

CONSERVATION TEAM CONSULTATION APPLICATION RESPONSE

APPLICATION REF:	26/00612/FP & 26/00613/LBC
CASE OFFICER:	VW
APPLICATION SITE:	The Biggin, Queen Street, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 1AB
DESCRIPTION OF WORKS:	Installation of perimeter railing, gate and wall following removal of existing fence. Installation of free-standing Air Source Heat Pump and associated enclosure, new bin and cycle store together with hard and soft landscaping works including low-level lighting. Internal and external alterations including replacement windows and installation of secondary glazing.

RECOMMENDATION:

26/00612/FP- I raise **NO OBJECTION** in principle on the basis that the proposal will facilitate maintaining an optimum viable use for this building and arrest deterioration to the extent that the building may not then appear on a future At Risk Register. Subject to an adequate response to points raised in my response, the proposal is likely to satisfy the provisions of Sections 66(1) and 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF, the aims of Policy HE1 of North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031.

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Impact on The Biggin and the Hitchin Conservation Area.

The setting to The Biggin and the Hitchin CA will not be harmed by the proposal submitted under ref: 26/00612/FP. The works proposed to the LB under ref: 26/00613/LBC are a measured, proportionate and well justified response, however, questions are raised regarding matters such as: size of units, recording and works within the attic voids, extent of timber frame repairs, internal insulation upgrades, window detailing etc which may have a small adverse impact upon the listed building.

SITE CONTEXT:

The Biggin is grade II* listed and is located within the Hitchin Conservation Area, therefore, the building and the area are Designated Heritage Assets for the purpose of applying the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF. The list entry can be found at the following link: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1102181?section=official-list-entry>



The building exudes architectural character as noted in the images below.

Small open courtyard

Cloister formed by a Small Tuscan colonnade along one side

Some old brickwork in tall chimney stacks



Although the 'grading' of the building's interior is provided at page 20 of the Statement of Significance (SofSig) -see below, **no assessment is provided of the roof space which would be helpful considering my comments below on this point.**

The various spaces or elements within The Biggin have been assessed and graded based upon the contribution they make to the overall significance of the building. This will provide an objective framework to assist in the future conservation and management of the building, to ensure the special qualities are retained over the various phases of works.

A guide to the grading levels is outlined below and highlighted on the accompanying colour coded floor plan:

- Exceptional
- Considerable
- Moderate
- Low
- Harmful



At 1.2.1 of the SofSig it says:

Refer to the attached detailed condition survey. The building is currently in a very variable state of condition internally and externally and it is important that works are carried out relatively quickly to arrest ongoing decay to the building but also accommodate new users. In summary the building could be described as a future building at risk.

As noted in the SofSig, *“Parts of the property have been unoccupied, due to mould, damp and sub-standard living arrangements. It is essential to implement improvements to the building’s sustainability, in view of the fact that the perceived maintenance burden of such a large property is likely to be a determining factor in the decision-making process. Today, several potential threats to the heritage and significance of the site for a number of reasons”* (3.2.5 of SofSig).

Furthermore, the fabric has deteriorated and the SofSig notes *“There is a loss of historic details and fabric due to rot and/or misuse. This is a matter that requires attention to remedy the issue or prevent it from worsening. The building is in poor condition internally; there are instances of inappropriate repair and maintenance work and poor moisture control. There is evidence of failure in the existing flashings and rainwater goods, but also damp ingress around the lower perimeter which is a cause for concern as there is evidence of water ingress and dampness to some areas of the external timbers and masonry”*.

Although not currently on NHC’s Buildings at Risk Register, The Biggin may well be a candidate for inclusion. Each entry in the Council’s Buildings at Risk register is categorised according to the scale below. Risk is assessed by a combination of condition and occupancy - an empty building can be in relatively good condition but still be rated as vulnerable, due to the building’s lack of a viable use. A building that is in poor condition but has a viable use, may not necessarily be considered to be at risk, although will normally be monitored as a vulnerable building.

- **Category 1** - Extreme risk of further decay or total loss
- **Category 2** - Severe risk of further decay
- **Category 3** - At risk of further decay
- **Category 4** - Vulnerable to further decay and may become at risk if problems not dealt with soon.
- **Category 5** - Not at risk, in fair condition
- **Category 6** - Not at risk, and in excellent condition

The following is noted on Historic England’s website:

Buildings and structures

Buildings or structures (not in use as a public place of worship) considered for inclusion on the Register must be listed grade I or II, (or grade II in London) or be a structural scheduled monument with upstanding remains. Buildings or structures are assessed for inclusion on the basis of condition and, where applicable, occupancy (or use) reflecting the fact that a building which is occupied is generally less vulnerable than one that is not.*

Occupancy (or use) is assessed as 'vacant', 'part occupied', 'occupied', 'not applicable', or occasionally, 'unknown'. Many structures fall into the 'not applicable' category as they can be ruins, walls, gates, headstones or boundary stones.

