



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 31 July 2023

by S M Holden BSc (Hons) MSc CEng MICE CTPP FCIHT MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 18th August 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/Z3825/W/22/3298402

Walled Garden, St Joseph's Abbey, Greyfriars Lane, Storrington RH20 4GJ

- 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 Benjamin Wilson against the decision of Horsham District Council.
 - The application Ref DC/21/1599, dated 9 July 2021, was refused by notice dated 10 November 2021.
 - The development proposed is construction of a new single storey dwelling with associated hard and soft landscaping including parking.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issues is whether the proposal would preserve the setting of St Joseph's Abbey, and preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Storrington Conservation area.

Reasons

Heritage assets

3. The appeal site is the northern part of the walled garden within the grounds of St Joseph's Abbey, a substantial Grade II listed building which has been converted into dwellings. It also lies within the Storrington Conservation Area.
4. St Joseph's Abbey was constructed in the 1870s as a rectory. Its architecture comprises a mix of neo-gothic design styles but re-used materials from earlier periods. It was converted into 6 dwellings about 20 years ago. It is surrounded by extensive grounds within which is a walled garden that also appears to date from the 1870s. Garages constructed to serve the converted dwellings have intruded into the garden, reducing its legibility, and the area is no longer used for horticulture. Nevertheless, the garden and its substantive stone walls are a notable feature of the Abbey's setting. The grassed area of the garden which has survived is an integral part of the verdant grounds which surround the Abbey, and which collectively positively contribute to its significance.
5. The Storrington Conservation Area is a large and more diverse area with buildings of differing sizes and ages centred on the historic core of the village. However, the Abbey and its grounds, the nearby Grade II* listed church, together with the other buildings and undeveloped areas along Greyfriars Lane all contribute positively to the historic fabric and spacious character of this part of the Conservation Area.

Assessment

6. The proposal would be a small, single-storey dwelling of contemporary design with an M-shaped footprint. Its rear elevation would be fused with the eastern boundary wall of the garden. The existing gate in the wall would be retained giving future occupants a right of access into the Abbey's communal gardens. It would be approached by a gravel path and its private amenity space would be a terrace in front of the house, together with the remainder of the open area of grass, much of which would be beneath the existing trees.
7. The design represents an innovative approach to inserting a dwelling into this unique space. It has endeavoured to take its design cues from historical horticultural buildings thereby revealing the heritage significance as part of the gardens associated with the rectory and convent. The proposed materials, including timber, large areas of glass, and a central section incorporating stone and brick under a zinc roof would be appropriate in this context.
8. However, there is no evidence to suggest that buildings or greenhouses of this scale were previously attached to the walls. The proposal would obscure large sections of the original wall along the eastern and northern sides of the site. The footprint of the house and its associated terrace would occupy a significant proportion of the undeveloped green space. As the site is at a higher level than the garages and driveway, the requirement for two parking spaces would cause an incision into the raised ground which would need a means of containment. This would leave an awkwardly shaped residual area. All these factors would diminish the contribution the site makes to the setting of the Abbey.
9. Even if the proposal was acceptable in visual terms, the change of use from a quiet part of the grounds to a domestic use, would fundamentally change its character. Its previous use for horticulture and cultivating produce for the rectory and convent is not directly comparable with future residents living on the site. A permanent home brings with it the inevitable domestic activities and paraphernalia, such as tables and chairs. The use would therefore erode the sense of tranquillity which permeates the Abbey's grounds, particularly given its proximity to the topiary garden with its ponds, trees and shrubs, which exude an exceptional sense of peace and serenity. Furthermore, restricting the use of the gate to future residents of the dwelling would mean it would no longer be possible for the Abbey's other residents to walk around and through the garden to reach other parts of the grounds.
10. I appreciate that the appellant has sought to address reasons that previous schemes for a dwelling on this site have been refused¹. However, I have determined the appeal proposal on its individual merits.
11. Consequently, for all the above reasons, the proposal would fail to preserve the setting of the Abbey and this in turn means that it would fail to preserve the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. It would also conflict with Policies 33 and 34 of the Horsham District Planning Framework 2015 which, amongst other things, require development to reinforce the special character of the district's historic environment, retain the setting of heritage assets and for design and layout to relate sympathetically with their built surroundings, open spaces and natural features.

¹ APP/Z3825/W/17/3174731, APP/Z3825/W/17/3184570 and APP/Z3825/W/19/3234521

Heritage balance

12. In terms of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), I consider the harm identified would be less than substantial. It is therefore necessary for me to weigh this harm against the public benefits of the scheme as required by paragraph 202 of the Framework.
13. The proposal would provide a new home in a location where there is a good range of facilities within walking distance. This is a factor in the scheme's favour but, as a single dwelling, it is of limited weight. The scheme would provide an opportunity to enhance the appearance of the long blank garage wall on the site's southern boundary. However, as the proposal includes minimal detail of how this would be achieved, it is a matter that attracts very limited weight.
14. On the other hand, paragraph 200 of the Framework states that any harm to a designated heritage asset requires clear and convincing justification. I am also required to give such harm considerable importance and weight in the balance.
15. This leads me to conclude that the limited public benefits of the scheme do not outweigh the harm to the setting of the Abbey and the failure to preserve the Storrington Conservation Area. It is therefore unacceptable.

Other Matters

16. The issue of water neutrality was raised by Natural England after the Council had determined the application. I have noted the appellant's statement in respect of this matter and the Council's response. However, as I have found the proposal to be unacceptable due to its adverse effects on designated heritage assets, it has not been necessary for me to address the issue of water neutrality further.

Conclusion

17. For the above reasons, the appeal is dismissed.

S M Holden

INSPECTOR