ST CATHERINE'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

REINFORCED AUTOCLAVED AERATED CONCRETE ROOFS URGENT MITIGATION WORKS

HERITAGE STATEMENT DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

NOVEMBER 2023



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1 Introduction

This combined Heritage Statement and Design and Access Statement has been written in support of a planning and listed building consent application for urgent mitigation works at St Catherine's College. These have become necessary due to the exceptional circumstances involving reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) roof planks.

Six buildings were built using RAAC roof planks. There are Staircases 1-8, Staircases 9-16, the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block, which includes the administration areas, SCR, kitchen, plant room and student facilities including the JCR. All of these buildings are included in the 1993 listing, at grade I.

As outlined below, to mitigate the effects of the updated assessment of RAAC roof planks, some urgent works have been undertaken in order that the college could open in time for the start of the new academic year. This has been a major challenge for the staff and contractors involved but due to some key decisions during the summer, the primary objectives have been delivered.

However, the urgent mitigation works are only a temporary solution for the primary objectives of making all of the study bedroom areas safe, providing a temporary kitchen and dining area, and some limited social space. Other than the two residential buildings of Staircases 1-8 and Staircases 9-16, all of the other affected buildings- the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block- have all been declared to be out of bounds for the most part and cannot be entered without permission.

Now that the temporary situation has been established and stabilised, this application for planning and listed building consent is a retrospective application to formalise the current temporary situation. There are also two areas of alterations to paving which have not yet been carried out and permission is sought within this application for those alterations.

Since this is largely a retrospective application, the assessment and impact aspects of the Heritage Statement or the review of the relevant planning policies in this document are not as comprehensive as would normally be the case. This is because due to the urgency of the works in Staircases 1-8 and Staircases 9-16 for safety reasons, the mitigation works had to be what they needed to be to achieve adequate safety. Similarly, to provide the most urgent services due to the loss of the kitchen and dining areas and some social space, the options for locating temporary marquees and a kitchen unit were limited. None of this is ideal and under less exceptional circumstances, the works would not have taken place. Even so, in carrying out these urgent mitigation works, consideration was still given to minimising their impact on the historic building fabric and the site landscaping, with all of the works being reversible, as outlined below. For the alterations to the two areas of paving not yet carried out, a more comprehensive assessment is provided.

With the new academic year underway, the governing body of St Catherine's College are now working towards the permanent proposals for making the RAAC roofs safe. A planning and listed building consent application for this will be submitted as soon as possible.

2 Historical Development And Significance

The origins of St Catherine's College lay in a Delegacy of 1868 for 'unattached' students unable to pay college fees. The students founded a social club, called St Catharine's from the hall where it met, and further clubs adopted the name in its modern spelling. In 1931 the Delegacy became the St Catherine's Society, which appointed Alan Bullock, then Dean of New College, as its Censor or warden in 1952. He quickly recognised that in the post-war era, when increasing numbers of students had grants but the cost of digs was rising fast, the need was for more accommodation. In April 1956 he proposed a new undergraduate college that would be equally balanced between the sciences and the arts, marking a shift towards science at Oxford. St Catherine's College was formally constituted in 1962.

In 1956 Merton College offered 6 acres of Holywell Great Meadow close to the city centre. By 1959 a 7.9 acre site had been secured, bounded to the west by an arm of the River Cherwell canalised in the seventeenth century to serve a flour mill, with road access only from the north. It was an almost featureless field but the surface level of the land had been raised when Oxford City Council used it as a tip in the late 1930s before adding topsoil. Then in the late 1940s the site was used as allotments. Povl Ahm of the engineers Ove Arup and Partners designed the flat Napper's Bridge leading on to the site in 1960-1.

With the establishment of the new college and a site unencumbered by any existing buildings, there was enthusiasm for the new buildings to be of a modern design. A committee was established to find a suitable architect, aided the University Surveyor, Jack Lankester. After a review of 37 English architects, whose work was considered to be tame and a review of American architects, who were thought to be located too far away, Scandinavian and in particular Danish architects were considered. Denmark's social modernism symbolised the egalitarianism that Bullock stood for in Oxford. In Jacobsen's work, design embraced furniture, light fittings and landscape gardening as well as architecture. This homogeneity appealed to Bullock and the committee members and in February 1959 they proposed that in addition to the new buildings, Jacobsen should design furniture and fittings, and also the landscaping. Bullock provided a schedule for the accommodation required, and had views about the general site layout and the preferred construction materials but the architectural language and design of the buildings, fixtures and fittings and the hard and soft landscaping were left to Jacobsen.

