


Comments from the Georgian Society

Offa House, Village Street, Offchurch, Warwickshire



James Darwin <James@georgiangroup.org.uk>

To David Hickie

 Follow up. Start by 04 August 2021. Due by 04 August 2021.
You forwarded this message on 05/08/2021 12:04.

Dear David,

Thanks once again for organizing our recent highly informative site meeting at Offa House. The present proposals were discussed by the Casework Committee of the Georgian Group at their meeting on the 26th of July. The Committee were mindful that this is a pre-application consultation and that some aspects of the scheme had not been worked up in great detail. Nevertheless, the Committee were grateful for the chance to examine these proposals at the pre-application stage. I must apologize for my delay in forwarding their brief initial advice.

Offa House is a grade II listed former rectory which is located within a conservation area. The rectory forms part of the setting of the grade II* parish church. Within the grounds is a former coach house which was once part of a large range of service structures which were largely demolished in the mid to late twentieth century. This building should be regarded as a curtilage structure. The recent planning history of the site is quite a complex one with a previous application for development on the site having been refused consent in January 2019 followed by a dismissal of your appeal. As I mentioned during our recent meeting, I can find no record of the Group or any of the other National Amenity Societies being notified of the previous application despite Warwick Council being legally required to do so. It is also apparent that the house's interior was considerably altered by its previous owners after the house was listed.

The Committee's comments were divided into three sections, the proposed works of demolition, the proposed two new houses, and the proposed internal and external alterations to the grade II listed Offa House.

The Proposed Works of Demolition

The Casework Committee welcomed the proposal to demolish all of the mid and later twentieth century additions to the house. They noted that in the previous scheme it had been proposed to partially retain the later twentieth century rear wing as a separate dwelling. The decision to remove this wing entirely in the revised proposals is however to be welcomed, as it will both improve the setting of the grade II listed building and help to safeguard its viability as a single private dwelling, which is arguably its optimum viable use.

The Committee accepted that a legitimate case had been made for the removal of the remaining much altered section of the former service range standing close to the house.

The proposed two new houses

The members of the Casework Committee had no objection in principle to the construction of two further dwellings within the house's grounds on the sites proposed, or to the creation of separate means of access to service the dwellings.

They welcomed the fact that the existing coach house was to be retained as a free-standing structure and were satisfied that the proposed new dwelling adjoining it would be largely hidden from view from both the listed house and the bulk of its surviving pleasure grounds. They would welcome the opportunity to comment on the external design of this structure at a later date when more detailed drawings are available.

The historic maps and other documentary evidence provided makes clear that a substantial parcel of land which appears to include the site of the second proposed dwelling was absorbed into the pleasure grounds of Offa House after 1850. Having examined maps of the grounds together with photographs they concluded that the proposed site of the new dwelling would not have a significant impact on the setting of the listed former Rectory, the grade II* listed church, or on the surviving elements of the designed landscape which surrounds the former Rectory.

Any negative impact on the conservation area caused by the proposed new entrance drive would not be great and could potentially be mitigated by a careful and understated design for the new entrance and any proposed gates and piers. The committee believed that the decision for the drive to follow where possible the line of the former avenue within the pleasure grounds was the correct one.

Proposed Alterations to the grade II listed Offa House

It is clear from the documentary evidence you have found and from an inspection of the house, that its building history is a far more complex one than the present listing description suggests. It is also clear that much of the significance of the interior has been lost due to later twentieth century internal alterations of a highly unsympathetic nature. Only one small section of the c1806 principal staircase survives, and this has been subject to a high level of unsympathetic repairs. Whilst the Committee had no objection in principle to many of the alterations proposed, a number of its members did express some concern about the size and grandeur of the proposed new top lit staircase hall and the potential impact of this element of the scheme on the surviving elements of the historic plan form of the 1806 range.

Concern was also raised by members over the design of the elevations of the proposed new kitchen wing which they concluded were of an overly assertive nature. Members stressed that the design of any proposed new addition should respect the historic hierarchy of the house's elevations in its materials and detailing. The elevation on which the proposed addition would be built was not designed for display and therefore was of a far more restrained design than either the 1806 garden façade, or the early eighteenth-century entrance range. Members also stressed that any new addition of the size proposed would need to be carefully justified as there may arguably potentially be space available within the existing fabric for a reasonably sized family kitchen.

Members had no objection in principle to the reintroduction of dormers on the principal façade.

Conclusion

The Casework Committee of the Georgian Group are grateful for this opportunity to examine these pre-application proposals for the repair and reuse of Offa House, and for a small-scale development

within its grounds. Members of the Committee believed that considerable efforts had been made to arrive at a sympathetic scheme and had no objection in principle to these proposals. We would be pleased to comment in more detail at a later stage should the opportunity arise but are broadly encouraged by the thoughtful nature of the present scheme.

There are two areas of the proposals as they relate to the main house however, which may need further consideration. The external treatment of the proposed new kitchen wing was a particular issue for members largely due to its adoption of formal classical detailing for an addition to one of the house's service façades. [A] A more restrained and less rigidly formal approach to the design of this wing would be welcomed, whilst the requirement for a new addition of the size proposed would also need careful justification. [B] Members also had some reservations regarding the potential impact of the proposed remodeling of the staircase hall on the special interest of the listed building, advising that an intervention of this scale and ambition would need further careful and detailed justification. If you would like further clarification of any of the issues raised in this email, I would be happy to discuss these issues with you. I must emphasize however that we regard the two areas of the scheme where we have some concerns as matters of detail and that we are largely happy with these proposals.

Yours Sincerely

James Darwin (Senior Conservation Adviser)

Note: Following the above comments the issues [A] and [B] have been carefully addressed. The kitchen extension has been redesigned; and, the staircase (existing C20) has been covered in more detail in this report.