



Abbey Gardens, Façade Planning Application Planning, Design and Access Statement Abbey Gardens, Reading

January 2026



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement has been prepared by hgh Consulting on behalf of The McGrath Group. It accompanies a planning application for improvements to the appearance of the facades of Abbey Gardens at Abbey Gardens, Abbey Street, Reading, RG1 3BA (“the Site”).
- 1.2 The description of development is as follows:
- “Replacement of façade to suit future residential use, including installation of aluminium cladding and brick slip panels, replacement fenestration, balconies and other associated development.”
- 1.3 A number of applications have been submitted and have either been approved or are currently under determination. This includes the granting of prior approvals for the change of use of the majority of the building from office to residential use and the installation of windows in the dormer roof.
- 1.4 This Statement should be read in conjunction with supporting plans and documents, including:
- Application Forms prepared by hgh Consulting;
 - Existing and Proposed Plans prepared by SADA Architecture;
 - Design and Access Statement prepared by SADA Architecture;
 - Noise Assessment prepared by KP Acoustics;
 - Daylight Sunlight Assessment prepared by Anstey Horne;
 - Flood Risk Assessment prepared by EAS;
 - Façade Demolition and Construction Plan prepared by Randalswood Construction Limited; and
 - Fire Assessment prepared by Ryan Consulting.
- 1.5 This Statement provides a detailed assessment of the proposal in relation to planning policy and other material planning considerations and the clear reasoned justification as to why planning permission for the proposed development should be granted.

2.0 SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

The Site

- 2.1 Abbey Gardens is located in the centre of Reading, close to key amenities, services and excellent public transport links, including less than a 10-minute walk to Reading Train Station and local bus routes.
- 2.2 Abbey Gardens comprises a modern office building that has been in use as Class E (formerly B1(a)) for a number of years since its construction. The building comprises of a seven-storey office block with mostly glass window exterior, supported by concrete blocks. There are up to six floors of office accommodation split across three distinct blocks and car parking is provided in undercroft and basement levels.



Figure 1: Existing Building

Surroundings and Historic Significance

- 2.3 The area surrounding the property is a mix of residential, retail and offices uses, commensurate with its town centre location.
- 2.4 The property is not statutorily listed nor located within a Conservation Area. It is however, within the setting of a number of heritage assets.
- 2.5 The site is located within the Abbey Quarter, and is in located in proximity to the Grade I Listed Reading Abbey Ruins and Grade II Listed Reading Gaol. The detailed listing for both is provided in Appendix 1 of this document.

Abbey Ruins

- 2.6 Reading Abbey was founded in 1121 by Henry I. It became one of the wealthiest abbeys in medieval England and made Reading the most important town in the Thames valley. After the Dissolution in 1539, the buildings were used as a stone quarry and most of them rapidly disappeared. The site remains of significant historic and archaeological importance.
- 2.7 The Ruins of the Abbey are located directly to the north of the Site and there is direct intervisibility between the two as a result. The Site therefore forms a functional part of the setting of the south of the Ruins, denoting its location within a modern town centre. The stark contrast between the two is readily apparent and there was apparently no attempt when designing the Site to provide a sympathetic relationship between. On this basis, the Site is seen to be a negative contributor to the setting of the Abbey Ruins.

Reading Gaol

- 2.8 Reading Gaol is located to the north east of the site, on part of the extensive former grounds associated with the Reading Abbey. It contained a house of correction since 1786 before being rebuilt.
- 2.9 The prison was listed for its 'fortress-like' design by prominent C19 architects George Gilbert Scott and William Boynton Moffatt. It was opened in 1844 and is a notable early example of Victorian prison architecture, based on the design of Pentonville Prison. It includes a prominent red brick wall forming an ominous and impermeable barrier along the northern edge of the River Kennet. This is a prominent feature in the townscape along the northern path running along the river.
- 2.10 The Gaol is also notable for housing Oscar Wilde between 1895 to 1897.
- 2.11 The Gaol closed in 1915 before being used for alternative uses and then reopening in 1969 after extensive demolition and reconstruction. It then closed permanently in early 2014.
- 2.12 Given the nature of the two sites, Abbey Gardens bears a more comfortable relationship with the function and appearance of the Gaol and its boundary walls which mostly obscure the built form behind. The Site is seen to represent a neutral impact on its setting.
- 2.13 The site is also located in proximity to a number of other heritage assets, including Abbey Mill Ruins, 10 Abbots Walk, 11-12 Abbots Walk, and Archway Connecting Forbury Gardens to Abbey Ruins, including Retaining Walls, Flanking Path to Abbey Ruins, Assize Courts, Shire Hall and Abbey Gate. As stated within the pre-application advice, due to the nature of the proposal, there would not be any direct impact on these assets.

