

**West Area Planning Committee**

-12th December 2012

**Application Number:** 12/02218/FUL

**Decision Due by:** 5th December 2012

**Proposal:** Change of use from class B1 offices to class D1 museum plus refurbishment and repair of buildings to include renovation of windows, new lift tower, walkways to central courtyard and roof, and alterations to Pembroke Street elevation. (Amended Plans)

**Site Address:** Rochester House Pembroke Street, **Appendix 1.**

**Ward:** Carfax Ward

**Agent:** Purcell

**Applicant:** Story Museum

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## **Recommendation:**

APPLICATION BE APPROVED

For the following reasons:

- 1 The proposed change of use from offices (B1) to a museum (D1) is considered to be an acceptable use for this building and would support the aims of Policies TA3, TA7, TA8, CP13, CP21, TR1, TR2 TR3, TR4, HE2, HE3, HE6, HE7, HE9, HE10 of the Oxford Local Plan, Policies CS5, CS13, CS18 and CS20 of the Core Strategy, Policies WE10, WE12 and WE24 of the West Area Action Plan and sections 1, 2, 4, 7, 8 and 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 2 Aside from the details on the front elevation of Rochester House, which require further amendment to be reserved by a condition, the proposed alterations to the buildings are considered to form an acceptable visual relationship with the existing buildings, would preserve the significance of the surrounding Heritage Assets and would not have a significant effect on the current and future occupants of adjacent properties. The proposal therefore complies with Policies CP1, CP8, CP10, HE3, HE6, HE7, HE9, HE10, and HS19 of the adopted Oxford Local Plan 2001 – 2016 and Policy CS18 of the Core Strategy.
- 3 The Council considers that the proposal, subject to the conditions imposed,

would accord with the special character and appearance of the conservation area. It has taken into consideration all other material matters, including matters raised in response to consultation and publicity.

- 4 Officers have considered carefully all objections to these proposals. Officers have come to the view, for the detailed reasons set out in the officers report, that the objections do not amount, individually or cumulatively, to a reason for refusal and that all the issues that have been raised have been adequately addressed and the relevant bodies consulted.

subject to the following conditions, which have been imposed for the reasons stated:-

- 1 Development begun within time limit
- 2 Deemed in accordance with approved plans
- 3 Samples in Conservation Area
- 4 Detailed Plans of Rochester House, Pembroke Road frontage and gates
- 5 Archaeology - Implementation of programme of work
- 6 Air conditioning plant
- 7 Cycle parking details required
- 8 Car/cycle parking provision before use
- 9 Construction no mud on highway
- 10 Construction Travel Plan
- 11 Travel Plan
- 12 Restricted Delivery Times
- 13 Facilities to encourage cycling
- 14 Disabled Access Provision and Details
- 15 Foul and Surface Water Drainage
- 16 Construction details of hard surfacing
- 17 Details of Energy Efficiency Measures
- 18 Details of all proposed lighting

### **Main Planning Policies:**

#### Oxford Local Plan 2001-2016

- CP1 - Development Proposals
- CP6 - Efficient Use of Land & Density
- CP8 - Design Development to Relate to its Context
- CP9 - Creating Successful New Places
- CP10 - Siting Development to Meet Functional Needs
- CP11 - Landscape Design
- CP13 - Accessibility
- CP20 - Lighting
- CP21 - Noise
- TR1 - Transport Assessment
- TR2 - Travel Plans
- TR3 - Car Parking Standards
- TR4 - Pedestrian & Cycle Facilities
- TR14 - Servicing Arrangements
- HE2 - Archaeology
- HE3 - Listed Buildings and Their Setting

HE6 - Buildings of Local Interest  
HE7 - Conservation Areas  
HE9 - High Building Areas  
HE10 - View Cones of Oxford  
RC14 - Advertisements  
RC15 - Shutters & Canopies  
TA3 - Tourist Information  
TA7 – Arts facilities  
TA8 - The Arts

#### Core Strategy

CS5 - West End  
CS9 - Energy and natural resources  
CS1\_ - Waste and recycling  
CS13 - Supporting access to new development  
CS18 - Urban design, town character, historic environment  
CS19 - Community safety  
CS20 - Cultural and community development

#### West End Area Action Plan

WE10 - Historic Environment  
WE11 - Design Code  
WE12 - Design & construction  
WE13 - Resource efficiency  
WE14 - Flooding  
WE23 - Retail  
WE24 - Cultural activity

#### **Other Material Considerations:**

- National Planning Policy Framework.
- Site falls within Central (City and University) Conservation Area,

#### **Relevant Site History:**

04/01595/FUL: Change of use of Class B1 office and former Post Office sorting office, to artists' studios, bar and night club on ground, first and second floors at rear of 102/104 St Aldates' and artists' studios and manager's flat on ground and first floors of Rochester House. Provision of cycle parking and ancillary facilities.(Amended noise assessment). Refused.

