

**APPEAL BY**

**JUSTIN GRAINGER**

Internal and external alterations,  
demolition of attached outbuildings  
and erection of single storey  
extension

Chancel Cottage, Fir Lane, Steeple  
Aston

Heritage statement prepared by  
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on behalf of Justin Grainger

14/01601/LB

APP/C3105/Y/15/3138337



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## Policy

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1. In March 2015 Historic England issued new advice on the management of the historic environment in three 'Good Practice Advice Notes'. The advice notes replace English Heritage's PPS5 Practice Guide, referred to in the earlier Heritage Report, which has now been withdrawn.
2. The historic environment policies of the NPPF are supported by these Historic England's Good Practice Advice Notes, which give more detailed advice about gathering the information on significance, assessing the impact and assessing harm with an emphasis on a proportionate approach and proactive and effective management of heritage assets.
3. Good Practice Advice Note 2 *Managing Significance in Decision-Taking in the Historic Environment* is relevant to this proposal. The Advice Note sets out a simple methodology for gathering evidence, understanding significance and assessing impact, assessing harm and measures to mitigate that harm. Paragraph 6 states:
  - Understand the significance of the affected assets;
  - Understand the impact of the proposal on that significance;

- Avoid, minimise and mitigate impact in a way that meets the objectives of the NPPF;
- Look for opportunities to better reveal or enhance significance;
- Justify any harmful impacts in terms of the sustainable development objective of conserving significance and the need for change;
- Offset negative impacts on aspects of significance by enhancing others through recording, disseminating and archiving archaeological and historical interest of the important elements of the heritage assets affected.

4. For the Council the Advice explains in paragraph 25 that

*Local planning authorities will need to assess the particular significance of the heritage asset(s) which may be affected by the proposal and the impact of the proposal **on that significance***  
(emphasis added)

And explains in paragraph 27 that

*Substantial harm is a high test, which may not arise in many cases.*

Adding in paragraph 29 that

*Change to heritage assets is inevitable but it is only harmful when*

*significance is damaged.*

5. The National Planning Policy Framework sets out the distinction between *substantial harm* and less than *substantial harm* and explains how decision makers should respond. These points are covered in paragraphs 132-134 of the Framework. In particular, it advises that substantial harm should be exceptional and advises local planning authorities to refuse applications involving substantial harm. For less than substantial harm then the local planning authority is required to assess harm against public benefits. There is a clear distinction between the two and how to treat proposals under each.
  
6. It is understood that the Council now no longer consider this proposal to represent substantial harm, advising that the case officer interpreted the conservation officer's advice incorrectly. This raises concerns about whether or not the Council understands the significance of the heritage asset, understands the proposals or understands the assessment methodology. Given that the conservation officer in her advice on the subsequent application (15/01328/LB, 15/01327/F) (email dated 8<sup>th</sup> September 2015, appendix 1) confirms that this appeal proposal would cause 'substantial harm' lends further confusion to the Council's stance.



## Heritage significance

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7. The Heritage Report (Worlledge Associates, February 2015) summarised the significance of Chancel Cottage as:

- Physical evidence of the development of the village during the C18th and the subsequent adaptation of the building to meet the needs of contemporary society,
- The formality of its façade illustrates architectural fashions of the period, as interpreted by rural craftsman. The simplicity of its form and absence of elaborate decoration helps understanding of the status of original occupants,
- The plan form and earlier function of the various rooms can be interpreted from surviving evidence (internal and external) and helps to explain how the household operated,
- The house, along with others in the street provide a sense of enclosure to the street, framing the green space of the churchyard,
- The openness of the churchyard allows views across it where the cottages in the lane provide a backdrop or visual stop,

- The use of natural, vernacular materials, simply employed has aesthetic value, the patina and texture of the materials, along with the variety of other materials in the village, adding interest and texture to the informal compositions and helping to reinforce local distinctiveness,
  - The cottage has lost internal features through phases of modernisation and upgrading through the latter part of the C20th.
8. Though published after the building was added to the list, the Historic England Listing Selection Guides (2011) offer some background for the reasons to include the building on the statutory list at this grade (Grade II) and is relevant to issues of defining significance. As a house type Chancel Cottage falls in the one dealing with Vernacular houses. The guide describes the characteristics of a vernacular building (page 2):

