

SMD/2021/0441 - Compton Mill Site, Leek

Erection of 57 no. over-65 retirement living apartments, together with external amenity space, parking and associated facilities

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Thank you for consulting me for my comments on heritage and related design matters.

Summary

The redevelopment and regeneration of this site is very important in Leek, but the site is extremely sensitive. I have attached photos (taken using a 50mm lens and full-frame DSLR camera) showing the site relative to some of the key sequential views from St. Edward Street and from Compton. These are really very special parts of the Leek townscape, highlighted in the Conservation Area Appraisal, as well as the submitted heritage statement. From St. Edward Street and the junction with the A53 the building will be very prominent, in particular the roof and the elevation to Cornhill Street. Descending St. Edward Street the roof of the new building and the north elevation will come in and out of view. Views considered in the Design and Access Statement do not extend this far north.

The approved scheme is the baseline for the purposes of this assessment. This was approved on the grounds that it replaced an existing mill building. However, of course, that was a very different scheme and I consider that fresh eyes are needed, as the brief is quite different for this development. It involves a different design approach (contemporary rather than the traditional approach of the approved scheme) incorporating a significant difference in height, which is determined by the requirements of the brief, as explained to me by the architect; i.e. floor-to-ceiling heights and adoption of MVHR. Rather than try to shoehorn some of the features of that development into this one, it needs a review of a few key areas.

My recommendations are for several major modifications to the design. I have sketched these on the attached elevations. I think that they offer scope to incorporate a better design, without necessarily additional build costs, and will result in a scheme which has the same amount of accommodation, the same footprint, the same floor-to-ceiling heights, but in my view significantly less negative visual impact. I am revisiting some of the previous comments of the Conservation Officer and making my own observations and recommendations, based on having spoken to the architect briefly. I believe there are significant opportunities to improve the design. There are, in my view a few fundamental problems with the design, which do not involve simply adjusting the materials. These involve the massing and scale of the roofs, which are overbearing, and the resulting appearance is awkward, particularly in long views looking along Compton from the north, all of which need to be resolved.

Ultimately, the best way forward in my view, given the very high sensitivity of the location, would be for the applicants to take the design to the Design Review panel – i.e. Design

Midlands. However, in the absence of a panel, my recommendations involve the following key principles:

- Remove the steep pitched roofs from all parts of the proposed building and alter the elevations to accommodate parapets and primarily flat roofs. If pitched roofs are still preferred to flat roofs, shallow hipped roofs can be hidden behind parapets and can be the artificial slate of choice, which will not be visible from immediate pedestrian level. Parapets must be properly articulated with a cornice to Compton and the return elevations into the side streets (see my sketches), whether traditional or contemporary, with a projecting coping. Continuous flat elevations to the top of the wall-head will not be acceptable on Compton and the return elevations, as a replacement for pitched roofs, in this sensitive location, but there is scope to remove the cornice to the rear ranges to reflect the street hierarchy, as long as the walls have a decent coping. Access to the roofs for maintenance will need to be provided within the floor plan.
- Retain the block articulation to Compton, in the three blocks as currently proposed, with the central one properly articulated, but swap the pitched roof at the north end of the elevation with a properly expressed stair tower at the opposite end of the elevation. This will help to create meaningful, plan-led, articulation.
- Integrate better the historic stair turret with the new building, by:
 1. expressing the very strong cornice of the stair turret in a continuous lintel band in cut and rubbed stone across the central block elevation to Compton. Preferably, incorporate a raised / moulded band as well as a flat lintel.
 2. Adopt the parapet to both side elevations to the north and south, to provide continuity.
 3. Echo the design and detail of the old stair turret and the design and detail of the stair tower.
 4. Remove the conflicts in the elevation behind the stair turret, adopting off-set small windows.
- Incorporate recessed balconies within the elevations (this will require some minor adjustment to the Compton (Elevation 01) and Cornhill Street (Elevation 04) elevations, to accommodate the masonry parapet), and may benefit from corner windows with balconies to one elevation. See image sheet.
- Create a strong plinth to the Compton elevation to visually ground the building. This should be an actual physical plinth (not a band of brick).
- Use a high quality red brick. One of the main components to the success of this scheme will be the quality of the red bricks. I am less concerned about the use of bands of brickwork, than the primary choice of red brick, and with the introduction of parapets I think that the blue/ grey brick at the third floor becomes visually redundant. It is far better to accommodate a high quality red brick.

- Express lintels and recess window and doors at least 100mm to articulate the elevations. This is essential for the Compton and Cornhill Street elevations.
- Alter the landscaping layout to retain the stair turret without attaching railings or wall to its curved form. Alter the alignments of the boundary walls to Compton.

That's the essence of my recommendations. I have included a sheet of images (including site photos) and photos of details for reference, as well as sketches. The justification for these comments follows.

