Environment Record (HER) were invited to comment on the factual details of the case as part of the consultation process. We are grateful for all responses received.

The local authority commented that the site is one of only two remaining industrial sites to the north of the railway line in Reading and that the locally listed building is a rare example of an entrance portal to a pre-world war power station in a regional town which should be listed, just as other entry portals to historic houses are listed. They further commented that the building has a high design standard by a regionally significant firm and has a strong historical association with the development of a regional town and people. They opine that some of the changes to the building are reversible. They suggested some changes to the details which have been made where relevant to the architectural and historic interest of the building.

HE Response: the architectural and historic interest of the building in the national context is considered below.

The owner's heritage consultant responded with a few suggestions for amending the details which have been made where relevant to the architectural and historic interest of the building. The consultant had previously supplied a representation against statutory listing which concluded that the principal front has some aesthetic interest through its relatively high quality design and materials which are characteristic of Reading's development at this time, but lacks the quality of execution or attention found on better examples. The degree of alteration has impacted the aesthetic interest of the frontage, however, and the other elevations are much plainer. The interior has also been altered and overall the consultant considers that the building does not have sufficient architectural interest to be listed.

HE Response: the architectural and historic interest of the building is considered below.

The HER responded but had no further records of the site.

No other comments were received.

DISCUSSION

The statutory criteria for listing are the special architectural or historic interest of a building, as set out in the Principles of Selection for Listed Buildings (November 2018). To be of special architectural interest a building must be of importance in its architectural design, decoration or craftsmanship; and to be of special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation's social, economic, cultural, or military history. The building itself in its current form will afford a strong connection with the valued aspect of history. For buildings dating from 1850 to 1945, because of the greatly increased number of buildings erected and the much larger numbers that have survived, progressively greater selection is necessary.

Our Listing Selection Guide on Industrial Buildings (December 2017) provides further information on such building types. It explains that the period 1850-1914 saw a dramatic increase in production in all sectors, coupled with the expansion of the railways which allowed a much wider distribution of industries in most reasonably sized towns. Our Selection Guide on Infrastructure Buildings: Utilities and Communication (December 2017) provides further detail on electricity supply buildings, explaining that from about the 1890s large central electricity stations were built to generate power for transmission over wide areas, for a range of customers and uses. The two main structural components of an electricity power station are the boiler house and engine or turbine hall with one or more chimneys. The architecture of urban power stations often reflected municipal or company status or pride and confidence in the new technology. Only the most important power stations are listable, this may include the earliest survivors or key examples of a major development. Designation will normally depend on the architectural elaboration of the exterior, the quality of the interiors and the survival of any machinery or switchgear. Listed examples of electricity stations include: the former power station in Christchurch (Dorset, National Heritage List for England (NHLE) entry 1391049, 1903, Grade II) and Powick Mills, the former City of Worcester electricity works (NHLE entry 1390029, 1894) an entire complex including power halls, offices and a chimney stack, listed at Grade II*.

The Reading Electric Supply Co station buildings were designed by F W Albury himself or another in his practice. Albury was one of the directors of the company and so it is likely that he paid particular attention to their design, showcasing his proven ability to create prominent buildings in his home town, attested by his buildings on the statutory List such as Caversham Free Public Library (NHLE entry 1113456) and West Branch Library, Oxford Road (NHLE entry 1302878) of 1907. Albury was an accomplished local architect, and thus representative of the growing architectural profession of the late C19. His tutelage under Fowler of Louth, another well-regarded provincial architect, and recommendation as Fellow of the RIBA by Waterhouse, underpins his reputation as an assured regional architect of his generation. The front elevation of 55 Vastern Road, the locally listed former entrance building and offices being assessed, reflects his ability to use materials and detailing thoughtfully and to good effect. It has some architectural distinction, and its role as the 'polite' front to an industrial site, visible to passers-by, visitors and workers alike, was clearly an important one for the power station and town, and Albury's reputation too.

