

Statement of Significance: Luttrell Arms, Dunster

Significance of the Building complex

The Luttrell Arms is a Grade II* Listed building, statutorily designated as a building of more than special interest, of particular historical importance, with certain features, either architectural or interior details of note; of increased historical importance and worthy of individual description and therefore protection. Therefore the building has already been identified as significant, of national importance to the heritage of the country.

There are a number of reasons for this statutory recognition: the building is of multiple phases of construction with period details from the medieval to the modern era. This gives us a detailed insight into the development of architecture and building design. The raising of ceiling heights, changes in window styles and size, roof construction forms and the changing fashions of decorative schemes can be experienced as you move through the various elements within the building complex. The building also reflects the financial progress of the town and to some extent Exmoor; with significant work being undertaken in the early 17th century, when the main front block was constructed and again in the 19th century, when the building complex was significantly expanded and all of the service buildings constructed. The early work is connected to the Luttrell family and the ownership of the building by George Luttrell, with a plaque on the front of the building recording the significant works he undertook in the 1620s. The Luttrells were a powerful local family, owning Dunster Castle, as well as holding national importance within politics, notably during the Civil War. The association of the building with the family therefore provides two levels of significance for the building; as an architectural example of the fashions of early 17th century construction, with grand plaster ceilings and decorative overmantles; and a cultural resonance with an association with a known family who appear in the national historical records with frequency and import.

As a hotel in the 19th century the Luttrell Arms was clearly responding to public demand and consequently providing additional accommodation and entertainment space. The town of Dunster and the surrounding area was obviously busy in this period; indeed Exmoor underwent considerable work in the 19th century with the reclamation of moorland areas and improvement and expansion in farming under the Knight family and the creation/construction of a few large estates. The outbuildings are fine examples of this 19th century expansion of domestic offices within both private and public buildings, often found in the West Country and particularly Exmoor during this time. The coach, house, stables, workshops and staff cottages show the complex was self-reliant, with large numbers of staff providing a complete service to their guests. They also show the consideration and importance laid on appearance and presentation, even in service buildings, in the 19th century, with dressed stone frontages to the cottages and coach house range. The complex also represents the development of the antiquarians and recognition for the value of architectural pieces, as there are a number of historic features within the complex as a whole, such as the fine timber windows in the main bar, which are clearly historical salvage, either from a building disturbed on the site during the 19th century works or possibly removed from Dunster Castle, which also underwent extensive 19th century work. Although possibly not in their original position or even original to the structure these key pieces have been collated and inserted into the space, creating a fascinating mix of styles and in itself representing the later 19th century admiration of the medieval age and medieval artefacts.

Aside from its architectural merits, the significance of the Luttrell Arms complex also lies in its survival, age, preservation and the fact it can still be experienced and enjoyed today by the public, in continual use as a historic public house and hotel; a function which it has undertaken since the mid-17th century.

Areas affected by proposed works

The proposed works due to take place at the Luttrell Arms, Dunster will have a direct, physical effect on six different structures in the complex of buildings.



Figure 1: Phased plan showing the existing ground floor and proposed tunnels. Note the Skittle Alley is at first floor level.

Coach House and Workshop

The Coach House and Workshop form a key part of the major 19th century makeover of the Luttrell Arms complex. The exterior appearance of these buildings is where their architectural value lies, and they add value to the complex as a whole. The large, arched doors are a key feature of this group as are the small windows of the attached workshop (formerly a tack room?) which informs of the different uses of the space. There are also loading doors leading into the first floor of the workshop, in its west elevation, although this floor has since been removed. There are no obvious fittings within

the interior of the workshop and coach house apart from the chimney in the south elevation of the workshop.

The stripping and clearing of the building during the works may give a better idea of the former use of the workshop and its chimney as they are currently quite obscured. The proposals appear to retain all of the historic walls of these buildings, with one opening being forced in the western end of the south wall, adjacent to the chimney. The ground floor will remain essentially the same, with the workshop becoming the entrance to a spa facility in the adjoining Coach House. The small garden to the south will be excavated to create a lobby and toilets. To the south east of this area is a recently restored mid-18th century pottery kiln and activity associated with this may be revealed during the development works in this area. The proposed works for this area appear to be considered and sensitive and the exterior of the buildings, where their real significance lies, will remain unchanged.

Northern Retaining Wall

To the north of the site is a retaining wall built of stone, most likely built in the 17th century and showing signs of several phases of repair throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Concrete block and brick patching can be seen, along with various types of mortar, including pink lime and modern cements. Along the wall the scars left following the demolition of former buildings that had been built up against it can be seen, these buildings were most likely 19th century in date. The angle of the wall in relation to the main street suggests that this wall could have a medieval origin, constructed to outline burgage plots. The wall is of fairly minimal significance as it has been altered and repaired many times, which has changed its appearance and structure. The proposed development will include breaching the wall in two, limited locations. This will leave the majority of the wall intact, while providing the possibility for more accurate dating of the structure and the possibility of recovering finds within or below the structure. The extensive underground excavations proposed to the rear of the wall also provide the possibility for dating and further understanding the dating and construction of this structure.

Skittle Alley

The skittle alley is a late 19th or early 20th century structure in very poor condition. The walls are a mixture of brick patched with concrete block and in some sections to the north, boarded or corrugated sheeting. The exterior walls are mostly rendered in a cement render. It has a shallow pitch roof of bolted A-frame trusses, with raised collars, with through and through purlins and a thin on-edge ridge pole. The roof is covered in corrugated sheeting. The building holds little to no significance.

At the east end of the Skittle Alley is a wall, which lies on a different alignment, following the line of the stone boundary wall. This is constructed of stone, patched with brick and has one, small opening with a thick timber lintel and sloping sides, presumably the remnant of an earlier service building most likely from the 18th century phase of development. The proposed works will see the demolition of the skittle alley, excavation of a large store and tunnel, and construction of a long, low building on the site of the skittle alley to function as a bar. It would appear that the section of wall to the east of

the skittle alley will be retained and incorporated into the new building. The demolition of the skittle alley and excavation of the store and tunnel will allow the opportunity to expose remains of earlier phases of the site.

Staff Areas

The Staff Areas occupy an early 19th building fronting the High Street, which adjoins an extension of the main block. The building was constructed to accommodate a dancehall or ballroom on the first floor. The ground floor most likely had a service or storage function. This ground floor was completely overhauled in the late 20th century in order to provide a number of small staff bedrooms and toilets for the public bar in the south west end. Any historic features which may survive are completely obscured by modern plaster- or chipboard. The building is significant as it portrays part of the early 19th century phase of the Luttrell Arms development. The majority of this significance, however, is in the first floor and external features, therefore the proposed work will not have a negative impact on this structure and may expose historic features which could provide further insight into the original purposes and uses of the ground floor.

Service Courtyard

To the north of the main block of the building between the older building and the 18th/19th century buildings lies the Service Courtyard. It is accessed via large double doors off the High Street and has a cobbled surface. It provides access to the public bar and associated dining room and is dominated by a spiral fire escape. The courtyard contains the rear of a 16th to 17th century chimney stack, which serves the fireplace in the main bar. It is proposed that the current fire escape is removed and replaced with a fire escape along the north wall which will adjoin the extant fire escape running along the east wall. This will open up the courtyard and provide light, as well as making the historic chimney a more prominent feature in the courtyard and allowing the phases of the buildings around the courtyard to be better observed and understood. A glazed roof will be installed to provide cover for the courtyard. During this stage of development there will be an internal staircase installed inside the housekeeper's room in the northwest corner of the courtyard and within the 19th century structure. The area has been heavily modernised and does not have much significance, save for its external appearance. One of the late 19th century windows will be forced in this area to accommodate the new fire escape walkway.

Store

To the east of the main building complex, set into the bank of Dunster Steep, the hill around which the building is built, is an underground storeroom. This dates to the 19th century expansion of the service sections of the building complex and presumably provided cold food and wine storage on a larger scale. The building is of stone, with a brick arched roof, accessed via a double door in its western end. This leads into the passage which connects with the main courtyard and kitchens, to the south and south-east. The building has been modernised internally to provide storage and its architectural details are basic and functional, with no direct historical significance to the structure

itself. The building is relevant as part of the substantial 19th century makeover of the complex as a whole and therefore how it relates to the other service buildings as a cohesive development and expansion. The structure is to be minimally altered by the development as the underground tunnel will enter through its north-west corner, breaching the historic fabric. The store will fundamentally change in its use and it will no longer be a single access secure space but will have a mixed use, with the existing space being sub-divided; although since the majority of the historic structure remains untouched, the impact is minimal.

Conclusion

The structures that will be altered as part of the proposed works are of varying dates and levels of significance. The Skittle Alley and associated retaining wall, which will be the most impacted, are of the lowest architectural significance. Conversely, the highest significance lies with the Coach House and Barns, and the development here will be the most sensitive and leave the buildings virtually unchanged externally.

It is recommended that where walls will be breached or the ground will be excavated, a program of archaeological monitoring should take place. Such works may contribute to a greater understanding of the complex, its phases and historic uses.