Condition is assessed as 'very bad', 'poor', 'fair' or 'good'. The condition of buildings or structures on the Register typically ranges from 'very bad' to 'poor', 'fair' and (occasionally) 'good' reflecting the fact that some buildings or structures capable of use are vulnerable to becoming at risk because they are empty, under-used or face redundancy without a new use to secure their future.

Assessing vulnerability in the case of buildings in fair condition necessarily involves judgement and discretion. A few buildings remain on the Register in good condition while solutions are being implemented as a reminder of the need for monitoring, and to ensure that repair and re-use are seen through to completion. Buildings or structures are removed from the Register when they are fully repaired/consolidated, and their future secured through either occupation and use, or through the adoption of appropriate management.

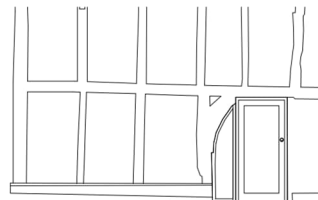
DETAILED ANALYSIS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

The main issue is to consider the impact of the works on the special character of The Biggin and upon the character and appearance of the Hitchin Conservation Area. First and foremost, this application is well illustrated and documented. The SofSig lists the formal scope of work as:

- *The removal of the of internal 1960s partitions, fixtures, and services*
- *New internal stud partitions and acoustic linings*
- *Internal door overhaul and replacement as illustrated.*
- *New decorative service zone linings*
- *New internal ventilation system and ductwork*
- *New internal electrical services layout, including new cylinders and radiators.*
- *New underfloor heating system to the ground floor.*
- *Fit out of new kitchens, joinery elements, and bathrooms.*
- *Plaster repairs, new plastering to new partitions, internal decorations, and fireproofing.*
- *Internal timber repairs, panelling and carpentry repairs and restoration, and revealing existing fireplaces.*
- *New carpeting to the first floor, New LVT floors to the ground*
- *Replacement windows, window paint stripping, and window repairs as per the schedule.*
- *New secondary glazing systems as per the schedule.*
- *External timber repairs.*
- *Localised areas of cement pointing to removed and made good, removal of felt flashings.*
- *Localised wattle and daub infill to replace cement infills to timber frame.*
- *removal of impervious paint breathable exterior redecoration and new rainwater goods*
- *Removal of cement haunching at the base of the timber frame and the formation of a french drain perimeter.*
- *Fence removal new perimeter railing, gate, and wall.,*
- *New external works including pathways, soft landscaping bin, mail, and bike store*
- *Concrete removal, replacement paving to the internal courtyard area.*
- *External lighting*
- *Air source heat pump and new plant room area*
- *New external entrance doors, repair to the front storm door.*
- *Insulation and raised walkway to the loft area.*

Entrance Doors

I am not entirely convinced by the detailing of new entrance doors on drawing no. 070 Rev R01 or the side light to the south elevation entrance. I would have thought that timber, wide-boarded doors would be more sympathetic to the host building's exceptional character and with glazed side panel.



South Building Elevation, New Entrance Door Shown

Courtyard

The following is noted in the SeabrookGroves Ltd's Initial Structural Report dated 26 February 2026:

3.66. One interesting feature was a raking cut to form a pocket in the side of the central post above the cloister. This was almost certainly introduced to provide a 'jacking' point, such that a robust and

slightly overlong timber strut could be located into the pocket at an angle to the ground. As the base of the strut was driven sideways, towards the pocket, the structure above would be lifted, taking load off the ground floor elements for repair: an early form of Acrow Prop.

