

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/288

25 August 2020

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By e-mail: [planning@bury.gov.uk](mailto:planning@bury.gov.uk)

**Application:** 65698

**Site:** 51-53 Bolton Street, Ramsbottom, Bury, BL0 9HU

**Proposals:** Conversion of first and second floors and dormers at front and rear to provide 11 no. apartments with alterations to external elevations.

## **Remit:**

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

## **Comment:**

This application has come to the attention of the Trust because it proposes conversion to residential use on the first and second floors of this site, which includes the currently disused Co-Op Hall. We were not consulted despite this proposal falling within our statutory remit outlined above.

The Co-Op Hall is an early music hall built in 1876 by the Ramsbottom Industrial and Provident Society for which it is a rare survivor with very few other examples around the UK; of the numerous halls built between 1850-1880 only a few are known to remain. Moreover, it is relatively intact and well-preserved; it was visited by the Trust's Architectural Adviser in 2017 and photos taken on that occasion show that it retains almost all its original features including paintwork.

When built it was the main theatrical venue for Ramsbottom with a capacity of 800 people and originally held variety entertainment and concerts along with lectures and public meetings. Later, by the 1920s, it was used by travelling theatre groups and performers. From the 1930s its use included the showing of films, which were produced for campaigning and educational purposes

### **Theatres Trust**

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**Chair** Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

**Trustees** Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Simon Ricketts, Truda Spruyt

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national by the Wholesale Co-Operative Society. It was requisitioned for army training during World War II and our records suggest it has been unused since, although the applicant's Heritage Statement reports theatre use continuing until the late 1970s. However this is not conclusive and images within the Heritage Statement taken in the 1970s suggest a deteriorating condition even then.

The Co-Op Hall consisted of a full gallery around three sides with arcades of decorative cast iron columns with a boarded upper ceiling with ornate cast-iron ventilator sunburners. The fourth side contained a stage area with a painted-on proscenium arch. This is representative of the form music halls were taking by the 1870s, moving away from a 'supper room' style with open concert platform to what we now consider a more typical theatrical configuration with rows of benches and simple stage and galleries. It was accessed by a decorative staircase directly from the street, which remains.

The Ramsbottom Conservation Area Appraisal & Management Plan acknowledges the Co-Operative building is partly vacant and in need of a new use to its upper levels. Policy 24 includes it within specific buildings causing concern, seeking proposals which will re-use, protect, repair or replace. Although this proposal will retain the building, albeit with external alteration, we consider its primary significance to be internal and this would be lost were this application to be permitted. On that basis we would consider the 'protect' and 'repair' elements of Policy 24 to be most pertinent and in that context 're-use' would be most appropriately utilised in seeking a new use which is compatible with the hall's existing form and configuration.

Similarly the applicant's Heritage Statement, whilst detailed with extensive information on the building's history accompanied by some photographic record, also focuses on external changes and the impact of development on the Ramsbottom Conservation Area within its conclusions. It determines the proposal would amount to less than substantial harm which is outweighed by the public benefits of securing the long-term retention of the building and providing housing. We would refute that conclusion, because the loss of one of the UK's few surviving music halls of the 1850-1880 period through removal of its internal features and fabric constitutes at least substantial harm if not total loss given all that would remain would be the host building.

Paragraph 15 of Planning Practice Guidance on the Historic environment states the optimum viable use for an asset may not necessarily be the most economically viable one, but the one least likely to cause harm to the significance of the asset. We consider there may be scope for re-introduction into the Co-Op Hall of a use which is more conducive to maintaining and restoring its features, form and character as a historic music hall, particularly given the context of Ramsbottom as a town centre with a strong independent offer. We are aware of interest in the recent past for example of utilising the hall as a music venue and would be keen to see such opportunities explored further. With the Co-Op Hall having been disused for so long there may be lack of awareness of its existence both amongst the local community and potential operators.

Before development of the nature proposed is permitted, we would expect some robust

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demonstration that efforts to market community and cultural use for the Hall have been attempted without success. The applicant has not provided evidence of that nature. Such evidence is also important in the context of addressing paragraph 197 of the NPPF (2019) which states, “the effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application” and that, “a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset”. As we have outlined, the Co-Op Hall is a rare survivor and represents a historically significant building type which must also be important in terms of the history of the Co-Operative movement. We consider that statutory listing is merited and have submitted an application to Historic England on that basis.

In conclusion, this proposal would result in the loss of the Co-Op Hall as a currently undesignated heritage asset but one with great local and potentially national significance without evidence that restoration to facilitate a more compatible use cannot be achieved. Therefore the Trust strongly objects to this proposal and recommends the refusal of planning permission.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Trust should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser

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