

PLANNING and LISTED BUILDING CONSENT APPLICATIONS FOR THE
ERECTION OF EXTENSIONS AND NEW BUILDINGS AT STONE HILL
HOUSE, STONE HILL, BLOXHAM, OXON.
(Refs: 21/01505F and 01476/LB)

SUMMARY

The proposed 'extension of existing boarding house through the reinstatement of part of the existing ruined coach house, the demolition of outbuildings, the erection of an extension and link structure (with associated alterations to Stone Hill House), insertion of internal wall, and associated works' would harm the listed structures at Stone Hill House, harm the setting of nearby heritage assets and harm the character and appearance of the Bloxham Conservation Area.

I INTRODUCTION

Mr Richard Goulden, the owner of Ashwell Cottage, Stone Hill, Bloxham, has commissioned James Edgar, historic buildings consultant,¹ to assess the impact of the proposed erection of new buildings at Stone Hill House on the heritage assets in the area and on their settings.

2 HERITAGE ASSETS

2.1 The government's policy with regard to proposed development that affects heritage assets is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF"). It defines heritage assets as follows:

A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing). (Annex2: Glossary, p 66)

2.2 And it advises that

Heritage assets range from sites and buildings of local historic value to those of the highest significance, such as World Heritage Sites which are internationally recognised to be of Outstanding Universal Value. These assets are an irreplaceable resource, and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so

¹ James Edgar, BA (Hons), MSc, MA, Dip Archaeol, MRTPI, IHBC is an experienced conservation professional (a full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation for over 20 years) who was, for 23 years, English Heritage's team leader and Historic Buildings Inspector responsible for the City of Westminster and then counties in the East Midlands. Prior to that he was engaged to compile the lists of historic buildings. He has extensive experience of listed building consent and planning casework including providing evidence at appeal. He has provided training to the Planning Inspectorate in these matters.

that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations (paragraph 184).

2.3 There are two types of heritage assets: designated and non-designated. Designated assets have been recognised under primary legislation. Non-designated assets are those recognised by the local planning authority to be of local or some, but not special, interest even though they make a positive contribution to the character or appearance of conservation areas, which are defined as areas of special architectural or historic interest.

2.4 Stone Hill House and the 'attached wall with elliptical keystone arch to rear', are structures of special architectural or historic interest. The designation for Stone Hill House also includes the boundary wall to Old Park Farm and all the remaining sections of historic wall in the yard as these elements are either fixed to the listed wall or within the curtilage.² Stone Hill Cottage and Ashwell House, Ashwell Cottage and Hill House are also included on the Secretary of State's list of buildings of special interest.

2.5 The applicant's heritage consultants state that there are 'two designated assets whose significance has the potential to be affected by the proposals' (HCUK, para 4.2). These are Stone Hill House and the Bloxham Conservation Area. No mention is made of Stone Hill Cottage, Ashwell House, Ashwell Cottage and Hill House or of the unlisted properties, in particular Old Park Farmhouse. The Victoria County History records that the former farmhouse was 'built on a 2-unit plan with the fire-place backing upon the through passage, [and] dates from the early 17th century.'³ The building is recognised as a 'local heritage asset' in the draft revised Conservation Area Appraisal.⁴

2.6 The NPPF states that 'local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting' (paragraph 189). The statement is clear: any affected assets and their setting should be assessed.⁵ However, the significance, and the impact on the setting, of Stone Hill Cottage, Ashwell House, Ashwell Cottage and Old Park Farm has not been assessed; all of these heritage assets have elevations close to, and looking onto, the proposed development site. As the applicant's heritage statement has not taken account of the other heritage assets it does not meet the requirements of the NPPF.

² Cherwell District Council have determined that Ashwell Cottage is listed as parts of it formed part of Ashwell House at the date of the listing survey in 1955. Over the past 26 years the planning authority has required the submission of listed building consent applications for alterations and extensions at the property.

³ Mary D Lobel and Alan Crossley, eds., 'Parishes: Bloxham', in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 9, Bloxham Hundred*, (1969), pp. 53-85. The building is referred to as Park Farm.

⁴ Cherwell District Council, *Bloxham Conservation Area Appraisal*, draft revised version, published for consultation in February 2020, p 97.

⁵ Historic England, *The Setting of Heritage Assets Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3*, December 2017, p 9-12.

The significance of the outbuildings

2.7 It might be that, as seen on the 1801 enclosure map, there was a continuous building along the road frontage adjoining the rear of Stone Hill House, but it is clear from the first edition of the Ordnance Survey Map (1881) that these structures had been altered to something similar to the plan form as seen today. This phase of alteration requires further explanation, and its significance needs to be fully assessed.

2.8 It seems unlikely that the outbuilding parallel to the road was 'a coach house' or 'stable' – confusingly both terms, and the words 'store' and 'barn', are used (HCUK, paragraphs 3.21 and 5.31); no evidence – documentary or fabric – has been adduced to support this hypothesis. Are there any remains of internal fittings or of typical features such as doorways and windows for the stable area? Coach houses do not usually have opposed wide openings; the one to the road might be a late alteration as no crossover is indicated on the historic OS plans and it is not evident why an opening would be necessary here given the proximity of the entrance to the yard to the east.

2.9 An alternative explanation might be that these structures were originally farm buildings around a yard (HCUK, para 3.5) and, at a later date, they were altered and converted for other purposes, possibly a carpenter's/builder's yard around 1877-80 (HCUK, paragraphs 3.7-3.12). Some details such as the brick surrounds to the remaining windows (HCUK figures 21 and 25) appear to be later nineteenth century features and are of an 'industrial' nature. What is evident from the historic maps is that one significant alteration was the physical separation of the house from the yard: by 1881 (OS) the internal garden wall, with its distinctive curve, had been erected and the projecting extension at the southwest corner formed.

2.10 Whatever the use of the outbuildings, the later phase of alteration is significant as it produced the relationship between the buildings that is experienced today. A key element in that relationship was, and remains, the separation between the house and the outbuildings.

Bloxham Conservation Area

2.11 The whole of Stone Hill is included in the Bloxham Conservation Area, as designated by Cherwell District Council in 1975. The Council published an Appraisal of the Conservation Area in 2007 and revised draft was produced in 2020.

2.12 In the adopted appraisal the conservation area is divided into character zones: the site of the proposed development falls within the 'Hill Lanes' zone, specifically at location 4. The description in the adopted appraisal draws attention to the fact that Ashwell House is one of Bloxham's 'most impressive buildings'. The draft revised version retains the southern side of Stone Hill in the Hill Lanes character area but, oddly, places the buildings and land on the north side in the 'School' character area. The dividing line between the two suggested areas is drawn at the back of the pavement on the north side of Stone Hill. This is a very

strange suggestion given that the common history and characteristics shared by both sides of Stone Hill. The contribution of the historic buildings on the north side to the character and appearance of the conservation area is primarily derived from their history, not present-day ownership or land use.

2.13 The draft revised Appraisal includes much of the text of the 2007 document but adds a few details, including the following:

Stone Hill and Rosebank in particular allow strong visual links to the key landmark buildings and give a sense of early settlement.

A number of buildings along Workhouse Lane and off Stone Hill Lane appear to have been deliberately located to take advantage of the elevated topography Old Park Farm, Stonehill House and Hill House in particular appear monumental. (p 42)

2.14 It has long been recognised that the best use for historic buildings is the original use; in the case of Stone Hill House and Old Park Farm the buildings were single family dwellings. Part of the reason for this assessment is that such uses produce the familiar plan forms and features of historic buildings and are less likely to bring about pressure for larger-scale developments and inappropriate alterations. The school does indeed have an important role in the history of Bloxham, but this claim is best understood in terms of purpose-built structures, not the conversion of historic buildings and tranches of the historic village.

2.15 Historical value is sometimes derived from ownership and use but this is usually confined to close associations with important people, including the patronage of the owner and the significance of the designer, or the fact that important events took place at the site. The more recent ownership and use of Stone Hill, Old Park Farm and Park Close imparts no historical value or interest; these are just the facts of purchase and possession. It can be argued that such a use has negative consequences, such as traffic issues and the pressure for inappropriate alterations and developments. For the interior of Stone Hill House, for example, HCUK state that 'much of the building has an institutional feel in common with its use as a school building over the past half century' (HCUK, paragraph 4.7).

