

Cobh Town Hall

Roger Casement Square, Ringmeen, Cobh, Co.Cork.

Conservation Report - Heritage Impact Assessment:



Cobh Town Hall.

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1.0 Introduction:

Design Forum Conservation were engaged by RKA Consulting Engineers and Cork County Council to assist in preparing a Heritage Impact assessment and conservation report for this property, to support a Part 8 application for alterations at ground floor of the building below the Cobh Library, to introduce an E- hub, workplace.

The only area of the building impacted by the current proposed development is the right ground floor wing as outlined in fig 3. below, and there are no proposed additional works at this point. This work is internal in the existing building and including the existing rear flat roofed extensions behind.

This report however has also taken a brief overview of the overall building, and issues to be monitored and potentially looked at in future.

Initial site visits/inspections took place on 13th October 2023 was carried out by:

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2.0 Background

2.1 Historical context summary.

The building is located in the centre of Cobh, overlooking Casement Square and the 'West Beach' and Cork Harbour below to the South. The building was originally the Cobh Town Hall, built c. 1852 and now accommodates the County Council Library, Cobh tourist office and Cobh Chamber offices.

Following Philip De Barry's arrival in the 1170's the Smith/Barry family dominated Cobh and its surroundings for over seven centuries. Residing at Fota House they were responsible for a number of iconic local buildings including the Cobh Town Hall and market house which opened in 1852. The builder James Smith Barry 1816 -1856 also created the formal gardens at Fota House.

On its voyage from New York to Liverpool on May 7, 1915, The Lusitania, was struck by a torpedo from a German u-boat, 12 miles off the coast of the Old Head of Kinsale.

There were 1962 people on board the ship, with only 764 surviving the impact. The ship sank within 18 minutes. Many of the bodies were brought ashore apparently to this building which acted at the time as a temporary Morgue.

The building has some significant upgrade in more recent years, to accommodate the current uses, and the ground floor Eastern wing has been in partial uses for some time as a library store.



• Fig 1. Site location.



• Fig 2. South Elevation and view up 'West View' road.



• Fig 3. Aerial view with building in lower left side overlooking Casement Square.



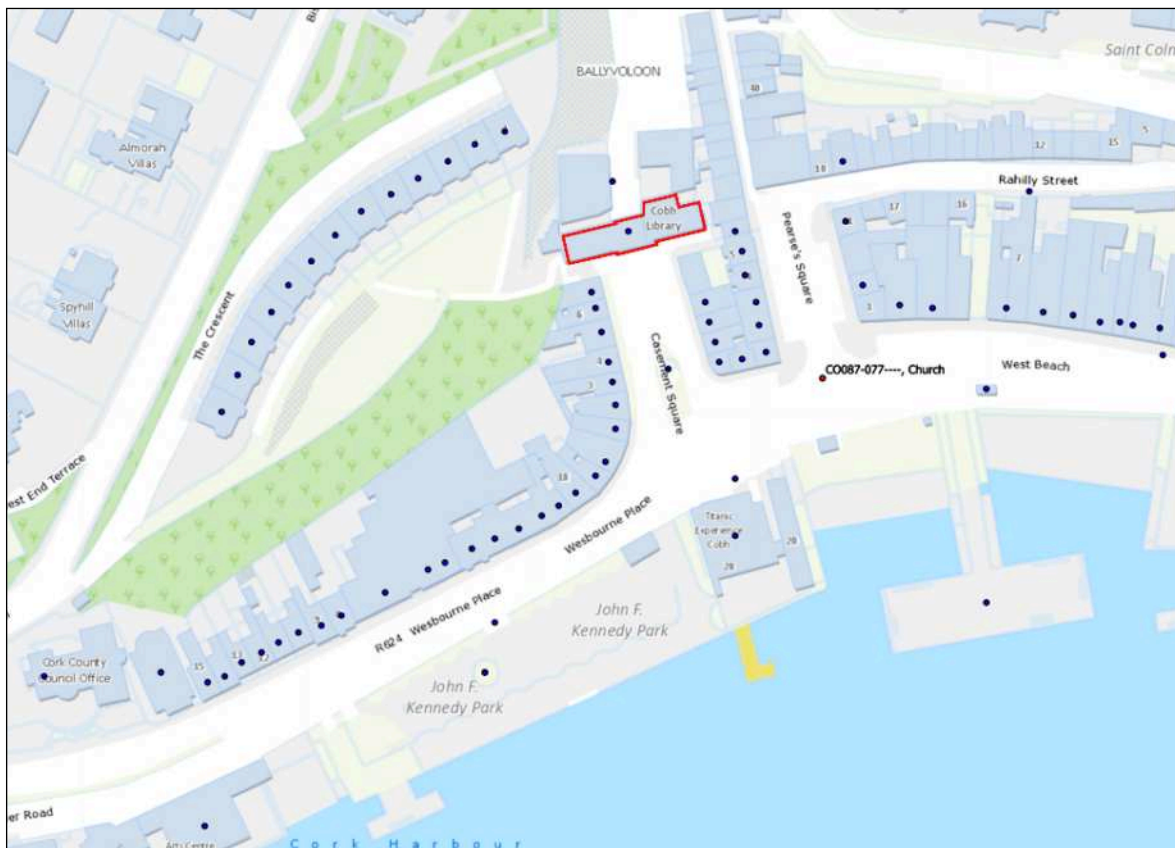
• Fig 4. Site location on c1840 OS map, before construction of building or casement Square.