Planning Designations

2.14 The relevant planning designations are shown in Figure 2 below:

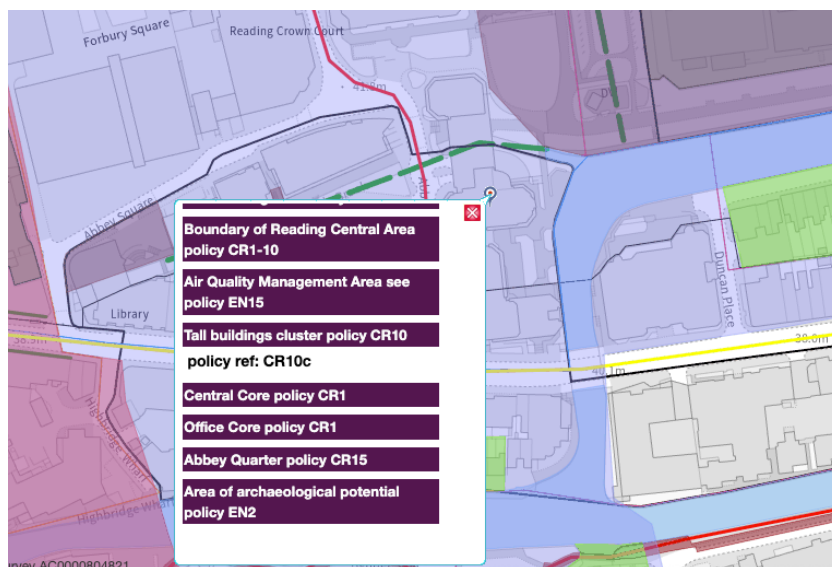


Figure 2: Planning Policy Map

2.15 In addition to the above the site is partially located within Flood Zone 3. The source of flooding is the River Kennet, an EA Main River.

Planning History

2.16 There are a number of historic applications relating to the office use of the building.

2.17 More recently a number of prior approval applications have been granted for the conversion of the majority of the building from office to residential. Planning permission has also been granted and applied for in relation to the installation of windows in the roof top plant space to allow for the provision of further residential units.

2.18 These applications are summarised in the Table below.

2.19 It is the applicant's intention to start the conversion works pursuant to these consents shortly.

Decision Date	Description of Development and Reference	Decision
N/A	Change of use of part of building from Class E (offices) to Class C3 (dwelling houses) to comprise 12 new flats. Prior Notification under	Under Consideration

	Class MA, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015 (ref: PL/26/0012)	
N/A	Installation of roof space windows within the north, east, south and west elevations of the of the south block at Abbey Gardens (ref: PL/25/1729)	Under Consideration
N/A	Change of use of part of building from Class E (offices) to Class C3 (dwelling houses) to comprise 12 new flats. Prior Notification under Class MA, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015. (ref: PL/26/0012)	Under Consideration
13 December 2025	Installation of roof space windows on the north, east and west elevations of the north block and north, south and west elevations of the central block and construction of a roof to enclose the plant area within part of the central block (ref: PL/25/1175)	Approved
19 September 2025	Change of use of part of the 5th (north block) and 6th (middle block) floors from Class E (offices) to Class C3 (dwelling houses) to comprise 14 (1x1, 11x2 & 2x3-bedroom) residential units. Prior Notification under Class MA, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015 (as amended).	Withdrawn
21 August 2025	Change of use of part of the ground floor to seventh floor from Class E (offices) to C3 (dwelling houses) to comprise 53 1x bed and 54 2x bed flats. Prior Notification under Class MA, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015.	Approved
23 May 2025	Change of use of part of ground, first, second, third, fourth and fifth floors from Class E (offices) to C3 (dwellinghouses) to comprise 84x1 bed and 8x2 bed flats. Prior Notification under Class MA, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015.	Approved
19/04/2023	New glazed entrance and external step platform lift (ref PL/23/0211)	Approved
01/03/2021	Removal of 1No. glazed panel and the installation of a new air intake/outlet to match existing (part retrospective)	Approved
27/05/2020	Remove existing glazed panel an replace with new entrance door to terrace area (ref: PL/20/0477)	Approved

