



553 Oxford Road, Reading

Heritage Statement

1.0 Introduction

This Heritage Statement has been prepared by CPL Chartered Architects (CPL) to accompany a planning application for the land at 553 Oxford Road, known as The Gate Oxford Road Centre, formerly Reading Community Church.

The main existing building on the site is a late nineteenth century chapel, historically known as Grovelands Baptist Chapel. The chapel provides 315m² gross internal floor area which includes some lean-to ancillary buildings to the rear. The site also contains a small hall in the south-east corner measuring 55m² in gross internal floor area. To the rear of the chapel is a parking courtyard, accessible off Wilson Road.

The existing buildings are not energy efficient and the roof is in a relatively poor state of repair. The proposed development would provide high quality, energy efficient and more accessible community space and would represent an increase in community use floor space.

This statement sets out the Heritage background together with details of proposed redevelopment where they are relevant to the proposed demolition of the existing buildings, all to address and demonstrate compliance with Reading Borough Council's Core Strategy Policy CS33, Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment.

The chapel is not classified as Listed nor is the Applicant a Registered Denomination for the purposes of Ecclesiastical Exemption, so secular Planning rules apply.

2.0 Overview of the Site and Buildings

For detailed historical and architectural information, reference should be made to Appendix A, a letter from English Heritage dated 3 September 2009.

In 1896 the development site was acquired by Reading's Baptist congregations and architect WR Howell was engaged to design a 450 seat chapel. The chapel opened in 1899. The building has remained in religious use since that time, albeit that The Gate (formerly Reading Community Church) now hold their Sunday services at their building at 384 The Meadway, located approximately two kilometres west of the Oxford Road site.

The site comprises two buildings, the chapel and a small hall, thought to have been constructed as a Sunday school. The buildings are constructed of red brown brick with terracotta dressings and tiled roofs.

Although the buildings considered to be handsome, well composed and of good quality design, the exterior of the building is a stark contrast to the interior, where almost all original features have been removed. The conclusion made by English Heritage in assessing whether or not to List the building was that the church *'falls short of the threshold of national importance and shouldn't be designated.'*



Furthermore English Heritage concluded that the church 'is not recommended for designation for the following principal reasons:

Its interior has been comprehensively remodelled and virtually all of its original fittings removed; While of local interest for its pleasing elevations the external architectural quality is not sufficiently high to outweigh the loss of the interior.'

3.0 New Community Space Provision

CPL submitted a pre-application enquiry submission (council ref: 160296) with a response received in May 2016. In its response, the Local Authority stated, with reference to the previous planning consent obtained for this site that:

'With regard to the approved scheme there was acceptance by officers that the benefits associated with the new building, i.e. a new purpose built church with ancillary facilities providing a more comprehensive programme of community activities, and the ability to provide a more efficient use of the site, and more cost effective than refurbishing and extending the building, outweighed the harm resulting from its loss. Such a case would need to be made in association with a scheme which on the face of it significantly reduces the community element of the overall scheme.'

Since the pre-application enquiry submission, the applicant's brief has changed with respect to the community use space at ground floor level. The designs to which this application relates will now provide 372m² of community use space (compared with existing building floor area of 370m²) thus there would be a nominal overall gain in community space on the site.

The church will manage the community use space which will be available for various community groups and activities. A nursery is to be provided catering for up to 24 two-four year olds at any one time.

The church has a history of engagement and partnership with a range of local initiatives and groups and intends to maintain such partnerships wherever possible. The design of the community space has a flexible layout, with sliding folding partitions, enabling the size of spaces to be controlled to suit end user needs. In addition to the three hall spaces, an entrance foyer/cafe area provides a welcoming main entrance/hub and is served by a kitchen.

The ground floor area enables use of the whole space as one large hall. The nursery has been provided with storage to enable equipment to be cleared away if necessary. The nursery will make use of Halls 1 and 2. The circulation and access design enables Hall 3 and the foyer / drop-in cafe area to be used concurrently with the nursery at all times.

The nursery has access (via electro-magnetically held open doors) to a children's WC/washroom area as well as to an external, partially covered soft play area at ground floor level. From the soft play area, a screened external stair provides access to a raised and screened external area at first floor level which will be of benefit to both the nursery and other community groups using the building.



4.0 Conclusion

Reference has been made to Reading Borough Council's Core Strategy Policy CS33, Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment. However, with consideration to the heritage of the site, the views expressed by English Heritage and the church's current operational needs and aspirations for their multiple sites in the locality, it is considered that the provision of a high quality and sustainable mixed use development providing a nominally greater area of community space, including use as a nursery, together with new and much needed residential development at the upper levels, outweighs protection of the existing buildings.

