

Design and Conservation

Cherwell District and South Northamptonshire Councils

Design Advice

Application Number	18/01253/F
Applicant's Name	Bicester Heritage
Application Title	Hotel
Application Type	Full application
Location	RAF Bicester
Case Officer	Maria Philpot

1. Context

This advice is in response to the above planning application dated 24 July 2018 and the series of accompanying site plans, building plans and elevations, and supporting materials showing the proposal for the new hotel. The application proposal has developed through a process of pre-app meetings and detailed feedback, including heritage advice.

Bicester airfield is a significant historic site. In the later 1990s Historic England (HE) assessed the site to be the most complete airfield of the interwar period, following a detailed thematic survey of military airfields. It has been designated as a conservation area and has many listed buildings and scheduled monuments. Historic England's assessment of the site is as follows:

RAF Bicester is primarily of significance as the most complete and unaltered Trenchard era bomber base in the country and (along with West Raynham in Norfolk) the best-preserved bomber base predating 1945. All other bases have undergone a high degree of change and most now bear little resemblance to their original form, but Bicester is like a time capsule. The reason so many buildings at Bicester are listed, while very similar buildings elsewhere are not, is that the base as a whole was recognised as an exemplar; a unique place where it is possible to experience at first-hand what it would have been like to live and work on an interwar airbase. [HE masterplan pre-app letter dated 14.5.2018]

English Heritage's earlier *Survey of Military Aviation Sites and Structures* document which formed the basis of airfield's Listing recommendations in 1999/2000, confirmed that:

[I]t [Bicester] retains, better than any other airbase in Britain, the layout and fabric relating to both pre-1930s military aviation and the development of Britain's strategic bomber force up to 1939. The grass flying field still survives with its 1939 boundaries largely intact, bounded by a group of bomb stores built in 1938/9 and airfield defences built in the early stages of the Second World War (EH document, 2000, Bicester airfield overview).

The airfield as a whole has been the focus of considerable research and assessment to underpin the protection afforded to the site, including a report on its historic significance, The Conservation Area Appraisal, Listing and Scheduling designations, the Planning Brief, and the Heritage Partnership Agreement.

The site was bought in 2013 by Bicester Heritage from the MOD, following the mothballing of the site in 1994. Over the last five years the airfield has seen substantial investment in its historic fabric and revitalisation of the site, with the renovation of existing buildings and the successful launch of a historic motor industry hub.

To date, the focus of Bicester Heritage has been on the refurbishment of the historic technical site and the existing buildings therein. In 2015 The Cherwell Local Plan Part 1 was adopted. Policy 8 establishes the principle of further development at RAF Bicester; however, this is tempered by the need to balance any development opportunities against the significance of the site's heritage.

The Council has worked closely with Bicester Heritage on the developments to date and has adopted a Heritage Partnership Agreement for the site. Bicester Heritage has conserved and developed the historic site to a high standard, securing the longer-term viability of many historic airfield buildings. Heritage site protection is extensive including the Conservation Area, individually Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments and other non-designated heritage assets. These are considered further below in respect of the proposed development.

2. Historic context of the airfield, technical site and proposed hotel site

The airfield's historic technical site is laid out according to the trident footprint developed during the 1920s when Lord Trenchard was the head of the RAF, and the bomber was deemed the most effective form of deterrent. Bicester was developed and used by bomber squadrons during the interwar period, and during the war used for training. Whilst additional buildings were added during the 1930s expansion-period as the threat from Nazi Germany grew (and it was anticipated that Bicester would be an operational station), the core of the technical site is legible as that envisaged during the Trenchardian era. The airfield site also includes the original 1920s flying field, which was extended further to the east in early 1940. At that time the concrete perimeter track was also laid. The airfield's domestic site is also well-preserved, and lays to the west of the technical site and flying field. In addition to buildings, the airfield also retains its bomb stores, airfield defences and air-raid shelters.

The proposed hotel site is to the north-east of the historic technical site. The technical site itself comprises a range of buildings and structures developed during the 1920s and 30s, initially as part of the original Trenchardian-period bomber airfield, then through expansion, to provide a wide range of command, admin, technical support and MT functions. These buildings vary in footprint size and height, the larger buildings other than hangers being Buildings 90, 99 and 119, in the central area. Small buildings and structures nearer to the site of the proposed hotel, but within the technical site, are Buildings 102, 106 and 107.

