

CONTEXT



Institute of Historic Building Conservation

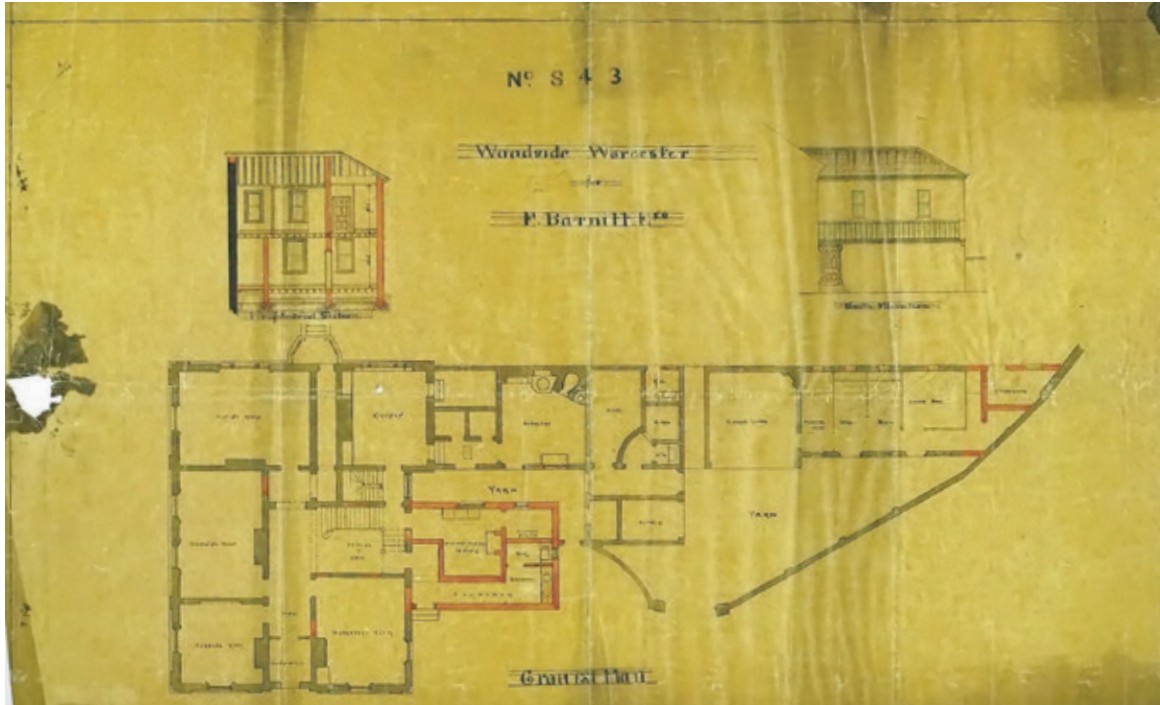
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Valuing heritage

The conflict and controversy

Worcester's HER21 project

Worcester City Historic Environment Record (HER) has been created to support informed and intelligent plan-making and development management.



The plans and elevations for Woodside, a suburban gentleman's residence of around 1820, raise some tricky questions.

In 2010 Worcester City Council's development management service obtained funding from English Heritage towards the Worcester City Historic Buildings Data Project. The project aimed to digitally capture historic building application records for Worcester, dating from 1865–1948, and assimilate them into the Worcester City Historic Environment Record (HER). This was to enable fully searchable, geographic-information-system-based access to an important but under-used dataset to be provided to a broad spectrum of users.

The aim was to allow local authority conservation, archaeological and planning officers to develop an enhanced understanding of Worcester's historic built fabric, further enabling its informed and intelligent management through plan-making and development management. Three thousand groups of records, many of them very fragile, were digitally preserved, removing the need to use the original documents.

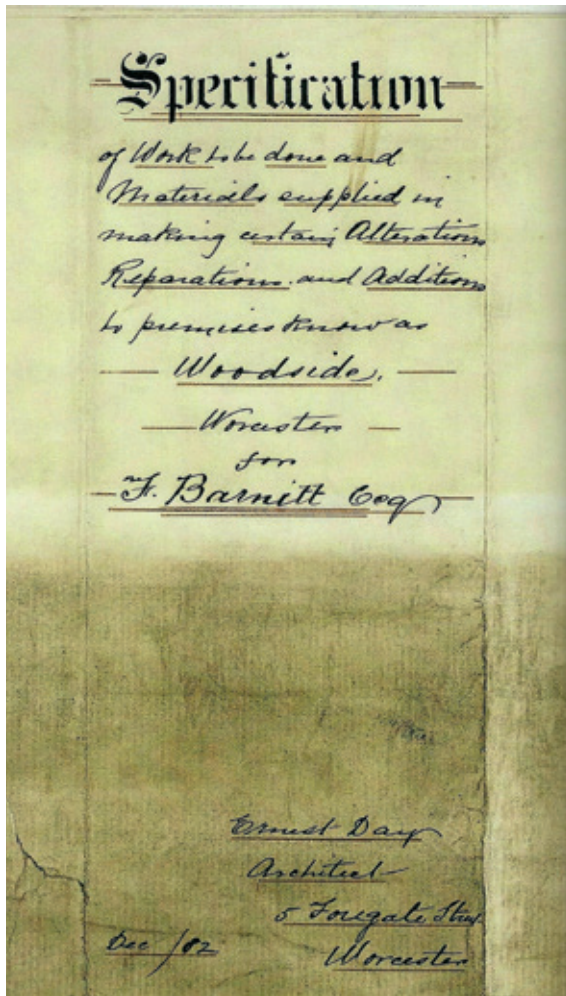
Project officers now had access to high-resolution images of the original architects' drawings: plans, elevations and sections all in colour and fully annotated. These were usually accompanied with specifications for materials to be used, quantities and how they were to be employed, and information relating to ownership, building use and the names of the architects themselves. The advantages of having these missing pieces of the jigsaw to study are self-evident and numerous.

