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Heritage, Design and Access Statement



Change of Use of Offices to C3 Residential Serviced Apartments, The Old Customs House, West Strand, Whitehaven – **Rev A** Oct 2021

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Heritage, Design & Access Statement

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 1793-5 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 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 does not impact on the setting of the building.

This work is an alteration to the previous modern extension which was planning approved by CBC, this was constructed in modern cavity

blockwork and it is proposed to extend upwards in similar materials with render finish

The current staircase is significant and impacts on the appearance of the rear elevation, and the removal of this over three floors offers a significant improvement over the current rear outlook. The Conservation officer should place significant weight on the offered solution in removing the upper floor sections and reducing the extent of the stair to access a single apartment. It is noted that there is concern over the alignment of this staircase across the coaching archway. In this situation the overall improvement and slender nature of the steel staircase in front of this allows the original profile to be read clearly and therefore has limited impact.

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 be designed to utilise the whole of the building structure and to offer unique views out to the harbourside.



Indicative image of galvanised staircase finish

The proposal to introduce rooflights into both the front and rear roof pitches is a modest intrusion in the old building, the scale and height of these from ground level do not offer significant harm to the setting of

the building. Rooflights as a historic feature have been in use for around 150 years and do not detract from the setting and used frequently to provide daylight in historic buildings. Originally used to light stairwells their use has become more predominant over the last fifty years. The development of the attic space into useable accommodation is sensitive in size (in reference to overall footprint) and allows a more practical use of the upper floors. It allows for the original structure to be exposed whilst the mezzanine will free span therefore offering no loading on the existing timbered roof / truss.

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.

The replacement of this roof is seen as another positive attribute to the development and addresses previously approved works by the LA. The new roof and terrace is sited on the less dominant elevation and also where the proportions and quality of the architecture has been significantly diminished through earlier planning decisions. The walls to this terrace are retained high with a low height glass screen offering a transparent guarding of the upper level.

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 including YMCA building where a contemporary and significant extension was approved.

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.

As part of the works it is proposed to remove the existing modern ramp to the building frontage, therefore reducing disabled access to the property. A single accessible unit remains to the ground floor with the current stairlift removed from the rear stair to reinstate the stairwell and consideration of a passenger lift to serve all floors impacts too significantly on the historic building and not appropriate for the conversion

Café

This facility exists in the current pre-developed building and was used by Age Concern as previous owners of the building. There is no required change of use for this element of works the significant variation is to not allow seating for a café within the building. The proposed works see the relocation of the server / kitchen and this will become a 'licensed café'. Public access remains from the harbourside. It is not anticipated that the frying / cooking will occur on site therefore there is no request for the installation of commercial cooking extract internally or externally on the building fabric.

Opening hours for the facility are yet to be agreed and would form part of the licensing agreement with the Local Authority but initially it could potentially be open between 8 – 6pm and increase into the evening during the summer or special events within the town.

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.

Assessing Significance of Historic Buildings

The Customs House is Listed due to its historic and important role within the town of Whitehaven, its harbour location and prominence to the harbour quay. It remains Grade II Listed and is surrounded in close proximity by converted or newer buildings being predominantly residential properties forming harbourside apartments.

The property is constructed over three principle floors with part basement to the West of the building. The building has been used as regional headquarters for Age Concern and this use has included office, café, day centre and meeting room areas. The building has been maintained over their ownership and their utilitarian approach to the building has seen the insertion of modern walling, suspended ceilings and fully IT circuits throughout. In areas existing features including coving, skirtings and architraves have all been damaged by these works.

Works in majority have been restricted to the practical day to day operation within the building and this has in part spilt over to the external envelope of the building. Externally the utilitarian approach has included new door screens to the former coaching arch, ramped access to the front door and three storey metal fire escape stair to the rear with associated bin stores.

The proposal seeks to revert or minimise these external interventions in the following elements :

1. Removal of ramped access to front door
2. Replacement of Coach arch screen with sympathetic design appropriate to the building
3. Removal of steel fire escape stair over three floors and new reduced size staircase in galvanised steel to prevent current issues with salt in the atmosphere accelerating corrosion.

It is recognised that there are some minor new build elements proposed and these are only to the rear of the building and built off more modern rear extension / outriggers. The impact to this elevation is both limited and minimal given the context and back drop off a

tarmac car park and overshadowed by the apartment block adjoining to the West gable.

Internally sees much more significant works proposed to the building and this is now detailed on the demolition plan Dwg No 06. These works are as described for the external works removing the modern additions to the building being stud walling, office screening and suspended ceilings.

An initial loose strip out of these materials have exposed the structure and indicate the building is generally in good condition and the was maintained by Age Concern in reasonable order. Structural repairs to roof timbers etc have been completed and remain in good order.

Naturally the proposals have seen the introduction of new internal stud walls within the building to form new bedrooms / bathrooms etc. These locations have been chosen to avoid / minimise disturbance to the to the building fabric and the room orientation towards the harbour front remains important and key to the layout. Earlier design options included increased apartment numbers but it was agreed with the applicant that this detracted from the original building and it's generously proportioned form.

The proposals as presented are a considered approach to the building allow for a re-purpose of the original building into a new use. Interventions with the old structure have been limited in volume and mass to provide a considered and proportionate response to the building. The works in general offer no negative impact to the original building when considered against the current form and offer a 'light' touch. The works as proposed are proportionate to the building.