The airfield's four hangers are to the south-west and south of the proposed hotel, the nearest being Building 79, an A-type hanger. The airfield's two A-types were built in the late 1920s as part of the original Trenchardian trident layout and are of especial historic interest because of their completeness and rarity. The original 1926 plan suggests that an additional four hangers were considered, these to the east of the existing two A-types. Building 108, a C-type hanger, is to the south of the proposed hotel. The larger C-type hangers were added during the 1930s expansion, as was the fort-type Watch Office (Building 109). The hanger positions in relation to the flying field reflects the approach adopted on numerous RAF stations, where the hanger longer sides are parallel to the edge of the flying field, their shorter sides at broadly 90 degrees to the latter. Concrete hardstandings were laid around and between hangers to enable the efficient movement of aircraft and vehicles within these areas. These remain in situ, as do the concrete taxi-ways connecting these.

There are several Scheduled Monuments within the vicinity of the proposed hotel site. These include a small air raid shelter to the north, adjacent to the Buckingham Road (constraint area 8: this was later suggested to be an anti-aircraft gun position); three undefended air-raid shelters nearer the hangers; and a pillbox to the north-east corner of Building 108 (constraint areas 9-11). These are included in List entry 1021455.

The proposed hotel site was never developed as part of the airfield, and remained much as it appears now. However, during the Second World War four large structures were built to the immediate north-east of Building 79, these appearing on the 1945 airfield plan, and a 1946 aerial

view. These were subsequently removed. There was also an aviation fuel installation to the immediate north of these and adjacent to the Buckingham Road, now removed.

3. The hotel proposal – heritage comment on orientation and design

The hotel design has evolved through extensive pre-app collaboration between Bicester Heritage, its designers, and the Council. A starting point for the design was the hotel's orientation, massing, footprint, design, material palette, access, car parking and landscaping. Key considerations during discussions were those elements discussed below in the heritage assessment and advice section, but also the viability of the hotel as a business, and its relationship to the wider airfield site, and other development.

The hotel is of the same volume as a C-type hanger, which was agreed during pre-app discussions, where a bold approach to integrating a modern addition to the site was agreed. The orientation is intended to respect the primacy and spirit of the historic trident form, whilst also allowing views across the airfield and accommodating car-parking, landscaping and a clear spatial and functional relationship to the historic site. Other considerations included views from the Watch Office and airfield's main entrance.

The design and materials palette have again been the focus of detailed discussions. Whilst a design which had a clear relationship (discourse) with historic buildings was clearly important – detailing and materials – it was also considered important that the hotel 'spoke for itself' and was of a contemporary style within its own right. It was not considered appropriate simply to mimic the existing hangers, and Bicester Heritage were encouraged to evolve a design reflecting the best contemporary architectural design possible, within the evident constraints.

Given the information included in the application regarding the design, details and materials, it is not necessary to repeat this here, other than to offer comments about these from a heritage perspective. It is evident that each façade of the hotel is different, yet are unified through the use of brick and consistent detailing throughout. In the case of facades facing onto historic buildings, detailing materials reflects these setting sensitivities (these points are discussed further below). Where facades face away from heritage assets, a more contemporary approach has been adopted. This is evident in the proposed east- and north-facing elevations where a single-storey glazed-curtain curving projection envelops and wraps around the north-east corner of the hotel. This has been positioned here both to benefit from views across the flying field, but also because it is out of sight when viewed from within the technical site. When viewed from Buckingham Road, these elevations will be more obvious, but will also be a reminder to passers-by that the hotel is a new addition, but which respects the grain of the historic airfield site.

In detailing terms, of particular interest has been the proposal to add expanded metal mesh to some facades, mimicking wartime camouflage netting. This innovation is welcomed.

The other factor concerns the proposed hotel's height. Because of room sizes and internal modelling, Bicester Heritage's designers found it necessary to raise the eaves height above what had been confirmed in previous pre-app discussions. This height difference is considered to be modest, and does not affect how the hotel is read in conjunction with adjacent historic hangers. This is therefore considered acceptable in heritage terms.

Hotel landscaping surface treatments includes car-parking a new access road, pathways, new grass and tree planting. Some earth-mounding / binding is proposed to a height of 1.5m.

