

Jamie Corless, assistant listed buildings caseworker at the Council for British Archaeology, presents an example from the council's files

76. 18-19 Colliergate, York

When making alterations to historic buildings, engaging with heritage specialists is not merely a procedural formality – it is a fundamental step that can make or break the success of a project.

Unlike many of their more modern counterparts, historic buildings often have a complex set of needs that govern what changes are appropriate. Factors such as a building's age, condition, or use of traditional materials can make them especially vulnerable to harm if not carefully considered and incorporated into sympathetically designed proposals.

Ignoring these factors can result in all manner of issues, ranging from damp caused by the use of inappropriate materials, to structural problems arising from the removal of load-bearing internal features, not to mention the possibility of outright refusal of proposals at the planning stage.

In addition to these practical considerations, historic buildings are also recognised as immensely valuable places, with many being protected by listing or other designations. Their significance is often embodied within their very fabric, with different phases of construction reflecting their changing uses through time and providing insight into how successive generations of people have interacted with them.

Retaining the legibility of this phased development is another crucial



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component of designing successful new additions or alterations.

Yet, it is imperative that historic buildings remain in active use and are updated to modern standards. So how should the owners of historic buildings navigate this complexity when seeking to make alterations?

At the Council for British Archaeology, we advocate for a conservation-led approach to managing change in the historic environment. Broadly speaking, this can be defined as a methodology that, through early engagement with heritage specialists, ensures that proposed changes are

informed by a deep understanding of the building's history and significance.

By placing conservation at the forefront of any interventions, this approach allows owners and developers to ensure that their proposals are both sensitive to the building's past and sustainable for its future.

Unfortunately, not every application we assess utilises this methodology and all too often we find ourselves recommending changes to poorly thought through applications submitted by often well-meaning but ill-informed applicants who have not involved heritage specialists in the design of works to complex listed buildings.

Sometimes, however, excellent examples of conservation-led schemes do cross our desks. One such scheme that we were recently involved in was a listed building consent application for the conversion of 18-19 Colliergate, a Grade II* listed building in the centre of York's historic core.

Don't be fooled by its elegant Georgian frontage and the date of 1748 proudly embossed on its rainwater hopper; 18-19 Colliergate is much older. Like many of its neighbours on Colliergate (and York more broadly) the building as it currently stands is the result of the re-fronting of an older timber-framed structure.

This practice was common in the eighteenth century as York sought to



Right: Internal leaded window in attic



Right: Eighteenth century first floor saloon

modernise its medieval streetscapes. However, beneath its Georgian façade lies a building with a much more complex history, one that spans back to at least the early seventeenth century.

We first became aware of the proposals at the site in November 2023, when we were contacted by the applicant's heritage consultants who were seeking pre-application advice from Historic England and the National Amenity Societies.

A promising start – the applicant clearly understood the scale of the task at hand, having employed a team of highly qualified specialists who were themselves keen to collaborate with us in order to decipher the stories that lay within the building's fabric and, ultimately, secure its sustainable future.

Two clear options for the refurbishment of the building were presented to us:

Option 1 proposed its conversion for commercial purposes with a bar on the ground floor and hotel accommodation above. A more invasive approach, this would have involved significant alterations to the internal layout of the building.

This option aimed to maximise the commercial potential of the site but risked undermining the historical integrity of the building by removing key architectural features that illustrated its phased development over the centuries.

Option 2 sought to bring the building into mixed commercial and residential use, with a commercial unit at basement and ground floor levels, and the division of the first, second, and third floors into two separate dwellings.

Since the building was historically two distinct houses, this more conservative approach aimed to utilise and, where possible, reinstate elements of the building's historic planform.

We were invited to attend a site visit in December to assess the viability of each option. Upon arrival, we were struck by the unique character of the building, particularly the stark contrast between the elaborate Georgian saloon on the first floor and the attic, where exposed timber framing and a blocked mullion window provided tangible



evidence of the building's seventeenth century origins.

The phased development of the building was evident throughout, with each period of construction telling a different story about its use and adaptation over time.

After careful consideration, we, along with Historic England and our fellow national amenity society caseworkers at the Georgian Group, advised in favour of option 2. We believed that this approach would ensure that the building's historical significance was retained, while facilitating its adaptation for a new contemporary use.

The applicant's heritage consultants agreed and, following some minor tweaks, the proposals outlined in option 2 were submitted to City of York Council in March this year. We were delighted to see that our advice had been taken on board and responded with a letter of support, thanking the applicant and their heritage consultants for their collaborative, conservation-led approach.

At the time of writing, the application is still awaiting a decision from the Council's planning department. However, after receiving positive feedback from several consultees, we expect it to be granted approval in the near future.

This project exemplifies the importance of utilising a conservation-led methodology and engaging with heritage specialists early in the planning process. By doing so, the applicant not



Top left: Exposed timber frame showing historic roofline

Above: Blocked timber mullion window

Left: Sixteenth / seventeenth century partitions in the attic

only successfully navigated the complexities of working with a Grade II* listed building, but did so proactively and efficiently, avoiding the need for costly back-and-forth revisions and re-consultations. ■

See the proposals and read the CBA's full response on our online Casework Database: <https://casework.jcnas.org.uk/appl/192793>