

Combined Design, Access Statement And Heritage Statement For Works To The Boiler House At St Mary's Church, Hitchin

A Document Prepared For A Planning Application To North Herts Council



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Introduction

This document should be read in conjunction with the drawings and other documents included with the submission for planning permission.

This document is part of the planning application submitted for the Church of St Mary, Hitchin in relation to the proposals to carefully remove the north envelope wall of the boiler house, its concrete roof and ground slab and their reconstruction.

It is a combined statement prepared in accordance with the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework and local planning policies.

Reasons For The Planning Application

It is moot whether planning consent for this proposal is necessary, as externally the reconstructed boiler house will be the same in material and visual appearance with the exception of the louvred doors, which might be regarded as a de minimis change. However the determination is not vested in the applicant who, aware of the sensitivity of the context, (demolition and reconstruction of part of a grade one listed building that is the central feature of a conservation area) wishes to verify that they have consent before undertaking the work. Further it might also be the case that the north wall will not be demolished completely. It will not be taken down unnecessarily. However the applicant has to provide for the possibility that it will be demolished.

Exemption From Listed Building Consent & Faculty Jurisdiction

As this building is a church belonging to the Church of England, works to it are exempt from Listed Building Consent under a faculty jurisdiction. The Parochial Church Council submitted an application for a faculty for these works in earlier this year and that submission has been recommended by St Alban's Diocesan Advisory Committee subject to planning permission, if needed, being granted. The faculty submission is currently with the diocesan chancellor's office.

Relevant Planning Policy

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 was adopted on Tuesday 8 November 2022 and replaces the saved policies of the District Plan Second Review with Alterations.

This statement is made in reference to the current North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 together with national and regional planning guidance.

Relevant Policies Include:

ENV2

Protect, and enhance the historic character of North Hertfordshire's towns, villages, hamlets and landscape by promoting good design that creates a distinctive sense of place.

ENV3

Protect, maintain and enhance the District's historic and natural environment, its cultural assets and network of open spaces, urban and rural landscapes.

ENV4

Mitigate the effects of climate change by encouraging the use of sustainable construction techniques, the appropriate use of renewable energy technologies and reducing the risk of flooding.

Policy SP1: Sustainable development in North Hertfordshire

c) Grant planning permission for proposals that, individually or cumulatively:

- iv protect key elements of North Hertfordshire's environment including biodiversity, important landscapes, heritage assets and green infrastructure (including the water environment);

Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability

The Council considers good design to be a key aspect of sustainable development. We will:

- a) Support new development where it is well designed and located and responds positively to its local context;
- f) Assess proposals against detailed policy requirements set out in this Plan and have regard to the Design SPD;

Policy SP13: Historic environment

The Council will balance the need for growth with the proper protection and enhancement of the historic environment. When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight will be given to the asset's conservation and the management of its setting. We will pursue a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment through:

- a) Maintaining a strong presumption in favour of the retention, preservation and enhancement of heritage assets and their setting according to their significance;

Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets

Planning applications relating to Designated heritage Assets or their setting shall be accompanied by a Heritage Assessment/Justification Statement that:

- i Assesses the significance of heritage assets, including their setting;
- ii Justifies and details the impacts of any proposal upon the significance of the designated heritage asset(s); and
- iii Informs any necessary measures to minimise or mitigate against any identified harms.

Planning permission for development proposals affecting Designated Heritage Assets or their setting will be granted where they (as applicable):

- a) Enable the heritage asset to be used in a manner that secures its conservation and preserves its significance;
- b) Incorporate a palette of materials that make a positive contribution to local character or distinctiveness, where it is appropriate and justified; and
- c) Will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of the designated heritage asset, and this harm is outweighed by the public benefits of the development, including securing the asset's optimum viable use.

Where substantial harm to, or loss of significance, of a designated heritage asset is proposed the Council shall refuse consent unless it can be demonstrated that the scheme is necessary to deliver considerable public benefits that outweigh the harm or loss.

The Government has set out its planning policies for the historic environment and our heritage assets in the NPPF(1).

The government published its Planning Practice Guidance in March 2014.

The Building and Surroundings



St Mary's Church is the largest parish church in Hertfordshire. The church has been listed Grade 1 since 1951. It is one of 2 grade 1 listed buildings in Hitchin, the other being the Priory. Located northeast of the market place, the churchyard is bounded on the east by the River Hiz. It has long been the major public building in the town and lies at its heart as the most significant landmark.

The church lies within the Hitchin Conservation Area that was designated in 1969. It is identified as section 2b of character area 2, The Town Centre (See Appendix 1). This area comprises St Mary's Church and its churchyard, the Garden of Rest, and the other pedestrianised alleys around the church – Munts Alley, Churchyard and Churchyard Walk. Below is the description of the character area, in Hitchin Conservation Area: Character Statement 26 July 201.