The funding for the accommodation blocks came from the University but sponsorship had to be found for the other buildings, with the lecture theatre delayed until funding was provided by Bernard Sunley. After the main college area was completed, the entrance planting was revised by Jacobsen in November 1968 when the gateway was remodelled. It was adapted again after Jacobsen's death when the Alan Bullock and Mary Sunley buildings were built in 1982-3 by Jack Lankester in homage to Jacobsen's style, with the advice of Jacobsen's assistant, Knud Holscher. Subsequently the college has expanded to the north of Manor Road, with buildings by Stephen Hodder from 1994-5, 2002-5 (including a new lodge) and Purcell, 2018-19, (in part extending Hodder's eastern range of 2002-5). These developments are built from a similar palette of materials as the original buildings and incorporate a long lawn and beech hedges that reflect the character of the earlier gardens.

The significance of the Jacobsen designed buildings, fixtures and fittings and the built landscaping features were recognised when they were listed in March 1993.

The main listing is for the area described as the podium, being the raised area that had been the council tip. This listing covers the dining hall, common room blocks (administration block); two residential blocks (staircases 1-16); library; Bernard Sunley Lecture Theatre; bell tower; piers and covering to walkways to east and west of library and east and west of hall; bridge adjoining west side of podium; brick walls enclosing canal and patio areas on western edge of podium; brick walls to patio areas to eastern edge of podium; twenty five short stretches of garden wall all running east-west, some incorporating seats; paving to podium surface and steps to east and south sides.

There are separate listings from March 1993 for the gym, the music house, the brick retaining wall running north from the music house to the bridge to staircase 14, the Master's lodgings, and the bicycle store. All of these listings are at grade I, with group value.

Outside of the area to the south side of Manor Road, the punt house designed by Jacobsen and built in the north-west corner of the site was also listed in March 1993, at grade II.

The whole area of the college to the south of Manor Road (ie also including the Alan Bullock Building and Mary Sunley Building and the maintenance department and laundry building, all designed by Lankester) was also listed as a historic park and garden at grade I in July 1998. Outside of this area, the punt house designed by Jacobsen and built in the north-west corner of the site was also listed in March 1993, at grade II.

The reasons for such a comprehensive listing at grade I were included in the landscaping listed as being for the following principal reasons:

Historic interest: as a physical manifestation of Arne Jacobsen's comprehensive plan for the college, which was constructed entirely anew in the mid-1960s on an undeveloped site.

Design interest: as a highly unusual and complete integration of architecture and landscape, the whole created on a 3m square grid which unifies the buildings and landscape in scale and planning; the refined design includes buildings and landscape as a single, cohesive entity, with an overall concept in design, colours and materials; the landscape includes garden rooms linking the buildings, walls which extend the buildings' form and materials into the landscape, and elements from the landscape are reflected in the buildings; strongly influenced by garden design in his native Denmark, the apparently simple, rational layout of Jacobsen's landscape demonstrates real quality in design and execution.

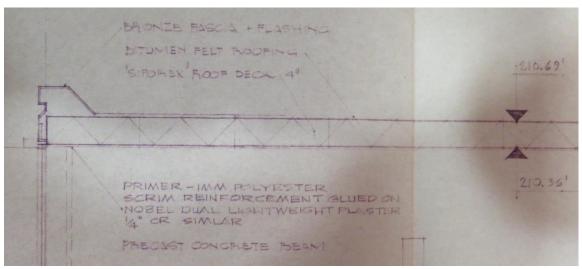
Designer: the work of one of the world's greatest architects and designers of the mid-C20, Arne Jacobsen, who considered it his favourite commission.

Degree of survival: despite some minor changes to areas of planting and paving, the structure of the landscape survives almost entirely, along with much of the original planting scheme, which includes carefully sited specimen trees; it retains its character and the strong identity created by Jacobsen, which also gives it the flexibility to sustain minor alterations.

3 The Need For The Works

It has always been known that the roofs of Staircases 1-8, Staircases 9-16, the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block were built using RAAC planks made by Siporex, as they are shown on the original drawings by Jacobsen, held in the college archive. The roof planks of the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and Administration Block are 4" thick (100mm), the roof planks on Staircases 1-8 and 9-16 are 5" thick (125mm) and the roof planks on the Bernard Sunley Building are 6" thick (150mm). RAAC is a construction material that had obvious appeal to designers, with its light weight, fire resistance, slenderness, and good thermal properties.

