

## **St Osyth Priory: Darcy House East and South ranges**

### **Ph 3 Works**

### **Heritage Impact Assessment**

#### **Introduction**

Permission exists for the conversion of Darcy House for use as a functions venue, as set out in 21/00798/LBC and 799/FUL.

Following receipt of these approvals, the project has been developed to provide more detail which has been approved under 22/00662/LBC and 23/00707/LBC. The latter proposals have been implemented and the venue is now partially built. To complete the detailed submissions, the current documents have been assembled to give greater detail of the south and east ranges, mostly in connexion with their servicing but as listed below.

Phase 3 covers the building East and South of the hybrid structures known as the Abbot's Lodgings and is concerned with the "hotel" accommodation which will support the Darcy House Wedding/ Functions Venue.

#### **Heritage Significance**

##### 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 values

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.*

*Darcy House East Wing: the Johnson service wing. In comparison with the rest of Darcy House, this is a poorly detailed building which nonetheless has the potential to work well with the rest of the house on account of its scale and materials. Disappointingly, when viewed from the Park, the wing sits uncomfortably with its neighbours. Whilst architecturally, it makes Johnson's drawing room block a focal point, as an arrival elevation it fails to deliver and is the least successful element in an otherwise impressive centrepiece for the Park. Interiors are modest.*

*Darcy House South Wing: Johnson's refurbishment of Darcy work built over Vintoner work is of exceptional aesthetic value and of great historic significance. It preserves the monastery's cellarer's range and is thus of the highest evidential value also. The ground floor spaces are of moderate significance only and have planning permission to be re-ordered.*

The whole is listed Grade I irrespective of the lesser architectural value of the east range in that that whole is exceptional for its illustrative historical and archaeological value and much of the south range is architecturally of the highest value too. The proposals treat with the idea of it being of the highest value, hence their division into detailed phases, the general layouts and the scope of detail being already agreed with the LPA and their advisers, and Historic England.

## **Description of the proposal**

The extent of works is as follows:

- Internal alterations to layouts to facilitate accommodation.
- Electrical (Lighting / Small Power / Fire / Security / Cable Routes) specialist installation
- Mechanical (Ventilation / Drainage / Comfort cooling & heating / Domestic Water ) specialist installation.
- Minor Demolitions
- Improved Fire proofing / stopping to protected structure.

- Fire strategy (which follows on from rules established in earlier phases)
- Specification for paints / lighting / sanitary & brass / flooring.

The submitted drawings, markups, photographs and specialist design detail and specifications set out the extent of work.

One area of difference with the previous phases is that the plans show three areas of intervention into the scheduled monument in order to execute the scheme.

The western bedroom on the ground floor needs to have its late (1950s) timber floor lowered to provide level access; it is important to provide inclusive access in this way and very little intrusion will occur in the placing of a new slab and finishes. Excavation will be monitored and will not exceed the top 300mm of earth.

The stair in the clock tower will need a concrete pad and this will be monitored similarly.

The 1950s toilet block slab needs to be broken up and recast. This will also be monitored.

These 3 operations are the subject of a separate application for SMC.

### **Heritage Impact**

The works follow an agreed layout (21/00798/LBC, as modified) and the intention of the submitted documents is to describe their detailed impact. The services routes chosen cause the least harm possible to allow the layouts to be implemented. They follow an already agreed phase of details (23/00707/LBC) in the so-called Abbot's Lodging which sets the tone for this last phase.

Consequently, the interventions 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.