



SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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Our ref: L00460971

26 June 2015

Dear Mr Worlledge

**Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications Direction 2015 &
T&CP (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015**

**CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE MERTON STREET OXFORD OXFORDSHIRE OX1
4JF**

Application No 15/01550/LBC

Thank you for your letter of 1 June 2015 notifying Historic England of the above application. Our comments also pertain to the associated planning application 15/01549/FUL.

Summary

The proposed new library at Corpus Christi College has been developed in close consultation with both Oxford City Council and Historic England. In general we are content with the proposals: the applicant has made a good case for the necessity of the scale of the new building and handled the design in a sensitive manner. However, we remain unconvinced that removing a primary window opening at first floor level is the best way to link old and new libraries.

Historic England Advice

The principle of development

The College and the team advising them have made argued pervasively that there is a need to improve their library facilities. They have also identified what is almost certainly the only area of the College where it would be possible to insert a new library without seriously compromising the significance of an excellent group of historic buildings.

The site in question lies between the front quad and the President's Lodgings in the south-west corner of the college. This has a reasonably handsome but unexciting gothic revival façade of 1905-6 facing the Fellows Building which has been compromised by the addition of an ugly mansard roof. Behind this façade is a building



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by Michael Powers of the Architect's Co-partnership dating from 1957-9. Pevsner's write up of the College looks on this building rather favourably, calling it pretty with an ingenious plan. However, it has not stood the test of time well (Pevsner was writing in 1974) and the plan has been compromised by alterations carried out in the 1980s. We therefore accept the critique of this building set out in pages 30-33 of the Heritage Audit, which states that this building to be of very limited architectural and historical significance. Consequently we are content with the principle of replacing it with a high quality building.

The design of the proposed library

The College have looked carefully at their needs and are clear that the proposed building, which is four storeys high, represents the minimum size necessary to meet their requirements. Successfully placing a building of this size in this space presents many challenges. The small size and intimate nature of Corpus is a very important aspect of its character and one of the most distinctive things about the College. Any new building must respect this context and avoid seeming out of scale with its neighbours. The issue of scale is intensified by the fact that the most important, and most diminutive, element of the grade II listed President's Lodgings is the remains of the 1690s wing, which stands right next to the site of the proposed library. The historic library itself, while bigger than the Lodgings, is also a relatively small building. While the nearby early 18th century Fellows' Building is larger, and appreciably higher than the front quad, this cannot automatically be taken as a precedent for a suitable height. The Fellows' building benefits from having the Cloister and Garden Quad to mediate between it and earlier parts of the College which allows for a change in scale in a way that cannot be accommodated as easily in the proposed new library site.

The difficulty caused by the scale of the proposed library is most apparent on the east elevation, which would form a link between the library and the President's Lodgings. The Architects have reduced its impact as far as possible by setting back the majority of the top storey using and vertical fins to differentiate this level. However, the top storey of the projecting bay has not been set back in the same way. The applicants maintain that this space is necessary in order to make the library function effectively but in my view it would appear a little overbearing in views of the courtyard. Nevertheless, the fin-like cladding of the top storey would reduce its impact and as a whole it has the potential to be a handsome elevation if well executed. We therefore conclude that the harm to significance entailed by this element of the proposal has been minimised and is relatively low.

A larger building would also affect the setting of Christchurch College. Views from the Dean's drawing room and Dean's garden would certainly change, as the presence of a large building would be noticeable. As this a varied townscape with a number of large buildings already in these views (most notably Christchurch Library) an additional large building of high design quality would not necessarily harm the setting of the



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Christchurch College. However, there would be an impact on views from the Cathedral Garden, where a pleasant view of the tower of Merton Chapel would be obscured. This is an incidental rather than a designed view and doesn't directly contribute to an appreciation of the historic or aesthetic qualities of the Cathedral. However, these fortuitous glimpses of one historic building from another are part of what makes Oxford so special: they give the sense of being surrounded on all sides by history. Therefore there is an element of harm, albeit small, to the conservation area.

The northern elevation is well designed and would present a much better face to Oriel Square than the current building. While there is an element of harm in that part of the west elevation of the front quadrangle is obscured overall we judge the impact to be positive.

In summary we consider that the proposals are for a high quality building that reacts well to its context while meeting a demanding brief. While the scale of the building would entail an element of harm to the significance of the College and surrounding Heritage Assets this has been reduced to the minimum possible through the design process and is now considered to be relatively low.