4. Heritage assessment and advice

The key heritage constraints for the proposed new technical site is the Conservation Area which covers the site as a whole, and the setting of several Listed Buildings (the nearest being hanger

Buildings 79 and 108; deeper within the technical site are Listed Buildings 96, 99 and 103. There are air-raid shelters to the north-eastern sides of Buildings 79 and 108, which are scheduled monuments. There are a range of non-designated heritage assets within the area of the technical site, including several buildings which make a positive contribution to the airfield setting and appearance (Buildings 101, 102, 104, 105).

The key heritage considerations of the proposed hotel are the impact upon:

- The Conservation Area;
- The setting of the Conservation Area from outside the site – e.g. viewing the airfield from the Buckingham Road;
- Buildings 79 and 108 (Listed hangers);
- Buildings 96, 99 and 103 (Listed);
- Buildings 101, 102, 104 and 105 (not Listed, but making a positive contribution); and
- The air-raid shelters and pillbox within scheduled monument constraint areas 9-11
- The landscaping around the hotel

These are now considered in turn.

- **The Conservation Area**

There are several aspects to this, considered individually.

- *Views from within the technical site looking north-east towards the hotel*

These views will essentially be looking between the two hangers (Buildings 79 and 108), which because of their orientations and positions, will limit views of the proposed hotel from within the technical site. Unless one stands between the two hangers nearer their corners to their northern halves, it will be difficult to see the hotel in its entirety (e.g. its south- and west-facing elevations). Depending upon position, the hotel's south-facing elevation will be visible, as will its west-facing longer side. The hotel's south-facing elevation is comprised of brick piers to its corners which mimic the hanger design, the fenestration forming its main façade. The proposed west-facing elevation is primarily of brick, with a glazed atrium to its northern half. As a consequence, when viewing the hotel from within the technical site, the brick-work to the southern half of this elevation will be the visible element. The full-height glazed atrium will only be visible when standing to the eastern side of Building 79 (A-type hanger), looking north-east.

It is considered that the proposed hotel design will not harm the setting of the Conservation Area here. Whilst the hotel is a large, new addition, its design and position are such that the less than substantial harm to the setting of the two historic hangers, and assets to the south-west of these within the technical site, are offset by the public benefits gained by the hotel.

- *Views from the Watch Office looking north-west towards the hotel*

Historically, clear views of the flying field and its edges (perimeter-tracks / taxiways) from the Watch Office were essential, and the proposed hotel orientation largely retains this setting aspect. Viewed from the Watch Office – which is the eastern-most building within the technical site – only the east-facing façade of the hotel will be visible (its south-eastern elevation). Noted above, the hotel's orientation is a reasonable compromise between the primacy of the historic trident plan-form, and the requirements of the hotel as a business (guest experience). The proposed curtain-glazed single-storey projecting restaurant curve has been discussed previously. This is at some distance from the Watch Office and is considered to be a reasonable design given its function and other considerations.

It is considered that the proposed hotel will not harm the important views of the flying field, as seen from the Watch Office. Whilst the character and setting of the northern part of the site has been changed, the less than substantial harm is outweighed by the public benefit of the hotel.

- *Views from within, and at the edges of the flying field, looking north-west towards the hotel*

This clearly depends upon the position of the viewer. For instance, if one is standing at the eastern side of the airfield, the maximum distance to the Watch Office is c. 930m. If standing in the area of the bomb stores to the south, the distance to the Watch office is c. 650m. If standing to the southern boundary of the airfield, and due south of the Watch Office, the distance between the two points is c. 500m. It is evident when viewing the proposed hotel position from various points around the edges of airfield (e.g. to the north-west, west, and south-west) that it will not be an individually prominent feature. Because of its massing the hotel will in effect merge into the horizon with adjacent hangers, forming a continuous edge. Tree-screening also tones down these views of the hangers. Clearly, if viewing the proposed hotel from a closer viewpoint, within the flying field area, then it will be more evident. Given that relatively few people will see it from this perspective, this is not considered to create potential difficulties (and see setting of the Conservation Area below).

- *Views from the main airfield entrance looking north-east towards the hotel*

Because of its position and orientation, the hotel will not be visible from this position.

- *Views from the hotel looking south into the technical site*

The key perspectives will be those in which the hotel and hangers are in the same viewpoints. For instance, if standing with the hotel atrium to one's left, and the viewpoint is towards Building 113 (hanger), then the south half of the hotel's west-facing elevation will be seen. Similarly, from the same viewpoint, the hotel would be included in views towards Buildings 101, 102 and 103. If standing near to the northern corner of Building 79 (hanger), looking south towards Buildings 108 and 113 (hangers) then the hotel would be in this view.