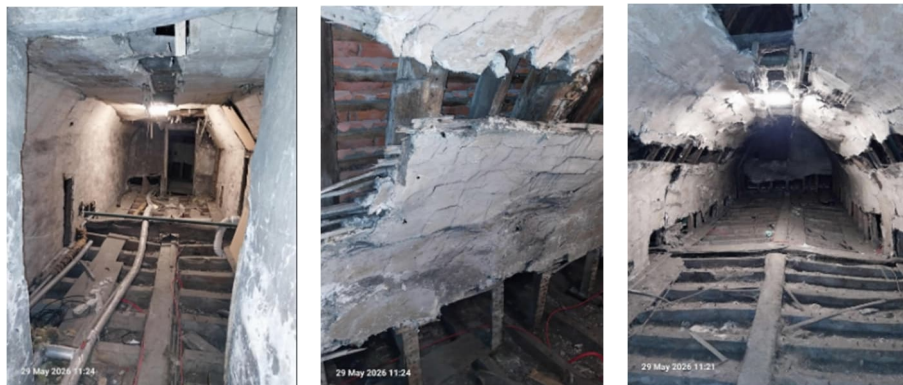
This point of interest should be retained (images below left and centre) and is in the vicinity of the lean-to shelter in the image at page 10 of the SofSig (below right).



Pocket to provide means of temporary propping for repairs.

Roof space

There is an extensive attic space which is generally in poor condition with significant panels of failing lath-and plaster.

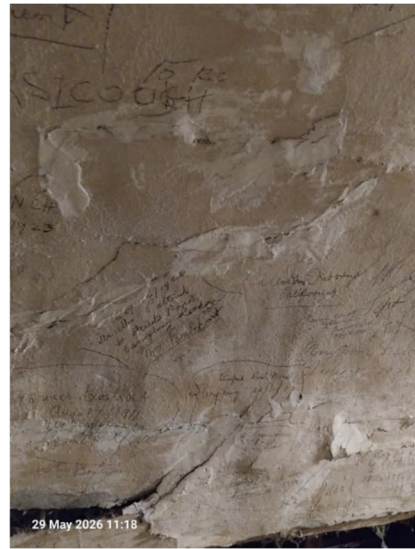


The following is noted in the SeabrookGroves Ltd's Initial Structural Report dated 26 February 2026:

3.56. The original rafters predominantly supported the lime plaster and lath ceiling. The plasterwork extended along the underside for the rafters and across the base of ceiling collars and where existing rafters could be observed, their underside was blackened, presumably from wood smoke, which suggested both that the rafters were original and once part of an open and vaulted roof structure and that the lath and plaster ceiling was a later edition, possibly dating from the Victorian period when the roof void may have been use for accommodation.

The significance of the smoke blackening is noted, and I am interested in 3.58 to 3.62. As stated, there are significant areas of signed/graffiti plaster and in the photo below left there are dates from 1899, 1900, 1907, 1921 etc. whilst in the image below right places referred to include California, Wapping, Bermondsey(?) etc. This clearly indicates significant use of the attic floor but there is no reference to the 'attic' or indeed the 'roof space', in the SofSig.

The significance of these inscriptions is not fully understood but a level of recording is advised in case of further loss considering the need to undertake duct work and install walkways in the loft. This has the potential to be important archive information.



Key points are:

- *The oldest known annotation could not be determined from the time available on site, but it may be considered a loss if the ceiling failed or was demolished and this local record of visitors, albeit domestic, was lost.*
- *Keeping the ceiling in position would take a very long period of careful specialist work which would be an expensive process and should be weighed against the use of funding for possibly more critical items.*
- *Panels of ceiling could be carefully cut out and framed in some way to preserve them and make them available to view.*
- *Retention of the ceiling is an interesting piece of local history, but on the other hand, a later addition to the building and in very poor condition.*

I have made initial contact with Ros Allwood (Cultural Services Manager) and Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews (Museum Curator and Heritage Access Officer) to draw their attention to this.

Amount of accommodation

A key issue with this scheme is functionality of the accommodation being provided. Currently the building provides eleven units of accommodation with a communal storeroom and laundry on the ground floor. For some reason there is no Flat 1 so the flat numbering runs from 2 -12. The square metreage is provided for the existing units which I have calculated as follows:

- **Flat 2** – $14.11 + 0.57 + 4.49 + 2.16 = \mathbf{21.33}$
- **Flat 3** – $13.52 + 0.57 + 1.44 + 3.99 + 2.77 + 0.66 = \mathbf{22.95}$
- **Flat 4** – $11.14 + 1.96 + 2.22 + 0.56 + 3.40 = \mathbf{19.28}$
- **Flat 5** – $11.41 + 4.62 + 2.63 + 1.08 + 2.78 = \mathbf{22.52}$
- **Flat 6** – $14.11 + 0.57 + 4.49 + 2.16 + 0.63 = \mathbf{21.96}$
- **Flat 7** – $18.81 + 0.48 + 5.98 + 0.52 + 2.24 + 0.46 + 0.36 = \mathbf{28.85}$
- **Flat 8** – $12.78 + 2.59 + 0.66 + 3.37 + 0.39 + 1.51 + 0.31 = \mathbf{21.61}$
- **Flat 9** – $12.36 + 1.83 + 1.60 + 2.14 + 3.26 \text{ (not 12.36)} = \mathbf{21.19}$
- **Flat 10** – $12.54 + 2.00 + 3.19 + 5.41 + 0.34 + 0.39 = \mathbf{23.87}$
- **Flat 11** – $11.44 + 6.38 + 0.27 + 0.50 + 1.79 = \mathbf{20.38}$
- **Flat 12** – $22.20 + 0.99 + 0.39 + 6.17 + 1.12 + 2.52 = \mathbf{33.39}$

Average size of unit = $257.33/11 = \mathbf{23.39m^2}$

According to the **Technical housing standards – nationally described space standard (27 March 2015)**, a 1p 1b unit should have 39m² with 1m² of built in storage where this type of unit has a shower room instead of a bathroom, the floor area may be reduced from 39m² to 37m². **These units fall well short of the minimal standard.** The proposal indicates an enlargement of Flat 6 which is a positive. In contrast the smallest unit is Flat 4 with very little space (half of the prescribed standard). The largest unit (no.12) whilst also falling short of the minimum standard includes a panelled room at first floor considered on page 20 of the SofSig as possessing Exceptional Significance. It is noted here that the panelling would not be interfered with.

In my opinion, the layout could be improved by:

- Allocating Flat 4's bedroom and bathroom to Flat 3 to become a slightly more generous kitchen to Flat 3
- Allocating Flat 4's kitchen to Flat 5 (the bedroom to Flat 5 could then become the kitchen whilst the kitchen to Flat 4 could become Flat 5's bedroom)
- A similar approach could be adopted at first floor where Flat 10's space is split between Flats 9 & 11

I appreciate that this would reduce the scheme to nine and would leave Flats 2 and 8, particularly on the small side. This is strictly a non-heritage matter, and the proposed layout is not too dissimilar to the existing layout, but I feel that there is a duty of care and consideration of the well-being of future occupiers by ensuring an adequate level of accommodation.



Ground Floor



First Floor



Ground Floor



First Floor

New internal ventilation system and ductwork to run from the ground floor and first floor flats to the loft area and terminate via the large existing grilles.

It is noted that there is the potential for intrusive penetrations through existing plaster and lath ceilings and where fire collars are integrated. There are issues around fixing the ducts to areas where there is a considerable and exceptional heritage value.

I note page 7 of the Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment where there is commentary on Reversibility, Mitigation, Compensation and Outcomes and these are also considered acceptable in '*vastly improving the buildings performance and safety*'.

Works to the timber frame

The following is noted at page 15 of the Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment

Remedial Works to the Existing Timber Frame

Proposal: The proposed works will involve remedial work to specific historic timbers of varying historic periods.

It is noted that much of this survey work cannot be undertaken until enabling works have commenced and opportunity arises to inspect the timbers in question at close hand.

Investigative works to date have revealed some evidence of water ingress, the presence of fungal attack and potentially historical attack of deathwatch beetle. It is proposed to commission a further, specialist extensive survey at the commencement of the works.

Although not exhaustive, investigative works have revealed potential works to the following historic timbers:

1. 14th Century timber corner posts, and truss ends, potential 14th re-used rafters
2. 16th and 17th century studs floor joists and rafters
3. 19th century floor and roof timbers

A timber-by-timber repair schedule has not currently been able to be prepared and some 'opening-up' works are necessary to inform those repairs. **A request has been received by email to allow some opening-up of the external infill panels to enable a more detailed assessment of the structure and I am awaiting a reply.** This is matter also covered in Seabrook Groves Ltd's Initial Structural Report dated 26 February 2026:

4.13. A critical part of the timber repairs will be the removal of cementitious material around all the timbers, whether repaired or otherwise. Without removing the cementitious material from around the timber and replacing it with lime, the new timbers will begin to decay, which must be avoided.

