

The Old Town Hall

Withington, Didsbury

Heritage Assessment to Assess
the Impact of Proposals for Solar
Photovoltaic Panels to the Grade II
Listed Old Town Hall

Undertaken by TheUrbanGlow
Design & Heritage Ltd 2024



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The former Withington Town Hall is a fine late Victorian civic building that has significance architectural, aesthetic and communal heritage values. The building is in need of securing its own sustainable future on a micro scale and as such the proposal assessed within is concerned with the integration of solar PV panels to the south facing, rear roof slope. The report illustrates that the location of these panels has been thoroughly thought through and that there would be no harm to the significance of the building as a whole.

Undertaken by TheUrbanGlow Design & Heritage Ltd
TheUrbanGlow are HESPR Registered Service Providers for the Historic Environment

2024
TheUrbanGlow Design & Heritage
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INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to assess the impact of proposals to install Solar Photovoltaic panels (PV) to the roof of the Grade II Listed Former Withington Town Hall, hereby known as ‘The Old Town Hall’. The proposals are fully intended to ensure future energy sustainability to this building and the installation has been carefully designed so as to minimise or remove any impact upon the fabric of the building and to protect the significance of the building itself.

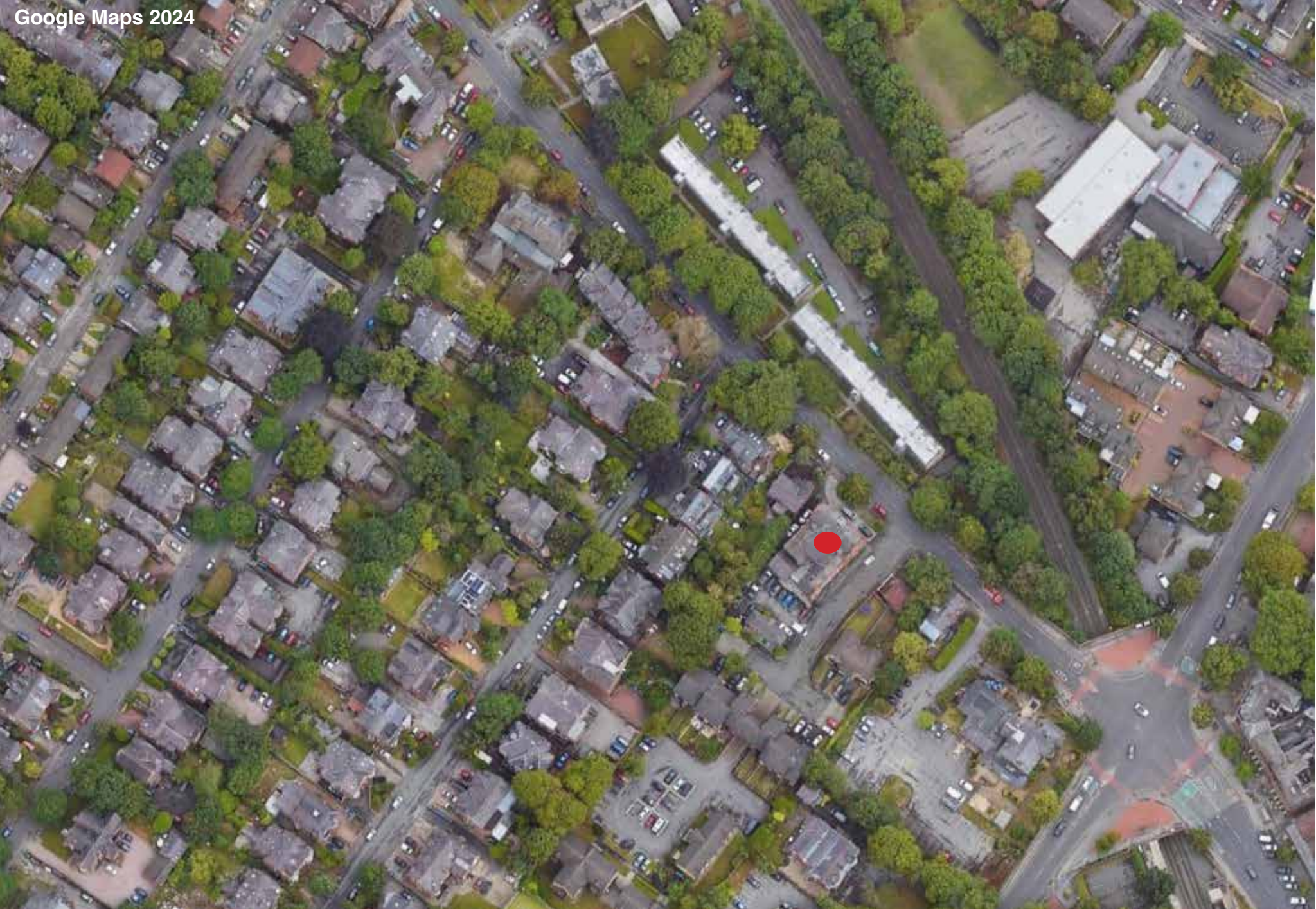
TheUrbanGlow Design & Heritage Ltd were asked to provide an independent assessment of the proposed scheme with regards any impact that the proposal may have upon the Listed Building. This statement should be read in conjunction with other reports and plans as submitted by **Space Architecture and Planning**.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this assessment exercise has been based on the references to significance in the National Planning Policy Framework (as revised 2018), as informed by two non statutory Historic England documents namely; Managing Significance in Decision Taking in the Historic Environment (2015) and Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management (2016).

