

# Thame Museum Extension Proposals

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**Response to concerns raised by the Old Maltings Residents Association**  
July 2016

13 July 2016

Old Maltings Residents' Association  
c/o Jeff Lowe

Dear Jeff

Thank you for your email of 27 June '16 summarising feedback from the recent OMRA meeting.

Since our meeting on 26 May '16 I have met with representatives from the museum management committee and relayed the concerns of OMRA. I would like to assure your members that all comments received on the developing design proposals have been taken seriously and have been carefully considered and investigated. On behalf of the Museum Committee, I would like to respond to each of the points as follows.

1. The case for development

Thame Town Council purchased the former Magistrates' Court in 2004 to house Thame Museum. A grant from the South Oxfordshire District Council Community Fund facilitated the conversion into the current museum accommodation which opened to the public in 2007. In the 9 years since then, the museum has attracted custom from local residents and visitors to Thame, it has been staffed by numerous volunteers and hosts a growing number of exhibits with local interest as well as guest collections from further afield. It is a valuable asset to the community of Thame providing cultural and historic resources with educational, research and general interest value.

The museum is run to a high professional standard and has a unique service offering in the town. It has been a successful initiative, attracting a respectable 4,000 visitors annually and partnering with over 20 local community organisations.

Over the course of the 9-year occupation of the building, the constraints of the current layout (little changed from its previous use) have become manifestly obvious to the volunteers, management committee and trustees. Much deliberation has gone into how best to overcome the shortcomings, culminating in the design proposals currently under discussion.

The Town Council and Museum Trust are committed to continuing to provide a high standard of service and to do so, need to invest in alterations to the building.

The principal needs to be addressed in the building project are:

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- i. Improved visitor entrance*  
The entrance to the building is unwelcoming and, for some, difficult to negotiate. It is tucked away from view in the walled courtyard. The result is that the museum lacks street presence, it is uninviting and looks closed, even when open.
- ii. Poor visitor facilities*  
The visitor facilities are disjointed and lack coherence owing to the reuse of the Magistrates' Court accommodation and having to 'make do' with the existing layout. Visitor facilities include the reception area, library and research area, museum shop and informal rest and meeting space which should be grouped together in one area for practical and staffing reasons.
- iii. Lack of display space*  
The museum has, or has access to, very much more exhibition content than can currently be displayed. This is the fundamental purpose of the building and needs to be an important consideration in any proposed alterations.
- iv. Lack of storage space*  
The current stores are completely full and exhibition and other rooms including kitchen, library and exhibition space are currently having to provide storage. This is inappropriate and unsustainable.
- v. Lack of conservation work space*  
Conservation work on the exhibits must currently be carried out when the museum is closed as there is no dedicated space for this work. This is unhelpful and imposes restrictions on staff working hours.
- vi. Lack of space for children's resources*  
In order to promote and sustain the work of the museum in the town, there is a need to cater for a wider audience, part of this includes space for educational resources for younger children.

## 2. Options considered

The museum committee and trustees have considered various options to overcome the shortcomings and address the needs including the following.

- i. Leave the building unchanged*  
This option is unacceptable to the committee. Some of the issues are increasingly problematic and there is a demonstrable need to invest in the building to sustain the ongoing and future work of the museum.

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- ii. *Reconfiguration of the current single storey accommodation*  
There is insufficient floor space in the existing building to accommodate the current museum activities, additional floor space is required to address the needs outlined above.

Options have been explored to reorganise the existing accommodation including reinstatement of the existing front door. In 2004 a planning application to install ramped access into this doorway was refused by South Oxfordshire District Council. Since then, the growth of the museum and the way in which the three primary spaces are regularly used have led to the realisation that reinstating the front entrance would not be in the best interests of the museum.

To relocate the main entrance in this way would require subdivision of the front room to create a draught lobby for environmental control. The remainder of the room would become reception and foyer space. This room is the second largest exhibition space and is regularly used as a meeting room. It is well-proportioned in architectural terms and its functionality could not be replaced anywhere else in the building or by extending or altering the building in a sensible way.

- iii. *Create additional floor space by introducing mezzanine levels*  
The former courtroom is the only room with sufficient ceiling height to consider inserting a mezzanine floor or gallery. This room is the principal exhibition space and has the highest quality and aesthetic appeal of any of the spaces on account of its décor, proportions and natural daylight from the skylight above.

The grade II listing status means that any alterations to the building, whether internal or external, are subject to listed building consent. The onus is on the applicant to prove the need for change to the building and to demonstrate that proposals are appropriate and justified in terms of the impact on the setting of the listed building. Given that there is an alternative solution to the proven need for additional space to sustain the ongoing work of the museum with lesser impact on the listed building itself, it would be exceedingly difficult to substantiate so intrusive a change to the former courtroom which, arguably, is the space with the highest heritage and architectural significance.