• Fig 5. Casement Square c1930.

2.2 Conservation Status and Related Regulations:

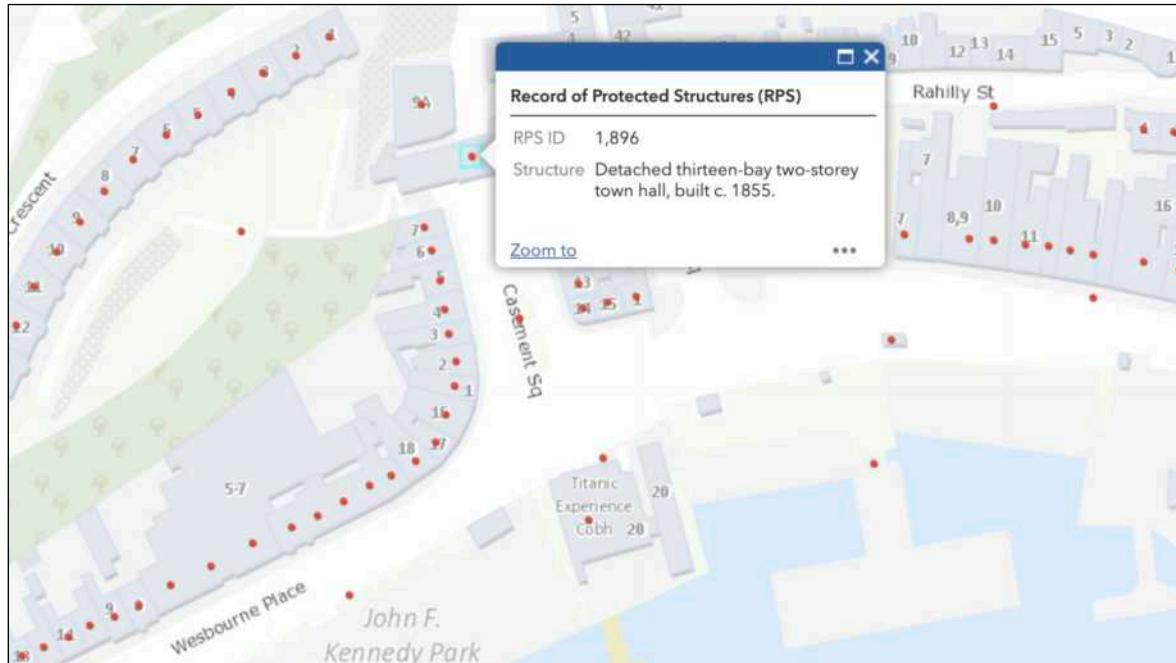
The building is a significant landmark in the town of Cobh. Located overlooking the harbour and Casement Square. The blue dots below representing the buildings listed on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage NIAH map, indicates the historical significance of the locality, with this building so prominently located in this setting.



• Fig 6. Site location on NIAH map- Blue dots NIAH listed properties.

2.2.1 Protected Structure:

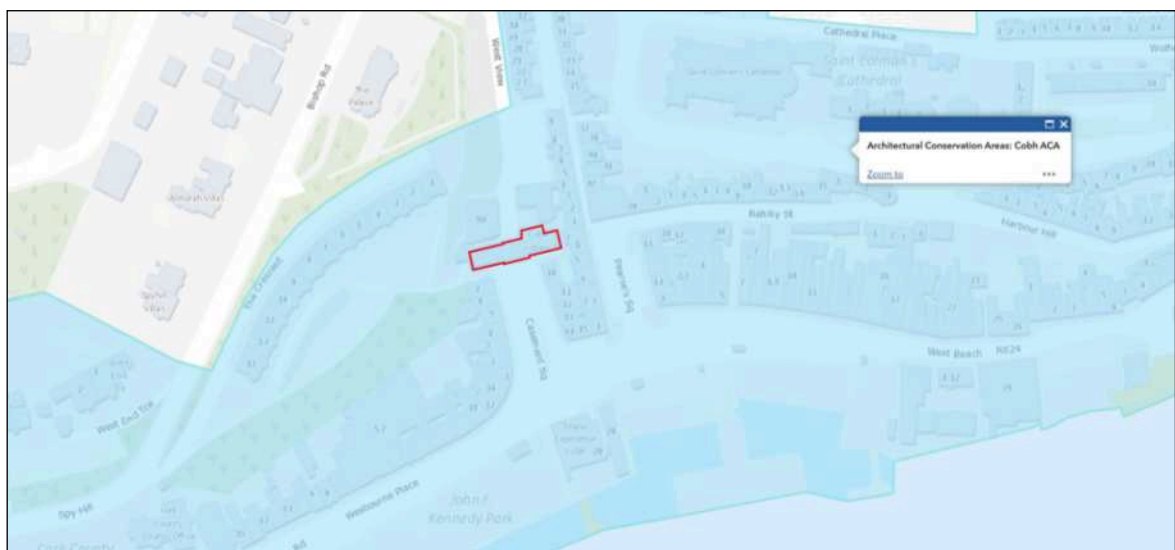
The building is a Protected Structure and is listed in the Record of Protected Structures in the development plan as No. 1,896. *'Detached thirteen bay two storey town hall, built c1855'*. It is listed along with almost all adjoining and adjacent properties, once again giving a good indication of the significance of the setting.



