



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 17 October 2022

by C Harding BA(Hons) PGDipTRP PGCert MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 4 November 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/J1915/W/22/3292604

5 Watton House, Watton At Stone, Herts SG14 3NZ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Mr J Humphreys against the decision of East Hertfordshire District Council.
 - The application Ref 3/21/1913/FUL, dated 29 July 2021, was refused by notice dated 20 October 2021.
 - The development proposed is proposed roof terrace with access hatch and external guarding.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. The site lies within the Green Belt. The parties agree that the proposed development would not result in harm to the Green Belt and based on what I have seen and read I see no reason to dispute this view.

Main Issue

3. Accordingly, the main issue is whether the proposed development would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of Watton-at-Stone Conservation Area (WCA) and non-designated heritage assets.

Reasons

4. The focus of Watton-at-Stone Conservation Area is the main thoroughfare through the settlement, and wider areas to the south and east around the River Beane that contain the Church of St Andrew and St Mary, and Watton House. The significance of the Conservation Area is derived from the variety of historic buildings that is evident and, in some areas, the landscaped setting of such buildings.
5. Watton House itself is a substantial country house set within wooded grounds, currently subdivided into apartments. The evidence indicates that it is a former residence of the notable railway engineer Sir Nigel Gresley. In close proximity to the rear of the house is a modern housing development, however the sloping front garden and principal elevation of the property retains a traditional character. The property is identified by the Council as a well-preserved, notable and imposing late Victorian property, an 'unlisted building to be protected from demolition', and therefore a non-designated heritage asset (NDHA). I agree with this assessment.

6. The proposed development would introduce a roof terrace to the property with associated obscure glazed guarding. The size of the proposed terrace means that it is unlikely that significant amounts of outdoor paraphernalia could be accommodated and be visible from ground level. However, the glazed guarding, and users of the roof terrace would be situated above the ridge line of the existing building and would be visible from a variety of viewpoints at ground level, including from the sloping lawn area. Despite the modest scale and simple design of the proposal along with the use of obscure glazing, its contemporary nature would nevertheless result in a visually jarring modern feature in the primary elevation view of the building on an otherwise largely unaltered roofline.
7. Furthermore, the use of the terrace in a rooftop location where such activity would not normally be expected in association with a building of this age and design, would serve to draw the eye to the proposed development, to the detriment of the overall architectural composition.
8. Watton House sits within its own grounds and is not widely visible from elsewhere in the WCA. However, as the significance of the conservation area is derived, in part, from the number and variety of historic buildings within it, of which the host property is an example, the proposed development would result in less than substantial harm to the WCA. It would also harm the historic character of the house itself as a NDHA.
9. The proposal would provide private amenity space for existing and future occupiers which would improve the quality of the housing stock and contribute to the long-term conservation of the asset as a result. However, I have no evidence before me to suggest that the current accommodation provides sub-standard living conditions and so I give only very limited weight to the proposal as a public benefit. Such benefits would be insufficient to outweigh the harm identified and so the proposal would fail to comply with guidance in the Framework
10. I therefore conclude that the proposed development would fail to preserve the character or appearance of the WCA and the NDHA. Accordingly, the development would be contrary to Policies DES4, HA2 and HA4 of the East Herts District Plan 2018 which together seek to ensure that new developments conserve, enhance or strengthen the distinctiveness of the local landscape and its features; that developments be of a high standard of design and layout to reflect local distinctiveness; that development preserve and, where appropriate, enhance the historic environment, including the special interest of Conservation Area; and be appropriate to the character, appearance and setting of the surrounding area.

Other Matters

11. I have had regards to representations received from local residents, the majority of which indicate support for the proposed development. However, the views expressed do not introduce any additional evidence that would lead me to conclude that the proposed development would not result in harm to heritage assets.

Conclusion

12. The proposed development would result in less than substantial harm to the significance of the WCA. Paragraph 202 of the National Planning Policy Framework ('the Framework') states that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The Framework also states that great weight should be given to the conservation of the asset. Moreover, the proposal would also result in limited harm to a NDHA. No public benefits have been identified that would outweigh the harm that I have identified.
13. For the reasons given above I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

C Harding

INSPECTOR