5.0 Appendices

Appendix A – Letter from English Heritage



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Reading Community Church
c/o David Turner
Brooklands
Tidmarsh
Reading
RG8 8ER

Our Ref: 169025

Direct Line: 0207 973 3377
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03 December 2009

Dear Mr Turner,

PLANNING (LISTED BUILDINGS AND CONSERVATION AREAS) ACT 1990 BUILDINGS OF SPECIAL ARCHITECTURAL OR HISTORIC INTEREST

Reading Community Church, 553, OXFORD ROAD, READING, BERKSHIRE

I refer to the application to add the above building to the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

The Secretary of State has consulted us in our role as the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment with responsibility for listing. We have considered all representations made, and completed the assessment of the above building. Having considered our recommendation the Secretary of State has decided not to list the building.

I enclose a copy of our advice report, prepared for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which gives the principal reasons for this decision.

If you consider that this decision has been wrongly made you may contact the DCMS within 28 days of the date of this letter to request that the Secretary of State review the decision. An example of a decision made wrongly would be where there was a factual error or an irregularity in the process which affected the outcome. You may also ask the Secretary of State to review the decision if you have any significant evidence relating to the special architectural or historic interest of the building which was not previously considered. Further details of the review criteria and process and how to request a review are contained in the annex to this letter.

Yours sincerely

1 WATERHOUSE SQUARE, 138 – 142 HOLBORN, LONDON, EC1N 2ST

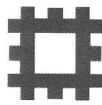
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Please note that English Heritage operates an access to information policy.

Correspondence or information which you send us may therefore become publicly available





ENGLISH HERITAGE

L. Horsfall

Mrs Louise Horsfall

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Data Protection Act 1998

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ADDRESS

Reading Community Church, 553 OXFORD ROAD, READING

Parish READING
District READING
County BERKSHIRE

Case UID: 169025

Date First Listed:

Formerly Listed As:

RECOMMENDATION

Outcome: No, do not list

Recommended Grade: NL

28-SEP-2009

BACKGROUND:

After examining all the papers on this file and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, the criteria for listing are not fulfilled.

HISTORY

The development of the western end of Reading's Oxford Road began in 1877 with the construction of the Brock Barracks, one of a large number of new military 'depots' established under the provisions of the Registration of the Forces Act of 1871, which aimed to encourage infantry recruitment by allowing soldiers to serve in their own county regiment rather than being drafted further afield. There was at that time no church in the area, and in 1879 two Anglican laymen, the brothers AW and MJ Sutton, founded a mission hall in Grovelands Road East (now Wilson Road) as a place of worship and virtuous recreation for the soldiers. A few years later this operation was taken over by Reading's long-established Baptist community.

Over the next two decades the area between the barracks and the town centre was developed for housing, mainly modest working-class terraces in a grid of small streets on either side of Oxford Road. By the end of the century the original corrugated-iron mission hall became hopelessly inadequate for the district's vastly expanded population, and funds were raised by Reading's five Baptist congregations, as well as among the other Christian denominations, for a permanent building. In 1896 a plot of land was acquired across the street from the old site, and designs obtained from the architect WR Howell, a partner in the Reading-based firm of Cooper and Howell, for a new chapel to seat 450 worshippers. In March 1899 AW Sutton laid the foundation stone, and the chapel opened in October of the same year, having cost around £2,700 to build. Its fittings included an open tiled baptistery, a central feature of Baptist worship. The building, now known as the Reading Community Church, has remained in religious use ever since, although in the late C20 the interior was stripped of its original fittings and the open timber roof covered by a suspended ceiling.

William Roland Howell (1867-1940) was born in Reading and lived and worked there throughout his life. He received his architectural training with the Reading practice of Cooper, Son and Millar; after becoming ARIBA in 1890 he went into partnership with the son of his former employer - John Omer Cooper, a prominent local Baptist - before setting up in independent practice in 1905. He was responsible for a number of buildings in Reading, from his monumental Gothic art gallery and municipal buildings of 1894-7 to a faience-clad Art Nouveau shop-front of 1905 at 8 High Street (both listed at Grade II). He also designed numerous schools, factories, banks, hospital buildings and private houses in and around the town. He was a prominent figure in borough and county life,

serving on Reading Council from 1911 to 1930 (including a stint as Mayor between 1921 and 1922), as Chairman of the Berkshire Society of Architects from 1922, and as Superintendent of Works for Berkshire from 1924.

