



PLANNING HERITAGE

Conservation Planning Consultancy



HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

Project: 38-40 Oxford Road & 3-5 Cheapside, Reading

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1.1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this assessment of Nos. 38/40 Oxford Road and Nos.3/5 Cheapside, Reading is to provide a baseline understanding of the architectural and historical interest of the building. Archival research has been limited by current lockdown restrictions, which has prohibited access to the local and county archives.

The report supports an application for the repurposing of the building's upper levels for residential use whilst retaining the commercial uses on the ground floor. The report shows the scheme builds upon the previous approvals granted (091455/FUL and 091456/LBC) in which a similar layout was proposed.

The assessment was carried out by Gregory Beale, IHBC, RTPI, Planning Heritage Limited.

1.2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The focus of this report is to examine and assess the impact of the proposed development of the building upon the historic significance of the listed building. The assessment also considers the contribution the building makes to the street scene and wider views from the adjoining areas within the town.

This assessment has been made following a pre-application meeting with the Authority (Ref: 201459/PREAPP) in which the Council's view was that the principle of development for residential use will be able to be justified from a land use perspective however as with any listed building application, consideration must be given as to how the proposed works would impact the historic fabric of the listed building.

This report sets out a robust assessment of the character of both the building and its location, whilst considering what contribution the site makes in context to the wider area.

The conclusion of that assessment is the site can accommodate the proposed works and the resultant change in appearance will not be harmful or detrimental to the building or the surrounding urban landscape.

The existing building dates from the early C20 and was erected following the clearance of earlier properties. Architecturally reflects the elaborate designs of the late Victorian/early Edwardian periods that are found in the centre the town and it does play a part in forming a part of the strong visual element of the commercial area in Reading and in this regard it contributes to the visual significance of the wider streetscape. It is typical for the period in which it was built.

The proposed plans seek to extend the building at the rear to allow for a connection to the adjacent property and create better circulation with the upper levels as part of the works to repurpose the accommodation for residential use. In this regard, the works proposed will provide a viable use and improve and enhance the property, this being the key test as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework in determining applications that may affect heritage assets.

Key Findings:

The key findings include:

- The scheme will provide a building of quality and one that visually contributes to the architectural diversity of the location;
- The conversion of the upper floors will provide a viable use and one for which it was original designed;
- The proposed scheme is similar to that previously approved;
- The proposals will not cause substantial harm or loss to the listed building.

2.1 CONTEXT

The site has had a continuous history of commercial and retail, with the existing building having replaced the original C19 properties in the early C20. Unfortunately the property has remained vacant on the upper floors for the last c.20 years and the original residential units of the building are in a very dilapidated condition.

The site comprises Nos.38-40 Oxford Road and 3-5 Cheapside located on the northern side of Oxford Road at the corner with Cheapside. The site occupies an important corner plot on the Oxford Road towards the western end of the town centre. The Oxford Road was formerly Pangbourne Road or Lane as it emerged from the town centre to the west. Historically, the land either side of Oxford Road were a mix of fields and market gardens, interspersed with the occasional larger property for the wealthier families of Reading. During the 1800s, the land between the Oxford Road and Castle Hill to the south, which had been market gardens and nurseries began to be developed as a residential area as the town expanded. The housing was mixed with properties for all classes. Today, the area is defined by the mix of largely C20 commercial properties including the Broad Street Mall, Travel Lodge and PentaHotel buildings.

A major influence on the development of this land had been the Berks & Hants railway which opened in 1847, which acted as the stimulus for the building along the Oxford Road up to, and then beyond, the Reading West railway bridge. Until the development of the railway, much of the land either side of the Oxford Road was agricultural. At the start of the C19, the land either side of Oxford Road (then also known as Pangbourne Road or Lane) were a mix of fields and market gardens, interspersed with the occasional larger property for the wealthier families of Reading. A grid of streets gradually infilled the whole area between the two main roads.

