

Understanding of Place - The context of the property

Brand Street was originally known as Pound Lane and Park Lane which formed one of many alleys from the medieval market of Bancroft to the north, it was widened and renamed Brand street in 1830. Brand Street is highly visible from the main junction with the high street and is recognised by the NHDC conservation appraisal as forming part of a key view (view 3 within area 2a). It has been subject to significant alteration and redevelopment over the last century and much of its historic fabric has been lost.

The street was defined at its end following the widening in 1930 by the construction of the first Town Hall in 1840 which presents a large classically proportioned and detailed Stucco facade which is rare example of a more urban form of institutional architecture in Hitchin designed by London Architect Thomas Bellamy. This was designed to accommodate meetings previously held in the towns many inns (HHS 2018). In 1901, the new Town Hall (now North Herts Museum) provided larger facilities. Following a period of use as a technical school, Council administrative use and later as ‘The Ivory’ nightclub, the building has now been converted to residential use. This building is significant to the proposed due to its critical adjacency.

The property subject to this application was the Library and Mechanics’ Institute constructed in 1860 to combine three independent libraries at the time. This included the Quakers’ Library for Apprentices & Tradesmen, the 1835 Hitchin Working Man’s & Mechanics’ Institute and a public subscription library incorporating a small reading room and museum (HHS 2018). The lettering “LIBRARY – MDCCCLX” is engraved in stone above the entrance. The library ceased use in 1926. The building was substantially altered internally and converted to residential use. The building pays a historical role in the early knowledge and administrative institutions of Hitchin and the evolution of the town from its traditionally mercantile and agrarian economy following the arrival of the railway.

Sources:

The Historic England listed buildings register was considered, along with historic mapping using Digimap Pevsner buildings of England was consulted, along with sources from Hitchin Historical Society (notably Simon Walkers Hitchin; ‘Glimpses from the Past’, 2021, and The NHDC Hitchin Character area 2a appraisal 2011.

Designations: Grade II listed

Title FORMER LIBRARY NOW PART OF NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, 1860, former Library. Stucco, Neoclassical temple form. Pedimented Welsh slated roof, 1 storey, 2 Doric pilasters, 2 tall sash windows. Closed central porch with Doric pilasters. Massive cast iron spearhead railings on right.

The structure was listed in 1974.

Condition

The portion of the site in question is currently surrounded by later 20th century development to Paynes Park and also to the rear of the High Street. The exterior elevations, and roof of the property is in a moderate condition, the interior whilst recently converted suffers from a number of defects internally.

Gaps in Knowledge

The use of the building following its period of redundancy as a library then part of the engineering institute is not well documented, however there is limited evidence of other significant uses that have had a material impact upon its form. No records could be located relating to the interior features of the former library, which have now been removed.



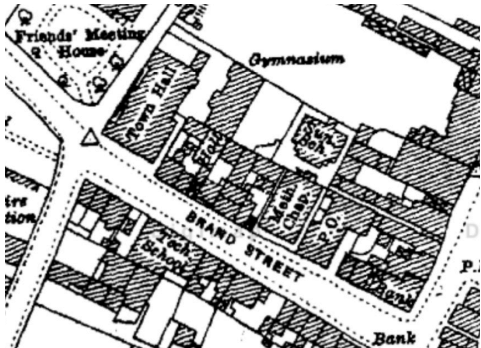
Brand Street Circa 1920 (note the presence of both sets of railings)



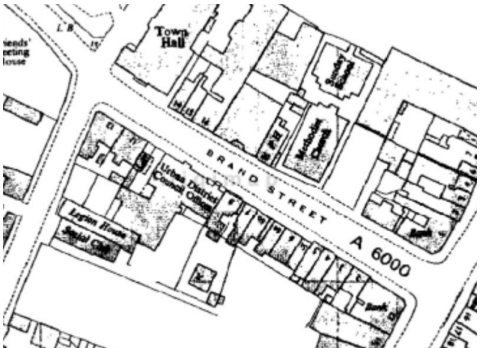
Brand Street 1907, streetscape source Hertford Museum



1870-1880



1930



1960

Figure 1 - Cartographic Analysis

Appraisal

In its current state the site incorporates a part two storey dwelling set over a basement.

Approach to Significance

The basis of protection for buildings of cultural heritage significance is understanding their unique identity, expressed as a collection of values that can be enshrined by a place – in other words, what is important, and what aspects of the building contribute to that importance.

