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Heritage Statement & Assessment of Significance

Site: 3 Gravel Hill Cottages, Blagrove Lane, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7DY
Client: The Mapledurham Estate

Date: April 2022

This has been drawn up using the guidance of Historic England's Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance document. In addition, the Burra Charter Process (Articles 7-13) has been used to enhance the robustness in terms of measuring wider cultural significance issues. As such, this statement seeks to understand and demonstrate the overall impact of the current proposals upon the heritage assets that are affected.

In this instance the application is for alterations to an existing dwelling together with the replacement of an existing concrete garage with a new timber framed garage.

On that basis this Statement will consider the nature and significance of the listed cottage and any nearby assets, and then provide some judgement as to any harm or impact on them.

This Heritage Statement has been produced by Ross Aylward, RIBA, CA, a Conservation Architect accredited under the RIBA's Conservation Register.

Heritage Assets

Building Details:

Building Name:

3, Blagrove Lane

District: Reading**Parish:** Non Civil Parish

Details:

English Heritage Building ID: 1113399**Grade:** II**Date Listed:** 9th February 1959**Date of most recent amendment:** 14th December 1978**OS Grid Reference:** SU 69361 75498**OS Grid Coordinates:** -**Latitude/Longitude:** -**Listing Text:**

BLAGRAVE LANE 1. 5128 No 3 (Formerly listed as Old Gravelhill Cottages in the Rural District of Henley) SU 67 NE 14/408 9.2.59. II 2. Late C17. 1 1/2 storey cottage (probably a pair originally). Square frame timber frame, formerly thatched. 4 bays. Brick infill. Modern tile roof with off-ridge gable end chimneys, left hand chimney stack external and has gabled socle. 2 modern dormers with 3 light casement windows. Outer lean-to porches.

Building History and On-Site Evaluation

3 Gravel Hill Cottages is located on the North-Western edge of Reading, where Caversham gives way to open countryside, on the edge of the Mapledurham Estate as the ground rises to the North of the river Thames.



Fig 1: Image above from Google Maps. Red dot indicates the position of the property.



Fig 2: Image above from Google Maps. Red dot indicates the position of the property.

As shown in figure 2 above, the cottage, which originally would have stood in countryside, has now been joined on its South-Eastern side by continuous development of large dwellings of varying quality from the 20th century, which have significantly altered its original context.



Fig 3: Image above from Google Maps. Site indicated in red.



Fig 4: Image above from Google Maps. View South along Blagrove Lane, with 3 Gravel Hill Cottages in the background on the right, and the modern housing on the left-hand side.

The properties directly to the opposite side of Blagrove Lane are from the latter part of the 20th century and of indifferent quality. However, the narrow and tightly bounded nature of Blagrove Lane, with high hedges and curving road, do maintain something of a rural feel which is to the benefit of the setting of 3 Gravel Hill Cottages (3GHC).

In terms of other nearby heritage assets, the Historic England map as included in Figure 5 illustrates that the nearest listed buildings are some 375m to the South-East along Upper Warren Avenue or 400m to the South-West at Chazey Court Farmhouse. The nature of the topography and intervening buildings mean that there is no intervisibility or contextual relationship between these assets in any real appreciable sense when on site.

