

ITEM NO:

Location: **Hitchin Town Hall
Brand Street
Hitchin
Hertfordshire
SG5 1HX**

Applicant: **Mr H Barry**

Proposal: **Replace existing wood floor to Hitchin Town Hall using
solid oak floor planks secret nailed/ glued to new
hardwood support battens.**

Ref. No: 20/02371/LBC

Officer: **Mark Simmons**

Date of expiry of statutory period : 25.12.2020

1.0 Policies

SECN16 Conserve + enhance historic environment

XHE1 Designated Heritage Assets

2.0 Site History

2.1 **12/02796/1** - Erection of two storey glazed entrance and link structure; roof terrace with glazed balustrade. Addition of first floor including provision of roof top plant equipment to facilitate change of use of gymnasium (Class D2) and associated changing facilities, store and activity room to museum (Class D1). Internal alterations to existing buildings to provide cafe, shop, display area and ancillary facilities. Rear staircase and refuse enclosure and alteration to existing steps to provide disabled access to Town Hall. (as amended by plan nos. PL01B; PL02A; PL03A; PL04A & PL06A received 26th January 2013)

CP 26.02.2013

12/02797/1LB - Erection of two-storey glazed entrance and link structure, roof terrace with glazed balustrade and flank wall to No. 16 Brand Street. Addition of first floor including provision of roof top plant equipment to facilitate change of use of gymnasium (D2) and associated changing facilities, store and activity room to museum (D1). Internal alterations to existing buildings to provide cafe, display area and ancillary facilities including alterations to layout of toilets and kitchen area. Inside existing Town Hall building provision of lift, alterations to stage to create museum storage. Alterations to first floor balcony with new floor, glass balustrade and new access way replacing existing window opening. Alterations to stepped access to Town Hall.

CCON 26.02.2013

14/01633/1LB -Internal alterations forming part of the services installation relating to the refurbishment and extension of the Town Hall (as amended and amplified by drawing nos. (06)002C2, (06)004C2, (24)002C2 & (45)010C1, revised Design and Access statement, Supplementary Planning Statement and manufacturers information re modern services installations (received 16th and 17th July 2014).

CCON 18.08.2014

3.0 **Policies**

3.1 National Planning Policy Framework Section 16: Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

Particularly 189,192-194, 196

The Local Plan was scheduled to have several additional hearings in Spring 2020 but the LP Inspector confirmed the postponement of the LP Hearings due to coronavirus. The Hearings were rescheduled and recommenced on 23rd November. Some weight can still be attributed to the emerging North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 Proposed Submission (September 2016) Incorporating The Proposed Main Modifications (November 2018) and the policies contained within it.

Policy HE1

4.0 **Representations**

4.1 **Press & site notices** – Although internal alterations only do not need to be advertised or a site notice displayed both were undertaken. Site notice expiry date was 03/12/2020 whilst the press notice was 05/12/2020. No representations received.

4.2 **Procedural matters**

4.2.1 Hitchin Town Hall is owned by the North Hertfordshire District Council. If the Council had been the applicant then the Local Planning Authority could not determine its own listed building consent application but instead it would have to be referred to the National Planning Casework Unit (on behalf of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) after consultation with Historic England the National Amenity Societies.

4.2.2 Had this been the case and in determining whether this application had to be referred to the NPCU the following legislation is relevant:

1) Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

2) Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Regulations 1990

3) Circular 01/2001 - Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications - Notification and Directions by the Secretary of State

4.2.3 Section 13 of the LBCA 1990 Act states that if an LPA, to whom an application is made for listed building consent, intends to grant consent, they should first notify the Secretary of State. Paragraph 26 (1) of Circular 01/2001 however, refers to the determination by LPA's of certain listed building applications without notifying the Secretary of State. It states that section 13 of the Act shall not apply to applications for listed building consent to carry out works for the demolition, alteration, or extension of a grade II (unstarred) listed building outside Greater London unless the application proposes the carrying out of:

- a) works for the demolition of any principal building: or
- b) works for the alterations of any principal building which comprise or include:
 - i) the demolition of a principal external wall of the principal building: or
 - ii) the demolition of all or a substantial part of the interior of the principal building.