*Vernacular buildings were responsive to change and frequently emulated polite architecture, but a degree of conservatism remains an essential part of their character. By their nature they will seldom be in the vanguard of fashion, but they often display considerable technical innovation and versatility,*



9. Interest in the 'plan form' of a building is in what it tells us about how a building was used in order to provide an understanding of occupants' status, needs and values. The Selection Guide explains on page 12:

*Plan-form tells us much about how buildings were used, and should play a part in their assessment. Part of the interest of vernacular housing lies in the use of rooms at different social levels, and in changes in room use over time.*

## Assessment of impact

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10. The degree of harm is measured in proportion to the level of significance that the building holds. This is an important concept which recognises that not all change need be harmful and that the level of harm of a particular proposal would vary depending on the level of significance. The Planning Practice Guide seeks to clarify this stating in paragraph 017:

*It is the degree of harm to the asset's significance rather than the scale of the development that is to be assessed [.....] works that are moderate or minor in scale are likely to cause less than substantial harm or no harm at all.*

11. Whilst the Council appear to accept that the applicant had properly understood the heritage significance that the cottage held and had properly articulated how this significance had informed the design of the proposals, there was disagreement about the extent and nature of the impact, which resulted in the planning and listed building consent applications being refused for the following reason:

*The proposed development, by virtue of its scale, form, massing and materials, and the insertion of six rooflights in the existing building, and the insertion of an internal doorway opening at first floor level, would result in 'substantial' harm to the character, setting and*

*significance of the Grade II listed Chancel Cottage, and 'less than substantial' harm to the character and appearance of the Steeple Aston Conservation Area and the character, setting and significance of the Grade II\* listed St Peter's Church. The proposal would therefore fail to accord with Policies C28 and C30 of the Cherwell Local Plan, Policy ESD16 of the Submission Cherwell Local Plan, and paragraphs 14, 17, 132 and 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework, and it is considered that this identified harm significantly and demonstrably outweighs the proposal's benefits.*

12. As a summary the Council's concerns relate to:

- The formation of a doorway at first floor level,
- The insertion of six rooflights in the existing building,
- The scale, form and massing of the proposed extension,
- Impact on plan form,
- Materials,
- Setting.

Arguing that this would result in substantial harm that is not outweighed by public benefits.

13. As explained earlier 'substantial harm' is a high threshold, intended to describe proposals whose impact would effectively erase the significance a place holds. This is not the case here. The Practice Guide also points out that it is not the scale of development but the impact on significance that is the measure of harm. It would seem that the Council now agrees that the proposal would not cause substantial harm. In the appellant's view the proposal would not be harmful with the addition of an extension and refurbishment preserving not harming the significance of the designated heritage assets.



## Assessment of impact

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### Forming a new doorway

14. A new doorway is necessary to bring a part of the building into use.

The conservation officer previously commented on this aspect of the proposal that:

*There is evidence of a former opening at first floor level, which has since been blocked up. There would be some harm to the significance of the site if this element of the building were to be converted, but this would need to be weighed against the public benefit of bringing this section of the building into use with the associated benefits of better maintenance.*

15. It is a puzzle why she considers making the opening would harm significance (as she doesn't explain why) but her conclusion clearly shows that on balance the benefits would outweigh any harm. It is thus a bigger puzzle why this aspect of the proposal has been included in the reason for refusal. It is important and beneficial that this part of the building is brought into use. The loss of some existing internal masonry in this later addition would not harm the significance of the building.

16. Indeed, the first phase extension to the house involved new openings, an event that in the passage of time the Council appears to consider now to be an important part of the plan form. Historic England comment that change can add to the history of a heritage asset and the foreword to the NPPF recognises that change is necessary.

### **Roof lights**

17. The conservation officer did not comment that the proposed rooflights would be harmful and it is reasonable to conclude from her absence of comment that this element was considered acceptable. However, to address the reason for refusal the number of rooflights could be reduced by condition. They would be 'conservation rooflights' to reflect historic precedents.