10/01/2020	Removal of of 2no glazed panels and installation of new Air Intake Louvres to match existing (ref: PL/19/1777)	Approved
10/05/2018	External terrace and decked area (ref: PL/17/2261)	Refused
04/10/2012	Non-material change to planning permission 11/01726/FUL for modifying and raising the levels of the planters to the south elevation along Kings Road to include for the existing floor structure below (ref: PL/12/1582)	Approved
04/10/2012	3 Maples - crown reduced by 2-2.5m, crown clean and crown lift to 4m (ref: PL/12/1851)	Split
22/08/2012	Hoarding marketing wrap and 2 halo illuminated entrance signs (ref: PL/12/0497)	Approved
15/08/2012	Certificate of Lawfulness for proposed new door (ref: PL/12/1616)	Approved (Permitted Development)
28/06/2012	Discharge of condition 4 of planning permission 11/01726/FUL (ref: PL/12/1139)	Approved
11/02/2012	Non-Material Amendment to permitted application 200477 - revise the design from a single door to a single door with side and overhead glazed panels.	Approved
07/02/2012	Installation of new plant and alterations to the roof to create associated louvre openings (PL/11/1790)	Approved
04/01/2012	Remodelling of existing office entrance area and alterations to access to include disabled entrance and lift (PL/11/0658)	Approved

3.0 PRE-APPLICATION CONSULTATION / STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- 3.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (“NPPF”), Localism Act and strategic local policies and guidance emphasise that early engagement and good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources.
- 3.2 The applicant has undertaken pre-application discussions with Reading Borough Council officers and presented the application to the Design Review Panel.

Pre-Application

- 3.3 A pre-application meeting was held with Reading Borough Council officers on 28 November 2025 (ref: PL/25/1190). The principle of reworking the façade is supported, including the use of a brick based solution. A number of comments were raised in relation to the evolving design. Further information is provided in the submitted Design and Access Statement.
- 3.4 A number of comments were received in relation to the application validation requirements. This included the suggestion that the application may be supported by an archaeological assessment, utilities statement and contaminated land survey. As the application includes no work below ground, these reports have not been deemed necessary for a robust determination of the application.

Reading Design Review Panel (DRP)

- 3.5 A meeting was held with the Reading DRP on 4 December 2025.
- 3.6 The DRP understood the rationale behind the application. The main purpose of the meeting was to provide feedback on the design approach informing the proposals.
- 3.7 The panel welcomed the use of brick, but considered that the applicant need to do further work on the design development and narrative leading to the proposals. The panel considered that this further work should be included as part of the planning application to demonstrate that the proposals are of a high quality and are respectful of the nearby historic context. This additional detail has been provided in the submitted Design and Access Statement.

Engagement with Amenity Groups and Local Councillors

- 3.8 Prior to submission of the application, as recommended as part of the pre-application process, the applicant has contacted the below amenity groups and councillors to inform them of the proposal:
- Reading CAAC;
 - Reading Civic Society; and

- Save Reading Gaol Campaign.
- 3.9 The applicant also contacted the three local ward councillors, Cllr Mohammed Ayub, Cllr Karen Rowland and Cllr David Stevens.
- 3.10 The applicant is in the process of arranging meetings with the local ward Cllrs to discuss the proposal.