• Fig 7. Cork County Council protected Structures (Red dots).

2.2.2 Architectural Conservation Area - ACA

The building is sited within the *local Cobh ACA*.



• Fig 8. Local Architectural Conservation Area, with site outlined.

2.2.3 National Inventory of Architectural Heritage - NIAH

The building is listed on the NIAH listing: Reg No. 20827287

Queenstown Town Hall and Courthouse

The building is listed as being of Regional Significance and Of Architectural, Artistic, Historical and Scientific, Social and Technical interest.

NIAH Description

Detached thirteen-bay two-storey former town hall, built c. 1855, having three-bay pedimented central breakfront with integral carriage arch flanked by pedestrian arches. Flight of limestone steps having cast-iron railings to west-end bay, front (south) elevation. Now in use as a library. Pitched and hipped slate roofs with brick and rendered chimneystacks. Moulded render cornices having brackets, ashlar limestone pediment to breakfront with plaque to centre and limestone brackets. Rendered walls having limestone plinth courses, quoins and ashlar limestone walls to breakfront, ground floor. Round-headed openings to ground floor with render hood mouldings, limestone sills and overlights over six-over-six pane timber sliding sash windows. Square-headed openings to first floor having render surrounds, six-over-six pane timber sliding sash windows and continuous limestone sill course. Square-headed openings to breakfront, first floor having render surrounds, limestone sills, six-over-six pane timber sliding sash windows, round-headed architrave flanked by pedimented architraves. Round-headed carriage arch and pedestrian entrances having ashlar limestone voussoirs, impost courses and plinth courses. Square-headed openings under arch, east and west elevations with overlights over timber panelled double-leaf doors. Square-headed opening to first floor, front elevation with render surround and overlight and double-leaf timber panelled double-leaf doors.

NIAH Appraisal

Fine Italianate structure, having a commanding presence in the streetscape, which forms the focal point of Casement Square. The finely cut limestone façade lends this town hall a sense of authority befitting a structure of its importance.

3.0 Building record:

3.1 Existing building:

The buildings are divided into County Council Library on one side, and Cobh tourist office and Cobh Chamber offices on the other. On ground floor, these are divided by the Casement Square / West View road running up through the middle.



• Fig 9. Arch fronted road crossing under building.



• Fig 10. Arch fronted road crossing under building from Casement Square.

3.1.1 Exterior:



• Fig 11. South elevation and St. Finbarrs Cathedral behind.



• Fig 12. South elevation and East wing, now housing library on upper level and site for new Hub below.



• Fig 13. West elevation with tourist office to ground floor



• Fig 14. South elevation and from east.



• Fig 15. Building undercroft looking South.



• Fig 16. Building undercroft looking West towards Tourist office.



• Fig 17. North elevation.



• Fig 18. North elevation and view through arch to Casement Square.



• Fig 19. North elevation, East end and EIR car parking area. Flat roofed structure behind main building.



• Fig 20. North elevation looking East through EIR car park.