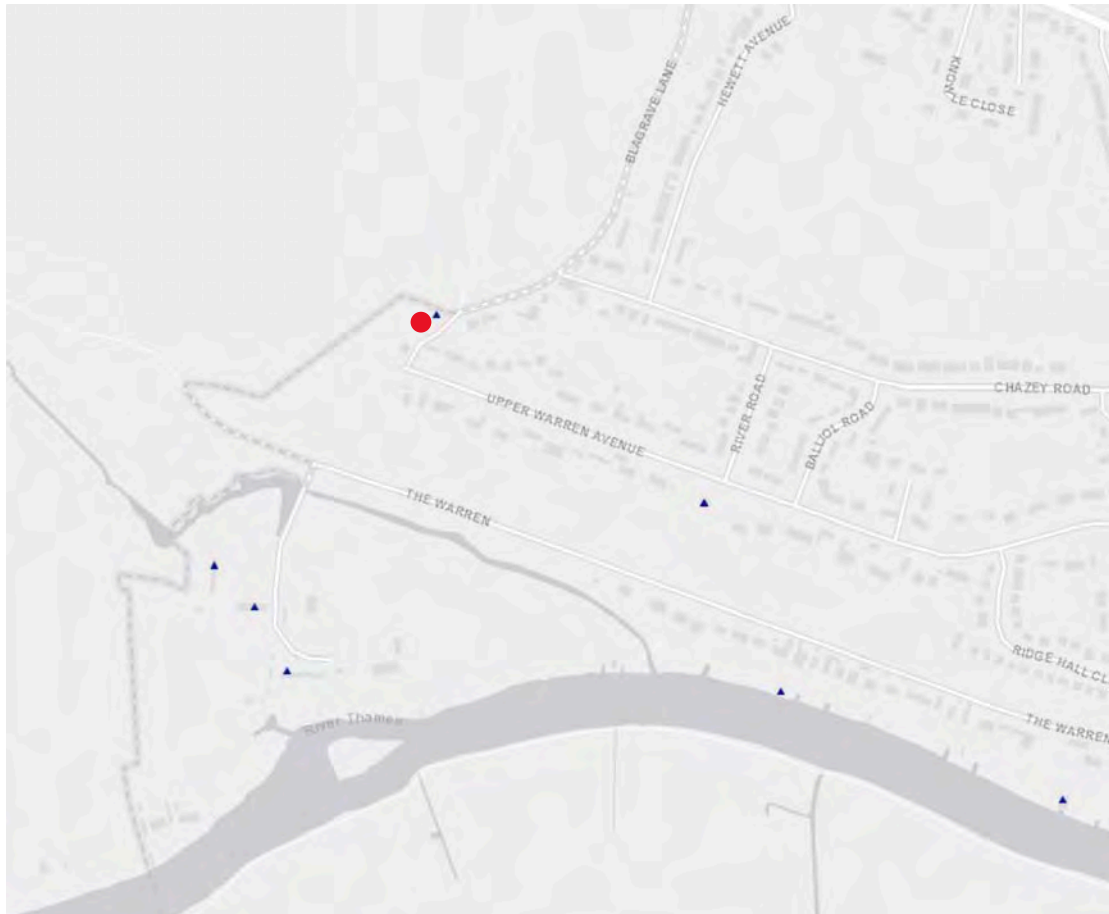


Fig 5: Image above from Historic England mapping. Site indicated with red dot.



Fig 6: Image above from Historic England mapping. Site indicated in red.

To the South of 3GHC, the only traditional buildings are a pair of attractive late Victorian or early Edwardian cottages, known as 1&2 Gravel Hill Cottages as shown in Figure 7, below. Due to the planting to the gardens and boundary between 3GHC and these two properties, there is no strong visual relationship between them. It is likely that both these and 3GHC were all originally inhabited by agricultural workers, in what then would have been a significantly more rural landscape.



Fig 7: Image above from Google Maps. View of 1&2 Gravel Hill Cottages from Blagrove Lane.

3GHC appears to be as described by the list description – a late C17 cottage, as evidenced by the fact that it has small panel box framing, has seemingly always been fully floored, and has end stack chimneys. It is also apparent that the cottage would have originally been thatched due to the steeply pitched roof.



Fig 8: The South-East elevation of 3 Gravel Hill Cottages, viewed from Blagrove Lane.

Whether the cottage was ever two dwellings when originally constructed, as suggested in the listing, is unclear. The arrangement of the staircase, between two closely positioned frames towards the centre of the house is suggestive of it only having been one dwelling, as there are no other areas where first floor access appears likely to have been taken through the first floor.