DESCRIPTION

The site comprises two buildings: the main chapel of 1899 at the corner of Oxford Road and Wilson Road, and a smaller hall to the south, probably built as a Sunday school. The chapel is built of red-brown brick with terracotta dressings, in an Arts and Crafts-influenced Free Renaissance style. A steep gabled roof of red tile covers the main worship space. The east gable end adjoins a neighbouring house, while on the exposed west gable, above a range of four small two-light windows, is a 'Venetian window' motif composed of a three-light mullion-and-transom window flanked by single transomed lights and surmounted by a blind semicircular tympanum with a moulded keystone. A projecting transept-like wing on the north front displays a similar motif, this time comprising three cross-windows beneath an egg-and-dart cornice, above which is a semi-circular window resembling a fanlight. Also on this elevation is the round-arched entrance porch, with battered upper walls and a swept parapet, within which a datestone records the foundation of the new church in 1899. To the right of this is a low square tower, its upper stage similar to that of the porch but topped by a lead-covered timber cupola. The south elevation is extremely plain, having a row of square two-light windows above and a pair of small lean-to blocks below.

The main interior consists of a single large space beneath a modern suspended ceiling. With the exception of a number of ventilation ducts and two pairs of double doors in the north and south walls, the latter containing simple Art Nouveau stained glass, no original fittings survive. To the north is a small vestibule, which in turn gives access to the entrance porch and the space beneath the tower. To the south, within the lean-to blocks, are toilets, a kitchen and a vestry.

The smaller hall is a simple rectangular building, built like the church of red brick with a steep tiled roof, with two segment-headed doorways and four-light timber casement windows with glazing bars. The single-cell interior, now stripped down and modern, contains no features of note.

ASSESSMENT:

CONTEXT

We have been asked to consider the Reading Community Church, formerly the Grovelands Baptist Church, for listing. The building is not in a conservation area. In 2006 the congregation obtained planning permission to remodel and extend the building, but these works were not carried out. It is now proposed to demolish the existing church and build a new one on the site.

ASSESSMENT

The English Heritage Selection Guide for places of worship offers a number of designation criteria, prominent among which are quality of architectural and decorative design, quality and completeness of fixtures and fittings, and association with important architects, clergymen or religious movements.

The former Grovelands Chapel is a handsome and well-composed building, the work of a leading local architect who used the emerging vocabulary of Arts and Crafts and Free Classical motifs with assurance and flair. Repeated motifs, such as the variants on the 'Venetian window' device in the north and west gables, or the battered pilasters and swept parapets that crown the north porch and tower, tie the design together and bring unity to its disparate elements. The squat tower, which even with its eccentric cupola is still considerably lower than the main roof-ridge, gives a firm emphasis to the corner site whilst suggesting an unpretentious homeliness appropriate to the informality of Baptist churchmanship.

The quality of the exterior is in stark contrast to the denuded state of the interior. Virtually all the original fittings - which would typically have included fixed pews, a communion table and a large central pulpit - have been removed, and the tiled baptistery mentioned in contemporary accounts has been either floored over or filled in completely. The arrangement of windows at the west end suggests that there may have been a gallery here; if so, this too has been removed, perhaps at the same time that the open roof was filled in with the present suspended ceiling, which transforms the proportions of the space and conceals the large gable windows. Aside from the latter and the internal lobby doors, the original stained glass has all been removed.

The simple, hall-like interiors of Nonconformist churches tend, much more than their Anglican equivalents, to rely for their interest on the completeness of their fixtures and fittings. Here, that interest has been almost completely lost. The quality of the chapel's exterior and the local standing of its architect give it considerable significance in the Reading context, but the interior is now much too altered to be of special interest at national level.

CONCLUSION

The Reading Community Church falls short of the threshold of national importance, and should not be designated.

SOURCES

Sidney M Gold, A biographical dictionary of architects at Reading (1999)

RIBA biographical file on WR Howell

Reading Standard, March 10 1899 p.3, Oct 13 1899 p.3, Oct 27 1899 p.3

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION:

The Reading Community Church is not recommended for designation for the following principal reasons:

- * Its interior has been comprehensively remodelled and virtually all of its original fittings removed;
- * While of local interest for its pleasing elevations, the external architectural quality is not sufficiently high to outweigh the loss of the interior.

VISITS

18-SEP-0009 Full inspection

COUNTERSIGNING

Countersigning Comments: Agreed. This is an attractive church in the Arts and Crafts manner with good townscape value. However, the loss of the interior means that it lacks the overall level of architectural interest required for listing. 01.10.09

Second Countersigning Comments: Agreed. This Baptist church has considerable street presence for its striking north and west elevations. Regrettably the loss of the interior puts it below the bar for statutory listing although it is of strong local architectural interest. 09.10.09

HP Director Comments: