

OLD TOWN HALL, GRAVESEND

Introduction

At the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee on 4 September 2003, Members received a briefing on attempts to secure a future use for the Old Town Hall in Gravesend.

The building is Grade II* listed and has been empty since a Magistrates Court use ceased in 2000. A joint KCC, Gravesham Borough Council and Urban Space Management working group continues to meet regularly to move this and other Gravesend Town Centre issues forward. This report sets out progress since September 2003.

Conservation Plan

Consultants Alan Baxter and Associates were appointed in November 2003 to deliver a Conservation Plan for the Old Town Hall. This is a technical piece of work identifying the significance of the building in historic and architectural terms and its vulnerability to change. During the first stage of the process, the commission was extended to include a condition survey necessary to determine the constraints and costs of re-occupation.

The Conservation Plan and Condition Survey are now complete. Their main findings are:

- The significance of the building in architectural terms lies in the alterations carried out by Amon Henry Wilds who was a noted architect of the mid 19th Century, with a portfolio of classical style public buildings. The Old Town Hall is typical of his style and is a very good example, relatively unaltered.
- The key points of high significance in the building are the front façade, the late 19th Century alterations around the main chamber and the main chamber itself (the former Council chamber). Parts of this are likely to retain fabric of the pre-Wilds building. Any proposed building alterations within this area of the building need to be handled extremely sensitively.
- The presence of a public path between two wings of the building is a key area of significance that should be protected.
- The public nature of the former uses gives the building its historical significance within the community it served. The Plan recommends that extensive public access to the building should be an objective of its future use.
- The Plan identifies areas of medium significance as the entire late 19th century south wing which remains relatively complete, the two smaller court rooms and ancillary accommodation on the first floor, with fittings such as fireplaces retained, and the northern flank of cells on the ground floor.
- The Plan identifies areas of lower significance on the north side of the building where extensive alterations to staircases and divisions between rooms to provide toilets and further cells have been carried out.

The supporting schedule of condition and full condition survey identify some priorities for action within any future renovation. It assesses the condition of the building as being reasonable for an empty building of its age and type. The key findings are:

- There are not thought to be any major structural challenges for renovation. The construction is traditional, being brick and timber for the most part with no complicated, specialist or innovative construction techniques in evidence.
- There are a number of minor repairs required that, if neglected, could lead to deterioration. These concern the guttering, re-pointing of external walls in some areas and minor repairs to the roof, some of which have already been attended to.
- There are cosmetic repairs needed to external joinery, window cills and frames
- Some preventative works are recommended. The main columns are showing signs of cracking with the likely cause being the rusting of cast iron ties at their heart. An ultrasound survey of the columns is recommended. It was also noted that bird droppings could damage the external stonework if left to accumulate.

Two cost estimates for the renovation of the building have been given, based on two levels of intervention. The first assumes that work can be carried out to effectively 'mothball' the building to protect it from deterioration. This would cost in the order of £270,000 including preliminaries and contingencies. The second assumes a standing start renovation of all aspects of the building, including replacing all mechanical and electrical services and installing a lift system. This is the work that any occupier of the whole building would be expected to undertake. This is estimated to cost around £1.9m at today's prices. The cost of this would reduce should the building have been 'mothballed' previously.

Funding for Future Works

The Conservation Plan and Condition Survey were funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), through the priority investment programme. The Plan will be used as the basis for compiling funding bids to ODPM and others.

A further £150,000 is available from the ODPM this year. The bidding process for this money is about to begin. The priorities for the Town Hall are to embark on a programme of minor works to ensure the building is water tight and wind proofed. They will very likely concentrate on the roof, drainpipes, bird prevention measures and a monitoring survey of the columns.

Search for New Uses

It had originally been envisaged that a focused piece of marketing would help identify opportunities for future use. These plans have been put on hold temporarily because of the Town Hall's potential role in wider proposals for Gravesend's Heritage Quarter.

A board for Gravesend Town Centre has been established to shadow the Kent Thameside Delivery Board. This is the local executive decision making mechanism for ODPM funding for the area. The Gravesend board has recently been through a process of identifying potential development partners and in partnering negotiations to take forward proposals for the Heritage Quarter. All the key landowning interests (Gravesend Borough Council, KCC and the Church of England) have a place on the board and were party to the selection process.

Short - term Initiatives

It was recognised by the joint working group that an empty, unkempt building can have a blighting effect on the area around it. A range of initiatives have attempted to breath life into the building on a temporary basis, pending a bigger solution to its long term future.

The Gravesend Museum has been opening on the last Saturday of every month since September 2002 in a joint initiative with Gravesham Historical Society. The museum continues to prosper attracting a consistent 150 or so people every time it opens. Linked to local events, there are plans to conduct guided tours around the rest of the building, including the cells, staffed by historical society volunteers.

A small amount of KCC funding has been allocated to carry out some minor but significant work to the museum to carry out access improvements, improve displays, and signage and establish the feasibility of linking the museum with the cells area for added interest. This work is nearly complete.

Urban Space Management (who manage the Market on behalf of Gravesham) have been granted a lease by KCC to use part of the ground floor (south side) for retail and arts and craft uses. To date, one wedding accessories retailer has taken a room and USM are in discussion with a number of potential applicants for the rest of the space. There are opportunities to use the rest of the building for one-off events and these are being looked at by the joint working group.

Minor Works to the Building

KCC has carried out some cosmetic improvements to the building including a lighting upgrade to external areas, repairs to broken windows and the painting of all external walls at ground level through the undercroft. Further preventative work was recommended by the Conservation Plan and Condition Survey and these will be prioritised for an application to the ODPM for funding.

Advice has been sought on the moving of some of the artifacts contained in the museum in the light of previous leaks in the roof. A short term solution to their storage is being sought. Previous advice was that the artifacts are safer left where they are and the wider issue of the re-use of the building will need to address the future home of all artifacts contained in the building.

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