

**An Archaeological Impact Assessment
of
The City Rooms,
Hotel Street,
Leicester
SK 585 043**

Planning Application 2003/0917

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Summary

*Situated on Hotel Street, Leicester, and comparatively unaltered following its original construction c.1800 and two, subsequent extensions in 1818-1819 and c.1889 respectively the building currently known as **The City Rooms** represents an interesting historical palimpsest in terms of both its name(s) and location. The present title, **The City Rooms** is the third name the building has carried during its two hundred years existence. The initial intention to develop the property as a Hotel failed before its completion and the building became a meeting place that was known as **The Assembly Rooms** for the first 20 years of its existence. In 1819 the building was acquired by the County Magistrates Office who enhanced its residential facilities to serve as the Judges Lodgings, eventually re-naming the premises **The County Rooms**. In 1986 the property was transferred to the City of Leicester authorities and again re-named - **The City Rooms**. And for over 200 years the building has been situated in Hotel Street, a toponym given to the area on the pretext of the original developers intention to build an Hotel there.*

Historical Background and Location

The building currently known as the **City Rooms**, was designed by the Leicester architect, John Johnson, (1732-1814)¹ and completed in 1800. The initial intention had been to develop the site as a Hotel, however financial constraints prevented that ambition being realised and the unfinished building was sold to a group of local gentlemen who, adapted the Ground Floor area for use as a coffee house while the first floor ballroom was used for balls, formal receptions and similar events and the premises became known as the **Assembly Rooms**. When this business venture failed in 1817 the property was acquired by Leicestershire magistrates for use as the Judge's Lodgings during the assizes and quarter sessions. In 1889, Leicestershire County Council acquired the premises for use as a Council Chamber and other local authority business, re-naming the premises the **County Rooms**. For the next ninety-seven years it was known as such, but in 1986 a property exchange between the City and County Councils saw the building transferred to Leicester City Council's property portfolio and its name changed to the **City Rooms**. Paradoxically all that remains of the original intention to develop the building as a hotel is the name of the street in which the **City Rooms** stand – Hotel Street, (*see Fig.1*).

After Johnson's death in 1814 the Leicester based architect, Joshua Harrison is believed to have been responsible for a series of extensions to the original building, c.1817-18, particularly the Market Place extension which is joined to the main building by a single storey link notable for its Tuscan columns *in antis*. The 1st edition of the 25inch Ordnance Survey map of Leicester, (1888)² shows the two extensions onto Market Place South and Horsefair Street, though by that date the Horsefair Street extension had become the County Police Office. Internally residual evidence of the link between the original Assembly Rooms and the Horsefair Street extension is most aptly expressed by a fine, free-standing, staircase with cast-iron balusters which sweeps upwards from a lobby area on the south-east side of the building coming to an abrupt halt against a solid wall, (*see Plate 1*).

Methodology

This Report represents the outcome of a non-intrusive evaluation of the standing fabric of the **City Rooms**, Hotel Street, Leicester, undertaken following a desk-top analysis of a series of plans produced by the Brian Dearlove Partnership, Whetstone, Leicestershire on behalf of their client Naresh Parmar. A list of Plans received forms

Appendix 1 in this report, all room names and numbers are as indicated on the Plans received and are given in the text in *italic*.

Proposed works contained on the plans received are concerned exclusively with the re-development of the Second and Third Floor levels of the property as a small hotel. As no works were identified at either Ground Floor or Basement levels, the Sites & Monuments Record was not consulted on this occasion.

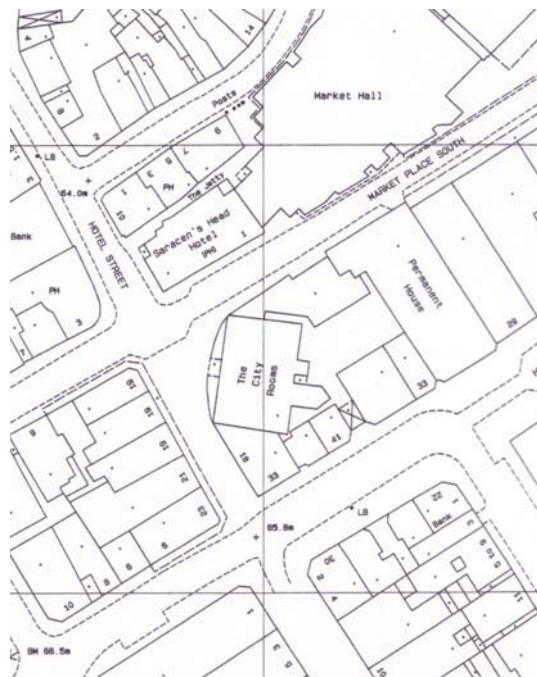


Figure 1: Site Location

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Objectives And Methodology

The principal objectives of this report were to provide interpretative evidence in relation to those areas at Second and Third Floor levels where it was intended to undertake necessary works to enable a series of four, *en suite* facilities to be installed and other works required to ensure the necessary fire security facilities were installed.

