

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 2 September 2024

by Tom Bristow BA MSc MRTPI AssocRICS

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 8th October 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/N1730/Y/24/3346935

Blounce Cottage, Alton Road, Blounce, South Warnborough RG29 1RX

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended (the 'LBCA Act') against a refusal to grant listed building consent ('LBC').
 - The appeal is made by David Warburton against the decision of Hart District Council ('HDC').
 - The application ref. is 23/01576/LBC.
 - The works proposed are described in the application form as: '2 No single storey black crittall orangery extensions to the rear elevation of Blounce Cottage. All original features to the rear extension of the listed cottage are to be retained and protected.'
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary matters

Statutory and policy context

2. The proposed works relate to grade II listed Blounce Cottage.¹ I have therefore approached the appeal in the context of section 16(2) of the LBCA Act (section 66(1) relating to development which affects a listed building or its setting). It is a truism that historic buildings must evolve somewhat to remain in (optimum viable) use. As in Article 5 of the 1964 Venice Charter, conservation is facilitated by making use of heritage assets 'for some socially useful purpose', the Planning Practice Guidance saying similar.²
3. Reflecting that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource at paragraph 195, paragraph 205 of the National Planning Policy Framework (20 December 2023, the 'NPPF') sets out how 'great weight' should be given to assets' conservation relative to their importance. I have also had regard to the development plan, which here includes policies of the Hart Local Plan Strategy and Sites (adopted April 2020, the 'LPSS'). LPSS policies NBE8 and NBE9, cited in HDC's decision notice of 21 February 2024, in summary and amongst other things, seek to ensure that development integrates appropriately with the historic environment.

¹ List entry no. 1272244.

² Reference ID: 19a-002-20190723.

4. As above the appeal is in relation to LBC rather than in respect of planning permission.³ In respect of planning applications, proposals must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.⁴ Whilst each proposal turns on its merits, and I have assessed the proposed works independently, I note that via decision notice also dated 21 February 2024 HDC refused permission for a parallel planning application.⁵ That does not appear to have been appealed.

Planning history

5. Blounce Cottage was first listed in 1986. The list entry sets out that at that juncture there was a 'modern single-storeyed entrance wing... set back at the north end, [and] a small modern single-storeyed wing extends the front at the south end'. Via permission ostensibly of 1985 and LBC of 1986, various alterations and extensions were authorised.⁶ HDC indicate that effecting that mid-80s scheme nearly doubled the floor area of the property. That is not countered by the appellant. A single storey addition to the property was authorised in 2005, albeit unimplemented (and therefore lapsed).⁷ There have variously been changes proposed to the listed building as far back as 1964.⁸ For comprehensiveness, there is no indication that the current nature of Blounce Cottage is in any sense unauthorised.

Main issue

6. Whilst I note the points raised by the appellant regarding their perspective on HDC's handling of application ref. 23/01576/LBC, those are incidental to an assessment of the implications of the scheme (which my decision is focussed squarely on). Against the context above, the main issue is whether proposed works would preserve Blounce Cottage, its setting, or any features of special architectural or historic interest it possesses.

Reasons

Special interest and significance

7. Blounce Cottage falls close to the B3349 to the east, the most direct route between Alton and Hook. It is one of a small cluster of buildings, principally historic,⁹ set within a staunchly rural context. Whilst Blounce Cottage and Blounce Farmhouse appear to have emerged at a similar time amidst similar historic forces, there is no indication that they otherwise shared an historic associative connection.
8. The list entry aptly describes the Cottage as follows: 'C17. 2 storeys, 3 windows. Tall timber-framed house with a steep tiled roof, 1/2-hipped at each end. Walling has exposed frame, filled with painted brickwork. Leaded small casements...'. With reference to paragraph 5 above, that is only a partial description. Although the significance of an asset may not lie solely its

³ In respect of which appeals are governed by section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended.

⁴ Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 as amended.

⁵ Ref. 23/01576/LBC.

⁶ Refs. 82/13201/HOU and 86/00370/LBC.

⁷ Refs. 05/01802/FUL and 05/01803/LBC.

⁸ Refs. 70/06599/H1, 70/0659/H2, 69/06599/H and 64/0547/H (apparently the subject of associated appeals).

⁹ Including Blounce Farmhouse, list entry no. 1272245, noting that the granary there is also grade II listed (list entry no. 1244692).

original form, twentieth century extensions possess nothing meaningful by way of embodied or representative significance.

9. There is nonetheless an appreciable historic nature to the central element of the Cottage (the 'core' as HDC put it). As in the list entry that is signified by timber-framed walls infilled with brick, although I saw that some brickwork is unlikely to be historic. Reflecting a rural and essentially functional nature, the listed building was originally humble. Its modest form, and the intimate nature of spaces within the property, authentically reflect the limitations of historic construction (resulting from the spans of available timber and structural qualities of material used for infilling walls). The listed building very much emerged out of its surroundings, its materials and detailing embodying historic craftsmanship.
10. The Historic Environment Record, referenced in HDC's officer report, indicates that Blounce Cottage likely traces its origins further back still. Judging by the presence of soot blackened beams, it suggests that Blounce Cottage was an earlier fifteenth century timber framed hall house. As with other buildings of that era its historic core likely reflects the 'Great Rebuilding' preceding the Civil War (a period when many buildings, notably rural buildings, were reconstructed or altered so as to endure structurally). That extensive lineage makes the property something of a rarity.
11. Insofar as relevant to this appeal, the special interest and significance of Blounce Cottage derives principally from the legibility of its historic materials, craftsmanship, and to no small extent from its modest proportions. Whilst the overall composition of the listed building has been much altered, those characteristics are still very much apparent. They speak authentically to the past in the present, embodying a long continuity of change (and reflect broader intangible historic trends in physical form).

