

Highbridge House, Highbridge Wharf, Reading: Heritage Statement

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Introduction

- 1 This report considers the impact on heritage assets of the proposals at the Grade II listed Highbridge House, which currently forms part of Kings Wharf, Reading. The purpose of the report is to describe heritage significance of the site and its context and to comment on the proposals.
- 2 The report has been prepared by Nick Collins BSc (Hons) MSc MRICS IHBC of KMHeritage. Nick has twenty years experience in the property sector, including most recently as a Director of the Conservation Team at integrated design consultants, Alan Baxter & Associates. Nick spent eight years at Historic England as Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings & Areas where he led a specialist team of historic building inspectors, architects, and archaeologists on a wide range of heritage projects in East & South London. Previously Conservation Officer at the London Borough of Bromley, Nick began his career at international real estate consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle as a Chartered Surveyor.

History¹

Development of the area

- 3 The first mention of Reading is in 870. The Domesday Book records a borough, with one church. The town occupied high ground at a crossing of the River Kennet just west of its marshy confluence with the Thames, which runs to the north. It is also located at the point where the main post-Roman road from London to Bath crossed a key North-South route from Oxford to Southampton and Winchester.
- 4 The town became a prosperous centre for cloth-making during the medieval period. During the Civil War Reading changed hands three times in as many years, however in 1725 Daniel Defoe still found the town 'very large and wealthy' and 'handsomely built'. The big timber framed houses he would have seen are now rare; as early as 1813 Reading was described as chiefly of brick. That was just after the Kennet and Avon Canal began to ship in Bath stone. Later, from 1840, materials and prosperity came with the arrival of the Great Western Railway.
- 5 This expanding late Georgian town is seen at its best on the approach roads and inner suburbs. King's Road and Queens Road, of the 1830s have further interest as amendments to the medieval town plan, for a more direct approach from London.

¹ Information in this section is drawn from The Buildings of England: Berkshire (2010) Tyack, G, Bradley, S, Pevsner, N.

- 6 Highbridge House is now a remnant of this era, tucked on Highbridge Wharf behind Kings Road, close to the centre of the town.

