

HERITAGE ASSET STATEMENT

3 DIGSWELL HOUSE, MONKS RISE, WELWYN GARDEN CITY AL8 7NX

Proposed internal alterations at lower ground floor- comprising new stud wall partition & door; & small opening in external wall (lower ground floor) for kitchen extractor fan housing

Introduction

The purpose of this Heritage Asset Statement & Impact Assessment, together with a summary Historic Building Appraisal, is to support & inform the application for listed building consent.

The statement will provide the **description of significance** of Digswell House & its immediate setting & wider context. An assessment of the **impact of the proposals** on the special interest, character, appearance & significance of the designated heritage asset- the Grade II listed building- will be considered & evaluated.

The statement has special regard to: Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed buildings and conservation areas) Act 1990, as the site includes a listed building;

& is to satisfy the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (July 2018) 16- Conserving and enhancing the historic environment, paragraphs 189, 193- 202;

Statements of Heritage Significance: Analysing Significance in Heritage Assets, Historic England Advice Note 12 (October 2019);

& accords with the requirements of WHBC local planning policy.

This Heritage Asset Statement concentrates specifically on the Grade II listed building & its setting. The HAS is to be read alongside the Design & Access Statement (by Hertfordshire Architects Ltd), the annotated detailed drawings & the accompanying information relating to the proposed works.

Background

Digswell House is a 2-storey Grade II listed building- built 1807 as a Neo-classical Regency country house by Samuel Wyatt for Lord Cowper (replacing a medieval moated manor house, with warren & fish ponds, bought in 1414 by Sir John Perient) The former country house, now subdivided in residential use, has painted render walls, with low hipped slate roofs. The entrance front (north) has a central 3-bay pediment & Doric porch; the garden elevation (south) includes an elegant shallow portico of 4 slim Ionic columns.

Digswell House was still in use as a country house residence until 1914- 18, when occupied as a Red Cross Australian Auxiliary Hospital, with Col. Alfred Dyke Acland; the whole estate parkland, gardens & grounds were sold by Cowper Estates (death duties) & purchased by Ebenezer Howard for the establishment & development of the garden city in 1919. It was used as conference centre, then later as Digswell Arts Centre (visited by Gandhi, Bernard Shaw & Henry Moore etc).

The later symmetrical wings were added to the east & west ends soon after the house, then Digswell Arts Centre, was sold for subdivision & development for residential dwellings in 1985 (& are shown in the Images of England record photo in 2006) are sympathetically designed & now form an integral part of the total grouping & context of the historic core Wyatt house. The total building, including the later wings, now comprises 12 dwellings, plus no. 10A. No. 3, in the west wing, has an existing rooflight, on the north roof slope.

The house was first listed in 1950; amended 1980. The list description is below.

GV II Circa 1807. Built by Samuel Wyatt for Lord Cowper after the demolition of the medieval mansion a few years previously. A classical block of two storeys in brown stone, rendered and painted, with a replaced hipped slate roof. North (entrance) front has five windows in plain reveals, the centre three windows set in a slightly advanced bay under a simple pediment. Band at first floor cills. The front door, now entirely glazed, is enclosed by a severe Doric porch with two columns supporting a simple projecting cornice below a flat roof. Later C19 brick wing added to the north east. Rendered plinth. The south front is enriched by a very shallow portico of four tall Ionic columns that run the whole height of the house and support an undecorated entablature. Above this runs a low parapet, stepped slightly over the central pair of columns. The outer windows on the ground floor are of the C19 three-light type, set in shallow round-headed recesses. Plain panels are sunk above the central three windows, in order to relieve the voids between the storeys. The west end is a plain wall with three windows. All windows have hung sashes with glazing bars.

Listing NGR: TL2374414869

The earlier extensive landscaped parkland & gardens, surrounding the former country house, has been much taken up & crowded in with 20th century housing- Monks Rise, Fern Grove, Kirklands & Knightsfield etc, though the ghost of the former pleasure gardens & extensive parklands can still be traced through this part of the garden city (see appendix 1) & some open space remains to the east & west of the now existing gardens of Digswell House.

The Parish Church of St John (Grade II listed- originally a small church c.1200; tower added 1530; much altered 1811, related to the development of Digswell House; substantially restored 1876; large modern extension 1962) is located close to the east of Digswell House, within its setting & immediate context.

Heritage assets: There are no other listed buildings within the wider site context; there are no scheduled monuments nearby; the site is not located within a designated conservation area.

Proposed development

At the lower ground floor- a new lightweight timber stud **partition & door** are proposed, together with a new **small opening in an external wall** for a kitchen extractor fan housing.

Considering potential impacts to significance

The principal significance of the former country house is as described in the brief formal list description (Historic England, 1950/ 1980). In terms of special architectural & historical interest- this significance relates solely to the historic 1807 core house, by Samuel Wyatt. This is a fine example of a Regency country house, designed & constructed in the highly fashionable contemporary taste of the early 19th century. This key significance has been, in part, essentially preserved- but not without considerable compromise in the required alterations & development of the two wings. These would have been justified on the basis of an urgent need to both conserve & to enable the re-use & conversion of the building- to provide a viable future to ensure long-term preservation, repair, maintenance & enhancement.

The two modern end wings have resulted in an acceptable- though inevitably much altered- relationship to the principal dominant element of the grouping- the original Wyatt country house.

The wings are thoughtfully balanced & symmetrical at each side, in terms of character & appearance- even though relatively large in scale & massing, they still form a reasonably comfortable subordinate grouping around the principal central block. As such, any alterations to these wings- in particular to the main elevations to the entrance frontage & the garden front- must be sympathetic & not be obtrusive or to unduly detract from the sense of unity & balance.

The proposed **internal alterations** at the lower ground floor (new partition, door & extractor fan) of the modern west wing are relatively minor works- involving only the formation of a **small opening in the external wall** for the extractor fan housing- will have no impact on any historic structure or fabric & would result in no harm the significance of the Grade II listed building.

Conclusion, design appraisal & comment

The modern east & west wings of Digswell House are attached but subordinate to the principal significance of the original 1807 Grade II listed country house. *Great weight should be given to the asset's conservation* (NPPF para. 193)- & the intrinsic character & appearance of the heritage asset is not directly or detrimentally affected by the proposals. The internal & external changes proposed are low-key & cannot reasonably be considered to be unduly intrusive or in any way assertive or detrimental to the significance, character or appearance of Digswell House in any way.

It is axiomatic that today, listed buildings- as *a precious & finite resource*- must continue to be relevant, sustainable & viable for use & life in the 21st century.

Historic buildings need to adapt to current circumstances & requirements for varied social, economic, technological & cultural reasons. Many, if not most, listed buildings have changed quite dramatically over time (for example, the conversion & large extensions to Digswell House). Permanence is an illusion. All making good will accord with usual conservation good practice & carefully match the surrounding fabric.

The key significance of the former country house will continue, thoughtfully conserved for existing & future generations, so long as it has a **viable & sustainable long-term future**. The proposed relatively minor & insignificant alterations will provide a more easily useable & functional circulation space to suit current requirements & expectations.