

APPLICATION NO.	P18/S2735/LB
APPLICATION TYPE	LISTED BLDG. CONSENT
REGISTERED	21.8.2018
PARISH	THAME
WARD MEMBER(S)	David Dodds, Nigel Champken-Woods & Jeannette Matelot
APPLICANT	Thame Town Council
SITE PROPOSAL	Various Listed Buildings, Thame Town Centre, Thame Production and installation of commemorative plaques denoting the use of 6 listed buildings in Thame as filming locations for the Midsomer Murders series.
OFFICER	Marc Pullen

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This application is referred to the Planning Committee as a formal call-in has been made by Councillor David Dodds.
- 1.2 The scope of this application covers a number of buildings (which are shown on the OS extract attached as **Appendix A**) scattered across the town centre.

2.0 PROPOSAL

- 2.1 This application seeks listed building consent to affix and display six plaques on individual listed buildings in Thame Town centre. The individual listed buildings are:
1. Spread Eagle Hotel, 16-17 Cornmarket Street – *Grade II* listed*
 2. Swan Hotel, 9 Upper High Street – *Grade II* listed*
 3. Thame Town Hall, High Street – *Grade II listed*
 4. Thame Museum, 79 High Street – *Grade II listed*
 5. Market House, North Street – *Grade II listed*
 6. Rumsey's Chocolate Shop, 8 Upper High Street – *Grade II listed*
- 2.2 A copy of all the current plans accompanying the application is attached as **Appendix B**. Other documentation associated with the application can be viewed on the council's website, www.southoxon.gov.uk

3.0 SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS & REPRESENTATIONS

3.1 Thame Town Council

- Proposal is not considered to be harmful to the historic interest of the listed buildings concerned nor have an adverse effect on the character of the area.
- The installation of the plaques will have a positive impact on the vibrancy and vitality of the town.

Thame Cons.Area Advisory Comm

- Two in favour
- Three strongly against

Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society

- While we acknowledge the popular interest in this television series, and accept that cultural history should embrace such phenomena, we disagree fundamentally with a number of the statements made in the supporting documentation
- Lack of justification to a number of claims made within supporting documentation

South Oxfordshire District Council – Committee Report

- The proposed plaques do not convey public benefits that over-ride the harm caused to the listed buildings and the conservation area
- The plaques are an excessively intrusive way of achieving the objectives of the proponents of this scheme. There are many alternative ways of showing tourists what to see and why they should see it, such as mobile phone apps and heritage trail leaflets
- Moreover, if any of these buildings were needed as locations for future filming, the plaques would have to be removed

Historic England (South East)

- Do not wish to offer any comments. We suggest that you seek the views of your specialist conservation adviser

Oxfordshire Blue Plaques -

- We still feel that the unspoilt and authentic character of Thame and the Midsomer villages must surely be the main attraction for most tourists rather than the precise identification of the sites used in the films. We recognize the importance attached by Thame Town Council to these plaques for promoting tourism and greater prosperity. While still having reservations about the proposal, we take a balanced view of it.

Conservation Officer (South)

- This scheme is not appropriate and would result in harm to the significance of the listed buildings
- Unable to support this application due to the adverse impact on the special interest of the individual buildings and adverse impact on the character and appearance of the Thame Conservation Area
- Concerned about the subject matter of the plaques. The large-scale commemoration of fictional characters and places would not be appropriate.
- It is considered that these plaques would not meet the tests of the English Heritage guidance on commemorative plaques and the cumulative impact of a collection of plaques on one subject would undermine the function of other plaques across Thame and the District more generally.
- It is considered that that the association of the identified buildings with, for the most part, singular appearances in the TV show should not be considered an event of historic significance that should be commemorated by a permanent plaque on the building.
- Concern that this would lead to a desire for more and more plaques as other buildings are used in the programme, especially given the previous application (which was withdrawn) sought consent for 12 plaques.
- It is appreciated that the places associated with Midsomer Murders are notable tourist attractions within Thame and the wider area across South Oxfordshire District and parts of the adjoining district of Buckinghamshire. As such, the Council is in full favour of the existing Visit Midsomer programme that currently exists to promote Midsomer locations across Oxfordshire. However, it is not considered to be appropriately justified to identify specific sites in Thame with a permanent marker on the building as proposed.

Economic Development

- As per earlier application P18/S2735/LB, the economic development team is supportive of the initiative as it will diversify and strengthen the local economy, encouraging visitors to explore the town centre.

4.0 **RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

4.1 [P17/S1978/LB](#) – Withdrawn prior to determination (05/01/2018)

Production and installation of commemorative plaques denoting the use of 12 listed buildings in Thame as filming locations for the Midsomer Murders ITV series.