#### **Representations Received:**

John Mason Road, Abingdon:

- Lack of on-site parking provision
- Existing parking provision is limited
- Noise and general disturbance as a result of people congregating outside of the building
- Disruption to delivery vehicles and pedestrians along Pembroke Street as a result of people congregating

- The development would be better sited outside of the city centre

### **Statutory and Other Consultees:**

Thames Water: No objection in terms of sewerage or water infrastructure.

Oxford County Council (Highways): No objection subject to conditions relating to a Travel Plan, cycle parking and facilities, delivery and service times and a Construction Traffic Management Plan, along with an informative advising that an over-sailing license will be required for any signs that overhang the highway/footway.

Environment Agency: No objection.

English Heritage: Recommend further amendments to the scheme: The site lies within the Central Conservation Area, fronting onto Pembroke Street, where it is surrounded by listed buildings, several of them Grade II\*. The building itself, which is unlisted, makes an interesting contribution to the streetscape and the roofscape is likely to be visible from several important viewing points. The proposed works aim to make the building more prominent to advertise its use as the Story Museum, which has inspired the reference to the fairytale, fantasy designs. This is completely at odds with the character of the street and it will have a harmful impact on the character of the conservation area and the setting of the Grade II\* buildings.

English Heritage recommends that the proposed alterations to the front elevation are omitted and that the local authority negotiates an alternative way of signalling the presence of the Story Museum, for example by appropriately designed signage. We recommend that the local authority request further information on the impact of the proposed roofscape. Should any of the proposed elements impact on the significance of views within the city, we recommend that these are omitted.

### **Officers Assessment:**

#### **Site Description:**

1. The application site is known collectively as Rochester House and comprises three linked buildings with the main access fronting onto Pembroke Street in the centre of Oxford. The original building, Rochester House is a part two, part three storey building constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in an arts and crafts style, finished predominantly in red brick with stone dressings and applied timber onto render. The other two linked buildings known as the North and South blocks were originally early 20<sup>th</sup> Century extensions to the Post Office which is located on St Aldates. These buildings also range between two and three storeys and are finished in painted render. Together, the buildings are arranged around a central courtyard.
2. The main pedestrian access into the site is from Pembroke Street, although vehicular access is provided from St Aldates.
3. The building is presently used as offices and for the administration for The Story Museum, an organisation which was already in existence before moving to the application property. Occasional, temporary exhibitions and workshops are held at the premises, although its authorised use remains as offices, (B1). The buildings are in a state of some disrepair having been vacant for a

number of years and require refurbishment and repair works to help secure their longevity.

4. The site lies within the Oxford Central (City and University) Conservation Area and within the setting of listed buildings. The application property is not listed, however.

### **Proposal:**

5. This application seeks permission for the change of use from class B1 (offices) to class D1 (museum). The museum would be known as The Story Museum, and would primarily be aimed at children with the intention of celebrating children's stories and to give visitors the opportunity to listen to and become inspired by story telling, using the building as a means of doing this.
6. In addition to refurbishment and repair works, external alterations to the building are also proposed and these include two new lift towers, walkways to the central courtyard and roof and alterations to the front elevation of Pembroke Street. Photovoltaic panels are also proposed on the flat lantern roof over the North block. The buildings would accommodate galleries, public space, a theatre, café, bookshop, education rooms, storyteller's studio, children's play house, offices and storage.
7. The museum would be open every day except Mondays with opening hours of 9am to 6pm, and 10pm on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Entry to the public courtyard, ground floor bookshop and café will be open every day and visitors would not require a ticket for this. The museum proposes to employ 26 full time staff in addition to volunteers, and estimate annual visitor numbers to be between 90,000 and 110,000. The public entrance would be from Pembroke Street.
8. Officers consider the key determining issues in this case to be:
  - Policy context and principle of the development
  - Design and built form
  - Impact on Heritage Assets
  - Impact on residential amenity
  - Highway Safety
  - Sustainability

### **Policy Context and Principle of the Development**

9. The National Planning Policy Framework [NPPF] encourages the efficient use of existing buildings and in particular, outlines the importance of finding active uses for vacant buildings within city centres to help add to their vitality. The property is currently in use by the Story Museum but had been vacant for a number of years before this, despite being in a prime city centre location. The proposed use would present the opportunity for establishing a long-term, active use for the building.