### **Scale, form and massing**

18. Because the house and the existing extensions are only one room deep, circulation routes around the building reduce the 'usable space'. The applicant is keenly aware of the need to respect this 'single pile' section, but that does create a challenge in creating usable space (i.e. that not taken up by circulation space).
19. The extension adopts an 'additive' nature, single storey with a ridge set below the height of the existing. This is a characteristic of how

the house (and many other historic houses) has evolved, changing to meet the needs of its occupants, and represents the physical evidence of its history. Heritage management policies and practice seek to sustain this history and add to it, not 'freeze frame' it. It is important that our needs and aspirations are reflected in the buildings we occupy; it provides evidence for future generations to understand the past and provides a context to understand their cultural roots. Assessing the impact and determining the harm, if any, is not determined just by physical dimension. Scale and form are assessed three dimensionally and in relation to the context. The fact that a proposed extension may be longer than another part of the building does not mean that it will appear as the dominant element. In this proposal it will not. Massing refers to its overall shape and size. The extension would be of domestic scale, single storey, shaped to reflect the existing forms and akin in size to many a traditional outbuilding.

20. It is hard to envisage how such a modest-sized extension could have the damaging impact on the building's significance, setting and the setting of the Church opposite as described by the Council.



## **Plan Form**

21. The extension will not alter the 'original' plan form – that remains intact and easy to understand, as would the plan form as subsequently adapted with the earlier extensions. The external shape of the building will change from an L plan, but that cannot be objectionable otherwise the effect would be to prevent any extension. The plan form is not an exceptional survival (otherwise the building would be listed at a higher grade) and has already been altered. Just because the extension is proposed to be at right angles does not mean that the building will be interpreted as a U plan. It would not. The building would be interpreted as a main house fronting the road with subsidiary rear extensions, each one dropping down in scale, creating a pleasant courtyard. Rear courtyards are evident elsewhere in the village and would not appear out of place. The experience in passing views and views from the churchyard would be of a vernacular house with a series of joined 'outbuildings'. The house would remain the primary range and that is how it would be experienced and not, as the Council suggests, as being subservient to the extension. Only glimpses of the rear extensions would be visible from the street and church. Similarly, the extension would appear as a small object in the view from the open spaces to the rear of the house.

## **Materials**

22. Contemporary use of traditional materials ensures that new development is understood as such, representing Contemporary society's growing understanding of its environment and the importance of expressing its own ideals and needs. Because something is different it need not be harmful. The street is characterised by variety. If sensitively designed with regard to scale, mass and relationship to its neighbours, a contemporary use of materials to clad a building that is otherwise traditional in form would be a fitting addition. The proposed use of timber is designed as an expression to give emphasis to the main range, not detract from it.

## **Impact on setting**

23. The proposed extension would be a minor element within the conservation area, visible but not intrusive.
24. Historic England (GPA3) explains that the contribution of setting is often expressed by reference to views of the surroundings from or through the asset. In relation to Steeple Aston, Chancel Cottage and the Church, these views are kinetic and the assets are experienced from a variety of viewing places as one moves through the area. The experience of this is that buildings and spaces come into and go out of view and the relationship between them can be perceived

differently from different view points. In looking at such scenes the eye will pause at points of interest, capturing certain details to inform the viewer's general understanding and appreciation of the view.

25. In relation to the conservation area and the setting of the Church, there is much to look at and the proposed extension would not be prominent in the viewing experience. To those familiar with a view it may be noted for the change it introduces, but its modest scale and use of natural materials would ensure that it is read as a part of the village scene and not dominating it.

## Conclusion

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26. It is not the intention of government to stop change and freeze-frame our historic environment. Historic England recognises that changes are a part of our history and can add to the significance of heritage assets.
27. In relation to the (agreed) heritage significance that Chancel Cottage holds these proposals will:
- Secure the building's future and sustain its residential use,
  - Preserve the physical evidence of the development of the village during the C18th and the history of the cottage,
  - Preserve the formality of its façade,
  - Preserve the plan form and understanding of it,
  - Preserve the sense of enclosure to the street, framing the green space of the churchyard,
  - Preserve the setting of the Church,
  - Maintain the role of a backdrop or visual stop in views from the churchyard,

- Continue the use of natural, vernacular materials, simply employed, adding interest and texture to the informal compositions and helping to reinforce local distinctiveness,
  - Enhance the appearance of the conservation area, helping to conceal views of overhead lines and transformers,
  - Avoid any unnecessary or unjustified loss of existing fabric.
28. Thus the proposals would not cause harm to the heritage assets, their settings or the conservation area.