The former Library embodies a range of values relating to historic, cultural, social and associational aspects of its past. An overview of these helps define what makes the building special, and is therefore what significance the wider site has in relation to this Heritage asset. This is essential to the informed decisions about the proposed interventions upon the site.

The following assessment of significance is laid out in accordance with the documents Historic England Conservation Principles, 2008 and British Standard 7913: Conservation of Historic Buildings, 2013, which acknowledge that understanding both the tangible and intangible significances of this site to enables effective decision making about its future. Further, The ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (1988, also known as The Burra Charter), lays down the principles for assessing cultural significance, defined as “the aesthetic historic, scientific or social values for past, present and future generations.”

Historic England Conservation Principles, 2008, clearly states, “A ‘statement of significance’ of a place should be a summary of the cultural and natural heritage values currently attached to it and how they interrelate, which distils the particular character of the place. It should explain the relative importance of the heritage values of the place (where appropriate, by reference to criteria for statutory designation), how they relate to its physical fabric and setting, the extent of any uncertainty about its values (particularly in relation to potential for hidden or buried elements), and identify any tensions between potentially conflicting values.

3.2 Assessment of Cultural Values

BS Standard 7913 identifies four categories of primary values, paraphrased as follows:

1. Evidential value

An element of an historic asset that provides evidence about past human activity, including standing structures that are easily visible, as well as those that may be hidden below ground or under water. This aspect of value is strongly related to physical remains, but may also include documentary sources, pictorial records and artefacts.

2. Historical value

These aspects of significance are often less tangible than physical evidence, including associations with notable people, or historical events or developments. They often connect past people, events and aspects of life with the present, and are likely to have changed with time of shifting perspectives. Historical values are less vulnerable to change than evidential values.

3. Aesthetic value

This is derived from the way in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from an historic asset, including its appearance and how it lies within its setting. As such, this aspect of value is more subjective than the preceding classifications, being particularly sensitive to change over time and subject to fluctuations depending on many factors.

4. Communal value

This element of value derives from the meanings an historic asset holds for those who relate to it, or for whom it forms part of a collective experience, or memory. This may include emotional links, and aspects of the site that people can relate to their collective history and heritage.

3.3 RELATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

The various spaces or elements within The Library 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 Significance

A space or element of the building, which is of great importance, and is integral to the overall significance and character of the building. Layout and original fabric are intact, and the space or element is a strong example of a particular period or style.

Considerable Significance

A space or element of the building, which makes an important contribution to the significance and character of the overall building. Layout and original fabric are substantially intact, and the space or element is a good example of a particular period or style.

Moderate Significance

A space or element of the building which contributes to the overall significance of the building but is not a key component.

Low Significance

A space or element which makes little or no contribution to the significance of the building.
The elements or spaces have been subsequently graded according to their sensitivity to change, as outlined below;

Very High

Even minimal change or alteration has the potential to negatively impact upon the significance of the building.

High

Some small degree of change or alteration is possible, without having negative impact upon overall significance.

Moderate

A reasonable degree of change is possible.

Low

The space is not of special importance and a considerable degree of change is possible.

5.1 Introduction

As stated by BS 7913, The purpose of heritage impact assessments (HIAs) is to gain an understanding of the effect of developments and changes on the historic asset, and how the impact of change might be mitigated.

5.2 Overview

The proposals are broadly comprised of:

- The alteration of the existing roof pitch to form a new rooflight, repairs and re-tiling/ slating of the existing roof.
- The creation of a new gallery floor, and internal alterations
- The extension of the existing basement area and the creation of a new lightwell at the front new low level windows on the street side.
- The enlargement to the existing windows at the rear elevation.

The history of the building itself is deserving of an exceptional and site specific design approach. The existing residential alterations do not celebrate the existing architectural features and reduce the legibility of the once singular interior library space. Modern interventions are largely hidden or discreet from the street and aim to reveal/ celebrate existing features that may be uncovered during the works.

This philosophy identifies the following overarching objectives that form is the driver for intervention within the heritage asset:

1. To safeguard the building and its significance by opening up the interior and creating a series of light interventions internally.
2. To preserve the character of the existing building from the front
3. To retain the special character of the building within its setting.
4. To create well considered, honest, modern and lightweight additions that create a complementary contrast to the existing building.
5. An exemplary approach to environmental sustainability.

