

Your ref: 20230940

Our ref: 188011

Owletts, The Street, Cobham, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 3AP

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

Thank you for notifying the SPAB of this application for listed building consent. We apologise for the delay in replying which is due to a heavy caseload at the current time. I am afraid that the submission as it stands raises considerable concerns. Whilst some of the repairs-based proposals seem sensible, most have the potential to cause unnecessary harm to the significance of the building while not in fact addressing the cause of the damp issues. Overall there appears to be a poor understanding of what is causing these moisture-related issues. We would comment as follows:

C17 Basement

An invasive system involving tanking and drainage channels is proposed. While this can be appropriate in certain circumstances, it should not be the first line of defence. It is possible that the solution proposed will actually create problems in adjoining areas and there may be other less invasive ways of dealing with the issues. The applicant should be asked to determine the exact cause of the water ingress: it is not enough for the application to state that the problem occurs in bad weather and provide a list of possible causes - none of which are seemingly to be investigated further. All of the possible causes listed ('lack of ventilation, the gulley and downpipe located on the external wall, the outside pavement gently sloping towards the wall, as well as vegetation and soil directly abutting the external wall') should be thoroughly investigated and can if necessary be addressed through relatively simple conservative repairs which may well may render tanking unnecessary.

We would dispute the assessment of significance of the basement as being 'the lowest significance area within the house'. As the application states, the basement retains the original C17 fabric and plan form and is therefore an important intact survival from the earliest phase of the house, the 'utilitarian' nature of which in no way diminishes its significance.

C17 Dining Room

Permission is sought for investigative works including removal of a large amount of panelling (the age and significance of which has not been established; while the panelling above the dado is relatively recent, the lower level panelling may be much older. Removing this would be very difficult to do without some destruction of historic fabric). There is no investigation of the cause of moisture ingress / mould. Although the external wall has apparently been surveyed, the application does not include the relevant drawing and no commentary is provided in the heritage statement. Without this information, it is difficult to establish what the cause of the damp might be, however we struggle to see why the applicant is seeking permission for the invasive step of removing the panelling in advance of a proper understanding of possible external causes. The application proposes 'if the wall is saturated, all the plaster will need to be removed' but this is addressing symptom rather than cause. Possible external causes of water ingress should be determined and addressed first, and the wall then left to dry out for an extended period of time. Once dry, it is difficult to understand why replacing what may be ancient, even original, lime plaster with new lime plaster would be necessary.

C17/C20 Library

We have no objection to what are appropriate external works to address damp.

C20 Porch

The porch is C20, but nonetheless significant, and is suffering from mould that the applicant attributes to condensation. The proposals will limit drafts (fixed secondary glazing and door brushes) which will make it warmer but heating the porch and restricting air flow will simply result in a warm damp space if there are causes of water ingress that have not been investigated and addressed.

The application does not include a specification or schedule of works. We would expect to see a specification for the works which explains in detail the full extent of the works to be carried out and the materials and methods that will be used. In the absence of this information it is not possible to arrive at an understanding of how the work will impact on the interest of the historic building or whether the approach will be conservation led. Given the early date of the building, we consider that the availability of such information is essential before the application is determined.

In summary, in a traditional solid walled building correct investigation and identification of the causes and sources of damp is imperative. If the source of damp is identified as damaged or incorrectly functioning elements of the building, such as failing windows or rainwater goods, good maintenance can often lead to marked improvements. It is strongly recommended that the applicant engage an independent historic building surveyor or conservation architect who is appropriately qualified and familiar with traditional building typologies to investigate the issue and present an appropriate course of action. The SPAB's Technical Advice Line can provide recommendations for independent damp specialists as well as further advice. Alternatively, the applicant might wish make use of SPAB's free Technical Advice Line. Tel: 0207 456 0916. Opening hours – Monday to Friday 9.30am – 12.30pm.

We object to the application as it currently stands.