

Soane Point, 3-10 Market Place Reading, RG1 2EG.

Heritage, Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment to accompany Full Planning Application



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Heritage Architecture has been instructed by Tene Living UK (Reading) Ltd (the 'applicant') to provide consultancy services and produce this Heritage Statement to accompany a detailed application for planning permission for the redevelopment of the site at 3-10 Market Place, Reading, RG1 2EG (the 'site').

The site is located within the administrative boundary of Reading Borough Council ('RBC'), who are the Local Planning Authority.

The Proposals

The proposals (the 'proposed development') that are the subject of this report are summarised as follows:

"External works to existing building, including partial replacement of the existing façades fronting Market Place and Abbey Square alongside other external works to the building; set back single-storey extension above part of block fronting Market Place, part two part three storey extensions above other blocks; and conversion and alterations to ground floor reception and car parking area; together the works will deliver 38 new homes and (internal and external) residential amenity areas with associated car parking"

The proposals have developed from a thorough understanding of the subject site and its surrounding context. The applicant team has benefitted from consultation and detailed engagement with RBC and their advisory bodies.

The proposed development has been designed by tp bennett architects in consultation with the applicant, Heritage Architecture and the wider design team. The detail of the proposals is presented in the Design and Access Statement and Application Drawings prepared by tp bennett.

Purpose of this Report

This report has been prepared to assess the impact of the proposed development on the significance of heritage assets in the setting of the site. The assessment has been informed by a detailed understanding of the site - its sensitivities and opportunities - and the proposed development.

The assessment of heritage impacts is presented in the form of a Visual Impact Assessment which illustrates how the proposed development will appear in the local townscape context and alongside heritage assets within the site's setting.

The structure of this report is as follows:

- Section 1: Introduction to the site and location context;
- Section 2: Summary of the historic development of this part of Reading and of the subject site;
- Section 3: Character appraisal of the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area;
- Section 4: Description of the proposed development;

- Section 5: Summary of pre-application engagement with RBC and design responses to feedback;
- Section 6: Visual Impact Assessment; and
- Section 7: Conclusion of heritage impacts.

Authorship

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The Site

The site is located in Reading's historic town centre in a highly accessible and sustainable location. The site has two primary interfaces, fronting Market Place to the west and Abbey Square and an unnamed passage to the east. Market Place comprises a pedestrianised area of public realm. It is located to the south of Town Hall Square, which contains a series of Reading's most notable and highly graded listed buildings, and the north of London Road which provides an important access into the town centre from the south. Reading Station is located approximately 300m to the north.

Reading's retail centre is located to the west of the site, centred on Broad Street, and to the south-west with larger outlet development. To the east of Market Place, the character of the townscape is informed by a coarser grain with large scale commercial buildings. Reading's medieval former abbey complex is located to the north-west of Market Place.

The existing building on the site dates from the mid-1960s and was built to the designs of architecture practice Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) in a Brutalist style. The four-six storey building accommodates retail space at ground floor with commercial office space at the upper levels.

Heritage Context

The site does not contain any statutorily or locally listed buildings however it is located within the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area. There are a number of listed buildings adjacent to the site and within its local and wider setting, including Grade II, II* and I listed buildings and structures.

The closest listed buildings include Nos. 1 and 2 Market Place (Grade II), the National West Minster Bank (Grade II), No. 10 High Street (Grade II) and the Simeon Monument (Grade II*) amongst others. The Grade I listed Church of St Laurence, Grade II* Town Council Chamber and Offices and The Forbury Garden Registered Park and Garden (Grade II) are located to the north and north-east of the site.

RBC's adopted appraisal for the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area identifies the existing building on the site as making a negative contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Summary of Assessment

This report and Heritage Architecture's assessment has been prepared in accordance with relevant statute, national and local planning policy, and guidance provided by the National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF', 2021) and Historic England.

The assessment of heritage impacts has also been informed by a series of modelled viewpoints from locations in the setting of the site which illustrate how the proposed development will appear in its local and wider townscape context.

Through the Visual Impact Assessment undertaken at Section 6 of this report, Heritage Architecture concludes that the overarching impact of the proposed development on local heritage assets will be positive and beneficial. It is considered that the proposed development will enhance the appearance of the building, particularly its Market Place elevation, through the reconfiguration of the façade to reflect the grain and verticality of the traditional buildings that enclose the area of public realm, through the articulation of the building with high quality materials and detailing that reflect local contextual examples and through improving the building's interface with the street. Rooftop extensions and further height within the centre and rear parts of the site do not affect the ability to appreciate the significance of heritage assets on Market Place or in the wider setting of the site.

The overall quality and cohesiveness of the proposed development will provide a more appropriate and contextual response to the site's sensitive historic surroundings and will serve to improve the site's contribution to the setting of proximate listed buildings and the character and appearance of the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area. Localised views towards the site will be improved and the proposed development will integrate more successfully into the Market Place streetscape. The proposed development will deliver demonstrable townscape benefits across the site, including to its Abbey Square interface, where a legible residential entry point will be created, and the overall appearance and quality of the building improved through the redesign of its external envelope.

Heritage Architecture find that the proposed development complies with relevant local and national policy; and guidance provided in the NPPF and by Historic England. The proposed development meets the statutory requirements established by Sections 66(1) and 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to preserve the setting of listed buildings and to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of conservation areas respectively.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report accompanies a Full Planning Application for the subject site- Soane Point, 3-10 Market Place, Reading for the following works:

“External works to existing building, including partial replacement of the existing façades fronting Market Place and Abbey Square alongside other external works to the building; set back single-storey extension above part of block fronting Market Place, part two part three storey extensions above other blocks; and conversion and alterations to ground floor reception and car parking area; together the works will deliver 38 new homes and (internal and external) residential amenity areas with associated car parking”

It includes an assessment of the (non-sdesignated) site within the Market Place / London Road Conservation Area, the character and significance of the area (Market Place sub-area), identification of key viewpoints and an impact assessment (visual) of the proposed works.

1.1 The Site

The subject site is located on the east side of Market Place in the historic heart of Reading; and west of the Reading Abbey precinct. It is currently occupied by a four-to-six storey, mid-20th C building which runs through the block and thus faces onto Market Place to the west and has part of its elevation facing onto Abbey Square to the south-east. The eastern (rear) façade is accessed from an unnamed alleyway running north from Abbey Square.

The subject building is neither listed nor locally listed; and is identified as a negative contributor to, and detracting from the character and appearance of the Market Place / London Road Conservation Area, within which it is located.

It was designed in 1965 by the architecture practice Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) which is now a large architectural practice with offices across the world. At the time the practice was growing rapidly from its inception in 1956 to the 350 employees it had by 1967. Today RMJM take on large projects in all sectors all over the world including airports, towers, and sports stadia in China, Abu Dhabi and Russia.

The subject building is surrounded by a number of listed buildings – notably 1 and 2 Market Place (Grade II) immediately to the south of the site and The Simeon Monument (Grade II*) which forms the focal point of the market square.



Figure 1: Aerial photograph of the site showing its relationship to Market Place and Abbey Square.

1.2 Location in Context

Market Place was created in the medieval period to draw trade towards the eastern gateways to the medieval Abbey complex. The site itself is considered to be outside of the Abbey precinct but directly adjacent to its western boundary.

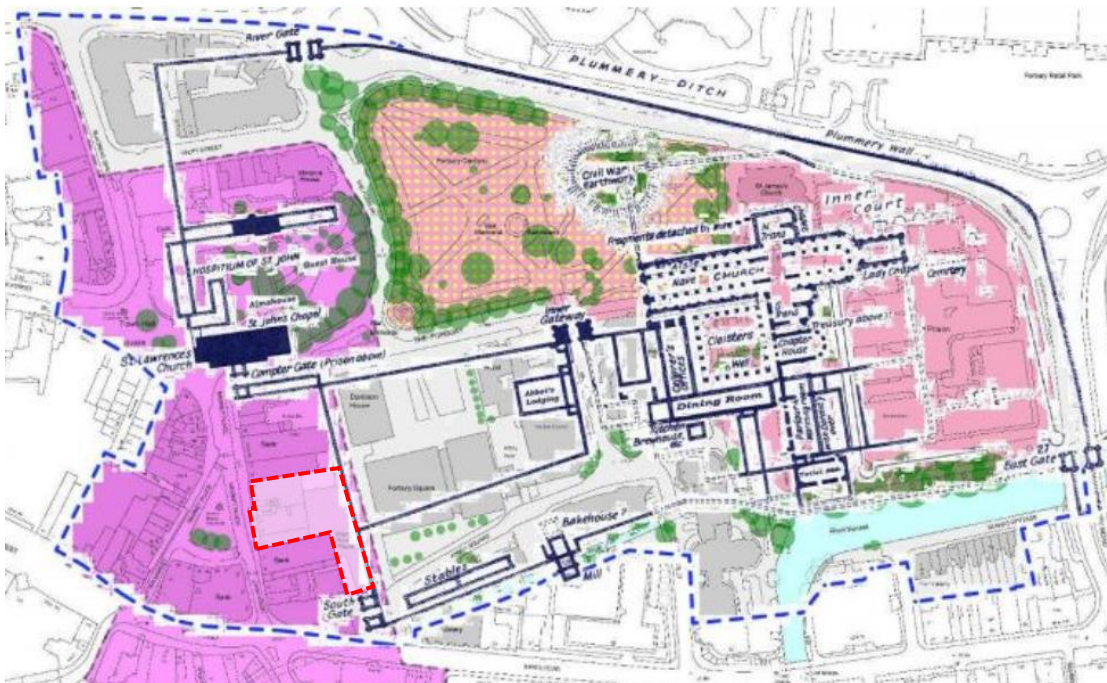


Figure 2: Plan of the extent of the Abbey and its precincts- conjectured (source: readingabbeyquarter.org.uk)

The site is located towards the northern end of the Market Place / London Street Conservation Area (CA) at the threshold of the Jackson's Corner, and Market Place Character Areas. The Character Areas

have fairly distinct qualities, with the southern Jackson's Corner area being a place of transition between Market Place and the Town Hall area to the north and the London Street area to the south.

To the west of the Market Place area, lies the commercial heart of modern Reading and to the east, in the historic Abbey precinct, lies the Forbury Square area which has in recent years been developed as a large-scale office quarter.



Figure 3: Extract from RBC's Character Area Map showing the site straddling the Market Place Character Area to the north (4) and Jackson's Corner Character Area to the south (3)



Figure 4: Aerial view of the application site from the south-east showing the commercial shopping district to the west and taller office district to the east.



Figure 5: Photographs of the front (top) and rear (above) of the application site facing on to Market Place and Abbey Square respectively

2. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

2.1 Historic Development of the Area

The history of Reading goes back at least as far as the Romans although the name of the town derives from the Saxon tribe 'Readingas' who settled there in the 6th century. The doomsday book (1086) paints a picture of a thriving urban community living there in the 11th century.

A key moment in Reading's history was the founding of the Abbey by Henry I in 1211 which later became one of the richest in the country until the Dissolution. The remains of the enormous Abbey lie to the east of the site.

Reading developed rapidly during the medieval period based on the manufacture of woollen cloth, leather goods and silk weaving. Industry and trade was no doubt helped by the town's location at the confluence of the rivers Thames and Kennet and on the crossing of major historic land routes.

From the mid-18th century Reading flourished as an important stopping-off point between London and Bath. Inns multiplied and regular public coaches began in 1780. Leather tanning continued and was joined by new industries, notably brewing, brick and tile making, iron-founding and boat building.

Early 19th century maps suggest that the town had not physically grown much beyond the medieval core, but expansion was stimulated by the development of the canals. The Kennet Canal was completed 1723 and the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810, directly connecting London and Bristol.



Figure 6: Map from 1813 showing the extent of Reading at this time. London Street and Southampton Street are easily identified to the south. Fragments of the Abbey sit to the east of the site and the historic Broad and Friar Streets run to the west. All else around is meadow or farmland.

The Great Western Railway reached Reading in 1840 spurring further growth of major industries; notably Huntley & Palmers (biscuit makers) and Suttons Seeds. Reading became wealthy and attracted

a large number of residents in the mid-late 19th C, and a number of suburbs were developed during the Victorian period.

This rapid development continued up to the turn of the last century, but was stalled by the slow decline of trade in the interwar period. Although Reading did not suffer much damage (relative to other towns in South East England) during WWII, the decline of trade and opportunities resulted in general deprivation.