None of the criteria set out in a) or b) above apply to this current application and therefore no consultation with the Secretary of State is required under the above Act or Circular.

4.2.4 Regulation 13 of the Planning (LBCA) Regs 1990 subsection (1) refers to applications by local planning authorities for alterations to listed buildings. Sub section (2) states that in such cases the Authority shall make application to the Secretary of State.

4.2.5 However, this listed building application is not made by the LPA but Floorteq Limited and notice has been served on North Hertfordshire District Council in the making of the application to the Local Planning Authority. As such, with the Local Planning Authority not being the applicant for this application, there is no requirement for referral to the Secretary of State. This procedure is the same as applied with the three previous sets of planning, listed building and conservation consent applications previously determined by the Local Planning Authority, where the applications were not made by the LPA but by a third party (in the case of the previous applications the applicant was Buttress Conservation Architects on one occasion and Hitchin Initiative in the case of the other two).

4.2.6 Circular 01/2001 (Annex A) provides procedural guidance on notification of listed building applications to the National Amenity Societies. The National Amenity Societies are listed as:

- Ancient Monuments Society
- The Council for British Archaeology
- The Georgian Group
- The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
- The Victorian Society
- The Twentieth Century Society

Local Planning Authorities are required to notify the above Societies in the following cases:

- a) for works for the demolition of a listed building; or
- b) for works for the alteration of a listed building which comprise or include the demolition of any part of that building

As the works the subject of this listed building application do not involve the demolition of any part of the building there is no requirement to consult any of the National Amenity Societies. Historic England has not been consulted either and there is no requirement to do so.

4.2.7 Consequently, the fact that:

- a) the building is owned by North Hertfordshire District Council
- b) the applicants are Floorteq Limited;
- c) the applicants are also agents for the application;
- d) Floorteq Limited are the appointed contractor;
- e) the works subject of this listed building application do not involve the demolition of any part of the building and there is no requirement to consult any of the National Amenity Societies or Historic England

The application can be determined by the Local Planning Authority.

4.2.8 Given the above legislation, I am satisfied that there is no requirement for this application to be referred to the NPCU on behalf of the Secretary of State and that the Local Planning Authority may determine this application.

5.0 **Planning Considerations**

5.1 **Site & Surroundings**

5.1.1 Hitchin Town Hall is located at the north-western end of Brand Street at the junction with Grammar School Walk, is grade II listed and is located within the Hitchin Conservation Area. The list entry reads as follows:

Town Hall, built 1900-1901, extended to the east in the later C20. Designed by Edward Mountford and T Geoffrey Lucas for Hitchin Urban District Council.

MATERIALS - The building is constructed in red brick, laid in English bond, with rendered details and stone dressings.

PLAN- Approximately rectangular with a slightly projecting front office range, and late C20 extensions linking with the former Workmen's Hall and gymnasium to the east.

EXTERIOR - The building comprises a Neo-Georgian front range, with 'Wrenaissance' influence, and a rear hall in the Arts and Crafts style, The office range has stone capping to the brick plinth and quoins to the corners. The hipped tile covered roof has a central cupola, an end stack at the east elevation and a stair turret beneath a gablet at the west elevation. A slightly projecting central panel of one bay framed by pilasters is clad in stone, At ground floor, a central moulded arched entrance with enlarged keystone has recessed later C20 glazed and timber doors with small-paned leaded lights above, Iron lantern brackets and suspended lanterns are above either side of the arch. Carved at the top of the pilasters are the letters HU (to the left) and DC (to the right) with AD and MCM (the date in Roman numerals) beneath.

At first floor, a pair of lancet windows with small-paned leaded lights and a moulded stone lintel lie beneath a pediment with central carved coat of arms and foliate motifs. The pediment and eaves rest on modillions. On either side of the central bay are three windows each to the ground and first floors. At ground floor, four are original mullion windows with small paned leaded lights; two to the left of centre have inserted transoms. All first-floor windows are mullion and transom windows with leaded lights.