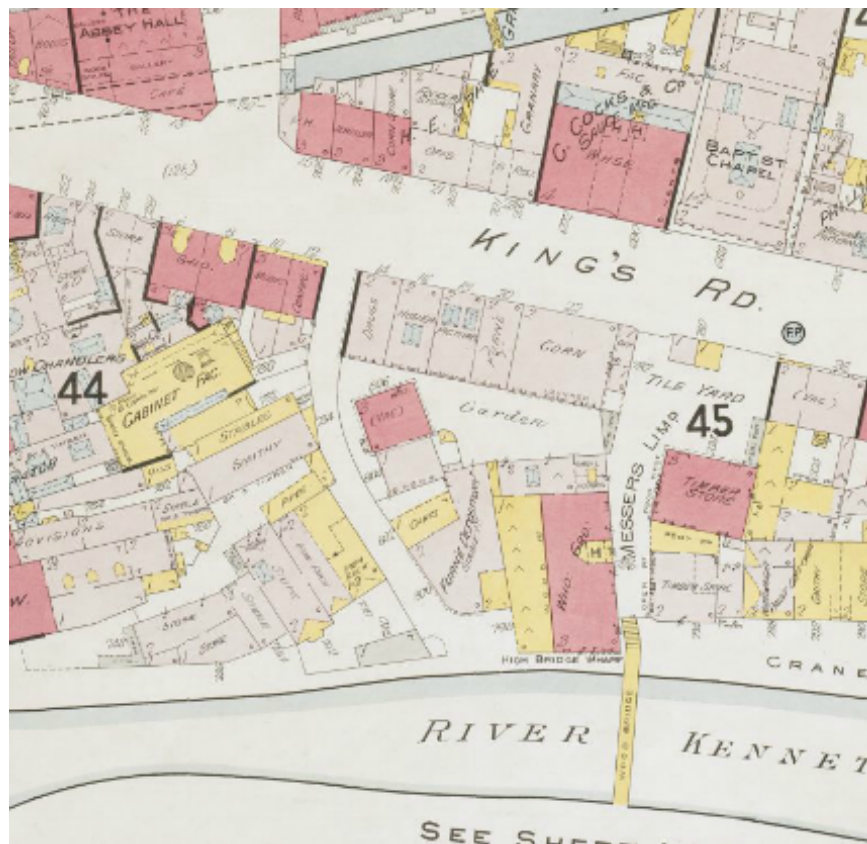


Figure 1: Insurance Goad Map 1895

- 7 The Goad Map of 1895 shows Highbridge House to be vacant, but the surrounding uses give an indication of what was happening in this part of Reading at that time. To the north, along King's Road were units for 'drugs', 'pictures', 'hosiers' as well as C. Cocks & Co Sauce Manufactory. Directly to the west, opposite, was a Cabinet Factory, Stables and Smithy, whilst to the south was Furne's Depository.
- 8 The great Victorian employers were breweries, Huntley & Palmer's biscuit factory and Sutton's seeds. The great Victorian buildings of this era include Alfred Waterhouse's Town Hall.

The area today

- 9 Highbridge House takes its modern name from the nearby High Bridge, completed in 1788 by RWF Brettingham. However, to give the building its modern context the area is described in the Pevsner Architectural Guide thus:

To the south of the High Bridge are the retained facades of Poulton & Woodman's Police Station of 1862, a weird Hispano-Gothic affair, reconstructed in 1983. To its

south and east Queen's Road (laid out in 1832-2) has been swallowed up by the ring road that joins up with the new King's Road. To the north east of the footbridge crossing the River Kennet is CH Elsom & Partner's six-storey Kennett House (1962-4) by the lock channel. This began the rebuilding of King's Road with office blocks, now dominant here. On the north side of King's Road these include the other end of the 1980s development by Abbey Gardens. To the east is the severe brick'd No.100 by R Seifert & Partners of 1981-3 along with the little neo-regency block next door. To the west is King's Reach (Nos.38-50), c.1989 in red brick layered over blue glass, and Kings Wharf, similar but with cornices. To its south on Highbridge Wharf, a stranded early nineteenth century house with Doric porch [Highbridge House].

Highbridge House

- 10 Highbridge House is listed Grade II and was built in the early 19th century. It is 3 storeys in height and 3 bays wide. Built in red brick, it has stone cills to the windows and stone courses over the second floor. At ground and first floor it has six over six timber sash windows whilst the second floor has three over three sashes, reflecting the Georgian classical proportions. The building has a hipped slate roof with four side chimneys.
- 11 At ground floor the main entrance is through a projecting Greek Doric porch with fluted columns and an entablature above.
- 12 The ground floor windows have been sympathetically re-instated, but until relatively recently sliding garage doors had been inserted in the front elevation. Modern railings now front the building to the pavement. No features of note remain in the building and the plan form has been lost. There are a number of modern partitions that divide some of the floors and the staircase is not original. Only chimney breasts remain at each level and a number of historic nibs denoting a more historic plan form.
- 13 To the rear of its left flank and across the rear elevation, the building is now joined physically and commercially at ground and first floor level to Kings Wharf by a modern entrance structure that serves both buildings. This connection wraps around the rear of the building fully enclosing the rear elevation at ground and first floor.
- 14 Despite the extent to which the building has been 'stranded' and the loss of many of its original features, the building still retains a sense of its historical independence through the contrasting materials and architecture of Kings Wharf.



Figure 2: Highbridge House & Kings Wharf in 2012.

The heritage context

- 15 Highbridge House is listed Grade II and lies within the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area within the town of Reading. The Conservation Area was first designated in 1972 and extended in 1982. Highbridge House lies within *Character Area 3: Jackson's Corner including King Street, London Street (north), Duke Street and the River Kennet* as identified in the Conservation Area Character Appraisal.
- 16 There are a number of listed buildings in the vicinity including:
- The Simeon Monument, King's Road (Grade II*)
 - 2&2B King's Road (Grade II)
 - Coroner's Court (Grade II)
 - High Bridge (Scheduled Ancient Monument)

Nearby, 14 & 16 King's Road, on the western corner of Highbridge Wharf and King's Road, are identified as being Buildings of Townscape Merit.