The other buildings of the Reading Electric Supply Co station have been demolished and 55 Vastern Road is the only survivor. The local authority draws comparison between the locally listed building and entrance lodges of historic houses, but the office ranges of power stations provide a better benchmark as equivalents in function, form and date. In this respect the office ranges at the listed former tramways power station and offices (NHLE entry 1271012, 1901 by B F Simpson); the Old Power Station, Tonbridge (NHLE entry 1069958, 1902); the former power station, White Hart Road, Plumstead (NHLE entry 1271530 1903 by Mitchell and Sumner) and Enfield Electricity works, Ladysmith Road (NHLE entry 1389537, 1906), provide a good understanding of the level of architectural interest required for such buildings to be listed.

When compared to these listed examples of electricity station offices, the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road falls short of the requisite architectural quality to meet the criteria for statutory listing. It does not have a consistent treatment to all elevations and, although the principal front has some careful detailing, lacks the architectural distinction in composition, use of materials and interior fixtures and fittings evident in listed buildings of this type and date. The old power station in Tonbridge, for example, a two storey office range with engine room behind, is a skilled composition in Arts and Crafts style, with consistent, good quality treatment, materials and detailing; the interior retains fireplaces and doors in the manager's office. At White Hart Road, the offices have an elaborate frontage, with projecting moulded pilasters and brickwork with contrasting stone dressings, a Gibbsian surround to the entrance door, all topped with pyramidal roof, tall chimneys and dormers. The interiors are described as elaborate, with the stair, doors and chimneypieces in place. The Enfield Electricity station's front range, enlivened with terracotta dressings, has prominent arched hoods to the entrance doors and a cartouche with the carved words '1906 Enfield Electricity Works' resting on scrollwork. The Newcastle tramways power station, located in a prominent corner position, has a ground floor of ashlar, with the word 'office' carved into the spandrels of the office entrance, projecting oriels to the upper floors topped by copper turrets on either side of a pyramidal roof. Attached to the office a tall, deeply chamfered vehicle entrance has elaborate ashlar piers, a gabled arch and full-height gates with art nouveau scrolled wrought iron top panels. Internally, the offices have richly glazed walls and the dogleg stair has an art nouveau wrought iron balustrade and moulded wood handrail. In contrast, the locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road, is a modest building of some aesthetic merit but typical in character for a building of this date and type.

The building has been altered considerably also, and although some of these changes may be reversible, the loss of historic fabric, particularly the original office entrance and doorway at the ground floor, and the interior reconfiguration resulting in the loss of the main staircase and other fixtures and fittings, are major interventions that have further diminished the architectural interest of the building. There is no particular innovation in its construction or plan; the provision of accommodation over an office and a vehicular entrance to one side is not an unusual arrangement for a commercial or industrial building of the early C20.

The association with Albury and role of the building in the provision of electricity to the town confers local historic interest as recognised by its locally listed status. Industrial sites of this kind were relatively commonplace throughout the country, and although redevelopment has made them rarer, that doesn't necessarily raise their level of special interest. In this case, the loss of industrial context denudes the claims to national historic interest. The locally listed building is a vestigial element of a once much larger site and had a subsidiary role in the production of electricity. The historic interest of the whole as a relatively early example of an urban power station could have been enhanced, had the other power station buildings survived.

CONCLUSION

After examining all the records and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, the criteria for listing are not fulfilled. The BPN should not be upheld.

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION

The locally listed building at 55 Vastern Road, Reading, the former offices and entrance to the Reading Electric Supply Co. Station, of 1903 built to the designs of F W Albury, is not recommended for listing for the following principal reasons:

Degree of Architectural interest:

- * a modest building of some aesthetic merit but lacking the requisite architectural distinction in its composition, elevational treatment, use of materials and interior fixtures and fittings evident in listed buildings of this type and date;
- * significant loss of historic fabric and form has occurred including the remodelling of the original office entrance and doorway at the ground floor, and interior reconfiguration resulting in the removal of fixtures, fittings and plan-form.

