



J1273 CASTLE STREET ALMSHOUSES

Design, Access and Heritage Statement

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Bridges Associates Architects LLP
53 Rawstorne Street, London, EC1V 7NQ
Telephone 020 7837 1008
mail@bridgesassociates.co.uk
Registered in England and Wales
Partnership No. OC383122

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This Design, Access and Heritage Statement has been prepared by Bridges Associates Architects LLP ('BA') on behalf of Reading Almshouse Charity ('Applicant') in support of an application to improve the window performance of the Almshouses on Castle Street, Reading

Designations

- 1.2. The Almshouses are a Grade II listed building and were selected in December 1978. The listing is titled Vachel Almshouses, 1-32, Castle Street. The list description is limited to the architectural characteristics of the original wings designed by Reading based architect William Henry Woodman in 1863.

- 1.3. Vachel Almshouses were in fact located further along Castle Street at Coley Place and when the charity was amalgamated into the Reading Almshouse Charities, it was sold, and the proceeds contributed to the building of the Castle Street Almshouses. However, the sale of the old almshouses was only one limited source of the funds needed to build the new almshouses on Castle Street.

List Description:

- 1.4. *Founded by Sir Thomas Vachel in 1634 and then moved to this site. See plaques. Rebuilt 1864-67, architect William Henry Woodman. 2 storey cottages in 2 reflecting rows, stepped down to Holybrook in groups of 4. Vernacular style. Red brick with grey brick bands and decoration and with stone dressings. Tiled roofs with crested ridges; red brick ridge chimneys with grey decoration and coggled bands. Nos 5 to 16 and 21 to 32 : 5 windows, 2 being canted dormered bays flanking central entrance and 2 light windows with chamfered mullions. Pointed doorways with shouldered lintels and tumbled brick in arches, strap hinges. Nos 1 to 4 and 17 to 20: also 5 bays but in 3 staggered planes. 1st plane has corbelled 1st floor window to street and a bay to front. 2nd plane now has tower porch with encorbelled parapet, pointed entrance and trefoil headed side window. This part formerly (till 1957) had a turret over. 3rd plane has gabled bay. Low screen wall to street with cast and wrought iron rails and gates.*

- 1.5. The site is located within the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area which was designated in 1972. The conservation area is at the heart of Saxon Reading. The primary landmark of the area is the Grade I listed St Mary's Church and its grounds are important green space in the City centre. The area contains some of the oldest surviving buildings in Reading and contains a high proportion of listed buildings of various periods and styles.

- 1.6. The Almshouses are noted for their positive contribution in the Conservation Area Appraisal as they provide a unique and attractive open space and notes the view between the rows down to the Holy Brook as being significant.

Site context

- 1.7. The building consists of two symmetrical wings, each originally containing 16 almshouses, lining a pedestrian lane leading down a gentle slope from Castle Street to the Holybrook. Modernisation works in 2000/2001 resulted in 8 dwellings on the Western Wing being amalgamated into 4 larger dwellings to allow for occupation by married couples.

Brief

- 1.8. The purpose of this application is to improve the thermal performance and functionality of the existing windows throughout the Almshouses and replace modern windows with better performing alternatives.
- 1.9. This project is intended to reduce demands for heating and reduce residents' energy bills at a time when gas prices are volatile. There are other considerations such as security at ground floor and safety considerations in line with Technical Guidance Document (TGD) Part K of the Building Regulations which must also be considered.

- Scope of the current report and research*
- 1.10. The purpose of this report is to explain the history of the site and the wider area and to assess the significance of the site (overall and of its component parts). The assessment will comprise the following:
- Establish the architectural and historical significance of the site.
 - The relationship between the site and the surrounding St Mary's Butts / Castle Street Conservation Area.
 - Assessment of the impact of proposals.
- 1.11. The history of the site and its surroundings has been researched from various online sources, purchased books, BA's internal library and visits to the Berkshire Record office in person to view archive materials. Two site visits were carried out in April and May 2022 (for site photos, see **Appendix B** (BA/B)).
- Report structure and appendices*
- 1.12. An overview of the relevant policy context is provided in **Section 2**. Overview of the history of the site and the surrounding area can be found in **Sections 3 and 4**. Heritage significance is assessed in **Section 5**. A description of the proposed works is located in **Section 6**. Assessment of proposed works' impact on significance is included in **Section 7**. Conclusions can be found in **Section 8**. Visual information in the form of maps, plans and illustration has been included in **Appendix A** (BA/A) of this report and site photos on **Appendix B** (BA/B). Individual figures will be referred to in the text as BA/A/XX etc.