5.0 **POLICY & GUIDANCE**

5.1 **National Planning Policy Framework & National Planning Practice Guidance**

5.2 **South Oxfordshire Core Strategy 2012 policies;**

CSEN3 - Historic environment

CSS1 - The Overall Strategy

5.3 **South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2011 policies;**

CON3 - Alteration to listed building

5.4 **Thame Neighbourhood Plan 2013 policies;**

WS2 - Retain and enhance primary and secondary retail frontages

ESDQ15 - Developers must demonstrate in a Design and Access Statement how their proposed development reinforces Thame's character

ESDQ16 - Development must relate well to its site and its surroundings

ESDQ17 - Development must make a positive contribution towards the distinctive character of the town as a whole

ESDQ20 - Building style must be appropriate to the historic context

ESDQ21 - Development proposals, particularly where sited on the edge of Thame or adjoining Cuttle Brook, must maintain visual connections with the countryside

5.4 **South Oxfordshire Design Guide (2016)**

6.0 **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

- 6.1
- Impact on the special interest of the listed buildings and character and appearance of Thame Conservation Area

Introduction

6.2 This application follows from a previous application which sought listed building consent for 12 red plaques on 12 individual listed buildings in Thame. These plaques would be red in colour and would vary in size between 350mm diameter (two plaques) and 253mm or 300mm diameter (four plaques). The signs would be produced in encapsulated aluminium, digitally printed and coated in plastic coating. The plaques would not be set flush with the brickwork to which they will be affixed and instead would project from the brickwork using spacers. Each plaque would be situated within the Thame Conservation Area and each plaque would be affixed to a listed building. The application states that the plaques would be fixed and installed in accordance with English Heritage guidelines.

6.3 The intention behind the installation of these six plaques is to commemorate the TV programme, Midsomer Murders and specific episodes that have been filmed in Thame. The individual plaques would identify the building that it is installed on as a filming location for Midsomer Murders. Midsomer Murders generates visitor numbers to the District and there are already a few incentives in place in Thame to encourage visitors; including Midsomer walking trails and regular Midsomer tours. These plaques seek to build upon this success to identify certain filming locations along the walking trail and tour.

6.4 Application ref. [P17/S1978/LB](#) sought consent for 12 plaques and was withdrawn prior to determination in 2017. The Council was intending to refuse this application due to the impact caused to the listed buildings in question and to the Thame Conservation Area. This application retains six of the originally proposed 12 plaques. As identified above these plaques would be situated on six individual listed buildings which are a mix of Grade II* to Grade II listed.

South Oxfordshire District Council – Committee Report

- 6.5 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) seeks for local planning authorities to take account of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make and the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness (para 192, NPPF).
- 6.6 When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance (para. 193, NPPF).
- 6.7 Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use (para. 196, NPPF).
- 6.8 Policy CSEN3 of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (SOCS) states that the district's designated historic heritage assets will be conserved and enhanced for their historic significance and their important contribution to local distinctiveness, character and sense of place. Policy CON3 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan (SOLP) states that any alteration to a listed building must respect its established character and not diminish the special historical or architectural qualities which make it worthy of inclusion on the statutory list. Policy CON7 (SOLP) seeks to protect the character and appearance of conservation areas and its historic value.

Impact on listed buildings and conservation area

- 6.9 In the view of the Council, the proposed works to the listed buildings would have adverse impact on the special interest of the individual listed buildings and the character and appearance of the Thame Conservation Area. It is acknowledged that Midsomer Murders provides an important economic benefit to the town of Thame as well as across the wider district. The benefits of this are positive. However, the Council is of the view that this specific project, to produce a series of commemorative plaques and fix them to the buildings, would compromise the significance of the listed buildings which are included within the National Heritage List for England for their architectural and historic interest and not as a result of their association with a television programme.
- 6.10 Whilst it is recognised that the submitted details demonstrate a fixing-method that results in as little physical impact to historic fabric as possible, the fact remains that there would be a physical and visual impact to this scheme which should be a consideration in the determination of the application.
- 6.11 The large-scale commemoration of fictional characters and places would not be appropriate. The Council does not consider that these meet the tests of the English Heritage guidance on commemorative plaques and that the cumulative impact of a collection of plaques on one subject would undermine the function of other plaques across Thame and the District more generally. The guidance suggests that commemorating fictitious characters or sites may be appropriate where a site has a unique association with a well-known and influential fictitious entity, but the identification of sites as part of a whole scheme is likely to de-value the commemoration of other more historically significant subjects (Celebrating People and Place. Guidance on Commemorative Plaques and Plaques Schemes, English Heritage 2010:40). Officers are of particular concern that this would be the case here if this application is approved.

