



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 10 July 2024

by K Stephens BSc (Hons) MTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 6 September 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/M2840/Y/23/3335063

26 Paddock Lane, Mears Ashby, Northamptonshire NN6 0EQ

- 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 Theresa Watts against the decision of North Northamptonshire Council.
- The application Ref is NW/23/00456/LBC.
- The works proposed are removal of thatched roof covering and replacement by slate or tiled roof.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. I have taken the description of works from the Council's refusal notice as it simply and adequately describes the proposed works, instead of the lengthy description given by the appellant on the application form.
3. During the course of the appeal a revised National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) was published in December 2023. However, as any policies in the Framework that are material to this decision have not fundamentally changed, I am satisfied that neither party would be prejudiced by my consideration of the revised Framework in reaching my decision.
4. As the proposal relates to works to a listed building which is located within a conservation area, I have had special regard to section 16(2) and paid special attention to section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act).

Main Issues

5. The main issues in this appeal are whether the proposal would i) preserve the Grade II listed building known as 26 Paddock Lane or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses; and ii) preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Mears Ashby Conservation Area (the CA).

Reasons

Special interest and significance of the heritage assets

6. The official list entry¹ made in 1972 describes the listed building as dating from the late 17th century. It is built of regular coursed ironstone and limestone and is single storey with attic. There are ashlar gable parapets and kneelers to left

¹ National Heritage List for England: list entry number 1191270

and large brick and stone stacks to ridge and end, and the left gable has evidence of raised parapets. I saw that the roof was thatched. A barn attached to the right was reconstructed in the 20th century and now forms part of the house and has a clay pantile roof. I saw the two described 17th century fireplaces were still in situ.

7. At the time of listing in 1972 the roof was described as having a corrugated metal roof – not thatch. This would have been based on the observations at the time. As the Council's Conservation Officer comments, it is not uncommon to cover a thatch roof with corrugated tin to avoid the costs of rethatching while keeping the building dry, and in some instances the tin roof became a permanent solution for whatever reason and over time thatch roofs were lost.
8. The appellant's Design and Access Statement states the property was re-thatched about 20 years ago. An undated photograph used in the submitted Village Design Statement² (the VDS) to illustrate a 'pinch point' in Paddock Lane, shows the property with a thatch roof. The Council's Conservation Officer considers that it is reasonable to assume that the building was historically thatched, given the age and typology of the site. In my view this is a reasonable assumption as on my visit I saw a number of other existing thatch roof properties in the village. Furthermore, photographic evidence in the VDS clearly shows other properties in the village were once thatched but are no longer so, or the thatched properties have been demolished, such as shown in the "then and now" photographs of Bakehouse Lane. Moreover, no substantive evidence has been provided by the appellant to challenge the Council's assertions or to demonstrate that the property was not historically thatched.
9. From the evidence before me and what I saw on site, the special interest and significance of the listed building, insofar as it relates to this appeal, are largely derived from a combination of its historic and architectural interests as an example of a late 17th century vernacular domestic building within a village. The building's age, surviving historic fabric, extant historic features and use of traditional construction and materials make important contributions in these regards. Whilst the existing thatch does not constitute historic fabric, it provides a degree of authenticity to the building's roof covering. In doing so it contributes in a positive way to the architectural integrity of the heritage asset and thus to its special interest and significance.
10. The host property is also located within the CA, which is centred on the historic core of the village and the swathe of green space either side of the Bells Brook valley that runs through the centre of the village. With a long history and being mentioned in the Domesday Book, Mears Ashby has grown organically, surrounded by a large rural hinterland. There are a variety of buildings of different ages, designs and sizes, built with a palette of local building materials. Both the CA Appraisal (the Appraisal) and the VDS refer to these local building materials, with specific reference to the preponderance of local Mears Ashby stone for walls, and natural roof coverings in the form of plain clay tiles, pantiles and slate (including local Northamptonshire Collyweston stone slate) as well as thatch.
11. Thatch is a traditional roofing material found in the area and contributes to local distinctiveness. Its soft, undulating form creates a very different roof covering to tiles or slates that adds to the architectural variety of the village.

² Mears Ashby Village Design Statement Supplementary Planning Document – adopted February 2017

The use of thatch in particular therefore has a significant effect on the character and appearance of the village due in part to its rarity. Indeed both above-mentioned documents refer to the limited survival of thatch on four named properties in the village the size of Mears Ashby as being particularly notable.

12. Given the above, the character and appearance and thus special interest and significance of the CA, insofar as it relates to this appeal, is derived principally from the preservation and legibility of the village's historic street pattern and open spaces, the architectural richness and variety of its historic buildings, use of local traditional building and roofing materials, including thatch, which reflect the growth of Mears Ashby and its agrarian surroundings. With its heritage merit as well as its aesthetic charm, the listed building positively contributes to the character and appearance of the CA as a whole, and thereby to its significance as a designated heritage asset.