The exercise was carried out by Andrew Graham BA(hons) MAued IHBC and in order to fully appreciate the building and locality a site visit was undertaken in July 2024. Archive research and map regression were also undertaken in order to gain a greater understanding of significance of the Listed Building and the contribution that the existing roof slope makes to the buildings’ overall significance.

Google Maps 2024



POLICY AND GUIDANCE FRAMEWORK

This Heritage Assessment is created in reference to relevant UK national policy and guidance. Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that Local Planning Authorities should have “special regard” for the “architectural or historic interest” of a Designated Asset when considering whether to grant permission for development (Planning Act 1990, 91-92). Section 72 of the same Act states that local planning authorities should give ‘special attention’ to the desirability of preserving *or* enhancing a Conservation Area when considering whether to grant planning permission.

The proposal will affect the Grade II Listed Building of the Former Withington Town Hall (The Old Town Hall). The site is also within the Albert Park Conservation Area and as such both Section 66(1) and Section 72 of the 1990 Act is engaged.

NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

The National Planning Policy Framework (December 2023) provides guidance on the management of the historic environment. Paragraph 200 of the Framework requires an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected by a proposal, including and contribution made by their setting to this significance. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets’ importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance. This assessment provides that assessment of significance and will help the Local Planning Authority in its duty to undertake the following:

“In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage asset(s) affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets’ importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance.”

The NPPF goes on to offer the following guidance in paragraphs 205-209; *“205. When considering the impact of a proposed development*

on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification. Substantial harm to or loss of: a) grade II listed buildings, or grade II registered parks or gardens, should be exceptional; b) assets of the highest significance, notably scheduled monuments, protected wreck sites, registered battlefields, grade I and II listed buildings, grade I and II* registered parks and gardens, and World Heritage Sites, should be wholly exceptional.”*

The proposal within this case will not result in significant loss of fabric as it utilises the spaces already created within this building prior to Listing in 1985. As such any impact would be Less than Substantial. The NPPF states the following with regards to less than substantial harm;

“208. Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.”

This assessment is being undertaken so as to demonstrate a clear and comprehensive understanding of the significance of the Listed building and the context of this site and to elaborate upon the historic evolution of this area with a mind to understanding the effect of these proposals.

CONSERVATION AREA

The site is located within the adopted Albert Park Conservation Area whose significance is largely obtained through the high quality suburban expansion that has defined much of the area. The Albert Park Conservation Area Management Plan Guidance seeks to reflect the National planning Policy through development preserving or enhancing

the conservation area. Although slate roofs are recognised as being distinctive in the area there would appear to be no guidance on energy efficiency need within the Climate Emergency.

