

Design and Access Statement

Greyfriars Church

Friar Street Reading RG1 1EH

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Existing Site Plan

Proposed 3D image of West End from Friar St



Proposed Phase Plan showing phases 1

Proposed 3D image of West End from West

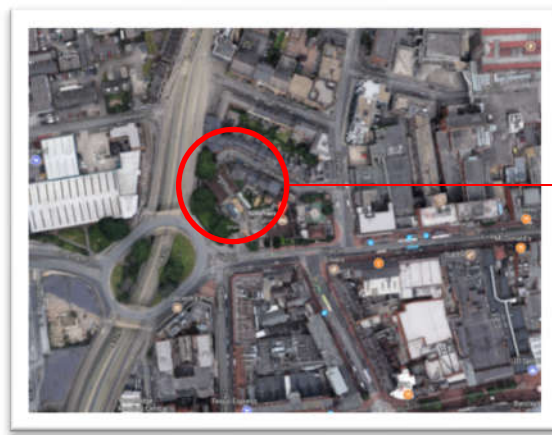


1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This Design and Access Statement accompanies the planning application for **Phase 1** of the proposed development at the site of Greyfriars Church Reading. The site includes the two adjacent houses Nos 2 and 4 Sackville Street. The Sackville street houses will be upgraded and their back extensions rebuilt. Also the small external area of No 2 will be built over to provide access from the church to the new toilet provision. This will connect the Sackville street improvements and new toilets with a new foyer to replace the existing West End of the church. Phase 2, is the possible construction of the new church centre. This has now been deferred. **THIS APPLICATION IS ONLY FOR PHASE 1 AND INCLUDES ONLY THE SCOPE OF WORK WHICH IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS PLANNING APPLICATION.**
- 1.2 Phase 2 is the possible construction of the new church centre. This has now been deferred. In the initial pre-app process for the whole site, the planners comments lead to the conclusion that the initial focus should be on the proposals for the south of the site and give further thought to the north end (Phase 2) and for possibly a new site access, including taking in the land at the north east of the site, which will have to be negotiated with the Council. This work is NOT part of this application.
- 1.3 The application is accompanied by a *Planning Policy Statement* dated April 2019 by Bluestone Planning Consultants, a *Statement of Significance* received 14 November 2017 by Oxford Heritage Partnership, and a *Heritage Impact Statement*, dealing with the replacement of the west end rooms and possible link building, (not part of this application, received 11 January 2018). There is also a *Statement of Need* produced by Greyfriars church dated March 2019 which sets out the detailed case for the need and justification for the development of the site. This document is to be read in conjunction with these three statements, to give an understanding of the balance between addressing the needs for the existing and future uses of the church buildings, and doing it in such a way as to preserve the significant aspects of the building's history.

2.0 THE CHURCH and THE SITE

- 2.1 Greyfriars Church is a former Franciscan Friary, in the town centre of Reading in the county of Berkshire. It is an Anglican church and is part of the Diocese of Oxford. It is listed Grade 1. The church is very well attended for Christian worship, and hosts a full programme of church and community events and programmes during the week. Approximately 400 children and adults attend two Sunday morning services, and approximately 150 adults attend Sunday evening services. Weekday bookings include church mothers and toddlers groups, bible study groups, and prayer meetings, as well as NHS bookings, School groups, Reading Borough Council groups, Alzheimer's groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, and the John Lewis Retirement Fellowship. A third arm of the church's work is running a Nursery School on the site of the original Vicarage, on the East End of the church, which is a self-contained secure site, but owned and run by the church for children of the general public.



Greyfriars Church

Satellite site plan

2.2

The intensive use of the facilities by the church requires not only meeting spaces, but support facilities, like offices, toilets, foyer space, storage space, and refreshment provision. The work of the church has reached a stage where they could do significantly more, but their buildings are too restricted and difficult to function in. Something needs to be done to continue both the current work in a safe and satisfactory manner, and also to improve it and extend it. The vision for the church is to work with the community, both in Christian service, and in a wider support role to the local community.