By the early 1850s, two-storey shops mixed with earlier residential terraces had largely filled the Oxford Road frontage between Howard Street and Prospect Street. By the end of the C19 Reading's elite started to relocate away from the town centre and



1. The Oxford Road c.1910; the McIlroy store and the application site

plots began to be subdivided or large houses demolished to make way for new developments of smaller properties. This was a period which also witnessed the redevelopment of the commercial properties along the Oxford Road, of which the

application site was one. The redevelopment along the Oxford Road in the late C19/ early C20 saw larger Victorian buildings replacing smaller individual premises. The cartographic evidence shows Cheapside created c.1900, when it is first shown on the OS maps. The William McIlroy department store was opened in 1903 and the photographic evidence shows Cheapside was still being developed well in the late 1920s.

The application site forms part of an eclectic group of commercial properties, taking its architectural references from the earlier McIlroy department store building opposite, which originally was more elaborate with stepped gables, brackets, corbels and ornate brickwork and known as the 'Crystal Palace of Reading'. The department store closed in 1955 by which time the ground floor was a parade of shops with offices on the upper floors. The upper floors fell into disrepair after the 1970s.

Unlike, the former McIlroy department store building, the application site has not been remodelled and it retains many of its original external details, including the distinctive stepped corner gable with terracotta decoration above the third floor windows and external stacks which rise up the main elevations from the upper levels.

Today, the Oxford Road remains a primary route in/out of the centre to the west and is heavily utilised by both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, now primarily buses. It is defined by both its busy use and its diversity of cultures, which is reflected in the shops lining the main road. A search of on-line available Street Directories dating from 1899-1914 gives an insight to the variety of businesses using the buildings.

In 1902 prior to the construction of the current buildings, the properties fronting the Oxford Road were occupied by commercial businesses which included at No. 42 Henry James Aberly, second hand clothes dealer; in No. 40 and No. 38 formerly the Pioneer Drug Store of Cross and Company, with dental surgery above; No. 36 Francis John Reading, tailor; the corner of Cheapside (formerly called The Vinery), with the new department store of William McIlroy Ltd. nearing completion at No. 34. 1900-1909.

By 1914 the present buildings had been built and the directories list No.1 as the Bromo Art Co photographers; No.3a Cheapside as being the address for three occupants; Mrs Felgate, Sidney Montague (artificial teeth manufacturer) and Richard Bancroft; No.5 was the Misfit & Secondhand Clothing Co., whilst No.38 Oxford Road was the address of the Snowflake Laundry (receiving office) and No.40 was John Brown cycle and motorcycle works.

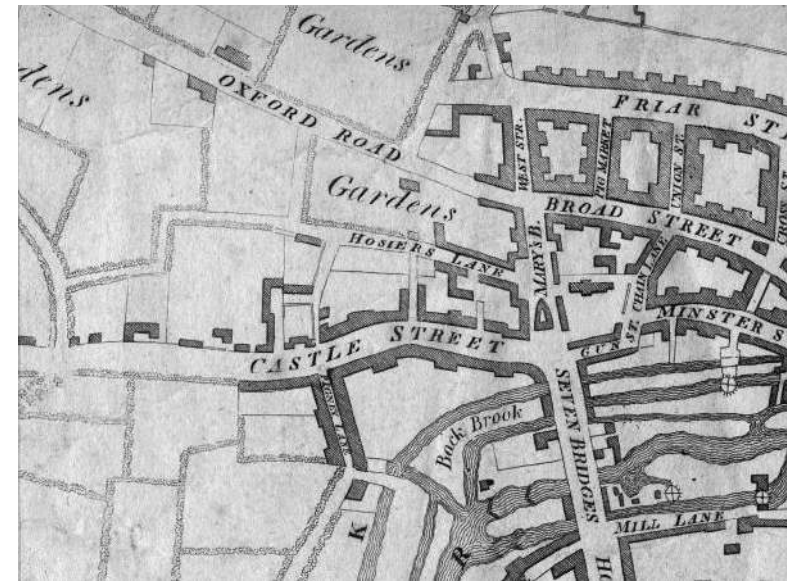


Fig.i: Extract from John Man's Map of Reading 1813



Fig. ii: Extract from 1879 1st Edition OS map



Fig.iii: Extract from 1900 OS map



Fig.iv: Extract from 1912 OS Map



Fig.v: Extract from 1934 OS map

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Fig.vi: 1914 advertisement in Kelly's Directory; the Snowflake Laundry, Oxford Road

2.2 BUILDING ASSESSMENT

The buildings date from c.1904-10. Photographic evidence shows the McIlroy department store was developed before the application site and that the application site was previously smaller two storey Late C18-early C19 properties.