As seen in figure 8 above, the cottage is on one and a half stories in height, with a lean-to extension added to each end. That at the South-Western (left hand in figure 8) end is a modest projection to accommodate the large fireplace with a baffle entry porch to the roadside. The extension to the North-Eastern end (right hand side, figure 8) is a later twentieth century lean-to extension, which provides some sanitary accommodation. This is of a rather utilitarian quality.

The other notable feature of the building is the pair of prominent dormers. These are quite large and almost certainly represent additions from the time when the building was altered from thatch to a tiled roof, probably replacing earlier, lower, dormers in the same location.

The frame appears to be in reasonable condition, and there is a mixture of infill panels, some of which are brickwork, and some rendered. All are painted. The render is at least in part sand-cement, which is not breathable and not sympathetic to the timber frame. Some areas have become cracked or broken away, as shown in figure 9 below.



Fig 9: Section of blown render to the South-East elevation. Note modern masonry infill and the end of the first-floor joist behind.

Other issues with fabric externally include rotten joinery elements, predominantly in the form of window casements, a lack of flashings to some roof/wall and chimney junctions, and the concrete path against the external wall, which promotes damp.



Fig 10: South-West end elevation. Note the projection for the fireplace, with chimney above built as a separate stack against, but not attached to, the gable. The projection continues as the porch to the right-hand side. Above this the wall has been packed out and rendered.



Fig 11: North-West (rear) elevation.



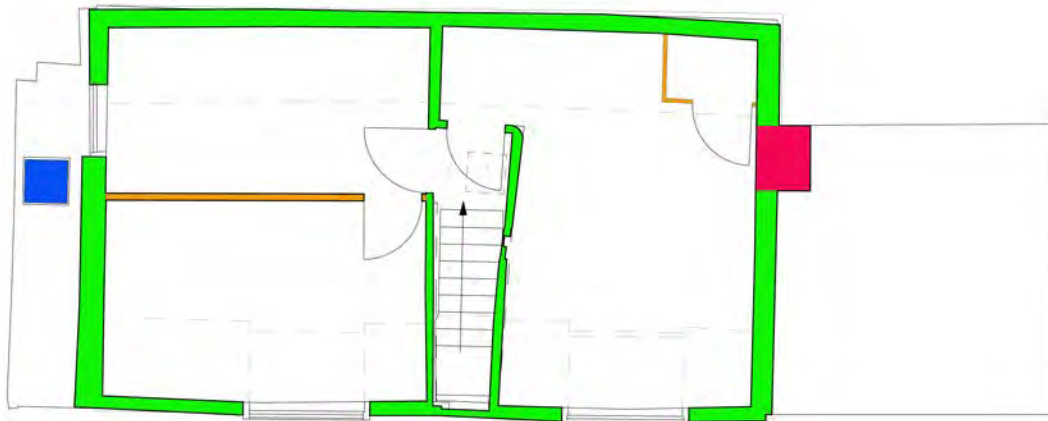
Fig 12: North-East elevation. Note again the packing-off and rendering of the gable.

Internally the plan form of the cottage is still recognisable, although it has suffered later subdivision in the creation of the separate Kitchen and Dining Rooms where there would formerly have been only one room, and also on the first floor to create two rooms out of one with a longitudinal partition.