LISTED BUILDINGS

The List Description of the Former Withington Town Hall is as follows:

GVII Local Board of Health Offices, now former Town Hall. Probably c.1880-1890. Buff brick with dressings of red brick and red terracotta, slate roof.

Rectangular plan at right-angles to street, formed by entrance block parallel to street, rear block on the same axis, and an intermediate range between these. Two unequal storeys and five bays, symmetrical,with banded red brick plinth, red brick pilasters (banded at first floor), pierced parapet with urn finials and central clock-turret.

The ground floor has a round-headed doorway with terracotta architrave including fluted pilasters, rusticated voussoirs with scrolled keystone and enriched pediment on scrolled consoles, and two windows to each bay, with buff brick pilasters and red terracotta heads.

The first floor has large elliptical-arched windows with similar pilasters and enriched red terracotta heads and keystones,containing tripartite sashes with coloured small-paned heads; and over the central bay is a gable containing a terracotta roundel with a shield and console supporters, under a semi-circular band with raised lettering “LOCAL BOARD OFFICES”, and behind this a short pyramidal turret supporting a square clock with swept copper-clad fleche finished with a weathervane.

The gable walls are similar to the front, that to the left with a large elliptical-arched window at first floor, and both with shaped gables and enriched triangular pediments of red terracotta. Lower ranges to rear in similar materials but simpler style.

Interior: large open-well staircase with ornamental cast-iron balusters; first-floor assembly hall.

History: Withington Local Board formed in 1876, became Urban District Council 1894. Good example of modest late C19 civic building, representing an important phase in the development of local government.

Listing NGR: SJ8428392141

The nearest other Listed Building is at 99 Palatine Road which is located over 100m from the application site.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The National Heritage List describes the Old Town Hall as dating from 1880 and it was constructed in what was a fashionable buff brick with red terracotta details throughout, including Neo Classical Pilasters and rather beautiful pediment features. The building sports a fine clock tower and flèche which echo a Gothic Revival mix of forms.

The town hall was a direct result of suburban expansion of this part of Manchester whereby early suburban houses began to populate such areas attracted by good rail links and road links but with houses benefitting from larger plots and gardens. Prior to this the area was predominately rural where the junctions of roads formed hamlets and village clusters that still retain some sense of identity. Lapwing Hall was seemingly a house of some significance nearby.

The Town Hall occupied a plot known as ‘Town’s Yard’ which was presumably a reference to the land being used by the municipal authorities and historic photos show this area being used for all manner of practical uses from the parking of vehicles to waste incineration. To the rear of the Town Hall was a tennis club and this and the yard can be clearly seen on aerial images from 1929.

The Town Hall also, like many such large civic buildings, rented accommodation for dances and events and the image opposite illustrate the advertisement upon the wall of the building to this effect.

Following local government reorganisation the town hall was however deemed surplus to requirements and subsequently sold. It currently has a new lease of life as offices for creative businesses and although its

Historic maps showing the evolution of the area around the Old Town Hall. Top left illustrates the setting of the area prior to 1850. Some remnants of potentially planned medieval field patters which likely carried on through the laying out of the Towns Yard. Other maps show the evolution of the area from the 1890s to 1908 (lower maps) that illustrate the suburban nature of the area and the suburban we know today.



Town’s Yard has since been sold for development the former Town Hall itself still survives as a fine example of Victorian exuberance and civic pride.

SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE

The application site is of architectural and historic significance and this is largely obtained through the following means:

Evidential value: *the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.*

In general, the archaeological potential of the site is likely to be low due to past disturbance and the site only being developed from the late 1880’s onwards. There may be elements of technological enhancements that survive within the building but this would likely be limited. The evidential value of this site is therefore considered to be **Low**.

Historical value: the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present.

The building has historical value through both its use as a health board and Town Hall. The building is a testament to the history and evolution of the area as a result. The historical associative value of the building is therefore considered to be **Medium/High**.

Aesthetic value: the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.