The hall to the rear has a tiled gable roof and rough-cast render at the upper levels. It is five bays long, has a rectangular plan and lies at a right angle to the front range. Each bay is defined by half-buttresses and has a semi-circular or Diocletian window with two mullions beneath the eaves.

There are two tile-hung dormers to each pitch with timber casement windows. The west elevation has a central opening at ground floor with stone quoins, part glazed doors and a canted, pent roof. To the rear is a remodelled brick extension with hipped roofs, partly constructed in the same style as the hall, which accommodates the stage and back rooms internally.

The later C20, flat-roofed single and two-storey extensions to the east obscure the east elevation of the hall and have no historic interest. The linked, much altered, two-storey gymnasium has a half-hipped roof covered in slate with dentil cornice, some contrasting brickwork and replacement windows.

INTERIOR - In the office range, a central ground-floor foyer has contemporary quarry tiles, plain dado rail and cornices and a wooden plaque commemorating honours won by Hitchin men in World War I. A simple, enclosed staircase leads to the first floor. The rooms off the staircase are plain in decoration, served by corridors with arched openings, plain dado rails and cornices. The Lucas room on the first floor has two entrance doors with a moulded architrave. A fireplace at the east end has a deeply coloured tile and carved wood surround. There is a plaster cartouche thought to represent the Lucas family crest, surrounded by foliate and shell motifs above. There are deep cornices, some with egg and dart motifs.

To the rear of the foyer double doors lead to the multi-functional hall. The hall has an adjustable sprung wooden floor, contemporary with its construction, and a barrel-vaulted ceiling with prominent concrete beams rising from columns and elaborate consoles to the cornice. The details on the consoles represent a rose and lavender, crops grown locally for the horticultural and pharmaceutical industries. Contemporary brass light fittings remain. To the north, the stage has a simply moulded proscenium arch and remodelled rooms beneath. To the south, a first-floor gallery is supported on three slender columns; a separate access to the seated gallery is at the first floor. On the east side, an inserted double opening leads to a remodelled corridor partly integrated into the later C20 extensions which incorporate a new entrance into the complex and link the hall with the former Workmen's Hall and Gymnasium. The latter now serves as a late C20 sports facility and the former hall has been subdivided; neither have fixtures and fittings of interest.

HISTORY - Hitchin Town Hall was constructed for Hitchin Urban District Council in 1900-1901 as a replacement for the Old Town Hall of 1840, also on Brand Street. Built on land donated in 1897 by local dignitaries Frederic Seebohm and William and Alfred Ransom, the competition to design the Town Hall was won by Edward Mountford and T Geoffry Lucas. It was constructed at a cost of £7,300 and combined council offices and a hall. A small extension at the rear of the hall was built on land donated by Dr Oswald Foster and appears to have been either constructed or remodelled during the interwar years. In the 1960s the hall was extended to the south-east, linking it to the Workmen's Hall and Gymnasium of 1841, resulting in some exterior and interior remodelling.

SOURCES NHDC.- Proposed Register of Buildings of Local Interest in Hitchin. July 2009. Field, Richard. Hitchin, A Pictorial History 1991. A Stuart Gray . Edwardian Architecture A Biographical Dictionary (1985) p.237,267-9 Pevsner, N and Cherry, B.The Buildings of England : Hertfordshire:2nd Edition (1977) pp 204-205. The Builder 30 March 1901, p.320

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION - Hitchin Town Hall of 1900-1901, Brand Street, Hitchin is designated at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

Architectural Interest; the front range of the building has carefully considered detailing expressing civil dignity balanced by the domestic quality of the flanking bays and elevations of the rear hall. The building was designed by E W Mountford and T Geoffry Lucas, renowned architects in the design of municipal and domestic buildings with many listed buildings to their names

Intactness; both the exterior and interior of the building are largely intact

Interior; the Lucas Room is distinguished for its decorative plasterwork

Group Value; Hitchin Town Hall has group value with the designated old Town Hall, the contrasting architecture of the two buildings demonstrating the evolution of the building type from the mid-C 19 onwards.

(CASE OFFICER EMPHASIS IN BOLD)

5.2 Proposal

- 5.2.1 Replace existing wood floor to Hitchin Town Hall using solid oak floor planks secret nailed/ glued to new hardwood support battens.