2.3

The site is on Friar Street, an originally ancient road leading out of the town centre towards the west. The picture below is of the Victorian church as restored in 1863.



A full history of the site is documented in the Statement of Significance. However, at this stage in its history, the whole of the surrounding area is the subject of a comprehensive

development strategy to support the growth of Reading Town Centre. Well-designed flats and car parks are being developed across the IDR. To the north the flats will be 17 storeys high. The developments are bold and well executed. This makes it opportune for Greyfriars to examine their own present and future needs in the light of their lack of space.

- 2.4 For many years Nos. 2 and 4 Sackville Street (one owned by Reading Borough Council) were used for a counselling service. It is the intention to retain the use of these two properties as church offices, prayer space, and as spaces for related charities to use. They have extant planning permission for office use, and have been knocked into one facility, with connecting internal doors not only on the ground floor, but on the upper floors as well. There is therefore no change of use required. The original back extensions - pitched roofed ground floor buildings shared by both properties, are still intact. One has been added to.
- 2.5 The properties are in relatively sound condition, although shabby, and poorly serviced. They need a complete make-over, and to be provided with a lift for disabled access so as to be fully compliant. The rear buildings, built with very little substance, or insulation, are to be demolished and replaced with toilets.
- 2.6 The lower (north) part of the site is currently occupied by the existing Church Centre, a brick built structure dating from the 1980s, containing a sports hall, a small café space, a bookshop, two meeting rooms, and some very cramped gallery offices. There are also toilets. Although a relatively recent building, it is over-used, and far too small to deal with the community and church activities. It could serve the local community in a more extensive way. For this reason, in the long term, there are plans to either replace or refurbish it, but for the present works to this building are not part of this application.
- 2.6 Attached to the church is the West End building, containing a meeting room and a small entrance foyer, off the church. Also there are cramped male and female toilets, which are inadequate to cope with the existing numbers. This building, built in 1972/3 is one of those church buildings which even though inadequate, is working extremely hard. It has to serve over 400 people very regularly, but is far too small. There is currently no compliant disabled toilet provision. As a facility it is grossly inadequate, and needs replacement.
- 2.7 Between the West End and the Church Centre there is a sloping car park, and a raised embankment. On the raised embankment is a line of porta-cabins which serve as part of the church office provision, the other part being in the gallery of the church centre. These porta-cabins have been there for more than a decade now, and are freezing cold in winter, and hot in summer, and as cramped as they were when they were installed as a temporary measure. It is proposed that these are removed, and the office accommodation provided in the Sackville Street properties.

3.0 THE PROPOSED WORKS

3.1 Sackville Street and North Corridor

- 3.1.1 The proposed refurbishment of Nos 2 and 4 Sackville Street, and the building over of the external garden space behind No 2, is to provide an adequate connection between the new facilities afforded by these two properties and the church. The purchasing of the two properties and the opportunities provided, is literally a God-send. This is because all the previous proposals, attempted over the years, to improve the inadequate toilet facilities for

the church were hampered by a lack of space. With the Sackville Street properties now becoming available, by roofing over the small garden of No 2 Sackville street and by rebuilding the existing back extensions, much more space is made available.

- 3.1.2 A comprehensive Daylight and Sunlight analysis was undertaken along with a Rights-to-Light Assessment, to establish the extent of envelope that is possible to build within. The main purpose was to ensure that the rights of the remaining residents of Sackville Street are not adversely affected by any of the development phases.
- 3.1.3 The roof over the existing rear garden of Nos 2 Sackville Street has been designed within the parameters of the rights-to-light envelope. The new building will contain an Atrium roof light, to make the space light and airy. It will be of great benefit to the church and will have no adverse impact on the remainder of the Sackville Street properties.
- 3.1.4 New toilets will be located in the position where the existing back extension block of the two houses is currently situated.
- 3.1.5 Within the Sackville Street properties, one of the ground floor living rooms, (of No 2) will be converted to a chapel and prayer space, and the remainder of the two connected buildings into office use. The suite will be relatively self-contained with its own toilets, (including disabled) and with lift and stair access.
- 3.1.6 The new Atrium will be integrated with the current access to the basement boiler room, the vestry, and safer more pleasant access both to the adjacent Memorial Hall (currently used intensively by the Nursery School), and to the outside.

