

Our ref: JCH01066

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## 19/05000/HYB FORT HALSTEAD, KENT - HERITAGE NOTE

### Introduction

1. This Heritage Note has been prepared by RPS Heritage (formerly CgMs) as a summary of the heritage assessment work undertaken in association with the redevelopment of Fort Halstead, Kent. The Site is currently the subject of a live planning application (19/05000/HYB) for the construction of 635 dwellings, in addition to employment space, community spaces, infrastructure and landscaping.
2. The Site has been subject to detailed assessment related to its heritage significance which is presented in the Built Heritage Statement (Site Wide) prepared by CgMs in September 2019 and submitted with the application as part of the Environmental Statement (Volume III 8.1). This also summarised previous assessment work undertaken by Heritage Collective and included a detailed Built Heritage Gazetteer of all designated and non-designated heritage assets within the Site. The Built Heritage Statement was prepared to address paragraph 189 of the NPPF, to identify and assess all built heritage assets likely to be affected by the proposed development and assess the impacts to their significance arising from the proposed development. It was also used as the baseline report to the ES Chapter submitted with the application (Chapter 8: Historic Environment).
3. The purpose of this Note is to summarise the assessment work previously undertaken and demonstrate how the current proposals have been developed in response to the heritage sensitivities of the Site and the significance of the heritage assets within it. In particular, it responds to comments made by Historic England in their representation dated 20 November 2019, discussions held with officers at Sevenoaks Council and a Site visit with Historic England and members of the development team on 2 March 2020. Although the Site contains a number of designated and non-designated heritage assets, this report focuses primarily on the scheduled monument of Fort Halstead (NHLE 1004214) and those listed buildings located closest to it, which are considered to be the most significant and sensitive heritage assets within the Site. Historic England have also raised particular concerns related to the potential impact to the significance of the scheduled Fort.
4. This Note is also accompanied by a Conservation Management Plan (dated 28 May 2020) which provides an update to the Management Plan previously prepared by Heritage Collective and submitted in support of the 2015 application. The purpose of the Conservation Management Plan is to demonstrate how the Historic Interpretation Centre can be established and managed at Fort Halstead to conserve the significance of the scheduled monument and associated listed and non-listed buildings and provide the heritage assets with new, long-term viable uses.

### Assessment of Significance

5. Fort Halstead was originally developed as a Mobilisation Centre in the late nineteenth century. It formed one of fifteen centres to the northeast, east and south of London which together were designed to protect London in case of enemy invasion. It retained this use until shortly after the First World War, although it was never required for conflict and was only occupied for intermittent periods. After the threat of invasion subsided, Fort Halstead was sold and used as a private residence for a period, before being purchased by the government in 1937. It subsequently performed an important new role as a centre for rocketry research, later becoming the High Explosives Research Headquarters,

responsible for the development of Britain's first atomic bomb. During this period, the government purchased land surrounding the original Fort and rapidly developed it with associated research buildings, laboratories and residential dwellings for workers.

6. The significance of Fort Halstead is derived from:
  - Historic interest – as a purpose-built Mobilisation Centre that was intended to perform a role in the protection of London in the nineteenth century as part of the London Defence Scheme, a role it performed until 1906
  - Historic interest – as part of the London anti-invasion stop-line during the First World War
  - Historic interest – for its integral role in the rocketry research and development from the 1930s
  - Historic interest – for its important role developing Britain's first atomic bomb Blue Danube'
  - Architectural interest – as a purpose-built mobilisation centre displaying military strategy and construction techniques in the late nineteenth century
  - Architectural interest – for the purpose-built structures within the fortification which were constructed specifically for the development of the atomic bomb
  - Archaeological interest – as a mobilisation centre that has undergone substantial alterations in association with rocketry research and the development of the atomic bomb. The Fort is likely to hold archaeological evidence related to these phases of development
7. As detailed in the Heritage Statement the setting of the Fort has undergone substantial changes since its original construction in the late nineteenth century. This included extensive development within the wider grounds of the Fort after they were purchased in 1939. The progressive development of this land reduced the isolation of the Fort and views both from and to the scheduled monument to the north, east and west. The land to the south remained undeveloped, reflecting the original use of the Fort. This development has enclosed the setting of the scheduled monument, however it demonstrates the progressive development of the Fort as an important military research centre, with the development post-1939 demonstrating the rapid expansion of the Fort due to its military importance during the Second World War and its role in developing the atomic bomb.
8. The functional and visual relationship between the Fort and these buildings therefore represents the twentieth-century development of the Site and contributes to the significance of the Fort as a military centre. This development has, however, reduced the isolation within which the building would have historically been experienced and the Fort is now experienced as part of a functional setting that has evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Historic England's Comments

