

Heritage Statement



The Oracle, Reading

On behalf of Hammerson PLC

January 2019

Project Ref: 1966B

Project Number:	1966B
Authored by:	Jen Coates
Reviewed by:	Jon Lowe and Jonathan Edis
Date:	January 2019
Document version	M:\HC\Projects\Projects 1501- 2000\Projects 1901-2000\1966 - Oracle shopping centre, Reading\1966B\Reports\2019.01.24 The Oracle HS (Signage) Final.docx

CONTENTS

PAGE NO.

1.0	INTRODUCTION	4
2.0	SITE AND BUILDING DESCRIPTIONS	6
3.0	RELEVANT HERITAGE POLICY AND GUIDANCE	11
4.0	IMPACT OF PROPOSALS	16
5.0	CONCLUSIONS	19

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This heritage statement has been prepared by Heritage Collective on behalf of The Oracle Shopping Centre Ltd. The shopping centre was built in the 1990s and is not listed or of heritage value. The building partially sits within the St Marys Butts/ Castle Street Conservation Area and is adjacent to several grade II listed buildings, the grade I listed St Marys Church and the Market Place/ London Street Conservation Area.
- 1.2 The proposed works are for new signage to the Oracle Shopping Centre. The proposed signs are shown/ described within the Design and Access Statement and illustrated in the submitted drawings accompanying the planning application.
- 1.3 Due to the limited nature of the proposals, not all of these designated heritage assets have the potential to be affected by a change within their setting. This assessment extends to St Mary Butts Conservation Area, 7-15 Gun Street (listed grade II) The George Hotel (listed grade II) and the setting of Market Place/ London Street Conservation Area.

Scope of the Assessment

- 1.4 This statement assesses the effect of the proposed development on the significance of the designated heritage assets within the vicinity of the Oracle Shopping Centre resulting from change within their setting. In doing so the statement enables Reading Borough Council to understand and determine the effect of the works on the significance of the identified heritage assets.

Background

- 1.5 Pre-application advice was sought from Reading Borough Council on the proposals and their perceived effect on heritage assets. The feedback from the Council was that a Heritage Statement was required to '*persuade officers that the proposed location is in-fact appropriate*' and will not affect the setting of the buildings on Gun Street. The other signage was not considered to have an effect on any heritage assets.

- 1.6 Heritage Collective are familiar with the area, heritage assets and the application site having previously visited the site in May 2015 when a Heritage Statement in support of the application for the Oracle Shopping Centre management suite proposals was prepared.

2.0 SITE AND BUILDING DESCRIPTIONS

- 2.1 This chapter of the assessment identifies the site and the designated heritage assets adjacent to the proposal site which could be affected by the signage.

The Site

- 2.2 The Oracle Shopping Centre is located in the town centre, it was built in the 1990s and is a large development on previous industrial and transport related ground, flanking the River Kennet immediately to the south of the town centre. Although the vast majority of the building is outside St Mary Butts Conservation Area, the proposed signage will be within the conservation area boundary.

Adjacent Designated Heritage Assets

- 2.3 The close spatial relation of buildings within this part of the town means there are several listed buildings where the setting could be affected by the proposals. Due to the high number of listed buildings on Gun Street these have been grouped together, with a brief description taken from the National Heritage List.¹

St Mary Butts Conservation Area

- 2.4 The following assessment of character and appearance has been taken from the St Marys Butts/ Castle Street Conservation Area Appraisal (2008):
- 2.5 The conservation area was designated in 1972. Its special interest is from its position at the Saxon Centre of Reading at the Cross Roads of the main east-west and north-south routes through the town, just north of an original crossing point over the river.
- 2.6 The architectural interest of the area is derived from the street scene which is comprised of two and three storey buildings dating mainly from the 16th – 18th century. These buildings are largely of brick design and reflects the popularity of it as a building material in the 18th and 19th century when the area was being rebuilt.

¹ All list descriptions can be found on Historic England's website <http://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list>

- 2.7 Historic interest derives from the town's development from a Saxon village to a market town. There are few notable historic associations with the area.
- 2.8 Artistic and archaeological interest is achieved through the interesting streetscape and town plan following the Saxon and medieval ways through the village.