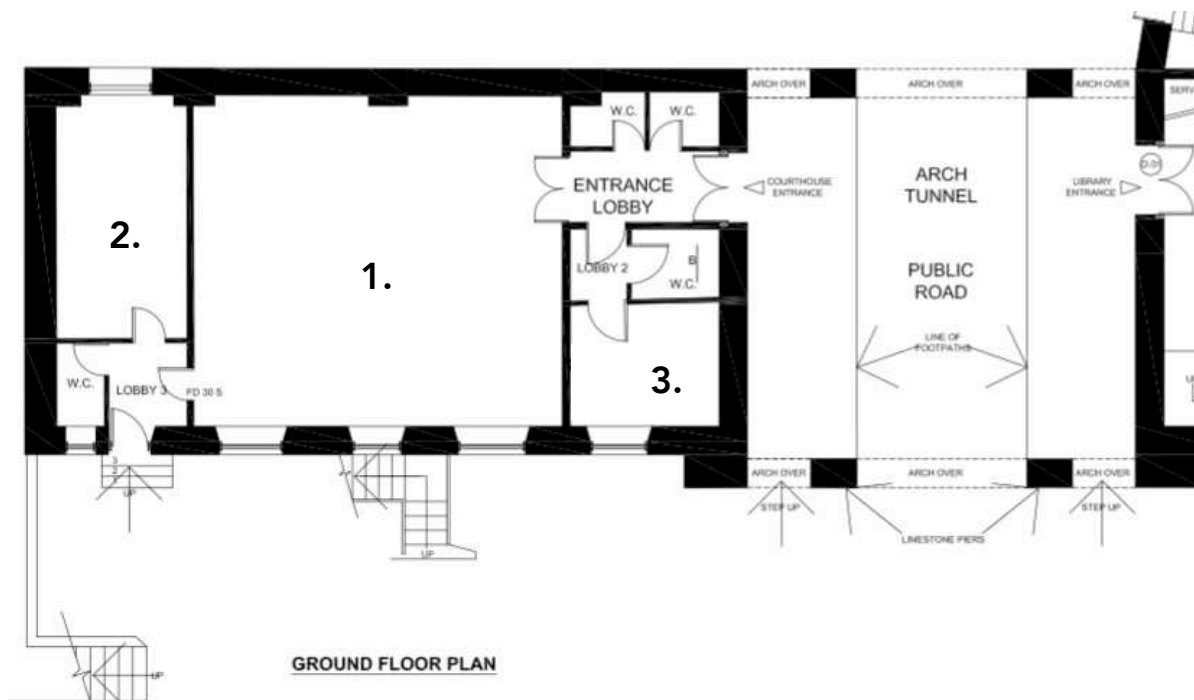


• Fig 21 - 24. North elevation looking West and adjoining building behind.



3.1.2 Interior: West Wing:

This wing incorporates the Tourist office to ground floor. (Former Courthouse) The tourist office has two entrances, one from South West end on Southern face and the main entrance on the road side under the covered underpass. (Arch Tunnel)



• Fig 25. Ground floor plan West Wing.



• Fig 26. Entrance to tourist office.



• Fig 27. Min room tourist office looking South West. Room 1.



• Fig 28. Maln room tourist office looking West. Room 1.



• Fig 29. Maln room tourist office looking North West. Room 1.



• Fig 30. Maln room tourist office looking North West. Room 1.



• Fig 31. Maln room tourist office looking South. Room 1.



• Fig 32. Maln room tourist office looking NE towards entrance door. Room 1.



• Fig 33. Maln room tourist office looking South East and reception desk. Room 1.



• Fig 34. Chamber of commerce meeting room looking North inside door. Room 2.



• Fig 35. Chamber of commerce meeting room looking South. Room 2.



• Fig 36-37. Lobby into tourist office staff toilet and private office (Room 3 behind door).



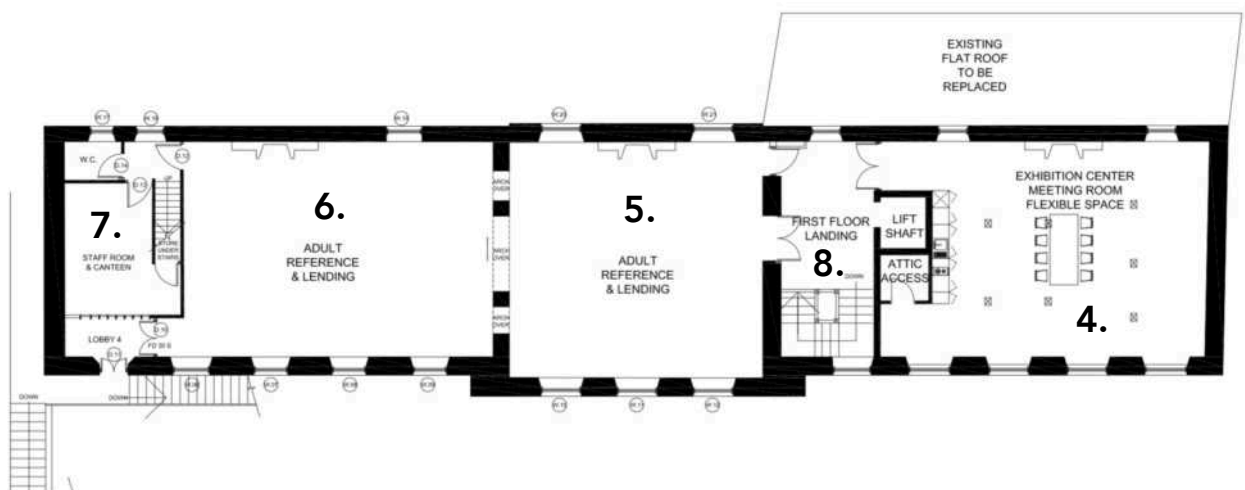
• Fig 38-39. Lobby into tourist office from inside and out.

3.1.3 Interior: Upper floor:

This upper floor of the entire building is the current County Library. Access is opposite tourist office from undercroft, and up more recent stairs (No. 8) inside door of the East wing. The access has been enhanced by addition of a lift in this side, making upper floor library fully accessible to the public.

First floor has flexible space to East and library reference rooms over road in middle and on Western end of building, with staff canteen to West end.

An alternative means of escape is available outside the SW end of building to external original staircase.



• Fig 40. First floor existing building.



• Fig 41. Room 4. Exhibition room/ flexible space, looking SW.



• Fig 42. Room 4. Exhibition space looking SE



• Fig 43. Middle main access stairs. Room 8.