The work has been carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologist's Code of Conduct and their *Standard and Guidance for the Archaeological Investigation and Recording of Standing buildings or Structures* and is consistent with Level 2 criteria as identified in the Royal Commission on Historic Building's *Recording Buildings: A Descriptive Specification* (RCHME Third Edition, 1996).

Building Description – 1 – Ground and First Floor levels

The proposed works this Archaeological Impact Assessment is concerned with occur in the ‘private’ and ‘service’ areas of the second and third floors of the property. This Building Description offers a general description of the social concourse areas of the ground and first floors of the property. Information is drawn from the DCMS, Grade I, Listed Building Description,³ Pevsner,⁴ an undated pamphlet entitled “*The Hotel that never was*” produced circa 1987,⁵ and Banner’s study of Leicester.⁶

The City Rooms form a fine classical building with a three-bay, ashlar-faced front and rusticated ground floor into which four windows with flat arches are set. The projecting entrance porch with its heavy entablature is carried on two pairs of Tuscan columns. At first floor level there are three, widely spaced, tripartite windows having semi-circular heads with glazed tympana. The main windows are modern sashes with glazing bars. The central window is flanked by two niches containing figures of female musicians; above the niches are two bas-relief panels of dancing figures. A central stone pediment is alleged to have been reversed to obscure the word ‘Hotel,’ and some of the stonework of the parapet which bore the words ‘Assembly Rooms’ has also been reversed; this work is believed to have been undertaken when the Assembly Rooms were acquired by Leicestershire County Council in 1888. Internally a narrow lobby area leads to the Entrance Hall which has the staircase at its rear, (*see Plate 2*). The stairs start in one flight and return in two. The entire front of the first floor consists of the ballroom which has a shallow tunnel vault, sparing stucco decoration and a series of panels painted by *R. R. Reinagle*.

All other interiors are believed to have been executed by *Joshua Harrison* in 1817-18, when the Leicestershire Magistrates Office first acquired the property. While the small office suite with stained-glass panels situated at a mezzanine level, forming a landing at the top of the initial flight stairs of the main staircase, (*see Plate 2*), is part of a later series of 19th- or very early 20th-century works introduced when Leicestershire County Council owned the property. A ‘service’ staircase, with a block and turned newel, simple moulded handrail and stick balusters, rises through the building from ground to second floor level at the rear, i.e., south-east elevation, (*see Plate 3*). This stair, which is set in its own, separate tower, is lit by the three part sash-window with semi-circular head seen at the rear of the property. The rear elevation also shows an array of sash windows that largely represent the ‘service’ elevation of the original Hotel proposal, (*see Plate 4*), and the later additional block now forming the Kitchens and mezzanine Office

Building Description –2 – Second, Third and Attic Floor levels (*see Figs. 2 and 3*)

The principal elevation of the City Rooms shows ranges of windows at ground and first floor levels. The only feature on the front elevation not previously referred to in the Building Description are a series of four, rooflights providing limited illumination for the series of partitioned areas that are still partially floored over and may originally have served as storage or other accommodation within the roof space. The dimensions of these units, like those of a similar series at the rear of the property, are largely governed by the presence of some extremely long, deal roof trusses and will be discussed in more detail in the Attic Section below. The two central rooflights also open to provide access to the roof. The roof of the outshoots and the front elevation are all of Welsh slate, though in all cases this must be a replacement for earlier

material as Welsh slate would not have been available at the time of building. The rear wall and north gable wall of the building, (Market Place elevation) are raised in English Bond. At the rear, east elevation, there is a substantial range of sash windows at first, second and third floor levels, many of which retain 19th century glass in them.