In the mid-20th century the centre of Reading was redeveloped by demolishing parts of the historic core to provide offices and shopping precincts. This included the creation of a ring road - the Inner Distribution Road ('IDR') - and other associated developments.

Reading today is a vibrant and multi-cultural hub, with an internationally renowned university, large retail and commercial areas, a good housing stock, and boasting of excellent transport links to London and beyond.

2.2 Historic Development of the Site

The east side of Market Place was occupied by buildings from as early as the 13th century. The earliest map of the area, from 1611, shows the situation after the dissolution of the monasteries but clearly shows a run of medieval buildings lining the square and backing onto what would have been Reading Abbey's outer precinct.



Figure 7: John Speed's map from 1611 showing the pattern of buildings around Market Place from this time. The remnants of the Abbey lie to the east beyond its outer precinct.



Figure 8: John Rocque's map from 1761. Little has changed in the centre of Reading but the block to the east of Market Place has extended into the Abbey precinct north of today's Abbey Square.

Over time, the medieval buildings were replaced and the majority of the buildings before the 1950 / 60s rebuilding of Market Place appear to date from the Regency / Victorian era. Insurance plans from 1895 along with historic photographs from the late 19th century give a good idea of the character of the area before at the turn of the 20th century.

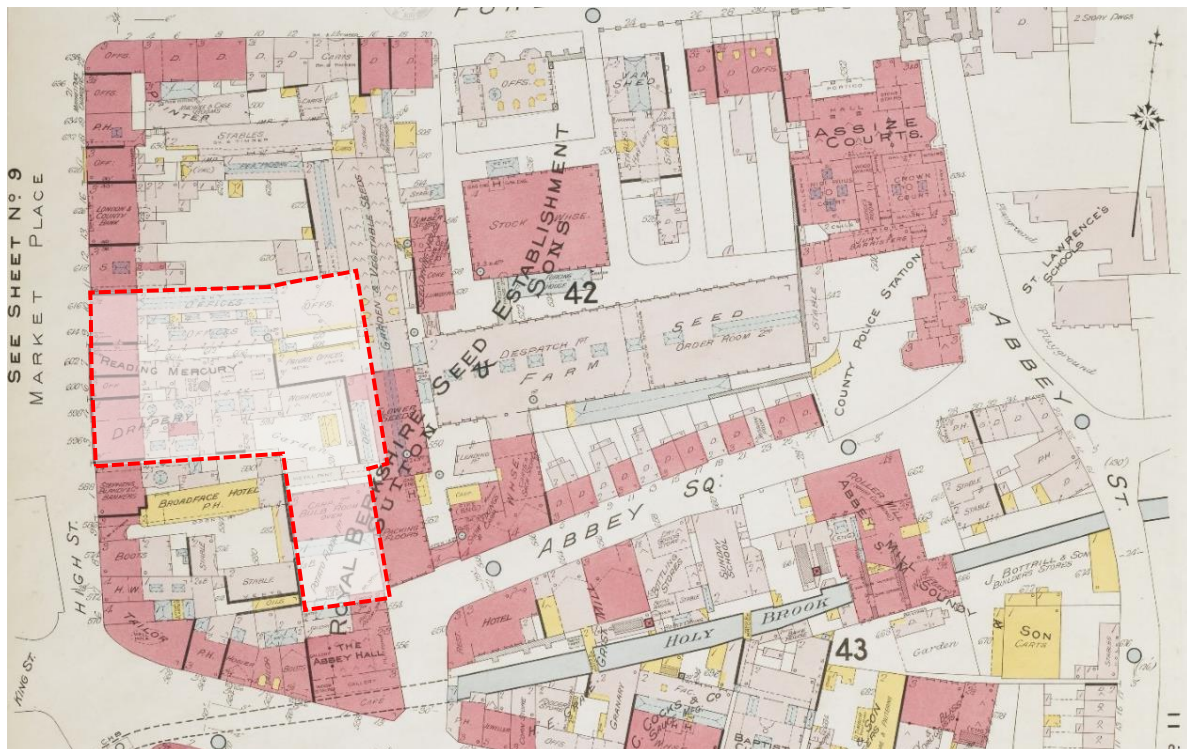


Figure 9: Goad Insurance map of the block to the east of Market Place from 1895. The pink colour is original and indicates the depth of the main buildings. Behind this is a piecemeal architecture of industrial units and extensions. Note entirety of the centre of the block is owned by Suttons Seeds.



Figure 10: View of Market Place from 1890 looking from the south-east towards St Laurence's in the north. The site is indicated to the right of the view.



Figure 11: View of Market Place from 1890 the north looking south-east. The current site occupies four buildings on the left-hand side.

The current site occupies what was four plots which, before reconstruction, were occupied by (from north to south) Suttons Seeds, the Reading Mercury, Butler Multio-Meters and Morris Edward & Co Dressmakers. The Suttons Seeds building, although one of the grandest buildings on the square, was

merely a front to the business which occupied the majority of the rest of the urban block to the east as far as the Crown Court.

Historic mapping suggests that the built form of Market Place throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was relatively stable.

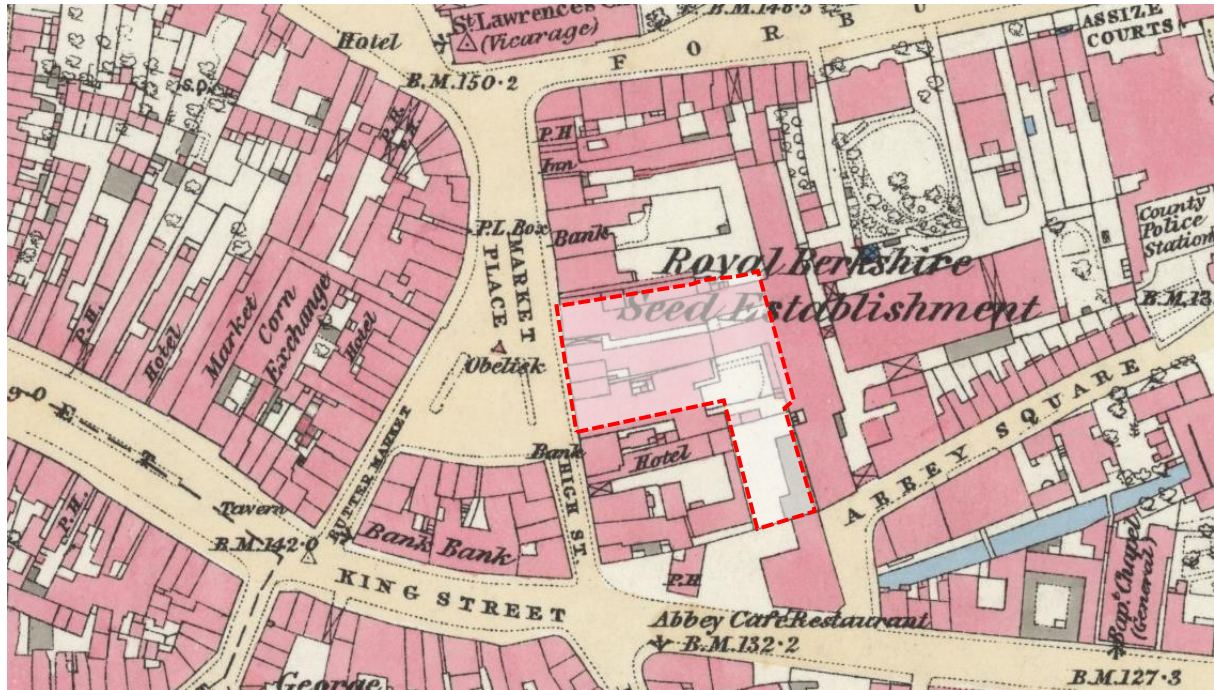


Figure 12: OS map from 1875 showing the urban form generated from the medieval layout and the Regency / Victorian rebuilding era.

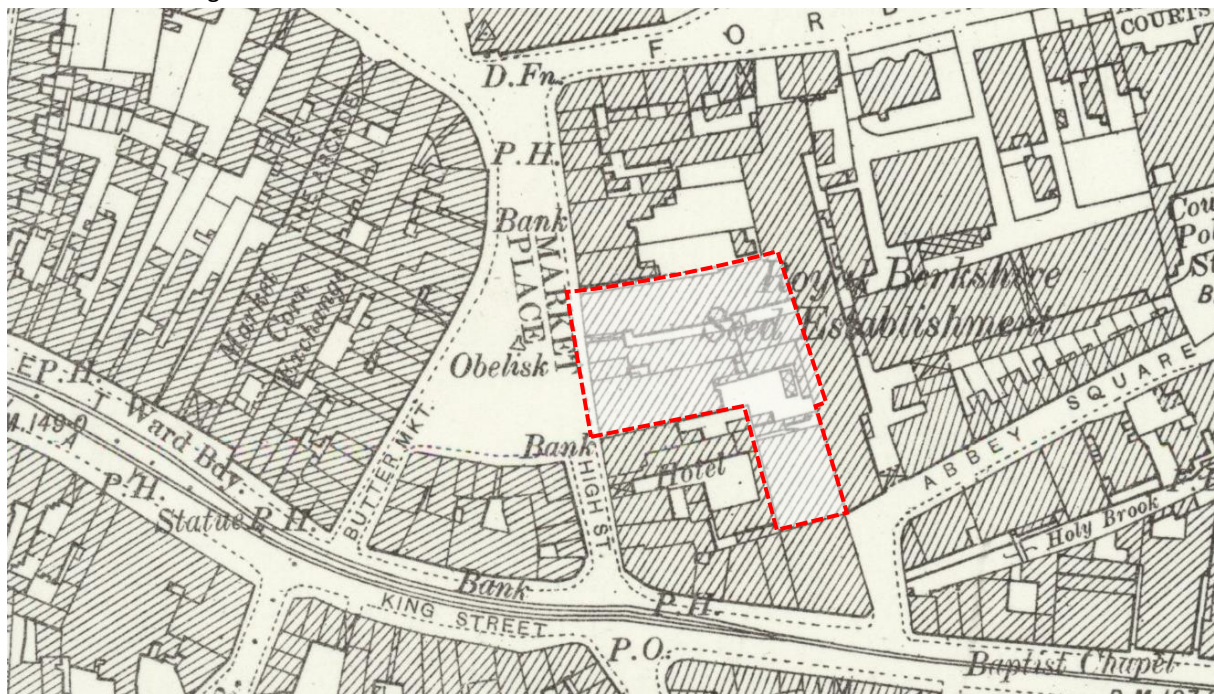


Figure 13: OS map from 1898 showing little change to Market Place over the preceding 25 years. Jackson's Corner has been added to the south and the interior of the block owned by Suttons Seeds has been densified with additional buildings.

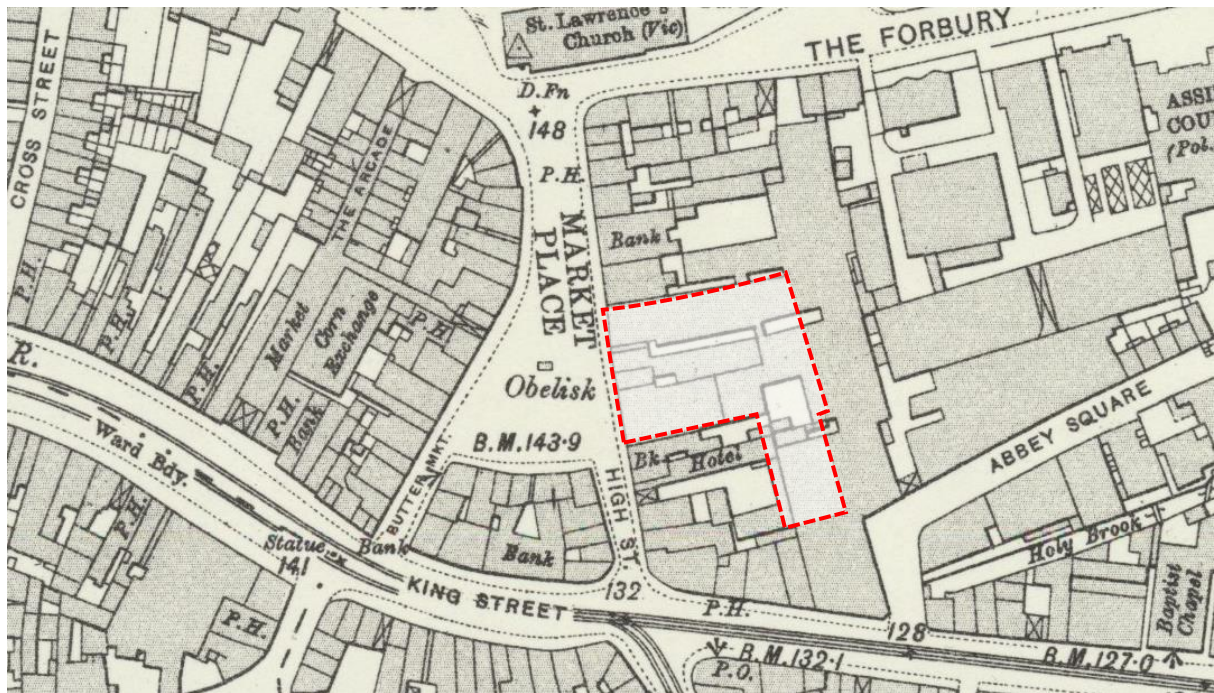


Figure 14: OS map from 1909. No change to Market Square by more densification in the block to the east.