The building is undoubtedly of a high quality of architectural design that reflected the aspiration of such emerging suburbs in the late 19th century. The ornate detailing and mix of buff red brick and red terracotta all enhance the building’s aesthetic appeal. The building therefore has **Medium/High** aesthetic value to its main facades.

Communal value: the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.

The building was a communal focal point within the area where all residents would have, in theory, had ownership and access. Being a town hall it epitomised the identity of the area. However, further to this, the use of the hall and rooms within for dances, meetings and events likely added to the building’s communal importance and the meaning that people did, and still, derive from it. The building therefore has **High** Communal Value.

THE SITE’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALBERT PARK CONSERVATION AREA

The building is an undoubtedly Positive Building within the Albert Park Conservation Area and has significant Landmark Value within the streetscene. As such the buildings contribution to the conservation area is **High**.



Historic maps showing the building, top, complete with fine lantern clad gateposts.
 Lower Left: A sign advising members of the community that the Town hall was available for 'meetings, concerts, dances etc'.
 Lower Right: Britain from above image showing the town hall and its associated Town's Yard with tennis courts just visible beneath.

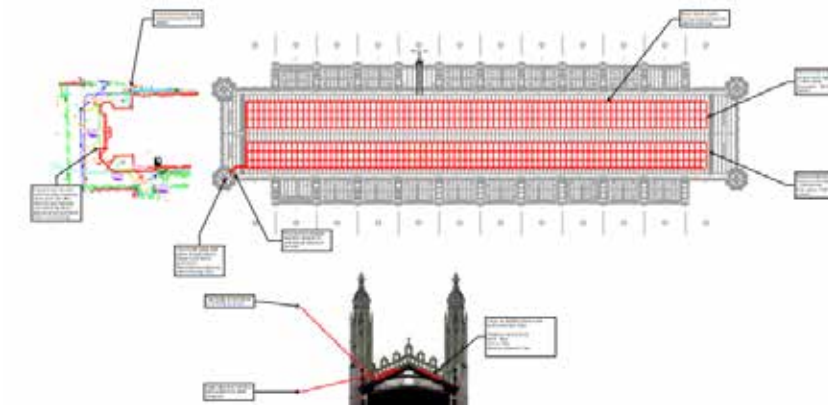


DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSAL

The proposals seeks permission for the integration of 18 Photovoltaic Solar Panels to the south facing roof slope of the Grade II Listed Building. The building is however north facing and as such any such intervention would be located thoroughly to the rear side. This side is the least sensitive elevation of the building.