Heritage Assets

The application site directly affects the setting of **Leek Conservation Area and St. Mary's RC Church**. In fact, the CA boundary runs along the east side of the street, abutting the mill site, rather than down the middle of the road, which is more usual. Views through Compton fall within the experience of the Leek Conservation Area and although the boundary is staggered and incorporates clusters of older development along the street, it is how we experience the townscape in approaches from the north and south which is of particular importance. The approach into Leek from Cheddleton is arguably one of the most architecturally significant in Leek, with extremely high quality buildings, including Norman Shaw's Church of All Saints on the right, followed by Albert Vicars church on the left, before arriving at the lavish architectural composition of The Unicorn and Victoria Buildings, both designed by James Smith, framing the entrance to St. Edward Street, at the bottom of Compton, with its high concentration of listed buildings, one of the most distinctive set pieces of townscape in the region. The vacant application site sits within this experience and is a very important and sensitive site, not least because of the relative heights of the site compared with the street level at the bottom (north end) of Compton, which is at 180 metres AOD, whereas the middle of the site lies at 190 metres. This difference of 10 metres in height over a relatively short distance makes a significant impact on the visual impact of the mill in views from the northern end of Compton looking south up the hill and looking across to the site from the higher ground on St. Edward Street. The important views of St. Mary's Church are recognised in the Heritage Statement submitted by the applicant and this is helpful, describing the stair turret as "an opposing focal point", which "frames the view".

The RC Church of St. Mary's is a very significant landmark, located on the rising ground towards the top of Compton, at around 185 metres. The church designed by Albert Vicars in 1886-87 had a lot to live up to with major denominational churches at St. Edwards and All Saints, Compton, being built by Norman Shaw at precisely the same time. The foundation stone was laid on October 15th 1885 and it was opened on Thursday 12th May 1887 to accommodate 600 worshippers. Drawings in The Building News (October 16th 1885) illustrate the proposed church including views and ground plans. The south east corner tower, which is off-set and which incorporates a broach spire, four corner turrets and corner buttresses, is very high indeed. The Tablet (Saturday 21st May 1887) described the spire as 'may be seen from almost all parts of the town and neighbourhood'.

In terms of the assessment of heritage assets, the Heritage Statement is overall quite reasonable, but the Impact Assessment states that the scale is comparable with Compton

Mill but that is not the case. It is significantly taller, particularly to Compton. That is not to say that a four-storey building would not work on this site; it is the roof impact which is relevant. The HIA responds to this by stating "This double ridged arrangement to the roof of the development, resulting in double gable ends to the north and south facades will aid in breaking up the mass and scale and provide a visual interest.' I disagree with this assessment for the reasons set out below. The HIA states "The main façade is set back from Compton behind the stair tower. This, together with the stepping up towards the rear of the site, ensures that the proposed development will not be competing with the bulk of the Grade II St Mary's RC Church opposite." Again, I disagree with this conclusion. The stepped gables provide significant competition and will be visually distracting in views in particular from St. Edward Street and the road junction (see also comments below).

Mills – context of prominent large buildings

The mills which fronted Compton were relatively small in the context of Leek mills, with flat roofs and parapets to Compton, with a complex incorporating uneven pitched roofs with northern rooflights laid perpendicular to the street. This helped to suppress their impact. Aerial photos of the site in 2006 and 2017 show the roofscape to comprise the two flat roofs of the main buildings fronting Compton and a series of pitched roofs running back into the site north-east / south-west.

Heights of 4-storey mills are evident within the neighbouring streets. The Planning Statement and Heritage Statement refer to 'five storey buildings' along London Road, but this is incorrect. There are only four-storey mills along London Road. There is one short section of five-storey mill fronting Brook Street. It is the relative height AOD which is relevant.

In the immediate vicinity are Haywood Street Mill (a 10-bay four-storey mill, with pitched roof), London Mills (9-bay, 5-bay, 14-bay, and 14-bay stepped four-storey mills), with parapets and pitched roofs behind the parapets. Big Mill, which dominates the northern Macclesfield approach, also has parapets and a very extensive perimeter of flat roof with central, shallow hipped slate roofs, largely concealed from immediate views.

One of the key features of many of the later 19th century silk mills in Leek is that the top floor of the rear ranges was operational and provided a machining / weaving floor incorporating looms. Cross Street Mill and Belle Vue Mills both have parapets and flat roofs, but behind them are a series of pitched roofs with northern rooflights for machining floors and looms. York Mill also has a parapet to Ashbourne Road, but this disguises shallow, pitched slate roofs. These can work well where the parapets are treated as distinct elements, with well-defined copings and cornices or string courses.