The link with the Old Library

The proposals only involve one major intervention into the historic fabric of the College: the removal of a twin light gothic style window at first floor level to connect old and new elements of the library. We agree with the chronology set out in Appendix 2 of the Heritage Impact assessment that the window is likely to be composed of 18th century fabric. This was a renewal of the early 16th century original. This relatively late date should not be taken as an indication of low significance. Most of the external stonework on medieval and Tudor buildings in Oxford has been renewed in a similar way but is valued highly because it preserves the form and spirit of the original. This window is no exception to this general rule. Furthermore, the current fenestration arrangement and thus offers valuable clues as to the likely original internal arrangements within the building. Its removal therefore would entail a high degree of harm and could only be accepted if there is a very strong justification.

We accept that there is a need to link into the Old Library at this level if the new library is to operate effectively. The question is whether it is better to achieve this by opening up the window or enlarging the existing doorway at this level (this was inserted at some point before 1905). The applicant has opted to enlarge the window on the grounds that this would involve less loss of and disruption to historic fabric (for instance there would be less disruption of the panelling in the Old President's study). They believe that would be less disruptive to the architectural qualities of the exterior and result in a more logical circulation route. Minimal intervention is proposed into the opening: the mullion and material beneath it would be removed leaving the head in place, making it obvious that a window has been removed here. In our opinion is that



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enlarging the existing door would be a less harmful solution for the following reasons:

- While it involves the loss of a greater proportion of primary fabric this would be wall core and internal face work which is in our view of lesser significance than the window which, although a renewal, preserves the form and architectural qualities of the original building.
- Leaving the window head in place would look very odd. More architecturally satisfactory alternatives would involve a greater loss of historic fabric and design intent.
- The issue of disturbing the panelling in the Old President's study is probably soluble with a limited degree of harm, particularly as the panelling has already been altered to admit a doorway.
- The disadvantages in terms of circulation are not great as the route from new library to old remains obvious.

Planning Policy Considerations

Paragraph 132 of the NPPF requires all proposals that would entail harm to the significance of a listed building to be clearly and convincingly justified. In the case of the window we do not consider the harm justified, as the works could be done in a way which, in our view, would be less harmful.

There are other elements of the proposals which involve a degree of harm, most notably the increase in the scale of the building. We accept that these are justified as they are necessary to create a building that meets the needs of the College and cannot be further mitigated by refining the design. In accordance with paragraph 134 of the NPPF this harm needs to be weighed against the public benefits of the application. While it will be for Oxford City Council carry out this balancing exercise we consider that the level of harm is relatively low (with the exception of the matter of the window). We also acknowledge that there are strong public benefits to the proposals in terms of better caring from an outstanding collection of historic documents and allowing the College to carry out its teaching functions in a way that meets modern expectations.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the application is amended to retain the window to the Old President's Study and enlarge the adjacent door as an alternative means of access between new and old libraries. We consider that this issue is of sufficient importance to recommend refusal if the applicant is unwilling to make this change, given that in our opinion the harm would not be justified in terms of Paragraph 132 of the NPPF. If this issue can be resolved satisfactorily we would be content for listed building consent and planning permission to be granted.



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We would welcome the opportunity of advising further. Please consult us again if any additional information or amendments are submitted. If, notwithstanding our advice, you propose to approve the scheme in its present form, please advise us of the date of the committee and send us a copy of your report at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely

Richard Peats

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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Enclosure: Checklist for notification to the National Planning Casework Unit



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CHECKLIST OF INFORMATION FOR NOTIFICATION TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE (NATIONAL PLANNING CASEWORK UNIT)

Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications Direction 2015 & T&CP (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015

If you are required to notify the National Planning Casework Unit of this application, it will help to save time if you include the following documents:

- ◆ Copy of the application
- ◆ List of the drawing numbers
- ◆ Copy of the list description(s)
- ◆ Recent photographs if available
- ◆ Copy of the advertisement
- ◆ Copies of any representations received
- ◆ Statement explaining the extent to which the local authority has taken on board the advice and recommendations from Historic England and other consultees
- ◆ Confirmation of any amendments made to the application subsequent to initial notification to Historic England
- ◆ Explanation of why the local authority is disposed to grant consent, including copies of committee report(s) and minutes, where relevant
- ◆ List of proposed conditions



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