For the museum committee, the notion of compromising the historic architectural integrity of the courtroom is at odds with its aims and values to promote learning and understanding of the history of Thame and the surrounding area. The history of the former courthouse is understood and appreciated in its current, relatively untouched arrangement.

For these reasons, the option of creating additional space by means of a gallery or mezzanine level were ruled out by the Museum Committee and Town Council long before I was engaged to prepare concept design proposals.

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iv. *Off-site storage*

The suggestion of off-site storage is one the museum committee would be forced to investigate were all other on-site options exhausted. However, it would be far from ideal as it would add to long term expenditure and create significant logistical and staffing challenges, not least of which is likely to be the controlled environmental conditions required for storing historic artefacts. For this reason, it has been discounted as a viable option given the possibilities presented by extension of the museum into the courtyard.

### 3. Design response

The architectural design brief for the museum extension was well-defined before my engagement. It was not prescriptive in stipulating how the needs should be addressed but clearly and comprehensively set out the priorities to be addressed in proposals to alter the building.

In preparing concept proposals, I have sought to understand the use patterns of the museum and future aspirations. I have also taken account of the physical constraints including the available space, the architectural qualities and importance of the building as a heritage asset for which a comprehensive heritage statement was prepared by a building conservation consultant. This analysis has led me to the conclusion that the most viable and responsible solution is to make use of the unattractive and underused courtyard to the east of the building. The underlying principles of this approach were discussed and agreed with the committee who had reached the same conclusions independently of my involvement.

Sketch designs were developed to explore the concept in more detail and consultation was extended to Planning & Conservation Officers, the Town Council, OMRA and museum members.

In addition to resolving the operational challenges, the current proposals address every one of the expressed needs, they respect the architectural and heritage qualities of the listed building and furthermore, reverse the unfortunate and unhelpful 1980s side extension to reinstate the original east elevation of the courthouse building, all of which is supported and encouraged by the Planning and Conservation Officers.

### 4. Neighbourliness of the proposals

I realise that the current proposals will bring the eastern external wall of the museum closer to residents in The Old Maltings and that this raises concerns of appropriateness and neighbourliness. These concerns were discussed with the Planning and Conservation Officer during their visit. The intended use of the building was not thought to be of serious

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impact to the amenity of local residents. They have also been considered and reconsidered by the Museum Committee.

The building is currently a museum; this will not change. Use patterns and times of use are unlikely to change, particularly because the running of the museum depends upon volunteer staff and stewards. It is not a profit-making commercial enterprise but a community facility for the enjoyment of the residents of Thame.

The museum is open to the public on four days per week between the hours of 10am and 4pm. It is possible that with improved facilities allowing conservation work to be carried out during open times, this could extend to a further day or two per week though it is not expected that normal opening hours would extend later into the evenings.

There are occasional evening functions hosted by the museum. The events hosted are, and will be, appropriate to the function of the building and are highly unlikely to pose a nuisance to nearby residents in terms of noise, or anti-social disturbance.

On the occasions that the museum hosts a function on darker winter evenings, lights will be on in the reception area. We have yet to agree the proportion of high-level glazing and louvres to the east and north elevations and control mechanisms to control sunlight and/or artificial light spill. However, the light emitted from the proposed extension will not be significant because of the very limited evening use and the proximity of the building to its nearest neighbours.

### 5. Encroachment on OMRA land

Assuming the Town Council and Museum Committee pursue the current proposals and are successful in obtaining planning and listed building consent and fundraising, the most straightforward method of constructing the extension would undeniably be to request permission to use a narrow strip of land alongside the boundary wall with The Old Maltings. Were this agreeable to OMRA, this would result in a far more efficient build process than the alternative option of building 'over-hand' entirely from the museum's side which would add time and cost to the build.

I realise this would be an inconvenience and we have discussed the possible implications for residents of OMRA concerning possible loss of parking spaces for the duration of the build. I also realise that this is subject to agreement with OMRA which, on the basis of your email appears unlikely. However, were OMRA minded to reconsider their position and support the museum in their efforts to extend and improve the facility in this way, I would be pleased to work with you to explore ways to mitigate the inconvenience.

Notwithstanding any such commitment or agreement between the museum and OMRA for use of land to assist with the build, we will do our utmost to ensure that the building contractor is respectful of the well-being of museum neighbours and is advised of

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sensitivities concerning access, deliveries and neighbourliness through the construction process.

This response to the OMRA concerns is unlikely to be welcomed in view of the concerns raised and the increasing likelihood that the current proposals are pursued through a full planning application in the near future but I hope it might be helpful in explaining in more detail the rationale behind the proposals and the responsible approach the museum committee and Town Council have adopted in exploring the most appropriate way forward. The decision to extend the museum building has not been taken lightly nor have the proposals been conceived on a whim; they have been developed carefully and based on a reasoned and logical appraisal of the circumstances and in the best interests of the museum's future.

Yours sincerely

Kelvin Sampson