Heritage significance

- 17 The listed building itself and the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area are ‘designated heritage assets’, as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The unlisted buildings within the conservation area, including ‘unlisted buildings of merit’, that contribute to its heritage significance are ‘undesigned heritage assets’.
- 18 ‘Significance’ is defined in the NPPF as ‘the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic’. The Historic England ‘Planning for the Historic Environment Practice Guide’ puts it slightly differently – as ‘the sum of its architectural, historic, artistic or archaeological interest’.
- 19 ‘Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment’ (Historic England, April 2008) describes a number of ‘heritage values’ that may be present in a ‘significant place’. These are evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.
- 20 In this case, the character and appearance of the conservation area, as articulated in the Council’s Conservation Area Audit, also help to identify the area’s significance.
- 21 Historical value is described as being illustrative or associative. The listed and unlisted buildings of any discernible historical quality, their relationship to one another and to the conservation area, illustrates the evolution of this part of Reading. Highbridge House and the older surviving buildings along King’s Road as well as the remaining street pattern tell us about the transformation of the town from the 19th century onwards, about social change and lifestyles in various periods, about the mechanics of development in particular during the 20th century and about the architectural preferences of the period.
- 22 In particular, the character of this area is identified in the Conservation Area Appraisal as follows:

“This is the least homogeneous of the four character areas but represents the transition from central core shopping area to other uses including hotel, casino and office use as one progressed towards London Street. The area can be divided into riverside development beside the Kennet and urban development around Jacksons Corner. From Yield Hall Place the area is dominated by the bulk of the Oracle Shopping Centre.

High Bridge, built over the Kennet in 1787, stands just upstream from a narrow modern bridge built approximately 200 years later on. The close proximity of the two bridges typifies the close mix of old and new development that characterises this part of the area.

Jackson's Corner is a spacious crossroads where curved late 19th century corner buildings such as 1-9 King's Road (Jacksons) and 2 Duke Street/25 King Street (Jacobs) have been designed to take account of their prominent location.

A modern shopping mall (Kings Walk) and modern development on the east side of Duke Street/King's Road junction is out of character with the historic form and layout of the area".

- 23 Taking this description of character into account, similar to the two bridges, Highbridge House typifies the proximity and juxtaposition of old and new in this part of the town centre.
- 24 In terms of Historic England's 'Conservation Principles', buildings can provide us with 'evidence about past human activity' and by means of their fabric, design and appearance communicate information about their past. The buildings of the conservation area, including Highbridge House, along with other streets and groups of buildings, play an important part in providing that evidence and in communicating about the area. These buildings and streets exude the essential character of the conservation area and immediately communicate their nature and past to us and thus have evidential, historical and communal value.
- 25 The architectural significance of Highbridge House now rests nearly entirely in its external architectural character and detailing. Particularly from the front, the building retains its classical proportions and box-like form and whilst it has been heavily restored (for example the re-instatement of the ground floor front windows) it nevertheless exudes its Georgian origins and is an important reminder of the area's past.
- 26 Internally there are no remaining features of note and therefore this space has relatively little significance.
- 27 Even though the building is now a 'stranded' survival amongst modern commercial development it is an important positive contributor to the conservation area.

The policy context

- 28 This section of the report briefly sets out the range of national and local policy and guidance relevant to the consideration of change in the historic built environment.

The National Planning Policy Framework

- 29 The legislation governing listed buildings and conservation areas is the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

- 30 Section 66 (1) of the Act requires decision makers to ‘have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses’ when determining applications which affect a listed building or its setting. Section 72(1) of the Act requires decision makers with respect to any buildings or other land in a conservation area to pay ‘special attention...to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area’
- 31 In 2012, the Government published the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 32 Section 12 of the NPPF deals with ‘Conserving and enhancing the historic environment’. It says at Paragraph 126 that ‘Local planning authorities should set out in their Local Plan a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment’, and that
- ‘In developing this strategy, local planning authorities should take into account:
- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
 - the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring;
 - the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness;
 - and opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place’.
- 33 The NPPF says at Paragraph 128 that:
- In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets’ importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance.
- 34 A description and analysis of the heritage significance of the site and its surroundings is provided earlier in this report.
- 35 The NPPF also requires local planning authorities to ‘identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this assessment into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage

asset, to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal'.