No.3-5 Cheapside is listed and was first included upon the statute list in December 1978. The description states: **Nos 3 to 7 (odd) SU 7173 SW 2/430 II 2. Including No 38 Oxford Road. Circa 1900. Architects, Joseph Morris and Son. 6 bays corner site. 3 1/2 storeys. Dutch stepped gables to attic dormers. English bond grey brick with red brick or terracotta dressings, transom and lintel level bands and moulded strings to crow steps; terracotta decoration and relieving arches to 2 larger gables. Parapet. Tiled roof. 4 off-ridge chimneys, one to right of corner gable is an external stack, corbelled and with an applied corbelled red brick diagonal shaft. Tall gable of 4 lights on corner, with 3 light gable to left and a group of 3 gables 2-3-2 lights to right, at far end is a wide 5-light gable with coped verge and sash ends. 1st and 2nd floor windows have decorative lintels, moulded transoms and fluted mullions. 4 lights to corner bay; Oxford Road bay has an angled bay flanked by single lights. Two 5-light oriels to Cheapside flanking a 5-light window on 2nd floor, pattern revised on 1st floor with bracketed hood over. Outer bay plainer. Heavy kidney shaped rainwater heads. Modern ground floor shop premises retaining former fascia.**

The original Edwardian buildings have ornate external detailing with notable stepped gables and external projecting stacks, in contrast to the plain appearance of the interior accommodation. The available documentary sources indicate the present buildings were constructed c.1904-10. As discussed in this report, Cheapside was formed c.1900 as part of a wider redevelopment of the town and the present application site was built c.1905-10 to a design that appears to have taken its architectural references from the McIlroy building.

The available records show the present building with its distinctive stepped gables and external projecting stacks. The ornate exterior is a stark contrast to the plain appearance of the interiors, which have little in the way of detailing. The longterm vacancy of the residential accommodation has not been kind to the property with many features being damaged. The inspection has shown that the planform has evolved with rooms being knocked through and features such as fireplaces being boarded over or removed.

Access to the upper floors of the property is now served by a single staircase with its access onto Cheapside. The main staircase within No.38 Oxford Road the property facing the corner of Cheapside and Oxford Road, has been removed at ground level.

The accommodation would have originally provided living space for the shop keepers, although later these were converted into offices with a number alterations to the room plan being carried out. More recently their vacancy has led to the buildings having been occupied for anti-social uses. The current condition of the apartments means they are no longer habitable. The longterm lack of maintenance has also impacted upon the fabric.

The inspection revealed that where domestic fittings survive, many are later additions dating from the 1920-50s and although of some interest in themselves they are of little quality. More recent additions dating from the buildings use as offices such as WCs and kitchenettes, have no merit. Other features including fireplaces have been removed or boarded over, although a kitchen range survives in one blocked up fireplace. A single kitchen dresser also survives, albeit missing elements such as. The original bathrooms do not survive. The fenestration is typical for its period with sash windows of one over one with heavy central mullions to accommodate the boxes. The original doors are of a four panelled style with finger plates and Bakelite fittings, where they survive, otherwise a number doors have been replaced with standard 6 panelled fire doors.

The overall assessment has shown the rooms are generally modest and devoid of decorative features or fixtures and as noted, the main staircase in the No.38 has been removed at ground level, thus severing the access to the shop below. The bannisters are square with a splat bannister with cut-out triangle pattern to add decoration, the newel posts have caps. The detailing of the main staircase is replicated on the back straight flight, which is proposed for removal. The main staircase was lit by a ventilation cover/sky light which has been boarded over. This would have provided natural light into this area of the property.

One room has been decorated in with carpet squares and off-cuts, which gives it a somewhat colourful appearance.

A modern link has been formed to connect No.38 through to No.40 Oxford Road to the property facing Oxford Road. There is a considerable difference in levels between the buildings, necessitating a stepped access between the two properties.

