

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN
IMPACT ASSESSMENT
OF
RYCOTE WOOD COLLEGE,
THAME,
OXFORDSHIRE**

On behalf of

Berkeley Homes (Oxford & Chiltern) Ltd

OCTOBER 2005

REPORT FOR Berkeley Homes (Oxford & Chiltern) Ltd
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1 PLANNING BACKGROUND

The Rycotewood College site, formerly the Thame Union Workhouse (NGR SU 701 064) has been acquired by Berkeley Homes (Oxford & Chiltern Ltd) for conversion to residential accommodation. As a requirement of the planning process, an assessment has been requested to evaluate the historic significance of the surviving fabric.

The previous work carried out on the site include: A Historic Building assessment by Oxford Archaeology (June 2004) involving study of all available historic maps and plans, together with a documentary search.

This was followed by a Level 3 recording action (RCHME 1996) involving an on-site investigation undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services (2004) to examine the standing building fabric, assess the development of the site over time and to determine the uses and circulation of the buildings, in order to determine age and function.

In addition to this a full photographic record was made of the building as it stands to assist in the understanding of the significance of the buildings and the development of the site over time. This included:

- A room-by-room photographic survey with the photographic locations shown on the floor plans to be included in the site archive.
- Internal and external general and detail photography, including a record of surviving period detail.

A drawn record was made involving the production of scaled plans showing the location of features significant to the buildings original function and subsequent development.

This assessment makes use of the previous reports in order to assess the historic layout of the site but does not attempt to repeat the detailed information contained therein.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

An analysis of the building has been requested to assess the significance of the surviving fabric in order to provide sufficient information to allow Planning Services at South Oxfordshire District Council to assess the likely impact of the new proposals on the special character of the building.

3 ASSESSMENT OF ORIGINAL AND HISTORIC SURVIVAL OF THE BUILDING FABRIC

3.1 The Western range:

The external fabric of the western range of the former workhouse has good survival of original fabric, windows and early historic insertions. On the whole, the eastern elevation is the most intact with most of the windows in situ from the original design, three were added within the first fifteen years of occupation. The only modern feature within the elevation was the inserted door (within original opening) and the late porch arrangement.

Survival is also good within the western elevation; of twenty-three openings, only four are not historic or original to the structure. The modern insertions include one window at ground floor level and three on the second floor. This indicates an increased level of alteration to the internal space at second floor level, probably due to conversion from open-plan to smaller units.

3.2 The Eastern range

Again external survival of the fabric of the building is fair to good. The eastern elevation shows survival of three quarters of the original or historic windows. The western elevation has six modern intrusions, three of which are replacements within historic breaches in the fabric. The remaining thirteen are historic or original. Eight original windows occur in the elevation to the north of the spoke, providing a more intact fenestration in this location. The elevation to the south of the spoke also bears a modern stair tower, which blocks a further two window openings of at least historic origin.

3.3 The West Spoke

The southern elevation of the western spoke has four surviving basket arches of which three contain original/historic windows; the fourth had been altered to provide access to the college reception. There is a modern door at ground floor level. All six windows of six are original at first floor level and there is an original or historic window in the ground floor. The survival of original fabric and features on this elevation is good; the slightly altered arrangements within the basket-arched openings did not breach further historic fabric.

The northern elevation has five out of eight original or historic windows, the remaining three being modern insertions. The ground floor had been subject to extensive alteration in the 1990s with the addition of a large extension abutting the ground floor elevation. Some early fabric remains, but alterations occur in the form of blocking and breaches to create different circulation within a building converted to a different use. Overall the survival to the western spoke is fair to good on the first floor, average to ground floor and once again, the better survival occurs to the southern elevation.

3.4 The East Spoke

Of the four basket arches in the southern elevation, two have been altered. In addition to this, two current windows are situated within altered fabric. The first floor fares better in that all six windows are in situ originals.

The northern elevation at first floor level has less than half the original windows in situ. Of seven, only three are historic or original, relating to the original function as a workhouse. The ground floor was also subject to much alteration with changes in the circulation echoing that found in the west spoke. The arches are still in situ to the rear but the modern extension obscures historic detail. There is less than fifty percent survival of historic features on this northern elevation.

3.5 The Northeast range

This two-storey block is of historic origin, not an original construction as part of the design of the workhouse, but a later addition to it. The west facing fenestration bears much evidence of alteration, however, the three first floor windows are historic in origin, and the doorway is modern. The later addition of an upper storey, also historic in origin, had six windows, three each on the western and eastern elevations. All six windows are of historic original and are probably contemporary with the construction of the upper floor. Overall, the survival of historic (but not original) fabric in this building is very good, with only minor blocking of earlier openings at ground floor level, breached by the insertion of a modern doorway.

3.6 The Southwest range

The survival of historic fabric on the eastern elevation of this one storey building is good: there are four windows of original origin; an early door has been blocked. The chamfered end of this range had been altered, the original features replaced with modern alternatives. The western elevation has four windows of historic origin and no modern intrusions. Overall this building has a good rate of survival, with the original features once again surviving on the eastern elevation. The chamfered area to the south has modern intrusions, leaving poor survival in this particular area of historic fabric and features.

3.7 The Kitchen range

The western elevation has been much altered, and the surviving fabric has been further compromised by the addition of modern extensions. Two historic windows survive on the western elevation; one modern intrusion and much additional alteration where the kitchen range and hub meet. The eastern elevation has a single modern window. In general, the kitchen range is externally much modified historically, where it meets the hub on the western side, and in modern times with the insertion of windows and addition of extensions. The survival rate of original features is therefore poor, but may improve should the modern extensions be removed.

3.8 The Hub

Overall, the Hub has the greatest survival of historic fabric and detail. At ground floor level three of the four windows are historic insertions, the remaining window is original. The northern elevation bears its original window locations, albeit blocked to facilitate the addition of the 1990s extension. Circulation between the west and east spokes was modified historically, by blocking up the access, and further altered on the western side in modern times.

At first floor level, all windows are original; the doorways are original, although the doors are modern. The survival rate at first floor level is excellent.

At second floor level two of the four corner windows are original, those situated to the west; the northeastern window was modern in origin, the southeastern had been converted to a doorway for fire escape access. The survival of original features here is fair.

3.9 The Entrance Hall

The small entrance hall has good survival on the southern elevation. The fenestration is intact and original. The elevations to the east and west had been altered when the adjoining structures were removed. The current east and west fenestrations are of unknown origin but are in keeping with the surviving southern elevation.

3.10 The Basement

As is often the case, survival of early period detail and layout is best observed in the roof or in the basements and cellars of the historic properties. This is the case with the workhouse. The basement is of brick and retains period detail, some obscured by later 1950s conversion. In general the survival is good of historic fabric, but the structural condition is poor.

4 ASSESSMENT OF SURVIVAL OF INTERNAL LAYOUT

4.1 The Western range

Some of the current centrally located partitioning at ground floor level may be the remains of earlier features within this range, in addition to two chimneybreasts. The first floor of the west wing had no trace of original internal layout with the exception of a single chimneybreast. The second floor of the west wing also had no trace of original internal layout with the exception of the fireplaces. The Historic Building Record (JMHS 2004) details the implications of the remains in terms of probable historic layout, and should not be duplicated here. The surviving chimneybreasts suggest some internal divisions that have not survived the conversion to college.

4.2 The Eastern range

A single partition towards the northern end of this range at ground floor level may be the remains of a workhouse feature. No internal features survive in the first floor of this wing. Only a single, triangular in plan, chimneybreast remains in situ on the second floor, which may indicate a more open plan original layout. No further historic features survived.

4.3 The West Spoke

No indications of any earlier internal divisions were visible within the ground floor of this spoke. Some partitioning survived in the first floor of this range, in the eastern half of the spoke. No further indications were visible of earlier interior arrangements.

4.4 The East Spoke

No indications of any earlier internal divisions were visible within the ground floor of this spoke. At first floor level, no indications were visible of earlier interior arrangements.

4.5 The Northeast Range

No internal arrangements were visible within this building at ground or first floor level, a later construction to a later block, this building was probably designed for a specific function and may never have had detailed interior divisions.

4.6 The Southwestern range

No indications of any earlier internal divisions were visible within the interior of this range.

4.7 The Hub

The current ground floor layout of the hub has been altered, however, a number of key structural elements survive in situ. The current layout of the first floor of the hub and the partitioning within the second floor of the hub is believed to be original.

4.8 The Entrance Hall

The partitioning in situ within the entrance hall is of modern original; no trace of any earlier division of space was discernible.

4.9 The Kitchen Range

Although some key features survive within the kitchen range (such as the roof lantern), no earlier divisions of space were noted. Access to the basement,

originally to be had from the kitchen, was blocked during the college conversion but the staircase is still in situ and can be seen from the basement.

5 SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC FABRIC SURVIVAL

The main survival of the original and historic fabric of the workhouse is to be seen on the external elevations, the roof structures and the basement. In these areas, survival is generally good. Many of the windows are original or historic and reflect the layout to some extent of the interior of the buildings.

In general, the elevations facing in towards the hub have a higher degree of survival. The highest degree of survival to be seen is in the eastern and western ranges, and of course, the central hub. Where alterations have been made, much is in the form of blocked openings and less breaches to the fabric. Many of the original window and door locations are visible within the current layout. The most significant impact to the historic fabric occurs to the ground floor northern elevation, where the 1990s extension was situated. Overall the survival of the original and historic fabric on the exterior of the workhouse is high.

The internal arrangements are more difficult to assess. This is partly due to the college conversion and modern improvements since that date. In addition to this, early plans are only available for the ground floor, so comparisons do not exist for the upper levels. However, in many instances, particularly towards the top of the building, few if any features were to be found in the original workhouse layout. Dormitory accommodation was predominantly open plan, and in some case consisted of little more than a platform to sleep on. In the light of floor plans and architect's models from other contemporary structures, it is probable that few internal divisions existed, and therefore, the absence of indications at Rycote should not be taken to mean the removal of original features.

To summarise, the shell of the workhouse has good historic survival, the interior contains few indications of earlier layout. The hub is an exception, and it is there that the greatest survival of period detail can be seen.

6 THE IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED ALTERATIONS ON THE SURVIVING FABRIC

The proposed alterations to convert the college to private housing are sympathetic, taking into account the original and early development of the building. It is the intention of the client to make an informed design, based on the original building plans. Where internal divisions are required, it is the intention of the client to design them along the lines of the layout of the workhouse patterns of circulation, making use of a more open-plan layout. In addition, the client is aiming for symmetry, with the eastern ranges echoing that of the western, as would have been the case in the original segregated architect designed workhouse.

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