To follow is a detailed critical analysis of the proposed changes to the site in the form of an assessment of each major individual alteration or intervention. The purpose of this analysis is to manage the change methodology as advocated within BS 7913 and Historic England Planning Advice Note, “Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment”, 2015.

Internal alterations , and opening up the ceiling

Removal of the existing plasterboard ceiling along with ceiling timbers, (most of those visible are sawn timbers of a more modern variety, the existing ties / trusses will be retained). Creating a new gallery floor over part of the rear bedroom. Removal of existing partitions, floor sections and fixtures.

Impact: Low impact upon the loss of existing historic fabric. There is a moderate impact upon the evidence of a former flat ceiling however existing features , cornices etc are gone. The internal partitions, elements of flooring are from the last decade. Significance Low

Reversibility: reversible if required as the ceiling position/level could be reinstated.

Mitigation: Key features which have a heritage significance will be retained and expressed, notably the existing trusses, their bearings

Compensation: The removal of this element and the construction of the gallery floor will allow the existing chimney and loft timbers to be made visible and legible within the new space.

Forming a new rooflight and the repairs to the existing roof

The proposals involve the formation of a rooflight on the existing rear roof pitch.

Impact:

This will require the trimming of a number of rafters , the insertion of steel and new timber elements. The existing slates where the rooflight is proposed, and felt roof membrane would be stripped . All timbers to the front pitch and the existing ridge would be retained. The form of the existing rear pitch would not be altered as a result of the proposals. Significance Moderate

Reversibility: Limited as the alterations will be permanent, the rooflight could be removed and the integrity of the front roof pitch and ridge retained.

Mitigation:

- The existing roof timbers whilst original do not carry a high level of significance , and there is evidence of mid-late 20th century alterations and repairs. The new rooflight would be split into a number panels in the manner of patent glazing often found on the roofs and cupolas of institutional buildings and archives so this is not an alien concept for a building of this nature.

Compensation:

The new roof alterations are not visible from the street, or seem easily from the rear, or the adjacent properties and as such have a negligible impact upon the special character of the Street.

Forming a new window infill to the rear elevation

New sash and case timber infills would be installed to the rear elevation. A number of complex requirements to fulfil 21st century regulations are required at the rear; this includes openable windows for escape, modern daylighting standards and escape.

Impact: Moderate impact on the rear elevation, it is deemed that the new window would not be incongruous or unusual and would compliment the existing facade.

Reversibility: low

Mitigation: The building has a strong symterical composition and as such the tall existing windows are extended to form three vertical elements which are split into panellised openings comprised of sash and case windows, spandrel panels and doors. the proportions of the framing, astragal spacing and general composition aim to emphasise the original instituional nature of the building rather than more domestic space openings.

New Basement , lightwell, low level windows and alterations to the front

Impact:

- The current basement would be enlarged, new tanking membranes and a new concrete slab , and under-pinning would be formed to the exterior walls. A new lightwell would impact upon the lower part of the front elevation of the property.
- The existing railings would be reinstated to the eastern side of the entrance.
- New windows are proposed at low level.

Significance Low/moderate

- The sub-division of the basement potentially creates some legibility issues with regards to the original basement however this is of a low value.
- The front elevation is exceptional however the new lightwell and glazing is proposed to the size of the original western opening, and in effect mirrors this to the east in the symmetrical manner of the buildings classical composition.

Reversibility: Low

Mitigation:

The basement works are discreet and in line with many of the basement conversations that can be seen along Bancroft, other classical buildings in Hitchin and across Hertfordshire. The presence of glazed lightwells whilst not original is a common feature in Hitchin to both institutional buildings and residential townhouses.

Compensation:

The build allows the opportunity for Archaeological works on the site to understand in more detail the sequencing of previous buildings on the site and historic use of the basement area. The works also provide the opportunity for the historic timbers anticipated below the existing property to be uncovered treated and preserved.

This document demonstrates that there is sufficient information, subject to detail, to comprehensively understand the impact of the works on the character of the listed building, and that the consequence of the proposals has been assessed.

The proposals will result in the loss of limited historic fabric however this is compensated for by heritage gains . The impact on the setting of building, primarily by the new openings is not considered to be detrimental, and an inventive approach to working with the existing heritage of the site is proposed. Overall it can be assessed that the proposals constitute less than significant harm to the heritage asset.