Views and Setting

The roofs as proposed are very top-heavy and over-bearing in views from Compton, and the latest overlay of the approved scheme and the latest revised proposals demonstrates that the impact and difference will be significant, enough in my view to sustain an objection on the grounds of scale. As proposed, the large mass of the heightened eaves and large expanse of roof to Compton will in my view have a negative impact on the grade II listed church opposite, particularly those views along Compton from the north and south. The

church was designed as a major landmark, and the design of the new development incorporates an awkward juxtaposition of half-pitched roofs which step up the site. These are going to be highly visually distracting and draw the eye in views of the church. The elevation to Duke Street has slightly less impact because of the smaller scale 'wings' which front the street, but this is still in my view over-sized. However, the elevation to Cornhill Street makes a very large impact and will be overbearing and harm the setting of the conservation area and grade II listed church.

The previously approved scheme addressed this northern corner carefully by having it well articulated and stepping the elevation down along Prospect Place emphatically broken into a series of lower, smaller pitched roofs and it was very satisfactorily resolved. In my view the current scheme does not do this. The retention of a small gable to Compton without the return gable and true pitched roof to Cornhill Street looks odd and this with the very prominent pitched roofs to Cornhill Street draws the eye, in conflict with the church.

Height of development

Leek is characterised, like many silk manufacturing towns, by a significant contrast in scale between small dwellings and the associated large manufacturing silk mills. The Leek Conservation Area Appraisal is useful as it sets out the context. There are a patchwork of streets outside the medieval core which contain tiny cottages and tall mills.

What is most significant of the context is that mills are broken down into blocks of development, with different roofs often stepping up the steep streets. It is the different planes and steps in the buildings which characterises the majority of the industrial buildings. These are very obvious steps and simple geometric forms, without artifice. For a very large development to work in this context the building needs to be well articulated and there is certainly scope to adopt multiple roof types and forms. The strict adherence to pitched roofs, as perceived from the frontages, seems to be a fall-back position inherited from the previous scheme, which was very different. It is of less importance than getting blocks which respond to the context, scale and massing. I would certainly prefer to see flat roofs and parapets which keep the form in regular blocks and a much lower overall height, rather than very contrived and lop-sided, asymmetric pitched roofs. In this location, flat roofs will not be seen from anywhere else, if hidden behind a parapet. The proposed arrangement of pitched roofs doesn't work. We should be looking for a parapet in this location and either a flat roof, or shallow pitched roofs behind a parapet. The key is to reduce the overall height and impact of the massing of the building to the key elevations to Compton, Cornhill Street and Duke Street.

Parapet and flat roof

Where a number of the mill buildings do incorporate parapets and flat roofs, or at least parapets and hidden gutters (with shallow pitched roofs), these are often successful because they use pier and panel construction, with corbelled brickwork below the parapet, or they adopt a distinct break above the upper floor windows. This serves to distinguish the parapet by articulating a strong horizontal line, a bold cornice. If the development has flat parapets then we would want to see a strong and bold cornice to Compton, with a parapet above this to break up the elevation; there would be little point in changing the pitched

roofs to flat roofs if the brickwork just continued in exactly the same plane with no modelling.

A parapet and flat roof to Compton could work very well with a stair tower in the south-west corner, also with a distinctive roof, above the general roof level. This makes much more sense of the elevation and I would recommend that the stand-alone pitched roof to the far left of the elevation is omitted.

Historic staircase turret

The Heritage Statement says "Together with the spire of St Mary's Church to the west, the stair tower helps to provide a framed view across the town on the northward approach along Compton." However, it is so significantly detached from the main bulk of the proposed development that it does not adequately do this. Instead, as proposed, the stair turret is slightly lost and stranded visually and the relationship is in my view inadequately resolved. This is exacerbated because the stair turret appears more isolated, with the elevation being set further back than the approved scheme.

The single strongest element of the turret is the cornice. This bound it to the building and principal elevation. The approved scheme was very successful in considering and reinstating this relationship. Providing a cornice to the new development which follows the historic alignment would be part interrupted by the windows, as pointed out to me by the architect. However, there is still the scope to install lintels and a lintel band to this part of the elevation which would still maintain the banding along the same line as the top of the cornice and then would express and articulate the central section of the development. In my view this is essential. I appreciate that the applicant has adopted stone lintels in the revised elevation but in my view this is not enough and greater cohesion is needed in the form of a lintel band / cornice.

We would want to see lintels expressed to both Compton and Cornhill Street with either brick lintels (the originals were brick wedge lintels) or stone, in order to create a level of articulation and to avoid simply face-planted window frames. The modelling of the windows and the avoidance of catnic lintels which are flush with the face of the building is essential. At this stage we should be seeking clarification about the depth and rebate of the windows and door openings. Without any additional relief, they need to be suitably set back, with rebates brickwork of a minimum of 100mm.