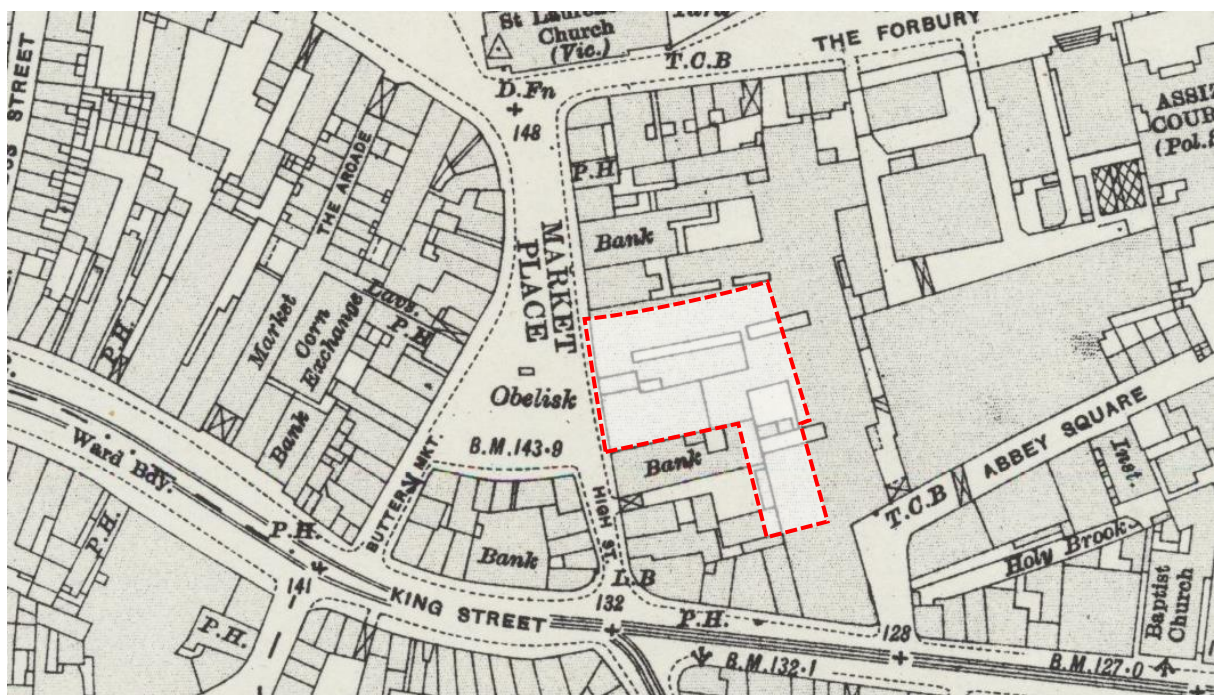


Figure 15: OS map from 1931 showing very little change between the wars.



Figure 16: Contemporary OS map. Market Place retained its form in the second half of the 20th century but many of the individual buildings were replaced - many in unsympathetic styles. Much of the land to the east of the site was redeveloped and the alleyway to the rear of the site added to provide service access.

Some parts of Market Place suffered from damage during the blitz although the Application Site was unaffected. Instead, it was redeveloped in the 1960s following Sutton Seeds' vacation from their part of the site and the land behind.

The current building was designed in 1965 by the architecture practice Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) in the Brutalist style fashionable at the time. The wide, uniform façade with its strong horizontal emphasis is considered to dominate the east elevation of Market Place and detract from the quality of the area. The proportions, materiality and monolithic form, lack repose and strike a jarring note in the streetscape. The building fails to reflect anything of its historic context and its dearth of articulation has eradicated any meaningful acknowledgement of the origins of the site. It is thus a "bad-mannered" intervention, that apart from some synergy in height, contributes nothing to this highly vibrant and historic location. In describing the 'negative features' of the Market Place Character Area, RBC's character appraisal states; 'modern architecture in Market Place is undistinguished and fails to respect neighbouring historic buildings'. Furthermore the sentiment is repeated as one of the wider issues of the area (section 6.10); 'many of the 1960s and 1970s developments pay little heed to their context and some have a notably negative effect on the character and appearance of the area.'

Some examples of RMJM's work in the UK such as the Scottish Parliament building (where they acted as executive architects to Enric Miralles) or the Falkirk Wheel are iconic, but the majority of their output here is of a generic commercial nature. 3-10 Market Place was carried out during a period of rapid growth in the practice and during an era of distinctly non-contextual design principles. The design of 3-10 Market Place lies firmly within the undistinguished category of the office's output; and consequently it has never been listed or locally listed for its association with the practice.



Figure 17: View of the application site from the south-west across Market Place. The large 1960s facade is at odds with the historic character of the public square in scale, material and articulation.

3. CHARACTER APPRAISAL OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

3.1 Introduction

The Market Place / London Street CA was designated in 1972 and extended in 1982. There are current efforts by the Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC) to extend the CA further north / north-west. The Application Site is located to the north of the CA at the boundary of the Market Place and Jackson's Corner Character Areas.

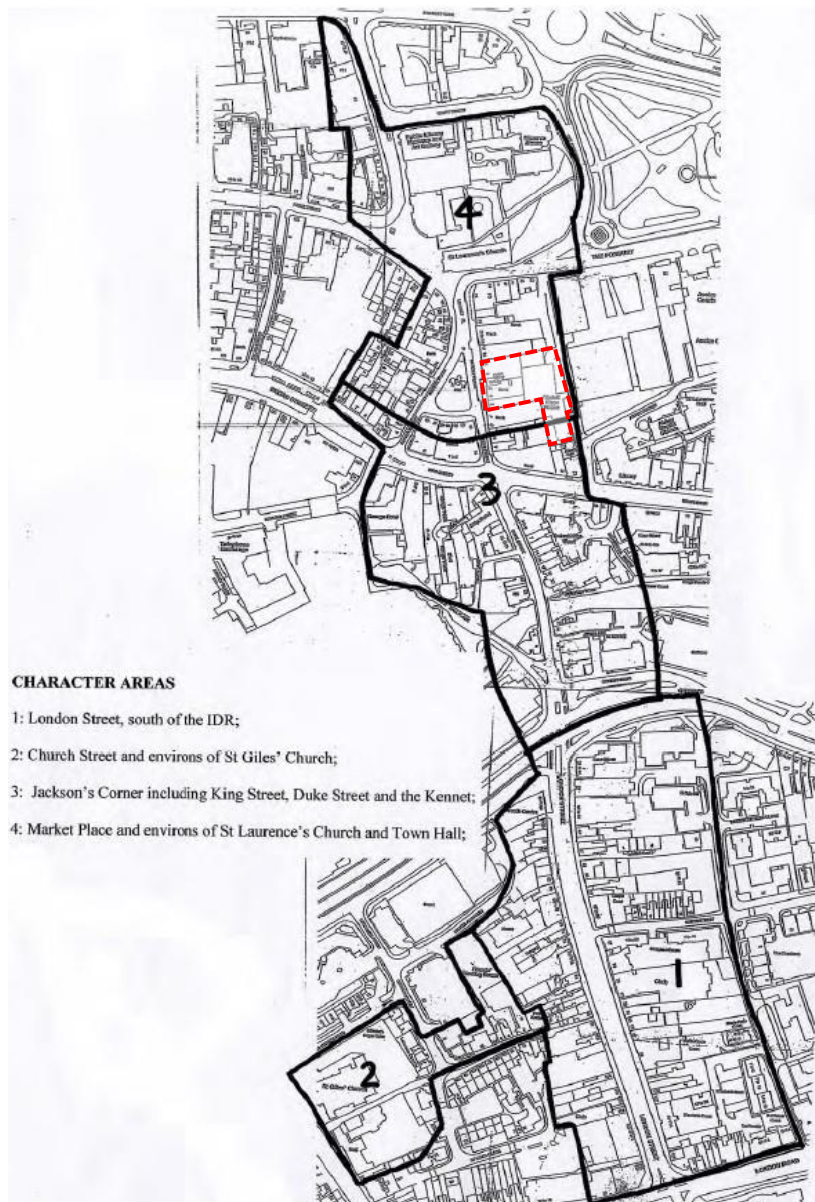


Figure 1: CA boundary map.
Source: RBC - Market Place / **London Street Conservation Area Appraisal, 2007**

3.2 Summary of Special Interest

RBC's CA Appraisal (2007) provides a description of the development and character of the area from which its special interest derives. The following statements summarise the conclusions most relevant to this proposal:

- The CA consists of a linear area along the planned medieval southern approach road over the River Kennet to a marketplace and church outside one of Reading Abbey's gateways.
- The CA contains numerous designated heritage assets including the medieval St. Laurence's Church, some isolated 16th and 17th century timber-framed buildings, and further groups of historic buildings around Market Place.
- The CA encompasses the special historic and architectural focus of the St Laurence's Church and Town Hall area.
- The CA accommodates some fine examples of 19th century banks and commercial buildings (inc. NatWest Bank, Market Place).
- The built stock includes many examples of buildings constructed with bricks from Reading's extensive local brickworks (red, blue and buff).
- The area houses two 19th century monuments: Sir John Soane's Simeon Monument in Market Place and the statue of Queen Victoria near the town hall.

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires Local Planning Authorities to determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

SLHA would therefore add to the above that the character or appearance it is desirable to preserve or enhance derives from the above special interest, the most significant elements of which are:

- The medieval street layout and plot widths.
- The scale and articulation of the 19th century rebuilding instigated by the industrialisation and growth of the town.

The character and appearance of the area is analysed in more detail below.

3.3 Summary of Townscape Character of the Conservation Area

According to RBC's Character Appraisal the overall spatial character of the northern part of the CA is described as:

- *'...generally speaking, a tightly knit urban area composed of continuous frontages of two-, three- and four-storey buildings beside streets of varying length and width. Close to St Laurence's Church there is a wide part-pedestrianised area that includes the triangular site of Market Place and an adjoining paved area around the statue of Queen Victoria known as Town Hall Square. This open space, based on the medieval market place and forecourt of a former gateway to the Abbey, provides a good setting for the area's historic buildings especially St Laurence's Church, the Town Hall and a row of listed buildings (nos. 23 to 34) on the north-east of Market Place.'*

Furthermore, it is worth noting the following points extracted from the appraisal:

- The northern part of the CA is centred around the medieval market square and the Town Hall. This area acts as the terminus for the historic route following today's London Street, Duke Street and High Street. Although no longer a significant north-south route, the linear course and triangular open space remain.
- Storey heights across the CA generally range from 2-4 storeys, with the higher buildings located close to the town centre in Market Place and Blagrove Street. London Street to the south is generally less dense than the tight urban form to the north.

SLHA agree with the overall description presented by RBC but note that the existing buildings on the application site are six-storeys tall to the rear and that several other plots (including Jacksons Corner directly to the south) have elements above four-storeys in height.

As discussed in Section 2 above and developed further in Section 3.9 below, the historic and contemporary townscape character of Market Place is of polite, three-to-four storey buildings facing onto the public space, with a larger-scale industrial landscape behind. Immediately to the east of the site, just outside the CA boundary but affecting its setting is the seven-storey high Forbury Square development which follows this pattern.



Figure 18: The character of Market Place showing the typical 3-4 storey buildings facing onto the public realm.

It is further noted that the emerging townscape to the west of Market Place at the Bristol and Bath Arcade site follows the same logic. The approved plans (180358FUL) show a four storey building to the street stepping up to eight storeys to the rear.