5.3 Key Issues

- 5.3.1 The key issue relates to whether replace the existing Kapur wood floor in the main hall with oak boards would occasion harm to the listed building's special character.

- 5.3.2 According to the list entry, “... *The hall has an adjustable sprung wooden floor, contemporary with its construction*”. Although the list entry is a relatively recent detailed description, I suggest that on the above point the list entry is incorrect. As stated at the beginning of the description the Town Hall was built in 1900-01, however, the ‘Valtor’ system was designed as an adjustable sprung load floor and was patented and installed by Francis Morton, Junior & Co. This floor system came to prominence from the 1920’s, presumably in response to society’s increased requirement for dance halls and was installed at over 400 venues including Nantwich Civic Hall (1951), Grafton Rooms, Adelphi Hotel, Reece’s Ballroom (Liverpool) and the Bradford Odeon. There is no evidence to suggest that the ‘Valtor’ system existed in 1900-01.
- 5.3.3 This system comprised rows of light steel girders laid under the floor, each divided into short lengths, coupled together by special spring fittings. The entire floor thus rested on steel springs, with no ‘dead point’ anywhere. The existing Kapur boards are generally $\frac{3}{4}$ ” thick and $2\frac{1}{2}$ ” wide. The floor is essentially in 7 sections (1 section under the gallery with 6 long sections beyond the gallery – 4 adjustable sprung floor bays with a non-sprung section either side resting on ventilated brick sleeper walls). There is a wall under the apron (fore stage) and on the alignment of the support columns to the gallery.
- 5.3.4 Originally, the floor system could be adjusted to provide varying degrees of springiness, and ‘locked’ to prevent movement when not required for dancing. This system came with a locking key (a long T-bar) and a winding mechanism exists under 4no. covers at the stage end of the hall. Unfortunately, the locking key is lost. If a locking key is found or made, neither myself or the floor contractor is able to provide any assurance that the spring floor mechanism is still operational and whether the proposed oak floor with wider boards would be capable of being adjusted using a locking key. Floorteq states that “...we can’t speculate as to its ongoing effectiveness...”. This application is principally concerned with the installation of a new, durable and visually attractive floor finish rather than being concerned with whether or not the ‘Valtor’ system is still operational. There is no intention to remove or alter the existing ‘Valtor’ system at Hitchin Town Hall.
- 5.3.5 Furthermore, not only is the ‘Valtor’ system probably not original, the floorboards are also non-original. I undertook some research at the County Records Office with the purpose of seeking to corroborate these views but without success. No evidence was found as to the original floor construction or finish. It is plausible, however, that the original floor could have been Oak, Beech or Maple.
- 5.3.6 The submitted Design and Access Statement states the following:
- “..... From information received and further historic research, it is believed the floor was later replaced in the 1950s; the reason for this is unknown. Replacement Kapur floor planks were used, probably due to cost or availability at a time when environmental import restrictions were less stringent. The installation included the use of softwood support battens, nailed perpendicular across the structural joists....*

.... Due to its current condition, as well as the cost and environmental implications of importing and using exotic hardwood planks, it is not proposed to reinstate a Kapur floor but to introduce an oak floor of modern width boards. Provision will also be made to replace the softwood undercarriage battens with plywood equivalents which will provide much improved support and anchorage for the new boards...

..... Although the oak floor will be lighter in colour and the board widths wider, the proposed floor will retain similar characteristics to the existing sprung floor and almost certainly be of a similar timber species to that used when the hall was built. The floor will also continue to be naturally ventilated by the installation of brass register grills at strategic locations to provide continued air circulation above and below the floor."

5.3.7 Investigating the structure below the existing floor, it is apparent that the existing floor has essentially 4 component parts:

- The existing timber floor is Kapur timber (an exotic hardwood, derived from trees of the genus *Dryobalanops* which is found in lowland tropical rainforests of Malaysia, Indonesia and South-East Asia);
- The boards are placed on cross-bearers or battens which are then fixed to timber joists, which in turn are fixed to
- The metal 'Valtor sprung system'; and
- Additionally, there are a number of brick-formed 'sleeper walls' but these are not considered to be of special interest.

