



Heritage, Design and Access Statement



Change of Use of Offices to C3 Residential Serviced Apartments, The Old Customs House, West Strand, Whitehaven

May 2021

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Background

The Old Customs House is situated directly adjacent to the Wharf forming Whitehaven Harbour to the West of the harbour front. It is a Grade II Listed building which has the following description :-

C18. 3 storeyed, stuccoed, old slate roof, cornice and frieze, pilasters at centre and ends of facade. 8 windows across the front; the 3 bays to the left are symmetrical, with centre segmental headed carriage entrance. The 5 bays to the right are also symmetrical, a centre porch with slender reeder 3/4 columns with frieze and cornice. All windows are 12-paned, all in well-moulded architraves but the square windows on the top floor have been renewed.

The building is believed to date to 1686/87 and was called the George Inn built for the brewer Samuel Brownrigg. The original Customs House was built on King Street but became too small so relocated to the new location on harbour front. Building work commenced in 1697 on the current building, under the instruction of Sir John Lowther.

The building in most recent times has been the head office for Age Concern in Cumbria, and has offered multi-use spaces to include café, offices & meetings. The building was sold in 2020 to the current owners and are the applicants for this Planning and Listed Building Application.



Basement area under the main building

The building at the time of purchase had been subject to modernisation and alterations to suit the building use and historic rooms had been sub-divided. Prior to this application the applicant has stripped back the modern temporary inserts which has included floor coverings and suspended ceilings to expose the structure and allow for inspection of previously concealed surfaces.



Rear elevation showing decayed steel staircase

Volume

The building sits over three floors with a small basement under the original building to the West of the site. The more recent Easterly extension extends the building over a similar footprint and takes on the alignment and proportions of the original building. To the rear is an original masonry staircase within an outrigger extension and several more recent extensions (circa 30 years) have been added to provide service rooms for the previous office use.

The proposal sees a minor alterations to the rear extension to include raising the roof to create additional living accommodation, this sits to the rear corner of the site and will not impact on the setting of the building.

The existing now decayed metal fire escape staircase is to be removed and replaced with a smaller stair serving the first floor only. This reduces

the dominance on the rear elevation and offers a simple solution to this location.

Layout & Scale

The building sees the re-purposing of the existing office to provide serviced apartments over the three floors. It also includes for the retention of the existing former café / concession area to the ground floor gable of the property, it is intended to operate this area independently of the main building with external access.

The apartments are laid out retaining the principle walls of the original building with modern stud walling removed and opened up to their original form. Modern works including skirtings, plasterboarding alongside significant IT intervention is being removed from the building as a whole.

The building has had expenditure over the last ownership and this has included structural repairs to the attic and roof trusses to strengthen and resist the effects of decay.



Original roof trusses within the second floor indicating additional strengthening and repairs

Significantly and as part of the works the second floor of the building is to be opened up to the roof pitch and in selected areas internal mezzanine floors introduced. These are to designed to utilise the whole

of the building structure and to offer unique views out to the harbourside.

To the rear of the building the current felt flat roof is being removed and extended upwards to create a small roof terrace on the top floor of the building.

As part of the design process it was noted that the views out from the second floor to the harbourside are limited in size and location. To address this and open up the building the second floor windows have been re-scaled in an appropriate manner to allow a vista across the harbour. The windows and fenestration have altered since photographs taken in the 1960's. It is understood that in part the proposals may be controversial, however several factors need to be considering when reviewing this : -

1. Is the work reversible – yes the works could be reversed and offer no impact on the internal layout / fixtures of fittings which form part of the Listing.
2. Re-use of Listed Buildings – it is important the any old building and particularly Listed buildings are re-purposed if their current use is redundant or defunct. Within Whitehaven Town centre there are various Listed buildings which are undeveloped which in part is due to their unsuitability for conversion. To allow this development to be success and to offer the high quality accommodation expected the alterations will offer significant enhancement to the serviced apartments.
3. The proportions of the new windows are scaled in accordance with the vertical window hierarchy expected and delivered on this building.

Appearance

There are proposed only minor and proportional changes to the building as part of this application and these are seen as a positive intervention. The removal of the two storey rear fire escape stair and ramp to the harbourside being the most notable adjustments. In addition the new rear staircase and roof alterations align with the client's views to pair back the building and offer a high quality internal / external space.

In addition to the alterations to the second floor windows a series of rooflights have been inserted into the roof plane. These have been limited in size and quantum to once again become sympathetic to the host building. These are by their nature at the highest element of the building and will align in appearance with many others inserted across the town centre in Listed Buildings.

Overall the alterations are subtle to the building fabric and offer essential enhancement to the building in both liveable space and functional use.

Landscaping

External landscaping forms the boundary of the sites and it is not proposed to alter this as part of the application

Access

This does not vary as part of the works with the principle external doors being retained.

Conclusion

The building sits prominently on the harbour front, the applicant is a successful and well known hotelier within the town, who has recognised the vision and opportunity this property to presents. It offers a new dimension to the current market place and they are uniquely placed to deliver the project.

We have worked with the Planning & Conservation Officers since purchase of the building and today's application is more rounded version of the original proposals. Suggested approaches to include Juliet balconies to the frontage have been removed from the design and supported tidying of the rear of the site form part of the overall scheme.

The building is now ready for a new use, and residential apartments alone are not unique within Whitehaven town centre however Serviced Apartments address a new market and demand. It is intended alongside the concession / retail on the ground floor to assist in the tourism industry and increase the footfall locally to West Cumbria.