3.2 West End – New building.

- 3.2.1 This involves the construction of a new West End foyer attached to the West End of the church.
- 3.2.2 The new West End Foyer will link directly into the west end of the church, through new glazed doors, so that there is a clear view into the church. The new main entrance to the church will be on the east-west axis of the church through the entrance on the west side of the new foyer. This is not just for practical reasons, but is intended to give the entrance into the church the importance that it deserves. Right from the entrance door threshold there will be a direct view into the magnificent church, with the dais, the cross and the reredos as the central focal point. The new west doors of the church will be a powerful invitation and welcome.
- 3.2.3 It is important to stress the real symbolism of a direct and welcoming entrance into a Christian church. For too long, perhaps for good reasons at the time, church entrances have been entrances into fortified towers, or solid buildings, with solid reinforced doors. The architectural language has been one of fortification, and in present day culture this has the effect of exclusion.
- 3.2.4 However, the church is symbolic of the house of God, and the home of the people of God. All people are welcome. God welcomes everyone. There is no reason to have fortified doors that are designed to keep out those whom God wishes to welcome in. Entrances therefore need to be visible, attractive, and welcoming. There also needs to be space inside.

- 3.2.5 A sense of space has a message. It says, “Here is place for you”. On a practical level the space is needed because of the large numbers that are using the church. The foyer will be about 245m², serving the church of about 450m². That is a little more than half. Ideally it should be more, but what is proposed will be a great improvement and will provide a much better foyer, and space to house a bookshop, café, and at times a separate informal meeting space.
- 3.2.6 The foyer will provide a place for the interaction of people. This is an essential component of a church community, and indeed any community. Congregations and community groups are bound together by relationships, connections and people. They provide understanding, support through difficulties, and the celebration of successes. Space is needed for these interactions. In addition there needs to be a place where newcomers can be identified and welcomed.
- 3.2.7 In terms of architectural character the proposed building will be accessible and visible. It will have a coffee servery to offer hospitality, a bookshop for inspirational reading matter, and a good, open view into the church. It will provide a connection between the generations that have gone before, represented by the historic church, and the modern and vibrant faith of today, represented by the new contemporary buildings.

3.3 The refurbishment of the existing car park and the landscaping.

- 3.3.1 The car park will be adapted to suit the proposed new buildings. This means re-configuring the south west part of the car park to accommodate the new foyer and entrance, and to provide 3 car parking places, 3 cycle racks, and 2 disabled car parking spaces. There will be a ramp down to the existing lower level, where there will be an additional 10 spaces in marked bays. There will be 15 officially marked compliant spaces in total. The existing car park has 13 officially marked parking bays, with no disabled spaces. There are other “squeeze in” spaces around the existing west end building, which will no longer be available.
- 3.3.2 The plan is at some point in the future to extend the site area to the west, and include some of the land currently owned by the Reading Borough Council, between the Greyfriars site and the IDR. This is a piece of left-over space, which has a number of trees on it. While the tree canopies provide shade, they also provide seclusion for all types of un-savoury activities like drug taking and dealing, and late night sex. There is no vigilance over the area, and it is a dark corner. It could really do with integrating into the church and be given a positive purpose.
- 3.3.4 Discussions with Reading Borough Council are an ongoing process. For the avoidance of doubt, this area of land is not part of this planning application.

4.0 Phase 2

- 4.1 Phase 2 is the proposed new Church Centre. This has been deferred for the present and is not part of this application.

5.0 The process leading up to the current proposals.

- 5.1 In the years since the re-ordering of the interior of the church building in 2000, explorations have been attempted to try to resolve some of the problems not solved by the internal re-arrangement. That is particularly the functional restrictions imposed by the very limited entrance lobby, the lack of adequate meeting rooms, and children's spaces, and the very poor provision for toilets. There are no disabled toilets, and the very poor provision for staff offices.
- 5.2 On the positive side, the church re-ordering did make it possible to serve many more members of the outside community, with all sorts of activities, and it also resulted in a growing congregation. However this did put pressure onto the existing facilities, and made it a necessity to plan to expand and adapt the church facilities.
- 5.3 As a result there followed design exercises for minor extensions to the west end, for filling in the tiny space between the church and the Sackville Street Memorial Hall, and trying to create more toilet space in the very narrow north side external area of the church. None was satisfactory, and none implemented.
- 5.4 In 2007, the church embarked on an architectural competition to try to deal with the whole problem in a cohesive and comprehensive way. They produced a brief of all their requirements, which, when added together were extensive and difficult to achieve without ingenuity and lateral thought. The accommodation of the list of requirements required radical action to achieve.
- 5.5 The result of the work during this period was an ambitious proposal, creating a basement car park entered from Sackville Street, and a very large three-storey building replacing the existing Centre. It extended right over the current car park along the back wall of the Sackville street houses and linked into a new large semi-circular West end extension connected to the church.
- 5.6 It was a large proposed building project. While it met all the stated needs of the brief, It had a price tag of upwards of £8m, it was just too ambitious to be achievable.
- 5.7 However there was something positive that came out of this exercise. There was extensive consultation within the church, community stakeholders, and the statutory consultees. Through this process a good understanding of the church's needs was established, and in the end the Reading Borough Council planning staff, the Council for the Care of Churches, English Heritage (as it was then) and the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Council all reached a point where they were satisfied with the proposal and gave it the green light to proceed to a planning application. However because of the scale of cost this proposal did not proceed to a planning application.
- 5.8 The needs have not gone away, but the delay has worked out for the good, through the purchase of 2 and 4 Sackville Street. This has provided additional floor space and has eased the external space as well, and in so doing has provided scope for a more modest and appropriate solution.

6.0 Architectural Design of this proposal.

- 6.1 The design of any building is first and foremost driven by the need to accommodate certain specific functions and needs of the client organisation. After this is required the architectural exercise to place a shell around the space and functional needs. In this case the client needs are a foyer, toilets, more offices, and the stub of a possible future link to a future church centre re-development.
- 6.2 In the design of the proposed new building, it was important to establish the 3 dimensional parameters that govern the envelope of the proposed building. A Rights to Light envelope was commissioned, particularly to demonstrate the degree of impact on the houses along Sackville Street, and to provide the extent of the envelope to design within. The study returned the large wedge shaped volume for a possible future Church Centre, (not part of this application), but showed that as regards the proposed west end and the link to Sackville street, including roofing over the garden of no 2, there were no conflicts with the Rights to Light.
- 6.3 It also showed that roofing over the garden of No 2 could be done without needing to slope down to a garden wall height, as is the existing case. This is a benefit, because otherwise it would have caused complications internally with restricted head heights.
- 6.4 The design of the West End is not constrained by Rights to Light, but by the potential negative impact on the historically significant West End Window, one of medieval significance, and important as a visible part of the magnificent original church. This constrained any tall building in that location, and quickly led to a decision to use a slim, neat flat roof, so that the West Window could be seen as best as is possible. To assess this, a Heritage Impact Assessment was commissioned and is available as part of the planning application.
- 6.5 With the envelope parameters set, the next step was to find an architectural expression that suited the function and the context. There was a desire to steer away from the castellated fortified appearance of the existing West End room, and to find an open meaning to the new building. This led to the almost obvious choice of glass - as much as possible, and as light as possible. A light-weight appearance was chosen so as to contrast with the heavy-mass of the church building. This idea was chosen because it enhances the massive solid character of the church, and does not try to mimic it. Another factor in the design was to accentuate entrances, to let people know the way in very clearly.
- 6.6 The West End design is the result of these considerations. In addition the design as proposed has had considerable consultation, and agreement with Historic England, Reading Borough Council and the DAC.

7.0 Materials

- 7.1 The existing church building is of flint, with smooth stone quoins, possibly Portland stone, certainly limestone. It would be a big mistake to copy these materials.

- 7.2 Having made a decision to use glass, one is automatically led to the need for a careful choice of contemporary complementing materials that would link it and harmonise with the original materials. For this reason limestone, as either solid blocks or cladding has been chosen for solid panels where they are required, with glass in between. The result is a limited palate, but this sort of restraint makes for clean contemporary architecture. The roof is to be thin and flat, and will be covered in dark Grey Sanafil membrane, which is robust in longevity, and crisp looking. There will be skylights.



8.0 Challenges and sensitive issues.

8.1 Junction with the old church.

- 8.1.1 One of the key questions raised during the design process, was, "How do you propose to join the new parts of the church extension with the existing church walls"? Linking in to a flint faced wall is a challenge, but there is already a junction and the obvious solution is to retain the flashing at the junction of the existing extension.
- 8.1.2 The 1970's extension resolved the junction by cutting a groove into the flint, and dressing a lead-counter flashing into the groove, and pointing it up in lime mortar. This joint does not leak, and rather than create another structural intervention into ancient fabric, there seems to be no reason not to simply re-use the existing lead flashing which is in good condition.
- 8.1.3 A Photograph of the existing flashing illustrates the good state of repair of the flashings.



8.2 Cutting through under the west window of the existing church.

- 8.2.1 The church has been able to trace and talk to a certain structural engineer, Roger Tant, who was the man responsible for the 1972/3 extension to the West End. He designed the original structural work, and visited the site twice during the course of construction.
- 8.2.2 He confirmed that the existing church west wall, is, as would be expected, an inner skin of stone, and an outer skin of stone, and rubble in between. These sorts of walls are massive, but there is a risk that the rubble interior can become unstable unless carefully treated when disturbed.
- 8.2.3 Therefore, when cutting the new stone wall, a careful method statement will be worked out by the project structural engineers to ensure that no structural instability will be caused to the window above, or lateral damage.
- 8.2.4 After negotiation with Mr Richard Peats of Historic England, agreement has now been reached as to the width and the treatment of the proposed new opening in the west end of the church wall. The photo below is of the agreed opening.



- 8.2.5 To do this there are a number of options to ensure that the window and tracery are held stable during the construction process. The window and sill will be held up with needle props, while the wall is carefully removed where the opening is to be.

- 8.2.6 The proposed supports in their final positions will be a composite box girder, made of parallel beams, posts and, ground beams, which will structurally replace the wall taken out, and transfer the loads back down to the sub-floor section of the existing wall, such that the loads to the ground will be as evenly distributed as at present.

9.0 Access and Accessibility

- 9.1 Greyfriars Reading, is on Friar Street on the edge of the middle of the town, on the western side. It is close to the road network out west, joining the A4. Public transport links are excellent. There is a bus stop almost outside the door. It is 10 minutes walk from the major bus terminus at the Railway Station. It is 10 minutes walk from the railway station itself, where there are main line links between Reading and London, Oxford, and Didcot, and further afield to Bristol and Exeter in the west. Main line trains travel to London on a frequent basis, allowing Reading to be a popular commuter town.
- 9.2 Car travel is also convenient, even though there is limited parking on site. However, within 5 minutes walk there is the Garrard Street car park, and a brand new car park diagonally across the main IDR roundabout which is up to modern international standards. Reading as a place is on the banks of the Thames river, and this means that for cyclists it is relatively flat, and easy to get around in.
- 9.3 Public access to Greyfriars is ideal. There is almost no impediment achieving access to Greyfriars Reading from anywhere, near or far, by the most appropriate transport, be that car, bus, taxi, train, cycle, or on foot.
- 9.4 For the proposals that are the subject of this planning application, there will be level access through the front door. All the remaining levels are the same as the entrance level, except the dais in the church, which is served by an existing disabled ramp installed during the reordering of the church in the year 2000.

Jeremy Bell 27 March 2019