



Historic England

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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Our ref: PA00406553

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Dear Ms Mizen

## Pre-application Advice

### HM PRISON READING, READING, RG1 3HY

It was a pleasure to meet with your team, client and Reading Council on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January and to discuss the latest iteration of the proposals for the future of Reading Gaol. Our thoughts on the emerging proposals, in relation to their impact on the Scheduled remains of Reading Abbey and the listed Reading Gaol, are set out below.

#### *The reuse of the Gaol building*

The feasibility study outlines four possible alternative uses for the Gaol: single story apartments, duplex apartments, a mixed use scheme combining hotel use on the upper floors with office or arts space on the ground floor and student accommodation. The most important elements of the interior of the building are the galleries, which are both impressive and evocative of the prison regime. By contrast the cells, which are all very similar and very plain, are of much lesser significance. All of the options achieve the most important goal of keeping the gallery spaces open but of the four the duplex apartments, which would involve cutting through the brick vaulted ceilings of cells and therefore much more disturbance of historic fabric, is the least sympathetic to the significance of the building and should not be pursued unless it is demonstrably essential to create a viable scheme. Whatever use is pursued where primary walls are removed nibs should be retained to give an indication of the original form of the building.

As a general principle, the proposal should include more detail on how cultural heritage will be incorporated into the development. Further detail on this is set out below. A number of cells should be retained in their current form as exemplars. We consider it is important that this includes one of the cells linked with Oscar Wilde's incarceration in the prison given that his association with the building is a key aspect of its significance. At least one cell that survives in as close to as built condition as possible, complete with original window, should also be retained as this would serve to evoke like in the prison most effectively.



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The way in which the galleries are to be upgraded to meet current building regulations also needs to be thought about carefully. It is accepted that a lift will be necessary and a glass lift that is as lightweight as possible in one of the galleries is likely to be the best way of achieving this. Upgrading the railings will be very tricky. Adding additional glass barriers would be highly intrusive visually as glass may be transparent but it is not invisible. A tensioned wire grid system over the central voids is likely to be the best way forward here.

It is also proposed to enlarge the windows to individual cells. As most of these have already been altered this would not involve much loss of original fabric but enlarging the windows would harm the significance of the building as it would make it look less prison-like. Nevertheless we realise that if the building is to find a viable new use these rooms will need to be better lit so accept the principle of enlarging windows that have already been altered. Doing this neatly, creating a single enlarged opening would be a better option than creating a slot below the existing window, which is likely to look too fussy. Where windows survive in their original form these should be retained.

*The impact of the proposed new development on the setting of the Gaol*

The principle of new development around the Gaol is accepted given the precedent set by modern prison buildings and replacing the existing buildings with something of better quality has the potential to enhance the setting of the prison itself. We accept the general scale and form of the development proposed to the north of the listed building, which opens up views of the north elevation, avoids the footprint of the Abbey church, retains a sense of enclosure and is kept relatively low, allowing the prison to be seen over the top of the new build. We welcome the proposal for open public space over the east end of the Abbey church, which will have considerable potential for heritage interpretation.

The proposed development to the south is more problematic as it is rather higher. While concentrating the highest development in the south-eastern corner is understandable, as this is the least sensitive area archaeologically and in terms of views, the proposed five storeys here would block views of the prison currently available when moving north along the Inner Distributor Road. The prison is seen at its most forbidding here, its Gothic form peeking over the walls, and this is the view of the building that is experienced by the largest number of people. The building height should be reduced here to maintain this view.

The height of the buildings proposed in the south-west corner is also problematic. Following our meeting I went to have another look at the site and concluded that seeing new buildings from the Abbey ruins need not be problematic providing that a clear view of the top of the prison is retained in its entirety, and the new buildings do





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not appear to dominate either the ruins or the prison building. It is important to be able to see the prison but it does not need to stand alone. However, the view of the prison from the bridge over the river Kennet on King's Road is also important and it is building heights in the south-western corner of the site that need to be kept low enough to keep this open. It is this view, rather than the view from the Abbey ruins, that will be the limiting factor on the height of new build here.

Clearly some breaks in the perimeter wall are needed to allow light into the new buildings and for the inhabitants to see out. Having looked again at the south wall it appears reasonably old, with clear joints visible were the corner towers were removed. Lowering the wall slightly across its length would be a better way forward than creating holes in the walls given it is partly a revetment wall so appears very high when viewed from outside at present.

The proposal should set out a cultural heritage strategy for the prison site which shows a clear vision for interpretation of the heritage, and which links the prison site to the rest of the Abbey quarter.

*Linking the Abbey ruins to the prison site*

The proposal shows sighting holes in the prison wall, with a main access between the two sites at the northern end. This misses the opportunity to combine the illustration of medieval building alignments across the two sites, (for example by a marked path) with a pedestrian access that draws visitors from one part of site to the other. This is not intended as a replacement of the northern access, but as a valuable addition, which will be particularly important for visitors entering Abbey ruins from the south (river) entrance. We therefore advise that in principle there could be further breaks in the prison wall at or near the locations where the sighting holes are currently proposed.

*Preservation of archaeological remains below new development*

The key principle here is whether any proposal will cause harm to the heritage assets. In this case the heritage assets are:

- the below-ground archaeological remains of the medieval abbey and of earlier phases of the prison
- the standing remains of the Abbey in the adjacent Abbey ruins site.

As regards the buried remains, the picture from archaeological work so far seems clear - medieval and post-medieval remains survive to varying heights across the site. Please note that within the archaeological evaluation report, the figures (45 and 46) showing sections across the site are potentially misleading. They could be read as showing 19th to 20th century fill across the entire gaol site and this is not the case. We





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are working with MOLA to resolve this.

Between the trenches the height of survival is reasonably predictable with reference to later buildings and activity. To give two examples:

- Area of former sports pitch (to south-west of main prison building). The tops of medieval walls and associated deposits are relatively close to the surface and are covered by between 0.6 and 1 m of deposits which are of low or no archaeological significance.
- Below the gymnasium block (to south-east of main prison building). The top of medieval remains is 3.6 m below ground surface, with the whole of that 3.6 m depth being made up of 19th- and 20th-century ground-raising layers.

The National Planning Policy Framework requires that harm to designated heritage assets should be avoided, or minimised and fully justified if it is not avoidable. Where less than substantial harm would result from a development, that harm should be balanced against the public benefits of the scheme.

We advise that in principle it would be possible to build over the top of the archaeological remains in doing so; taking the following matters have been taken into account:

- The onus will be on yourselves to show that you can design a building foundation (and services) which sits above the archaeological remains and does not damage them, either during construction or in the future (e.g. through compression or desiccation). This would need to be a rafted foundation - we advise that piling would not be acceptable. As previously advised at our meeting on 9/8/19, you should also consider further geophysical work now that the form, depth and location of some prison and medieval walls have been identified. HE would be glad to advise further on this. Should the design process for new building foundations be problematic and further information is required, HE would consider any proposal for further evaluation trenches.
- Proposals for any further archaeological excavation, (other than necessary targeted evaluation trenches) would raise two important considerations:
  1. Is this process, which would inevitably result in some destruction of archaeological remains, justified? Excavation is considered harmful, even if the harm is partly mitigated because the excavation is controlled, archaeological, and the results are fully analysed and published. To give an example, archaeological excavation did not form part of the recent Reading Abbey ruins conservation and interpretation project - there was no risk to the buried archaeology, so it was left in situ.



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2. Once buried stone walls are exposed, they are very difficult to conserve and display, even within a cover building. The process is very difficult both to execute and to maintain, and attempts to do this have often failed. We would need to be fully satisfied that open conservation was possible.

**Next Steps**

We trust that the above advice is useful. Given the complexity of the site and the development issues, we would be pleased to respond further to specific questions which you may have,

Yours sincerely

Richard Peats

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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cc. Katharine Barber, Purcell  
Chris McGee, MOJ

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