2. RELEVANT LEGISLATION, POLICY AND GUIDANCE

- 2.1. The following section outlines relevant legislation, policy, and guidance. These form the baseline on which the proposals will be assessed.

Statutory Legislation

- 2.2. *The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990*
Section 66 (1) of the Act requires that special regard be had to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses. Section 66(1) the Act will be considered in the light of the relevant judgments when determining whether any harm to the settings of heritage assets should be attributed to the proposed scheme.
- 2.3. Section 72 of the Act sets out the statutory duties for dealing with heritage assets in planning decisions. In relation to listed buildings, all planning decisions should: “have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses” and, in relation to conservation areas, special attention must be paid to “the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.”

Conservation Areas

- 2.4. The application site lies within the St. Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area which was first designated by Reading Borough Council in 1972. There is a published character appraisal for the CA (March 2008). The appraisal summarises the special interest of the CA, designates character areas and makes suggestions for enhancements. The Castle Street almshouses are located in *Character Area 3: The Gun Street and Castle Street Frontages*. The green open space between the almshouses is highlighted as well as the view down to the Holybrook and brewery buildings beyond.

Listed Buildings

- 2.5. The almshouses 1 to 32 are listed as a single National Heritage List entry and they were designed as a single architectural composition. They were designated at grade II. The list description would suggest they were selected for their architectural value. However, there is also community value as their construction was funded by voluntary contributions and there is a historical link to the Vachel family which held high political positions in Reading and had their seat at Coley Manor.

National Planning Policy and Guidance

- 2.6. *DHCLG's National Planning Policy Framework (2021)*
Paragraph 126 of Section 12 ('Achieving well-designed places') states the creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve.
- 2.7. Section 16 of the NPPF sets out how the importance of conserving and enhancing the historic environment and makes clear at paragraph 199 that when considering the impact of a proposal on a designated heritage asset (which includes its setting), local planning authorities should give 'great weight' to conserving the asset's significance. Other relevant paragraphs considered in this Assessment include 200 ('Harm and loss of the significance of the designated heritage asset'), and paragraph 201-202 ('Identifying harm on designated heritage assets').
- 2.8. The NPPF para 190 advises LPAs to set out 'a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment' in their Local Plan. Emphasis (para 197) is placed on 'sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets' and recognising that (para 189) heritage assets are an 'irreplaceable resource' and should be conserved 'in a manner appropriate to their significance'.
- 2.9. Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) sets out more detailed guidance in relation to the policies set out in the NPPF. There are over 40 (un-numbered) sections, of which those on Design

and the Historic Environment are most relevant. The section of the PPG dealing with the historic environment reflects the policies in the NPPF and other best-practice guidance such as Historic England's guidance on the setting of heritage assets.

Local Planning Policies

Reading Borough Local Plan (November 2019)

- 2.10. The Local Plan sets out planning policies for Reading up to 2036 and was adopted as the Council's official policy on 4th November 2019 replacing all previous Core Strategies, Action Plans and Policies documents.

CC1: Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development

- 2.11. The presumption in favour of development expressed in this policy has two exceptions: :
- *The application of policies in the NPPF that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed; or*
 - *Any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the NPPF taken as a whole.*

EN1: Protection and Enhancement of The Historic Environment

- 2.12. *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.*

EN3: Enhancement of Conservation Areas

- 2.13. *The special interest, character and architecture of Conservation Areas will be conserved and enhanced. Development proposals within Conservation Areas must make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness. Positive consideration will be given to proposals which take opportunities to enhance the character of conservation areas.*

St Mary's Butts / Castle Street Conservation Area Appraisal (March 2008)

- 2.14. See paragraph 2.4 above.