10. The proposed use of the building as a museum is appropriate as a city centre activity. The NPPF emphasises the important contribution such uses have on the local economy. The City Council also recognise that tourism is important to the national and local economy, in terms of generating trade and jobs. The museum hopes to attract approximately 100,000 visitors a year which would have a positive contribution to the local economy and boost the city's attraction as a tourist destination. The proposed use would also make an important contribution to the provision of facilities for the performance and enjoyment of the arts within the city which are currently underprovided, in line with policy TA8 of the Local Plan. It is considered therefore that the proposed use would not only provide an active use to this locally important building, it would also make an important contribution to the local economy, providing a source of employment, and adding to the diversity of cultural attractions in the city.
11. The proposed change of use from offices into a museum in this location would be supported by in principle therefore, subject to the detailed considerations and policy context outlined in this report.
12. Whilst the West Area Action Plan, adopted 2008, seeks to obtain financial contributions from new development in this area to contribute to local infrastructure, it should be noted that museums are excluded from this requirement.

### **Design and Built form**

- 13 The proposed change of use would require external alterations to facilitate the use of the buildings as a museum. In doing so it is important to consider the impact of the proposals on the character and appearance of the existing building, and on significance of the surrounding Heritage Assets which include the conservation area, listed buildings, buildings of local interest and important views. :
- 14 The three buildings that contain Rochester House are linked and composed around a central courtyard which is not visible from either Pembroke Street or St Aldates. They comprise Rochester House, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century part two, part three storey brick building which fronts Pembroke Street. Sitting at a right angle and to the north of this building is a three storey building constructed as an extension to the Post Office in 1924 to accommodate a new automatic telephone exchange, (East Block). Finally, to the north, and enclosing the courtyard is a three storey building again previously an extension to the Post Office, constructed in 1934 and formerly used as the Oxford switchboard, (North Block). The later former Post Office extension buildings accommodate larger spaces and there is a visual contrast between these and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rochester House.
- 15 Whilst not listed, Rochester House makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area, and compliments the setting of the adjoining historic buildings along Pembroke Street. The character of Rochester House is mainly influenced by its arts and craft styling,

most evident on the projecting front gables which incorporate applied timber onto painted render, and the stone dressings and detailing which create an interesting contrast with the red brickwork on the building.

- 16 The majority of the alterations proposed to these buildings would be internal works to reconfigure the building for its new use as a museum and to make the most efficient use of the existing space for this purpose. The external alterations comprise of a new lift tower to be sited at the western end of the internal courtyard, to the rear of Rochester House. This would have a utilitarian character to reflect the adjacent 1930s buildings, but would also have a strong cylindrical shape, drawing the eye upwards. Subtle contrasts in materials and shape at each level would also draw attention to the different floors of the museum and the different identity of each.
- 17 Elevated walkways at the first and second floor levels in the south western corner of the courtyard are proposed to allow people to observe the internal courtyard from the upper levels, as well as to provide a unifying connection between the older Rochester House and later buildings. A rooftop walkway is then proposed along the south eastern corner of the courtyard which would then lead to the north to a 'Story Tower' placed between the two later buildings. The Story Tower would be the second narrow vertical tower within the courtyard and would be decorated richly in contrast to the more functional materials of the surrounding buildings. From the tower, a viewing platform would provide views across to the south west of the city.
- 18 It is clear that the proposed alterations to the application property have been designed to inspire the imagination of the children visiting the museum and to draw attention to it as a destination. The character of the internal courtyard is currently somewhat discordant by virtue of the utilitarian buildings that dominate the north and east sides. The proposed lift tower, story tower and elevated walkways, whilst perhaps fanciful and themed, would create an attractive and interesting environment within the courtyard, reflecting the spirit of the museum.
- 19 The remaining issue to consider in terms of the impact of the alterations on the buildings are in relation to the Pembroke Street elevation. This is considered to be the most important elevation of the building currently, by virtue of the fact that it has the most visual interest, it is the most prominent, and it would serve as the public entrance to the museum.
- 20 The alterations on this elevation comprise of the addition of two 5.5m timber clad rooftop spires above the existing roof dormers, the replacement of the existing timber doors with new gates and a new timber surround around these gates. This element would be quite ornate but would be wholly reversible from the building. Vertical cladding is also proposed above the gated entrance to obscure two existing windows, required to provide a solid background for the exhibition space behind this wall. All features are proposed to be illuminated.
- 21 Concern has been raised with respect to the proposed alterations on this elevation, with particular attention to the spires and gates, which are

