



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 June 2024

by N Thomas MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 8 July 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/P3610/Y/23/3333271

Members Room 12 - The Royal Automobile Club, Woodcote Park, Epsom, Surrey KT18 7EW

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
 - The appeal is made by The Royal Automobile Club against the decision of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.
 - The application reference is 22/01876/LBA.
The works proposed are the repair and refurbishment of members room no.12, its en-suite bathroom and lobby.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. As the proposal relates to a listed building I have had special regard to section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) (the Act).
3. The description of the site refers to room no. 12 and the appellant states that this is a 'test case' for further refurbishment works to other members' rooms. I have considered the appeal in terms of the effects of the works to room no. 12 on the listed building as a whole. The possible refurbishment of the rest of the rooms is not before me and would require further applications for listed building consent. The Design, Access and Heritage Statement refers to possible locations for future external plant, but this does not form part of the submitted proposal.
4. I saw that the room has already been refurbished and this includes some of the proposed works that are the subject of the appeal. The Council has advised that a revised scheme to refurbish the building has been approved that retains the original features under reference 23/00988/LBA. I saw that the radiators with their plinths, fitted wardrobe, skirtings, cornices, windows including glass have all been retained in the refurbishment. An alternative heat slot diffuser has also been installed. Photographs have been provided showing the pre-existing room and these have informed my assessment of the proposed works. I have considered the appeal on the basis of the works as applied for.
5. Although the proposal covers a range of works, the matters of dispute are set out in the appeal documents. The Council has not raised concerns with the other aspects of the proposal and I have no reason to disagree.

Main Issue

6. The main issue is whether the proposal would preserve a Grade II* listed building known as The Royal Automobile Country Club (RAC) (Ref: 1288718) (the LB), and any of the features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses.

Reasons

7. The LB includes entrance steps, curved colonnades and outer pavilions that were associated with an eighteenth-century mansion built in a Palladian style designed by Isaac Ware. The estate and mansion were purchased in 1913 by the Royal Automobile Club in order to provide members with a spacious sports complex, including a new golf course. The mansion largely burnt down in 1934 leaving the features described above, and the front (south) façade. The mansion was subsequently rebuilt to a design by Mewès and Davis, the architects of the RAC's building at Pall Mall.
8. The façade was a reproduction of the original but using a steel frame faced in red brick with ashlar dressings. The interior was completely reconstructed to provide state of the art accommodation for the RAC, with modern luxuries such as radiators and fitted wardrobes. The rooms were considered to be advanced for their time. The building was listed in 1954, well after the mansion was rebuilt. While the listing description sets out the surviving remnants of the eighteenth-century mansion, it also lists the Royal Automobile Country Club and describes the main elevation of the replacement building. It should not be inferred from the listing description that the main building is of less interest than the remnants of the original mansion. In any event, list descriptions are primarily for identification purposes.
9. Given the above, I find the special interest of the LB, insofar as it relates to this appeal, to be primarily associated with the historic fabric and fixtures and fittings, illustrating its design and function as a country club for RAC members since the 1930s.

Removal of single glazing and internal secondary glazing and replacement with double glazing

10. The room contains 4 windows of varying widths, one of which is within the ensuite bathroom. They are all sliding sash windows from the 1930s. They have Georgian proportions to replicate those in the original mansion. I have no reason to believe that the glass panes are not those that were originally installed and that they are part of the historic fabric of the building.
11. The existing single 4mm glazing would be replaced with thicker double-glazed units. The existing glazing bars would be reused. The windows would be redecorated including their boxes, frames, timber sills and window surrounds. The appellant's view is that as a result there would be no harm to the external appearance of the windows. Nonetheless, the removal of the existing glass would cause the loss of historic fabric which would be harmful. Furthermore, it has not been shown that the replacement glass would have similar reflective properties and would therefore cause further harm to the appearance of this part of the LB.
12. The appellant refers to paragraph 161 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in the appeal statement in November 2023. Following

revisions in December 2023, the relevant paragraph is now paragraph 164. This advises that great weight should be given to the need to support energy efficiency. However, where proposals would affect listed buildings, the policies set out in chapter 16 of the NPPF should also be applied. In particular, paragraph 205 states that when considering the impact of a development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation.