The proposed works¹⁰

12. The proposal is to construct two orangeries to the rear of the Cottage, both west-facing. Plan no. 'DW/01/23/004 Rev. B' gives the external dimensions of the larger as 4000 by 6985mm, the dimensions of the smaller being 3150 by 4715mm. Including as shown on plan no. 'DW/01/23/003 Rev. B' the scheme would entail some alterations to ground levels, retaining walls and service runs.
13. The orangeries would be set atop low stretches of painted brick and be principally of crittall framed casement windows, finished black, with aluminium roof lanterns. As reflected in the description of development in the banner heading above, historic fabric would be retained. The proposal would inevitably necessitate some tying in, making good and cosmetic finishing (with an appropriately sensitive approach in that respect capable of being secured via condition were the scheme otherwise acceptable).

¹⁰ Shown on plan nos. 'DW/01/23/005 Rev. A' (Site location and block plan), 'DW/01/23/001 Rev. B' (Existing floor plans) which instead shows elevations, 'DW/01/23/002 Rev. B' (Existing floor plans), 'DW/01/23/003 Rev. B' (Proposed elevations), 'DW/01/23/004 Rev. B' (Proposed ground and first floor plans).

The effect of the proposed works

14. Whilst clearly 'modern' and understated in form and materials, contemporary design and historic craftsmanship are not inherently inimical. Arguably the former marks a clear and legible break with the latter, rather than blurring the distinction between latter interventions and historic fabric. HDC raise no objection to the design of the orangeries *per se*. The proposed additions would also be relatively modest compared to the scale of Blounce Cottage as it stands (noting that HDC evidently found that some degree of enlargement to the property was acceptable in 2005). Being to the rear, and given the presence of substantial boundary features demarcating plots and established planting within them, there would be no meaningful visibility of the proposed orangeries other than from within the plot of the listed building itself.
15. There comes a threshold, however, where the accumulation of alterations to an asset crosses a threshold beyond which historic integrity is diminished. In my view that threshold would be crossed by the proposed works for 3 principal reasons. Firstly, as referenced above, over time the floor area of the property has nearly doubled from its historic form. The orangeries would represent a significant addition to that, such that in relative terms more floor area at the property would be recent as opposed to historic. That would be clearly at odds with the humble origins of the listed building which contributes towards significance.
16. Secondly, as shown on plan no. DW/01/23/003 Rev. B, the form of the larger orangery would, even though of lightweight and extensively glazed design, obscure the historic form and some fabric central to the listed building. Whilst no historic fabric would be lost, and visibility and significance are different concepts, that would make it more challenging to appreciate the origins and evolution of Blounce Cottage.
17. Thirdly, the scheme would further enclose the historic core of the building, not only by virtue of previous extensions to the north and south, but also now to the west. Whilst I acknowledge there have previously been extensive alterations to Blounce Cottage diverging from its historic materials, craftsmanship and form, that does not justify further erosion of significance. If anything it instead places greater emphasis on maintaining that integrity which remains.

Consideration

18. Inherent in my reasoning above is that the proposal would fail to preserve the special interest and significance of the listed building, in conflict with the expectations of statute and with the relevant provisions of LPSS policies NBE8 and NBE9 and of NPPF paragraph 195.
19. It is for the decision-taker to gauge the extent of any harm. As set out in paragraph 14 above there are various moderating factors, such that the magnitude of harm that would result may fairly be described as 'less than substantial' with reference to NPPF paragraph 205 (and towards the lower end of a spectrum within that categorisation).

20. NPPF paragraph 208 guides that, in such circumstances, the extent of harm should be weighed against any public benefits. That is a balance to which I now turn, noting that NPPF paragraph 206 establishes that any harm, not just that which is substantial, should require 'clear and convincing justification'.

The heritage balance

21. The appellant explains how the scheme is 'proposed to enhance the living accommodation and for the applicant to enjoy the views to the rear of the property which are at present restricted due to the size and position of the existing casements'. I understand the logic of the scheme from that perspective, and given also the proposal would create space with much greater availability of natural light than at the historic core of the building. The appellant has also set out how the scheme, by virtue of necessitating the alteration of external ground levels which rise to the rear of the property, would enable improvements to drainage away from the property. That, and the additional protection to historic fabric that would result from the presence of the orangeries themselves would, I acknowledge, likely be beneficial to the structural longevity of the listed building.
22. Nevertheless many individuals accept quirks and constraints as the logically corollary of living in a property with a rich historic and character. They are to some extent inevitable. As such the benefits of the scheme in terms of living conditions are essentially a matter of personal preference rather than intrinsically required. There is moreover no robust evidence that existing drainage arrangements are detrimental to structural integrity, nor that any improvement is contingent on the scheme before me. There is moreover nothing by way of evidence in terms of the structural integrity of the property, which is evidently very longstanding.
23. Consequently, although I appreciate the motivation for the proposal, and note that neither South Warnborough Parish Council nor anyone else has objected to it, the public benefits of the scheme do not provide clear and convincing justification relative to the harm that would result.

Other matters

24. The appellant has drawn my attention to modern properties built close to the South Warnborough Conservation Area ('SWCA') some distance away. The circumstances that led to their being granted permission are, however, not before me. Although I do not comment on their effect on the SWCA or its setting, even if they are not 'in character with the locale' as the appellant describes them, that does not inherently justify harm elsewhere (consistent with my reasoning in paragraph 17 above).

Conclusion

25. For the above reasons, having taken account of the development plan as a whole along with all other relevant material considerations, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Tom Bristow

INSPECTOR