In all locations, the ends of the RAAC planks are supported on precast reinforced concrete beams 6" (150mm) wide, so the maximum bearing for the end of each plank is 3" (75mm). However, it is likely that not all of the planks will have this bearing, if they have irregular ends, or if end to end planks were not installed with equal bearings. All of the roof planks were originally covered by an asphalt roof finish or bitumen felt roofing laid directly onto the planks, but these have subsequently been covered with a variety of roofing membrane products in response to leaks.



Detail from a Jacobsen drawing for Wolfson Library roof, showing Siporex roof deck 4"

The College senior management team were aware that the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) had published a guidance document in April 2023, combining much of the technical knowledge and latest advice. This refers to the failure of RAAC planks in a school in 2018, one of the most concerning aspects of which was that the planks failed and fell down without any forewarning of the failure. Subsequent analysis of the evidence suggesting that it was due to shear cracking at the support, combined with potentially misplaced reinforcement bars during their manufacture. It was also during a very hot period, so thermal influences could not be ruled out as a contributing factor. One of the more relevant parts of the IStructE reports mentions that the factor of safety for end bearings should be increased as follows- 'Any bearing less than 75mm would be considered substandard and present an unacceptable risk to panels from shear failure or slippage and remedial actions are recommended.'

The principal concerns with RAAC relate to:

- Corrosion of embedded reinforcement bars, due to water ingress leading to longitudinal cracks
- Excessive deflection caused by overloading and even self-weight only leading to transverse cracks and damage to roofing membranes.
- Panels acting independently of each other rather than as a whole structure.
- Insufficient end bearings leading to tensile cracks beyond or close to the embedded reinforcement bar zone.
- Poorly conceived or implemented openings and penetrations.
- Inappropriate repairs and repair materials.
- Susceptibility to damage during transportation, storage, and installation, and once in-situ, by drilling or fixing into the material due to its brittle nature.

The IStructE recommended that a thorough risk assessment is carried out for all buildings with RAAC planks. This exercise should involve identifying, referencing, and individually assessing each plank, of which there are thousands at St Catherine's College. Part of the initial assessment would be to measure any deflection wherever this was possible and to then categorise the risk of each plank based on all known and assumed factors. It should then be possible to identify priority planks in terms of the risk management based on location and area use, although the possible lack of end bearing would be a constant concern and could put all planks in the highest risk category from the start. Once the risk is assessed, there would need to be a decision made on whether planks could be maintained, temporarily propped, or scheduled for replacement. Clearly the cost and extent of disruption on site would be significant.

There was widespread headline coverage in the media during the summer of 2023 about RAAC roofs in schools and the decision by the Secretary of State for Education to increase the level of safety in schools with RAAC roofs. This was due to another failure earlier in the summer and resulted in some school closures at short notice just prior to the start of the autumn term.

St Catherine's College were already aware of the increased safety concerns due to the IStructE guidance and had engaged the structural engineers, AKS Ward, to carry out an assessment of the affected roofs at the College. The conclusion of the survey was that although the roofs of Staircases 1-8, Staircases 9-16, the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block have remained in place and have not yet deteriorated sufficiently to become a cause for concern, they are now 60 years old, which is now widely accepted as being double their 'useful' lifespan, according to the IStructE guidance.

It was accepted by the College governing body that the risk of plank failure was real, it was unpredictable and should not be ignored. The implications of a failure are obviously potentially catastrophic and therefore the issue had to be acknowledged and addressed. Ultimately the only feasible mid-to-long-term solution will be to replace all of the RAAC plank roofs, to eradicate the risk. Meanwhile, in the short-term, urgent mitigation works had to be undertaken, to ensure the safety of everyone on site.

4 Works Already Carried Out

Firstly, in order to be able to accommodate all of the 160 students who had been allocated second floor study bedrooms in Staircases 1-8 and Staircases 9-16 for the start of term, the RAAC plank roofs had to be made safe. In the study bedrooms, the structural engineer designed a system of timber joists to support each RAAC plank along its centre, with the joists fixed to timber wall plates along the ends of the joists and the wall plates bolted back-to-back through the structural cross walls. In the staircases, a similar approach was adopted, with timber wall plates bolted to the structural walls adjacent to the stairs and along the landing walls and timber joists spanning between the wall plates. The thinner partitions around three sides of the staircases were also given additional stiffening with timber studwork and plywood. These works are shown on the accompanying structural engineer's drawing and in the photographs included on the accompanying architect's drawings.