For the reasons noted above, it is considered that the hotel's design takes account of these factors. Any large building in this position will potentially harm the setting of the Conservation Area. It is considered that the less than substantial harm is outweighed by the public benefits of the hotel.

- **The setting of the Conservation Area**

A key view is that from the Buckingham Road as one head south-west towards the main roundabout near the main site entrance. From this viewpoint the hotel will be clearly visible through a wide gap in the boundary hedging as one nears the proposed site. In this same view will also be visible Buildings 79 and 108 (hangers) and the technical site beyond. When heading north-west from the roundabout, screening obscures the airfield and hangers, such that only glimpsed views are obtained, depending upon season.

The proposed hotel will also be visible from housing to the north-west, to the north side of the Buckingham Road (e.g. Turnpike Road), where depending upon viewpoint, the hotel may be visible. This said, there is mature tree-growth and hedging along the Buckingham Road which will obscure views quite significantly. It will be possible to view the hotel from the Thompson Drive area to the north, where the distance between housing and the hotel at their nearest points is c. 200m. It is suggested that whilst this will alter the appearance and setting of the hangers and technical site from this viewpoint, the distances involved mitigate this to a degree.

It is evident that the setting of the Conservation Area when viewed from outwith the site to its northern side, will be altered by the addition of the hotel. However, because of hedging and other screening, these views tend to be glimpses other than the stretch of open boundary nearer the roundabout (e.g. when heading south-west) when the hotel will be more visible. As a result, clear views of Buildings 79 and 108 (hangers) will no longer be possible to the extent that is currently experienced. Noted above, the hotel design seeks to add a positive element to the historic site in this area, with a more contemporary design. In massing terms, the hotel will not be read as a significantly different addition to this part of the airfield site. Because of these factors, it is considered that the less than substantial harm to the setting of the Conservation Area is outweighed by the public benefits of the proposed hotel.

- **Buildings 79 and 108 (Listed hangers)**

The A- and C-type hangers are those buildings closest to the proposed hotel. It is considered that the same setting principles apply as previously discussed in relation to the Conservation Area, as above – e.g. views into and outwith the technical site to its northern area. This discussion included commentary on the proposed hotel facades facing onto these two hangers.

- **Buildings 96, 99 and 103 (Listed)**

These three buildings are set back within the technical site, intervening buildings and tree-screening obscuring clear glimpses of these in relation to the proposed hotel. It is therefore considered that because of the distance between these assets, and intervening screening, that the same principles apply as assessed above in relation to the Conservation Area.

- **Buildings 101, 102, 104 and 105 (not Listed, but making a positive contribution)**

These four buildings are set back within the technical site and are at some distance from the nearest point of the proposed hotel. The above assessment regarding views into and outwith the technical site, as above, are considered to address the setting of these buildings.

- **The air-raid shelters and pillbox within scheduled monument constraint areas 9-11**

There is some distance between the proposed hotel and the identified SAMs. It is though recommended that Historic England's advice is sought on these assets.

- **The landscaping around the hotel**

Additional landscape work is proposed as part of the hotel development, including the rerouting of the taxiway. This is an important part of the development proposal, but feels less considered than other aspects of the plan. We are not convinced by the high bunding in places. The proposed tree planting has a number of geometries and it is not clear how these features will reinforce or enhance the character of the area. No information has been provided on any boundary features which might be used to separate the hotel function from other, more secure areas of the site

Conclusions

The proposed hotel has evolved through detailed pre-app discussions with Bicester Heritage and their design team. Whilst a number of different designs and orientations are possible, the submitted design is considered to be appropriate given the various heritage constraints and business considerations involved. In terms of the hotel design itself, it would be useful to clarify more precisely how the expanded metal mesh covering will be executed on the hotel's facades,

especially where it gives the impression of changing façade texturing across wall planes. This design detail proposal is welcomed and clarification would be useful on this point.

The impact on heritage assets has been considered above, and the relative harm to setting assessed. The scheduled monuments potentially impacted should be referred to Historic England. In the main, it is considered that whilst there will be less than substantial harm to the setting of the Conservation Area and Listed and other non-designated heritage assets, within the context of NPPF (July 2018) para. 196, these are outweighed by the public benefits of the hotel. A key factor is that the hotel's success will ensure longer-term conservation and site viability into the future.

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Date	23 August 2018
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