
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 22 January 2025

by **G Bayliss BA (Hons) MA MA MRTPI IHBC**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 29 January 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/W2845/Y/24/3349858

The Old Rectory, Brockhall Road, Brockhall, West Northamptonshire NN7 4JY

- 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 Mr Richard Howard against the decision of West Northamptonshire Council.
 - The application Ref is 2023/7977/LBC.
 - The works proposed are substitution of existing timber flooring with stone flooring in entrance hall and drawing room.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The Government published a revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) on 12 December 2024. I have considered its amendments against the earlier version and against the parties' appeal evidence. I have also updated Framework paragraph numbers where necessary. However, I have not gone back to the parties for comment, as I do not consider the Framework changes to be substantive or determinative to the outcome of this appeal.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether the proposed works would preserve a Grade II listed building (listed as The Old Rectory) and any of the features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses, and whether it would preserve the significance of the heritage asset.

Reasons

4. The Old Rectory (Ref.1045891) is a Grade II listed building. The list description mentions, amongst other things, that the former rectory dates from the early 19th century with later alterations and is constructed in red brick with a hipped slate roof. It describes the external appearance of the building and its architectural features including, on the side elevation to the garden, a Doric pillared stone porch and double-leaf part-glazed door with fanlight and sash windows with gauged brick lintels. The list description also mentions internal features, including 19th century marble chimneypieces and details of the open well staircase which is probably rearranged. It should be noted that list descriptions are primarily for identification purposes only and do not provide an exhaustive or complete description of the special interest of those buildings.

5. From the details available to me, including the list description and my visit, I consider that the special interest and significance of the listed building, insofar as it relates to this appeal, is predominantly derived from its age, function, historic fabric and its architectural interest. The interiors of many of the principal ground floor rooms reflect the high status of the building with finely executed period interiors and architectural details. These interiors contribute to that special interest and significance.
6. Section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act) requires special regard to be had to the desirability of preserving the listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses. The Framework confirms that great weight should be given to the conservation of a designated heritage asset. It also mentions that the particular significance of any element of the historic environment likely to be affected by a proposal should be identified and assessed and any harm should require clear and convincing justification.
7. The appeal proposal relates to the entrance hall and drawing room which lies to its rear (the latter room described by the appellant as a living room on the proposed ground floor plan). The proposal seeks to replace the existing timber floor boards with a new stone flooring product. It is proposed that the stone flooring would be the same thickness as the existing floor boards with the floor joists remaining in place. Photographic images of typical examples of the suggested stone flooring are provided in the Appellant's Heritage Impact Assessment (October 2023). They show roughly square, light stone slabs with a contrasting darker lozenge pattern. I also saw on site several plain stone slabs of a rectangular size laid out as a sample in the entrance hall. I have few details to indicate how this flooring would be laid on the floor joists, the size or bond of the slabs or exactly what the finished effect would be.
8. The entrance hall is a grand and elegant room, accessed via the stone porch mentioned above, with an elaborate, decorative interior including ornate fireplace, intricate cornices, and period joinery. It appears as a unified and authentic period interior. Similarly, the drawing room, although slightly less ornate, reflects many features of a fine period interior, including sash windows and shutters, a period fireplace and decorative cornices.
9. Within the hall, the suspended wooden floor is neatly laid, polished wooden floorboards, and it is carefully finished around the hearth and doorways. In the drawing room, I was not able to view the floor as it was carpeted but the evidence suggests that this is a similar suspended timber floor. Elsewhere on the ground floor I saw a mixture of wooden floor boards and more modern flooring materials.
10. Whilst I noted that the wooden floor boards in the hall were slightly uneven around the porch entrance, with raw edges around the mat well, on the whole, the floor boards appeared to be in good order with a lustrous patina. I did not see or have been directed to any significant defects. All in all, based on what I saw, the submitted evidence and my knowledge of period interiors, the wooden flooring appeared to be appropriate for the age and character of the building, complimented the interior and therefore forms part of the special interest and significance of the building.

11. The Heritage Impact Assessment discusses renovations undertaken in 2002 following a period of dilapidation. The contractor at the time comments that the suspended timber floor in the hall and drawing room was extensively repaired/replaced and reclaimed floorboards were used. He also notes that the floors of other rooms were surfaced in concrete screed with soil beneath, and these were replaced with York Stone, later to be topped with laminate by the previous owner. Consequently, I recognise that there is some doubt as to whether any of the flooring on the ground floor is historic or original to the building.
12. The contractor considers that the suspended timber floor in the hall and drawing room is not historic as traces of more modern fabric were found between the joists, there was an unusually shallow sub-floor void, some joists were small and there was an absence of sub floor ventilation. However, this is insufficient evidence to demonstrate to me that the suspended timber flooring, subject to this appeal, is not an historic detail, especially as it appears to have been repaired/replaced during the renovations 'like for like' rather than installing stone as in some other rooms.
13. It is suggested that the hall and drawing room were originally one grand reception room which has subsequently been divided into two. However, I see limited evidence before me to justify this, especially given the well-proportioned interiors and completeness of the decoration within each room. The fact that the floorboards may run in opposite directions does not satisfy me that suspended floors were fitted at the same time as any dividing wall.
14. I recognise that many historic properties have grand entrance halls and other principal rooms with floors surfaced in stone tiles or slabs. The stone porch and steps also may suggest that this material continued into these rooms and that it might be more resistant to wear and tear. However, this all appears to be conjecture and there is no credible evidence to indicate that the historic flooring in the rooms subject to this appeal was stone instead of a suspended timber floor and floor boards. The proposed flooring material may well be reversible, especially if the flooring structure beneath is retained. However, that does not justify installing flooring which is not proven to have existed in these rooms and, in any event, I have few exact details of the proposal or reassurance that it would faithfully replicate a period detail.
15. Considering all of the above, the proposed works would not preserve the special interest and significance of the listed building and any of the features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses, and it would not preserve the significance of the heritage asset. Therefore, the expectations of the Act are not met. Paragraph 212 of the Framework advises 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. Paragraph 213 goes on to advise that significance can be harmed or lost through alteration or destruction of the asset and any such harm should have a clear and convincing justification. I find the harm in the context of the significance of the heritage asset as a whole, in the language of the Framework, to be less than substantial in this instance. This commands considerable importance and weight and is not to be treated as a less than substantial objection to the proposal.
16. Where a proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, paragraph 215 of the Framework advises that this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. In undertaking this

balance, I have taken account of the Planning Practice Guidance¹ which explains what constitutes a public benefit. This states that they should be of a nature or scale to be of benefit to the public at large and not just be a private benefit. The appellant seeks a more durable surface in these rooms and wishes to create a harmonious visual flow of flooring throughout this part of the building to complement internal alterations already consented. However, these are mainly private benefits which would not benefit the public at large and as such little weight can be given to them.

17. I appreciate that this appeal decision will be a disappointment to the appellant, especially given the significant investment in the building's refurbishment. However, it has not been clearly demonstrated that the works would be sensitive to the building's special interest and significance. I therefore conclude that the public benefits identified would be insufficient to outweigh the great weight to be given to the harm to the Grade II listed building. As such, the proposal would not comply with the Framework. In addition, there is no clear and convincing justification for the harm to the significance of the listed building. Consequently, the proposal would not comply with the Framework, and the development plan policies insofar as these are relevant.

Conclusion

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

G Bayliss

INSPECTOR

¹ Planning Practice Guidance 'Historic Environment': Paragraph 020 Reference ID 18a-020-20190723