

**20/04801/LBA**

**Friends Meeting House York Street City Centre Bath BA1 1NG**

External alterations for the installation of 4no. hand painted timber signs fixed onto side and front elevations and 1no. hand painted sign applied over existing painted signage to portico.

*Object*

The Friends’ Meeting House is a Grade II early 19th century Quaker meeting house, formerly designed as a Freemasons’ Hall by William Wilkins in a Greek Revival style, situated within the Bath conservation area and World Heritage Site. It forms part of the setting for multiple Grade II terraced buildings along York Street, notably 11A and 12-15 York Street which are thought to also have been designed by William Wilkins, with a frontage contemporary to the Friends’ Meeting House. The building’s special architectural and historic interest is principally defined from its principal street elevation, with a portico pediment and symmetrical, flanking wings, and a pair of circular lanterns to provide internal natural lighting via the roof. The blind doorway was intentionally designed to reinforce Masonic mystery and secrecy. Originally, the windows were similarly blind, but these were likely opened in the 1820s-1840s following the change of use from a Freemasons’ Hall to an events space and non-conformist chapel until it became the Bethesda Chapel in 1842.

The Trust previously supported consented scheme 20/04050/LBA for the reuse and refurbishment of the building to house Toppings book shop. We accepted the business case need for central access and that the loss of historic fabric in the creation of an opening would be outweighed by public benefit brought about by the improved interaction with the streetscape to facilitate the successful, long term reoccupation and reuse of the building. Most recently, we commented positively on revisions including the new rectilinear design of the principal access steps, the apparent removal of infill balustrade from between the portico columns, and the removal of the proposed blind doorway fanlight and retention of Bath stone infill. We objected to proposals for the recurving of the ‘1842’ pediment inscription to read ‘1817’.

There initially appears to be a lack of clarity regarding the existing consent. Whilst the revised drawings and Heritage/D&A Statement attached to 20/04050/LBA indicated the exclusion of a balustrade between the portico columns from the scheme, the drawings and visual montages attached to this application continue to show this balustrade in situ. This is not elaborated on within the attached Heritage/D&A Statement, and therefore it is unclear as to whether this forms part of the active proposal.

We call for the omission of the metal balustrade between the portico columns, which would close off the space between the columns. We continue to recommend that an alternative solution is found to allow for an increased transparency between the columns as originally designed, or that this aspect of the scheme is removed entirely. We therefore suggest this is clarified by the LPA before this application progresses further.

In principle, the hand painting of a new sign to the frieze panel is acceptable. We reiterate our preference for the retention of the existing Friends’ Meeting House signage and other paint layers as part of the building’s ongoing socio-historic narrative, but appreciate that the deteriorating condition of the stone may necessitate repairs. It would be beneficial for this element of the scheme to be clarified with the case officer.

However, we have some concerns with the proposed size of the new frieze sign. We feel the repainting of the whole frieze in ‘Chinese Blue’ colour, by virtue of the size and position, would result in an assertive appearance that detracts from the building’s architectural palette and composition. The inset panel filled with render identified in the Condition Survey likely formed the basis for the building’s original inscription. We therefore feel that it would be more appropriate to restrict new signage to this panel within a stone surround, thereby reducing the size and associated visual dominance of the proposed sign whilst aesthetically reinstating a historic feature of interest.

We do not feel that adequate justification has been provided regarding the proposed volume of signage across the building’s principal façade. Whilst the principle of wall-mounted signs in moderation is not unacceptable, we consider the proposed size and volume of signage to be cumulatively excessive and would result in a confused, cluttered appearance. We find the proposed signage to the external returns of the portico to be more appropriate; whilst these would function as street level advertising in mid-range views along the York Street approach, they would be of negligible visual impact within the principal north-facing elevation in immediate views. We therefore highlight the use of signage either side of the blind doorway to be of more substantial visual harm to the building’s architectural facade and recommend their exclusion from the scheme.

We additionally highlight the absence of information regarding the means of fixing the proposed hardwood panels to the stonework, or whether it is proposed to restrain fixings as best as possible to the mortar joints. We encourage the case officer to ask for this additional information to facilitate further assessment with regards to the possible loss of historic fabric and associated harm to the principal façade of a Grade II listed building.

We feel that the repainting of the side doors in a matching blue would result in an overbearing and bright appearance that would detract from the natural stone palette of a listed building and the wider streetscape of the conservation area. We instead suggest that the doors are repainted in a more recessive, neutral colour such as a dark blue or grey as included in the Bath Pattern Book. We recommend the proposed brighter blue and yellow combination is restrained to the signage panels to minimise its visual intrusiveness.

**Conclusion**

In its current iteration, this application proposes an excessive volume of signage which would be of cumulative visual harm to the special historic and architectural interest of a listed building, and would neither preserve nor enhance the character or appearance of the conservation area. It is therefore contrary to the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Section 16 of the NPPF, and Policies B1, D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D9, and HE1 of the Core Strategy and Placemaking Plan. We encourage the reduction of the number and scale of the proposed wall-mounted signs and frieze sign, and suggest that the side doors are repainted in a darker, more neutral colour in keeping with the Pattern Book.