Figure 19: View of Reading Market Place with the Simeon Monument in the foreground.

3.4 Key Landmarks

RBC's CA Appraisal identifies St. Laurence's Church and 'the clock tower and lively roovescape of the townhall' as key landmarks within the CA. The appraisal's townscape map also identifies Jacksons Corner and Corn Exchange Arcade Entrance on Market Place as local landmarks.

SLHA would add the Simeon Monument on Market Place and the statue of Queen Victoria near the Town Hall as important landmarks within the townscape.



Figure 20: The church tower and Queen Victoria's statue are important landmarks within the townscape.

3.5 Key Views

The key views in the CA relate primarily to their capacity to allow appreciation of the landmarks and listed buildings within the area. Subsequently, locations which open up vistas or frame such buildings contribute to the character of the area. The most relevant views identified in the adopted Character Appraisal and in CAAC's draft appraisal (2021) are as follows:

- North from the north end of Duke Street / High Street at entrance to Market Place. RVC's character appraisal states; *'as one approaches from High Street the Town Hall clock tower comes into view and eventually one can see [the] medieval church, 17th century timber framed buildings and 19th century town hall in a single view.'*
- The open space of Market Place enables good view of the surrounding buildings, particularly those that are listed. There are therefore several views in Market Place in which the site affects the setting of designated Heritage Assets.

3.6 Local Character Areas

The application site sits across the boundary of two Character Areas. These areas have distinct characters, particularly as the Duke Street area is experienced primarily as a transitional zone between the Market Place (to the north) and London Street (to the south) Character Areas which have much stronger identities of their own.

The following is a brief summary of the relevant descriptions of the two areas as identified by RBC's Character Appraisal.

3.7 Summary of Character Area 3: Duke Street, Jackson Corner and the River Kennet

According to the Character Appraisal, this area 'is the least homogenous of the four character areas but represents the transition from central core shopping area to other uses including hotel, casino and office use as one progresses towards London Street.'

Positive contributors to the area consist primarily of local landmarks and listed buildings such as Jackson's Corner, and of the view up High Street towards St Laurence's church tower.

Negative contributors consist of the traffic on the busy roads in the area and the high proportion of undistinguished modern developments.

3.8 Summary of Character Area 4: Market Place and environs of St Laurence's Church and Town Hall

According to the Character Appraisal, 'St Laurence's Church and the adjacent Town Hall complex are the key buildings of this character area. The early 12th century church looks down the Market Place and overlooks Town Hall Square.'

It is noted that the Market Place has a mixed character, split between historic facades and mid-20th century Brutalist architecture. As such, there are both positive and negative elements to the focus of this Character Area.

Positive contributions are made by the architectural statement composed of St Laurence's Church and the Town Hall buildings and the collection of listed buildings and statutes around Market Place. Furthermore, views of St Laurence's and the Town Hall Clocktower contribute positively to the area, as do the trees and greenery of St Laurence's Churchyard.

The modern architecture in Market Place is considered to have a negative effect on the character of the area, as is the loss of original fabric in historic buildings and landscapes.

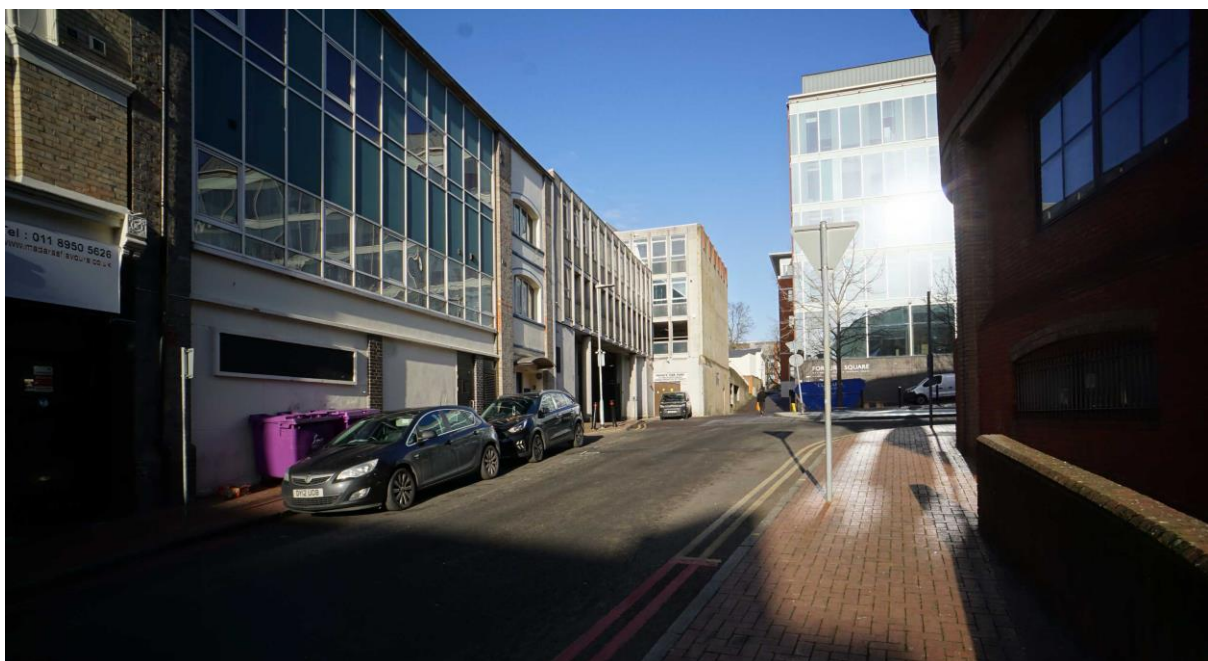


Figure 21: View of buildings to the rear of Market Place, closer to Abbey Square.



Figure 22: View of buildings around Market Place- note the general consistency of heights, with significant variations in materials, details and finishes. Where historic buildings on burgage plots have been replaced by modern buildings, the plot widths are inconsistent with the overall character of the streetscene.

3.9 Further Assessment of Historical Character of the Local Area

It has already been established that the street pattern of the local area and of the Market Place in particular are of medieval origin. This creates a large part of the tightly-knit, intimate character of the area.

Later OS maps and photographs show that the developments which replaced the medieval buildings in the 19th century created a considerable amount of the scale, grain and texture that defined the area prior to its post-war redevelopment. Where this built fabric remains, it still contributes positively to the streetscape of the area.



Figure 23: Photograph 1890 looking south along the west side of Market Place. Like the application site in the background, the Victorian, Elephant Hotel on the left was developed in the 1960s

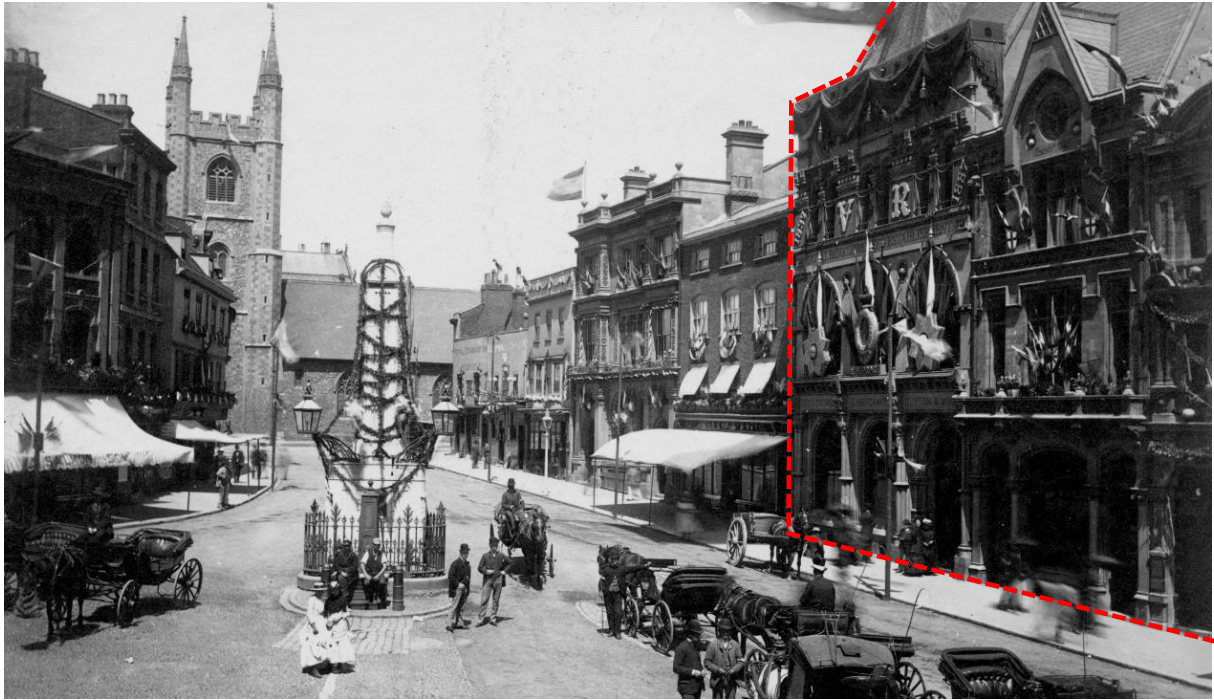


Figure 24: Photograph from 1887 looking north across Market Place as dressed up for the Queen's golden jubilee.

Aerial views and insurance maps hint at a characteristic type of development where the buildings facing onto Market Place and the perimeter of the urban blocks are of a highly designed, urban character but behind this façade, inhabiting the perimeter of the block, lay a more industrial landscape. This type of development is exemplified by the Sutton Seeds site, but is also apparent to the west of Market Place on the current sites of Corn Exchange Arcade and Marks and Spencer.

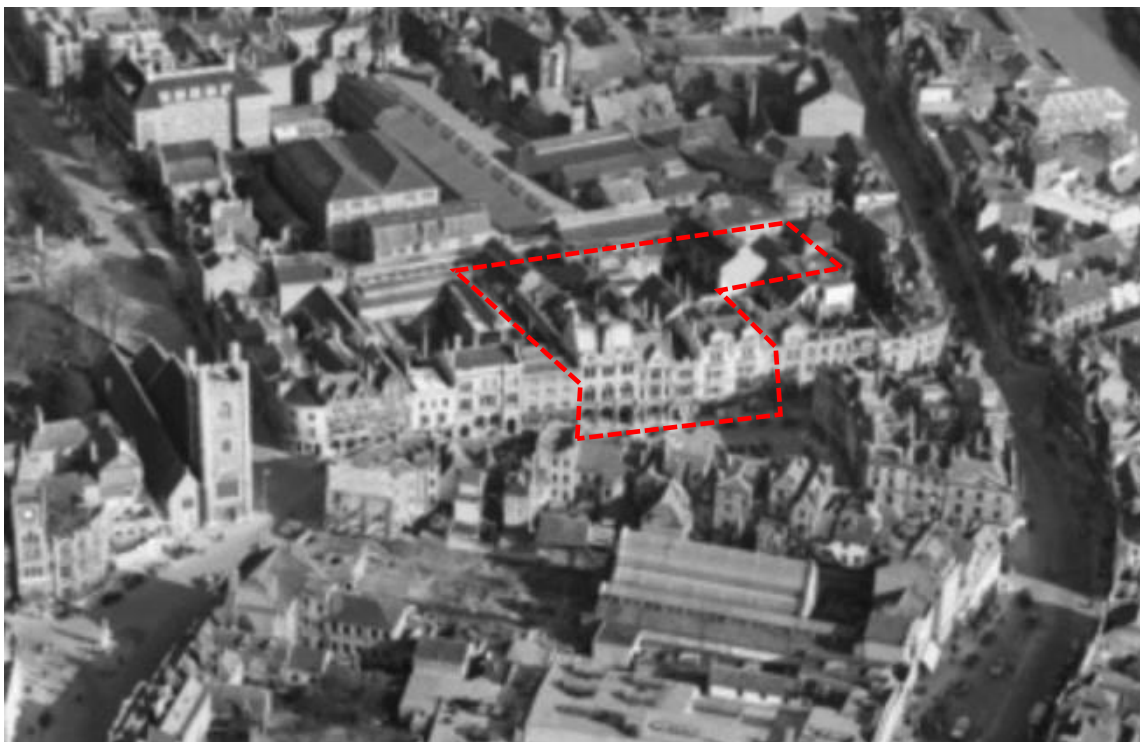


Figure 25: Aerial photograph from 1951 showing the site intact following WW2 but before Suttons Seeds left permitting it to come up for sale and redevelopment.