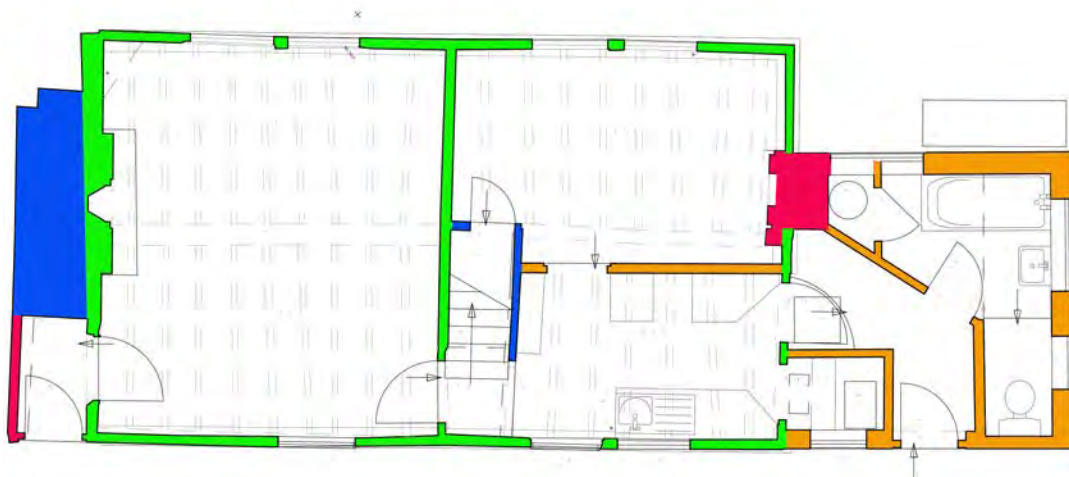
The wall between the Kitchen and Dining Room is of C20 fletton brickwork, and is set off centre to the original space, so that it does not rise beneath the central beam to the first floor.

The wall which divides one of the original first floor rooms into two is constructed of boards and rails, probably dating from the late Victorian or Edwardian period.

These have been marked on the illustrative plans in figure 13 below.



First Floor Plan



Ground Floor Plan

Fig 13: Indicative phasing plans, giving a suggested development of the parts of the building.
Green = C17, Blue = C18, Red = C19, Orange = C20. Please note this is not definitive, and there may be elements of later work within elements shown as being earlier phases. Not to scale.

It is considered likely that the chimneys were added at different times, with the larger external fireplace and stack to the South-Western elevation certainly being older than the small stack at the North-Eastern end, and if not original to the cottage then not being much later.

The South-Western stack has been closed down as is typical and now has a small fireplace opening, and a detracting C20 fire surround in decorative stone cladding. The upper section of the chimney has been rebuilt.

The North-Eastern stack is small in plan from the ground floor up, which suggests it is Victorian at the earliest.



Fig 14: Internal view of the Living Room and North-Eastern fireplace. Note also the exposed floor beam and joists to the first floor.



Fig 15: Internal view of the Dining Room and South-Western fireplace. Note damp to wall on left-hand side.

The axial, or bridging, beams to the first floor include chamfers and stops to their underside, indicating that they were always designed to be visible. The stops are of a type known as a 'step-stop' which was prevalent in the 16th and early 17th centuries.



Fig 16: View of step-stop to end of axial beam in Living Room.