considered to detract from the character and appearance of the existing building. Officers agree that certain elements of this part of the scheme could usefully be amended to ensure that the alterations are more sympathetic to the original design and character of the building. To this end negotiations are continuing with the applicants, seeking appropriate amendments to the form of the roof spires, vertical cladding above the entrance way, and detail of the entrance gates and surround. These discussions are well advanced, and if amended drawings are available they will be provided at committee. Otherwise a condition is suggested requiring these details to be submitted and approved prior to commencement of development.

### **Impact on Heritage Assets**

- 22 As well as considering the impact of the alterations to this building, it is important to consider the impact of the proposals on the significance of the surrounding Heritage Assets which include the conservation area, listed buildings, buildings of local interest and views.
- 23 The nature of the proposals is to allow the building to visually assert itself as a visitor's destination and to reflect its use as a story museum. It is clear that if the business is to be successful, its presence within the streetscene must allow it to be recognisable to attract visitors. There is a balance to be struck however, between the requirement for the museum to be clearly visible for visitors who may not all be familiar with the locality, and the impact any increased visibility may have on the character and appearance of the surrounding area.
- 24 The site is located within the Oxford Central (City and University) Conservation Area and within the setting of listed buildings, and non-designated buildings of local interest, all of which are Heritage Assets. The property itself, whilst not statutorily listed, is also considered to be a building of local interest and so is also a non-designated Heritage Asset.
- 25 Pembroke Street is a relatively narrow street characterised by domestic scale buildings of a range of styles and dates, many of them listed. Nos.13-14, 17 and 38 are listed Grade II\*. Immediately opposite the site is a narrow alley leading to Pembroke Square, dominated by St Aldate's Church, Grade II\* and Pembroke College, Grade I. The main entrance to Pembroke College is directly opposite the front elevation of the Story Museum, visible through the alley. The historic street layout and high quality traditional buildings are considered to have high evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal value.
- 26 The National Planning Policy Framework requires proposals to be based upon an informed analysis of the significance of any affected Heritage Asset and expects applicants to understand the impact of any proposal upon the asset with the objective being to preserve that significance. These aims are embodied in Local Plan Policy HE7 which seeks to preserve or enhance the special character and appearance of the conservation area or its setting. In considering the impact of development on the significance of Heritage Assets, new development must not cause harm to this significance of these assets



and where there is the potential for harm, the public benefits must clearly outweigh that harm.

- 27 Policy CS18 of the Oxford Core Strategy 2026 requires proposals to demonstrate high-quality urban design that responds appropriately to the site and surroundings; creates a strong sense of place; contributes to an attractive public realm; and high quality architecture. The Local Plan encourages new development to enhance the quality of the environment, with Policy CP1 central to this purpose. Policy CP8 requires development to relate to its context with the siting, massing and design creating an appropriate visual relationship with the form, grain and scale of the surrounding area.
- 28 In this context, many of the proposed alterations to the building would either be internal works which would not require planning permission, or they would be located within the internal courtyard where views from within the public realm are screened by the Pembroke Street elevation of the building. The proposals that would be visible within the public realm would be the story tower, roof walk and alterations to the front elevation of the building. Here, limited views of the story tower would be afforded, although these views would be screened by much of the frontage of Rochester House and by virtue of the narrow width of Pembroke Street which limits views above and passed the building. It is therefore considered that these elements would not be visually dominant, and consequently, would have a very limited impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area in terms of short distance views from street level.
- 29 Having said this, it is also important to consider the proposals in light of wider views of the site, and concern has been raised in this respect. The proposed alterations to the roof of the buildings and two towers have the potential to impact on views afforded across the city. The applicants and Officers have considered carefully the impact of each proposal on both short term and long term views within the city. The proposed rooftop walkway would not be visible from the top of Carfax Tower. The solar panels, lift tower and story tower would be partially visible, although these would be long-distance views and by virtue of the relatively modest scale in this perspective, these elements of the proposal would not appear unduly prominent within this important viewpoint.