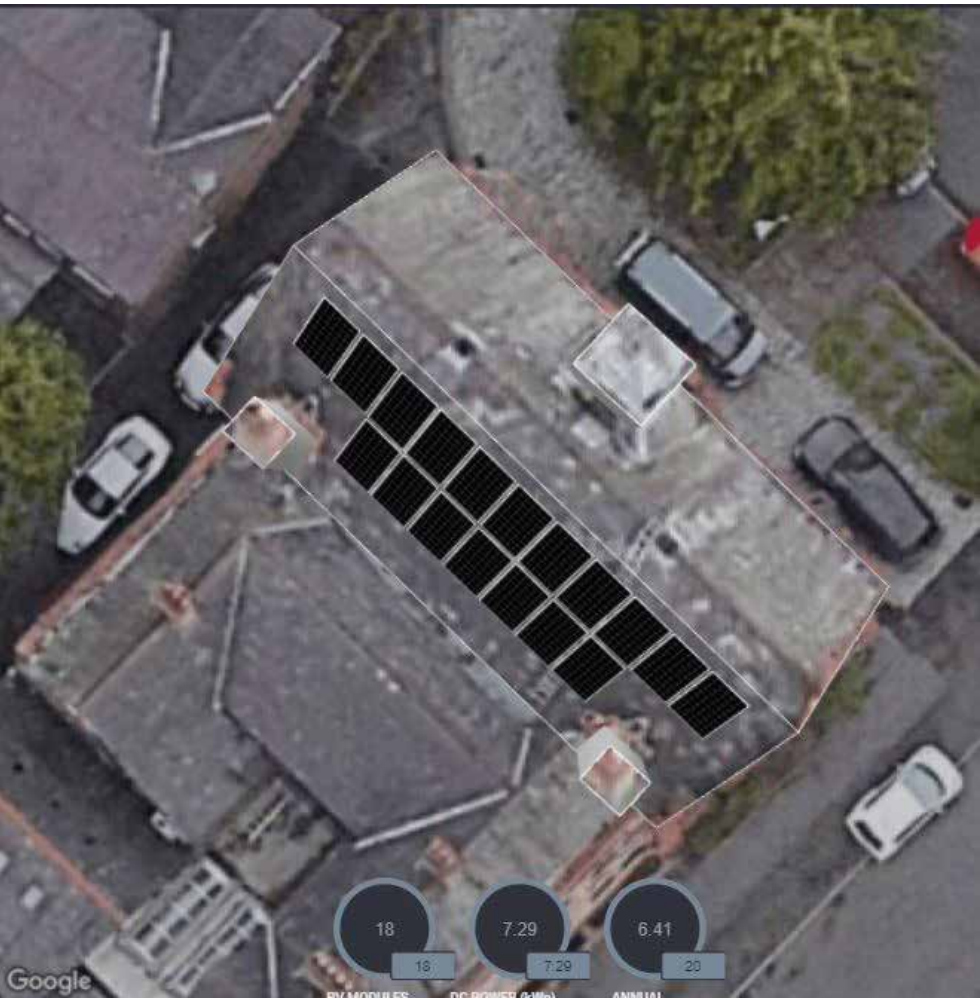
The justification for such a proposal is hopefully obvious in this day and age of Climate Emergency, environmental risk and energy insecurity and this building seeks to follow the examples that have recently been set by exceptionally historic places such as PV panels to Grade I Listed King College Cambridge, York Minster and Ripon Cathedral in their attempts to cut energy expenditure and save carbon dioxide.

The proposal would therefore seek to install 18 PV panels upon the mid slope of the rear valley roof. This roof has not just been chosen due to its suitable orientation but also due to the fact that it is recessive within the building and is mostly hidden within a valley behind the rear flanking wings.



Images showing PV panels proposed and in situ upon the Grade I Listed Building of Kings College, Cambridge. This was the first of many schemes for such proposals.





Indicative images showing (top left) Proposed layout of PV tiles on the Town Hall Roof and (right) Example of integration within a slate roof.

ASSESSMENT OF PROPOSAL

The proposals seek permission to install the 18 PV Panels to the rear roof slope of the Grade II Listed Former Town Hall. In assessing this impact of this we must firstly consider the significance of the existing roof in its current state with regards any particular added significance it gives to the building as a whole.

The Conservation Area Appraisal for Albert Park does highlight the slate materials as being of some distinctive quality. This is likely due to the fact that, at the time that so much building was occurring, Welsh or Lakeland Slate was the easiest source of roofing material to use. Moreover it could be transported effectively along the canal and railway networks. As a result and like many such places around the time, slate became the prominent roofing material. Having a long life expectancy roofs still maintain their original roofing. To this site, the roof has more than likely seen changes but largely the material is the same as would have been present originally. The roof itself is of a form and design that illustrates clearly the building ranges beneath. The simple lose U-plan culminates in rear wings that extend backwards leaving only glimpses of the main rear roof slope visible from some angles and these are uniquely from the rear. Chimneys also intervene into such views (see images below).

In assessing the significance of the roof, we must recognise that there is some significance to be given to a locally distinctive material. However, the material is typical rather than unique and as such only has **Medium** significance overall. When giving weight to the rear roof slope, the significance of this elevation is considerably less than the front roof slope. Although the location of the panels is upon the principal, frontage, range, the actual significance of this area of roof is **Low**.