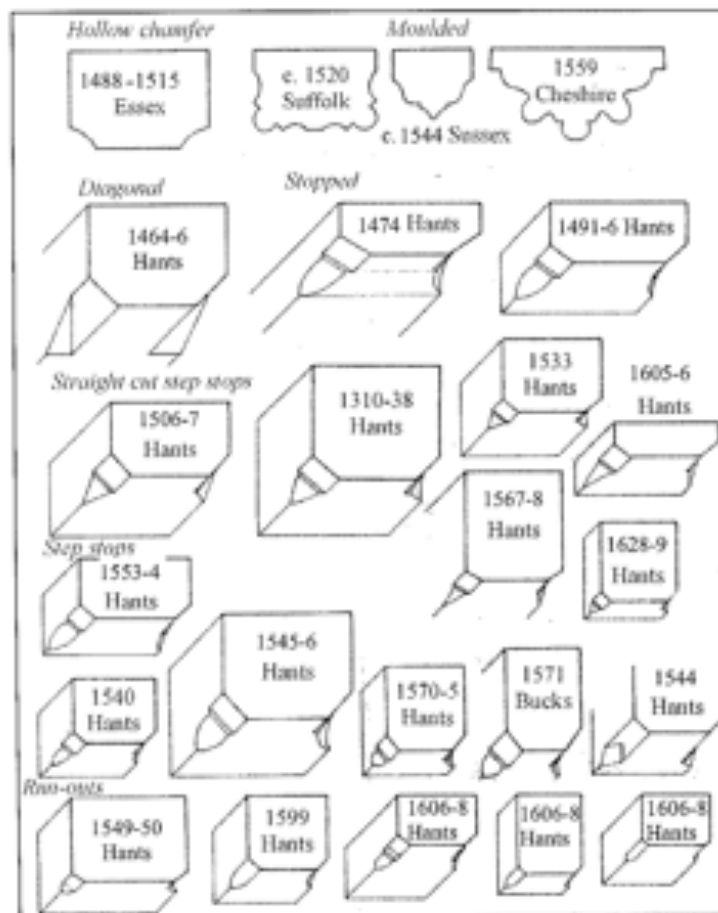


Fig 6.16a (left): Examples of joists with stops. An unusual lozenge-shaped stop occurs at 1544 Hants, while other joists of this date have simple run-outs. The latest example of chamfered and stopped joists in Hampshire occur in 1628-9, but unstopped chamfers can occur as late as 1686. An Essex house of 1488-1515 has large joists with hollow chamfers, and in the 16th century moulded joists may be used in the wealthiest houses, particularly in the towns. C1520 Suffolk and c1544 Sussex are wealthy town-houses, while Little Moreton Hall (1559 Cheshire) has massive moulded beams and joists in the parlour. The largest joists (top left) are 7 inches (177mm) wide, the smallest (bottom right) are 3½ inches (89mm).

Fig 17: Floor beams & joists – dated examples of step-stops, published in "Period House Fixtures & Fittings 1300-1900" by Linda Hall, Countryside Books, 2005.

The first floor is supported on very slender joists, the majority of which have been replaced with new hardwood joists in relatively recent times. A substantial number of the remainder are in a very poor condition and the first floor is extremely 'live' when walking on it. This floor has been considered unfit for use by a structural engineer.



Fig 18: View of Kitchen. Note modern dividing wall on left-hand side.



Fig 19: View of wall between Kitchen and Dining Room from Dining Room side. Note raised floor to Kitchen, which is one step higher than the rest of the ground floor.

The staircase is likely to be 18th century, although it rises between two narrowly spaced frames in a narrow bay, with the original timber frame elements visible. This is shown in figure 20 on the following page.



Fig 20: View of stair rising between two narrowly spaced frames.

Also of interest, several doors within the property have ironmongery which dates to around the 18th century. Hinges in particular can be dated in general terms by their slenderness and strap ends. These are shown in figures 21 and 22 below.



Figs 21 & 22: View of bedroom door illustrating 18th century hinges.



Fig 23: View of the later dividing wall between the two first floor bedrooms.



Fig 24: View of the underlying older floorboards to the first floor.

As shown in figure 24, the first floor within the larger bedroom has been over-boarded with a thin board. Beneath this are an older layer of hardwood boards which may be original.

Historic Mapping

Due to the limited nature of the works proposed, and the previous on-site pre application meeting, no commercially available historic mapping has been purchased. However, these have been viewed online and the following points noted.

On the earliest of the Ordnance Survey County Series for the site, surveyed over 1877 and 1878, 3GHC is shown with a modest wing projecting towards the lane from the North-Eastern end on the South-Eastern side of the building. At this date the only other nearby buildings are one further large building on the opposite side of the lane (now lost), and nearby Chazey Farm. None of the suburban contexts which exists today is present and the north bank of the Thames is devoid of buildings essentially as far towards Caversham as St. Peter's church.

By the next survey in 1897 the wing to 3GHC has been lost. The first of the large houses, Cliff House, has been constructed along the top of The Warren at the Caversham end.