This design was developed in conjunction with the architect, to minimise the impact on the historic fabric and maximise its reversibility. In the study bedrooms, the structural cross walls are finished with painted hessian, so when the temporary timber joists and wall plates are removed, the holes can be filled and the hessian patched and decorated. In the staircases, the wall plates had to be plugged and screwed to bricks and not into mortar joints, in order to provide the required strength. When the temporary joists and wall plates are removed, the drilled bricks can be carefully removed, turned around and re-pointed but if they break up whilst this is being carried out, replacement calcium silicate bricks are still available and would be used, as they have been for previous repair works within the college.



Temporary timber joists and wall plates installed in a staircase

Secondly, with the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block all being out of bounds, the most urgent need was to provide an area for dining, a kitchen and some limited social space. This has been achieved by installing a marquee and a temporary kitchen on the lawn between the Master's Lodgings, gardeners work area and garages on the west side and the canal on the east side. There is also a marquee to the south of the JCR to provide a social area. At present, there is also a small temporary kitchen located near to the main kitchen but this has been a short-term installation, until the temporary kitchen adjacent to the main marquee was established. These marquees and temporary kitchens are shown in the photographs included below and on the accompanying architect's drawings.



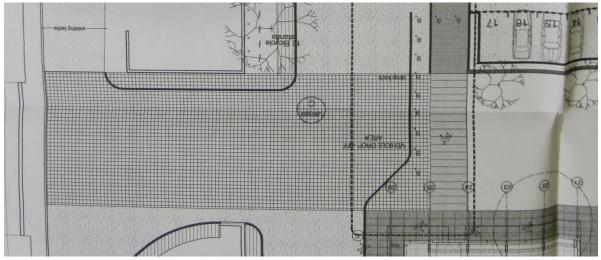
View looking north from bridge to staircase 14

Finally, with the Bernard Sunley Building, the Wolfson Library, the Dining Hall and the Administration Block all being out of bounds, there is no temporary provision for the lecture theatre and smaller rooms of the Bernard Sunley Building, no Library, and the various facilities within the Administration Block. Instead, existing spaces within the unaffected buildings to the north side of Manor Road are being utilised as best as possible but this is not an ideal arrangement and can only be for the short term.

5 Proposals Not Yet Carried Out

With the temporary marquees and kitchens in place and the use of rooms in the unaffected buildings to the north side of Manor Road being utilised for additional uses, the catering staff in particular but other staff as well are moving a lot more food and other materials around the site than previously. This has increased attention on two particular areas of paving in the main entrance area, which have been an issue since their installation, especially for anyone using a wheelchair.

The main entrance area from Manor Road was extensively altered by Stephen Hodder during his works of 1994-5 and 2002-5, to the north side of the Manor Road entrance. The Porter's Lodge (Arumugam Building) and accommodation blocks for Staircases 23-26 in the 2002-5 works were laid out in a north-south line along the eastern boundary of the northern area of the site, with a lawn in front. This lawn was a visual continuation of the lawn and canal through the western area of Jacobsen's buildings. Between the southern end of Hodder's new lawn and the northern end of Jacobsen's lawn, the area of Manor Road and the vehicle access into the southern area was laid with granite setts, designed to be the same width as the new lawn, as shown on the Hodder drawing below. This drawing has been shown inverted, so that north is to the right and thus consistent with the other application drawings. In this orientation, the approach from Manor Road is from the top, the Porter's Lodge is to the lower right and Jacobsen's lawn is to the left.



Extract from Hodder Associates external works hard landscaping drawing 0382 L(90) 001 A

This is an earlier revision of construction issue drawing, with revision A shown here since the later revision D in the college archive was marked up by hand with a variety of coloured pens and consequently is not as clear as this revision A. However, there is no difference to the layout. Although this is a construction drawing, the layout as built varies in two ways. The curved kerb line at the lower edge of the drawing is the lawn and path at the western end of the Mary Sunley Building and as shown on the drawing, the smooth tarmac road surface continues around the kerb and the straight edge of the granite setts does not touch the kerb line. However, as built, the curving kerb line is slightly further west, and meets the straight edge of the granite setts, as shown in the photograph below.



