
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 November 2021

by Geoff Underwood BA(Hons) PGDip(Urb Cons) MRTPI IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 1st February 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/Y/21/3284555

8 Prospect Place, Alnmouth NE66 2RL

- 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 Ms Sylvia Marelli-Winter against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 20/04343/LBC, dated 17 December 2020, was refused by notice dated 6 July 2021.
 - The works proposed are metal railings to balcony.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. The description in the heading above is taken from the application form although I have omitted terms which do not form part of the works themselves. The application sought to retain railings that were in situ. However, at the time of my site inspection they were not in place. I have therefore determined the appeal on the basis of the drawings, but also informed by the appellant's photographs of the railings and the understanding that the appellant's intention is to install railings of that specification and appearance.

Main Issue

3. The main issue raised by this appeal is the effect the works would have on the special architectural and historic interest of the grade II listed building recorded as 6, 7 and 8 with attached wall, Prospect Place and 52 Northumberland Street, and on the Alnmouth Conservation Area.

Reasons

4. The appeal property is a mid-terrace house forming part of the listed building which has an elongated plan running along Prospect Place. The appellant's Heritage Statement provides no more than a cursory overview of the special interest of the Listed Building and provides little appraisal of its significance. Nevertheless, from what information is before me and my observations, the stone and slate former granary derives considerable significance as a designated heritage asset of national importance from its age, materials, history and former uses, design, situation and architectural features.
5. A feature of note on the appeal property is an external stone stair with landing above a door. The list description notes that it served a blocked doorway and I

saw that substantial quoins are evident either side of a window which now largely occupies the opening. Although it is truncated at the base, with steps not extending to ground level and the landing supported by what could be a later brick pier, the stair is a feature which contributes to the special interest of the building and helps to understand its evolution and former function.

6. Alnmouth Conservation Area covers much of the historic town. Principal streets are linked by side lanes following a street layout and plot pattern of apparently much earlier origin, predominantly lined by stone buildings, many with historic architectural features. These aspects create a distinctive, historic townscape, contributing to its significance as a designated heritage asset.
7. Although the flight of steps does not extend to the ground, they still clearly read as an access to a former upper floor opening. There is very limited evidence of its earlier configuration including any enclosure it may have supported. However, it would have been likely that at least for some duration through its existence, there would have been some form of barrier around the landing and along the steps for safety purposes.
8. In this context the presence of some form of balustrade or handrail would not necessarily be an unexpected feature in the location proposed and an old photograph is purported to show a very simple handrail on what could be the lower part of steps. The proposed railings would enclose the small landing area on three sides creating a modest balcony area albeit the appellant does not intend to use it as such. However, based on the available information, the proposed railings would consist of metal uprights set within a more substantial frame with flat top and bottom rail bolted onto more substantial ends formed with what would appear to be box section elements.
9. Their detailed appearance would lack the subtleties of traditionally worked metalwork and the bottom rail would create a noticeable gap between uprights and the landing. Overall, this effect would be of a utilitarian and basic appearance and character, rather than a simple and elegant one. This would be particularly noticeable when seen in silhouette against the sky. Even if the design is bespoke to the project, the detailing would nevertheless have a mass-produced appearance. Some of these subtleties may be less apparent from a distance but the listed building's special interest and significance is not dependent on such views.
10. The slender profile and proportionate spacing of uprights along with the overall height proposed would go some way to assimilating an enclosure into the building's character. Being painted black would make the railings appear less prominent and visually recessive against the weathered stone of the building. I note that it is not a matter in dispute between the main parties that black painted metal would be acceptable in principle. Notwithstanding those aspects which may reduce the incongruous appearance of the railings to a degree, their detailing would harm the special interest and hence significance of the listed building, albeit to a limited extent.
11. As the significance of the Conservation Area depends to an extent on the richness and intricacies of architectural features of historic buildings within it, including metalwork, it follows that its special architectural and historic character and appearance, and therefore its significance, would be similarly, incrementally harmed.

12. I have had special regard to the desirability of preserving the listed building and have found that the works would fail to preserve the listed building or features of special architectural or historic interest it possesses. This would be contrary to section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act). I have also paid special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing Alnmouth Conservation Area which the proposal would fail to do contrary to section 72(1) of the Act.
13. This harm would be less than substantial in the terms of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) as it would be limited to one part of the listed building and a discrete part of the Conservation Area. These are circumstances where the Framework requires such harm to be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The proposal's benefits would largely be private ones for the owners and occupiers of the property. The railings would do little to prevent unauthorised access to the steps themselves thereby preventing falls or criminal activity, but would make a fall less likely from the landing. The works could therefore be considered to have some very minor public benefit but of an extremely limited scale.
14. The Framework requires that great weight should be given to a designated heritage asset's conservation when considering the impact of a proposal on its significance. Although the level of harm would be limited it nevertheless carries considerable importance and weight. The extremely limited public benefit of the proposal would not outweigh this harm. The works would run contrary to saved Policy S15 of the Core Strategy¹, insofar as it is material to the proposal, which seeks to protect the historic environment.
15. I have noted other alterations to the listed building, in particular an enclosure on top of an oriel window on an adjacent property whose situation and appearance is somewhat at odds with the building. I have no information about the circumstances of its installation. However, other less than sympathetic alterations to the listed building do not in themselves justify further instances. I note that such alterations are not so prevalent on the listed building as to have created a character appearance in which any form of alteration would be acceptable. By the same token other examples of existing metalwork, such as the simple handrails either side of the door of No 7, even though unlikely to be original or early, do not have such adverse effects. In any event, I have determined the appeal on its own merits.
16. Wheelie bins and parked cars may add visual clutter to the narrow Prospect Place. However their moveable and transitory nature means that they do not detract from the Conservation Area's character or appearance to such a degree that the harm that would be caused by the works would be less conspicuous.
17. In the absence of any substantive evidence to the contrary, I am not convinced that the only alternative to the proposed design would be a pastiche, "fake Victorian" approach as the appellant puts it. Bearing in mind that aspects of the principle would appear to be acceptable I have considered whether the detailed design and sections could be controlled by way of a condition. However listed building consent was sought for the works shown on the drawings and the appellant was clear that they sought to retain the particular railings already constructed. Such a condition would not accord with the Framework's requirement that conditions need to be reasonable.

¹ Alnwick District Local Development Framework – Core strategy Development Plan Document, 2007.

Conclusion

18. For the above reasons, the works would harm the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building and fail to preserve the Conservation Area, contrary to the Act and the Framework. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

Geoff Underwood

INSPECTOR