Environmental Upgrade Strategy

This is addressed at page 16 of the SofSig and the following is noted:

Breathable thermal upgrades are proposed to the existing building walls, roof and floors in accordance with the Historic England guidelines, "Energy Efficiency and Historic Buildings: How to Improve Energy Efficiency", 2018. The method used should be largely determined by the extent and condition of the original fabric that remains. Where lath and plaster survives, there will normally be a cavity between this and the masonry wall. Where original linings have been lost, more recent dry linings can be removed and replaced with insulation, either directly to the masonry ('on the hard') or, where space allows, the wall can be framed with timber to hold insulation in place. In general, thinner materials such as calcium silicate based insulation board, are best applied directly to the masonry, whilst thicker materials such as wood fibreboard and hemp board are best held in place with framing.

This raises a question regarding impact on the internal character of rooms affected if a timber framing system were to be installed and will also have a small yet further impact on restricted floorspace. Whilst lining internal walls may secure a thermal upgrade, I am unconvinced that this will not have some adverse impact if several walls are 'squared off'.

The positioning of the Hot Water Cylinders on drawing no. TB-SK-MEP-PL-11 Rev P1 and the Ventilation layout on drawing no. TB-SK-MEP-PL-12 Rev P1 are considered acceptable subject to my comments regarding less units which may then mean less penetrations.

Glazing

The following is noted at page 16 of the Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment

Where appropriate, glass in sash and case or casement windows can be replaced with thin or slim profile double glazing in existing timber sashes. Careful assessment of the historic or cultural significance of the original glass is required before this work is undertaken. For example, the removal of crown glass should be discouraged given the rarity of surviving examples and the significant visual value which this glass adds to a building elevation. Where timber frames have suffered decay, components can be repaired with new timber sections before the double glazed units are fitted.

Drawing no.032 Rev R01 indicates a window strategy for the external elevations with three approaches suggested.

Window Works Key:

- Retain, Repair, Introduce
Slimline Glazing: treat damage and dry out moisture. Introduce slimline secondary glazing. Strip white paint subject to timber condition.
- Retain and Repair:
Clean, repair any damage. Courtyard only.
- Replace: replace with double glazed dark hardwood frames rectangular leaded lights

Firstly, it is not that clear from the above drawing which windows are affected by the light and dark blue annotation, particularly considering that the light blue annotation reads as '*Retain and Repair: Clean, repair any damage. Courtyard only*'. This suggests that the window strategy for external elevations is either a dark blue or light green strategy. The Window Schedule gives more clarity as follows:

Dark Blue = WG-04, -09, -12, -13, -15, -16, -17, -20, -21, -22,
WF-06, -07, -09, -14

Light Blue = WG-014,
WF-01, -05, -08, -11, -13, -16, -17, -18, -19, -20, -21, -22, -23,
DG-01

Green = WG-01, -02, -03, -05, -06, -07, -08, -10, -11, -18, -19,
WF-02, 03, -04, -10, -12, -15,
DG-02, -03

In terms of the dark blue windows, where slimlite glazing is proposed for leaded-lights I would find this objectionable but slimlite secondary glazing is generally considered acceptable. With respect to the 'green' windows I am unwilling to support double-glazed leaded lights but there may be a case to support let's say, slimlite or even better, vacuum glazed windows with 'through' glazing bars to the 3no. green windows on the South Elevation.

The agent has offered a viewing of windows installed at The Lodge, Elmside Walk to see how the same architectural practice dealt with a similar matter on an unlisted building.

Boundary Treatment, bin/bike store and Air Source Heat Pump

The details provided on drawing no. 082 Rev R01 are considered acceptable and I raise no objection either to the other matters above.



French drain

The French drain detail around the building's perimeter is a very practical and beneficial proposal and would sit alongside restored brick sett paving as noted on drawing no. 002 Rev R02 and is acceptable.



The following is noted in the Seabrook Groves Engineers Initial Structural Report dated 26 February 2026. It is assumed that the pathway will be completely levelled for ease of access.

3.37. The condition of the drainage channel meant that much water would escape and stay in the vicinity of the wall thus causing the damp.



Damp in the base of the south wall caused by the drainage channel

HERITAGE POLICY ASSESSMENT:

Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990:

Sections 16(2), 66(1) and 72(1)

North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031:

Policy HE1

NPPF (December 2024):

The following paragraphs are relevant:

- **135 c)** (*sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment*),
- **207** (*local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting*)
- **210** (*desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness*),
- **212** (*great weight should be given to the asset's conservation*),
- **213** (*clear and convincing justification*), and
- **215** (*harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use*).

CONCLUSION:

There are several matters requiring attention but, I am likely to find this scheme or a variation of, **UNOBJECTIONABLE**.

OFFICER: Mark Simmons

DATE: 25/06/2026