• Fig 44. Room 4. Exhibition room/ flexible space, looking NE.



• Fig 45. Access from stairs (Room 8) Westwards towards reading room, Room 5.



• Fig 46. Rear end of reading room, Room 6, looking West towards exit door and staff area.



• Fig 47. Rear end of reading room, Room 6, looking West towards exit door and staff area.



• Fig 48. Rear end of reading room, Room 6, looking East towards entrance and reception.



• Fig 49. Room 5, looking East towards entrance door and reception.



• Fig 50. Room 6, looking East towards entrance door and reception, exit door to external stair behind.



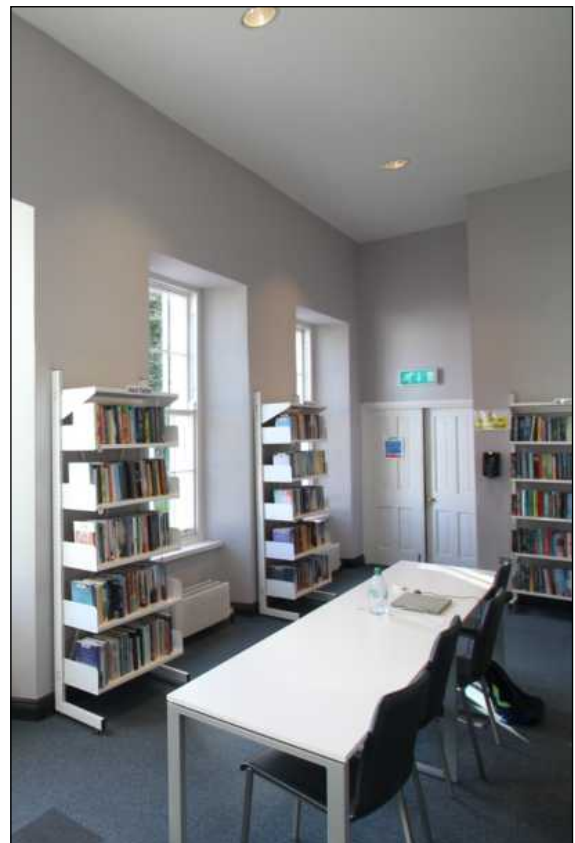
• Fig 51. Staff room - Room 7. (Plumber, not staff creating mess!!).



• Fig 52. Reception desk. Room 5.



• Fig 53 - 54 rear exit door. Stairs to ground floor.



• Fig 55 Stairs to outside and fig 56. exit door to lobby for same. Rear looking SW of room 6.



• Fig 51. Staff room - Room 7. (Plumber, not staff creating mess!!).



• Fig 52. Reception desk. Room 5.



• Fig 53 - 54 rear exit door. Stairs to ground floor.



• Fig 55. Stairs to outside and fig 56. exit door to lobby for same. Rear looking SW of room 6.

3.1.4 Interior: Ground floor East wing:

This area is currently un used other than for some storage. This is the area of the building it is intended to convert to an E-Hub, as part of this development.

The area extends out the back with a flat roof (orange toned areas) up to the rear boundary to the EIR facility behind.

The rear area has not been recently maintained and it has a good few building fabric significant issues to be addressed.



• Fig 57. First floor existing building.



• Fig 58. Room 9. Former Childrens reference and lending, and view to NE corner.



• Fig 59. Room 9. Former Childrens reference and lending looking to NW corner and entry.



• Fig 60. Room 9. Rear flat North roofed rooms under arches.



• Fig 61. Room 9. Rear flat North roofed rooms under arches.



• Fig 62. Room 10. Rear flat North roofed rooms.



• Fig 63. Room 10. Rear flat North roofed rooms.



• Fig 64. Room 9. Looking South.



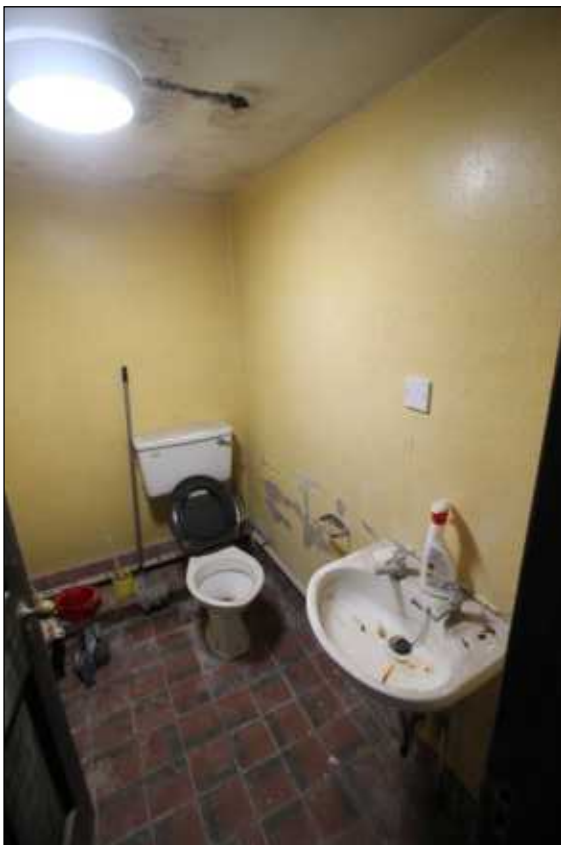
• Fig 65. Rear North Room No. 12.