Other Planning Advice

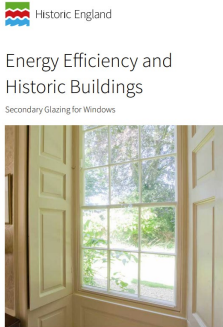
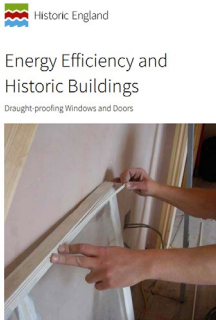
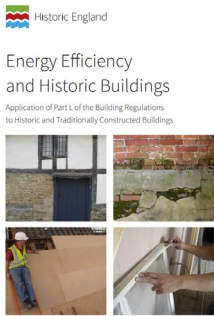
Historic England, 2015 – Good Practice Advice Note in Planning Note 2 – Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment (March 2015)

- 2.15. GPA Note 2 emphasises that the information required in support of applications for planning permission and listed building consent should be no more than is necessary to reach an informed decision, and that activities to conserve or investigate the asset needs to be proportionate to the significance of the heritage assets affected and the impact on that significance.

Guidance regarding traditional window upgrades

- 2.16. The need for thermal improvements to listed buildings is something which all organizations and societies concerned with the conservation of built heritage have recognized and over the past 20 years have produced research and guidance for home owners and conservation professionals.
- 2.17. All the guidance suggests the place to start is good maintenance and repair. The general advice for historic properties is that the windows can be upgraded for better draughtproofing, thermal insulation and noise control. However, in general replacement, which is a loss of historic fabric, will require a clear and obvious justification.

2.18. The guidance below is just a small sample of the guidance documents available. Historic England Guidance carries some weight in planning decisions. .



3. DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

- 3.1. The almshouses are composed with two symmetrical wings (which will be referred to as East and West Wings) facing each other across a green pedestrian lane. The lane leads down to a small pleasure garden which is bounded to the south by the Holybrook. The gardens and the verges of the lane are well tended and vibrant.
- 3.2. The buildings are built of red brick with banding and occasional flourishes in a dark blue/black brick. Lintels, sills and mullions of the main elevations along the pedestrian lane are dressed in a light-coloured ashlar sandstone. The buildings are vernacular but with occasional flourishes in the English Gothic Revival style, which was favoured by the architect, William Henry Woodman.
- 3.3. The elevations along the pedestrian lane are defined by a rhythm of two storey bay windows, decorated entrance doors and stepping down along the slope every 4 dwellings. The entrance doors, painted yellow and with faux iron strap hinges in a trefoil design, have shouldered sandstone lintels and English gothic style side lights. The wings are set back symmetrically, widening the lane, as it approaches the Castle street end and include a turret on each side at the set back.
- 3.4. The Castle Street elevation consists of the gable ends of both wings, each with decorative brickwork forming a projecting bay window at first floor level. A low brick wall with railings and a gate in the centre enclose the lane.
- 3.5. The windows on the lane are generally traditional sash windows with large Victorian period glass. The windows are of fine proportions but with little decoration as, unusually, there are no internal mouldings decorating the sash frames and glazing bars. The bedroom windows and bay windows consist of joined sash window frames. The joints in the sash frames are concealed externally by ashlar sandstone mullions. These are in a range of conditions from good and operable to very poor and inoperable.
- 3.6. Modernising works were undertaken in the early 1960s which added bathrooms and kitchens to the rear of each wing in two storey extensions. The extensions only remain to the rear of the East Wing. The extensions are of a simple vernacular style to match the original Almshouse buildings but utilised the popular Crittall Steel windows. It appears the windows are standardised designs and dimensions of a type mass produced in the Crittall Factory. It is very likely the windows not dip galvanised, an industrial process which was introduced at the Crittall factory in 1938, as no evidence could be found of corrosion.
- 3.7. Some windows were then inserted into the rear elevation of the existing wings, providing some cross ventilation, as the new extensions obscured large sections of the rear elevation.
- 3.8. The 1960s work was also when the plaques, both the original stone 17th century Vachel Almshouses plaque which had been found (See Section 4), and contemporary carved plaques explaining the modernisation works undertaken in the 1960s were mounted on the turret of the West Wing on the wall facing out to Castle Street.
- 3.9. In 2000 planning permission was granted to remove the relatively modern extensions to the rear of West Wing and rebuild them again, larger and with some modifications. This allowed some of the dwellings to be combined to provide space for married couples to avail of the Almshouses accommodation. The modern extensions utilise double glazed timber casement windows which are of a fairly rudimentary design.
- 3.10. A brief selection of site photographs can be found in Appendix B.

