

Heritage Assessment for 6 Church Street, Caversham (listed Grade II)

Site visit on 24 April 2025

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

Context: No. 6 is one of two cottages (No. 8 being the other) that are listed together as one site in the National Heritage List for England, available on British Listed Buildings. The date is assumed to be seventeenth century, in keeping with the cluster of other properties in this area, although several – and perhaps No. 6 – are considered to have origins in the Elizabethan period. It appears to have been common practice to rebuild vernacular structures such as this one in the same style when in need of repair. Thus, it is often difficult to date these buildings precisely.

The cottage at No 6 Church Street adjoins the former Spice Oven to the west, and No. 8, now part of Gardiner's Agency, on the east side. Its location is iconic, as it sits in the middle of a cluster of historic vernacular buildings at the very centre of 'old Caversham', and it faces Caversham Bridge, being directly in the line of sight and, therefore, one of the first things travellers see when crossing the bridge into Caversham. Therefore, No. 6 Church Street occupies a prominent site within the historic built environment of Caversham; in addition to the Grade II listing, it is situated in a conservation area.

Exterior: the exterior facing Church Street is a typical three-storey timbered 'cottage' elevation, the third floor consisting of one small room under the eaves of the roof, which has a steep pitch and is tile hung. As the structure consists of large beams of some antiquity, there is a pleasing undulation in the roof, both to the front and the rear. These buildings have in recent years been painted cream colour but were white for many years with contrasting terracotta tiles and wooden beams. No. 6 has three larger, small-paned windows of some age, although not 'original' to the building, on the front and a smaller window upstairs in the infill building, tucked under the roof; there is also a small window in the eaves, facing west, on the top floor. The rear elevation will be discussed at the end of this report along with the small but attractive courtyard.

The roof tiles here have been cemented to the adjacent building, and there is no evidence of lead flashing; thus, water has come into the side structure from this join of the roof.

More serious, however, is the wide, paved public pavement in front of these buildings which has a modest channel set in to manage water that is no longer effective. The downwards slope of the pavement towards the cottages is having a very negative effect on No. 6 and its immediate neighbours. I understand the owner has raised the matter with Reading Borough Council Highways Department, and in principle the idea of digging gravelled drainage ditches, or 'French Drains', at the front of this group of listed buildings has been accepted. However, no specific date of when this work might take place has been agreed. This remedial work – which is outside of the scope of the present application -- is quite urgent in order to safeguard not only this listed property, but the properties to either side of it which are also listed.

Interiors: the front door directly on the street is not normally used, and access to the property is via a gate behind Gardiner's Agency that opens into the shared brick courtyard. I

understand that a parking place is available in Gardiner's car park, and the proposed works by the owner will have no impact on existing parking arrangements. The courtyard door of the cottage opens onto a small hallway that leads directly into the kitchen on the left and the staircase on the right, but it also leads through one of the wooden, plank-construction doors in the house into the main living space.

Kitchen: in both the kitchen and the bathroom upstairs, the intention is to re-use existing pipework and outflows but to improve the use of the limited space and modernise appliances. The kitchen has an attractive window looking out onto the courtyard (north), but there appear to be no particular features of significance in terms of heritage planning.

The door leading into the main living area is attractive and appears to have handmade strap hinges of iron, so it has some degree of period interest.

Living area: this consists of the principal room of the house, with a smaller subsidiary space to the west, created by filling in the gap between No. 6 and the Spice Oven. This was clearly done a long time ago, perhaps in the eighteenth century. There is a step down onto the brick laid floor of this subsidiary space, which has been badly affected by the problems with damp discussed above. In the ceiling here, and in other areas of the house, the original plaster has been replaced some time ago by plaster boarding with an Artex finish, probably in the post-War period. The damp is perceptible here, and a de-humidifier is currently running in this space.

The main living area currently has a concrete floor and a not unattractive brick fireplace surround with a beam for a mantle on the east wall; this appears to be post-War in date (i.e. the period of the 1960s-80s). Despite the busy traffic on the road in front, the secondary glazing (post-War, again?) does a good job of reducing road noise, as does the enclosure of the front door by a very solid internal porch and a panelled door with a brass knob which appears to date to the early part of the twentieth century – perhaps around 1920. The major north-south timber beams at either side of the room are intact, as is one old beam that runs east-west. There are smaller subsidiary beams of varied ages that run north-south, and the whole effect is attractive and consistent with the age of the cottage.

Staircase: this is one of the distinctive features of the cottage, although it is likely not older than about 1920, perhaps done at the same time the front door was enclosed. The staircase is quite steep and runs directly up two flights to the top of the cottage on its west side; it has sensibly been divided, and at the first floor landing it turns 90 degrees with a sturdy railing of good height. It is constructed in a simple timbered style and therefore is a good safety feature, as well as being visually attractive and consistent with the scale and materials of the rest of the building. The second level of the staircase has some lovely old beams on the west side.

Bathroom: immediately to the left of the first floor landing is the bathroom; I understand the owners intend to re-use existing pipework and outflows but modernise the facilities; the boiler will be relocated from the kitchen to the bathroom, where no further pipework will be necessary. The owners wish to reconfigure the space more efficiently and use space currently under the eaves of the roof for storage, retaining the surviving old beams. This should not have any negative impact on heritage assets.

Further, taking up an old floor covering has revealed that the bathroom and the bedrooms all have floors with wide elm floorboards of some age, and they will be left exposed as an historic feature of the interiors.

Principal bedroom: this is situated on the first floor, with one larger space opening onto a smaller space set into the side extension of the cottage. There are three planked, wooden doors with ironmongery; one door, leading onto the subsidiary room, appears to have some antiquity, with handmade hinges and ironwork. The other two doors are in the same style but of more recent date. The major, structural beams run east-west and are intact, with a couple of beams exposed in the plastered walls. They are very attractive and characteristic features of this cottage.

Top-floor bedroom: this is situated above the principal bedroom but is smaller in size because the side extension of the cottage is only two stories in height. There are some lovely beams supporting the eaves of the roof, but the single window to the west is small and appears to be of post-War date; in addition, it cannot currently be opened, and if opened, would let in considerable road noise. The owners are seeking planning permission to install a small flush conservation roof light facing north, and to keep the existing west window permanently shut. Given that the room is small and dark, and that the north side of the house is the quietest, this would certainly make the room pleasanter to occupy.

Courtyard and rear elevation: the courtyard is shared with Gardiner's Agency and is paved in brick; there is an eccentric but attractive raised terrace in the same brick, with steps at either end and some areas for planting. Apparently this was an original design by a professional landscape designer at some point in the twentieth century; the purpose of raising the seating area was to catch more sunlight. It is surrounded by fairly high walls of the neighbouring buildings and is an attractive and private feature of this property.

The rear elevation is more or less symmetrical with that of No. 8 next door (to the east) except for a single dormer in the roofline, as opposed to the double dormer at No. 8. At both front and rear there is considerable undulation of the tile-hung roof, and attractive period of the property and part of its 'period charm'.