Degree of Historic interest:

* local historic interest is acknowledged for the association with renowned architect F W Albury and the provision of electricity to the town but the building is a vestigial element of a once much larger industrial site, the loss of which denudes the claim to national historic interest.

Countersigning comments:

Agreed.

Annex 1

Factual Details

Name: 55 Vastern Road

Location: Reading, RG1 8BU

County	District	District Type	Parish
	Reading	Unitary Authority	Non Civil Parish

History

55 Vastern Road is the remaining structure of the former Reading Electric Supply Co Ltd works, taken over by the Scottish and Southern Electricity (SSE) company in 1958; the other historic buildings on this industrial site have been demolished. The Reading Electric Supply Co Ltd was incorporated in 1892, with one of their directors being F W Albury, of the Reading architectural practice Albury and Brown, and the architect who designed the new buildings, which were constructed in 1894; the complex was extended in 1898 and 1926.

The site chosen for the electrical generating station was at Vastern Road, located between the River Thames to the north and Reading railway station and its sidings to the south.

The locally listed building is the former entrance lodge located at the east end of 55 Vastern Road. Mapping evidence suggests that it was built between 1897 and 1910; the Local List entry suggests a construction date of 1903. The historic Ordnance Survey (OS) map of 1932 indicates that at this time there was a building attached to the east side of vehicular entrance which was removed in the mid-C20. Historic photographs in the Heritage Statement accompanying the planning application indicate that overall the industrial buildings on the site were relatively plain with some architectural detailing to the gable ends.

The building attached to the west (left) of the locally listed building was probably constructed in about 1903 as a warehouse for the Company, also apparently designed by Albury, but was described in the 1910 Ordnance Survey (OS) map as a roller-skating rink before becoming a food store during the First World War, and warehousing in the post-war period. More recently it served as offices for SSE and there is no evidence of the rink or previous functions. It has been significantly altered externally and to the rear is a modern extension. Internally, all of the fixtures and fittings are modern, but some of the round, iron columns of the structure remain exposed on the first floor. This attached building is noted here for historical context but is not being assessed for listing.

The locally listed building comprised an entrance lodge with pedestrian access for workers and an integrated carriageway or vehicular entrance. Historic mapping indicates that it was set back from a forecourt with surrounding walls. It probably functioned as offices on the ground floor, with the main entrance at the central bay of the principal front. A separate entrance to the west of the bay accessed the superintendent's accommodation on the first floor. On the east side of the bay was a carriage or vehicular entrance.

By about 1970, the vehicular entrances were infilled with rendered blockwork to the south and timber-clad blockwork to the north. Other significant remodelling probably also occurred at around the same time, including: the main entrance was partially infilled to create a window: the entrance door to the first floor accommodation was replaced: the chimney stacks were truncated: the interior was reconfigured including removing the stairs to the first-floor accommodation: the lightwell between the locally listed building and offices next door was blocked in: a doorway from the vehicular entrance into the office was infilled; toilet and workshop facilities were inserted into the rear wings at the ground floor: a door opening was punched through the west party wall into the adjacent offices: a doorway from the vehicular entrance into the offices was infilled and in the rear wing toilet and workshop facilities were installed. On the first floor, the former accommodation was reconfigured including the removal of partitions, chimneypieces and infilling of some windows. In the late-C20, the fenestration was replaced with PVC-u alternatives; ramps were inserted for access and internal doors mostly replaced. The building is currently vacant (January 2022).