4. UNDERSTANDING VALUES

- 4.1. The area of Castle Street and St Mary's Butts is at a historically important junction of North South and East West roads by the confluence of the River Thames and River Kennet. It is at this junction that the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement, the origins of what is now Reading, was located. St Mary's Butts takes the name from the church of St Mary's, heavily remodelled by the Victorians, but has been a site of a church since the 11th century.
- 4.2. Castle street, leading to Castle Hill, has been in use as the street name since the early 13th century. Ditchfield & Page (1923) state a castle existed on Castle Hill and was held by Stephen [of Blois] during his battles against Empress Maude and was destroyed in 1151 by an unknown party (Roque J 1761 [BA/A/1](#)). There may once have been a wooden fortification such as a motte and bailey on or near Castle Hill. However, there is little archaeological evidence of a castle ever existing in the immediate vicinity.
- 4.3. The prosperity of Reading was greatly increased by the foundation of Battle Abbey in 1125 by King Henry I. Reading became home to a number of wealthy individuals under the power and influence of the Abbey.
- 4.4. Before the creation of the Welfare State, responsibility for the poor was shared amongst the church and wealthy philanthropists. Several almshouses were built carrying the names of some prominent Reading figures of the period. The alms-people were usually endowed with an annual income in return for which they were expected to pray for the souls of their respective benefactors. Three of these pious figures in particular relate to the Castle Street Almshouses.
- 4.5. John A'Larder, secretary to the Abbot of Reading Abbey, had arranged in the mid-late 15th century to build five almshouses near the market in the St Mary's Butts area. The Will of John A'Larder in 1477 directed his executors to build three further almshouses for three poor people near his five existing almshouses (Blandy 1962). He also provided arrangements that tenements and lands should be purchased and the income from those properties should provide an income of eight marks for the eight people housed in his almshouses annually.
- 4.6. In his Will, in 1617, Bernard Harrison, a local magistrate, gave property to the Mayor of Reading for the provision of Almshouses and the relief of those alms-people therein.
- 4.7. In 1634, Sir Thomas Vachel, a knight baron who had his seat at Coley Manor, commissioned the building of six almshouses for poor widowers. It was located at the junction of Coley Street (then Pigney Lane) and Castle Street (See [BA/A/13](#)). In 1954 when cement render was being stripped from a wall of premises next to Coley Street the workers uncovered an inscribed plaque (North 1977). The Plaque, now mounted on the Castle Street Almshouses, read:

"Sr Thomas Vachel Kt erected these almshouses ann. Domani 1634 and endowed them with forty pounds p. annum for ever for the maintenance of six poor men."
- 4.8. In 1861 a Private Act of Parliament under the name of "The Consolidated General Almshouse Charities of Reading" consolidated what had then grown to a disparate number of Reading based charities set up, by wealthy individuals, from the 15th century onwards to care for the poor. Two main charities emerged: the Reading Consolidated Almshouse Charity (General Almshouse Charity) and the Consolidated Church Almshouse Charities of Reading (Church Almshouse Charity).
- 4.9. According to. Blandy (1962) the site of the current Castle Street Almshouses was then in the John A'Larder property portfolio and also included some property under control of the charity of Bernard Harrison. Any buildings on the site were pulled down in 1865 and this roughly aligns with the date the Almshouses were constructed.

"For effectuating this object, the properties constituting the endowments of A'Larder's and Harrison's Almshouses were developed and made

productive of increased income and new almshouses erected in Castle Street, in or about 1865, for sixteen inmates, either men or women."
Ditchfield & Page (1923)