"The building probably originally faced its market place but encroachments of the medieval period (to create what is now Munts Alley and Churchyard) now provide it with a more intimate setting. The buildings which face the church are generally attractive historic buildings and include some timber-framed structures with probably 18th or 19th century fronts. Turning towards the Market Place however, nos. 8-12 (consec.) are listed grade II, being the surviving western range of a complex of courts which were demolished to make way for Churchyard Shopping Centre in the early 1970s. Whilst built from concrete and using generally unsympathetic details, the flank wall of the Churchgate Centre does at least try and reflect the scale of the historical form of development. Whilst acknowledg-*

ing its positive community function, improvements to Church House or indeed its redevelopment would potentially improve the appearance of the conservation area and the setting of St Mary's Church. Conversely, Warners Almshouses, a modest locally listed brick building completed in 1893, lies to the south east of and makes a positive contribution to the setting the church. The River Hiz is a significant aspect of the church's setting and even on non-market days people are drawn to this attractive riverside environment, the tranquil character enhanced by the weeping willows, the large lawn between the church and the river, the bird life on the river, and the black squirrels in the churchyard."

The Character Statement identifies the church and churchyard as positive features in the area and cites 3 important views:

"1: from the public car park facing St Mary's Square, over the lake and fountain towards the east elevation of St Mary's Church – one of the defining views of Hitchin; 2: On emerging from Munt's Alley, a narrow pathway from Bancroft, a pretty view of the church and churchyard, with the many mature trees and grass-covered churchyard and 3: On approaching the church and churchyard from the Market Place, where pedestrians have priority and the War Memorial and grade I listed St Mary's Church dominate the view."

The church comprises a chancel, nave and aisles, north and south porches, each with a parvis; west tower, north and south chapels and a small crypt, that was formerly a chancel. The nave arcade is 4 bays long and the chancel unusually as long and includes a retrochoir. The chapels and aisles are almost as wide as the nave and chancel. Their plan forms a broad rectangle. The walling is faced with numerous stone types including flint rubble. It has ashlar dressings. The tower incorporates re-used Roman bricks, 16th and 17th century and also some later brickwork. The roofs of the north aisle, south and north porches and tower are leaded. Those of nave and chancel have diminishing-course Westmoreland slates. The south aisle has a copper roof. We note that the Victoria County History of 1912 reported this to have had a lead roof at that time. A lead-clad flèche rises from an embattled tower roof. There are further crenellated parapets to the aisles, side chapels and each parvis.

During the laying of a new floor in the church in 1911, foundations of a more ancient Saxon church building were found. The will of Aethelgifu, circa 985, refers to a pre-Conquest church on the site. As this spoke of a monastery, or minster, it is probable that this was of long standing. The Domesday Book lists St Mary's as the most important church in the Deanery of St. Albans. According to the local historian Hine, the church was damaged by lightning in 1292 and an earthquake in 1298. Despite repairs, six years later the roof collapsed. There was a substantial rebuild in the early 14th century.

The exterior fabric of the present church is largely 15th century but the nave, and lower stages of the tower, are 12th century, which probably consisted of chancel, nave and west tower only. The tower was probably 'completed' about the middle of the 13th century, when the present tower arch was inserted and the stair-turret at the southeast of the tower built. About 75 years later the north aisle was built and then the south. The arcades were added about the same time. Then or slightly earlier the chancel was enlarged. In the following century the chancel was further enlarged. The foundation of the 14th-century east wall was made to form the west wall of the chancel, which was constructed at the same time. The north and south chapels were added about the same time and arcades

inserted between them and the chancel with a clerestory over. The chancel arch was raised, the nave clerestory added and the north porch built, while new windows were inserted throughout the church, which was re-roofed. The south porch was added towards the end of the century. The aisles extended a bay beyond the chancel.

The tower was repaired in brick to honour the Restoration of Charles II. The chancel screen was removed and galleries and box pews inserted in 1770. The chancel was given a new, hipped roof at that time. Between 1858 and 1878 George Gilbert Scott undertook a Gothic Revival Restoration. This removed many post reformation features including box pews, choir stalls, aisle ceilings and galleries. The floors were relaid with pammets. At the same time, Arthur Blomfield, an alumnus, was commissioned by Trinity College Cambridge to restore the east end of the church and rebuild the clerestory. The tower was restored in 1906-7 and the floor was relaid in 1911 at which time many of the cast iron downpipes were added. Joseph Elders, in the Conservation Management Plan, states that early 19th-century Roman cement was removed from the church at that time but I found some during my inspection on repairs to north aisle windows. So I must conclude that not all was removed. In the 1920s buildings were demolished on the east bank of the River Hiz, the river canalised and the present raised terrace constructed east of the sanctuary. The noted church architect George Pace, designed new lights for the church in 1962, as well as a nave altar other fittings in the south chapel that he reordered and was renamed the St Andrew's chapel at the time. Previously it had been known as the Radcliffe chapel after a family who had provided an earlier chantry chapel there. The east end was reordered in 1980. The Victorian reredos was placed at the rear of the 'retrochoir' and the screen behind the high altar left truncated.