Figure 26: Aerial photograph from 1928 providing a good view of the difference between the polite market facing buildings and the industrial rear. This pattern is apparent on both east and west sides of Market Place.

As a result of the importance of contribution of the market facing facades prior to post-war redevelopment, SLHA have used insurance plans and historic photographs to piece together an historic façade for the east of Market Place from around the turn of the 19th century.

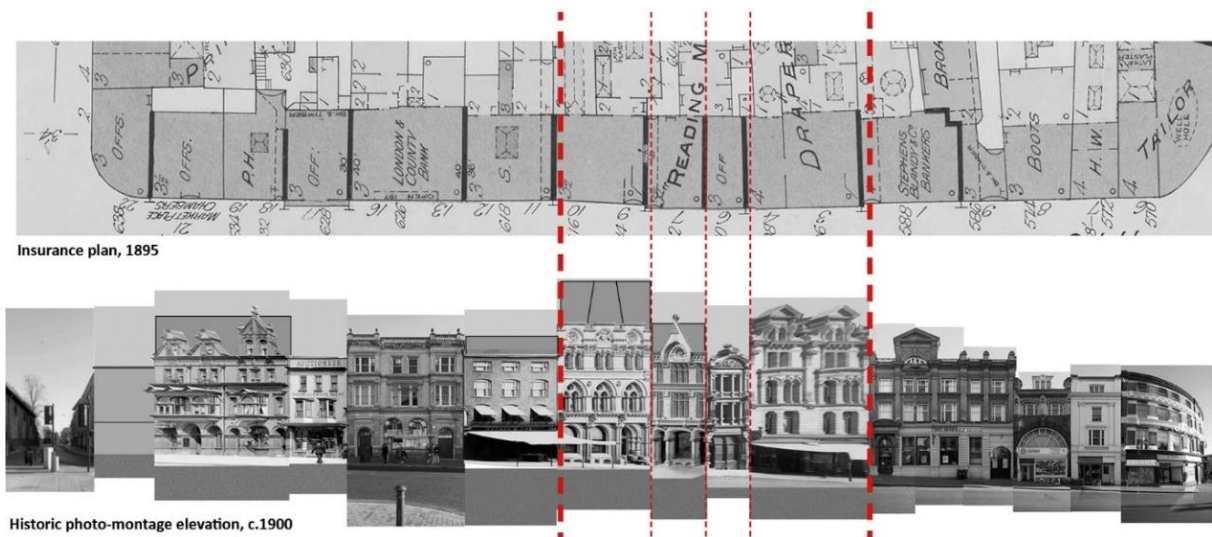


Figure 27: Diagram showing photomontage contemporary and historic (c.1900) elevations of the east of Market Place in relation to an insurance plan from 1895.

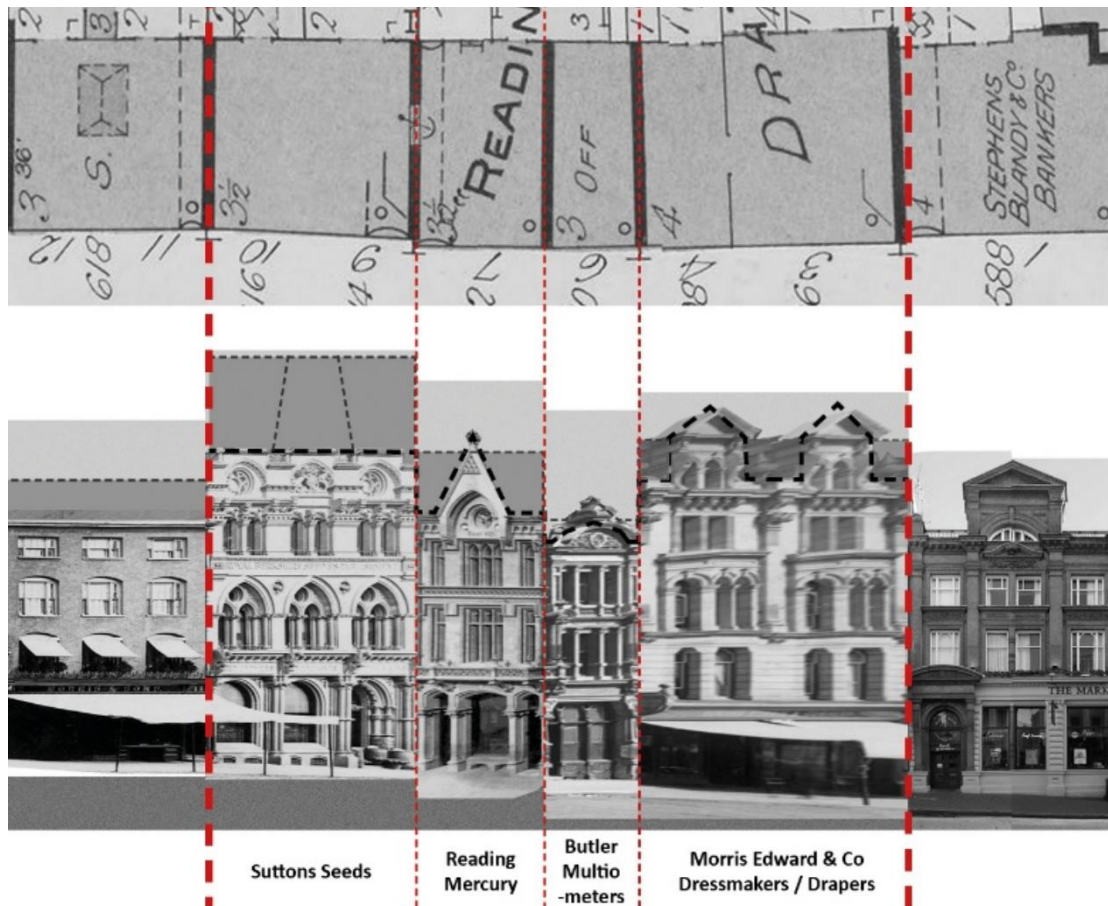


Figure 28: Diagram showing a photomontage elevation of the west facade of the application site c.1900.

It is felt that the historic plans, photographs, and elevation help to understand better the most significant aspects of the character of the area. A preliminary assessment of the key features of the character of the local area are:

- Relatively narrow frontages breaking blocks into vertically oriented parcels deriving from historic burgage plots which are extant in the earliest mapping.
- Predominantly three to four-storeys eaves height but variation within this range. Considerable roofs with dormers and gables contribute to the roofscape above the eaves line.
- Dense urban buildings line the perimeter of blocks with utilitarian / industrial built form occupying the centre.
- A limited range of materials - predominantly brick and stone with modest use of tiles (or render on lower quality buildings).
- Variety of architectural languages of predominantly Regency / Victorian heritage - texturally rich with variations in detailing at different levels / hierarchies between elements.

3.10 Summary of Significance of the Conservation Area and Local Area

SLHA are in general agreement with RBC's summary of special interest and description of the area and concludes that the most significant qualities derive from the historic street pattern, close-knit urban

grain, the architectural quality of the historic buildings with their early burgage plots where they remain, and the scale of the street-facing facades.

Following NPPF and Historic England guidance (Statements of Heritage Significance: Analysing Significance in Heritage Assets Historic England Advice Note 12, 2019), the significance is summarised under the categories of archaeological, architectural and artistic, and historic interest as below:

Archaeological Interest

The archaeological interest of the CA lies in the street pattern and urban grain which provide a record of the historical development of the centre of Reading. The long history of the area may mean that there is considerable quantity of evidence below ground level that is of interest. However due to the significant reconstruction works over the centuries, but most notably since the mid-1960s, it is likely that some of this archaeology has been eroded by later works - especially excavations and construction of deep foundations.

Architectural and Artistic Interest

The most significant aspects of the current aesthetic experience of the CA are:

- The street pattern and plot widths deriving from the medieval layout provide an intimate scale to the street.
- The medieval burgage plot widths provide a human scale rhythm to the streets and a sense of verticality to the façades as each building transitions to the next.
- The vertical scale, materiality and visual texture of the 19th century façades which record a significant stage in the development of the town and provide a pleasing aesthetic experience.
- The remaining medieval – 18th century buildings and the other monuments contribute their own more unique characters to the area where they are visible increasing, the sense of living history as well as adding architectural quality to the townscape.

Historic Interest

The historic interest of the CA lies in the street pattern and urban grain through which people can experience a sense of the past. There are minor historical associations with individuals such as the Simeon monument which was designed by the renowned Sir John Soane.

4. PROPOSED WORKS

4.1 Description of proposed works

The proposals are for *“External works to existing building, including partial replacement of the existing façades fronting Market Place and Abbey Square alongside other external works to the building; set back single-storey extension above part of block fronting Market Place, part two part three storey extensions above other blocks; and conversion and alterations to ground floor reception and car parking area; together the works will deliver 38 new homes and (internal and external) residential amenity areas with associated car parking”*

The proposed development is described and illustrated in detail in the Design and Access Statement and Application Drawings prepared by the project architect, tp bennett. Heritage Architecture’s assessment of the proposed development has been informed by the information provided in earlier drafts of this documentation which should be referred to when reading this report.

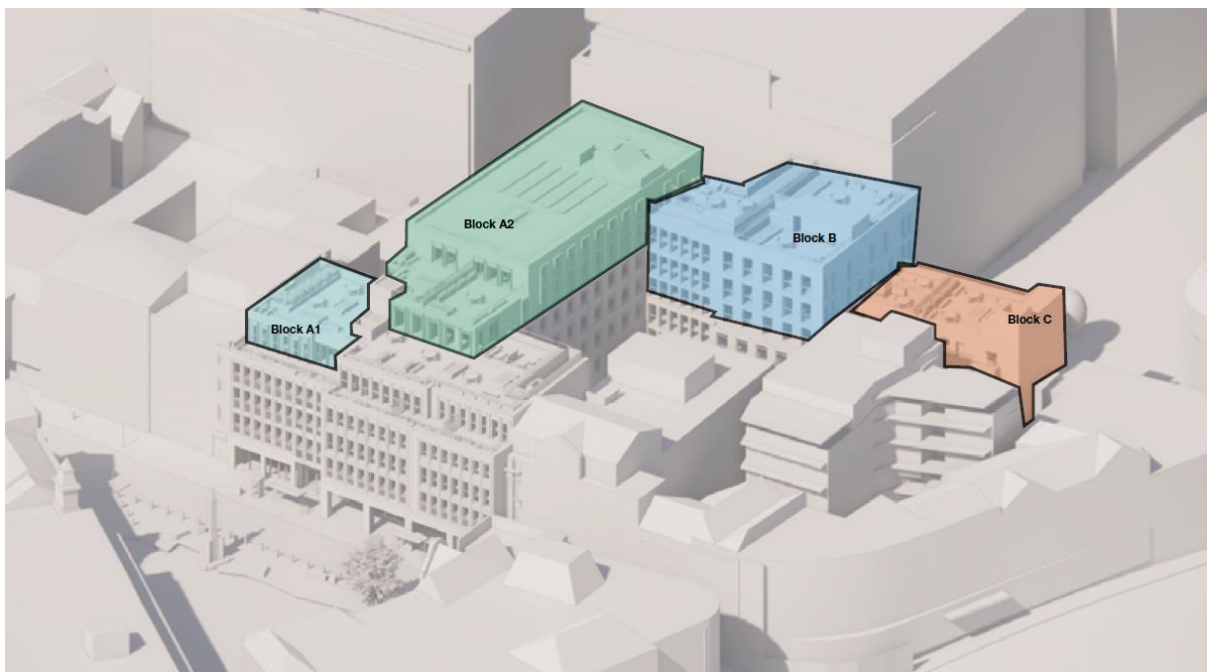


Figure 29 Illustrative block plan showing proposed areas of extension (source: tp bennett, Design and Access Statement).

