The Planning Inspectorate

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 27 January 2020

by Tim Wood BA(Hons) BTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 17 February 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/Q3115/Y/19/3239826
Various properties within Thame

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
- The appeal is made by Thame Town Council against the decision of South Oxfordshire District Council.
- The application Ref P18/S2735/LB, dated 18 July 2018, was refused by notice dated 26 April 2019.
- The works proposed are the installation of commemorative plaques.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The single application sought consent to install plaques at the following listed properties within Thame Town Centre. The grade of listing is included after each building: The Spread Eagle Hotel, Cornmarket (Grade II*); The Swan Hotel, 9 Upper High Street (Grade II*); Rumsey's Chocolaterie, 9 Upper High Street (Grade II); Thame Museum, 79 High Street (Grade II); Thame Town Hall, High Street (Grade II); Market House, North Street (Grade II).

Main Issue

3. The main issue in this appeal is the effects of the plaques on the significance of the listed buildings and conservation area.

Reason

4. The proposal seeks to gain consent to erect a number of plaques to indicate locations which have featured in the television series 'Midsomer Murders'. The fictitious series has used locations within Thame, and indeed within the wider surrounding area and towns, for its location-based filming.

5. Although the Council has clearly had regard to the location of each individual plaque, it's submitted case and its reason for refusal indicates that the principle of the proposal is unacceptable. Similarly, the appellant seeks to address the scheme as a whole and does not draw any particular distinction between the individual locations. I shall determine the appeal on a similar basis.

6. The appellant indicates that the popular television drama gives rise to a number of visitors to the area. This has led to the establishment of tours and other associated tourist material. The appellant wishes to identify certain

buildings within Thame that have featured in the television series in order to direct and help with locating them.

7. Each of the buildings is included on the Statutory List due to their architectural and historic significance. Commemorative plaque schemes are often used to help to identify historic associations or events at a location and as a means of celebrating "…our history and historic environment" (English Heritage '*Celebrating People and Places. Guidance on Commemorative Plaques and Plaque Schemes').* The guidance also warns that, as each such proposal would bring about a change to a (historic) building there should be "strong justification for each case". It also advises that schemes which commemorate brief associations or subjects of limited importance should be considered with particular care.

8. The Council indicates that the commemoration of fictional characters and places would be inappropriate and would devalue the existing scheme which commemorates actual historic events and people. The English Heritage guidance acknowledges that there are some examples of plaques which commemorate fictitious characters. Whilst noting that these can be popular it advises that they can devalue other plaques which commemorate historic events/people.

9. I have no reason to doubt that the television series is popular and generates tourism for the area. However, the proposals will bring about a change to these buildings of historic and architectural significance. The plaques would not relate to an important or well-known historic figure or event but to an appearance as a location (or perhaps a few appearances) within a relatively recent fictional television drama. I consider that this would significantly devalue the existing plaques which commemorate individuals or historic events which have taken place at each location. The proposed plaques would fail to preserve the architectural and historic interest of the listed buildings by the commemoration of its appearance within a fictional drama. In this way, the proposal would reduce the positive contribution that the buildings make to the Thame Conservation Area. As a consequence, the proposal would fail to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area.

10. I agree with the Council that the proposal would give rise to 'less than substantial harm' to the listed buildings and conservation area and this needs to be weighed against any public benefits. I acknowledge that tourism related to the television series is important to the area. I also note the various references to guided walks and other information. Whilst the proposal may help existing tourists to identify filming locations, in my judgement, this benefit does not outweigh the harm that the proposed plaques would give rise to.

Conclusions

11. For the reasons set out above, I consider that the proposal would have a harmful effect on each of the listed buildings and on the conservation area. Therefore, the proposal is contrary to Policy CSEN3 of the Core Strategy and Policies CON3 and CON7 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan and I find nothing sufficient to outweigh this conflict. As a consequence, the appeal is dismissed.

S T Wood

INSPECTOR