4.0 THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Description of the Proposed Development

- 4.1 The application relates to the removal of the existing curtain walling façade up to the existing parapet level and its replacement with an alternative design that is more sympathetic and attractive for the upcoming residential use.
- 4.2 Careful consideration has been given to the surrounding historic context and the intent is to provide a subtle contrast to the historic materials in the Abbey Ruins and Reading Gaol so that there is no direct competition or visual confusion with these assets.
- 4.3 The appearance of the building will move from being commercial to one that is residential. The use of brick set within the retained concrete frame will be more complementary of the surrounding area and be more consistent with the materials found on the majority of buildings along Kings Road.
- 4.4 The architectural intent is to create a "collection" of volumes. By assigning unique identities to the north, central and south blocks through the use of contrasting but complementary materials, the massing of the building will be broken down and appear as a cluster of smaller buildings when seen from dynamic views.
- 4.5 The existing continuous glazed appearance will be replaced with "punched" window openings that will be of a more traditional residential character. This allows for the opportunity to introduce a new hierarchy of openings, create a more visually interesting façade and introduce a rhythm to the façade that reflects the layout of the consented residential scheme. The provision of new high quality glazing will provide thermal efficiency improvements as well as lower noise impacts.
- 4.6 New Juliette and projecting balconies will provide much needed amenity space.
- 4.7 Care has been taken to ensure the provision of light that will be experienced by the new dwellings, as approved, will be maximised.
- 4.8 In terms of materiality, the following materials are proposed:
 - South Block: Brick Type 1 - a textured, multi-tonal grey brick with a 'stony' appearance;
 - North and Central Block: Brick Type 2 - a high-quality deep earthy brown with subtle tonal variations;
 - Link and Details: A dense, smooth-faced brick in a deep charcoal / slate-blue tone;
 - Windows: High-performance aluminium frame windows in a black / dark grey finish to match the existing curtain wall frames that are being retained in certain locations;

- Balconies: Constructed from galvanised steel flat plates, painted to match the window frames;
- Balcony Soffits: Finished with a painted soffit liner board for a clean, residential appearance;
- Juliet Balconies: Utilised to break the rigid vertical alignment of the façade and maximise daylight without excessive overshadowing.

4.9 Further detail is contained within the accompanying Design and Access Statement.

Phasing

4.10 A portion of the building in the north block at ground and first floor remains under a commercial lease. Whilst this application seeks permission for façade works to be undertaken to the entirety of the building up to parapet level, this is expected to be delivered in two phases. The majority of the works to the building will be carried out from the outset, alongside the change of use of the respective residential elements. The works to the remainder of the building (the ground and first floor of the north block) will follow, along with a future application for the change of use of this additional space. The submitted proposed elevation drawings makes this clear. The design has been mindful of this phased approach and care has been taken to ensure the replacement façade will be complementary to the retained elements for the period they remain in place.

Compatibility with Existing Prior Approvals

- 4.11 During pre-application discussions, a question arose as to the compatibility of alterations to the façade with the extant prior approvals for the change of use of the building, including with any conditions attached to said prior approvals.
- 4.12 It is not uncommon for physical works to be carried out to buildings in parallel with prior approvals and numerous examples can be provided to officers if that is seen to be helpful.
- 4.13 Part 3 Paragraph W of the General Permitted Development Order 2015 (as amended) deals with the procedure for application for prior approval. Paragraph W(12) states:

“The development must be carried out—

(a) where prior approval is required, in accordance with the details approved by the local planning authority...

...unless the local planning authority and the developer agree otherwise in writing.”

- 4.14 The function of granting planning permission for alterations to the façade will serve as agreement in writing for the purpose of Part 3 Paragraph W(12).

- 4.15 It should further be noted that the prior approval permissions involve the change of use of the internal space only and cannot by definition include works to the exterior of the building. The approved floor plans will remain unaltered within the parameter of the building.
- 4.16 Conditions relating to the approved specification of glazing will be adhered to. There will be no changes in terms of the approach to fire control and an updated Daylight Sunlight Assessment is submitted alongside this application.

Future Applications

- 4.17 It should be noted that this application covers works to the façade up to the parapet level only. It is anticipated that a future planning application will be submitted to make further alterations above the parapet level to provide additional amenity space. In addition, further works will be undertaken to the hard and soft landscaping surrounding the building.