• Fig 66 Entrance to plant room.



Fig 67. Rear of room 12.



• Fig 68. Toilets off room 11 .



Fig 69. Damp issues in rear rooms.



• Fig 70. Room 11. Rear North flat roofed rooms .



• Fig 71 & 72. Rear North flat roofed rooms. Room 1.



• Fig 73. Boiler room No. 13.



• Fig 74 & 75. Boiler room No. 13.



• Fig 76 & 77. Rear flat roofs.



3.2 Building condition:

This is not a survey or detailed condition report but there are a few obvious areas that would need to be considered and some are within the area of proposed works and much easier to address at this point.

3.2.1 Roof:

The rear flat roofs are clearly in need of attention, as illustrated above. Much of the trouble is likely to stem from blocked outlets and build up of 'greenery' on the roof. It is assumed this roof is being replaced and as such less of a concern.

There is no clear evidence of any issue with the upper pitched roof, however there gutters are in need of attention and there are leaks from the joints in front gutters, and signs of other blocked gutters in areas very difficult to access because of boundary issues.



• Fig 78. Leaking gutter junctions in places (over Eastern wing South elevation.) Corrosion evident also.

3.2.3 Dampness in locations:

The walls of the building appear to be dry lined, which has the overall effect of maintaining dry insulated inside faces of walls, but preventing ventilation of the existing structure. The evidence in places of moisture in the internal plaster skin are slightly worrying signs that all might not be well in wall hidden cavity.

The biggest concern when this happens, is that embedded timbers within the walls can deteriorate significantly with permanent contact with dampness and areas of interstitial condensation.



• Fig 79 & 80. Rot indications in rear rooms to GF Eastern block.

There are some indications of the potential wall condition in some areas like internal stairs which is not lined and dampness/ peeling wall finished in the area:



• Fig. 81 & 82. Stairs wall (unlined) problem areas.





• Fig. 83. Leaking rear gutters.

3.2.4 Accessibility:

The library has been made accessible by a detail at door step that facilitates the access. The same has not been done at the tourist office side, and it would be worth trying to address this in the same way, to ensure visitor/ guest access.



• Fig. 84. Tourist office entry step.



• Fig. 85. Library ramped entry step.

4.0 Development proposal and Conservation strategy.

4.1 Proposed development.

The proposals is to refurbish the ground floor underutilised Eastern side of the building as an E-Hub. The section of building impacted is outlined below.

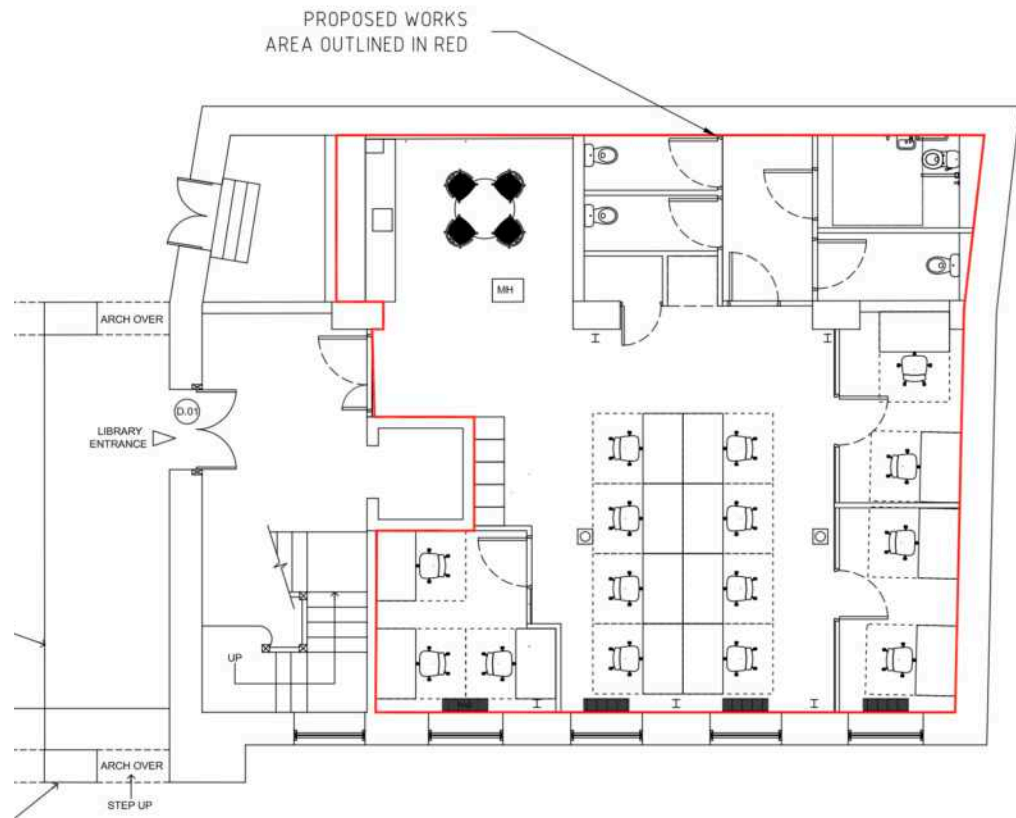


• Fig 84. Location of works.