It is interesting to note the extent of damage and decay since applications 091455/FUL and the corresponding LB application 091456/LBA were considered by the Authority.



2. The application site; EPW022700 ENGLAND (1928)



3. The application site; EAW034975 ENGLAND (1951)



4. Military parade February 1942 showing the application site



5. Nos.38-40 Oxford Road and Nos.3-5 Cheapside



7. The shop front and access to the apartments



6. Nos. 3-5 Cheapside



8. The access staircase



9. First Floor; main reception



10. First Floor; main reception



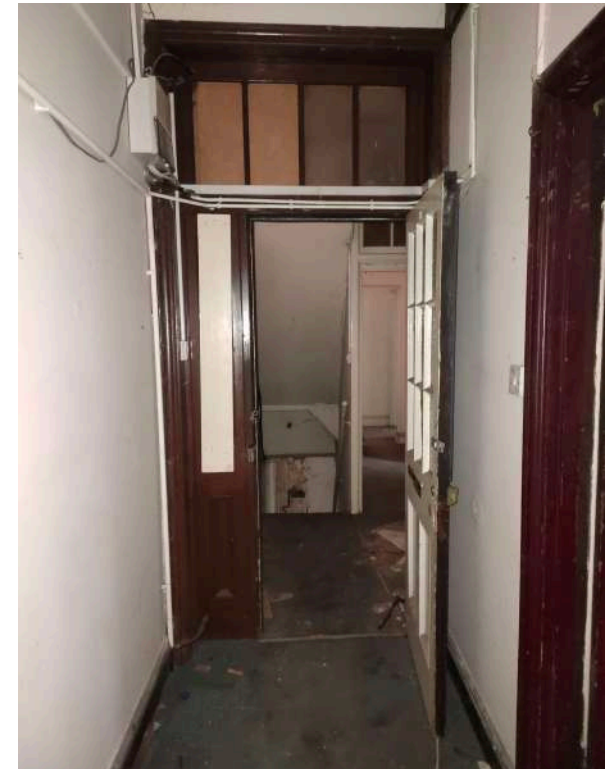
11. First Floor; room 1.10 on plan



12. First floor; kitchen



13. First floor lobby



14. First floor entrance into Oxford Road flat



15. Second floor; main office with knock through



16. Second floor; former front room



17. Second floor; access through to No.40 Oxford Road



18. Second floor; link to offices



19. Second floor; office room 2.3 on plans



20. Second Floor; room 2.1 on plan



21. Second floor; fireplace in room 2.1



22. Second floor kitchenette in lobby area



23. Third floor; room 3.7 on plan



24. Third floor; window in corner gable room 3.6 on plan



25. Room 1.10 fireplace



26. Blocked and remove fireplace room 1.7



27. Room 1.10 later wardrobe with picture rail running through back



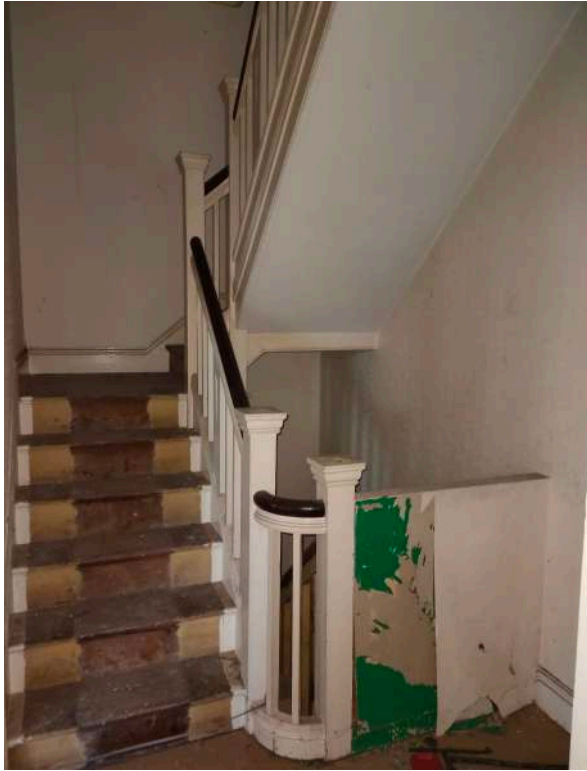
28. Room 1.7 cupboard



