

St Osyth Priory

Gatehouse

Proposed new door at 2nd floor level

Heritage Impact Assessment and Design Statement 14nov23

Introduction

The Great Gatehouse at St Osyth Priory is currently being repaired and converted into support accommodation for the new wedding venue on the wider site. The current layout of the central room of the second floor is inadequate to cope with its permitted use and it is proposed to create another door opening in its east wall to alleviate the problem.

History of St Osyth, its Abbey and Gatehouse

The settlement takes its name from the martyred abbess of the reputed seventh century nunnery on which it is said Richard de Belmeis founded the Priory. It was raised to the status of Abbey by 1200 and was suppressed in 1539. The crowning glory of the monastic phase was Abbot John Vintoner's Great Gatehouse of 1475 and his lodgings and guest house of 1527. Only the screen wall and oriel survive from the latter.

Thomas, 1st Lord Darcy was finally granted the Abbey in 1553 having worked on the transformation of the Precinct since the Dissolution. He created a substantial country house, boldly incorporating material from demolished parts of the Abbey and including the iconic Abbot's Tower which provided him with a prospect. Until 1858, the Priory as it came to be known, remained in the possession of his descendants, who continued to demolish, alter, and extend the buildings. A major period of development took place during the eighteenth century under the Earls of Rochford when a designed Park, for amenity and prestige, incorporating woodlands, avenues, formal landscape features and ponds, was created within Little Park, one of the manorial deer parks.

In 1863 the Priory was acquired by John Johnson who continued to develop both the buildings, the Park and the Gardens. Following his death the Estate changed hands several times and at each stage buildings and landscape features were altered, demolished or lost through decay. Darcy House as the remodelled house came to be known, became a convalescent home in 1949 and in 1954, Somerset de Chair purchased the estate. During his ownership, the Park was extensively excavated for gravel and the Estate lodges and tied cottages demolished. Mr de Chair died in 1995 and the Estate was bought by the Sargeant Family in 1999.

Heritage Significance

The site was assessed in 2011 and a comprehensive description of significance can be read in *A STATEMENT OF THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ST OSYTH PRIORY ESTATE AND ITS SURROUNDING (2011)* already in the possession of the council and in the public domain. The following descriptions are taken from that document:

St Osyth Priory is an exceptional place. Its iconic gatehouse represents the last flourish of monastic building in England and its famous Abbot's Tower marks the origin of the fashion for country houses that succeeded it. The Priory precinct retains a sense of monastic quiet within its inner Green, and its Park takes its place in the eighteenth century English Landscape movement, a remarkably large enclosed landscape in a settlement with such a small historic core, in a far-flung corner of northern Essex.

The Priory and Park perch above the Creeks of the Colne Estuary in Northeast Essex. The trio of Tower, ruined house (with Vintoner's lodging) and Gatehouse have symbolised religious influence and feudal power since Richard de Belmeis, Bishop of London, founded an Augustinian Priory here around 1120.

The significance of the 'trinity' emanates from a complex layering of four eras (monastic, Darcy, Rochford and Johnson), a process which gives the final result a charming eccentricity which comes across to the viewer more than any constituent part of the ensemble.

The Great Gatehouse of 1475 is a tour de force of late monastic flint flushwork, remarkably complete in form yet incorporating a 13th century stone gate and still sporting a fine eighteenth century embellishment. The structure is the most complete remaining Augustinian gatehouse in the country. It was listed at Grade I in 1950 and stands on a scheduled monument.