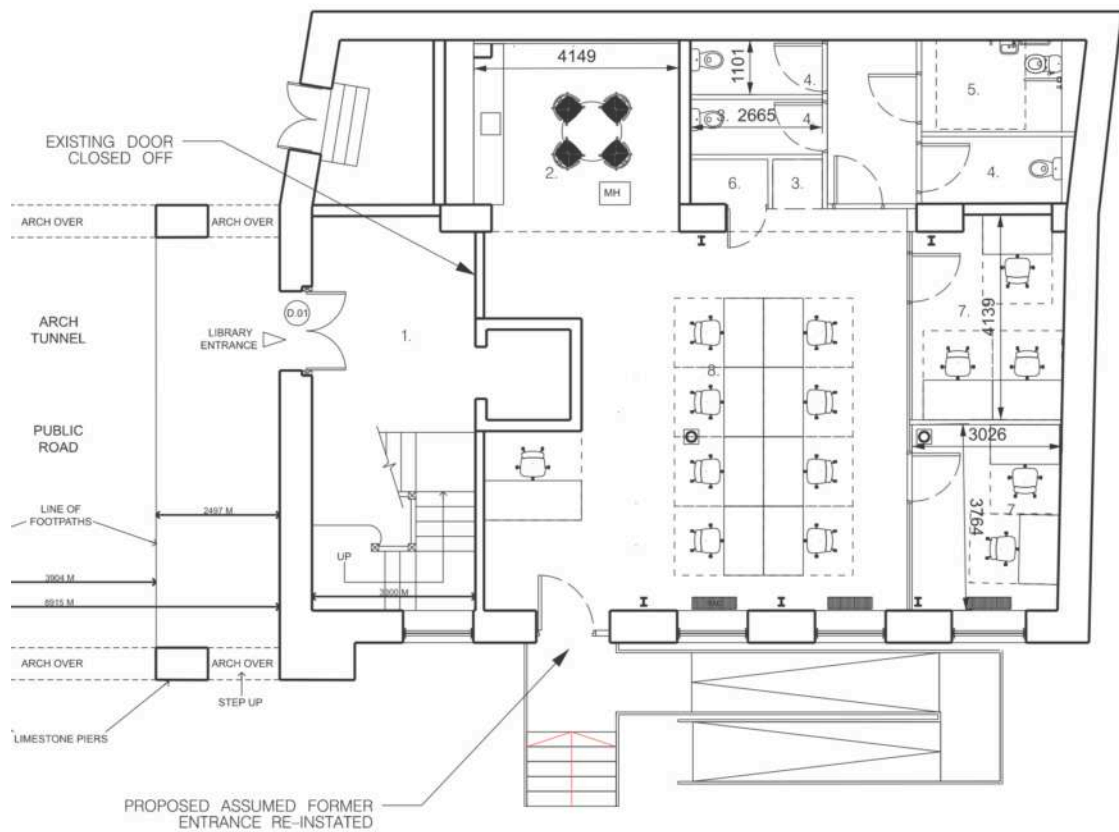
It is proposed that this space will accommodate a work hub, with new toilets and small number of cellular closed offices and open plan areas.

This work is all within the existing envelope and has no alternative impact unless and option for external entrance coming directly from South into the floor area.

The current proposed access is from the same access as the library and from the undercroft of the building.



• Fig 85. Proposed plan with existing entrance.



• Fig 86. Alternative plan with access from south.

4.2 New building relationship with Protected Structure.

The proposal has minimal impact on the existing building and in fact the development will reintroduce activity into this vacant part of the building. Ventilating and heating the building by occupying it, is the single best way to maintain the property and ensure its survival.

If the souther entrance is to be considered, there does appear to have been a precedent for an entrance here, and as such a case could be made. For the purpose of this report it is currently assumed the entrance is from the existing door.

4.3 Interventions and Analysis of Impacts:

The proposal has little impact on the building, other than the rear modern flat roofs a back, which need significant attention regardless. There are however a few suggestions we might make regarding the new proposed work.

4.3.1 Insulation:

If the new areas are to be re-lined, it would be worth considering a breathable insulation internally such as Cork, Calcium Silicate board, or cork lime insulation, to improved thermal performance and allow breathability of the fabric.

4.3.2 External skin:

The walls are likely to be rendered in impermeable sand /cement render unfortunately and this does tend to trap moisture within the walls. There is an opportunity however, particularly at the base of the walls to address any pointing of stone plinth with lime mortar. (unless this has already been done!) This would potentially improve any 'rising damp' concerns and allow moisture in walls and opportunity to week out some of its potential moisture.

