

**20/04050/LBA**

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

Alterations to change the use of the building from a place of public worship to a retail unit. External alterations, to include opening the central blank doorway beneath the portico, new entrance steps, railings and signage. Internal alterations, to include insertion of a gallery, stairs and platform lift in the ground floor hall.

*Support (with reservations)*

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 as a Masonic symbol of 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 commented on consented scheme 08/04447/LBA, which proposed similar alterations to the frontage as does the current application, in particular the opening of the blind doorway to provide a centralised, stepped access from York Street. 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 the improved interaction with the streetscape to facilitate the successful, long term reoccupation and reuse of the building.

In principle, the Trust is supportive of bringing this significant, underutilised building back into a sustainable occupation. We maintain that so long as the works proposed are consistent with the special architectural and historic interest and value of a listed building, we are supportive of sensitive adaptive reuse which can ensure the long-term maintenance and management of an unusual example of Greek Revival architecture within Bath.

We regret the need to open the blind doorway and recognise the harm this would cause to the original architectural design of the building, however we are obliged to measure this against the proposed public benefit of the scheme in accordance with paragraphs 195 and 196 of the NPPF:

*“196. Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to (or total loss of significance of) a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or total loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss.”*

We therefore maintain that the harm proposed by the opening of the blind doorway would be outweighed by the public benefit of bringing the building back into use and consequently ensuring its long-term maintenance and conservation, public access, and the enlivened social character of this area of the conservation area. We feel that it would be unlikely for the building to be able to come back into public use and maintain viable commercial operation without opening the doorway.

We continue to maintain our preference for a solid door infill to ensure the solid, closed appearance and architectural integrity of the façade can be retained after closing hours. We note the sloped sides of the blind doorway architrave would require a bespoke, fitted door design to ensure the retention of the doorway’s original dimensions and evidential outline, with regard to the proposed transom window, we feel this introduces a strong horizonal emphasis that would be at odds with the strong verticality of the door, architrave and portico.

Whilst the principle of stepped access from the street level is practically necessary, we remain unconvinced by the proposed design of the stepped access to the new entrance via the portico. We feel that the steps as proposed introduces an unwelcome, rounded element into a façade which is otherwise primarily rectilinear in its articulation. Our suggestion would be that the steps are redesigned with straight lines. We are additionally resistant to the proposed metal balustrade between the portico columns, which would visually close off the central, recessed viewpoint of the building’s façade. We continue to recommend that an alternative solution is found to allow for an increased transparency between the columns as originally designed.

We are pleased that the applicant has taken into account our recommendations regarding signage. The current application now proposes that the existing stone fascia would be hand painted. However, whilst we appreciate the peeling condition of the existing Friends’ Meeting House signage, we feel that the removal of all existing painted signage would constitute a lost opportunity to preserve the ongoing social history and value of the building for the benefit of future generations. We therefore recommend that the existing signage is retained beneath an interlayer (of limewash or sheltercoat) over the top of which the new signage can then be applied.

We maintain that all joinery, masonry, and metalwork details should be provided in full and the sign-off of their detailed design conditioned as part of any granted consent to ensure a high quality finish to the appearance and character of a listed building.

**Conclusion**

Whilst we recognise that opening up the blind door would result in a degree of harm, we consider that harm is outweighed by public benefit, particularly in securing new use and occupation that will sustain the building’s long term conservation.

We encourage a physical interpretation of the building on site, including description of its early purpose as a Freemasons’ Hall and the wider architectural portfolio of William Wilkins, such as the National Gallery, that could be situated just inside the glazed doorway for public engagement. BPT would happily be commissioned to undertake this work.