5.0 PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

- 5.1 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires planning applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Development Plan

- 5.2 The development plan for the purposes of this application consists of:

- Reading Local Plan (adopted November 2019)

- 5.3 The relevant policies are as follows:

- Policy CC2: Sustainable Design and Construction
- Policy CC7: Design and The Public Realm
- Policy CR2: Design in Central Reading
- Policy EN1: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment
- Policy EN6: New Development in a Historic Context
- Policy CR15: The Reading Abbey Quarter

- 5.4 Other material considerations in respect of planning policy to be taken into account include:

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) December 2024
- Sustainable Design and Construction SPD (adopted December 2019)
- Revised Parking Standards and Design SPD (adopted October 2011)

6.0 PLANNING ASSESSMENT

6.1 This section considers the extent to which the proposed development accords with the relevant development plan policies and other material considerations. The key planning considerations relevant to the proposed development are:

- Principle of development;
- Design and heritage;
- Trees;
- Residential amenity;
- Sustainability;
- Flood risk;
- Ecology; and
- Biodiversity Net Gain.

Principle of Development

- 6.2 As acknowledged during pre-application discussions, the broad objective to provide the building with a more residential character to suit its upcoming change of use through a replacement façade is accepted in principle.
- 6.3 The existing building has a utilitarian, functional design which a product of its time and existing commercial use. The proposed alterations to the façade will provide future residents a more attractive and functional living environment, internally and externally.
- 6.4 Accordingly, the principle of replacing the façade is deemed acceptable in principle, as confirmed during pre-application discussions.

Design and Heritage

- 6.5 Policy CR2 of the Reading Borough Local Plan expects the architectural details and materials used in the central area to be high quality and respect the form and quality of the detailing and materials in areas local to the development site. More broadly, policy CC7 requires development to be of a high-quality design that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located. Developments should respond positively to their local context and create or reinforce local character and distinctiveness, including protecting and enhancing the historic environment.

- 6.6 Due to its scale and prominent position, the building currently acts as a local landmark and has a notable influence on the setting of the Abbey Gardens Scheduled Monument and Reading Gaol. While the building is well maintained, with its dated appearance and dominant massing it currently represents a minor negative to neutral contribution to the surrounding designated heritage assets.
- 6.7 There is an opportunity to provide a new lease of life to the appearance of the building, along with its residential conversion and maximise the contribution that this building has to the surrounding area.
- 6.8 Consideration on the building's function within the historic townscape has been given from the outset. The applicant has carefully reviewed the feedback received during pre-application discussions and from the DRP, and this has directly informed the evolution of the proposed design.
- 6.9 While initial pre-application feedback broadly supported the use of brickwork, concerns were raised regarding the use of red brick on the north block, particularly in relation to potential visual competition with the listed prison walls. In response, the applicant proposes an earthy brown brick for the north, ensuring that the development does not compete with the red brick of the Reading Gaol including its boundary walls, as well as the lighter shade of stone remaining from the Abbey Ruins.
- 6.10 Further refinements to the design include the replacement of the previously proposed black brick slips with Staffordshire blue brick. This revised material palette is considered to provide a more refined and contextually appropriate finish, offering subtle detailing in contrast to the previously proposed modern black treatment.
- 6.11 The design of the balconies has also been amended in response to feedback. The underside of the balconies will now match the overall balcony materiality, ensuring a high-quality appearance when viewed from street level. Their frequency and placement has been reviewed to create more balanced elevations.
- 6.12 Overall, the proposal represents a high-quality design response that enhances the building's relationship with its surroundings and complies with Policies CR2 and CC7 of the Reading Borough Local Plan.
- 6.13 The improvement to the appearance of the building leads to the conclusion that it will have a neutral to minimal positive impact on the setting of the Abbey Ruins and Reading Gaol and therefore have a neutral impact on their significance.

Trees

- 6.14 A number of trees are located within and adjacent to the site, including trees protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs).

- 6.15 In order to undertake the façade works, there needs to be a clear access around the building of 2m from the façade.
- 6.16 As outlined within the Façade Demolition and Construction Plan, no trees will be removed as part of these works. As agreed with the RBC Natural Environment Officer, Sarah Hanson, some pruning of the trees has been necessary to facilitate the works.
- 6.17 Further detail is provided in the submitted Demolition and Construction Plan.

