

Heritage Assessment for 144 Southampton Street, Reading (listed Grade II)

Site visit on 19 February 2025

Carried out by Dr M. B. Aldrich for the owner

Context:

The property constitutes the middle of three units which are listed together as 142-146 Southampton Street. The property was very likely divided into three units sometime during the middle of the nineteenth century, when it appears that 142, the northernmost unit of this block, was added to the other two units. It has a red brick exterior and different fenestration, looking much more like a Victorian villa than its neighbours to the south. Therefore, the Historic England website needs updating, as 144-146 appear to have been an existing house with different brickwork and window openings. A comment left in 2021 on the Heritage England website for this address suggested that 144 and 146 were, in fact, one house dating to c. 1770. It would be worth following this up.

Certain features which remain inside 144 do, indeed, suggest a date of the later eighteenth century, and they will be itemised in this report. After inspection of this site, it is my impression that the original house at 144-146 Southampton Street was surrounded by a plot of land to the front and back; I suspect there would have been stables and some sort of coach house to the rear of the property until the later nineteenth-century development of this area of Reading, which is to the south of the town centre. The property may have been a farmhouse or a small gentleman's 'villa'. It would be interesting to pursue this further in future research, as eighteenth-century houses in and around Reading centre are rare and therefore important.

Exterior:

The exterior of 144 preserves some very interesting architectural elements, including a parapet across the top of the roofline which is now somewhat eroded. I understand the owner will prioritise its restoration, which is commendable. The plum-coloured brick and rubbed red brick detailing across the exterior, typical of the eighteenth century, shows evidence of a new door having been cut into the wall to make an entrance, doubtless when the property was sub-divided. The entrance door appears to date to the 1930s, but it is sturdy and not unattractive, and it is included in the listing of 1978 so should remain. Two six-over-six small-paned sash windows survive, with an additional exterior moulding put around the lower window, which could be restored to match the window immediately above it. These appear to be consistent with a later eighteenth-century date and, with the parapet and contrasting brickwork, form a key part of the historic design of the exterior.

One of the distinctive features of this property is the long front garden and the greenery facing Southampton Street, further reinforcing the idea of this property having been part of a smart farmhouse or villa set in its own plot on the road into Reading in the later eighteenth century. This is a key feature of these units and should be maintained, along with the attractive, original brick walling on the street frontage and the low brick walls between the three units, probably erected in the middle of the nineteenth century to the front and the back gardens. An unattractive and visually illiterate varnished wooden gate has been

recently installed at the front of 142, unfortunately detracting from these properties, which should be viewed as a whole. As regards 144, I understand the owner is willing to take up the ugly concrete path to the front door and replace it with brickwork or gravel, which would be much more suitable to a property of this age, as well as being more ecologically sound. I would recommend that reclaimed brick be used and matched as closely as possible to the brick of the front wall, on the street.

I refer back to my earlier observation that stabling would have been situated at the back of this house, when built. It is inevitable that new owners of this important bit of old Reading will require parking, whether for construction vehicles, family transport, visitors, or other purposes, given that Southampton Street is a busy road into Reading and the IDR. I would therefore recommend, given the length of the front garden of 144, that no more than one-third of the entire length of the front garden be allocated to a gravelled parking spot for one vehicle. This could be done and the brick walling and hedge, and other planting, should be preserved on either side of the entrance.

Interiors:

Front sitting room: this room has two of the most significant architectural features, the arched niches with shelves surmounted by a keystone in the middle of the upper arch, placed at either side of the former fire surround. These are classic eighteenth-century architectural features and must be retained. There are panelled cupboards below the shelving within each arch, and the owner has kept the doors which covered the arched sections of each niche so that they can be restored to their former glory. The skirting boards match those in the dining room and appear to be original, or at least old (i.e. nineteenth-century, if not earlier).

It is unfortunate that the original fireplace has disappeared and has been replaced by an exquisitely ugly faux-brick 1970s gas fire on a raised brick plinth. Although technically this may be covered by the listing, it would improve the room greatly to have a replacement that is more sympathetic to the other historic features of this room. It might be possible to source a compatible fire surround of similar age from an antiques shop or a reclamation yard, and an online search should give some idea of what it may have looked like. I have not seen the inside of 146, but that would be an obvious first step in searching for an appropriate replacement. The right design, between the two architectural niches, would recapture some of the lost period style in this room. Other noteworthy features include the original wooden panelling underneath each window, so radiators should be mounted on the walls and not on this historic panelling.

Dining room: aside from what appear to be original skirting boards, this room has a not unattractive, colourful Art Deco tiled fire surround that is covered by the listing and should be retained. There is a contemporary (i.e. 1930s) built in unit to the right of the fireplace that should also be retained. The current large-paned window is out of keeping with the rest of the house. It appears to be a non-standard size and will probably require a bespoke replacement, provided that listed building consent is given to replace it with something more attractive. The recessed niche in which it rests is an attractive feature.

Doors: there are a number of old/original panelled doors in the house, many off their hinges while remedial work is carried out. These have an attractive configuration of two taller upper recessed panels above two shorter lower panels, a configuration typical of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These should be retained and repaired, as they are historic and included in the listing. There are one or two plain, low-quality later doors which have been used in places in the house. I would recommend moving these to the less important rooms at the top of the house, leaving the panelled doors in the principal rooms. They are a very attractive design feature, as are the original small-paned windows on the two stair landings.

Middle floor/front bedroom:

This room is above the sitting room and has the same six-over-six small-paned sash window with wooden panelling underneath, which appears to date to the eighteenth century. The skirting boards have gone but can be replaced by copying those in the sitting room and dining room downstairs. A replacement fireplace could be considered [see my comments regarding the sitting room], as the footprint of the original has been revealed by taking off old wallpaper. It would add to the attractiveness of this room.

Bathroom: the owner has indicated his willingness to find a window more in keeping with those in the rest of the house, which would improve the rear elevation from the garden. However, this needs listed building consent, as the present undistinguished 20th-century window will be included in the listing.

Top floor/ front bedroom: this has a dormer window that is divided into two narrow panes and is partially hidden by the large parapet from the street entrance; it is inoffensive.

Rear bedroom: I have suggested considering a replacement to the rather ugly, modern, single-pane window which jars, visually, when seen from the garden. The appropriate model, given its size, would be the four-paned, squarish Victorian window next door at the rear of 142, which could be copied.

Cellar: the owner understands that this is a remarkable survival of an eighteenth-century kitchen complete with wall niches, ovens, and ceramic channels to direct water out of the house. I said he should think of this basically as a museum at the bottom of his house! It is of course fully protected by the listing. I think the owner's suggestion of introducing gentle heat to this area via one or two radiators on a low setting could be a good thing, given the damp and the fact that there are very old wooden beams supporting the ground floor of the house. Certainly his suggestion of re-opening an air vent to the front of the house, copying one which already exists, seems to be a good idea. Ventilation and low heat could be helpful in keeping the wooden beams in good condition, but an expert in this area should be consulted first.

Conclusion: in short, 144 Southampton Street is an intriguing property which, despite its recent neglect, retains a number of important architectural features, as detailed above. It very likely formed one-half of a larger, eighteenth-century house just to the south of Reading proper, and as such it is older and more important than it might appear, at first sight. The green space and garden walling surrounding 142-144 are also important features and need to be respected in any future renovations. This promises to be a rewarding project that will enhance the streetscape of Southampton Street.