4.2 Summary of Key Components

The main elements of the proposed development are defined as follows:

- Sustainable approach to the redevelopment of the site through the retention and extension of the existing structure;
- Building upon the existing consent for the conversion of the commercial building to residential units with addition of 38 new homes and residential facilities;
- Retention of existing retail units at street level to Market Place;
- Redesign and reconfiguration of external envelope of the building using contextually informed materials, details, proportions and fenestration patterns;

- Primary elevation to Market Place redesigned to create impression of a series of related buildings with greater vertical emphasis and improved street level interface which reference the grain and character of surrounding conservation area context;
- Single storey extension to the northern range on Market Place, set-back from the frontage of the building (Block A1);
- Two storey extension to rear northern range facing into the existing external courtyard (Block A2);
- Three storey extension to the rear central block facing Abbey Square (Block B);
- Two storey extension to the rear southern block facing Abbey Square (Block C);
- Creation of legible entry points into the site from Market Place and Abbey Square;
- Conversion of ground floor parking to residential amenity space and relocation of parking provision to basement level;
- Retention and re-landscaping of the existing central courtyard; and
- Creation of a network of connected landscaped roof terraces.

5. PLANNING CONTEXT AND RESPONSE TO PRE-APPLICATION COMMENTS

5.1 Introduction

The design team undertook a pre-application meeting with RBC on 17th November 2021. Amended plans were submitted on 1st December 2021 and feedback was received on 6th January 2022. The below considers the heritage and townscape feedback provided.

SLHA were appointed following receipt of the response to the first pre-application feedback to provide contextual analysis and assessment of character to inform the design process. A second pre-application meeting was held on 13th April 2022, with a Design Review Panel meeting held on 19th May 2022. The feedback received during these meetings is summarised in RBC's written advice letter dated 27th June 2022. The design submitted for this follow up pre-application was guided by archival research of the subject site; a detailed assessment of the character and appearance of the conservation area, and feedback received as part of the first pre-application.

5.2 Response to Pre-application Comments

This section considers Heritage, Conservation and Townscape comments received and provides a response to these, in light of the proposals being submitted for full application.

General Principles

It is noted that the revised proposals still seek conversion/upgrade of the existing building as opposed to demolition/rebuild. The initial pre-application advice response set out that the appearance of the existing building has a significant negative impact of the character and appearance of the surrounding area and that the building was specifically identified as having a negative impact on the historic character of the Market Place / London Street Conservation Area. Officers retain the view that any proposals which seek retention/upgrade of the existing building needs to demonstrate a very high level of design quality in order to overcome the negative visual impact of the existing structure. (Pg. 4)

Response: The proposals are for the retention of the existing, non-designated building but to address RBC's concerns through a redesign of the elevations fronting on to Market Place to make these contextually appropriate with the aim of enhancing the character, appearance and significance of the conservation area.

The proposed design draws from a detailed historical assessment of the site and addresses the principal reasons for the building being identified as a negative contributor - large horizontal massing, repetitive fenestration, incongruent materials and general monolithic uniformity of design, lacking in repose. The design response to these is discussed in further detail below.

Layout, Massing and Appearance

One concern raised was that the proposed side extension to the existing recessed top (5th) storey of the building to the Market Place façade which currently spans 2/3 of the width of the building did not reflect the staggered footprint of the building frontage resulting in the extension to the existing top storey appearing more prominent. It is noted that the revised design pack submitted shows a side extension to the existing recessed top storey of the building that is set back in line with the staggered building footprint and Market Place frontage. This results in a more subservient appearance to this

part of the roof top extension which would not appear unduly prominent to views from Market Place and within the Conservation Area. (Pg. 4)

Response: In line with the officer's comments above, the fifth and sixth storeys have been set back generously from the street frontage and are not visible in any of the views from Market Place (Views 1-4). They are visible in Views 5-7 which look to the rear of the building and are perceived to be part of the development along Abbey Square.

The existing fourth floor is set back and reflects the vertical divisions of the 4 blocks. Moreover, some of this floor is clad to reflect the design and materiality of a mansard roof, with some sections expressed as solid brick clad mass. This reinstates the visual interest in the skyline, which was historically characteristic of Market Place.

The revised proposals have reduced the width of the sixth and seventh storey roof top extensions and increased the set back from the front Market Place façade of the building. Based on indicative views drawings submitted with the pre-app, it is considered that the reduced massing and amended siting of the sixth and seventh storey extension would ensure these elements of the proposed extensions would not appear prominent to views from within Market Place and the conservation area (...) (Pg. 4)

Response: As demonstrated in the Visual Impact Assessment, the set back fifth and sixth floors/ rooftop extensions (counting as ground and upper floors) are not visible from views from Market Place and within the conservation area. Therefore this additional massing in the form of rooftop extensions will not have any adverse impact on the character, appearance and significance of the conservation area.

A further significant concern of officers set out in the initial pre-application advice letter was the appearance of Market Place façade of the building with the original proposals showing retention of the existing concrete structure and proliferation and uniformity of windows which was considered to result in the building retaining an appearance not dissimilar to its existing monolithic, dominant and out of keeping form. A key concern of officers was the lack of verticality of the original proposals which did not address the dominant appearance of the building from within Market Place as a result of its width and monolithic form. (Pg. 5)

Response: The officer's concerns have been taken on board, and the proposed design has an emphasis on verticality, with four "separate" blocks, informed by the historic burgage plots on this site. This is corroborated by detailed historic and architectural research of the site and its context.

The monolithic concrete block, and uniformity of windows across the elevation has been broken up by introducing a variety in materiality, and variation in window heights reflecting the traditional hierarchy of fenestration seen in historic buildings. The ground floor has been expressed differently as a plinth, clad in stone, which carries the upper floors clad in brick.

The existing concrete structure/ frame does impose a number of challenges, which were considered in the design process; and these have been integrated within the design in a more discreet manner.

The advice given was that a building much more in keeping with the historic character, appearance and proportions of the majority of other buildings which front on to Market Place would be required in order to provide a development which can successfully integrate with and contribute positively to and

enhance the character of Market Place and the Conservation Area and meet the requirements of policies CR14b, CR15, EN1, EN3 and CC7. (Pg. 5)

The revised proposals demonstrate a more detailed approach to treatment of the retained front façade of the building. The amended design proposes alternating use of materials, variations in the depth and forward projection of the upper floor façade of the building, varied parapet, windowsill and head heights which contribute to presenting the facade of the building in four sections, reflecting the narrower and more irregular frontages of the former burgage plots on the site. The proposals also show variations in windows heights for each section of the building, with window size and proportions reducing higher up the building. Officers and the LPA's Conservation and Urban Design Officer consider that the combination of all the detailed design features to the front façade results in a building which presents itself with more verticality and assists in reducing the dominance of the existing structure when viewed from Market Place. (Pg. 5)

Response: These perceptive comments from the conservation and design officer have been further explored during the design process and integrated into the proposed scheme. It is hoped that the proposed scheme will now be assessed favourably in accord with SLHA, as having an enhancing impact on the character, appearance and significance of the Market Place streetscene, and the conservation area as a whole.

The proposals have been assessed by the Reading Design Review Panel (DRP) who have commented that they agreed with the approach of adding verticality to the building through splitting the façade into the appearance of a series of different 'blocks' with the use of projection and different brick colours to break up the strong horizontal emphasis of the existing building and very repetitive grid pattern of windows. The panel advised that the verticality of the façade and historic references to the former burgage plots on the site could be further emphasised via greater variation to the parapet height, brickwork combinations and tones for each of the sections of the building with reference to the varying heights of the historic roofline of buildings to the site.

The Panel also noted that where the façade changes from one brick colour to another, this transition requires careful thought and suggested more asymmetry in terms of subservient and dominant blocks would help where colours are competing at piers. (Pg. 5)

Response: These helpful comments from the Design Review Panel have been incorporated into the design. The proposed design attempts to break away from the repetitive pattern of fenestration; through the introduction of a hierarchy of fenestration - reflecting the principal storey and upper floors distinctly.

The design of the parapet wall has also been varied to reflect individual blocks within the development. This is complemented by the massing of the recessed fourth floor, which reflects the roofscape of the historic building.

The materials of individual blocks have been designed to draw on and emphasise this verticality; and junctions between individual buildings have been considered. Further details will be required to comprehensively address these concerns, and can be addressed by "conditions", if requested.

In addition to the above, officers also consider that the recessed fifth storey of the building would benefit from use of a different material such that the bronze/zinc cladding indicated for use to the

proposed six and seventh storey extension elements to help distinguish this level of the building from the floors below and allow it greater visual subservience. (Pg. 5)

Response: As discussed above, the recessed fourth floor (counting as ground and upper floors) is designed and detailed to reflect the variation of roof style and design and draw on the vertical blocks. When seen in Views 1-3, it is visually subservient and enhances the visual interest of the roofscape.

The finish of the columns to the ground floor colonnade of the building also need to be reconsidered. At present this is shown to reflect the brick colour of the upper floors to the corresponding part of the building. Officers suggest that a separate material here would also be appropriate. A natural stone colonnade would reflect the stone finish to the ground floor frontage of a number of listed buildings set around Market Place. (Pg. 6)

Response: The ground floor colonnade has been clad in stone, in two of the blocks- reflecting the solidity of the base; whilst retaining the emphasis on individual blocks. Cladding of the slender pilotis like columns with stone to create a more substantial base, and detailed appropriately, is considered to be an enhancement over the existing visually weak arrangement of columns.

Officers acknowledge that the revised proposals have taken on board many of the design comments set out in the initial pre-application response in respect of the treatment of the Market Place façade of the building. Based on the follow up design pack submitted it is considered that, if implemented fully and to a high quality, the proposals, together with the reduction of massing of the upper floor extensions discussed above, would deal with officers' concerns with retention of the existing structure, its lack of verticality and dominant monolithic appearance when viewed from the Market Place and the buildings negative impact on the character of the Conservation Area. (Pg. 6)

Response: Following on the pre-application meeting, the design of the Market Place elevation has been further refined and detailed, to respond to additional points from the officer and from the DRP, as well as the CAAC (Conservation Area Advisory Committee).

The Panel also commented that the detailing to Block B should be increased, for example, the corner as it returns towards Block C featured a brick pier / grid detail that they considered appeared too narrow, weakening the overall composition of the Blocks. (Pg. 7)

Response: The return of Block B towards Block C to Abbey Square features two bays of slender windows set back from the corner with what is considered to be a generously proportioned pier. The detailing of the return reinforces a sense of the verticality and slenderness of this part of the proposal. It is clearly differentiated from Block C with the contrasting brick colour albeit there is a relating element at ground floor level.

However, officers retain concerns regarding treatment of the street-level facades at part lower ground and part ground floor to Abbey Square which are currently shown as concrete facades, similar to existing. Whilst acknowledging that these parts of the building would serve the car park, it is strongly considered that more needs to be done to enliven and add interest to the street-level part of this area of the site. (Pg. 7)

Response: It is proposed that this façade to Abbey Square will be improved through the introduction of high-quality materials that relate to the rest of the development creating a sense of cohesiveness

and consistency. The creation of legible entrances into the building at ground and lower ground floors levels will create activity and animation within the environs of the site, and introduce a level of natural surveillance that improves the environmental quality of this area and enlivens the streetscape.

The applicant team proposes to commission an artist to design an attractive and unusual gate into the site which will further improve the appearance of this elevation and the reinforce the legibility of this entry point into the site. The gate will create a sense of permeability at street level.

Conclusion

Therefore, whilst officers are encouraged by the design improvements to the Market Place and Abbey Square façades presented within the follow up pre-application submissions, any proposal which seeks to retain the existing building would be required to demonstrate high levels of compliance to other adopted policies in order to attract officer support in what would likely be a very finely balanced application in terms of its acceptability. (Pg. 9)

Response: The proposed redevelopment represents a sustainable approach to the regeneration of this important town-centre site. A consideration of the proposed development in the context of RBC's adopted policies is provided in the Planning Statement prepared by Savills in support of this application. This report undertakes the balancing exercise which weighs potential benefits of the proposed development against any potential harms.

6. VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

6.1 Proposed Works Summary

The proposed scheme involves *'External works to existing building, including partial replacement of the existing façades fronting Market Place and Abbey Square alongside other external works to the building; set back single-storey extension above part of block fronting Market Place, part two part three storey extensions above other blocks; and conversion and alterations to ground floor reception and car parking area; together the works will deliver 38 new homes and (internal and external) residential amenity areas with associated car parking'*.

The development would repurpose the existing building with the aim of enhancing its contribution to the conservation area and the Market Place street scene and includes additional massing in the form of rooftop and rear extensions, which are designed to fit within the existing and emerging site context.

For full details on the proposals, please refer to the submitted drawings and supporting documentation prepared by tp bennett Architects.

6.2 Selected viewpoints

- Eight viewpoints have been identified from both RBC's Character Appraisal (2007) and CAAC's Draft Update (2021), and from site visits from the team considering the potential impact of the project. It is considered that these views are adequate and sufficient in assessing the impact of the proposal on the conservation area and its setting.
- The views encompass close and medium range views. The viewpoint locations are indicated on the map below and photographs of the views follow afterwards.
- Considering the large number of viewpoints (8 viewpoints), a range of accurate CGI renders are used. For close up views of the development, and where this is seen prominently in the context of other development and the assessment of materials, textures and details is key, fully rendered CGIs have been used. In some cases where the views are long range, and the key aspect of assessment is the height, scale and massing of the proposals, wireline or grey massing models have been used.

Baseline Views for Visual Impact Assessment

View No	Description	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Heritage Assets in view	Heritage Value	Townscape Value	Significance of View for Assessment
1	View from Town Hall Square, looking south towards the subject site	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	High	Medium	High
2	View from the north end of Market Place	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	Medium-High	Medium-High	Medium-High
3	View from the west of Market Place Square looking east towards the subject site	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	High	High	High
4	View from High Street (south of Market Place) looking north towards Saint Laurence Church	Medium	Listed buildings; CA	Medium-High	Medium	Medium-High
5	View along Abbey Square alley, looking north towards the subject site	Medium	CA	Low	Low-Medium	Medium
6	View west along Abbey Square, looking towards the subject site	Medium	CA	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
7	View from the churchyard of St Laurence Church	Medium	Listed buildings; CA	Medium	Medium	Medium
8	View from London Street	High	Listed buildings, CA	Medium	Medium-High	Low

Map showing identified Viewpoints



Figure 30: Aerial maps with baseline viewpoint locations for discussion

6.3 Visual Impact Assessment

View 1 (As Existing)



This view is taken from the Town Hall Square, north of Market Place, and with St Laurence's Church (Grade I) in the foreground to the left. The Town Hall building (Grade II*) is located to the rear of the viewer in this view, and the Jubilee statue of Queen Victoria (Grade II) is located to the right (beyond the view frame).

23-26 Market Place, seen to the centre of this image (white stuccoed, four storey buildings) are Grade II listed, as is the buff stone clad former Nat West Bank building in the background to the left. These key heritage assets frame this important view looking south from Town Hall Square towards Market Square.

The subject site is seen in the background to the centre, and is a long, monolithic block of grey concrete, with uncharacteristic mullions- dictated by the structural frame of the existing building. In this view, the overt and discordant horizontality, the design, detailing and materiality of the existing building, sits in stark contrast to the general architectural character and scale of buildings in this view.

The **visual receptor sensitivity** of this view is **high**, considering the number of pedestrians using Town Hall Square and Market Square as a thoroughfare between the railway station, commercial/ retail heart of Reading and Abbey Square.

The **value of heritage assets** seen in this view is **high**, considering the Grade I listed St Laurence Church and other Grade II listed buildings which frame this view.

Overall, this view is of **high significance**.

View 1 (As Proposed)



The proposed development is seen in the background. The articulation of its façade breaks down the dominant horizontality of the existing building by introducing a façade expressed as four separate blocks with individual albeit related detailing. This emphasis on verticality is carried forward to the roof, with individual blocks being expressed independently, further enhancing the visual interest of the roofscape, and taking reference from the historic roof form in the area.

Although the proposals would involve some additional massing and height, this is generally well detailed; and in this view, the proposed development does not appear visually dominant. The additional massing at fourth floor level is recessed; and the floors above (fifth and sixth floors) are significantly set back from street level and not visible in this view. The proposed development serves to better integrate the building into the varied streetscape along Market Place and reflect the finer grain of the surrounding conservation area context.

Overall, the proposed development, as seen in this view, is a significant enhancement over the existing building and better responds to the immediate streetscene and wider townscape. It also provides a demonstrable enhancement to the settings of listed buildings in Market Place, including the Grade II Nos. 23-26 and National Westminster Bank and the Grade I St Laurence Church, as well as other buildings within the local streetscape.

Overall, the impact of the proposed development on this view is **beneficial**.

View 2 (As Existing)

This view is taken from the north end of Market Place, looking south towards the subject site. The view follows the line of the street leading to Jackson's Corner and thence on towards London Street and is an important vehicular route in this part of Reading. This is also a historic part of Reading, with the Market Place and surrounding streets of medieval origin; and the layout of many buildings reflecting medieval burgage plots. Although most of the existing buildings date from the 18th C or later, their design is reflective of traditional aesthetic, detailing and materials- drawing on Reading's history of brickmaking, as well as some stone buildings. The interface between the buildings and the street is also well articulated, with traditional shopfront designs or colonnades.

The Grade II listed former Nat West bank building is seen to the left (buff stone faced); the Grade II listed 27-28 Market Place frames this view to the right, and Grade II* listed Simeon Monument is glimpsed to the right, behind the latter. The Stuccoed 50-51 Market Place is seen in the background, likewise the Grade II listed 1-2 Market Place (red brick faced) is seen just beyond the subject site.

The subject site appears incongruent within this view, due to its relatively large, horizontally expressed monolithic massing, uncharacteristic framing, repetitive and standardised fenestration as well as materiality, inappropriate to the historic character of the square.

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is **high**, considering the high pedestrian footfall and vehicular traffic passing through this area, which acts as a key link between the commercial and transport hub of Reading with the Abbey Quarter (to the east) and London Street (south of the IDR).

Due to the number of heritage assets seen in this view, the value of heritage assets seen in this view is **medium-high**. Overall the significance of this view is **medium-high**.

View 2 (As Proposed)

The proposed development blends more seamlessly within the street scene when seen in this view. The architectural shortcomings of the existing building (from a contextual perspective) are rectified by the proposals. The elevation expressed as four separate blocks draws from the historic burgage plots on the site; each element has a distinct façade treatment using a variety of materials and textures that draws from the palette of high quality traditional buildings in Market Place. The overt and unrestful horizontality of the existing building is replaced by a considered verticality and an vastly improved empathy of scale.

The building's interface with the street has been modelled in a solid manner by cladding the thin pilotis-like columns at ground floor with substantial rectangular columns, echoing other historic examples in the wider area and mirroring the rhythm and articulation of the street interface of the Grade II Nat West Bank to the north of the subject site.

As in View 1, the additional rooftop massing is not perceived in this view; and the proposals include a variety in roof massing reflecting the historic character of the square. The proposed development is an enhancement over the existing building and is seen from this location at the north end of Market Place to be a contextually appropriate response to this site.

Overall, the impact of the proposed development on this view is **beneficial**.

View 3 (As Existing)

This view looks directly towards the subject site from the western edge of Market Place; with the openness of the square allowing for a better appreciation of the buildings. The Grade II* listed Simeon Monument is seen in the foreground to the left, but in this view, it is starkly contrasted with the non-traditional design and detailing of the subject site. Similarly, the Grade II listed 1-2 Market Place and the buff stone-faced former Bank building are seen to the right and left edges respectively.

The subject site occupies the centre-background and is prominently seen in this view. Although it is characteristic of the 1960s design ethos, it detracts from the character of Market Place owing to its incongruous and non-contextual design. Due to its large horizontal mass, it appears monolithic, with the solidity broken by a repetitive arrangement of standardised fenestration. As contrasted with overall historic scale and traditionally designed buildings, its street interface is recessed under a colonnade, with modern shopfronts.

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is **medium-high**, considering the pedestrian footfall in the area around Market Place. There are also intermittent events held in Market Place such as farmers markets, food stalls, etc which further reinforce its position/ focus in public life in the area.

Considering the heritage assets seen framing this view, and its townscape importance from a conservation area perspective, the significance of heritage assets in this view is **high**. Overall, this view is of **high** significance.

View 3 (As Proposed)

The proposed principal elevation, fronting on to Market Place, shows a significant improvement over the existing elevation. Drawing from the historic burgage plots on this site, it divides the existing building into four separately detailed blocks - breaking up the horizontal massing and introducing much needed verticality. This is expressed through the careful use of materials, reflecting other buildings within the square and the wider conservation area character.

The standard and repetitive fenestration design of the existing building has been broken down by providing different window heights, reflecting the hierarchy of fenestration in a traditional building. Differentiation between individual blocks – despite the reuse of the structural grid on elevations of three blocks - has been successfully given a greater level of visual interest through the expression of depth and shadows. This gives added expression of solidity depth and strength.

The street interface is improved by the replacement of the pilotis like slender columns with more substantial columns clad in stone, providing a fitting base for the buildings. The shopfronts are expressed through the openings within this colonnade, reflecting other examples within Market Square.

The design of the roofline reflects the variation in height and materiality historically seen in Market Place, and follows on the verticality of the scheme at lower floors.

As seen in this view, the upper storeys (set back from the street elevation) are not perceived. The general continuity of the parapet line (with slight variations to reflect the four individual blocks) is in keeping with the general character of Market Place. Overall, the impact of the proposed development on this view is **enhancing and beneficial**.

View 4 (As existing)



This view looks north towards Market Place from the junction of King Street and High Street, near Jackson's Corner. Prominently seen in this view is the tower of St Laurence Church (Grade I) which dominates the centre background and forms a focal point of this view.

A number of other listed buildings such as 7-8 High Street, 1-2 Market Place are seen to the right and 10 High Street is seen to the left (foreground) and framing this view. In the background 27-28 Market Place and 29-31 Market Place are seen. All of the above buildings are Grade II listed.

The subject site is seen to the right and markedly protrudes forward from the building line seen along the eastern face of Market Place. Its contextually inappropriate materiality and detailing are immediately apparent, as is the different street interface marked by visually weak columns holding up the front of the building and forming a colonnade.

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is **medium**, considering that it is mainly used by pedestrians; and vehicular traffic moves in the opposite direction. The value of heritage assets in this view is however **medium-high**, considering the number of listed buildings, and the focus of this view being the Grade I listed medieval church of St Laurence.

Overall, the significance of this view is **medium-high**.

View 4 (As Proposed)



The proposed development is seen to the right centre-ground and in its overall massing appears similar to the existing building. However, minor changes to the design such as the introduction of a base to the building through stone clad columns, and grey brick cladding are perceived. The set back upper storeys are not perceived in this view and will not be visible from King Street or Jackson's Corner.

The interface with the street level is better detailed and is more contextually appropriate than the existing building's design. The stone clad ground floor, forming a plinth to the upper brick faced elevations, reflects a number of similar buildings in the wider area and adds visual strength and rationality.

Given the visual separation of this part of the site from the conservation area and listed buildings on Market Place, the proposed development has no adverse impact on the character and appearance of these heritage assets when seen in this view and so the overall impact is considered to be **beneficial** in heritage terms.

View 5 (As Existing)

This view is taken from the south side of King Street and looks northward towards Abbey Square and the rear (east elevation) of the site. The Reading Central Library is seen to the right of this image, and a number of other unlisted buildings are seen to the left. In the background, the contemporary Davidson House- a multi-storeyed office/ commercial building is clearly seen. This building follows on the architectural form and aesthetic of similar buildings further east along Abbey Square.

As seen in this view, the immediate contextual built interface north of King Road follows on traditional design with brick faced elevations, hierarchy expressed on the elevations, architectural mouldings and general consistency of roofline. However, moving north, the architectural form, massing and scale transforms to reflect the more contemporary character of Abbey Square.

The subject site is seen in the background but is not visually prominent in this view. Although there are a number of contemporary buildings in this view, and in the wider area, the subject building still appears out of place, due to its materiality poor quality detailing..

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is **medium**, considering that this street acts as a thoroughfare for pedestrians and vehicles entering Abbey Square. As there are a number of commercial and institutional establishments in the area (including Reading Central Library), it is anticipated that users would encounter this view.

Since there are no listed buildings seen in this view, the significance of heritage assets in this view is **low**. Overall, the significance of this view is **medium**.

View 5 (As Proposed)

The proposed development, as seen in this view, incorporates greater height and massing as compared to the existing building. This provides a more meaningful urban context and balances better with the contemporary building immediately opposite creating an almost gateway form. This also reflects the changing character of Abbey Square, which includes taller buildings and a palette of contemporary materials.

The proposed development is seen as part of this wider development in the background of this view and is consequently read and understood as forming part of this taller, commercial context to the east of the site. The scale of this element of the site is contrasted with the low scale traditional buildings in the foreground of the view although it is not considered that the change the visual experience of the streetscape or introduce any sense of overbearing. The scale of the new building and the enhanced verticality provide a visually interesting feature, without being overbearing or dominant.

Overall, the proposed development would have an **enhancing** impact on this view and would not change how heritage assets in the setting of the site are understood and appreciated.

