



LONDON OFFICE

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Our ref: L10001433

16th July 2026

Dear Ms Harrison

Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications Direction 2015

**GADS HILL HOUSE SCHOOL, GRAVESEND ROAD, HIGHAM, ROCHESTER,
KENT ME3 7PA
Application No. 20260546**

Thank you for your letter of 29th June 2026 regarding the above application for listed building consent. On the basis of the information available to date, we offer the following advice to assist your authority in determining the application.

Summary

The application relates to limited investigative works to the principal helical staircase at Gads Hill Place, a grade I listed building and the former home of Charles Dickens.

The proposed works comprise a small-scale, reversible intervention within a concealed area of the building and would result in no harm to its special architectural or historic interest.

The investigations will inform future repairs and support the long-term conservation of the staircase and the wider heritage asset. The proposals are consistent with Historic England's conservation principles and the objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and are therefore considered both justified and beneficial.

Historic England Advice

Description of the Proposals

The current proposal forms part of a wider programme of condition assessment and planned maintenance intended to ensure the continued safe operation of the school.



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This phase of works concerns the structural investigation of the principal helical staircase in order to better understand its construction and condition and to support its long-term conservation.

The works involve localised opening-up of the plaster soffit beneath the staircase between ground and first-floor level. This will expose the structural supports and allow inspection of the stair construction, including the strings, treads and associated joints.

Following the investigation, the opening would be enclosed with a discreet removable access panel to facilitate future inspection and monitoring. The findings of the investigation will inform any subsequent programme of repair or remedial works that may prove necessary.

Significance of the Site

Gads Hill Place is a distinguished late eighteenth-century country house of exceptional national significance. Its importance derives from its architectural quality, historic fabric and, above all, its close literary association with Charles Dickens.

Built in 1779 for Thomas Stevens, former Mayor of Rochester, the house is a remarkably well-preserved example of a late Georgian villa occupying a prominent hilltop position with extensive views across the Medway Valley and surrounding countryside. The acquisition of the house fulfilled Dickens's lifelong ambition and it became his principal residence during the final years of his career. It was here that he wrote or completed several of his most important works, including *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The surrounding landscape also informed his writing, most notably the opening scenes of *Great Expectations*.

The house retains important evidence of Dickens's occupation, including his study, which survives substantially intact. The property also preserves elements of the alterations he introduced, such as the conservatory extension and the tunnel linking the house to the former site of his Swiss chalet.

The helical staircase, distinguished by its elegant sweeping form, is also an important historic feature of the house and appears to date from the original construction. The decorative infill panels inserted between alternate balusters are thought to have been painted by one of Dickens's daughters following the removal of the original spindles. These alterations reflect his desire to personalise the interior and express the family's individual tastes, contributing to the staircase's particular historic and associative significance.

Beyond its literary associations, Gads Hill Place possesses considerable architectural and aesthetic value as a well-composed Georgian villa whose elevated setting contributes strongly to its character and landmark quality.



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The combination of its architectural interest, historic fabric and direct connection with one of Britain's greatest novelists makes Gads Hill Place one of the most significant literary houses in England, fully justifying its grade I designation.

Impact of the Proposals on Significance

The proposed works are limited to a small area of concealed fabric beneath the principal staircase and are intended solely to facilitate investigation of its condition and structural performance.

No significant historic fabric or features of special architectural or historic interest would be lost, altered, or obscured. The proposed opening-up works represent the minimum intervention necessary to gain an understanding of the staircase's construction and condition, while the subsequent installation of a removable access panel will allow future monitoring without further disturbance.

The proposals would deliver a clear conservation benefit by informing any future repair works and helping to safeguard an important historic feature of the building. Overall, the works would preserve the special interest and significance of the grade I listed building and support its long-term conservation.

Historic England's Position on the Proposals

We support the proposals, as these accord with Historic England's published conservation principles and guidance, which advocate a proportionate, evidence-based approach to the management of historic buildings. Historic England recognises that investigative and opening-up works may be necessary to understand the condition, construction and significance of historic fabric, particularly where such understanding is required to inform appropriate repair and long-term conservation strategies.

The proposals also align with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 202 identifies heritage assets as an irreplaceable resource that should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, while paragraph 203 emphasises the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and securing their long-term conservation.

The proposed works embody the conservation principles of minimum intervention and reversibility. The opening-up is limited to a small, concealed area of the stair soffit, and the installation of a removable access panel will facilitate future monitoring while avoiding the need for repeated intrusive investigations.

The proposals therefore support the overarching objectives of both Historic England guidance and national planning policy by enabling informed stewardship of an exceptionally significant heritage asset.



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Recommendation

Historic England recommends that your Council should approve this application, which would secure the conservation of Gads Hill Place, unless it finds that other considerations would outweigh this benefit.

If there are any material changes to the proposals, or you would like further advice, please contact us.

Yours sincerely

Luciana Gallo

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