Painting (next time it comes around) is also best done with a breathable paint, of which there are many available now.

4.3.3 Interior:

The area being fitted out has few enough original early features of significance. The columns internally are significant structural members regardless of Conservation considerations and have been retained in the proposed new layouts.

Nothing of any potential early plaster detail, cornices etc, or any early joinery seems to remain in the space making the interior fit out relatively painless!

In assessing proposed works to a protected structure, a good way to ensure that the important fabric and form is conserved and would not result in a material alteration is to adhere to the principles of best conservation practice.

1. Minimal Intervention:

Often the most cost effective course of action. Well considered works often have a minimal impact and better energy efficiency returns e.g. hot water tank insulation and draught sealing systems.

2. Repair rather than replace:

Localised repairs of the existing fabric allow for the retention of good quality materials that have already stood the test of time, the original sustainable materials.

3. Use appropriate materials and methods:

Use like-for-like materials and methods when making alterations. This can often be difficult to reconcile with modern energy efficient technologies but consideration should be given to using natural materials e.g. sheep's wool or natural fibre insulation. 1

4. Use expert conservation advice:

Sounds like common sense but it is better to engage professionals and contractors who have experience in both conservation and the application of energy efficient systems to the best advantage of the existing fabric.

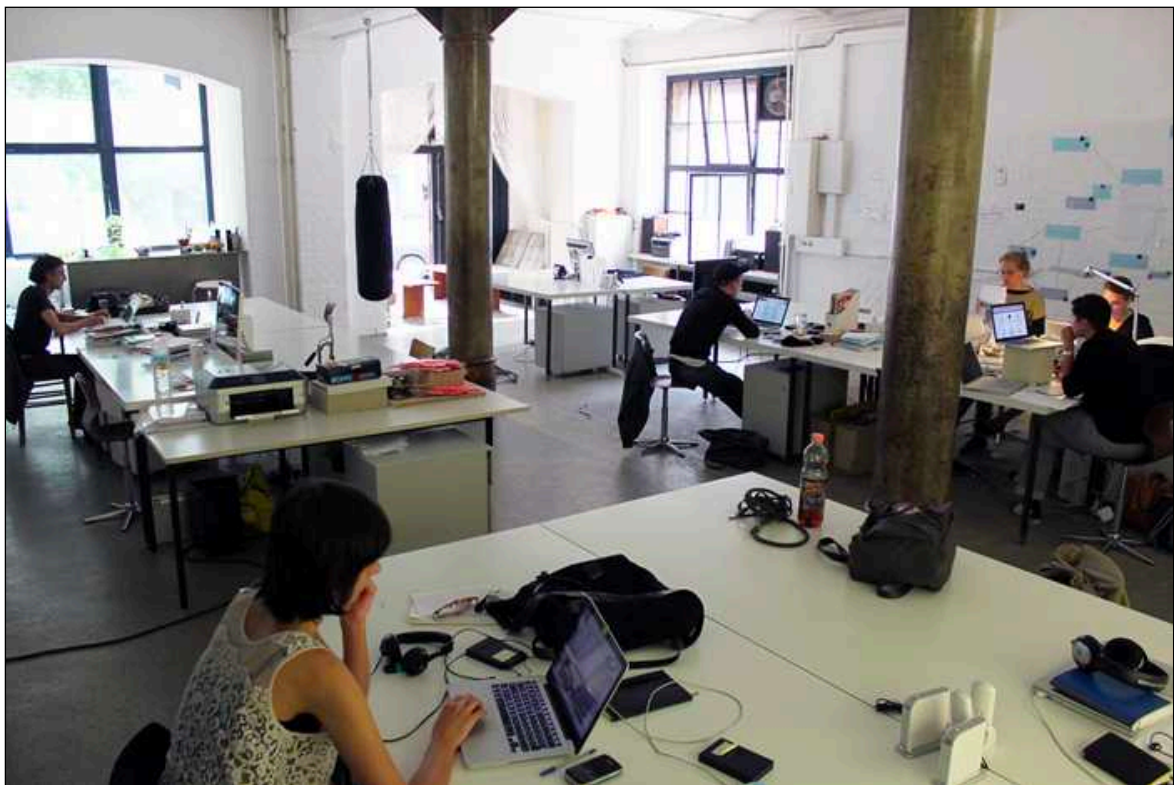
5. Respect earlier alterations of interest:

Many of these buildings have been altered and adapted over time as a result of changing tastes and occupancy requirements. These layers also need to be taken into consideration when planning upgrading works.

6. Keep a building in use:

Ensuring that a building has a sustainable use into the future is also a good energy efficiency principle. Applying inappropriate upgrades to a building not only undermines the significant character but performs poorly in terms of return in energy efficiency. For example, mould growth and condensation caused by over-sealing a building can in time render it more uncomfortable and unhealthy to live in than living with the pre-existing draughts.

The final suggestion No. 6 is probably the most significant and supports the strategy for re-use, particularly an activity like the E-HUB which related to the others in the building and not only gets the building back into use, but also supports the local community with remote working options.



• Fig 87. Typical shared workspace in refitted older building!