Appeal proposal and effects

13. The proposal would involve removing the existing thatch roof and replacing it with a tiled or slate roof. I saw that the thatch was in a poor state of repair with a tarpaulin over the ridge. The barn adjacent to the thatch roof (and currently part of the host property) has a clay pantile roof. The property on the other side of the 'pinch point' in Paddock Lane has a plain clay tile roof. With the Appraisal stating that slate, plain tiles or clay pantiles form part of the predominant roofing materials in the village, such a replacement would not be unduly out of keeping with the roofing palette of the village as a whole on face value.
14. That said, in addition to the host property there are a number of other thatched properties in the village, which the VDS mentions by name and which I saw were in generally good condition. I also saw a thatched roof to the rear of a property on Bakehouse Lane, which is not mentioned in the VDS. It is unclear why the appeal property is not named in the VDS as having a thatched roof, when there are photographs of it in the VDS. However, this omission from local documentation, whether intentional or not, does not lessen the historic merit of the building as it is deemed to be of national importance to the historic environment of the nation by virtue of being a listed building.
15. Whilst the roof covering on the property has been replaced over the years and the existing thatch is not historic, it is nonetheless a roofing form and material appropriate to the listed building in the village, as it reflects traditional materials and roofing methods used in this part of the country. And as discussed above, the building would likely have been thatched initially.
16. The VDS recognises that over the last 60 years or so the arrival of mass-produced brick and concrete roofing tiles and the general "absence of craftsman-like architectural detailing" is not locally distinctive and is adversely changing the character and appearance of the CA. This has led to a piecemeal loss of thatch in Mears Ashby over time. Against the increasing rarity of thatch roofs, the removal of the thatch from the appeal property and replacement with tiles or slates would see the loss of a more authentic roofing material. The proposal would thus erode the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building and harm its significance.

17. As the listed building is also an integral part of the village and CA, it follows that the contribution the host property would make to the CA would be diminished as a result of removing its thatch roof. Hence the proposal would not preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the CA as a whole and would harm its significance.

Public benefits and heritage balance

18. The Framework states at paragraph 195 that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance. Paragraph 205 states that when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation.
19. With reference to Framework paragraphs 207 and 208, in finding harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, the magnitude of that harm should be assessed. In this case, given the nature and extent of the proposed works, I find the harm to the significance of the listed building and the CA would be 'less than substantial'. Nonetheless, this harm carries considerable importance and weight. Under such circumstances, paragraph 208 requires the harm to be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.
20. There would be some public benefits. The local economy would benefit from jobs during the removal of the thatch and installation of the new roof. There would be some heritage and environmental benefits by reducing risks to the building as well as possible thermal improvements with wider climatic and carbon reduction implications. There would also be an improvement to the local housing stock.
21. Public benefits can also include works to a designated heritage asset to help secure its future. However, there is no substantive evidence before me that demonstrates that the proposal is necessary to secure the continued use of the building as a dwelling, or that the use of the building would be at risk if the appeal was to fail. The issues raised against the thatched roof are more than likely due to lack of ongoing maintenance.
22. There would be some cost savings to the appellant from installing a tiled/slate roof (costing about £20,000) instead of the more costly thatched roof (about £50,000) with potentially a longer lasting roofing material involving less regular and cheaper maintenance. I acknowledge that the increased costs that come with a thatched roof can be significant, and I appreciate the costs are ongoing because of additional maintenance requirements. I also accept that insurance premiums may also be less with a slate/tiled roof as fire risk is reduced.
23. The appellant refers to health issues from the damp and not being able to heat the house, although no substantive evidence has been submitted on this. Damp and water leaks are the likely result of poor thatch maintenance. I saw tell-tale signs on inside and outside walls that had suffered water damage, but these were localised and limited to areas where the thatch appeared to be in the poorest state. Pests and insects can inhabit thatch, but the use of chicken wire over the thatch, which I saw was in place, and good maintenance can reduce likely infestations. Traditional fireplaces and thatched roofs were common design features in such historic buildings. It is an established fact that a well-maintained thatched roof can have good insulating properties.

24. There are also well established measures that have been developed to manage fire risk in thatched properties. These include increased levels of fire detection including smoke detection in the roof, thatching techniques and use of fire-resistant materials and treatments. Good chimney maintenance can also further minimise the risk of fire.
25. Most of the benefits put forward by the appellant would be for their own personal comfort and convenience, rather than public benefits. Overall, the weight I ascribe to the limited public benefits is not sufficient to outweigh the considerable importance and weight I attach to the harm that would be caused to the significance of the listed building and the CA from the removal of the thatch roof. Accordingly, the proposal would fail to preserve the Grade II listed building or any features of special architectural and historic interest which it possesses and would not preserve or enhance the character of the CA. It would also fail to satisfy the requirements of the Act and the provisions of the Framework.
26. Listed building appeals are not subject to section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. Therefore development plan policies do not carry the same weight as when considering planning applications. Nevertheless, the Council refers to them. Accordingly, the proposed removal of a thatch roof and replacement with tile or slates would not comply with Policy 2 of the North Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy (2011-2031) which seeks, amongst other things, to protect, preserve and where possible enhance the distinctive North Northamptonshire historic environment and the significance of heritage assets. It would also be contrary to Character Guideline 1 of the VDS that seeks to ensure that the character contribution of listed buildings is maintained through the sympathetic treatment of their setting.

Other Matters

27. Wellingborough Civic Society refer to the corrugated tin roof in the listing from the 1970s and would like to see the thatch replaced with pantiles. I am also led to understand that neighbours support the replacement roof. Nonetheless, these views do not diminish the harm I have identified.
28. Other properties in the village may have lost their thatched roofs over time, but I do not have the details of these or the particular circumstances to be able to comment or make meaningful comparisons with the circumstances of the appeal. There was no tarpaulin over the roof at the time of my visit, only across the ridge. Even if there had been and it was an "eyesore" this is not a justification to replace the thatch roof with tiles or slates.
29. I have not been provided with any evidence of Council advice offered to the appellant in the past about re-roofing the property or why any advice might have changed over time. I acknowledge the appellant's concerns with the Council's handling of the application and delays in its determination, but in reaching my decision I have been concerned only with the merits of the case.

Conclusion

30. For the reasons given above, I conclude the appeal should be dismissed.

K. Stephens
INSPECTOR