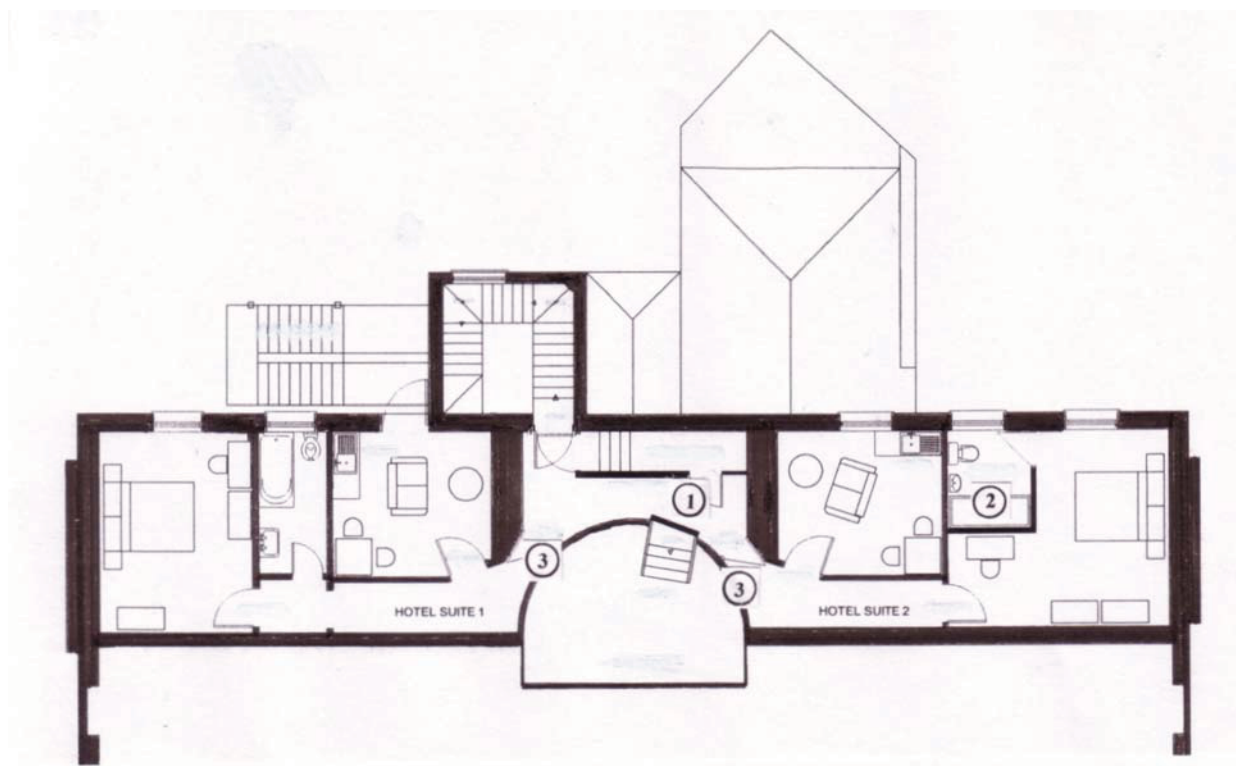


Figure 2 Plan : Second Floor, rear section, showing numbered locations of proposed works.

[Reduced version of original plans ex: Brian Dearlove Partnership, acknowledged]

Second Floor Rooms

Access to the second floor level is solely by means of the rear, ‘service’ stairs that rise from the Ground Floor to a narrow landing at second floor level, the reduced amount of space available at this point being governed by the rear of the semi-circular, orchestra balcony and its access door, (see Plate 5). The rooms on this level all face east and are serviced by a corridor running the full length of the building that has the inner wall of the ballroom along its north-west side.

Third Floor Rooms

Access to the Third Floor is by means of an internal staircase that rises alongside the rear wall of the building from a point directly at the head of the ‘service’ stairs to a narrow lobby area at third floor level. The reduced amount of space at this level is caused by the boxing of the domed head of the semi-circular orchestra balcony rising about 1metre into the lobby area and a flight of stairs that rise to the Attic level. At the head of the stairs rising from second floor level there is a single eight-over-eight

sash window which was originally part of a tripartite arrangement. The narrow side of one part of the window, now blocked, can be seen by the head of the stairs, (*see Plate 6*), the other blocked section is now concealed by a store cupboard containing a hot water cylinder. The rooms at this level all face east and are serviced by a corridor running the full length of the building, on the west side of the corridor there is continuous run of partitioning concealing much of the coving structure of the ballroom ceiling.