9. Following submission of the application Historic England provided detailed comments on 20 November 2019. They raised concerns regarding the following areas:
  - Demolition of Building Q1
  - Additional development within the Village Centre, including Blocks A and B and how these related to the setting of the Fort
  - Height of the proposed development and its impact on views to the Fort
  - Loss of the 'buffer' of open space proximate to the Fort and its impact on the Fort's prominence
10. Historic England did acknowledge that the current proposals would involve the demolition of fewer buildings than the previous scheme and that the increased density and housing would generally not have any greater impact on the significance of the Fort.
11. In summary, Historic England stated that the '*re-design of the Village Centre will no longer enhance, and indeed have an additional detrimental impact upon, the fort's setting*'.

12. On 2 March 2020 JTP conducted a Site visit with Historic England to 'walk' through the design proposals. During the visit it was acknowledged that retention of Building Q1 had been explored but that from an urban design point of view its demolition enabled the re-design of a Village Centre that would create a space that was more active and stimulating with existing and new buildings framing the public realm and emphasising the Fort's role as a key focal point within the new development.
13. The Site visit also enabled a greater understanding of the setting of the Fort and it was acknowledged that the proposed location of Blocks A and B would create a smaller square with a continuous frontage along Crow Road. Block A would provide a visual marker from the longer stretch of road to the West and Block B maintains the sense of enclosure currently experienced in the northern part of the Fort's setting. It was acknowledged that the proposed Village Centre was sympathetic to the latter part of the Site's history in terms of the cluster of built form whereas the southern part of the setting offered the open views down the escarpment which is sympathetic to the Fort's history as a Mobilisation Centre. The key elements of the Fort's historic use are therefore retained and emphasised by the masterplan.
14. The Site visit also demonstrated that the proposed height of Blocks A and B and the siting of Block B set back from the existing building line of Q8 would not block the view from the Fort towards Q14. The entrance to the Fort was acknowledged as being not as far east as originally thought.
15. Finally, it was also acknowledged that the scale of the open space between the Fort and the proposed Village Centre was greater than Historic England had envisaged with distances ranging from 20 metres to 40 metres.
16. Whilst the Site visit proved a useful exercise to better explain the proposals, Historic England's original comments are addressed in further detail below.

### **Design and response to heritage opportunities and constraints**

17. The current proposals have been informed by detailed heritage assessment and discussions with Sevenoaks Council and Historic England at pre-application stage. The Design and Access Statement for the Village Centre prepared by JTP and submitted as part of the application explains the design development process and how the scheme responds to the setting of the Fort and the other retained buildings within the Site. An important visual relationship was established between the entrance of the Fort and the Penney building. It also has been agreed that the location of the Fort and the Penney building at the heart of the development, set in the context of a vibrant, mixed use quarter is an important place-making component.
18. The current proposals provide a prominent building with a feature corner to Block B which importantly assists with navigation through the Site and draws people into the Village Centre and towards the Fort. The long uninterrupted route along Crow Drive requires a strong visual marker to act as a way finder to the Village Centre. The proposals now also include the retention and refurbishment of Buildings X2 and X3 to the immediate west of the Fort which will help provide a gateway to the Fort from Crow Road to the west. The retention of these buildings also encloses the view from the eastern approach and concludes the sequence of 'set pieces' including Building A10, the Cottages and the Q-series terminating with X2.
19. Block B has been designed to reflect the modern approach of a flat roof and set-back top storey to assist in reducing how the massing of the building will be experienced by residents and visitors and provide a counterpoint to the listed Q13 and Q14 opposite.
20. Block B together with Q13 and Q14 channel views to the Fort, with a colonnade provided at ground floor level to allow views through towards the Fort for pedestrians. The proposals represent an increase in height from the previous proposals, but this has been provided to allow a clear route through the proposed development towards the Fort, with the Fort terminating these views and acting as a focal point. This is particularly important for the new use of the Fort as a Heritage and Visitor Centre, with the proposals drawing people towards the Fort as a key component of the Village Centre. The proposed buildings also provide a simple design, utilising red brick and metal to reflect the architectural character of the military buildings within the Site. As referenced in paragraph 13 above,