The following 1910 survey is the first to show 1 and 2 GHC. By this time Upper Warren Avenue has been formally shown as more than a track, and the buildings along it are proliferating.

Proposed Development

The proposed works consist of alterations and repairs to the cottage and the demolition of the existing pre-cast concrete garage and poorly constructed garden storage buildings, and their proposed replacement with a timber framed double garage and log store.

These proposed alterations have been deliberately targeted to the later areas of the building, these being the Victorian, Edwardian, and C20 additions to the rear of the dwelling, so as to avoid harming those elements which have been recognized as of higher value and greater significance. The proposed alterations include:

- Internal alterations to the 20th century single storey lean-to extension to provide improved bathroom and utility spaces.
- Lowering of the raised floor to the Kitchen back to its original level, so as to improve the headroom.
- The Removal of the modern partition wall between the Kitchen and Dining Room in order to create a single Kitchen-Diner within the larger, original, space.
- The removal of the poor quality relatively modern first-floor partition between the two bedrooms, to remove the 'inner room' condition which does not comply with Building Regulations.
- Replacement of failing first-floor joists together with over-boardings to ensure safety of the floor for use, as recommended by the Structural Engineer.
- Removal of the unattractive stone-clad fireplace to the Living Room, and the opening up of the original fireplace in order to install a wood burner.
- Renewal of services.
- Repair of failing joinery, predominantly window casements, on a like-for-like basis.
- Installation of secondary glazing to improve thermal performance.
- Removal of the existing concrete path against the building and the installation of a French drain.
- Lowering of high ground level externally to reduce damp.

The existing concrete garage is detrimental to the setting of the heritage asset in terms of form and materials. From a functional perspective it is insufficiently sized to hold a modern motor car.

The proposed new timber framed garage has been sized according to current recommendations to enable its use for parking, and is of more appropriate materials and a traditional form. It also includes a small log store.

The proposals are described in detail on the drawings and Design Access Statement submitted with this application, and were also discussed with the Conservation Officer and Planning Officer.

Significance of the Place and Consideration of Harm

Following the desk-based assessment and on-site evaluation of the heritage assets, it is considered that the asset demonstrates the following nature of significance:

In all of the facets described below we have considered HISTORIC, EVIDENTIAL, and AESTHETIC values.

Consideration is then briefly given to whether any harm to an individual aspect may result from the proposals, before this is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Historic:

With regard to the wider landscape there is some level of historic significance to the asset. It is a traditional timber framed cottage set within a rural landscape, albeit one to which the suburban edge has now expanded to meet it on one side. Its position and age demonstrate historic land usage and parcels.

This now manifests itself through a number of facets, including evidentially by way of extant structures, boundaries, routes, and remains, and aesthetically through the relatively intact relationship between the buildings and places they create, which give a clear picture of traditional English landscape. Even with the modern housing to the South-East, the cottage and the farmland maintain a rural feel and lend this to the surrounding properties to some degree.

When considering the asset in particular, no specific historic events or connections are known beyond their valuable contribution to the aspects considered under the wider landscape in general.

As the proposals here relate to modest alterations, generally to the later elements of the building, and the replacement of an unsightly concrete garage with a more muted and complementary structure, it is not considered that any significance under this aspect would be harmed by the proposals.

Extent of Fabric: All

Level of Importance: Medium

Use:

The existing dwelling was constructed as such, and remains in domestic use. The continued use of the building as a residential property secures its future and its value is perpetuated in this regard.

Evidentially the timber framed element in particular is significant in demonstrating the technology which was historically used to construct buildings for this use type, and its strong aesthetic is characteristic of this.

Notwithstanding the above, it is not particularly exceptional in any way that has been recognised.

As this will not change no harm is considered to be done to this aspect of significance.

Extent of Fabric: All

Level of Importance: Medium

Architectural:

The building is not an example of any high form of architecture in an artistic sense, but is valuable evidentially and aesthetically in demonstrating construction and technology (everyday architecture) from history, as characteristic to a rural landscape.

Historically, it is interesting in demonstrating not only the underlying structure and age of the land use here, but particularly so given the creep of the development of Caversham along the North bank of the Thames.

The minor nature of the proposals, and their location away from the more historic elements of the building or removal of later elements minimize any harm to this facet. The removal of the jarring modern concrete garage and its replacement with a more suitable structure, is seen as beneficial.

Extent of Fabric: Form and construction (in part)

Level of Importance: Medium

Setting:

The setting of the asset is important in the broadest sense, in that it was built to inhabit a rural landscape, with the residents doubtless originally working the land.

As mentioned previously, the character of the setting has changed substantially, particularly throughout the 20th century, with the extension of the edge of Caversham along the North bank of the Thames. Whilst in a sense this has degraded the setting, especially with the rather basic late 20th century houses on the opposite side of the lane, but equally it has meant the value of the cottage has become more important in this setting as a reminder of the past, and a key element which reinforces the former rural nature of it.

However, there is no known specific significance to the exact nature of its position beyond the proximity of Gravel Hill, which gives the cottage its name.

In common with that aspect above, the removal of the unsightly concrete garage and its replacement with a more suitable type of traditional structure is considered to be beneficial.

It is not felt that this aspect of significance would be harmed by any element of the proposals.

Extent of Fabric: All

Level of Importance: Low

Location:

No particular significance is recognised with respect to location. However, one could suggest that the cottage and its construction are evidentially demonstrative of constructional techniques and aesthetics of rural housing from the 17th century in this location. In that respect it has some significance in understanding the local vernacular.

Extent of Fabric: All

Level of Importance: Low

Artistic:

In terms of high art, there are no recognised elements within the application site to be considered here.

The forms of the building itself, and any features it has being 'architectural' rather than high art.

Extent of Fabric: None

Level of Importance: None

Cultural:

Culturally the asset is significant in giving some level of tangibility to the tradition, context, and social memory of English rural life in the Thames valley.

The older elements of the building in particular, but also its position in the landscape are all woven into the character of the people who have historically lived and worked here, and their descendants or visitors who now come to the area.

This aspect of significance will not be harmed by the proposed alterations, or the addition of the new garage building.

Extent of Fabric: All

Level of Importance: Medium

Archaeological:

There is known archaeological interest.

Extent of Fabric: Site

Level of Importance: None known

Contents:

There are no contents of any significance.

Extent of Fabric: None

Level of Importance: None

Impact of development

Consideration of Issues & Basis for Judgement

Consideration has been given to assess all areas of recognised and possible significance, and this information has been taken into account when deciding where interventions may be made.

The assessment has demonstrated several facets of medium significance. These predominantly relate to the older core of the building, where the timber framed elements remain.

Balancing the need for modest changes to the building in areas with little or no significance in order to provide a dwelling which will continue to be desirable and be kept well maintained are important for the longevity of the asset, whilst minimising any harm.

The removal of the concrete framed garage and poor quality structures around it is considered to be beneficial and will undo earlier harm. A house of this type and size requires a useable garage building, but careful thought as to the materiality and siting of the new building, so that it does not detract from the asset is important.

The proposals have been developed in light of the above considerations, and are minimal in terms of extent and targeted to those areas where the least harm will be done.

Conclusions

The proposals will add to the usefulness and desirability of this historic home, continuing its use into a new era.

The proposals for the dwelling are all to later elements, with no impact on the historic timber framed parts which are of greatest significance. This minimises harm, and also keeps other elements such as heavily serviced rooms (such as the Utility and Bathroom) out of conflict with the older fabric where service routes would be required to be found.

The removal of the modern pre-cast concrete garage will undo harm, and the replacement timber framed garage will be more suitable.

Given the scope of impacts described above, and the consideration of the proposals to those areas of significance to these adjacent assets and their setting, we hope that you will be able to support this application.