- 4.10. The property appears as No. 318 on the Reading 1853 Tithe Map and this property number appears on a schedule of properties which were *to be excluded from payment of any portion of the Rent charge by a resolution passed at a public meeting of the proprietors*. An 1853 Map of the Borough shows the site clear of any buildings ([BA/A/2](#)).
- 4.11. With the collated properties of numerous charities at their disposal both Almshouse Charities agreed to enter a joint project to construct a new set of Almshouses in Castle Street. They appealed to the public for funding and £2014 3s 6d was generously raised. This was combined with the sale of the Vachel's almshouses which provided the remainder of the £4,232 16s 5d building fund (Blandy 1962).
- 4.12. The charities appointed the architect and borough surveyor William Henry Woodman to design and supervise the building of the almshouses. This was briefly noted in the Builder in August 1863: *"The local charity trustees are about rebuilding thirty-two almshouses in Castle-street Reading, under the superintendence of Mr. Woodman, the borough surveyor."*
- 4.13. Woodman was a partner of prolific architecture firm Poulton and Woodman from 1853 to 1863. Their work included several churches in England and a Hispano Gothic style former police station in Reading. Woodman is individually credited as the architect of several other public buildings in Reading. Significantly this includes civic contributions in the extensive restoration of Greyfriars Church and various improvements to the Town Hall. His designs also include the workhouse on Oxford Road, Reading which later became the Battle Hospital, and Foxhill House which are of a similar architectural language to the Castle Street Almshouses (Gold 1999).
- 4.14. An 1865 Title Deed (see [BA/A/3 & 4](#)) sets out the formal arrangements between the two charities for the building of the almshouses and management of the site. The initial intent was to build just twelve for the General Almshouse Charity and sixteen for the Church Almshouse Charity. The grounds included a large pleasure garden accessible by bridge over the Holybrook. In 1870 the excess income of the General Almshouse Charities allowed for the completion of the composition with 4 further almshouses being built, giving them twenty of the thirty-two almshouses once completed (Blandy).
- 4.15. A short set of regulations (see [BA/A/5](#)) was produced in 1866 which set out the expected conduct of the alms-person including attendance at church every Sunday with the possibility of losing their income at the charity's discretion for non-attendance.
- 4.16. The 1876 OS Town Plan Map (see [BA/A/6](#)) has a very detailed plan of the recently completed almshouses. This shows the internal layouts of the Ground Floor and the pleasure gardens extending across a bridge to the other side of the Holybrook.
- 4.17. Over time it became clear that the Church Almshouses Charity could not maintain the income for their 12 inhabitants or afford to maintain the buildings in good order. Following the Second World War all the almshouses stood in need of significant repair and modernisation. The General Almshouses Charity took over the management of all the Almshouses and this was confirmed by Private Act of Parliament in 1958 (Blandy).
- 4.18. A significant modernisation was planned for the almshouses which required the acquisition of land from the neighbouring properties on both sides (51 and 55 Castle Street). A sliver of land was purchased from No. 55 on the West side and the Deed Plan dated 1959 for this purchase is indicated in figure [BA/A/10](#).
- 4.19. On the East side, it is clear from a comparison of current site boundaries and the plan in figure [BA/A/10](#), that additional land was also acquired from the Rear of No. 51 down to the Holybrook. However, the record of this transaction wasn't found. Around this time the pleasure grounds south of the Holybrook appears to have been sold to the brewery to the south of the Almshouses to fund the modernisation works (North 1977).

- 4.20. The land to the South and East of the Almshouses, including the brewery lands between the Holybrook and River Kenneth and land to the rear of No. 51 was developed as a single cohesive development in the late 1960s and early 70s (see [BA/A/11](#)). We would speculate that it is very likely that the sale of the pleasure grounds greatly facilitated the development of this site and that a small sliver of land to the rear of the almshouses was likely included as part of the exchange.
- 4.21. The additional land acquired to the rear of the wings on both sides is notable in the shape of the plot on the 1972-1988 OS Map (see [BA/A/11](#)). The step to the rear of the East Wing occurs at the car park of the Rose Walk apartments and those apartments have been built during this period.
- 4.22. The works to modernise the almshouses resulted in each dwelling gaining central heating and an extension containing a separate kitchen and bathroom. These were designed in a vernacular fashion and were fenestrated with standardised Crittall windows.
- 4.23. The extent of improvements can be seen in the existing drawings which accompanied a planning application in 2000 to demolish all the western rear extensions and two on the East side to replace them with more modern alternatives. These new extensions copied the ashlar detailing of the original building with all window sills and lintels in sandstone. The walls are cavity construction with the external brick leaf being laid in stretcher bond, not the English bond of the original Almshouses. The plans of these improvements are shown in figures [BA/A/12-14](#).

5. ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

- 5.1. This section assesses the significance of the Castle Street Almshouses as required by para. 194 of the NPPF (July 2021). It is always difficult to agree on the definition of the Levels of Significance, but from experience in applying the approach devised by J S Kerr based on the Burra Charter, the following is proposed, where the threshold for inclusion on the national statutory list is level C or above.