views from the Fort have been considered in the design of Block B to better reveal the western and southern elevations of Q1.

## Discussion

21. The following section discusses how the design responds to the setting and significance of the relevant heritage assets and addresses the concerns expressed by Historic England.
22. Q1 retains significance as a purpose-built building associated with the development of the atomic bomb. Although the building dates from 1944-46, it was designed in 1939 and formed part of the major phase of construction undertaken from the start of the Second World War. The building is architecturally unassuming and is a simple, red-brick construction typical of the wider Fort Halstead development.
23. Its loss will result in harm both to Q1 as a non-designated heritage asset and to the significance of Fort Halstead due to the historic context that the building provides. However, this impact would remain 'less than substantial' as defined by the NPPF, with this loss necessary to provide an improved approach to the Fort along Crow Road. In addition, the demolition of Q1 should be seen in the context of the wider redevelopment of the Q Area. Historic England have raised concerns that the proposed demolition will reduce the legibility of this group of buildings and their role in the development of the atomic bomb. However, the demolition of the buildings Q1, Q3, Q4 and Q4-1 together allow for the redevelopment of this area and the opening up of new views to the Fort, providing an improved visual setting. This also partly follows Historic England advice provided in 2015 where they stated that '*the conservation of so many buildings is unlikely to be feasible*' as part of the redevelopment of the Site and therefore the selective demolition of buildings is acceptable.
24. Historic England have also noted that the redevelopment would remove the '*considerable buffer of open space*' shown on the previous approved masterplan, which would increase the visual impact of the proposals and their effect on the prominence of the Fort. It was acknowledged on the 2 March Site visit that the open space between the Fort and the proposed Village Centre is greater than Historic England had envisaged. The evolution of the Fort in the twentieth century has included extensive development within its immediate surroundings, with the Q area one of the first to be developed from 1939. This development was located in closer proximity to the Fort to aid the research undertaken there and represents an important part of the Site's historic development and purpose. The shift from the Fort's isolation as a single, isolated fortification to being surrounded by other buildings clearly marks the transition from the Site's role as a defensive fortification to a military research establishment. This close visual and functional relationship with the surrounding buildings is therefore important in understanding the important role the Fort has played during the twentieth century and it is not considered appropriate to provide a visual and physical separation between the proposed new built form and the Fort. In contrast, the land to the south and south-west will remain undeveloped, continuing the current experience of the Fort sat atop a ridgeline to oversee the lower land in this direction. With this element of setting demonstrating the original, nineteenth-century use of Fort Halstead as a Mobilisation Centre.
25. The proposals do, however, deliver positive beneficial changes allowing for greater visibility between Buildings Q13 and Q14 and the Fort, demonstrating their historic link, while also allowing public access and appreciation of the Fort. In addition, and in contrast to the previously approved application, the proposals now also include the retention and refurbishment of Buildings X2 and X3 to the immediate west of the Fort which, as discussed in paragraph 17 above, will help provide a gateway to the Fort from Crow Road to the west.
26. As discussed above, the layout and design of the proposed buildings has been determined to facilitate movement through the Site and Village Centre and towards the Fort which will form an integral part of the development. It should also be noted that overall the current proposals include the demolition of fewer buildings than the previous scheme, with those buildings of the highest significance being retained and their contribution to the significance of the Fort and wider understanding of the Site conserved.