Looking north from bottom left of Hodder drawing above, with Porter's Lodge on right

In addition to the curved kerb of the path and lawn by the Mary Sunley Building meeting the granite setts, it can be seen that the granite setts continue in the area of the road crossing between the path by the Mary Sunley Building to the path along the front of the Porter's Lodge and Staircases 23-26. This area of granite setts is not shown on the Hodder drawing.

Also, on the Hodder drawing above, it can be seen that the granite setts stop at the kerb of the path along the front of the low wall to the Jacobsen lawn. However, as built, there are 11 rows of granite setts forming the surface of the footpath. Further east, the path continues for the full length of the Administration Block, with a continuous edging of 3 rows of granite setts, as shown in the photograph below, looking west along the footpath.

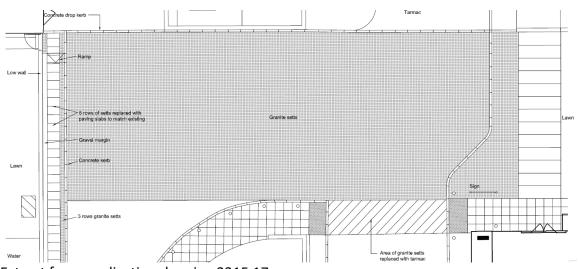


Looking west along footpath in front of low wall to Jacobsen lawn

The reason for outlining these differences between the areas of the granite setts on the construction drawing and the granite setts as installed, is that as built, they have a significant impact on the day-to-day use of the paths. Now that college staff are having to move a lot more food and other materials around the site than previously, it has highlighted the awkward nature of the granite setts surface for wheeling trolleys across. The setts are also difficult for anyone to travel across in a wheelchair. If the area between the paving to the west of the Mary Sunley Building and the Porter's Lodge had a smooth tarmac surface and if the path along the front of the wall to the Jacobsen lawn had the same concrete paving slabs as the rest of the path along the front of the Administration Block, then it would be easier for wheeling trollies or using a wheelchair around the main entrance area, instead of having to lift the trollies over the granite setts or hold onto the food, crockery or other goods on the trolley as it is jolted across the setts. It would also allow wheelchair access around the perimeter of the area of granite setts, which is not possible at present.

Whilst this problem has become more apparent under the current temporary circumstances, it has been an ongoing issue since the granite setts were installed and once the temporary kitchens are no longer required, the catering staff will still be frequently moving trollies of food to events in the Master's Lodgings, to the seminar rooms above the Porter's Lodge in the Arumugam Building or to the Graduate Centre in the Ainsworth Building at the north end of the College. People using wheelchairs would also benefit in the long-term from a route around the granite setts instead of having to travel across them.

Consequently, it is proposed to remove the granite setts in the road area between the path at the western side of the Mary Sunley Building and the Porters Lodge and replace it with a smooth tarmac surface to match the adjacent road surface and to remove 8 rows of the granite setts to the footpath along the wall in front of the Jacobsen lawn and replace them with concrete paving slabs to match the existing ones of the footpath, with three rows of granite setts retained along the kerb, as the existing footpath. These alterations would also have the benefit of giving the area of granite setts a more obvious definition as a continuation of the lawn in front of the Porters Lodge and Staircases 23-25, instead of the visually weaker definition that it currently has, and would then match the Hodder design as approved for installation.



Extract from application drawing 2315 17

6 The Impact Of The Works Already Carried Out

The impact of the works already carried out are difficult to assess in the accepted way, as set out in the Historic England document 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance' (2008). This is because of the exceptional circumstances involving the updated advice for the RAAC roof planks and the need of the College to undertake urgent mitigation works to make areas safe and to still provide some of the services that they needed to, all in time for the start of the new academic year. Under more usual circumstances with a much longer programme, the need for change can be predicted and managed and the impacts of the proposed changes considered in advance of any works being carried out. However, this was not possible due to the updated advice over RAAC roof planks and the urgent need to undertake the mitigation works and provide the temporary marquees and kitchen, in time for the start of the new academic year. In this context, it would be meaningless to retrospectively assess the impact of the works already carried out.

In the national context, there are likely to be very few buildings with RAAC roof planks which are listed and of those, there are unlikely to be many listed at grade I, as at St Catherine's College. So, in the vast majority of cases where RAAC roof planks need to be dealt with, the outcome is likely to be straightforward. At St Catherine's College, in many ways, the problem will be the same as with the vast majority of RAAC affected buildings. However, the outcome will need to be managed much more carefully, not because of the RAAC roof planks themselves but due to the listed status of the buildings. So, the challenge is likely to be more of a design challenge than a constructional challenge.

