

8. July, 2014.

Mr. T. Rea,
Area Planning Officer,
Planning Control and Conservation,
North Hertfordshire District Council,
Gernon Road,
Letchworth Garden City,
Herts. SG6 3 JF.

Dear Mr. Rea,

Town Hall, Brand Street, Hitchin, SG5 1HX (14/01633/1LB)

The Hitchin Society has received Mrs. Caldwell's letter of 20. June about this application, and we most certainly do have comments to make on it. In fact, our criticisms are numerous.

In the first instance, the Design and Access Statement bears many and distinct signs of having been drafted in great haste. We would like to put it on record that the Impact Assessment especially, which would otherwise be of particular interest to the community groups, is riddled with mistakes and is, without exception, the most illiterate application document that it has ever been our misfortune to read. You, as a Planning Officer, may conceivably know the meaning of such felicitous phrases as 'talked to be farmed', 'athletic radiator' or 'Soviet local systems', but we doubt it. We ourselves are not conversant with these terms – the mangling of the English language here is so egregious that it makes parts of the text totally incomprehensible; this obfuscates the issues and misleads those who try to make some sense of it.

Secondly, it strikes one as odd that the application form cites the same person as applicant and agent. It seems to us that NHDC itself, as the owner of the building, should be the applicant and Neal Charlton the agent. We can only wonder why this anomaly came about.

More substantively, we notice that the word 'retrospective' does not, as far as we can see, feature anywhere in this planning application. The works are referred to throughout as 'proposed' works, but it is quite clear that they are well under way, and were already, even before the application was submitted.

We are very concerned that NHDC and its architects have allowed work to be undertaken in the Mountford Hall, Lucas Room and foyer without having previously obtained all the necessary consents required for a listed building. The applicant's negative answer to question 3 on the application form does not seem credible, presumably recorded because the applicant knew that not doing so could run counter to current legislation and guidance on Listed Building Consent. We believe this to be a serious matter. If, as has been suggested, a previous planning application had already legitimised these works, it would seem perverse to submit the present application at all.

However, our major concern is that considerable damage has been done to a Grade 2 listed building. We would cite here the previous installation of mechanical or electrical plant above the wall across the stage (a wall which was an utter disgrace in itself), the lifting (and thereby ruining) of tongued and grooved floorboards in the Lucas Room, piping work in the foyer which has damaged the cornice mentioned in the English Heritage Listing Schedule and which will apparently require a lowering of the ceiling to conceal it, and the boxing-in of electrical cables along the whole length of the west side of the Mountford Hall just below the cornice. The architectural integrity of the building has unquestionably been compromised by these interventions.

And yet the DAS can speak of the plans as 'retaining charm and character' and the interventions as 'sympathetic to a historical asset' and causing 'little significant harm'. We also challenge the claim, mentioned several times in the DAS, that the interventions 'secure optimum viable use' of the premises. 'Optimum' is definitely not the word we would have used. We note too that a detail of the mechanical ventilation in the Mountford Hall is said to be 'entirely reversible' – presumably in the same way that the concrete wall across the stage is 'reversible'. To us, claims like these give rise to real concern. The drawings attached to the application are also inadequate.

The DAS contains the sentence: 'Whilst it was always our intention to fully concealed (sic) electrical distribution and service associated services throughout the listed building, it has become impossible to distribute electrical services along the internal wall facing grammar school walk (sic).' This reads more like the curse in a children's fairy tale, suddenly bringing doom to the protagonists when they were least expecting it, than a serious planning

application. Absolutely no attempt is made to explain why and when the intended plan all at once became 'impossible' when it had not been so previously. For some reason it was simply decided that the installations outlined here had to be made in this clumsy and obvious way, just as the 'necessity' for the wall across the stage was not made transparent in March. The DAS admits that 'the aesthetic value of the principle (sic) rooms is high', so the bulk of electrical and mechanical installations would surely have been better sited in the other half of the complex, which has no heritage status. As it is, considerable damage has been done to the Mountford Hall, the Lucas Room and the foyer, much to our distress.

In all, we find the content and form of this application to be woefully inadequate, not to mention the practices which have led up to this sad and sorry state of affairs. We do not, therefore, intend to dignify this sub-standard application with any more detailed critique.

What we will say is that there seems to be a glaring disjunction between the Development Agreement and what has actually happened; whether this disjunction has to do with 'the letter of the law' or just with the spirit, we cannot say, but what we perceive is that at the very least the spirit of the agreement has been violated.

The Hitchin Society considers that NHDC have badly let down their partners Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and the community, and have exhibited an extremely disturbing and disappointing lack of respect for a listed building.

In view of what we can only call acts of vandalism inflicted on our Town Hall, we now find it impossible to feel any trust or respect for the Project Team and those asking for planning permission. We strongly object to this application and all it implies and ask that this and any other application of the sort be rejected until such time as the damage already inflicted on this Grade 2 listed building has been rectified.

For The Hitchin Society