F W Albury (1845-1912) was born in Reading and attended Reading School of Art before working at the architectural firm of William and John Thomas Brown in the town. He was an assistant to the prolific architect James Fowler of Louth in 1875-1876 before returning to Reading to join his old firm. The architectural practice of Albury and Brown became a large practice in Reading. He was elected Fellow of the RIBA in 1875

(proposed by Alfred Waterhouse and others). He designed many buildings in the Reading area, a number of which are listed: Caversham Free Public Library (National Heritage List for England (NHLE) entry 1113456) and West Branch Library, Oxford Road (NHLE entry 1302878) both Grade II and completed in 1907. Although not attributed to him in the List entries, it seems the practice also designed: the Walter Parsons Corn Stores in Forbury Road (NHLE entry 1248738, 1890, Grade II) and the former National Westminster Bank in the Market Place (NHLE entry 1113535, 1876, Grade II).

Details

The former entrance range of the Reading Electric Supply Co Ltd works, comprising an office and vehicular access with accommodation over, built probably in about 1903 to the designs of F W Albury or his practice, altered by about 1970 and again in the late C20.

MATERIALS: orange-red brick elevations, with blue brick dressings to the former vehicular entrance, and stone dressings.

PLAN: approximately 'L' shaped footprint with additional rear wing at the west, comprising a south-facing principal front with off-centre entrance bay at the ground floor, pedestrian and vehicular entrance to the east (right) and pedestrian entrance to the west (left) providing access to the former accommodation at the first floor. Reconfigured internally in the mid-to-late- C20 to form office facilities.

EXTERIOR: a two-storey building with a flat roof (on top of which is a modern metal railing), constructed of brick laid in English bond. The principal front has moulded, classically-detailed stone dressings across this elevation, notably to the off-centre, double-height bay; pediment and brackets over the west doorway, and impostes and elliptical arch to the vehicular entrance. The rounded bay windows have moulded stone pilasters as mullions, but the once neatly curved windows have been replaced with angular PVC-u alternatives. There is a moulded stone string course above the ground floor and cornice beneath the parapet. The principal entrance at the centre of the ground floor bay retains its moulded stone head, but the doors have been replaced with a modern window above a rendered panel. The former entrance to the first floor accommodation retains its tiled floor covering but the door and fanlight above have been replaced. The former vehicular entrance has been infilled with rendered blockwork.

The east return is blind, but the rear (north) elevation has replacement fenestration generally in existing openings which have plain stone lintels and heads. A structural joist spans the former vehicular entrance, beneath which is timber cladding with a modern door and window at the ground floor. A late-C20 external metal stair is attached to the rear wing.

INTERIOR: the main office space at the ground floor retains some matchboard panelling and joinery including skirtings, picture rails and cornices. This space may have been divided into two rooms historically, but has been opened up into one area. The chimneypiece has been removed. Two historic, large multi-pane sash windows face onto the former vehicular entrance, presumably to enable observation of pedestrians and vehicles from the ground floor room.

The former vehicular entrance is used for storage; there are simple cornice mouldings, probably introduced when the space was converted. The moulded impostes to the entrance arch are partially exposed, and a projecting pier midway appears to have the possible scars of a hinge suggesting there was an interior gate. The window and blocked door openings into the ground floor room of the office have lightly chamfered surrounds.

The rooms to the rear (north) are converted to toilets and office spaces and appear to have no historic fixtures and fittings remaining.

The hallway which once led to the stairs to the first floor has matchboard panelling. Access to the first floor is via the modernised offices to the west as the historic staircase has been removed.

The former superintendent's accommodation at the first floor comprises rooms over the office, vehicular entrance and rooms to the rear (north). All chimneypieces have been removed from the front rooms apparently, but some joinery such as skirtings, picture rails and cornices remain. The room over the former vehicular entrance has been divided into two; there are in-built cupboards and a recess where the chimneypiece would have been. One modified original door remains, all others are late-C20 fire doors. In the rooms to the north few historic fixtures and fittings remain except for sections of picture rail, a door surround

and the recess for a range. The window openings onto the lightwell have been blocked. No evidence of the staircase is apparent at the first floor.

Selected Sources

Websites

Local List entry, accessed 2/2/22 from

<https://www.reading.gov.uk/planning/conservation-areas-listed-buildings/locally-listed-buildings/#LL8>

Map

National Grid Reference: SU7154774071



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