29. Kitchen range room 1.7



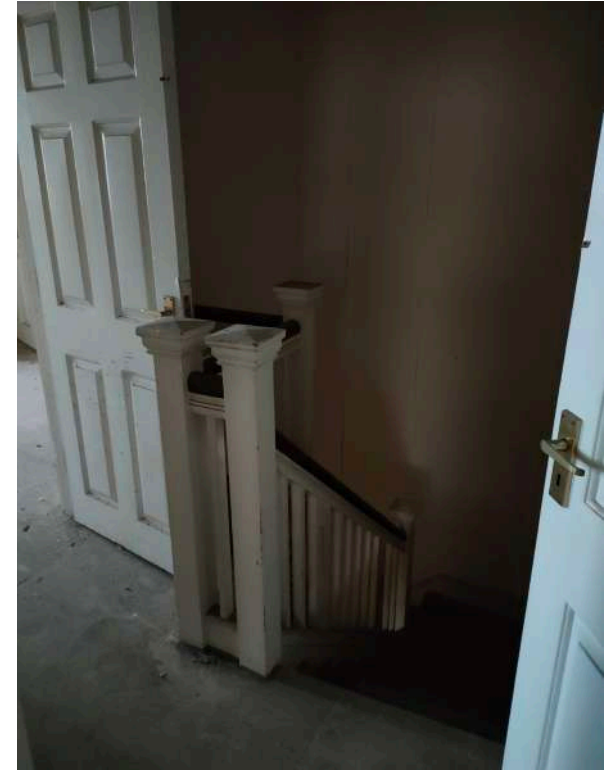
30. Kitchen dresser room 1.7



31. First floor; main staircase, No.38 Oxford Road with lower flight removed



32. Third floor staircase with skylight/ventilation shaft.



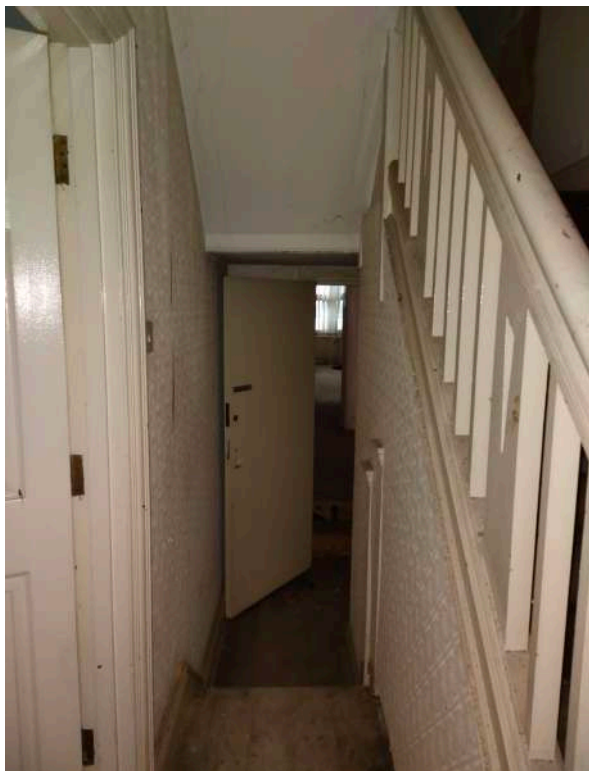
33. Third floor; main staircase



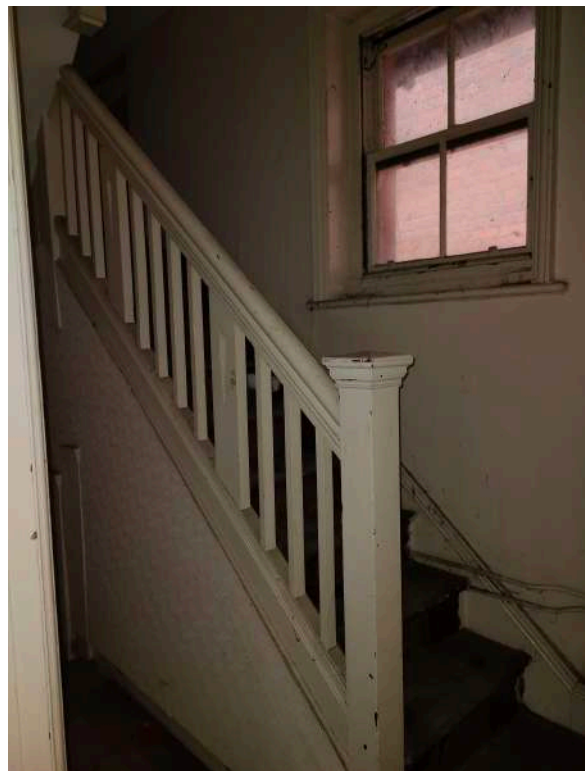
34. Third floor main staircase skylight



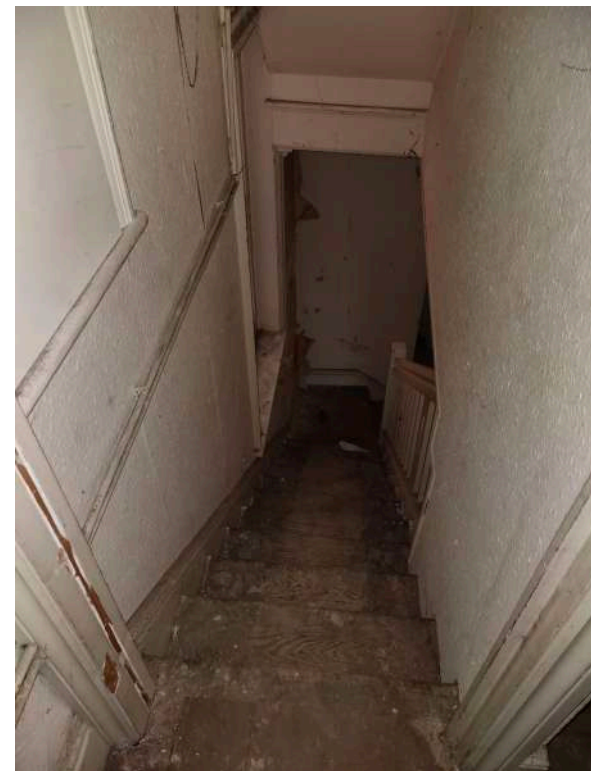
35. Staircase detailing



36. Straight staircase in Nos. 3-5 Cheapside



37. First floor; straight staircase



38. Second floor; straight staircase

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Significance can be defined as the *'value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest'*. Significance is unique to a place and it is vital to identify this, as the aim of conservation is to sensitively manage change to a place to ensure that its significance is protected, and also revealed, reinforced and enhanced at every possible opportunity.

In this case, an assessment must be made of the building and the contribution that it may make, if any to the understanding of the site and the area.

3.2 THE ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This assessment of significance has been informed by on-site investigation combined with on-line archival research restricted by the limitations of the CV19 lockdown. Notwithstanding those limitations, useful information was uncovered in the form of the photographs that allowed for a better understanding of the history of the property and the development of the land around the application site.

Many heritage values are recognised by the statutory designation and regulation of significant places.

In statutory terms, the building is listed but it is not located within a Conservation Area .

This designation provides a formal statement of the architectural and/or historical interest of the site and its local value. However, it is essential to go beyond this view to arrive at a deeper understanding of its values and significances that considers more than matters architectural-historical and identifies nuances in levels of significance. This ensures that decisions regarding both day-to-day and long-term management take into account the values that contribute to its significance.

3.3 ELEMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the property is primarily derived from the architectural treatment of the corner façade. The building's architectural design is one that makes a positive contribution to the streetscape, however its interior is not one that is of significance other than it has traces of its former residential use. It is unfortunate that through its use as offices and the subsequent uses for illicit purposes, the interior has been altered and vandalised.

The assessment of significance carried out highlights that although the property has a distinctive appearance and is of some scale and size, it is one in which it is the exterior that is of relevance to the architecture of the town and it is that give the property its importance. The quality and extent of the surviving features internally is not good or of high significance. The interior has had effectively been stripped of any features of note and where some survive they are modest and typical examples of their style and type. This has resulted in the internal character being devoid of historic note or interest.

It is however, accepted the architectural treatment of the building and its relationship to the corner does add to the character of the streetscene and the photographic evidence indicates that much of the architectural detailing on the front façade is historic/original.

3.4 STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the property has been diminished by the level of alteration to the interior and the loss of many interior fittings and fixtures. This has been further impact upon by the somewhat characterless room plan, which itself was modified to accommodate the office use on the upper floors.

The external façades with their decorative appearance and the notable stepped gable facing the corner that make a positive contribution.

Internally, the building does not reflect its Edwardian origins, having been stripped of original features and decoration, with the exception of small areas.

The property by virtue of its size and location, is a notable building in the streetscape, however, the vacancy over the last decades has made it a liability and as cut its repurposing for residential accommodation would bring about significant benefits, not least its reuse.

In short, this building is representative of Reading's commercial development but it is a building that has been severely compromised by the loss of use and the damage done to the interior.

HERITAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

4.1 CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT OF THE SITE

The scheme has been worked on following the advice received from a pre-application request in which the Authority stated the **alterations are similar to the previously approved schemes 091455/FUL and 091456/LBC in this respect. These alterations have been discussed with the Council's Heritage Officer who, having undertaken a site visit 7 December 2020, is largely supportive of the proposals to bring the building back in to use and to help preserve the building which has only been partially occupied for an extended period of time.**

Previously approved schemes (091455/FUL and 091456/LBC) that sought to convert the building in a manner similar to that proposed and this scheme seeks to mirror those approvals in terms of a number of changes including the removal of the secondary staircase in the Cheapside properties. A rear extension is proposed to facilitate better linkage to the adjacent property and although an addition to the built form, it is one that is not easily visible and it would enhance the connections rather than detract from the property.

With regard to the application site, the urban landscape has evolved and is typical of a C20 approach to city redevelopment rather than being representative of the C19 commercial town that it was. Today the application site is one of the few buildings that reflect the ornate brickwork of commercial buildings within the town centre.

The significance or merit of the application site has been compromised by the lack of use. However, by converting it to residential use it will withstand the uncertainty of retaining commercial tenants and as such it will contribute to the vitality of the town centre. The principle of a mixed use building means the site can contribute to the society that live and work in the town. The development of the site will bring enhancement and create an integrated part of a developing townscape.

This section acknowledges the proposals will change certain aspects of the interior plan, however these are based upon previously approved scheme of conversion that was not implemented. The changes relate primarily to the interior spaces and with the only external changes affecting the rear elevations that are obscured from public view points, this preserving the primary elevations.

The change proposed by this development will allow for the properties to be repurposed as dwellings on the upper levels thus introducing opportunities for urban living which in turn brings vibrancy to the town centre and will reflect the reuse of the McIlroy Building opposite. This will bring about positive change to the building and one without detriment to the architectural interest of the junction.

The design philosophy required careful consideration of many facets including the historic environment, the existing environment, design and street layout in order to ensure that the development would not harm the wider townscape or those heritage assets that are adjacent to the property.

In assessing the impact of the proposal upon the wider setting, consideration of how it relates to the streetscene was undertaken. The setting of a building or historic townscape are the surroundings in which it is experienced and it is this that makes an important contribution to the quality of the specific environment. Elements of a townscape and thus the setting can often make a positive contribution to the significance of an asset.

In the case of the application site it continues to make a visual impact upon the streetscene and the town and this will be enhanced through the occupancy of the upper floors, which for so long have remained vacant. The site will continue to contribute to the streetscene in that it forms part of a group of early C20 buildings which define the junction of Cheapside and the Oxford Road at the western end of the commercial town centre. In this respect its contribution can be said to be a positive one.

In this regard, the development will not harm or cause the loss of significance to the heritage asset.

4.2 IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED WORKS

With regard to the existing property, it is apparent that the building has been vacant formally years and its condition has deteriorated since approval for a similar scheme was given in 1997.