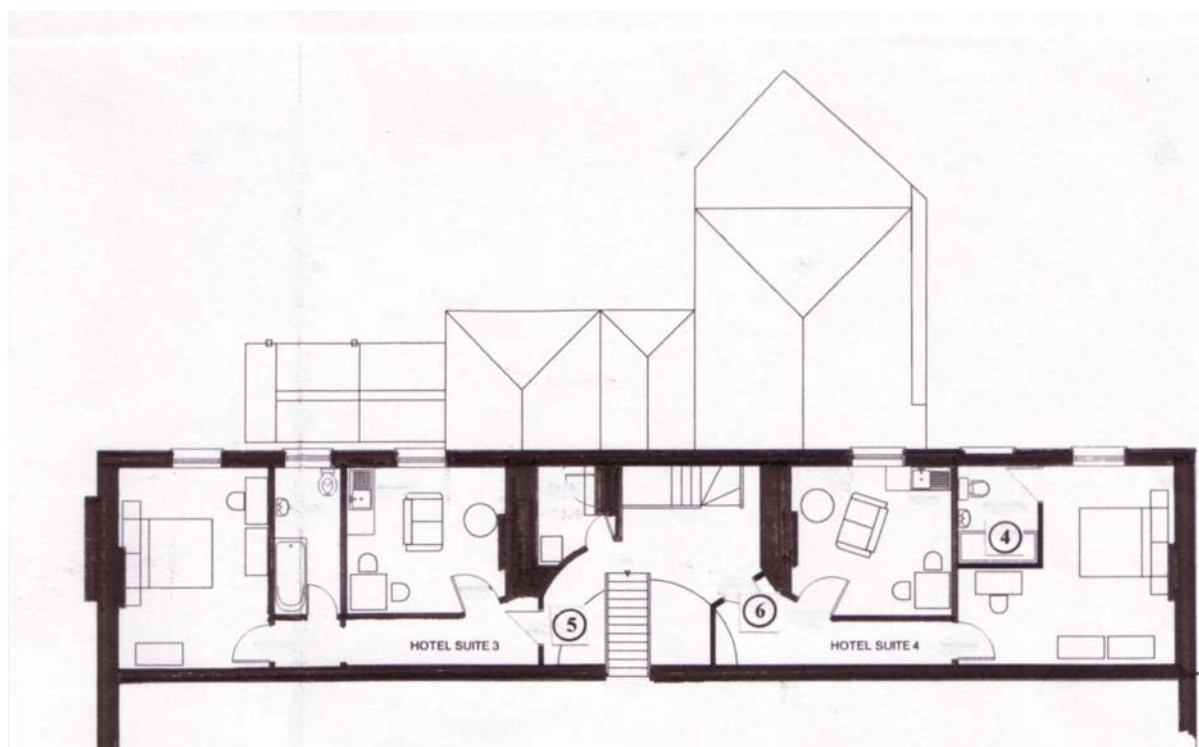


Figure 3 Plan : Third Floor, rear section, showing numbered locations of proposed works. [Reduced version of original plan ex: Brian Dearlove Partnership, acknowledged.]

Second and Third Floor Rooms

All the rooms at both Second and Third Floor level have substantial eight-over-eight sash windows the scale of which give the impression the rooms they lit were part of the intended hotel complex, however the basic nature of the stair access to both floors would indicate they were intended to be part of the ‘service’ rather than the ‘polite’ area of the building.

The rooms on the east side of the building contain a series of original cast-iron fireplaces with relief cast surrounds characteristic of the period 1840-1880, (*see Plates 7 and 8*). It would appear there were originally four rooms on each of the second and third floors, two rooms being located on either side of the central lobby area. On both floors plaster partitions had been installed between the two rooms in the north-east corner of the building and a bathroom installed. This feature was not repeated on the south-east corner on either floor. The variety of bathroom fixtures

made it difficult to establish precisely when this work was undertaken. The earliest fixtures consisted of a $\frac{3}{4}$ -sized, cast-iron bath with taps of late 19th or very early 20th century design on the Second Floor, though the toilet was a 20th-century pattern. At Third Floor level the bathroom suite was of a material and colour popular during the 1960s, being plastic and avocado coloured. The impression is given that the partitioning of these rooms was probably undertaken during the final quarter of the 19th century.

Attic Level

A flight of stairs rise from the landing area of the third floor to a narrow corridor which leads to a centrally located corridor at the Attic level. Two windows, set in the gables at each end of the building light the corridor and a further two windows set into the gables light all four end rooms at this level. A series of doorways on both sides of this main corridor give access to partitioned spaces within the roof area. Four of the partitioned areas on the east elevation of the Attic level have no natural light, while four of the partitioned areas on the west side are lit by rooflights. The size of the partitioned spaces are governed by the extremely long sections of pine trusses forming the roof construction.