With these circumstances in mind, it would be of no benefit at this stage to try and assess the impact of the urgent mitigation works already carried out. However, it should be noted that even in the circumstances of the urgent need to carry out the mitigation works, the temporary timber joists and wall plates in the second floor of Staircases 1-16 were designed in collaboration with the architect, to minimise the impact on the historic fabric and make the temporary works reversible, ready for when the permanent solution is designed and any repairs due to the temporary works need to be undertaken.

7 The Impact Of The Proposals Not Yet Carried Out

The proposals not yet carried out are for the alterations to two areas of granite setts in the main entrance area, as described in section 5 above.

Firstly, the area of granite setts between the end of the footpath around the lawn to the west of the Mary Sunley Building and the footpath in front of the Porter's Lodge was installed along with the main area of granite setts in the main entrance area, as part of the project to construct the Arumugam Building and Staircases 23-26 to the designs of Stephen Hodder, in 2002-5. Secondly, the area of 11 rows of granite setts on the footpath along the south side of the main entrance area for the width of the main area of granite setts, was also likely to have been installed at the same time.

It is proposed to remove the granite setts in the area between the end of the footpath around the lawn to the west of the Mary Sunley Building and the footpath in front of the Porter's Lodge and replace them with tarmac, as the adjacent road surface, to improve the smoothness of the surface for staff wheeling trollies of food, crockery or equipment and for any staff or students of the college or visiting public in wheelchairs travelling between the two footpaths. This area of granite setts is outside of the area of the listing for the historic park and garden, although it is within the same context.

It is also proposed to reduce these granite setts to 3 rows along the kerb side and add smooth concrete paving slabs to match the footpath along the front of the Administration Block, to improve the smoothness of the surface for staff wheeling trollies of food, crockery or equipment and for any staff or students of the college or visiting public in wheelchairs travelling along the footpath. This area of granite setts is within the area of the listing for the historic park and garden, although it is on the north side of the Jacobsen wall and clearly part of Hodder's work.

Both areas of granite setts do not appear to be part of the original design as shown on the Hodder construction drawings. The two areas of granite setts visually dilute the linear concept, so the replacement of the granite setts would be more in keeping with the original intentions and the approved drawings.

Overall, as defined in the Historic England document, Conservation Principles, the replacement of the two areas of granite setts is considered to have a low beneficial impact-The development enhances to a minor extent the heritage asset, views of the heritage asset, or the ability to appreciate its significance values.

Together, these two proposed alterations will provide a continuous smooth footpath route around the main entrance area granite setts, which does not exist at present. St Catherine's College takes the issue of inclusive access seriously and it is important that public parts of the College have an accessible design. Replacing the uneven granite setts with a regular smooth surface would remove an unnecessary physical impediment for disabled students, staff and visitors and demonstrate the College's commitment to implementing its equal opportunity policy and legal duties.

8 Accessibility

The doors into the temporary marquees have been provided with ramps with slip-resistant surfaces and have level floors throughout. An accessible toilet is available on the ground floor in the Porter's Lodge and whilst this is not adjacent to the dining marquee and is further away from the social area marquee, it is the best that can be provided temporarily. The proposal to remove some of the granite setts from two areas in the main entrance area and replace them with smooth surfaces will assist access from the marquees to the accessible toilet in the Porter's Lodge and will provide a continuous smooth footpath around the main entrance area granite setts, which does not exist at present.

Other aspects of the urgent mitigation works as carried out do not affect the accessibility of the marquees and other areas of the site still in use.

9 Conclusion

As outlined above, due to the exceptional circumstances of the updated advice over the RAAC roof planks, some urgent mitigation works have had to be carried out at St Catherine's College in time for the start of the new academic year, and retrospective planning permission and listed building consent are now being sought for those works. There are also two areas of alterations to paving in the main entrance area which have not yet been carried out, for which planning permission is sought. These alterations would provide permanent long-term improvements to the accessibility of the main entrance area.

Now that the temporary situation has been established and stabilised and the new academic year is underway, the governing body of St Catherine's College are working towards the permanent proposals for making the buildings with the RAAC roof planks safe and usable again. A planning and listed building consent application for this will be submitted as soon as possible.

In conclusion, the circumstances that have led to the need for the retrospective application have not been ideal but they have been unavoidable. Consequently, the works already carried out and the works proposed should be granted permission.