



Historic England

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

Ms Maria Philpott
Cherwell District Council
Bodicote House
Bodicote
Banbury
Oxfordshire
OX15 4AA

Direct Dial: 01483 252026

Our ref: P00958630

28 August 2018

Dear Ms Philpott

**T&CP (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015
& Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Regulations 1990**

**BICESTER HERITAGE BUCKINGHAM ROAD BICESTER
Application No. 18/01253/F**

Thank you for your letter of 10 August 2018 regarding the above application for planning permission. On the basis of the information available to date, we offer the following advice to assist your authority in determining the application.

Historic England Advice

The proposed hotel would have a marked impact on the RAF Bicester Conservation Area. As you are well aware RAF Bicester is a highly important and sensitive historic site. It is as the most complete and unaltered Trenchard era bomber base in the country and (along with West Rainham 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. While RAF Bicester itself played only a very minor role in the Second World War, bombers would have set off from very similar looking bases all over the country, so the base is not merely of academic interest, it is a tangible link to an important chapter of our national story.

The nature of the base as a time capsule means that change has the potential to be harmful to its significance and need to be considered very carefully. A hotel on the site proposed would represent a major change to the character of the base. It would be a very large building that would be clearly visible when approaching the base from the north, along the A4421, from within the technical site and from most of the grass runway and perimeter track. This would inevitably entail a degree of harm as it would be impossible to hide a large new building of very different purpose and appearance to



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the rest of the technical site so the sense that the base survives largely unchanged from its late 1930s form would be eroded.

However, Historic England acknowledge that a degree of change is necessary as if the base is to have a sustainable future it needs to host a variety of beneficial uses which together represent a viable business model that ensures it is well looked after for the foreseeable future. Bicester Heritage's classic car repair and storage operation is a very good fit for the site and understand that a hotel forms an important part of their business model and is likely to be key to the long-term success of the venture as a whole so accept the principle of a hotel and that this is the most practical and least harmful location for such a building.

I am aware that the precise siting and design of the building has been arrived at after extensive pre-application negotiations with the Council and we also had an opportunity to comment during the pre-application process. The siting of the building close to, and on the same alignment to a C-type hanger represent a compromise between the operational needs of the hotel, particularly the need for as many rooms as possible to face the track, and the desire of the Council for the building to fit into the trident layout of the base. As the massing of the hotel has been altered to conform more closely to the form of a hanger there is a strong argument for fitting it into the trident layout and I think this is a reasonable compromise.

The architects have been wrestling with the challenge of making this building conform to the massing of a C-type hanger and look like it belongs as part of the base without looking too much like a hanger. After all a hotel needs to look inviting. I think the south elevation achieves this reasonably successfully. The contrast between the brick ends and cladding centre gives the elevation a very clear structure and evokes the doors of the hanger. The west elevation works reasonably well in that it reads as a more solid elevation, which again effectively evokes a hangar, while the contrast between the strong corners, with plain walls enlivened by inset brickwork, and the more open centre works reasonably well at creating an interesting and balanced elevation. The other elevations are less successful. The curved corner does not sit comfortably with the strong, simple rectilinear form of the building, the transition from brick to metal mesh looks awkward and their composition, of very regular window openings with little surface modulation, is likely to appear overpowering on this scale.

I think that if the architects were given a bit more time, and pushed a bit harder, they could refine these elevations and produce a much better building here. It would be worth thinking further about how interest could be provided on this side of the building without resorting to the curved corner. One possibility would be to look at expressing the grid which frames the elevation more clearly, possibly by introducing more depth - recessing the windows or bringing the grid forward in places, while having less depth in other area, for instance at the corners.



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The NPPF states that conflict between a proposal and the conservation of a heritage asset (in this case the RAF Bicester conservation area) should be minimised (paragraph 190) that any proposal that entails harm to the significance of a Conservation Area should only be accepted if it is clearly and convincingly justified (paragraph 194) and that this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including securing its optimum viable use (paragraph 196). While we accept that the public benefits, particularly helping secure the long-term future of the RAF Bicester a whole, outweigh the harm there is the need to ensure that that harm is minimised as far as is possible if it is to be considered justified. As we believe that the impact of the proposals on the Conservation Area could be meaningfully reduced by further improving the design we do not think that harm is as yet justified and more time should be allowed for design development.

Recommendation

Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. We consider that the issues and safeguards outlined in our advice need to be addressed in order for the application to meet the requirements of paragraphs 190, 194 and 196 of the NPPF.

In determining this application you should bear in mind the statutory duty of section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings or their setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess and section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of conservation areas.

Your authority should take these representations into account and seek amendments, safeguards or further information as set out in our advice. If there are any material changes to the proposals, or you would like further advice, please contact us.

Yours sincerely



Richard Peats

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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cc: Garry Champion, Cherwell DC



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