A series of five, massive, deal roof trusses support the main roof of the building, (*see Fig.4, below*). The trusses consist of a pair of principal rafters set onto a tie-beam spanning the entire width of the building. Wherever they were visible, the tie-beams, each of which span 16metres, (52 feet), appeared to have a second, tie-beam section strapped to their underside. At approximately one third distance from the rear of the building a vertical stud rises from the tie-beam to the underside of the principal rafter. A diagonal tie, secured to a point on the underside of the principal rafter just above the stud, runs parallel to the line of the principal rafter with its lower end housed onto the topside of the tie-beam. Most of the joint points of these trusses have substantial metal strapping as part of their original make-up.

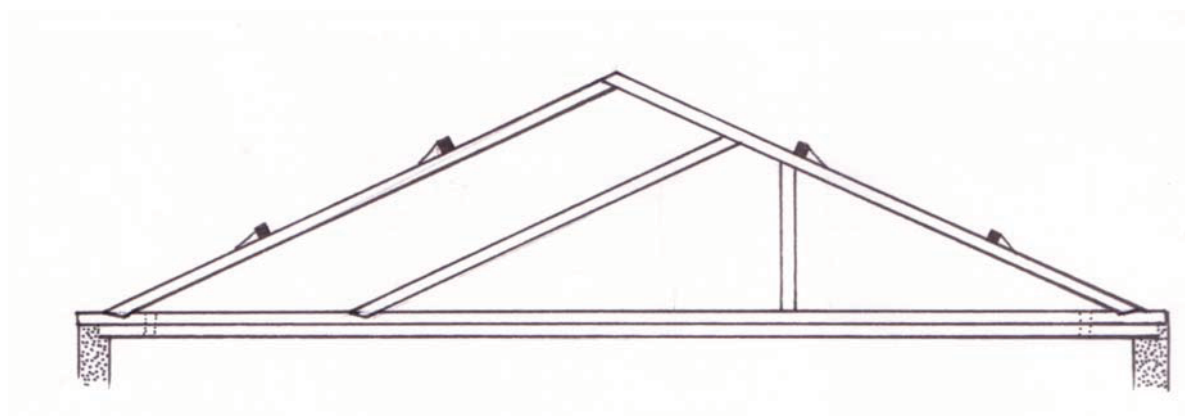


Figure 4 *Indicative Drawing, not to scale, of the roof truss construction of*

The City Rooms, a graffiti sketch of this arrangement occurs on the plaster partitioning of the Attic Corridor.

Archaeological Impact Assessment

Proposed Works at Second Floor

Proposal

1. Consolidation of the panelled screen to the staircase rising from second to third floor level

Comment

This work does not pose a threat to any material of historic significance and by its very nature would be reversible

Proposal

2. Install a partition into the south-east corner bedroom to form *en suite* facilities for this room.

Comment

Modern conservation techniques enable partition to be installed without causing irreversible damage to the historic fabric of the room. More consideration may need to be given in respect of installing the required service runs in this area of the building but no information concerning possible routing has been provided.

Proposal

3. Install New Fire Doors in Corridors giving access to Hotel Suite 1 and Hotel Suite 2

Comment

Installation of Fire Doors in the positions indicated on the Plans are not considered to pose any direct threat to the historic fabric of the building.

Fire Doors are also to be installed to the principal rooms of both Hotel Suites 1 and 2.

Proposed Works at Third Floor

Proposal

4. Install a partition into the south-east corner bedroom to form *en suite* facilities for this room

Comment

As for **2** above.

Proposal

5. Install a Fire Door and screen in access corridor to Hotel Suite 3.

Comment

The installation of mountings to carry the required fire door and screen at this point does not pose the threat of irreversible damage being caused to the historic fabric of the building.

Proposal

6. Install a Fire Door and Screen across the corridor giving access to Hotel Suite 4.

Comment

This proposal seeks to install a corridor Fire Door and a Fire Screen the greater part of which will be situated on top of the lath and plaster-work and boarding protecting the coving of the Orchestra Balcony. Concern is expressed in respect of the nature of the material of the Fire Screen to be installed and the means of creating an effecting barrier without damaging the historic fabric of the Orchestra Balcony.