Values: The Gatehouse range is rated exceptional throughout for its aesthetic (architectural) value and its illustrative value in history. It is of considerable evidential (archaeological) value too. Its contribution to the setting of the Priory and other historic monuments in the settlement is exceptional. (For ranking methodology, please see 2011 assessment) Historic England's most recent update of the list description values it thus; Architectural interest: the Gatehouse is considered by some to be one of the finest monastic buildings in the country and is the most prominent monastic building of the Priory. It is finely detailed, evident in the carved stonework and gate-hall vaulting and is an elegant and authoritative composition befitting the entrance to one of the wealthiest Augustinian order houses in the country. The east range, in particular, retains significant early monastic and post-monastic fabric, including the external walling, C13 entrance to the Priory, window and door detailing and dressings; Historic interest: the Priory buildings are important examples of monastic buildings of the Augustinian order which individually and collectively played a significant role in the religious, economic and social life of medieval England. The post-Reformation evolution of the Gatehouse and Ranges by nationally significant historic figures contributes to the unique character and overall architectural and historic interest of the site; Materials: the materials used in the construction are of high quality, handled with dexterity, reflecting the wealth and importance of the Priory and contributing to the exceptional interest of the buildings; Intactness: the Gatehouse, East Range and exterior of the West Range have a high degree of intactness; Interior: the survival of the interior plan-form and structure, and high quality interior fixtures and fittings such as the lavabo, C15 fireplaces, doors and door frames, the C17 staircase in the west range and C18 fixtures and fittings further add to the exceptional interest of the buildings; Group value: this group of structures form the focus of the Priory complex, thus have group value with the other designated buildings and structures on the site, the Scheduled Monument and the registered Park and Garden.

Description of the proposal

The bridal party will enter the central room via the west range stair whose (double) door is immediately adjacent to the door of the west turret stair which also serves the room. The room has another stair too – in the east turret. Off the second-floor landing of the West range stair there is also to be a self-contained bedroom and ensuite for a non-bridal party guest with its own door.

The bridal party will get ready in the central room which will accommodate a seating area and a large vanity station for makeup and dressing. The wedding bedroom suite is to be off this room to the east but currently the two rooms only communicate across the east turret stair via small single doors either side of a precipitous crossover stair arrangement that leads eventually down the newel stair to the ground floor. The current arrangement is hazardous to the able-bodied but only consistently 400mm wide and quite the challenge to a bride in her wedding dress.

The design team have investigated the provision of a drop-in timber landing to span the up and down of the stone steps but as this staircase is also to be a secondary fire escape for the bridal suite, such a landing could not be removed in short order and no safe solution can be found. The proposal therefore is to accept the higgledy-piggledy newel stair and form a new opening between the bridal dressing room and the bedroom suite.



Fig. 1: The configuration of the existing stair

The proposal is to replicate the timber door (but slightly wider) that currently serves the east turret stair in a new opening close by, thereby connecting the two rooms safely.

The configuration of doors will be very similar to the arrangement that currently exists, almost mirroring the main entrance into this central room off the west staircase (albeit with a single door).

Heritage Impact

The joinery in the room appears to be largely part of the C18 refit but the turret openings are Monastic as evidenced in their disused pintles. The door opening from the West wing is part of de Chair's 1950s conversion and the doors themselves are made of ply with planted mouldings in imitation of the turret doors. The C18 quality is high. The room walls appears to be late monastic where they can be glimpsed (old light fitting / unplastered wall) with well fired 9" x 2 ¼ " brickwork set in lime mortar.



Fig. 2: Exposed wall in the vicinity

The layout of the floor is much altered so the change does not affect the significance of this aspect of the building. The removal of fabric (brickwork; the lime plaster is modern) must be regarded as harmful although it is not 'special' or intended to be fair-faced.

In mitigation, the amount of common brickwork to be removed is small in comparison to the entirety of the building. It will be finished with high quality joinery and traditional limework so that will be in keeping with the original craftsmanship whilst the 1950s work was not always in this vein. Removal will also shed light on the wall construction and add to the archaeological record

of the place. Lastly, the harm would be small compared to the part played in achieving the acknowledged new 'viable use'.

Consequently, the intervention would be consistent with the NPPF requirement "of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation" (190a) Para 202 of NPPF notes that 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 proposal is one in which the benefit outweighs potential harm.