South Oxfordshire District Council – Committee Report

- 6.12 Good practice guidance for plaques has been established by Historic England in conjunction with blue plaque groups across the country. Generally, plaques placed on listed building are used to identify a historic association of the building with a person or event of historic significance. Officers do not believe that the association of the identified buildings with, for the most part, singular appearances in the television show should be considered an event of historic significance that should be commemorated by a permanent plaque on the building. In addition, officers are concerned that this would lead to a desire for more and more plaques as other buildings are used in the programme, especially as this is a reduced proposal from the first iteration.
- 6.13 Officers appreciate that the places associated with Midsomer Murders are a notable tourist attraction within Thame and the wider area across South Oxfordshire District and parts of the adjoining district of Buckinghamshire. As such, officers are in favour of the 'Visit Midsomer' programme that exists to promote Midsomer locations across Oxfordshire (attached as **Appendix C**). However, it is considered that it is not appropriately justified to identify specific sites in Thame with a permanent marker on the building as proposed.
- 6.14 At the moment the supporting documentation suggests that the regular weekly one-hour tours between April to October and the new Midsomer walking trail leaflet currently work well in promoting the town as a Midsomer filming location. There is no evidence that would suggest that these methods are failing and why it is essential that these plaques are needed in order to meet the aims of the Town Council. The use of walking trails and leaflets would adequately set out the specific buildings in question and can provide an explanation of their involvement in the Midsomer Murders television programme. In addition to this the Council has suggested that, other, non-evasive methods of identifying these buildings as filming locations are sought, which would have limited impact upon the listed buildings in question and the Thame Conservation Area; including the use of window stickers (which would not require consent), pavement plaques or an electronic data face such as a mobile phone app.
- 6.15 This application fails to identify why these plaques are needed in order to achieve the public benefit in question (economic prosperity of the Town). Neither does it justify why it is necessary to cause less than substantial harm to these heritage assets when there appears to be sufficient measures in place to promote the Town in the same manner as these plaques intend to.
- 6.16 As such, officers do not consider the application meets the criteria of Policy CSEN3 (SOCS), Policies CON3 and CON7 (SOLP) or the guidance and policy set out within the NPPF.
- 6.17 In accordance with the NPPF the Council takes a positive and proactive approach to development proposals. The Planning Service works with applicants/agents in a positive and proactive manner by offering advice and by advising applicants/agents of issues that arise during the processing of their application and where possible suggesting solutions to problems. The applicant/agent was advised why the proposal does not accord with the development plan and that there are no other material considerations to outweigh those objections before the application was determined. In accordance with the Council's constitution, the application was referred to be determined at Planning Committee and a decision was made to support the recommendation to refuse this application.

7.0 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Whilst the visitor may wish to 'arrive in Midsomer', it is important to also recognise that Midsomer is not real and that the market town of Thame is historically significant in its

own right and not as the set of a television programme. A number of opportunities exist to highlight the use of various buildings in the filming of the series, but officers do not consider the application of a physical marker on the buildings to be an appropriate way to do this. It is considered that the identification of the building in this manner would compromise the historic and architectural interest of the building. Officers do not consider that there would be a significant public benefit to this application as the submitted documentation demonstrates that these would be in addition to other viable and successful means of attracting Midsomer tourism.

- 7.2 For the reasons above, the Council recommends that this application is refused. Officers consider that there would be harm to the historic and architectural interest of the individual listed buildings as a result of the installation of a plaque highlighting its association to a fictional person or place, contrary to the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Policy CSEN3 (SOCS) and Policy CON3 (SOLP). Likewise, there would be a cumulative impact to the group of listed buildings and their contribution to the historic and architectural interest of the conservation area, contrary to the Act and Policies CON5 and CON7 (SOLP). Officers consider that overall, this application would result in less than substantial harm to the designated heritage assets as judged against the tests of the NPPF. It is advised that should listed building consent be considered then it should be satisfied that there would be demonstrable public benefits which outweigh this harm, such as securing the viability of any or all of the listed buildings or Thame Town centre in line with the requirements of the NPPF.

8.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

Refusal of Listed Building Consent

The proposed plaques would result in harm to the historic and architectural interests of the individual listed buildings, by identifying the importance of the building as belonging to a fictional person or place. There would be a cumulative impact to the group of listed buildings and their contribution to the historic and architectural interests of the Thame Conservation Area. The application would result in less than substantial harm to the designated heritage assets which is not be outweighed by public benefit as judged by the National Planning Policy Framework. As such the proposal would be contrary to Policy CSEN3 of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy, saved Policies CON3, CON5 and CON7 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan and the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework.

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