Amenity

Daylight Sunlight

- 6.18 The application is accompanied by a Daylight Sunlight Assessment prepared by Anstey Horne.
- 6.19 The assessment comprises a comprehensive technical appraisal undertaken in accordance with BRE Report 209, *Site Layout Planning for Daylight and Sunlight: A Guide to Good Practice* (the BRE Guidelines).
- 6.20 The assessment recognises that the scheme has been carefully designed within the inherent constraints of converting an existing building, where window positions, sizes, and orientations are largely fixed and offer limited scope for alteration.
- 6.21 Notwithstanding these constraints, the development achieves a high level of compliance, with overall daylight adherence of 80% and sunlight adherence of 92%, which is considered strong for a conversion scheme in a dense urban environment.
- 6.22 Overall, the Daylight Sunlight Assessment considers that future occupants will benefit from good access to daylight and sunlight amenity.

Noise

- 6.23 The application is also accompanied by a Noise Assessment prepared by KP Acoustics.
- 6.24 The Noise Assessment considers that the measured noise levels allowed a robust glazing specification to be proposed which would provide internal noise levels for all residential environments of the development commensurate to the design range of BS8233:2014. On this basis, the proposals are considered to be acceptable from a noise perspective.

Amenity Space

- 6.25 The proposed façade improvements include the introduction of Juliette and projecting balconies which will provide private amenity space for future occupiers.

- 6.26 Concerns raised during pre-application discussions regarding potential overlooking and privacy impacts have been addressed through design revisions. As demonstrated on Page 1 of the Design and Access Statement, balconies have been removed at key pinch points, fully resolving previous concerns and ensuring acceptable privacy standards. As a result, no screening is deemed necessary on the balconies.
- 6.27 Overall, it is considered that the proposals are acceptable from an amenity perspective and will lead to a substantial net improvement in the quality of accommodation for future residents.

Sustainability

- 6.28 Whilst officers confirmed that no formal energy strategy is required, further detail on the sustainability improvements arising from the scheme have been requested. This information is included in the submitted Design and Access Statement. The new façade will provide the opportunity to deliver a major upgrade to the building's thermal performance.
- 6.29 Furthermore, by retaining the primary structure of the building and upgrading its envelope, the project would significantly reduce the operational carbon, whilst also extending the lifespan of the building.

Flooding

- 6.30 The site is partially located within Flood Zone 3. The source of flooding is the River Kennet, an EA Main River.
- 6.31 The works proposed as part of this application are above ground only and do not give rise to any changes to the access and egress to the building. Resultingly, the proposal is not considered to give rise to any flood risk concerns.

Ecology

- 6.32 The proposed development incorporates ecological enhancement measures, including the provision of bat and bird boxes, as set out within the Design and Access Statement. These measures will deliver biodiversity enhancements in accordance with best practice and relevant policy objectives.

Biodiversity Net Gain

- 6.33 The type of development proposed falls under the exemption of the requirement to provide 10% Biodiversity Net Gain due to de minimis exemption (the development does not impact more than 25 sqm of on-site habitat).
- 6.34 Nevertheless, there will be a net gain in biodiversity due to the aforementioned installation of bird and bat boxes.

7.0 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement has demonstrated that the proposed façade alterations are acceptable in principle and represent a logical and high-quality response to the building's upcoming change of use to residential accommodation.
- 7.2 The development has carefully evolved and is designed in response to its sensitive town centre context, including its relationship with the Abbey Gardens Scheduled Monument and Reading Gaol. Through a refined material palette, informed by pre-application and Design Review Panel feedback, the proposals will enhance the appearance of the building and make a more positive contribution to the local townscape. Importantly, there will be a have a neutral impact on the significance of these designated heritage assets.
- 7.3 In amenity terms, the accompanying Daylight and Sunlight Assessment and Noise Assessment demonstrate that future occupiers will benefit from good levels of residential amenity, consistent with accepted guidance and standards for an urban conversion scheme. The introduction of private balconies further enhances the quality of accommodation, with privacy concerns appropriately addressed through design amendments.
- 7.4 Overall, the proposed development accords with the adopted development plan and there are no material considerations that indicate planning permission should be withheld. The proposals represent a sustainable and well-considered enhancement to the building and its setting, and planning permission is therefore respectfully sought.