This section seeks to demonstrate that the proposals will not cause harm to the character or appearance of the conservation area.

An assessment of the building and location including the areas of commercial properties along Oxford Road and in part Cheapside, was carried out as well as consideration of the location and the local environment, in order to understand the significance of the heritage asset (the conservation area) and whether that significance would be harmed or adversely affected by the proposed redevelopment of the site.

In considering the level of perceived harm to a heritage asset, a scheme must seek to deliver a scheme that through the proposed changes does not cause harm of where it does occur, that harm is outweighed by public benefit. It is apparent that in regard to this application, the exterior will remain largely unaffected and where change is proposed the Authority have stated it is acceptable. The internal changes, which are based upon previously approved alterations will create 6 dwellings that will provide much needed residential space within the town centre and in this regard, there is an opportunity for significant benefit.

The proposed scheme will provide contemporary apartments of an appropriate scale/size that are entirely suitable in this location, with the added benefit of doing so in an attractive building that contributes positively to the streetscape and the junction.

Throughout the design process, the design philosophy has been to seek to convert the upper floors in away that will provide suitable accommodation without compromising the building as a whole. These buildings original were designed to have modest residential accommodation and the scheme proposed will continue that with a modicum of alteration.

It is a scheme that ensures the building's architectural interest is not harmed and it one that continues to contribute to the wider location, preserving the appearance whilst enhancing the character of the street by overcoming the issue of vacancy.

The conclusion of this analysis is that the development will introduce positive changes that are complimentary and which will enhance the use of these properties.

4.3 THE ISSUE OF PRINCIPLE

The principle of the work needs to be considered in light of the need to provide a residential accommodation on the upper floors of this building in a manner that provides viable accommodation which does not harm the heritage asset or indeed the wider streetscape. The scheme, which the Authority considered largely acceptable at the pre-application stage will provide both town centre residential accommodation as well as continued retail accommodation on the ground floor, all of which can be considered to have a positive effect upon the character and appearance of the heritage asset.

Accepting that when assessing harm there is in effect a scale from none to substantial and in the short term there will be a degree of change/visual effect. However, in weighing any harm caused by such change against the benefits, the development will provide new and much needed residential and retail facilities, whilst undertaking full programme of renovation to the listed building.

In this regard, it is a scheme that could be considered to trigger NPPF paragraph 196 as a result of the proposed internal changes, accepting its integrity as a historic building will not be lost as whole. However in addressing the harm or impact of those change upon the character, the proposed scheme will bring about public benefit in the form addressing the vacancy issue by creating a viable mixed use building within the town centre with more suitable, small scale retail/commercial accommodation. Notwithstanding this, should it be considered a level of harm does arise, the benefits arising from the proposal would overcome any perception of such harm to the architectural interest of the building and the wider context or the setting of the town.

5.1 CONCLUSION

This reports seeks to highlight the historic significance of the building and sets out a series of key issues that are important considerations when assessing the proposal to redevelop the site, returning it to one a mixed use building.

The building has undergone a programme of repair to the front elevation and these works will provide further repair and renovation to the external appearance through the works. Thos works will enhance it external appearance whilst also repurposing the interior for modern living accommodation.

The assessment revealed the architectural interest is to be found in the exterior appearance whilst the interior is modest and somewhat plain. It is the exterior elevations fronting Oxford Road and Cheapside that make a positive contribution, whilst interiors are at best indicative of their period but hold little of interest other than what is typical of the Edwardian era. It is a building that suffered from vacancy and the associated damage caused by previous occupants. The inspection of the property highlighted that where some features survive, they do not survive in the quantity, quality or to the extent that they portray a complete or intact example of an early C20 mixed use property comprising living accommodation over the associated shop.

The proposed scheme provides an opportunity to enhance both the building and the wider town, undoing the harm caused by continued longterm vacancy and associated dereliction of the site. This is a scheme that builds on a previous consent to enable a sympathetic adaptation of the living accommodation that will provide a viable and active use for the upper floors whilst maintain the commercial premises on the ground floor. It is one that should seen as bringing about benefit to the town as a whole.