

Enhancement of Conservation Areas

MT/CONS

Meeting 25 September 2015 at 2.00

Notes for Item 3: Conservation Area Issues and Problems

Redlands Conservation Area

1. Redlands Conservation Area does not have any formal group or Association and I have been asked by the local Neighbourhood Action Group, which includes this area, to submit comments to this meeting.
2. I qualify as I have been a resident in this area for nearly 40 years and have practiced as an architect until I retired 9 years ago. I have carried out several projects in Reading and these include work in Redlands CA, two others and I was lead architect employed by Reading BC for the Town Hall restoration and alterations from start to finish.
3. Redlands Conservation Area Appraisal was published in March 2008 and follows the format advised by English Heritage. I have read this carefully and much of the content is still applicable apart from some policies which have changed since. If anything the Area is in a stable condition and in parts has improved. This results from:
 - Redlands has a high proportion of responsible owners many of whom have made positive improvements to properties in private ownership.
 - Problems, pressures and issues noted in paragraph 6.10 of the Appraisal are unchanged and still need attention.
 - The pressure on housing in Redlands Ward as a whole is great and some single properties converted to Houses in Multiple Occupancy. The Council put in place an Article 4 Direction in parts of Redlands which came into force in May 2013. As far as I can tell this has been effective within the Conservation Area although the Council has dealt with a number of applications for change of use within the Article 4 area and indicated that an early review is required. I support this.
 - Like many similar parts of Reading on street car parking is a major problem. Upper Redlands Road has had a Residents Parking Scheme since 2005-6 but in spite of several changes it remains hazardous. On 15 September 2014 the scheme was extended to include New Road and the effect has been remarkable and positive. Whilst such schemes do not form part of mainstream conservation this area now feels like a conservation area as the buildings can be seen. The downside is that there will be further pressure on Marlborough Avenue and Elmhurst Road which are in the same Conservation Area but declined to participate at that time.
 - There are two major institutions in or close to this area, namely The Royal Berkshire Hospital and the University of Reading. Whilst neither impacts directly on the fabric of the Conservation Area they both suffer from inadequate accommodation and car parking on site which, in turn, increases the pressure on the building stock and roads in Redlands CA.
4. Problems:

It will be evident from the above that Redlands CA is generally in 'good shape'. I have noted some areas for action in 6.10 of the Appraisal where nothing has happened. I do not propose to recite them here and it is very likely that such items will apply to most Conservation Areas in the town. However these matters should not be left any longer.

There is one particular characteristic that requires attention now. One notable feature of this Conservation Area is the extensive brick walling that divides or encloses the various properties from each other and from the highways. A major reason why these are here is because Reading is renowned for its brickworks and the variety of ways in which brick has been used. This may seem like a small issue but it is not. Here are relevant reasons:

- Two planning applications were submitted to and refused by this Council. The first was at 37 Upper Redlands Road by the West Berkshire Health Authority in 1992 and the second in the rectangle enclosed by Redlands Road, Upper Redlands Road and New Road. The latter was a major proposal by the University of Reading in 1996. Both applicants appealed to the Secretary of State and both appeals were dismissed.
- In each case the Inspectors remarked on this aspect of the Conservation Area and one noted “*..and the red brick walls which are a particular feature of the area.*” The Council has also recorded this as a “*positive contribution*” in its general comments included in the 2008 Appraisal.
- At the time of the Appeals PPG15 was the main Government Guidance and walls such as these required Conservation Area Consent before demolition. Later in that decade the Government issued a Ministerial Circular which effectively removed that protection. This was a major change.
- What is the current situation? The Government has issued a Direction titled: **THE CONSERVATION AREAS (APPLICATION OF SECTION 74 OF THE PLANNING (LISTED AND CONSERVATION AREAS) ACT 1990 - DIRECTION 2015**. This came into force on 15 April 2015. In Paragraph 4 titled: **Buildings to which section 74 of the Act does not apply** and in subparagraph (b) excludes the need to apply for permission to demolish walls, gates, fences etc. other than those above a modest height and there is no requirement to reinstate.
- Another aspect is the age of these walls. Most are well over 100 years old and up to 150 years. These walls are valuable to the Conservation Area but given their age are becoming dangerous as the foundations are slim and the walls built of lime mortar. Evidence of failure, instability and rebuilding is available. There is no requirement to rebuild however and this can be expensive.
- Much the same argument applies to enclosures at the front of properties facing the highway.

The questions which follow are:

- Is my understanding of the Direction 2015 correct?
- Given that Article 4 Directions can be made when the “*..the character of an area of acknowledged importance would be threatened..*” I request that an Article 4 Direction be made to cover all items listed in bullet points 4 and 5 above regarding enclosures and especially brick walls in the Redlands Conservation Area. Please comment.

Michael Thomas

24 September 2015