3 ASSESSMENT OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Planning law and policy

3.1 The Act relating to the control of works to listed buildings states that

In considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority or, as the case may be, the Secretary of State shall have *special* regard to the desirability of preserving the

building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.⁶

And,

In the exercise, with respect to any buildings or other land in a conservation area, of any powers under any of the provisions mentioned in subsection (2), special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.⁷

3.2 The NPPF policy is as follows:

When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance. (NPPF, para 193; author's underlining)

Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification. (NPPF, para 194; author's underlining)

Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use. (para 196; author's underlining)

3.3 The use of the word “special” in the context of a statutorily-imposed duty, underlines the importance of conservation to the nation. In a recent legal case, the High Court confirmed that ‘a decision maker should accord considerable importance and weight to the “desirability of preserving...the setting” of listed buildings’.⁸

3.4 Stone Hill is a wonderful street comprising a strong group of important historic buildings, all constructed in traditional forms and with traditional materials there are no discordant features or modern materials. The general guidance in the adopted CA Appraisal is that the Council will:

- Actively promote the use of traditional building and roofing materials in new building work, extensions and repair. (p 52)

⁶ Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, 1990, s. 66 (1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, s 72.

⁸ East Northants DC, English Heritage and National Trust v. SSCLG and Barnwell Manor Wind Energy Ltd [2013] EWHC 473 (Admin).

- Expect the scale, massing, proportions and height of new buildings to reflect those of the existing built environment of the immediate context or of the wider conservation area context. (p 52)
- Strive to ensure that the conversion of traditional buildings to alternative uses will be achieved with minimal intervention and without the destruction of original character. (p 52)
- Exercise a presumption in favour of new alterations and extensions that are sympathetic to the existing buildings in scale materials and design. (p 53)
- Support new buildings on infill plots which are sympathetic to the intrinsic character of the area in terms of scale, design and materials. (p 54)
- Promote the retention of boundary walls and gateways. (p 58)

3.5 In the draft revised Appraisal, it is stated that

Where historic roofing materials are to be replaced the new materials should preferably match the original in colour, size, texture and provenance. (p 70)

3.6 While it is not planning policy, it is interesting to note that the school's heritage consultants, the Heritage Collective, draw attention to the constraints that

Stone Hill, Stone Hill Cottage and curtilage are an important group, prominent with the town. Quality garden spaces and associated walls limit development opportunities. (Bloxham School Masterplan, September 2020, p 31)

3.7 The consultants make no suggestion that the site offers any opportunities for development. No specific mention is made of Old Park Farm, but it is reasonable to conclude that it too presents no opportunities because it is an important part of the 'important group, prominent with the town.'

Demolition and loss of historic fabric

3.8 Setting aside the two large blocks at the north side of the courtyard - because they have no historic fabric - it can be seen from the demolition plan that a considerable amount of significant and listed historic fabric would be demolished (Acanthus Clews drawing number 209). HCUK consider the loss of historic fabric to be 'regrettable' (HCUK, paragraph 5.31); a more appropriate word would be harmful as historic fabric is irreplaceable. The losses and alterations would clearly 'affect legibility of the major characteristics of the listed building' including planform and structural footprints.

3.9 Omitted from the drawing are the two areas that would be demolished to provide new openings into Glazed Links 01 and 02. The proposed openings in the former 'coach house' would result in the loss of listed historic fabric and radically alter and confuse the historic plan form.

3.10 The back wall of the former northern outbuilding would be removed, resulting in the loss of much of the plan form of this structure. Much of the historic dividing wall to Old Park Farm would be removed through what are described as 'modifications'. The proposed west elevation (drawing numbers 204-A and 207-A) indicates the extent of proposed removal: along the whole length of the proposed terrace and steps and a shorter length outside the doorway from the staircase. The result is that most of the wall above the garden level at Old Park Farm (see photograph in HCUK, p 22, para. 4.15) would not be retained. The new wall to be built adjacent to the historic boundary wall, that will be retained below garden level, would mean that historic wall would be 'lost'.