View 6 (As Existing)

This view is taken from Abbey Square, looking west towards the subject site- the rear (east) elevation of which is seen in this view. The townscape, as seen in this view is varied, but largely contemporary and is part of the mid-20th C and later development of Abbey Square. The architectural form, massing and overall design of buildings is modern, and the palette of materials used along this street (and as seen in this view) differs considerably from those along Market Place.

The subject building is seen in the centre background, partly screened by a large tree. The variety in parapet heights and roof form is clearly seen; and the existing subject building is perceived in different sections- to the left with standardised fenestration (reflecting the front elevation), and further right as a solid massing without window openings. The interface between the building and street as seen in this view is eclectic and unrestful, uninviting and unresolved, with significant scope for enhancement.

There are no listed buildings perceived in this view; however, this view looks towards the conservation area. This view has a **medium** visual receptor sensitivity due to pedestrian and vehicular traffic (predominantly users of Abbey Square) passing through this area. Overall, the significance of this view is **low-medium**.

View 6 (As Proposed)

The proposed development as seen in this view, responds to the existing and emerging character of Abbey Square. It has a relatively taller massing and uses a more limited palette of materials as compared with the front (Market Place) elevation but is of a similar height and massing, as compared with the Davidson House, to the right. The massing steps down from the tallest element to the south, creating a comfortable transition down to the neighbouring three storey building on Abbey Square.

At street level, the proposals aim to enhance the street frontage through the creation of openings, and introduction of an artwork installation (in the form of a metal gate), improving the existing scenario and creating visual interest at street level.

The block seen to the right (partly screened by Davidson House), is clad in a pale stock brick, which differentiates it from the adjacent grey brick clad block. The design and detail of fenestration used is also diverse, to reflect and divide up the existing large footprint into smaller, well-articulated blocks.

At the south end (to the left), the row of fenestration is terminated by a solid termination and provides a bookend to this development. The parapet heights gradually drop from north to south, reflecting and responding to the built form, and massing along Abbey Square (to the north and east) and Kings Road and Jackson's Corner (to the south). The injection of residential uses to this part of the site and the increased level of fenestration and a more legible street entrance has the effect of creating natural surveillance which will improve the experience of the visual receptor as they move around the environs of the site. The enhancement over the existing is highly apparent and what is presently a somewhat neglected area is imbued with a sense of place, which sets an exemplar for further streetscape improvements.

Overall, the proposed development has a **beneficial** impact on this view and would not change how heritage assets in the setting of the site are understood and appreciated.

View 7 (As Existing)

This view is taken from the southern part of the Churchyard of St Laurence and looks south towards the subject site. The view is filtered by mature trees demarcating the boundary of the churchyard and in the summer months the foliage would serve to increase the sense of enclosure within the green space.

The view is framed by development on The Forbury, including five storey red brick building at No.1 and the lower red brick and concrete clad buildings at Nos. 6-12. Through the gap between the aforementioned buildings, the subject site (north elevation) is seen. This is perceived in two parts, with the two rear ranges to Abbey Square visible albeit not particularly prominent or noticeable in the view.

There is a variety of materials seen in this view - from the red brick faced elevations in the middle-ground - expressed both in a traditional (12 The Forbury) manner and contemporary aesthetic (1 Forbury Square). Beyond the initial streetscape bounding the churchyard, the materiality changes, and introduces a wider material palette, as well as a wider range of architectural expression.

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is **low-medium** as this view is incidental and peripheral to an experience of the immediate greenery and monuments within the churchyard. There are Grade II listed monuments within the churchyard and the church itself, St Laurence, is Grade I listed. The receptor would appreciate the historic and contemplative nature of their surroundings and subsequently the view is judged to be of **medium** significance.

View 7 (As Proposed)

The proposed development appears within the gap of the streetscape of The Forbury, enclosing the existing break in the townscape to a certain degree. The scheme is expressed as a series of related parts, giving the impression of a number of individual building elements that share a design and architectural language. This serves to break down the visual massing of the proposed development within the view and provide interest and a sense of depth in the background.

The scale and massing of the proposed development sits comfortably within the height datum established by The Forbury streetscape and as such it is experienced as a background feature, and peripheral to the receptor's experience of their immediate environment within the churchyard. An area of plant at roof level is seen to rise above the roof of No. 12 The Forbury, although it has a simple form and is articulated in a light materiality which means that it is not overtly noticeable and does not detract from the streetscape in the middle-ground of the view.

The materiality and fenestration design and pattern of the proposed development reflects the traditional and traditionally informed architecture along The Forbury and as a result integrates successfully into the visible townscape.

The development's visual integration means that it is largely peripheral to an experience of the historic churchyard and appreciation of listed monuments and the church itself. As a result, the overall impact is judged to be **enhancing** and **beneficial**.

View 8 (As Existing)



This view is taken from London Street, across the IDR and south of the site, looking north towards it. London Street is part of the Market Place London Street Conservation Area, however it forms a different Character Area (London Street Character Area). There are a number of listed buildings seen in the foreground, framing London Street. In the centre-background, the IDR and associated buildings, including the Oracle complex retail buildings are glimpsed. Behind this, the church tower of St Laurence (Grade I) can be glimpsed in the skyline. The subject site, although not apparent in this view, is located very close to, and is partly screened by the vegetation seen, adjacent to the aforementioned Church tower.

The visual receptor sensitivity of this view is high, considering that London Street is a key North-South thoroughfare in Reading, which connects the IDR with London Road further south. It is also a historic street, with a large number of listed buildings, and originally connected with Market Place via Duke Street and High Bridge (Grade II listed and Scheduled Monument) over the River Kennet. The presence of the church tower in the skyline further reinforces the relationship between London Street and Market Place. In summary, this view has a **medium-to-high** significance, its value diminished to some extent by the presence of the unsympathetic and uncomplimentary form of the Oracle complex in the middle-ground of the view which provides a visual block against the skyline beyond.

View 8 (As Proposed)



The upper levels of Blocks B and A2 of the proposed development appear in the background of the view, the lower levels and rest of the scheme wholly obscured by interposing development. Although the proposal projects above the consistent ridgeline below the tower of St Laurence's Church, the scheme overall is read to sit comfortably within the established height datum along London Street and along the townscape corridor that leads towards the town centre. The massing of the scheme is broken into two component parts, creating a transition in scale down to the west.

The proposed development is visually separated from the tower of the Grade I listed church and does not challenge its primacy or landmark quality within the view or the receptor's visual experience of the marker as they move north on London Street. The light materiality of the proposal softens its appearance within the view and serves to visually integrate the building into the background. The fenestration serves to further break down the visual massing of the element and reduce its solidarity.

The receptor's visual focus on wayfinding along London Street and an appreciation of the tower of St Laurence's Church as a marker for Reading's historic centre is unchanged by the presence of the proposed development in this view. For that reason, the overall impact of the scheme on this view is considered to be **neutral**.

6.4 Summary of Visual Impact

Table summarising visual impacts described above

View No	Description	Visual Receptor Sensitivity	Heritage Assets in view	Heritage Value	Townscape Value	Significance of View for Assessment	Impact Assessment
1	View from Town Hall Square, looking south towards the subject site	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	High	Medium	High	Beneficial
2	View from the north end of Market Place	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	Medium-High	Medium	Medium-High	Beneficial
3	View from the west of Market Place Square looking east towards the subject site	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	High	Medium	High	Enhancing, Beneficial
4	View from High Street (south of Market Place) looking north towards Saint Laurence Church	Medium-High	Listed buildings; CA	High	Medium	Medium	Beneficial
5	View along Abbey Square alley, looking north towards the subject site	Low	CA	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium	Enhancing
6	View west along Abbey Square, looking towards the subject site	Low-Medium	CA	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium	Beneficial
7	View from the churchyard of St Laurence Church	Medium	Listed buildings; CA	Medium	Medium	Medium	Enhancing Beneficial
8	View from London Street	High	Listed buildings, CA	Medium	Medium-High	Low	Neutral

As assessed through the eight viewpoints presented and summarised in the table above, the proposed development would result in a series of generally beneficial effects on views in the local and wider townscape surrounding the site and on the setting of heritage assets, and does not create any adverse impacts.

The beneficial effects of the proposed development are largely derived from the views in Market Place (Views 1, 2 and 3), where the improved principal elevation of the scheme provides a highly articulated and complementary response to the traditional buildings which enclose this area of public realm in the town centre of Reading. The breaking down of the Market Place elevation into component parts more closely reflects the grain and pattern of development in the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area. As seen in Views 1 and 2, the expression of the Market Place elevation serves to remove the horizontal emphasis of the existing building and introduce a sense of verticality more in keeping with neighbouring listed buildings, providing an architectural reference to the medieval burgage plots which have informed the nature and character of the surrounding buildings and development of surrounding street networks.

The design of the Market Place elevation in particular employs a materiality, a level of detailing, an architectural hierarchy and a fenestration pattern that creates consistency in the streetscape with the scale of neighbouring traditional buildings on Market Place, without presenting a pastiche. The proposed development has a clean contemporary language that is sympathetic and complementary to the traditional buildings within its environs.

The top and bottom levels of the proposed building are seen to respond to the scale and interfaces of the listed buildings on Market Place, creating an enhanced relationship between the site and the open area of public space. Views 1-3 demonstrate how the increased scale on the site is recessed, the set-back upper levels either not visible in approach views to Market Place or, where visible, read as subservient and secondary to the main body of the building, and not distracting or prominent in views towards the site or when appreciating historic buildings and structures within the square.

Views of the rear parts of the site are generally considered to result in enhancing or neutral effects on the setting of surrounding heritage assets including listed buildings and the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area. This is primarily because from a number of the views, the site is not seen in conjunction with the heritage assets identified as being susceptible to change in the setting of the site. Views 4-8 demonstrate the visible enhancement that will be realised to the Abbey Square frontage and rear parts of the site, and how the increase in height will be read as a response to the taller commercial context to the east of Market Place. The character, materiality and detailing of this part of the proposed development shares the traditionally-informed architectural language of the primary Market Place elevation, creating a cohesive visual experience of the site for receptors as they move around the local area. Visual receptors would appreciate the improved interface at street level on Abbey Square, and there would be an increased level of natural surveillance provided by the presence of residential units at the upper levels.

In longer distance views of the site, namely Views 7 and 8, the scale of the proposed development is seen to accord with the prevailing height datum of the surrounding townscape. The scheme integrates into the townscape by reason of its complementary materiality and fenestration design and is experienced as largely peripheral to the experience and appreciation of heritage assets in the wider setting of the site such as listed buildings along London Road and monument in the church of St Laurence. View 8 demonstrates how, notwithstanding the minor increase in massing and height on the Site, the visual prominence and landmark quality of the Grade I listed St Laurence's Church is maintained in the kinetic visual experience of receptors as they move towards Reading town centre from the south.

7. CONCLUSION

The Site does not contain any statutorily listed or locally listed buildings but is located within the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area. There are a number of listed buildings in the setting of the site, including Grade I, II* and II listed buildings and structures.

This report has provided a detailed analysis of the historic development of this part of Reading and of the site. A detailed character appraisal of the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area and its individual character areas has been undertaken to provide an understanding of the area's inherent significance and the site's relationship with its surroundings in line with relevant guidance.

The site sits within an area of important historical and architectural significance at Reading's historic core. It also sits within an area of townscape transition where the fine grain townscape informed by Medieval burgage plots and street networks to the west meets a coarser grain, bigger scale, commercial townscape to the east.

The proposed development has developed with the benefit of a thorough understanding of the subject building and the character of the local townscape area in terms of its sensitivities and opportunities. Engagement and detailed consultation with officers at RBC has informed the approach to the regeneration of the Site and guided the broader as well as the finer principles of the proposal's design.

Overall, Heritage Architecture consider that the proposed development presents a beneficial, sustainable approach to the redevelopment of the Site that demonstrably improves its architectural and aesthetic quality, its relationship with neighbouring listed buildings and the public realm of Market Place, and the Site's overarching contribution to the character and appearance of the Market Place/London Road Conservation Area.

This assessment has been informed by the eight visually accurate views presented in the previous section which illustrate how the proposed development will appear from different points in the locality of the site.

It is considered that the proposed development complies with relevant local and national policy and guidance provided in the NPPF and by Historic England. Heritage Architecture finds that the proposed development meets the statutory requirements established by Sections 66(1) and 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to preserve the setting of listed buildings and to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of conservation areas respectively.