
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

Ms Mared Rees-Jones
Wrexham County Borough Council
The Guildhall
Wrexham
LL11 1AY

Your reference: P/2021/0173
Our reference: 164835

mared.rees-jones@wrexham.gov.uk

1 April 2021

Dear Ms Rees-Jones,

RE: 71 Acton Gate, Wrexham, LL11 2PW (Grade II, G. L. Sutcliffe, 1913): Single storey rear extension, internal alterations, replacement of windows.

Thank you for notifying the Victorian Society of this application. We **object** to the proposals and would like to offer our comments.

71 Acton Gate is the eastern-most of a row of five listed houses (63–71 Acton Gate) designed by G. L. Sutcliffe as part of Wrexham Garden Village. These five houses (two pairs semi-detached and one detached) were apparently the first group to be constructed and are the only part of this socially and historically important development to be protected by statutory listing. They were designed in a neo-vernacular style and are strongly characterised by their expansive and steeply-pitched slate roofs, their white roughcast render, their tall brick chimneys, and their simple joinery. The materiality of these buildings makes an important contribution to their significance, both individually and as a group. Also important is the intended relationship of these buildings to their gardens: each house was originally designed with a prominent veranda, linking the main living space to the front garden. In the two pairs of semi-detached houses these verandas are paired between the gabled wings in the centre of the composition, and are an important aspect of the architectural expression.

Of the five listed houses, nos. 63–69 retain most of their character intact — no visibly intrusive additions have been made, at least on the street side; their verandas remain open, as originally intended, and they seem mostly to retain painted timber joinery. From the information I have available it is hard to determine the provenance of the window frames, but it at least looks like nos. 65–69 are consistently fenestrated, all with the same slightly unusual frames featuring top-hung casements. These windows all seem to have genuine glazing bars articulating almost square panes — the regularity of the arrangement, combined with the shallow relief of the glazing bars, makes a strong contribution to the buildings' character. Unfortunately, the building which is subject of this application has at some point (before designation) had all its windows replaced with uPVC units with applied glazing bars. Its veranda has been infilled with glazed doors, as has its porch. These alterations have caused harm to the significance of both no. 71 itself, through the loss of fabric and erosion of its special architectural character, and to nos. 63–69, through the loss of material and design consistency to the group of buildings.

Patron
HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG, GCVO
President
Griff Rhys Jones
Chair
Professor Hilary Grainger

Vice Presidents
Sir David Cannadine
The Lord Howarth of Newport CBE
Sir Simon Jenkins
Fiona MacCarthy OBE

1 Priory Gardens, London W4 1TT
Telephone 020 8994 1019
admin@victoriansociety.org.uk
victoriansociety.org.uk

The current proposals include the replacement of all the uPVC windows with similar uPVC windows, the enlargement of two existing openings at the rear of the house and the construction of a new flat-roofed extension, and the rearrangement of the interior spaces, including the relocation of the kitchen and the creation of a new ensuite bathroom. Most of these alterations will cause further harm to the significance of this listed building. The construction of a new extension to the rear will cause harm through loss of fabric and erosion of architectural character. Although the rear of the building is the least sensitive aspect, the proposed form of the extension — flat-roofed, extensive glazing — reflects nothing of the strong vernacular character of the listed building, and adds nothing in terms of high quality modern design. The addition of an extra pair of large, glazed sliding doors to the current dining room will compound the harm that will be caused. The internal rearrangements — ensuite, relocation of kitchen — will act to obscure the building's planform, all the more because they both entail the full or partial concealment of the chimney breasts in these rooms. The addition of the breakfast bar to the chimney breast in the current living room will be particularly harmful, obscuring an important focal point of the plan form. The new window proposed to light the ensuite will cause a small amount of harm by intruding a modern element into a prominent elevation, again compromising the building's character. The only part of the proposals which will not cause harm to significance is the replacement of all the current windows with new versions. As noted above, the past loss of the original joinery has already caused a great deal of harm to the significance of this building through the erosion of its special character; the best that can be said of proposals to replace the windows is that they will not cause further harm.

No convincing justification has been offered for any of these alterations: the requirements of 'modern-day living' are neither pressing nor specific enough to justify the harm that these works will cause. The explicit justification for the construction of the new rear extension — that the living room is 'north facing so suffers from poor natural lighting' — is poor. The original design of the building gave this room windows to the north and to the south; if the past glazing in of the veranda has obscured to some degree the south-facing window this in no way justifies further harm through the construction of an insensitive extension. The repeated suggestion in the Heritage impact Statement that the proposals in some way represent a 'restoration' of the building, even in part, must be strongly rebutted.

Cadw's *Conservation Principles* offer the following definition of restoration: 'Restoration involves the recreation of the lost parts, appearance or function of an historic asset based upon the strongest available evidence for its construction and layout.' (*Conservation Principles for the sustainable management of the historic environment in Wales*, 2011, p. 26). The text goes on to describe in detail the issues that must be addressed when considering proposals for restoration, and we recommend that the applicants study this document carefully. Our opinion is that there is a clear opportunity in this case to enhance the significance of both no. 71 and the group of listed buildings of which it forms a prominent part by replacing the existing windows with timber windows to match those still extant at no. 69 — or, if those are not original and the original plans can be found, to match the original arrangements. This would be a genuine act of restoration as described by the *Conservation Principles*, and would add clear public benefits to a set of proposals which currently offers none.

For the reasons above we strongly recommend that your authority refuses consent and works with the applicants to develop more sensitive proposals. We would be grateful if you could inform us of your decision in due course and consult us again if any amendments are made.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Taylor

Conservation Adviser