8.0 APPENDIX 1: LISTING FOR READING ABBEY RUINS AND READING GAOL

8.1 The listing description for the Abbey Ruins is as follows:

Founded 1121 by Henry I and intended to be England's principal Cluniac House. Extensive precincts stretched from the Plummery Wall (qv) to the Kennet and from St Laurence's (at the west gate) (qv) to the east side of the Gaol (qv). Caen stone, quarry flint and Taynton stone.

From excavation and from what remains it is clear that the Abbey with its apse and apsidal transept chapels was in the mainstream of Norman architecture. It may have been vaulted but insufficient research has been done on this aspect, which would have made it remarkable indeed. The picturesque surviving fragments are a rubble core stripped almost entirely of its facing stone. The remains are principally grouped to the south of St James's RC School. They include portions of the north and south transepts, the chapter-house (which must have resembled that at Durham), the west wall of the Dorter and the rere-dorter.

Fragmentary remains in the Forbury Gardens are listed separately. A further stretch of wall runs towards Abbey Street behind Abbey Wall. For the Gatehouse, Hospitium see separate items. Reading Abbey's importance now lies in the field of Romanesque sculpture.

Fragments were disposed as far away as Shiplake, many are still incorporated in walls through-out Reading and several cart-loads of carved stones abound in the Forbury Gardens. The date of the carved fragments is probably not later than 1136 (when Henry I was buried in the chancel) and is more likely to be circa 1130. The best items which have come to light, many excavated in the 1950s and probably from a cloister, are now in Reading Museum (some, including the Coronation of the Virgin, were previously at the V and A where they were on display). The excavated cloister capitals include the earliest known representation of the Coronation of the Virgin and one with two bearded angels. Fragments of decoration include masks, chevron and more especially beakhead, probably its earliest use in England. A large stone with interlace now used as font in St James' RC Church (qv). (Ancient Monuments, Berks No 1).

8.2 The listing description for Reading Gaol is as follows:

"Summary County gaol, 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynton Moffatt, altered c.1970. Certain buildings and parts of the buildings are excluded from the Listing, as is made clear in the List entry.

Reasons for Designation

The main building at Reading Gaol, of 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynton Moffatt, is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

** Architectural interest: an impressive, fortress-like design that represents an early work by one of England's foremost C19 architects;*

** Planning interest: a pioneering English example of a radial-plan prison built for the newly-introduced 'separate system' of constant surveillance and solitary confinement;*

** Historic interest: strongly associated with the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, who spent eighteen months of his two-year sentence there and later immortalised the institution in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'.*

Details

County gaol, 1842-4 by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynton Moffatt, altered c.1970.

MATERIALS: red brick with Bath stone dressings, mostly now renewed in concrete. Roofs originally of slate, now replaced with asbestos tiles (not of special interest).*

PLAN: the main prison building originally stood within a square enclosure of approximately three acres, surrounded by a high boundary wall with octagonal corner towers and a large, multi-towered gatehouse complex on the north side providing accommodation for resident staff (the governor, deputy governors, warders, matron and chaplain) as well as additional security. Against the north wall and alongside the gatehouse was a block containing the women's cells.

All this was demolished c.1970, leaving only the cruciform main building. This comprises four wings, designated A to D, converging on a central semi-octagon. The upper three floors of A, B and C wings contained the male felons' cells. Originally there were twelve on each floor in B wing and twenty-five in the longer A and C wings, accessed on the upper two floors by means of galleries connecting via the central octagon. The basement beneath A wing originally contained the prison kitchens, and - in a sealed-off area to the west, accessed via a tunnel (now demolished) leading outside the prison wall - a munitions store for the Berkshire militia; the latter space was absorbed into the prison proper in 1878 and was last used as the prison hospital. The basement under B wing contained baths, punishment cells, a knife room and an officers' cleansing room.

D wing was aligned with the old gatehouse and formed the entrance to the main building. The ground floor and basement contained the debtors' cells: first-class debtors on the ground floor opposite the governor's office and visiting rooms, second-class debtors in the basement along with the reception cells and coal store. The first and second floors contained the chaplain's and schoolmaster's offices, a room from which the governor could oversee activity in the central octagon, and - rising through both floors in the centre of the wing - the prison chapel. Executions took place on a scaffold built against the eastern side of the wing.