36 At Paragraph 131, the NPPF says that:

In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

37 Paragraph 132 advises local planning authorities that '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. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be. Significance can be harmed or lost through alteration or destruction of the heritage asset or development within its setting'.

38 The NPPF says at Paragraph 133 'Good design ensures attractive, usable, durable and adaptable places and is a key element in achieving sustainable development. Good design is indivisible from good planning.' Paragraph 133 says:

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 loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss, or all of the following apply:

- the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and
- no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and
- conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and
- the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use.

39 Paragraph 134 says that '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 securing its optimum viable use.'

- 40 Further advice within Section 12 of the NPPF urges local planning authorities to take into account the effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset when determining the application. It says that ‘In weighing applications that affect directly or indirectly non designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset’.
- 41 Paragraph 137 of the NPPF advises local planning authorities to ‘look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance. Proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset should be treated favourably.
- 42 Paragraph 138 says that:
- Not all elements of a World Heritage Site or Conservation Area will necessarily contribute to its significance. Loss of a building (or other element) which makes a positive contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area or World Heritage Site should be treated either as substantial harm under paragraph 133 or less than substantial harm under paragraph 134, as appropriate, taking into account the relative significance of the element affected and its contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area or World Heritage Site as a whole.

Local Policy: Reading Borough Council

- 43 Reading Borough Council Core Strategy was adopted in 2008 and revised in January 2015. Policy CS33 deals with the ‘Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment’. It states:
- 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.

The proposals

- 44 The proposals with regards the listed building are relatively simple.

- 45 No major works are proposed to the exterior of the building. However, the main entrance to Kings Wharf is to be moved to the front corner of the building on King's Road and therefore the storm lobby currently inserted between the main bulk of Kings Wharf and Highbridge House can be removed.
- 46 This will have the benefit of creating an even greater sense of detachment between the two buildings with more of the left hand flank exposed in views south along Highbridge Wharf.
- 47 Where the draft lobby is removed the brick work will be carefully made-good using like for like materials to ensure a sympathetic restoration.
- 48 Internally, it is proposed that a number of non-original partitions will be removed to create more flexible office space. As has been described earlier in the report, no features of note remain in the building other than chimney breasts (which will be retained) and therefore there is little of significance. The existing partitions do not relate to a historic plan form which is only now readable from historic nibs. Where these nibs remain, denoting a more historic plan form, these will be retained, however the removal of the modern partitions will not harm the remaining significance or special interest of the building, but rather will give it a viable use for its future.
- 49 Further, it is intended to let Highbridge House as a separate unit – further restoring the building's historic independence.
- 50 The proposals will have no impact on the setting of any nearby listed buildings (or un-listed building's of merit) and the removal of the storm lobby will enhance the building's contribution to the conservation area.

Compliance with policy and guidance

- 51 This report has provided a description and analysis of the significance of the listed building and its heritage context, as required by Paragraph 128 of the National Planning Policy Framework. In addition, the report also describes how the proposed scheme will affect that heritage significance. We believe that effect is positive.
- 52 In respect of Paragraph 131 of the NPPF, the proposed scheme can certainly be described as 'sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation'. The removal of the storm lobby will return the listed building to a more visually detached state when viewed from the street and in particular King's Road which will further enhance its contribution to the Conservation Area.

- 53 The proposed scheme complies with Paragraph 133 of the NPPF – it certainly does not lead to ‘substantial harm to or total loss of significance of a designated heritage asset’. It also complies with paragraph 134 for the reasons given earlier – the scheme cannot be considered to harm the special interest of the listed building or the character and appearance of the conservation area, but rather alters it in a fashion that has no effect on those elements that are recognised as being of most importance – its architectural form and contribution to the conservation area as a polite remnant of late Georgian architecture in this part of Reading.
- 54 In terms of Reading’s local policies, the proposals will not have any adverse impact on the listed building – proposing a light touch approach that will further reveal the building’s independence in the street scene – and as a consequence will also have a positive impact on its contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area.