Gun Street

- 2.9 Numbers 7-15 Gun Street form the closest group of listed buildings to the application site. They are located within the immediate vicinity of the proposed signage and there is the potential for visibility of the new signage when looking at these buildings from the junction of Gun Street and Minster Street facing south.
- 2.10 The buildings on Gun Street vary in age, form and architectural style. However, they all reflect an evolved medieval townscape. They sit immediately to the north west of The Oracle Shopping Centre and are predominately two storeys set close to the back edge of the pavement. The primary significance is architectural and demonstrated by their street frontages and townscape which have group value.
- 2.11 As an old street with a direct townscape relationship with the Church and churchyard, Gun Street and the buildings within it have historic interest. The buildings illustrate the evolved post medieval period with a tight urban grain and variation in built form. Historic interest also derives from some older style shop fronts, though a number are modern replacements.
- 2.12 Artistic interest is found in the general aesthetic of the group when viewed from the front. There is also archaeological interest in the continued use of the street and plots from the medieval period.
- 2.13 To the rear these properties are in an ad-hoc form and have been developed in a piecemeal fashion over time. The architectural, historic, artistic and archaeological interest of the rear elements of this group of buildings have been compromised over time and are of lesser significance and interest than the street frontages. They have interest in their varied roof line of predominantly

two storey buildings with the elevated roofs of numbers 10, 11 and 12 being in contrast to the small-scale timber framed (albeit concealed) structure at No.15.

- 2.14 Numbers 7, 8 and 9 Gun Street are two storey and all grade II listed properties dating from the late 18th century. The brick frontages have silver grey brick headers with red dressings and slate or tile roofs.
- 2.15 Numbers 10, 11 and 12 Gun Street are all three storey buildings of red brick and grade II listed. Number 10 dates from the early 18th century whilst number 11 and 12 are later additions, built around the early 19th century. Number 10 has added historical value in retaining its early 19th century shop front. Numbers 11 and 12 have been replaced with modern additions.
- 2.16 Numbers 13 and 14 Gun Street are late 18th century two storey buildings. Number 13 has an attic, and gable end of a hipped mansard roof with a wide shop front on the ground floor.
- 2.17 Number 15 Gun Street is a grade II listed 17th century building altered in the early 19th century. It is two storeys and has some remains of timber framing. It also has historical associative value as a former pub. It is noted in the conservation area appraisal as one of the older remaining buildings within the conservation area although the external appearance conceals much of the evidence of this early date.

The George Hotel (61, 62 and 63 Minster Street, 10-12 King Street and 8 and 9 King Street

- 2.18 This building was first listed on 22 March 1957. It is of architectural and archaeological interest as a building that has 15th century origins and some surviving timber framing, although this has been heavily altered over time. The building has been extended in both the 18th and 19th century and modern fenestration, although predominately in a sympathetic style has been added. The George Inn has historic interest as a former popular coaching inn on the road between the West and London in the 18th century. It is of some archaeological interest due to its age and the surviving timber framing. The building is of limited artistic interest. Whilst it has some aesthetic interest, this primarily contributes to its architectural interest.

- 2.19 The setting of this building within the centre of the town contributes to its interest by aiding an appreciation of its former role as a coaching inn located within the main town and on the route to/from London. The surrounding areas offer the ability to see the external elevations of the building which contribute to its interest.

Market Place/ London Street Conservation Area

- 2.20 The Conservation Area Appraisal for the site records the following as contributing to its special interest:

- It is a linear conservation area beside the planned medieval southern approach road, over the River Kennet, to a market place and church outside one of Reading Abbey's gateways;
- There are isolated examples of timber-framed 16th and 17th century buildings and good examples of prestigious Georgian town houses in London Street;
- There is a fine collection of 19th century municipal buildings in Blagrove Street including Waterhouse's distinctive Town Hall and Victoria Hall, Concert Hall and Museum, Library and Art Gallery; with additional groups of historic buildings around Market Place;
- Of note is the historic and architectural focus around St Laurence's Church and the Town Hall complex;
- Within the conservation area there are many examples of Reading's locally produced bricks;
- The open and green spaces within the area contribute to its interest, these are identified as the churchyards of St Laurence's and St Giles' and the burial ground of the Friends Meeting House in addition to the part-pedestrianised Market Place and Town Hall Square;
- Jacksons Corner is a once busy crossroads and locally known landmark which contributes to the architectural interest of the area; and
- Trees in the public realm particularly street trees in London Street, Market Place and Town Hall Square.

- 2.21 The conservation area is of architectural, archaeological and historic interest due to the diversity of the built form which reflects the continued habitation of the area from the 16th century onwards, although the area was likely occupied prior to this. Its character and appearance reflect the historic nature of the town and its continued settlement and evolution.

3.0 RELEVANT HERITAGE POLICY AND GUIDANCE

- 3.1 The decision maker is required by section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving the character or appearance of a conservation area. There is a strong presumption against the grant of permission for development that would harm the character or appearance of a conservation area, though the presumption will plainly be lessened if the harm is less than substantial within the meaning in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as is explained further below.²
- 3.2 The decision maker is further required by section 66(1) of the Act to have special regard to the desirability of preserving a listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.
- 3.3 Harm is defined by English Heritage as change which erodes the significance of a heritage asset.³

National Planning Policy Framework (Revised 2018)

- 3.4 Paragraph 189 of the NPPF requires applicants to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected by a proposal, to a proportionate level of detail.
- 3.5 Paragraph 193 and 194 of the NPPF introduces the concepts of “substantial harm” or “less than substantial harm” as follows:

“When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.”

“Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting),

² The setting of a conservation area is not covered under legislation.

³ Paragraph 84 of Conservation Principles 2008.

should require clear and convincing justification. Substantial harm to or loss of:

a) grade II listed buildings, or grade II registered parks or gardens, should be exceptional;

b) assets of the highest significance, notably scheduled monuments, protected wreck sites, registered battlefields, grade I and II listed buildings, grade I and II* registered parks and gardens, and World Heritage Sites, should be wholly exceptional."*

- 3.6 Paragraph 195 of the NPPF then goes on to describe how the balancing exercise in respect of harm and public benefit should be undertaken when dealing with cases involving substantial harm:

"Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to (or total loss of significance of) a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or total loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss, or all of the following apply:

a) the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and

b) no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and

c) conservation by grant-funding or some form of not for profit, charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and

d) the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use."

- 3.7 The term "serious harm" has been held, in the Courts, to equate to substantial harm, such as to vitiate or drain away the significance of a heritage asset. It is for the same broad reason that National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) also makes it clear that substantial harm is a high test.

- 3.8 While the above relates to substantial harm, the paragraph 196 of the NPPF refers to a “less than substantial harm” as follows:

“Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.”

- 3.9 Whilst paragraph 197 refers to non-designated heritage assets, the overall decision is made as one process as held by the Courts.⁴

- 3.10 This heritage assessment is confined to the assessments of significance and harm.

Local Heritage Policy

Core Strategy 2008

- 3.11 Policy CS7: Design and the Public Realm states:

‘All development must be of high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located. The various components of development form, including:

- *Layout: urban structure and urban grain;*
- *Landscape;*
- *Density and mix;*
- *Scale: height and massing; and*
- *Architectural detail and materials.*

will be assessed to ensure that the development proposed makes a positive contribution to the following urban design objectives:

- *Character - a place with its own identity and sense of place*

⁴ Dorothy Bohm & Ors Vs. SoS for Communities and Local Government 2017 is relevant to the proposals. This judgment found that under s.72 it is the impact of the entire proposal which is in issue, and that there was no need to undertake two separate exercises to consider the non-designated heritage asset separately.

- *Continuity and enclosure*
- *Quality of the public realm*
- *Ease of movement and permeability*
- *Legibility - clear image and easy to understand*
- *Adaptability – capable of adaptation over time*
- *Diversity – meets a wide range of needs.*

Developments will also be assessed to ensure that they:

- *Respond positively to their local context and create or reinforce local character and distinctiveness, including protecting and enhancing the historic environment of the Borough and providing value to the public realm;*
- *Create safe and accessible environments where crime and disorder or fear of crime does not undermine quality of life or community cohesion;*
- *Address the needs of all in society and are accessible, usable and easy to understand by them; and*
- *Are visually attractive as a result of good high quality built forms and spaces, the inclusion of public art and appropriate materials and landscaping.*
- *Applications for major and minor developments should be accompanied by a design and access statement that deal with all the above matters.'*

3.12 Policy CS33: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment

'Historic features and areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including their settings, will be protected and where appropriate enhanced. This will include: -

- *Listed Buildings;*
- *Conservation Areas;*
- *Other features with local or national designation, such as sites and features of archaeological importance, and historic parks and gardens.*

Planning permission will only be granted where development has no adverse impact on historic assets and their settings. All proposals will be expected to protect and where appropriate enhance the character and appearance of the area in which they are located.'

4.0 EFFECT OF PROPOSALS

The Proposal

- 4.1 The proposal is for three new high-level signs at the Oracle Shopping Centre. This is to provide clearer way finding across the site, to make entrances to the shopping centre easily identifiable and to enhance the permeability of the site.
- 4.2 The proposed new signage is to be located in three separate areas; Gun Street entrance, Bridge Street facade and Minister Street entrance. The proposed signage has been designed to complement the existing building taking influence from the historical facade on Broad Street. The materials and colour palette reference this elevation and will be durable and sustainable. The signs will be internally illuminated by LED sources.
- 4.3 An advertisement application (170800) was submitted to secure consent for a number of other fascia signs and wayfinding signs as part of a comprehensive proposal to update all the signage for the Oracle Shopping Centre. Whilst this application was granted in August 2017 the three signs for Gun Street, Bridge Street and Minster Street were omitted from the application proposal due to concerns raised by the case officer.
- 4.4 A pre-application package was then submitted in December 2017 and a meeting held on 5th January 2018. The planning officer's subsequent written response states:

"At the time of application 170800 officers raised concerns with the impact on visual amenity and in relation to the impact on the setting of the terrace of buildings fronting Gun Street. Although this remains the case and that you are again advised to explore lower level signage at this entrance, officers also consider that you may be able to advance a case with the inclusion of a heritage statement in order to persuade officers that the proposed location is in-fact appropriate. This should be complemented with separate supporting commentary / visuals specifying the objectives of the signage at this point (specified in your supporting letter of increasing visibility from different pedestrian routes) and then demonstrating why this location is your preferred choice (also providing visual material as to why alternatives have been discounted). It is considered that should this

additional information be submitted at the time of any future application officers may be persuaded that this sign would be acceptable on balance."

Effect of Proposals on Heritage Assets

Effects on the St Mary/ Castle Street Conservation Area

- 4.5 The Oracle sits largely outside of the Conservation Area, although the proposed site for the signage is within the small area that falls within Saint Mary Butts/ Castle Street Conservation Area. The architectural and historical interest will not be affected by the proposed sign nor will the artistic and archaeological interest. The character and appearance of the conservation area will be preserved as there is no impact on the core values of the areas significance. No key views as identified in the conservation area appraisal will be affected by the proposals. The signage is an entirely appropriate addition to the conservation area which has been carefully designed and detailed to ensure the character and appearance of this robust heritage asset will be preserved by one new sign.

Gun Street Buildings

- 4.6 One experiences the Gun Street buildings in views along Gun Street. However, due to the height and position of the buildings the application site is not visible in these views and therefore the proposed signage will have little effect on their setting.
- 4.7 The interest of these buildings is as a terrace of buildings that reflect the evolved medieval townscape. The Oracle Shopping Centre does not contribute to this aspect of their interest. It is a modern building which has a stark difference in height, bulk, mass and scale. The proposed high-level signage has been carefully designed to complement the building using high quality materials and a contemporary design. The proposed signage will be located higher up the building than the existing sign, but this will entirely preserve the setting of these listed buildings.
- 4.8 The Oracle Shopping Centre is incidental to views of the buildings located along Gun Street. When appreciating the contribution the Gun Street buildings make to the townscape, and the contribution their principal (front) elevations make

to their significance, the Oracle Shopping Centre is only viewed to the rear of the site and does not offer a way to better appreciate the significance of these buildings. No harm will be caused to the architectural, historic, artistic or archaeological value of the Gun Street terraces by the proposed new signage which will only be seen within the background of the listed buildings and will not detract from views to the buildings.

Effects on the George Hotel

- 4.9 This building is primarily of architectural, historic and archaeological significance due to its phased development and continued use as an inn since the 15th century. Its later expansion has further contributed to its interest, but the Oracle makes no contribution to the significance of this building, other than by forming part of the varied townscape around the building. The proposed new sign will be seen as part of the commercial context of the Oracle Shopping Centre and will have no effect on the significance of this building by a change within its setting.

Effects on the London Street/ Market Place Conservation Area

- 4.10 The Oracle Shopping Centre is within the setting of the London Street/ Market Place Conservation Area. It is proposed to include one new high-level sign to the elevation that faces this conservation area. The shopping centre presently makes a limited contribution to the character and appearance of this conservation area by being within its setting. London Street/Market Place Conservation Area is primarily of interest as an area of Reading that shows its development around the market place from the medieval period to the present day. There are a number of historic buildings located within it but the proposed new signage on the Oracle which will be of high quality detailing and materials will ensure that its significance is completely preserved and will have no effect on the diverse architectural form or historic character of the conservation area.

Summary

- 4.11 The proposed new signage would have no effect on an appreciation of any of the identified heritage assets. Their significance would be entirely preserved by the minor change to the Oracle. No harm is identified and paragraphs 195-196 of the NPPF would not be engaged.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The proposed works are for the addition of new signage to the Oracle Shopping Centre. The building is not listed locally or statutorily but is partially located within the St Mary Butts Conservation Area and is adjacent to several listed buildings which have the potential to be affected by a change to their setting; these include 7-15 George Street and the London Street/ Market Place Conservation Area.
- 5.2 For the purposes of Section 66 of the act, the setting of the listed buildings adjacent to the site and within key views will not be affected by the proposals which have been carefully designed to ensure the proposals will preserve the significance of the listed buildings.
- 5.3 No harm has been identified and the proposals will preserve the significance of the listed buildings and conservation area for purposes of Sections 66 and 72(1) of the Act. Paragraphs 195 to 196 of the NPPF relating to harm are not engaged. The proposed signage is compliant with local policy CS7 and CS33.