

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/206

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**Application:** 22/02727/FULL & 22/02728/LBC

**Site:** 65 Drury Lane London WC2B 5SP

**Proposal:** Refurbishment works and alterations to nos. 65 and 66 Drury Lane including provision of new lightweight metal stair and platform in the Long Dock, leading up to the level of the Painting Room; new opening between the Painting Room and the Long Dock, with a small reduction in the width of the associated paint frame to allow for the new opening; lightweight infill to the central slot opening in the Painting Room floor; height reduction of the two central paint frames to allow headroom for the space; replacement of roof and rooflight over the Painting Room; and provision of new heating and ventilation to the Painting Room.

## 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:

These applications for planning permission and listed building consent have been brought to the attention of the Trust by the applicant because they cover refurbishments and alterations within the Painting Room and Long Dock at Theatre Royal Drury Lane. We were also engaged on these plans at pre-application stage and we welcome that plans have been revised following our feedback meaning some of our earlier concerns have been alleviated. The purpose of these works is to support the use of the spaces for administrative functions for the theatre's operator.

The Long Dock was originally a 'Scene Room' for the storage of canvasses and props built in 1814 but was altered in 1900 and 1904 followed by more recent changes around twenty years

## Theatres Trust

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**Chair** Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

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ago when it became used for physiotherapy followed by office functions. There was a wider permission covering back of house spaces including the Long Dock in 2018 which has seen the operator's administrative functions merged into the building from elsewhere.

The Painting Room was added in 1900 for the production of scenery and it contained four paint frames. This activity has ceased at the site leaving very few facilities in central London for this purpose. It is of high significance, being almost unaltered with just the addition of electrical operation for the winch system and the fourth frame being extended. It is the only example of a complete ensemble which remains within a theatre. Currently it could quite easily be returned to active use.

There would be alteration of both spaces to make them functional for administrative functions and to provide a suitably comfortable environment for staff and visitors. The nature and previous purpose of the Long Dock means that this part of the building is less sensitive in terms of change with its significance coming from its role as a back of house space supporting the theatre's operation and being legible as a part of the early-nineteenth century building envelope. It is already used as office space with some lightweight subdivisions for work areas and meeting rooms having been inserted.

This proposal will see further interventions, namely a new opening into the Painting Room with addition of a stairway necessary to facilitate the change in levels between the two spaces. Avoiding the redundancy of this space provides a heritage benefit which mitigates the less than substantial harm of alteration, particularly as it has been previously altered and used for other non-original purposes in recent years.

Changes to the Painting Room however are more contentious given its higher significance and rarity linked to its existing function. Its features including the frames, hanging systems, ropes and winches show how the space was used and could again be used. Whilst these would be retained to varying degrees, there will be alterations which compromises full reversibility. The bay of the first frame would be removed with the frame shortened and the second and third would be reduced in height and fixed in position with just the fourth remaining unaltered. There would also be some alteration to the overall structure with the aforementioned opening into the Long Dock, new heating and services and roof replacement.

In terms of the proposed alterations to the Painting Room structure, we raise no objection. There are now less interventions proposed than was originally the case. The roof works provide a heritage benefit in helping to maintain and conserve the space along with enhanced environmental sustainability through enhanced insulation and ventilation. Providing a physical link between the Painting Room and the Long Dock offers a general operational benefit irrespective of how the respective spaces are utilised.

It is the loss of function of the space as a painting room that is more sensitive given their scarcity, with other spaces within inner London having been lost in recent years; there was for example a campaign against redevelopment of Harker's Studio in Southwark and prior to that other facilities

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closed or were redeveloped such as Kingman also in Southwark, the Cochrane Theatre in Holborn, Newport Gallery and John Campbell in Chiswick due to retirement. Elms Lesters Painting Room on Flitcroft Street within the boundary of Camden would be left as the last complete space within the West End (although this has been operating as an exhibition/gallery space in recent years).


The approach now being taken, which we acknowledge is an improvement on the pre-application proposals as it is significantly less intrusive, would see the potential for the two outer frames to be operational (although with some alterations) alongside incoming functions. The benefit of this is that it provides an opportunity to conserve this function as part of a heritage-led reinterpretation of the space.

Whilst this represents a compromise position we consider it should be better justified in terms of evidencing a lack of need for a fully operational facility. For example, evidence of marketing and interest in light of indicative ongoing demand reflected by opposition to loss of the Harker's Studio facility. Arguably loss or reduction of function in this context constitutes substantial harm in heritage terms for which in line with paragraph 201 of the NPPF there should be demonstration the harm or loss is necessary. We would otherwise be supportive of the applicant's approach if lack of need can be better established and articulated.

Having taken further advice due to the specialist nature of this space it has been suggested that the controls for the north paint frame were from those of the central frames, so this may need to be clarified and if necessary altered to ensure the north frame can remain functional. It has also been suggested that this opportunity is taken to re-rope the central frames being fixed in place with traditional hemp rather than the current more modern steel wires to help mitigate impact and enhance understanding of how these were constructed and how they worked. Original machinery should be retained and displayed. We suggest that a condition is inserted into a permission which ensures it is practical to utilise the remaining operational frames, they are maintained to ensure the function is not permanently lost and that they remain available for hire/use for scenic painting.

To conclude, we can support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent subject to the clarifications and conditions set out above. On the assumption that retention of a fully-operational painting room is not feasible this scheme provides an opportunity to preserve important heritage and partial function whilst optimising use of the building.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments further.



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National Planning Adviser

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