Table 1. Levels of Significance

J S Kerr/ Burra Charter	HE Conservation Principles (2008)
A: Exceptional	Very High Significance
B: Considerable	High Significance
C: Some	Medium Significance
D: Little	Low Significance
N: Neutral	No Significance
Int: Intrusive	Buildings and elements that detract or are intrusive

Methodology

- 5.2. The assessment of significance has been informed by HE's guidance 'Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment' (March 2015) and DCMS's 'Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings' (March 2010) that outline statutory criteria when assessing whether a building is of special interest. These comprise of:

Architectural Interest - To be of special architectural interest a building must be of importance in its architectural design, decoration, or craftsmanship; special interest may also apply to nationally important examples of particular building types and techniques (e.g., buildings displaying technological innovation or virtuosity) and significant plan forms; and

Historic Interest - To be of special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation's social, economic, cultural, or military history and/or have close historical associations with nationally important people. There should normally be some quality of interest in the physical fabric of the building itself to justify the statutory protection afforded by listing.

- 5.3. The table below sets out examples of further detailed selection criteria commonly used to support heritage listing and the description of attributes which may be relevant. This will help guide the assessment of significance of the Site (HE 2008 and HE, May 2016). These criteria are also relevant when assessing undesigned heritage assets.

Table 2. Selection criteria for assessing suitability of assets for heritage listing

Criterion	Description	Relevant (Y/N)
Age	The age of an asset may be an important criterion and the age range can be adjusted to take into account distinctive regional/local characteristics	Y
Rarity	Appropriate for all assets, as judged against regional/local characteristics	Y
Aesthetic value	The intrinsic design value of an asset relating to regional/local styles, materials, or any other distinctive characteristics	Y

Table 2. Selection criteria for assessing suitability of assets for heritage listing

Criterion	Description	Relevant (Y/N)
Group value	Groupings of assets with a clear visual, design or historic relationship	Y
Evidential value	The significance of heritage asset may be enhanced by surviving fabric, plan form, features, fittings, and detailing	Y
Historic association	The significance of heritage asset of any kind may be enhanced by a significant historical association of local or national note, including links to important local figures	Y
Archaeological interest	This may be an appropriate reason to designate an asset on the grounds of archaeological interest if the evidence base is sufficiently compelling and if a distinct area can be identified	N
Designed landscapes	Relating to the interest attached to important designed landscapes, parks, and gardens	Y
Landmark status	An asset with strong communal or historical associations, or because it has especially striking aesthetic value, may be singled out as a landmark within the regional/local scene.	Y
Social and communal value	Relating to places perceived as a source of regional/local identity, distinctiveness, social interaction, and coherence; often residing in intangible aspects of heritage contributing to the 'collective memory' of a place.	Y

Age and rarity - Medium

- 5.4. All former buildings on the site were cleared and the current Almshouse buildings were completed circa 1865. There are several older and more historically significant properties adjacent to the site on Castle Street where the buildings are of a mix of periods from the 16th century onwards.
- 5.5. Almshouses are not a very common building typology in the UK. There are an estimated 30,000 Almshouse dwellings (individual dwellings not buildings) in England providing accommodation for 36,000 people (RICS 2020). The property of Castle Street Almshouses is reasonably rare as a surviving Victorian example in which its setting and frontages remain largely unaltered.
- 5.6. There are finer and older examples of Almshouses throughout the UK including the following limited examples:
- Long Alley almshouses (15th century), Abingdon
 - Cloisters almshouses (15th century), Ewelme
 - Trinity Green Grade I Listed almshouses, (1695) Mile End Road, London
 - Hopton's Grade II* listed almshouses (18th century), London
 - Tomkins' Grade II* listed almshouses (18th century), Abingdon

*Aesthetic value- Medium**Exterior - Medium*

- 5.7. The exterior of the property is in good condition and has its original decorative elements which are all well preserved. The design of the almshouses is vernacular with some flourishes in an English gothic style. To correspond with the modest almshouses, the architect exercised some restraint compared with some of his private works such as Foxhill House.

Interior --Low

- 5.8. The Interiors of the almshouses are modest as might be expected, but well-lit due to the large Bay windows in each living space. The shallow plan depth of the original building also offers ample cross ventilation. The quality of accommodation is of a high standard. There are few internal features of note other than an occasionally retained fireplace in bedrooms.

