



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 15 May 2024

by E Worthington BA (Hons) MTP MUED MRTPI IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 11th June 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/H4315/Y/23/3332612

St Helens College, Main Building, Water Street, St Helens, WA10 1PP

- 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 Mr Paul Nicholson, Nicholson Group, against the decision of St Helens Council.
 - The application Ref P/2022/0423/LBC, dated 22 June 2022, was refused by notice dated 12 May 2023.
 - The works proposed are described as 'placement of advertisement logo on the front of the Beecham Building in the same location as the old Beecham's logo. Advertisement consent has been submitted in addition to this application.'
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. As the works relate to a listed building, I have had special regard to sections 16(2) and 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act).
3. There is no appeal relating to advertisement consent before me. Nevertheless, Section 7 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Act) 1990 states that listed building consent is required for the demolition of a listed building or for its alteration or extension in any manner which would affect its character as a building of special architectural or historic interest.
4. On 19 December 2023 the government published its revised National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). Whilst this post-dates the evidence provided by the main parties in relation to this appeal, since the revised Framework's approach to the main issue in this case has not altered significantly, I confirm that all references to the Framework in this decision are to the updated 2023 version.

Main Issue

5. The main issue is whether the proposed works would preserve the Grade II listed building Beechams Clock Tower and offices (Ref: 1260540) and any of the features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses.
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Reasons

The listed building

6. Located on the corner of Westfield Street and Water Street close to the town centre, the appeal property was built in 1887 as a factory for Thomas Beecham and extended in the 20th century. A tall and imposing building constructed in red brick with sandstone and terracotta dressings, it has a Welsh slate roof with red clay tiles and sheet lead to its tall entrance tower which sits at the corner of its two impressive ranges. Set on an angle, the tower has four stages, the second stage has an open arch to each face and the third a clock face which sits below the steep pediments of the upper cupola. The building's distinctive and considered architectural style embraces an eclectic mix of European influences and is rich in fine detailing.
7. The building was more recently occupied by St Helens College and there is a modern atrium to the rear. Permission was granted in 2022 for the conversion of the building into a mixed use development comprising residential units with offices to the ground and first floor. Despite these factors, the building retains its identity and architectural interest as a former factory and is a remaining example of the particular architectural styles fashionable at the time of its construction. It is appreciated as an iconic landmark building that is seen from many vantage points around the town centre.
8. From the evidence before me, insofar as it relates to this appeal, I find that the special interest of the listed building is drawn from its distinctive form and landmark tower feature, grand scale and proportions, historic fabric and use of traditional materials. It is also associated with its fine varied architectural features including its highly decorative design. Further interest arises from the building's historic association with the Beecham's brand which tells of the important industrial heritage of St Helens.

The proposed works

9. An illuminated fascia sign would be installed on the splayed north eastern corner of the clock tower, below the bell and clock tower stages and above the second floor window pediment. The acrylic sign would measure 1.89 m by 1.7 m overall and display the letter 'N', with individual lettering with a total height of 0.575 m spelling out 'Nicholson Residence' below. It would be contemporary in design and illuminated using embedded back lit LEDs fixed using stainless steel screw standoff fixings. As such, there would be no loss of, or damage to, the building's historic fabric.
10. The internal illumination of the sign is intended to complement the building's recent permission and provide an indication of its new identity. I appreciate that the building's extensive decoration limits the space for new signage. Nevertheless, the proposed sign would be considerable in size and located in an elevated position. As a result of these factors, along with its illuminated nature, the proposal would introduce a strident and eye catching modern feature to the tower. It would appear directly at odds with, and compete visually with, the distinctive design, traditional materials and important architectural and decorative elements of the building. It would also be prominent in Westfield Street and highly visible around the town centre.