27. The current proposals also include the Village Centre within the first, detailed phase of development in contrast to the previous outline application. This provides certainty over the quantum of development and its precise design, materials and layout of the most sensitive part of the Site.
28. Therefore, the proposals deliver a number of crucial heritage benefits, in addition to the wider public benefits identified by CBRE in the Planning Statement submitted as part of the application. These include:
- Heritage benefits, including:
    - Provision of a new, long-term viable use for the Fort Halstead scheduled monument and associated listed buildings
    - Enhanced understanding, appreciation and interpretation of designated heritage assets, including the Fort and listed buildings on site, none of which have been open to the public before
    - Enhancements to the fabric of Q13 and Q14 including the reinstatement of original features and fenestration
    - Refurbishment and enhancement of the retained non-designated heritage assets, which will be provided with new, viable uses
    - Creation of new views to the Fort and enhancement of visual link between Q13 and Q14 and the Fort, with the Fort becoming a key focal point within the new settlement
  - Public benefits, including:
    - The regeneration of a major employment site providing a range of employment opportunities and creation of a new village community which complements the existing network of surrounding settlements
    - Provision of a range of high-quality new homes which respond to the District's needs
    - A balance of uses that will create a high-quality 'place' with its own identity, providing new homes, jobs, community facilities and open space to be enjoyed by the wider community
29. These public benefits, including the important heritage benefits, will therefore clearly outweigh any potential harm to the designated and non-designated heritage assets associated with the wider redevelopment of the Site, with the redevelopment necessary to secure the long-term viable use of Fort Halstead and its associated listed buildings.

## **Justification and Conclusion**

30. The current masterplan and design of the Village Centre have been developed through extensive consultation with Heritage Officers at Sevenoaks Council and Historic England. Although it is accepted that the proposals will lead to the loss of one additional building of historic importance, there will be more buildings retained elsewhere that have a better relationship to the historic context of the Fort. The design team have shaped the proposed development to ensure that those elements that most strongly contribute to the significance of the Fort and wider understanding of the Site have been retained and, where possible, enhanced.
31. The current proposals represent a divergence from some of the principles used in the previous application, with increased density and height provided within the Village Centre. However, this has been designed to ensure that the Village Centre is clearly experienced as the focal point of the new settlement, with pedestrians drawn into the Village Centre and on towards the Fort. It is important to note that this is not a small residential village but also a strategic employment location which will underpin the wider mix of uses in the Village Centre and provide interaction between workers, residents and visitors. The alignment of buildings has been determined to frame and capture key views of the Fort and reinstate the visual association between it and the surrounding buildings of highest significance. This means that the current density of surrounding built development will be retained, while still opening up views towards the Fort and enhancing the ability for the public to experience and appreciate it.

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32. Overall the proposals will therefore lead to some impacts to the significance of the Fort and loss of buildings of historic importance. However, this should be set against the public benefits, including clear heritage benefits, of securing a long-term viable use for the Fort, its direct visual relationship with the Village Centre and the highly-significant listed and non-listed buildings within the Site, in addition to providing public access to this important military site.
33. The impact to the significance of the Fort as a scheduled monument will be 'less than substantial' in magnitude, as confirmed by Historic England, resulting primarily from the loss of surrounding buildings. However, we disagree that this impact will be greater than the previously consented scheme because the proposals retain additional non-listed buildings and, for the reasons set out above, appropriately respond to the setting and significance of the Fort. The proposals will also provide enhancements and new viable uses for the Fort, Buildings F16 and F17, Building F11, Building X2 and X3 and Building Q14, all of which are designated heritage assets and the proposals therefore represent an appropriate development that responds to the heritage significance of Fort Halstead and the wider site.

Yours sincerely,  
for RPS Group Limited

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Copp', with a horizontal line underneath.

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