*Evidential value**Exterior – Medium*

- 5.9. The exterior of the property, especially the front façade has been well preserved with minimal interventions. The brickwork and ashlar flourishes generally appear in good condition. The sash windows and doors of the front façades are an important part of the buildings character. It is reasonable clear at the rear of both wings that the new extensions are modern and where modern interventions have been inserted into the original rear elevation.

Interior – Medium/low

- 5.10. The plan form is likely to be unaltered within the original footprint of the Almshouse buildings with only minor changes needed to make connections to the rear extensions on both wings. There were more substantial changes to a small number of the almshouses to enlarge them in 2000, combining two original almshouses into larger units for couples.

Group Value - High

- 5.11. The almshouses are in themselves a group and were deliberately designed as two unconnected wings because of the funding arrangements between the two main Almshouse charities in Reading. The almshouses also sit well within the historically significant frontages along the south side of Castle Street.

Designed landscapes - Gardens – Medium

- 5.12. The lane and pleasure garden's extents have been retained as originally designed apart from the loss of the pleasure gardens south of the Holybrook. The lane offers an uplifting approach to the entrances of the Almshouses. The pleasure grounds are well tended and vibrant and offer secluded space for quiet contemplation. The lane and gardens are an integral part of the Almshouses composition and make a strong positive contribution to the setting of the listed buildings.

Social and Communal Value – Medium

- 5.13. The Almshouses were half originally funded by public donations. This is commemorated on the plaques erected during the 1960s modernisation works. The almshouses have been home to many of Reading's elderly over the past 157 years and will have entered the collective memory of their younger generations.

Historic Association - Medium

- 5.14. The almshouses relate to various important figures throughout the history of Reading. These include:
- John A'Larder who was secretary to the Abbot of Reading in the 15th century and made numerous philanthropic provisions in his Will.
 - Bernard Harrison, a magistrate, who left provisions in his Will for the building of almshouses and the means to endow the alms-people with an income.
 - The Vachel family who held high positions in the governing of Reading as well as a large estate at Coley Park which gives its name to numerous lanes, avenues and streets south of Castle Street.

- 5.15. The almshouses are also the outcome of an Act of Parliament which allowed the consolidation of the resources and incomes of numerous charities set up by philanthropic individuals.

- 5.16. The architect, William Henry Woodman, would have been well known as a former partner of Poulton and Woodman, as the Borough Surveyor and for his works as an individual architect in the design and restoration of prominent Reading civic buildings.

Landmark Value – Medium

- 5.17. The gables of the Almshouses facing Castle Street are quite striking with their decorative brickwork framing a projecting window. The Almshouses' orientation and inward focus, creating a lane perpendicular to the street, creates a notable break in the row of buildings facing onto Castle Street. The Almshouses frame an important view down to Holybrook to the roofs of the former brewery.

Contribution to the St Mary's Butts / Castle Street CA – High

- 5.18. The Almshouses are a unique building which add character and richness to the St May's Butts / Castle Street CA. The Almshouses, while not of the oldest buildings, are one of the largest and most finely decorated in the Gun Street/Castle Street character area. The view down the lane to the Holybrook and beyond is recognised as significant in the CA's Appraisal.

Table 3. Summary of the significance of the Castle Street Almshouses

Value	Intrusive	Negligible	Low	Medium	High
1. Age and rarity				✓	
2. Aesthetic value				✓	
2.1. Exterior				✓	
2.2. Interior			✓		
2.3. Rear garden				✓	
3. Evidential value				✓	
3.1. Exterior				✓	
3.2. Interior			✓		
4. Historic (associative) value			✓		
5. Group value					✓
6. Designed landscapes				✓	
7. Social and communal value				✓	
8. Landmark value				✓	
9. Contribution to the CA					✓
OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE				✓	

Statement of Significance

- 5.1. The integrity of the Almshouses within their particular townscape is well preserved. The exterior façades have a positive aesthetic, evidential and group value. The green verged lane and gardens are aesthetically pleasing retaining the original setting of the almshouses. Relatively modern extensions to the rear are appropriate, sympathetic, and preserve the character and appearance of the original buildings.
- 5.2. Overall, the site retains historic and architectural value and contributes positively towards the character and appearance of the St. Mary's Butts / Castle Street Conservation Area. The property is assessed as having a **medium** overall architectural significance which is appropriate to its status as a Grade II listed building.