11. The existing Beecham's wording, brand slogan and stone work busts at the entrance at the base of the tower would be retained and would continue to provide evidence of the building's former use and history. However, the proposed sign would draw attention away from these more modest and low key street level features. In introducing overwhelming and unduly distracting alternative signage, the proposed sign would also serve to impair the ability to appreciate the building's historic interest and longstanding connection to Beecham's.
12. For these reasons I find that the proposed sign would be appreciated as an unsympathetic addition that would unacceptably diminish the prestige and stature of the iconic historic landmark building. In undermining its traditional form and distinctive architectural design and character, it would diminish the building's authenticity and reduce its historic integrity and legibility.
13. The appellant refers to the existence of a previous sign on the building during the mid 20th century. This spelt out 'the home of Beecham's pills' and is shown in photographs included in the Heritage Statement. The appellant considers the size, location and contemporary design of the appeal sign would take direction from that previously displayed sign. However, there is no evidence to indicate precisely when this was displayed or when it was removed and it seems to me that it has not been in place for some time. Additionally, in contrast to the appeal scheme, that sign related to the historic use of the building and the purpose for which it was constructed.
14. I appreciate the historic display of large signs on other Beecham's buildings was not unusual and have had regard to the examples highlighted by the appellant. However, I am not convinced that the historic use of such signage by the company on their buildings justifies the current appeal scheme on the appeal property.
15. I have also had regard to the examples of contemporary signs on other listed buildings in Liverpool cited by the appellant, and acknowledge that modern advertisements on heritage assets cannot necessarily be ruled out. However, I am not aware of the particular circumstances that led to those displays and so cannot be sure that they are the same as in the case before me. I am also mindful that they relate to a different city context and so differ from the appeal scheme. Accordingly, these examples do not add any weight in favour of the appeal scheme, which I have in any event considered on its own merits.
16. Bringing matters together, for the reasons given, I consider that the proposed works would impair the building's historic legibility and reduce its authenticity. They would thus have a detrimental effect on the building and its character as a building of special architectural and historic interest. I therefore conclude on the main issue that the proposed works would fail to preserve the special interest of the listed building. I give this harm considerable importance and weight in the balance of this appeal.

The heritage balance

17. The Framework advises at paragraph 205 that when considering the impact of a proposal on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation.

18. Paragraph 206 of the Framework indicates that significance can be harmed or lost through the alteration or destruction of those assets or from development within their setting and that this should have a clear and convincing justification. I consider that the harm to the listed building in this case would be less than substantial, but nevertheless of considerable importance and weight. Paragraph 208 of the Framework requires that less than substantial harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.
19. The appellant refers to the economic benefits to the business of being advertised and increased investment in the local area. However, the benefits that would arise in these regards are not further explained or quantified. The proposal is also considered to be a facilitator to the wider regeneration of the building driven by the need to ensure a sustainable solution for the former factory. Whilst I appreciate that the permitted conversion of the building has facilitated the re-use of a landmark building that had been vacant for some time, I have seen no substantiated evidence to suggest that the conversion of the building would be unviable in the absence of the proposed signage, or that the permitted use would cease if the appeal were to be unsuccessful.
20. Whilst the proposed sign would provide an indication of the appeal property's new identity, even taking into account the decorative nature of the building, I am conscious of the possibility that this could be achieved via alternative less intrusive signage. Finally, although I acknowledge that the proposal would aid wayfinding, given that the building is already a readily recognisable landmark, I am not convinced that any public benefits in this regard would be great.
21. I therefore find that, even taken together, the public benefits in this case are insufficient to outweigh the harm to the designated heritage asset that I have identified. For these reasons the proposed works would fail to satisfy the requirements of the Act and paragraph 203 of the Framework.
22. Although the decision notice refers to policies LPC11 and LPD08 of the St Helens Borough Local Plan which concern the historic environment and adverts respectively, I am mindful that listed building appeals are not subject to Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and so do not need to be determined in accordance with the development plan.

Conclusion

23. For the reasons set out above, and having regard to all the other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

E Worthington

INSPECTOR