Prior to the inception of HER21, the city council had its own HER. The records consisted of historic Ordnance Survey and tithe maps; historic photos dating from the

late 19th century (Board of Health Survey) to early 20th century; inter-war aerial photos (vertical and oblique); miscellaneous documents; and mapped records of find locations, archaeological interventions and scheduled ancient monuments. These, geographically searchable via GIS, highlighted listed buildings, buildings at risk, buildings of local significance and conservation areas. Given the HER's evolution from a tool purely for recording archaeological information, there were significant gaps in terms of robust information on historic buildings, a fact that this project had to address.

Sometimes a degree of uncertainty and supposition may have to be employed with conservation and history. With supposition can come confusion and with confusion





often comes dispute. This may lead to delay: architect and client versus the planning and conservation staff. With fewer conservation staff and continued pressure on them, any tool which saves time and aids the planning process is welcome. This new resource has potential to save money for both the applicant and the authority. The documents cover not only new build between 1865 and 1948, but also extensions, alterations and something described as ‘repairs’.

More important, this included works to many older buildings from the 19th century and, fortunately for us at Worcester, the 18th century. For most of the time, the information gained from 10 minutes studying the drawings endorsed initial thoughts. Likewise, they helped understanding present-day layouts with extensions or alterations. The information has enabled an open, honest and transparent dialogue with all parties, leaving an agreed way forward and clear instructions for the architect on what would and would not be acceptable, saving time and money.

One small word of warning. The HER21 project captured the plans and elevations of the buildings ‘as found’ or ‘as planned’, creating a reference point for the authority and conservation advice. For example, Woodside, a suburban gentleman’s residence of circa 1820, now has a fine curtailed main staircase opposite the entrance steps and vestibule. However, drawings for an extension to another part of the building, dated

December 1882, show the staircase in a different area. Is this the same staircase carefully reused and re-sited, as the dimensions suggest? Occasionally this kind of information might cause more of a quandary than clarity, begging the question of what the stance of the conservation officer would be if an applicant wanted to return the staircase to its 1882 position.

As a result of HER21, the city council now has over 17,000 drawings and associated documents, many of which pertain to listed buildings, buildings of local significance and buildings in conservation areas. Information on other buildings which are none of the above also helps us to understand a streetscape and put it into context.

With any application, significance is the key. This new resource has certainly helped staff determine this crucial element of conservation and heritage. Where once there may have been uncertainty over a missing element, or the introduction of a new element, the original drawings can clarify the decision and recommendation process. With evidence of original footprints, walls and features, often with a description, it has become difficult for any interested party to question or argue against something which is generally beyond doubt. How one responds to proposals when using this new tool still has to be justified. Not all the works shown on a drawing may actually have been carried out.

Whenever we conservation officers make a decision about works to a listed building, we have, rightly, to justify that decision to an architect, home owner, developer or colleague. There are no modules on any degree course which tell you about not making people happy and not being popular when you have to disappoint someone. But at least this new evidence enables the applicant and associated parties to understand why the conservation officer is making the decision and their justification for that decision is done with far more clarity.

In line with the National Planning Policy Framework, the local authority would always encourage the applicant to provide a heritage statement as part of the listed building consent process. For a fixed price, the existing HER would be searched for any relevant documents and any historic building applications would be captured, including any additional documents supplied. This might enable an architect, developer or owner to police themselves, as once they have seen the original drawings they may no longer wish to submit their application with the knowledge it is likely to be refused, because of loss of significance to original features. Conversely, if the application is to reinstate original missing features and so achieve a degree of conservation gain, they could submit with the knowledge, after consulting the conservation officer, they would probably receive a favourable outcome.

At present, apart from the information available through the Heritage Gateway, the full HER is only accessible by one officer. This could prove frustrating when that officer is not there (earlier attempts at making it accessible county-wide failed). However, there may still be the opportunity to employ the Lincolnshire model (see *Context* 131, pages 45–46).

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