5.3.8 During the course of considering this application, I have raised the following matters with Howard Barry (Floorteq Limited):

- If a locking key were located or a new one manufactured, could the floor be tensioned or un-tensioned as originally intended?
- What is the purpose of the damp proof membrane (DPM) mentioned at page 7 of the Design, Access and Heritage Statement?
- In terms of the hardness grading of timber how do Oak and Kapur compare?
- The Method Statement refers to the removal/disposal of skirting quadrant but not to its replacement – is skirting quadrant required?

5.3.9 It should be noted that without the existing locking key there is some uncertainty as to whether the floor can be 'locked' or 'unlocked' as originally intended. In response to my queries above, Mr Barry has replied as follows:

1.Potential difference in suspension characteristics with regard to the Valtor Spring System

Currently we cannot confirm whether this system has been tensioned or relaxed for dance use so we can't speculate as to its ongoing effectiveness. The proposed use of solid oak planks, by way of replacement to the existing kapur, presents consistent characteristics. While not wishing to get too technical, Kapur has a Janka hardness rating of 1205 lb and density of 47 lb/ cu ft whereas European oak has a hardness rating of 1120 lb and density between 35 - 56 lb cu ft (depending on the exact location of origin). In summary, we can foresee no discernible difference to the existing floor (apart from the finished appearance).

2. Inclusion of a damp proof membrane.

This really is a belt & braces approach to the installation, in view of potential damp within the floor void. Wood plank floors in general and oak, in particular are extremely susceptible to changes in (a) temperature and (b) humidity. A general rule of principle dictates that the temperature and humidity in the hall ideally should be the same as the temperature and humidity in the underfloor void to prevent distortion, twisting and buckling of the floor boards. That is the main reason why ventilation grills are currently fitted around the perimeter of the hall. The proposal is to simply lay Tyvek (or equivalent) vapour barrier across the top of the joists to provide a membrane beneath the support battens and floor boards.

As a point of reference, Junckers', one of the largest commercial flooring suppliers in Europe, recommend the inclusion of a damp proof membrane, irrespective of whether the floor is laid on a solid base or above a suspended void. I suggest if they are supplying 1000's of sq metres of solid wood flooring to sports centres and councils throughout the UK each year they must know something about the product's limitations.

3. Replacement quadrant/ skirting boards

The existing floor does not appear to run beneath the skirting boards. Instead, a hardwood quadrant has been carefully fitted around the perimeter of the hall to cover the expansion gap and painted to match the skirting boards. We intend to replicate this approach, without removing the skirting boards, unless absolutely necessary. A new, replacement hardwood quadrant will be fitted and sealed to the skirtings, as previously. There is no provision at this stage, however, to redecorate the quadrant to match.

5.4 Conclusion

- 5.4.1 It is considered that the replacement oak floor will not occasion harm to the listed building, thereby, satisfying the provisions of Section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF and Policy HE1 of the emerging North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 Proposed Submission (September 2016) Incorporating The Proposed Main Modifications (November 2018) and is considered **UNOBJECTIONABLE**.

5.5 Alternative Options

- 5.5.1 None applicable.

5.6 Pre-Commencement Conditions

- 5.6.1 None applicable.

6.0 **Legal Implications**

6.1 In considering whether to grant listed building consent for any works, under Section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the local planning authority is required to have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

7.0 **Recommendation**

7.1 That Listed Building Consent be **GRANTED** subject to the following conditions:

1. The work to which this consent relates shall be begun by not later than the expiration of the period of 3 years from the date of this notice.

Reason: To comply with the provisions of Section 18 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended by Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

2. The existing skirting boards are not intended to be removed. However, the existing quadrant that has been fixed to the skirting to conceal the joint between the existing Kapur floor and skirting shall be removed and following the installation of the oak floor, new quadrant shall be installed and shall be decorated to match the existing skirting unless otherwise agreed and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure that special regard is paid to protecting the special architectural and historic interest and integrity of this grade II listed building under Section 16(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.