Assessment of Impact Upon the Grade II Listed Building

The principal impact of this proposal would be through the partial removal of some slate roofing to the rear roofslope and the introduction of 18 flat profile PV Panels to the lower courses of the roof. The upper layers of slate would remain in situ and the roof profile would be unaffected. As a result the panels would be recessive within the roof slope. Moreover, the panels would be located to the rear whereby they would not be visible from the primary elevations or facades and this would include an intervening roof to the rear that would further mitigate any visual impact. The colouration of the panels would also be dark grey and would echo the tones of the grey slate roof.

In assessing this impact it is important to remember that this elevation is not the primary elevation. Indeed, the rear of this building was originally facing onto the Town's Yard where all manner of practical and dirty jobs were undertaken. As such there has always been a distinction between the rear of this building and the more formal frontage. Today the land to the rear of the building contains new housing located along the cul de sac that is Raleigh Close and, except for residents there is no public access. In summary, the installation of Solar PV to this roof slope is sensitive and bespoke to this building. As such, although it offers change, we do not believe that this change represents a harmful intervention.

Assessment of Impact - **Low**
Overall Assessment of Harm - **Negligible Harm/Minor Positive Benefit**

Impact of the Proposal Upon the Character and Appearance of the Albert Park Conservation Area

As mentioned above, most properties within the Albert Park Conservation Area were built around the same time. The area has not changed radically from its appearance in the early 20th century and the main contributing factors to this are the layout of buildings, distinctive materials and trees and landscaping. The Old Town Hall itself is obviously a landmark building within the conservation area and exhibits all the qualities identified above as a heritage asset of some value.

However, this proposal would be located wholly to the rear of the Listed Building and would not be visible from surrounding streets or other landmark buildings or key views. Indeed there would only be the slightest glimpse from Raleigh Close before the second roof slope comes into view as one moves further to the rear. Although the tennis club shown on the aerial photos above is still there, the former town yard has now been in filled with new development. As such there is no cross visibility between this site and local amenity spaces.

Ultimately, this proposal would be confined to the lower levels of the rear, recessive roof slope and as such any impact would be negligible.

Assessment of Impact - **Low**
Overall Assessment of Harm - **Negligible Harm.**



Image of the principal frontage elevation



Existing rear roof slope. Note the intervening roof slope.



Two images from Raleigh Close showing the same view without PV panels (left) and with (shown indicatively in pink) right.



Two images from the rear parking area where the roof in question would not be visible.



DISCUSSION

This proposal is obviously concerned with attempts to create an energy efficient building. It is recognised best practice that for PV solar to work, upon historic buildings that it needs to respond well to the fabric and significance of such a building. Whilst placing such panels on primary roof slopes that are highly visible would not, obviously, be appropriate, there is little reason to sustain objection against the integration of PV panels where their location is sensitive or largely obscured.

In this case, the proposal before us seeks to do just this. The scheme has located a suitable place for such panels that is not visible for the vast majority of people and that will not harm the perception, nor the significance of the Listed Building.

In terms of Public Benefits, this proposal would see the energy bills lower or be capable of being managed better. It would also contribute to mitigating harmful Climate Change that of itself presents significant threats to such buildings. This proposal would in turn would help the Listed Building be far more attractive as a building for people to inhabit, especially in a place where high grade eco office accommodation is all too common.

The proposal would also ensure that the roof of this building is examined and repaired, along with ongoing maintenance of the structure for the long term. All of these elements represent tangible benefits to the Listed Building and as such are benefits for the public at large through their role in helping sustain the condition and also the desirability of using such a building for the next 100 years at least.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this proposal will see a building that has very historic fabric maintained and made even more desirable for future generations. The proposals are minimal in their impact and sensitive in their execution. We believe therefore that buildings such as this, together with those exceptional heritage assets such as Kings College, provide us with an opportunity to preserve and ensure that such places are leading community efforts to be more sustainable in the future.

We believe therefore that this scheme is as sensitive as it could be and advance the case that public benefits of this proposal are real and tangible and that this proposal should obtain consent..

In conclusion the proposals before us lead to tangible and clear Public Benefits and there would be No Harm through these proposals to the historic fabric of significance of this building. As such Listed Building Consent and Planning Permission should, in our opinion, be forthcoming.



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