13. In any event, it has not been shown that the replacement glazing would bring greater energy efficiency improvements or carbon emissions savings over and above that of the existing secondary glazing. The double glazing may have acoustic benefits, but I have seen no detailed evidence that noise from nearby plant results in unsatisfactory conditions for those staying in the room, bearing in mind that stays in the room are likely to be short term.
14. I note the examples provided by the appellant of the use of double-glazed units in other listed buildings. I do not know the circumstances of those cases and cannot therefore conclude that they are comparable and have determined this appeal on its own individual merits.

Removal of radiators

15. The white-painted floor standing cast iron column radiators provided central heating at a time when most buildings were heated by stoves and fireplaces. It seems likely that they were part of the fitting out of the building when it was reconstructed following the 1934 fire. They therefore have some evidential value. The removal of the radiators would consequently result in the loss of historic fixtures. Their removal is not necessary in order to upgrade the means of heating the room as they can be disconnected and retained in situ. It follows that the removal of the radiators and wooden plinths on which they sit is not justified. I note that it is also proposed to install temporary electric radiators in place of the radiators although no further details have been provided.

Removal of built-in wardrobe

16. The extract from the Mewès and Davis drawing showing the original layout of Room 12 indicates that the room had a fitted wardrobe, which is still present. It is of a simple design with two doors and a panelled back. It is set into the wall. The cornice continues around the front and side of the wardrobe and there is an architrave above the door openings. The wardrobe would be removed and a section of new wall inserted in its place, with new sections of fibrous plaster cornice and timber skirting to match the existing.
17. Contrary to the view put forward by the appellant, it seems to me that good use can be made of the room as a double bedroom without the removal of the wardrobe. I have seen no evidence that the wardrobe blocks daylight from any of the windows to such an extent that the use of the room is compromised. The built-in wardrobe is part of the historic fabric of the building and its removal is not justified.

Removal and replacement of skirtings

18. There are various types of skirting evident on the site, with simple square edge or plain pencil round edge behind the radiators, and more ornate torus in the more prominent parts of the room. Following the removal of the radiators it is proposed to replace the plain skirting to match the torus skirting. The appellant

states that it is possible that the skirting has previously been replaced but in the absence of detailed investigation or evidence it cannot be demonstrated that the plain skirting does not form part of the historic fabric of the room. The replacement of the skirtings would allow for new floor covering of a different height but it is not clear to me that this is necessary in order to update the room. The work is therefore not adequately justified.

Removal and replacement of cornices

19. It is proposed to remove cornice along the wall/ceiling junction above the largest window (identified as window 1 on appellant's drawing). New cornice would be installed in a new location further into the room, to obscure curtain tracks. The justification for the works is to allow the blinds/curtains to give a full black out effect. The removal of the cornice would involve the loss of historic fabric and there are alternative means of obscuring curtain tracks and providing a suitable means of darkening the room, through the use of a pelmet for example as previously existed. The removal of the cornice is not therefore justified.

Installation of slot diffuser

20. To allow air heating and cooling it is proposed to create a false ceiling in the lobby area with a flangeless slot diffuser fitted above the lobby opening to allow blown air into the room to control temperature. Although the Council has not raised concerns with the loss of fabric to create the opening, I share their concern that such an opening would appear as a modern intrusion that would detract from the historic character of the room. As there are less harmful means of providing a slot diffuser this work is not justified.

Heritage balance

21. The proposed works would therefore result in the loss of historic fabric and harm to the historic interest of the LB for which there is no clear or convincing justification. The works would fail to preserve the special interest of the LB and would cause harm to the significance of the designated heritage asset. I give this harm considerable importance and weight. While the remnants of the original mansion may be more sensitive to inappropriate changes than the 1930s replacement, that does not mean that the proposals are not harmful to the special interest of the LB as a whole.
22. In view of the relatively small scale of the works and their effects on the LB, I find that the harm is less than substantial. Paragraph 208 of the NPPF requires that this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use. While it is a public benefit for a LB to continue to be in use, it has not been argued that the works are necessary for the use to continue. Indeed, listed building consent has now been granted for the refurbishment of the room without the elements that I have found to be harmful.
23. Given the above and in the absence of public benefits that would outweigh the harm that would be caused, I conclude that the proposal would fail to preserve the special historic interest of the Grade II* listed building.
24. This would fail to satisfy the requirements of the Act, paragraph 203 of the Framework and be inconsistent with policy CS1 of the Epsom and Ewell Core Strategy 2007 and policy DM8 of the Development Management Policies

Document 2015 insofar as relevant. These seek, among other things, to ensure that heritage assets are conserved and enhanced.

Conclusion

25. Given the above and considering all other matters raised, the appeal should be dismissed.

N Thomas

INSPECTOR