Elevations

There needs to be more fundamental articulation in certain aspects: plinth, string course or cill band, and cornice / copings. The proposed alternating bands of red and blue/grey brickwork at the base of the building on Compton Street are in my view not enough to ground the building and there should be a physical plinth, ideally which relates to the stair tower, preferably in the form of a chamfered brick plinth.

Proposed Stair tower

The architect has explained to me that one of the main constraints is the staircase which serves all floors of the building in the south-west corner. In my view this should therefore

be expressed as a stair tower and articulated. See annotation and images. It should not determine the height of all of the roofs. This can then be given a raised parapet roof, or a distinctive pitched roof (see for example the central turret at Waterloo Mill) or it can relate more closely to the existing stair turret, so that there is a direct correlation. The former California Mill had a projecting stair tower. The back of London Mills has a stair tower. This would provide a much stronger counterpoint to St. Mary's Church and would be a positive element in views along Compton and from St. Edward Street. I have flagged this up in the sketches as needing the architect's review and resolution.

Materials

There is no, or very limited, historic use of blue brick for industrial buildings in Leek, unlike Stoke-on-Trent and the wider Potteries. It is found in paving but is primarily reserved for late Victorian polychromy on domestic buildings. The dark brick accentuates the recesses, and is successful for that reason, in conjunction with the balconies.

At the moment the scheme relies almost entirely on changing horizontal bands of brick for positive articulation. In my view, the use of contrasting colours of brick is insufficient on its own to overcome the lack of modelling, particularly because of the large scale of the building.

If the applicant is willing to consider my suggestion of a parapet and flat roof, or parapet and shallow pitched roofs hidden behind the parapet, then in my view the strong blue/grey banding at the top of the elevation becomes unnecessary and would look odd anyway, without a deep overhanging eaves.

Roof materials. Once the architect has reviewed my recommended approach to the roofs, we can make a more considered response to roofing materials. It may be that if parapets and flat roofs are adopted this becomes less of an issue. I would have no objections to the use of an artificial slate if the roofs were shallow and hipped behind parapets. At present, the proposed roof pitches adopt the kind of pitch which is typical of tiled roofs, not slate, and the proposed small slate interlocking artificial slate 'tiles' are in my view unacceptable on the pitched roofs as they are so prominent and create an unrelieved mass and block with no variation. By comparison, the cottages running up Duke Street all have Staffordshire blue clay tiles, which by their nature are subtly coloured. Slate was adopted in the 19th century on lower pitches of 22 degrees typically. The RC church opposite is rather an exception to the general rule of thumb. The local roofs (35 degrees upwards) mainly adopt Staffordshire blue clay tiles.

Boundary Wall and fence

The proposed boundary wall and railings in the latest revised landscape layout to the front of the stair turret to Compton is now abutting the stair tower, an overall height of 1.5 metres. This is in my view unacceptable; it defeats the object of retaining the stair turret as an architectural feature and should be realigned so that it is tapered and does not abut the curve of the wall (see later comments and my photo which shows the appropriate location).

Domestic buildings within Leek do have areas of boundary walls and railings on occasion, although this pattern tends to be that of 18th century townhouses, and it is the strong urban

form of terraces lining the streets and back-of-pavement development which characterises the immediate area along Duke Street. Locally it is notable that the low walls are all stone and that the railings are proportionately tall.

At the moment the boundary walls are very poor, both in terms of condition, material (a mixture of modern mottled red brick and blue/black, on edge coping) and the staggered treatment. Good new boundary walls to Compton are going to be quite important. The treatment of the boundaries is going to be quite critical to the success of the project. It is essential that a contemporary approach is undertaken to the railings and no faux heritage. Simple, clean lines please, avoiding too many steps. High quality red brick should be used, preferably not a plain red. The latest set of landscape plans show a boundary wall with railings to the whole of Compton. This will be quite relentless. I am not sure of the justification for this because the plans still show areas of amenity planting and a secondary 'line of defence' along the Compton frontage and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this layout. There are some very odd changes in alignment of the proposed walls. These should have simple clean alignments which relate to the street and pavement. At present there are some odd indents, some inherited from the previous scheme. I don't understand whether the indent along the frontage near Duke Street is an old remnant of public seating but it really needs to be removed from the plan (assuming that it lies within the red line).

Windows – There are some window types of uPVC that mimic traditional flush windows being flush and we could consider these. R7 or Residence² designed by The Residence Collection (and manufactured by a third party) are both contemporary flush extruded uPVC windows, which may be acceptable. There are a number of others that incorporate flush details. The agent has provided a comparison and this may be acceptable and may have to be conditioned. However, irrespective of the actual finish of the doors and windows, I suggest we should only consider uPVC if the windows are set back within 100mm rebates. The use of round-moulded uPVC combined with windows and doors fitted flush with the brick facades would be completely out-of-place.

Conditions:

Can I make recommendations on conditions when we have the response to my comments, please?