Access

This proposal does not affect access arrangements to this listed building.

Design

The proposal concerns the rebuilding of the north wall of the boiler house and its roof. These are believed to have been constructed in the 1930s.

The asphalt-covered concrete roof will be rebuilt because it is cracked and because the crudely formed penetrations for flues are in the wrong



place. It will be replaced with a timber roof covered in asphalt. The reason for the change to timber is based on ease of construction and adaptability. In the short term it will need to accommodate the flues of two new condensing boilers, as well as a ventilation extract

from the toilets to be constructed in the north tower and a ventilation pipe over a soil stack. The new boilers will be much more efficient than the existing ones which are at the end of their service life. In the medium term the boilers will be removed and be replaced by a ground source heat pump, as the church seeks to become carbon neutral. At that time the flues will be removed and the roof made good. The concrete is not historically significant fabric.

It might not be necessary to demolish the entire north wall but in case it is that is included in this application. The existing wall is in disrepair. There is a steel beam within the fabric below the parapet and above the doors. This has rusted and expanded cracking the masonry. The wall will have to be taken down to at least that height, so that the steel beam can be removed. This steel is not structurally necessary for the door openings or to stabilise the parapet. It is probably a bearing plate for the edge of the concrete slab. The new timber roof will not require it. So a new steel beam will not be installed. We propose to reuse as many of the coping stones that can be retrieved. Some have cracks. Depending on their condition when they are lifted they will either be repaired with stainless steel dowels or replaced in matching stone.

The wall below the steel beam is cracked. Although it is faced with rubble stone and has a render plinth, this is attached to a brick substrate, which is bedded in cement mortar. There are cracks in the random facing of carstone and flint. This part of the wall will be examined again when the upper parts of have been demolished. A decision will then be made on conservation principles whether the wall should be taken down to ground level and rebuilt or be repaired. In the event of demolition the carstone and flints will be reused but the bricks probably cannot. Similarly the plain tile features will have to be replaced in new tiling. Replacement bricks will be imperial sized to match those existing. The lintel stones will be reused but one



over the double-doors is cracked. It will be repaired or replaced to match depending on its condition.

The existing timber doors and door sets are weathered and exhibit wet rot in lower parts where one would expect. Ordinarily, we would repair them. However the new boilers will require more background ventilation than the existing boilers. Rather than place vent panels in the walls, they can be more discretely accommodated within the doors. We therefore propose to replace them with new oak doors with integral oak louvres. These will be oiled and will darken with age.



A chute will be reformed in the wall in the current location and the cast iron hopper and downpipe that it discharges too will be overhauled and reinstated. We propose to reroute the downpipe from the aisle above, so that it discharges closer to the chute. That is protect the walling and the roof by getting the water away from the building as quickly as possible. Currently it discharges at the back of the roof by the tower wall. There is splashing in that location which will only get worse as the climate emergency progresses. This change will be barely noticeable except by the most observant.

Impact of The Proposals On The Significance of The Church As A Heritage Asset and Compliance With Planning Policy

The proposal does not affect the siting, layout or scale of the existing building. Nor does it affect development density in the local area or natural features. It will have no negative impact on the historic character of Hitchin, its natural environment, cultural assets or open spaces. It therefore complies with ENV2 and ENV3.

The construction techniques employed are sustainable. We would expect the design life of the rebuilt wall and roof, subject to appropriate maintenance and repair, to exceed one hundred years. The use of lime mortar enables masonry elements to be recovered and rebbed. The rebuilding has been promoted by fabric failure but it will also facilitate the upgrading of the heating facilities so that the Church can move towards carbon neutrality. Accordingly the proposal accords with ENV4 and SP1.

The loss or alteration of historic fabric, is a matter relating to listed building legislation and in this instance is being considered under the faculty application to the Diocese of St Albans. Nevertheless we record here that the construction of the boiler house dates from the first half of the 20th century and therefore by virtue of its age is much less significant than other parts of the fabric of this medieval building. As many of the element of the wall will be re-used when it is rebuilt. This proposal will not therefore have a negative impact on the significance of the church as a heritage asset on account of loss of important fabric. The appearance of the wall will be as existing. It will therefore not impact that significance in visual terms, affect key views or views within the churchyard. Currently the existing flues are visible above the parapet from the northwest path within the churchyard. However they do not have a large impact on the view of the Church from that direction. The flues of the new boilers will be smaller and will therefore have less impact. When a heat pump is installed, it should be possible to dispense with them completely. Accordingly the visual appearance of the proposal will not have a detrimental effect on the significance of the heritage asset. For these reasons the proposal will accord with policies SP9, SP13 and HE1.

We therefore submit that the proposal preserves the significance of the heritage asset and complies with current planning policy. Accordingly there should be a presumption in favour of granting permission for this application.

Appendix 1 Hitchin Conservation Area Character Area 2b