6. DESIGN PROPOSALS

- 6.1. The features and character of the existing site have been discussed at length in Section 3 of this report.
- 6.2. The proposed works included in this application relate only to the repair of all existing sash windows (1865) and the replacement of all existing modern casement windows installed from the 1960s onwards.
- 6.3. It is proposed that the existing sash windows will undergo a rigorous overhaul. The proposed works will include restoring the windows' full counterweighted functionality, removing excessive paint, reglazing with thermally improved single glazing, redecorating with paint of a type recommended by Historic England for traditional sash windows.
- 6.4. In two of the almshouses, particularly effected by damp, we propose to install new 7mm vacuum glazed sash windows which will replicate the existing sash windows in terms of profiles and dimensions. These are indicated on the proposed plans and elevations.
- 6.5. The existing Crittall windows were installed in the 1961-2 modernisation works as the extensions to which they are installed extend into land acquired in the late 1950s. The windows are of a mass-produced standardised size and opening style. It is proposed that these windows will be swapped for near identical steel windows which are thermally broken and double glazed. The glazing pattern, opening style and ironmongery will be replicated in the new windows.
- 6.6. The existing timber framed casements are double glazed. The glazing bars are of a rather chunky design, and this detracts from the appearance of the building to the notably less significant, rear facades. It is proposed that these windows will be replaced with modern double-glazed casements with finer glazing bars. The pattern of opening will reflect the existing arrangements.
- 6.7. A small number of existing timber doors, with upper halves glazed, to the rear are also proposed to be replaced. The existing doors are in poor condition, draughty, single glazed and in need of repair. The proposed replacements will match the existing in terms of appearance but will have double glazing and draught seals.

7. ACCESS STATEMENT

- 7.1. This application relates mainly to the repair of traditional sash windows and the replacement of modern casement windows only. The ease of use of those elements has been considered and measures to restore and improve usability of the windows are included as part of this application.
- 7.2. Entrance arrangements for the building which have had previous improvements to their accessibility will not be altered by these proposals. Interior layouts, circulation, WC provisions and means of escape will remain as existing and are not affected by the proposed works.

8. ASSESSMENT OF PROPOSALS

- 8.1. The proposals seek to fully restore the traditional sash windows which are original historic fabric and contribute positively to the appearance of the listed building. The thermal improvements take the form of draught proofing and replacement of the existing single glazing with thermally improved single glazing. There will be no change to the appearance of the listed building arising from these adjustments.
- 8.2. The Crittall windows proposed to be replaced are not historically significant fabric and were of mass produced to standard catalogue designs in the 1960s. The proposed thermally broken steel replacement windows will nonetheless retain the character and appearance of Crittall windows while greatly improving the thermal performance and air tightness of the building. There will be no change to the appearance of the listed building.
- 8.3. The double-glazed timber windows proposed to be replaced are not historically significant fabric and are of proportions which do not reflect the fineness of traditional sash windows. The proposed timber windows will improve the appearance of the 2000 extensions and rear elevations of the West Wing.
- 8.4. Overall, the impact of the proposals will enhance the Listed building by improving the thermal performance of the building while repairing the significant historic fabric and improving the appearance of the building. Retaining the various window styles allows the distinct phases of improvements (1960s & 2000s) to continue to be legible.
- 8.5. The proposals also preserve and enhance the appearance of the conservation area, restoring the traditional sash windows, retaining the appearance of the steel windows and improving the appearance of the timber casements.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1. This application is intended to improve the thermal performance of the Almshouses at a time when fuel prices are volatile, fuel poverty is rising and there is no end in sight. The residents of the almshouses may be vulnerable to these financial pressures.
- 9.2. The proposed changes enhance the appearance of the Listed Building while delivering improved inherent thermal properties of the windows and reducing the warm air lost through draughty windows. The proposals preserve and enhance the appearance of the St Mary's Butts / Castle Street CA.
- 9.3. This application, if permitted, will help to ensure the continued viability of the original intended use as Almshouses. This is the most desirable way to ensure ongoing care and maintenance of a historic building.

Kevin O'Sullivan RIBA Bsc BArch Msc AEES
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10. SOURCES

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