Fire Doors are also to be installed to the principal rooms of both Hotel Suites 3 and 4

Conclusion

The proposal to bring the Second and Third Floor areas of this property into active use are to be encouraged as a means of ensuring the building remains well ventilated with frequent air changes as a means of combating deterioration of fabric in an inert environment.

The works outlined in the plans received pose virtually no threat to the fabric of this Historic Building, however, as is often the case, the plans received give no indication of the routings of new services that must inevitably be installed if this small hotel unit is to work effectively and this remains a matter for consideration in respect of any Grade I Listed Building.

In a similar context, i.e., impacts on the existing historic fabric that still remain unknown there is also concern over the ability of the present building with or without the proposed works as shown, to meet criteria laid down in recent legislation regarding Disabled Access to public buildings. Such works may have a far more radical impact on the building than the works proposed in the received Plans and it is necessary to urge vigilance in this respect of these matters.

Rob Hayward : David Smith

November 2004

References

1. Curl, J. 1999 *Dictionary of Architecture* OUP p.349
Records *John Johnson* 1732-1814 In 1782 became Surveyor to Essex County
2. LLRRO Ordnance Survey 1st edn 1:25000 map: XXXI.10 1888
- 3 DCMS Listed Building Description
7. Pevsner, N & E. Williamson 1984 *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire & Rutland* Penguin. p.222
8. 'W.W.' n.d. *The Hotel that never was* Leicester City Council
6. Banner, J. 1998 *Out And About in Leicester*

Plates



Plate 1 Cast iron balustrade with moulded handrail rising from Ground floor lobby area to blocked doorway at First Floor Level



Plate 2 Main staircase rising from Entrance Hall to mezzanine level where an office was installed in the late 19th century



Plate 3 Service staircase rising from ground to second floor, showing stick balusters with block and turned newel posts, and part of the large sash window that lights this flight of stairs.



Plate 4 Rear view of the City Rooms showing the brick outshoot for the service staircase with deep sash window and later brick outshoot additions for the kitchen block and mezzanine office. Also shows the array of sash windows on this elevation.



Plate 5 Second floor corridor at point where the Fire Door is to be installed. The curved section on the extreme right is the partitioning of the orchestra balcony.



Plate 6 Detail of two parts of the tripartite window set at the head of the staircase rising from second to third floor. The eight-over-eight sash window is the central feature and the section to the right originally had a narrower four-over-four fixed window, now blocked.



Plate 7 and Plate 8. Two chamber fireplaces retained in the upper floor rooms, the earlier fireplaces with elevated grate and side panels (see left) is probably *c.* 1840, the other fireplace (right), with decorated draught control hood and transfer blue tiled surround is probably *c.* 1860/70

APPENDIX 1

Plans Received:

ex: **Brian Dearlove Partnership**
Grange Business Park
Enderby Road
Whetstone
Leicester

Ref: Drawing No: 3288 / 100 *Survey – Ground, First, Second, Third Floor Plans*

3288 / 101 *Survey – Elevations, Basement Plan and Fourth Floor Plan*

3288 / A *Sketch Scheme*

Fieldnotes from visit: 27th October 2004

[1] 3rd Floor Lobby Area - proposed location of a two firewalls and associated Fire doors for two bedrooms at this level -

In the present proposals the stairs leading up from the 3rd Floor to the 4th floor - roof area, remain exposed and are not to be enclosed or altered in any way.

[2] On the wall on the right hand side of the stairs leading up to the 4th Floor there is residual evidence in the form of a vertical section of an oil-printed wallpaper, approx Xmm wide, that had subsequently been covered by a plaster partition, now removed. (scrolls in pattern + photographed)

[3] Room to right of staircase at this level (3rd floor) has a cast-iron fireplace in it - this is in a the only position where a lift access for this floor might be installed. (fireplace photographed)

[4] At end of building there is a very fine cast-iron fireplace with basket complete. With slate casing to it. Bed is shown in this position on plan received. (photographed)

[5] Fireplace end room Horsefair Street (photographed) this room has bath facility to be installed in corner of room. Wooden floor.

[6] ** Windows are originals sashes and have retained a lot of original glass in them. This point is relative to all the rooms within the part of the building to be converted.

[7] Building is raised in English Bond brickwork at rear and on Market Place elevation - main elevation is concealed

[8] Outshoot features have Welsh slate roofs – roof of main building is not known and cannot be seen from any vantage point.

[9] Stair that goes nowhere - very good quality cast-iron balusters