3.11 A new opening would be formed in the fine, ashlar gable end of the small extension to the southeast of the house (the window immediately to the south was a doorway) and a length of the historic dividing wall between the house and the yard would be removed.

3.12 These aspects of the proposed scheme would cause harm because listed, historic fabric would be removed or altered in ways that would diminish significance. They would also contradict the guidance set out in the CA Appraisal (see 3.12 above).

Glazed Link 1

3.13 As HCUK state the proposed link would 'give rise to some erosion of the legibility of 19th century changes that were carried out at the site' (paragraph 5.14). In fact, there would be a new opening in the fine ashlar, gable end wall of the extension to the house (HCUK, Fig 22), the removal of a section of the important dividing wall between the house and yard and the blocking of the historic entranceway into the yard.

3.14 The design chosen for the gates is inappropriate for the listed building and conservation area; historic gates and doors do not have tall 'vision panels'. It should be noted that the historic gates (the gateway appears to be a late insertion in the wall) opened inwards, not outwards, in order that users of the footpath would not be impeded

3.15 These proposed alterations would result in the loss of historic fabric and the formation of a link that would damage and confuse the historic plan form of the site and the relationship between the house and the former outbuildings and yard; HCUK acknowledge that this would be a negative aspect of the scheme (HCUK, paragraph 5.30). It might be the case that the link is essential for this development (Planning, Design and Access Statement, page 12, paragraph 4.14) but if the proposal is dependent on harmful alterations, then an alternative should be sought. There should be 'clear and convincing justification' which

demonstrates why other sites cannot be utilised and why new buildings, if carefully planned, would be 'beyond the scale required and the cost that would be appropriate.'

Alterations to 'coach house'

3.16 The proposed works would entail the loss of historic fabric - all part of the listed building – in the outbuildings. This matter is addressed at 3.9 above.

3.17 It is accepted that there would be some heritage benefit to be derived the repair and consolidation of the structure but to claim that it is in the 'ruinous condition' (HCUK, paragraph 5.15) is an overstatement. Given the value of the property and the strength of the housing market, it is most unlikely that Stone Hill House and its outbuildings would ever be at risk.

3.18 Whereas all the former outbuildings had roofs, the applicant's heritage consultants have presented no evidence of their form (shape, eaves and ridge heights), features or materials; it cannot be assumed that the structure had stone gables (HCUK, paragraph 5.16) as there might have been a hipped roof. The proposed alterations include the addition of a zinc roof on the 'coach house' and the glazing of the gateway with aluminium polyester powder coated frames (see Acanthus Clews drawing number 208A). Such materials and details would contrast strongly with the traditional features and the structures in the street; they would stand out and present an inharmonious appearance. Not only are these details and materials inappropriate for, and harmful to, the listed building but they would also adversely affect the setting of the nearby listed buildings. The Council's guidance is clear:

'... promote the use of traditional building and roofing materials in new building work, extensions and repair' and to 'exercise a presumption in favour of new alterations and extensions that are sympathetic to the existing buildings in scale materials and design.'

If a new roof were to be formed, more evidence needs to be found to inform the proposed alteration.

3.19 The applicant's heritage consultants state that

Their [the outbuildings] contribution has been eroded through loss of the historic structures that now limits means to understand the nature and quality of such outbuildings. The standing remains now only hint at the degree of past ancillary accommodation serving this building. Their removal, particularly the loss of the roof over the stable, has also increased visibility of the rear elevation from the higher level of Stone Hill it has lessened the sense of enclosure to the rear, and separateness from the public streets that would have been present in the past. (HCUK, paragraph 4.6)

3.20 It is important to give due weight to present-day characteristics of setting and appearance, all of which have been present since designation of the heritage assets. The point is made as follows:

The setting of Stone Hill House consists of private amenity areas directly associated with the property and public areas which enable and allow visual means to experience it as part of an important group of period properties within the heart of Bloxham. (HCUK, paragraph 4.13).

3.21 In their present form therefore, the outbuildings enable views of the heritage assets to be enjoyed and appreciated and they protect the prominence of the listed buildings and local heritage asset. Moreover, the group including Old Park Farm, makes an important contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. As HCUK state the characteristics of the setting of Stone Hill 'enable and allow visual means to experience it as part of an important group of period properties within the heart of Bloxham' (HCUK, p 21, para 4.13) or, more succinctly, the present-day setting contributes to the heritage significance of the site and to the character and appearance of this part of the conservation area.

3.22 It is questionable therefore whether reinstatement of 'the sense of enclosure' – not that it is known – is a major benefit.

3.23 The proposed alterations to the 'coach house' by reason of the use of inappropriate materials and details would harm the listed building at Stone Hill House and the setting of Ashwell House and Cottage. They would also harm the character and appearance of the conservation area. This harm would not be offset by the proposed works.

New dormitory and common room block

3.24 The proposed works would entail the loss of historic fabric - all part of the listed building – in the outbuildings. This matter is addressed at 3.10 above. The Council's CA guidance is to 'Promote the retention of boundary walls and gateways'. This proposal would result in the removal of much of the boundary wall and the covering-over of much more; only a few short lengths would remain visible, and they would be unlikely to be appreciated in such an altered context. It is not just the fabric that would be 'lost' but also the very boundary line. HCUK state that the 'proposed entrances on the western side of the dormitories to the Old Park Farm site somewhat blur the property divisions ...' (HCUK, paragraph 5.24) and would 'erode historic legibility of a main house and ancillary areas.' It isn't just the 'entrances' that need to be considered but also the long terraced sections with steps. These features would do more than 'blur' the property division, they would make it almost unintelligible; the new building might appear to have been designed to take full

advantage of the garden of Old Park Farm and the two sites could be seen to coalesce.⁹ The historic legibility of the sites would indeed be eroded.



3.25 It cannot be claimed that the historic structures would be reinstated as no evidence has yet been provided to illustrate their form. The new building would occupy a much larger footprint than the structure depicted on the 1881 OS plan, the rear wall of which is likely to be the wall that it is proposed to demolish; as an outbuilding it likely that the historic structure was no more than a single storey in height. The proposed new dormitory and common room block would be a large, two storey structure which, if Glazed Link 2 is included, would be almost as long and wide as Stone Hill House. The ridge of the building would rise above the eaves line of Stone Hill House and above the stone building to the north of the site. More than one full storey and a high ridge would face directly onto the garden of Old Park Farm.

3.26 It is stated that the 'new accommodation is designed to maintain material contrast to the main listed house' (HCUK, paragraph 5.22). The chosen materials are zinc for the roof and both horizontal and vertical timber cladding for the elevations. The rectangular plan form would be broken by a set back and slightly lower section towards the north of the block. The elevation to the yard would be lit by French windows, interspersed with horizontal timber boarding, on the ground floor, and a mixture of window types at first

⁹ The construction of walkways linking Stonehill House and Old Park Farm Annexe and the provision of additional boarding house accommodation are included as development options in the masterplan with an implementation date of September 2021.

floor: one would wrap around the northeast corner; another would be a projecting bay that would extend across the eaves line into the roof and the third would be a two-light 'slot' window with a side panel of horizontal timber cladding. The elevation to Old Park Farm will be adorned with four full-height glazed doors and one full-height window.

3.27 It is far from clear how the form, size, features, details and materials are in accordance with the Council's guidance which is to

- Actively promote the use of traditional building and roofing materials in new building work, extensions and repair. (p 52)
- Expect the scale, massing, proportions and height of new buildings to reflect those of the existing built environment of the immediate context or of the wider conservation area context. (p 52)
- Exercise a presumption in favour of new alterations and extensions that are sympathetic to the existing buildings in scale materials and design. (p 53)

3.28 The proposed structure would be prominent in public views as demonstrated in the drawings included in the Acanthus Clews Design Statement. It would be fully visible from the street – recognised as important views in the CA Appraisal and in the school's Masterplan - and it would be an assertive modern intervention drawing attention to itself in the elevated topography of Old Park Farm and Stone Hill House.

3.29 The new structure would change the outlook and setting of Stone Hill House, as it would be a large and prominent structure with inappropriate materials and details. The same point can be made in terms of views from the principal rooms in, and entrances to, Ashwell House and Cottage. From Old Park Farm – a local heritage asset – the view of Stone Hill House would be largely blocked. The topography might well exaggerate the prominence of the new structure to the 'monumental' level in the views along Stone Hill.

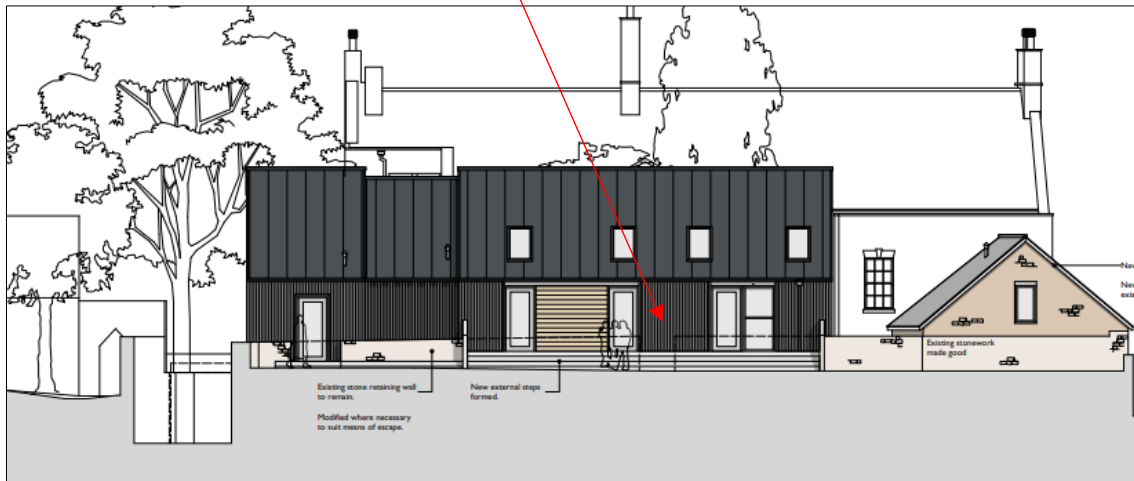


The view from Stone Hill from the west.





The view from Old Park Farm





Stone Hill from the west.

3.30 While it might be possible to redevelop more research should be undertaken to determine the form and materials of the 'lost' structures and the design should be informed by the Council's adopted guidance as set out in 3.4 and 3.27 above.

Level of harm

3.31 HCUK assess the level of harm as follows:

A low to medium level of less than substantial harm has been identified arising through an erosion of the historic values of the listed building as the legibility of historic separateness between the main house and ancillary areas will be lessened with the new structure built and a single use extended through all areas. (HCUK, paragraph 6.2)

And, although the impact on Ashwell House and Cottage and Old Park Farm, has not been addressed, a general comment is offered in respect of the conservation area. It is as follows:

The proposal, in respect of the conservation area, is not considered to cause harm and to preserve the character and appearance of the conservation area although part of the new block will become visible. (HCUK, paragraph 6.3)

The conclusion is that 'within the spectrum of less than substantial harm this proposal falls – the lowest end' (HCUK, 6.4).

3.32 It is agreed that in terms of the NPPF, the development proposal would lead to less than substantial harm. For the reasons set out above, however, it is not the case that there would be a low level of less than substantial harm; the harm would be serious and therefore must be set at the high level.

3.33 As any harm should require clear and convincing justification. It might be the case that the development of new boarding house facilities is essential for the school, but if the proposal is dependent on harmful alterations, then an alternative should be sought and there should be 'clear and convincing justification' which demonstrates why other sites cannot be utilised and why new buildings, if carefully planned, would be 'beyond the scale required and the cost that would be appropriate.'

4 CONCLUSION

The application for extensions and new buildings at Stone Hill House

- it would harm the fabric of the listed structures at Stone Hill House;
- it would harm the settings of nearby listed buildings and an important local heritage asset;
- it would harm the character and appearance of the Bloxham Conservation Area.

Some of the suggested heritage improvements at the former outbuilding are welcome but they would not offset the harm that would be caused by linking it with the house and by the erection of a large dormitory and common room block.

As such the application fails to meet the statutory tests to preserve or enhance as set in the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservations Areas) Act, 1990. s 66 (1) and s 72 and should be refused.

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