#### **Impact on Residential Amenity:**

- 30 The existing buildings are predominantly surrounded by mixed use developments including retail, office and educational uses. Pembroke College own many of the buildings on the south side of Pembroke Street which are used for their own purposes, some of which may include student residential uses. The predominant character of the area is however, as a mixed use development, rather than a residential area.
- 31 Whilst external alterations to the building are proposed, and the new use could result in an increase in the number and frequency of visitors to the site. However given the central city location of the development it is not considered

that there would be an adverse impact on neighbouring residential properties sufficient as to warrant opposition to the development on these grounds.

- 32 The proposed change of use and alterations are therefore considered to be acceptable in preserving the residential amenities of neighbouring properties in accordance with Policy HS19 of the Oxford Local plan and Policy HP14 of the Sites and Housing plan.

### **Highway Safety.**

- 33 The application site is located on a narrow, one-way street without on-street parking provision. Concern has been raised in respect of the potential impact visitors to the museum may have in terms of highway safety, in particular, the potential for visitors to try to access the site by car, or coach.
- 34 The site is located in a highly sustainable and accessible location in the City Centre and is well located for regular bus services to and from Oxford including park and ride services, access to the rail station and access to walking and cycling routes. Pembroke Street is also a well used pedestrian route.
- 35 The applicants estimate that the museum will attract between 90,000 and 110,000 visitors per year consisting of organised group visits, general admissions and visitors attending performances and events, with some seasonal fluctuation. Of these numbers, it is estimated that less than 20,000 visits will come from organised groups, those which are considered to be the most likely to use private transport such as coaches or mini-buses.
- 36 The proposed use will generate greater footfall on Pembroke Street and indeed St Aldates, particularly at the end of tours and performances. Concern has been raised with the potential for visitors to congregate on Pembroke Street. However, the proposed ground floor plans submitted with the application show that the ticket office will be located well into the courtyard which would itself, provide sufficient internal space to accommodate any queuing that may occur.
- 37 Furthermore, Pembroke Street is lightly trafficked as a one-way single carriageway road from St Ebbe's Street to St Aldates with the Highway Authority estimating that 50% of vehicle movements are made by cyclists. It is noted however, that the pavements either side of the street are very narrow and thus the proposed new gates should not open outwards where this could cause an obstruction to access.
- 38 The option for arriving at the site by coach or car will be severely limited by the nature of the site and Pembroke Street. It is considered that the narrow street giving poor vehicular access and lack of parking will deter access by this means, and visitors are more likely to be directed to the existing coach parking facility at Oxpens Coach Park as the primary drop off and pick-up point, or alternatively, at the bus stops on Speedwell Street which would be closer than

the Coach Park. From here accompanied groups of children would be walked to the museum.

39 The Highway Authority has not objected to the proposal subject to a number of conditions to address these issues. Subject to these conditions, it is not considered that the proposal would have a significant or detrimental impact on the safe operation of the surrounding highway network.

### **Conclusion.**

40 It is recommended that the proposed change of use and all alterations to the buildings be approved subject to conditions outlined in this report which shall include a condition to omit the details proposed for the front elevation of Rochester House. Should acceptable amended plans be received prior to the meeting, Officer's will recommend approval of these plans also.

### **Human Rights Act 1998**

Officers have considered the Human Rights Act 1998 in reaching a recommendation to grant planning permission, subject to conditions. Officers have considered the potential interference with the rights of the owners/occupiers of surrounding properties under Article 8 and/or Article 1 of the First Protocol of the Act and consider that it is proportionate.

Officers have also considered the interference with the human rights of the applicant under Article 8 and/or Article 1 of the First Protocol caused by imposing conditions. Officers consider that the conditions are necessary to protect the rights and freedoms of others and to control the use of property in accordance with the general interest. The interference is therefore justifiable and proportionate.

### **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

Officers have considered, with due regard, the likely effect of the proposal on the need to reduce crime and disorder as part of the determination of this application, in accordance with section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. In reaching a recommendation to approve, officers consider that the proposal will not undermine crime prevention or the promotion of community safety.