As well as the rebuilding of the perimeter walls, the works of c.1970 saw the construction of a number of new buildings within the old prison yards. These are plain red-brick structures of one and two storeys, and include: a new gatehouse at the north-west corner of the site; an administration block with visiting and interview rooms, abutting D wing to the north; and, in the angle between A and B wings, an education and training building, which now also contains the prison chapel and kitchens. In the angle between B and C wings is a former workshop of c.1910, a single-storey brick building with a part-glazed roof. These structures, and the rebuilt perimeter wall that encloses them, are not of special interest and are excluded from the listing.*

EXTERIOR: Scott and Moffatt's design displays the Tudor-Gothic details employed in their workhouse and hospital designs, here combined with castellated elements - battlements to the entrance block and central octagon, machicolations under the eaves throughout - intended to give a fortress-like aspect. The visual inspiration for the design, which was much criticised for its elaboration and expense, is said to have been Warwick Castle. The alterations of c.1970 greatly changed the building's external appearance: the original two-light cell windows were replaced with single square openings containing barred double-glazed window units (not of special interest), and most of the stone-dressed elements were replaced in concrete. (An unaltered original cell window survives in the basement of D wing.)]*

D wing is the main focus for architectural display. The projecting frontispiece at the northern end is fully crenellated and features tall ridged and corbelled chimney stacks, diapered brickwork and mullion-and-transom windows. The ground-floor entrance doorway has been lost, absorbed into a single-storey addition of c.1970. The wing behind is dominated by the tall chapel windows with their simple Gothic tracery. Beneath these, on the western side, are more mullion-and-transom windows, originally to the administrative offices. On the eastern side are the smaller pointed windows of the debtors' cells. In the centre is a larger archway, now bricked up, through which condemned prisoners were led out onto the scaffold.

A, B and C wings have pitched roofs over the central galleried section and flat roofs over the cell blocks on either side. The latter have the square concrete-framed windows installed c.1970; the former terminate in gabled projections with very tall mullion-and-transom windows (of concrete replacing the original stone) which are the main source of light to the internal galleries. There is a similar (and likewise renewed) window where each wing abuts the octagonal hub, the cell blocks terminating in quadrants here to allow light to penetrate the central space. The octagon itself has a crenellated parapet and a tall central turret, also crenellated, which forms the main stack for the plenum ventilation system.

INTERIORS: these have been much altered, with original features removed and a variety of modern fittings and finishes applied; the latter are not of special interest. The original cells with their jack-arched brick vaults mostly survive, but have in the majority of cases been doubled up by removing the wall between each pair, while the Tudor-arched entrance doorways now have flat concrete lintels, and renewed doors* (the doors not being of special interest). The metal gallery structures with their curved supporting brackets and cross-braced balustrades are original. The ceiling over the galleries is a pointed brick vault, while the central octagon has a brick vault with moulded stone ribs and corbels, and lozengeshaped ceiling lights cut through the webs of the vault. Air extracted from vents in the cells originally passed through the space above the vaults and out through the plenum tower. Suspended at first-floor level within the octagon was a glazed Gothic pavilion structure from which prison staff could keep watch on movements in A, B and C wings and (via the tall side windows) in the prison yard outside; the pavilion has been replaced with a modern prefabricated cabin* (not of special interest). In the basement under A wing, the layout of the former munitions store is still legible, despite the inserted ceiling* (not of special interest) and the demolition of the access tunnel. Beneath B wing some original cells survive, including high-security 'punishment' cells for the confinement of violent inmates.*

The chapel, later used as a games room, is a double-height space with an arch-braced queen-strut roof and central skylight. It originally contained a multi-tiered timber gallery structure that allowed each prisoner to observe the service from within an enclosed box; this arrangement, designed to minimise contact between prisoners in accordance with the 'separate system', can still be seen at Lincoln Castle but has been completely lost at Reading along with all other fittings and decoration. Elsewhere in D wing the layout of the offices survives, as do some of the debtors' cells.

** Pursuant to s.1 (5A) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 ('the Act') it is declared that these aforementioned features are not of special architectural or historic interest."*



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