

While we do support the renovation of the house and garden at 17 Hodwell in principle, the scale and design of the proposed extension mean that we must object to this application.

1. Impact on the Conservation Area and heritage assets

The site lies within the Ashwell Conservation Area, close to the grade I listed Church of St Mary and the grade II listed Rectory to the north, the grade II listed Plait Hall to the south, and the grade II listed Tower Cottage to the west. Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 places a statutory duty on the Council to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, and paragraphs within Chapter 16 of the NPPF require great weight to be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets.

The application site at 17 Hodwell was split from Plait Hall in the 1960s. Before this time, it comprised an orchard in the grounds of Plait Hall, along with a fish and chip shop and other outbuildings. Because the application site was subdivided from Plait Hall's grounds after 1948, the site may form part of the curtilage of Plait Hall for listed building purposes. The application or its supporting Heritage Statement has not addressed this and we ask the Council's conservation officer to consider this question before the application is determined.

We are concerned that the substantial increase in built form on this corner plot — replacing a single storey garage of 46m² with a two storey extension of 70m² footprint, together with new boundary walls, gates and rendering — represents a significant change to the appearance and grain of this prominent site at the junction of Hodwell, Swan Street and Church Lane, which forms part of the setting of the other nearby listed buildings and the historic core of the village. We do not consider the Design and Access/Heritage Statement adequately assesses the impact of the increased scale and massing, and the new boundary treatments, on the setting of the nearby heritage assets.

This is contrary to Policies SP13 and HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan, and to Policy ASH7 (Protecting Historic Assets) of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan, which states that development will not normally be allowed if it eliminates or damages historic structures, buildings or structures of local interest or their immediate setting. We also draw the Council's attention to the Ashwell Village Design Statement, which sets out design expectations (materials, massing, boundary treatments) against which this scheme should be assessed.

2. Scale, height and impact on neighbouring living conditions

The proposed two storey extension represents a material increase in bulk over the existing single storey garage it replaces, and the height of the roofline is of particular concern to us. Both Plait Hall and 36 High Street face 17 Hodwell across their gardens. The roof as proposed would form a solid block in the sightline of both

properties. It would be particularly intrusive from our property. The design has more of an urban rather than a village feel – there is variety in the local rooflines, with extension rooflines tending to be lower than the principal house.

We suggest that the roofline is lowered to an intermediate height with that of Hodwell Barn next door. A mansard roof could be considered, or simply a different angle of incline. There is already a property with a mansard roof on Ashwell Street, so although unusual it is not unknown here.

We are also concerned about the potential for increased overlooking, loss of privacy, and loss of light, contrary to Policy D3 (Protecting Living Conditions) and Policy D2 (House Extensions) of the Local Plan. We ask the Council to require full details of window positions on the two storey elements facing neighbouring gardens, and to assess the resulting impact on daylight/sunlight and privacy to adjoining properties before any decision is made.

3. Changes to north, east and west boundaries

The application proposes a new 1.75m high brick boundary wall, replacement close-boarded timber fencing, and enlarged vehicular/pedestrian gates at the junction of Hodwell, Swan Street and Church Lane. We are concerned that:

- The increased height and extent of solid brick walling will materially alter the open, informal character of this part of the Conservation Area, which currently allows views into and across the site from the street.
- The enlarged gate opening, at a site already located close to a junction of three roads, may affect visibility for pedestrians and vehicles using Hodwell, Swan Street and Church Lane.

We ask that the Council's Highways and Conservation officers specifically assess these matters.

The application proposes to remove the existing hedge to the northern boundary. Hedges within the Conservation Area benefit from a general presumption in favour of retention, as they make an important contribution to the street scene and local biodiversity. We do not consider the supporting information provides sufficient justification for its removal, nor sufficient detail of replacement planting. We ask the Council to require full details of any replacement boundary treatment and planting to ensure no net loss of amenity or biodiversity value, in line with Policy SP9 and the NPPF's requirements on the natural environment.

4. Impact on mature trees at the southern boundary

The Design and Access Statement refers to the nearest neighbour as living next door in Hodwell, but we at Plait Hall share a 100ft boundary along the entire length of our gardens.

The land slopes down from Plait Hall towards the north east, so when the garden was subdivided a retaining wall became necessary to provide a level base for the new house. We recognise that the retaining wall requires repair and possible rebuilding, but are concerned about the position of the new wall and the effect on the mature trees close to our boundary.

The application proposes to remove the existing timber fencing to the southern boundary and rebuild the retaining wall adjacent to it. The new retaining wall will be significantly longer and come right up to our boundary, and also form the foundation for the south wall of the new extension. Only one tree is shown on the site plan, while in reality there are numerous mature trees along this boundary, including a very rare apple variety.

Given the scale of excavation that appears likely to be needed to create a new retaining structure immediately adjacent to these mature trees, we do not consider the application has adequately assessed the risk to their root systems, nor demonstrated that the necessary consent process for works to trees in a Conservation Area has been, or will be, followed.

We have spent many years encouraging wildlife, particularly birds, to nest in the trees and shrubs along the fence line. We are used to pruning our trees, but felling them is a different matter, although we are prepared to have to fell the selfset prunus adjacent to the boundary.

The Ashwell Conservation Area affords blanket protection to all trees within it under section 211 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, meaning that any works likely to affect these trees — including excavation within their root protection areas — require six weeks' prior written notice to the Council before any work is carried out, so that the Council may consider making a Tree Preservation Order if warranted.

We ask the Council to require a full Arboricultural Impact Assessment and Method Statement (in line with BS5837:2012), including root protection area plans, before any works at this boundary are approved, and to confirm that section 211 notice requirements have been satisfied. No works should be permitted to proceed without this assessment, given the risk of irreversible harm to mature trees that make a demonstrable contribution to the character of the Conservation Area.

The current location of the extension would make maintenance of the fence (which is the responsibility of 17 Hodwell) difficult or impossible. There would also be a 'no man's land' between the fence and the extension which could encourage weeds and/or rodents. There is no indication of how this would be managed.

We suggest that the extension be re-sited at least 0.5m/2ft away from the fence line along its length. 17 Hodwell is a substantial plot and we think this could reasonably be accommodated.

Conclusion

For the reasons set out above, we do not consider the application, as currently submitted, adequately safeguards the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area, the setting of nearby listed buildings, the amenity of neighbouring occupiers, or trees and hedges. We ask the Council to refuse the application, or at the very least to secure amendments addressing the above concerns before any permission is granted.