**Background Papers:** Application 12/02218/FUL.

**Contact Officer:** Clare Golden

**Extension:** 2221

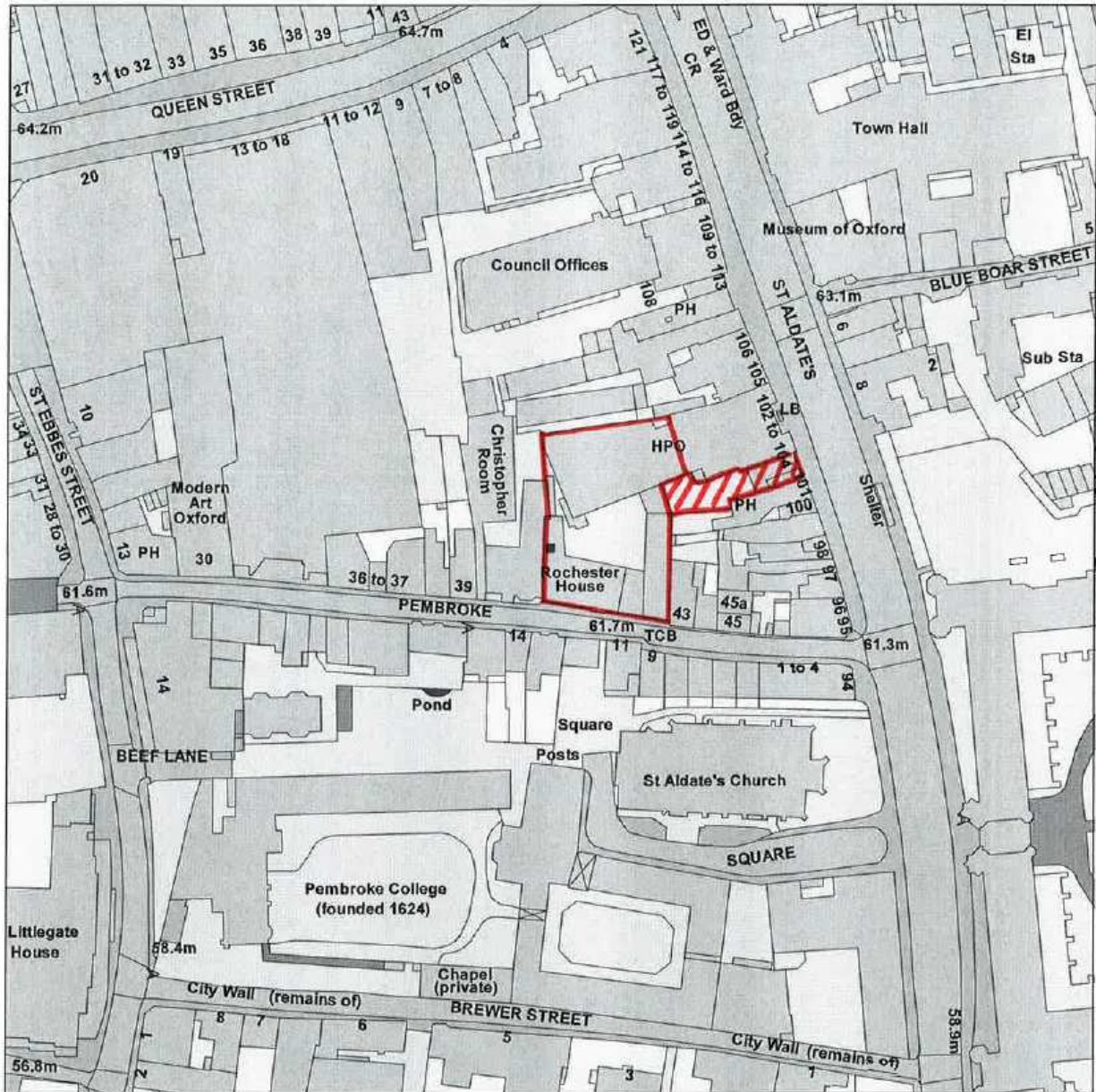
**Date:** 29th November 2012

# Appendix 1

## 12/02218/FUL Story Museum, Pembroke Street



GIS by ESRI (UK)



Scale : 1:1250

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Organisation	Not Set
Department	Not Set
Comments	
Date	29 November 2012
SLA Number	Not Set