

**Meridian House**  
Royal Hill, Greenwich, London, SE10

**Heritage Assessment**



April 2022

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## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 This report has been prepared to provide an understanding of the history and significance of Meridian House, Greenwich, formerly Greenwich Town Hall.

### Organisation

- 1.2 This introduction is followed by a description of Meridian House and its context, followed by an analysis of heritage significance in Section 3 and an outline in Section 4 of the national and local policy and guidance that is relevant to any future proposals. Section 5 analyses the heritage significance of the building, and its context and Section 6 identifies how the proposals comply with policy and guidance.

### Author

- 1.3 The author of this report is Nick Collins BSc (Hons) MSc MRICS IHBC. Nick has twenty years experience in the property sector, including most recently as a Director of the Conservation Team at integrated design consultants, Alan Baxter & Associates. Nick spent nine years at English Heritage as Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings & Areas where he led a specialist team of historic building inspectors, architects, and archaeologists on a wide range of heritage projects in East & South London. Previously Conservation Officer at the London Borough of Bromley, Nick began his career at international real estate consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle as a Chartered Surveyor. This experience has given Nick an in-depth understanding of the property industry, listed building and planning process, heritage policy and guidance and funding bodies.

## **2 The site and its context**

- 2.1 This section of the report describes the history and development of the building and its surroundings and provides an assessment of their heritage significance.

### Historical Background

- 2.2 Meridian House forms part of the Greenwich Town Hall complex that was opened in 1939. It lies on Greenwich High Road on the western approach to the town centre.
- 2.3 Greenwich began as a Thames-side fishing village. In 964AD King Edgar granted lands at Greenwich to the Abbey of St Peter in Ghent which lasted until 1414 when Henry V repossessed the estate and a Royal seat was established on the waterfront. Henry VI enclosed the park in 1433.
- 2.4 The Royal presence gave a new impetus to the fishing port, with a supporting community for the Court established outside the palace walls. The medieval town centred on Greenwich Church Street, between the river and the Church of St Alfege. There was also a friary nearby.
- 2.5 By the time of the establishment of the Royal Naval Hospital in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Greenwich had become a sizable urban centre. The Church of St Alfege was rebuilt to designs by Nicholas Hawksmoor and consecrated in 1718. Crooms Hill became the most fashionable address for Greenwich's gentry in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and was part of a wider migration of London's rich to new suburbs around the capital.
- 2.6 By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the town centre was overcrowded and run down. The town grew steadily with streets and terraces being laid out to the west of Hyde Vale and Crooms Hill, including Royal Hill. London's earliest commuter railway line terminated at Greenwich in 1840. The original building was re-erected on its present site in 1878. A theatre opened in 1871.
- 2.7 In the twentieth century further slum clearances took place, especially in the area now known as Cutty Sark Gardens. The Greenwich Foot Tunnel opened in 1902, enabling workers from Greenwich to reach the docks on the Isle of Dogs.
- 2.8 A similar tunnel opened at Deptford. West Greenwich Library opened in 1907 on the Greenwich High Road, but undoubtedly the main civic gesture in the first half of the twentieth century was the Town Hall on Greenwich High Road.

## Greenwich Town Hall

- 2.9 The Greenwich Town Hall complex was opened in 1939. Combining the administrative functions of a town hall (now Meridian House) with the entertainment and social aspects of an assembly hall it replaced the much smaller town hall which was criticised as dark and dreary. The new complex was a massive project for the Borough, not least of all for its size and the number of buildings cleared to make way for it.
- 2.10 The complex was designed by the architectural firm of Culpin & Son who were supposedly appointed based on their socialist political sympathies.
- 2.11 The architect responsible was Clifford Culpin. He was the son of Ewart Culpin, who owned the firm (originally known as EC Culpin and Bowers) which is known to have been involved in other projects such as Poplar Town Hall which was built around the same time. Ewart Culpin was the senior partner of the firm, which had been set up following the end of the First World War, and had previously worked as a journalist and had been secretary of the Garden City Association, a role in which he had flourished. He was a known supporter of the Labour Party and a socialist and himself served on the Ilford Council in 1917.
- 2.12 In the firm, Ewart appeared to be the administrator and originally Bowers the designer. Their firm was aimed at the “homes fit for heroes” spending of Lloyd George. Culpin and Bowers split up in the 1930s with Culpin subsequently working with his son Clifford, forming Culpin & Son in 1933, and Bowers working with the Transport Union.
- 2.13 Clifford Culpin, was an admirer of the architect Willem Dudok. He had visited the designer in Hilversum, Holland to see the Dutchman’s work first hand. Dudok’s most famous building was Hilversum Town Hall, completed between 1928 and 1931 which became a direct influence on the Greenwich Borough Town Hall complex.



Figure 1: Hilversum Town Hall by W Dudock

- 2.14 Initially controversial in its uncompromisingly modernist design, the Greenwich Town Hall complex was eventually celebrated as a magnificent piece of contemporary architecture. In 1951 Nikolaus Pevsner wrote that it was *“the only town hall of any London borough to represent the style of its time adequately”*.
- 2.15 The building consists of two main blocks. The first was the Town Hall that was dedicated to administrative offices and the council chamber. This is the old Town Hall or Meridian House today. The second was the Assembly or Borough Halls, comprising one large and one small public assembly hall.



Figure 2: perspective Drawing of the Greenwich Borough Town Hall complex drawn by JDM Harvey 1930s (Greenwich Heritage Centre)

- 2.16 The Town Hall was constructed of reinforced concrete whilst the block containing the assembly halls is of steel frame construction. An extra storey was allowed for both structurally and aesthetically and the clear geometry of the architecture makes extensions easy to incorporate. The complex's most defining feature is a soaring 165 ft tower, served by a lift, which the architects felt would indicate the position of the new town hall in the same way that the spire of a cathedral marked its position in a medieval city.



Figure 3: The Greenwich Borough Town Hall complex in 1939  
(Greenwich Heritage Centre)

- 2.17 Clock dials were on all four sides of the tower, which was designed not only to function as a clock tower but also an observation tower and as such has a glazed viewing level at the top. The tower and main elevations were faced with orange hand-made bricks, laid in a special bond to create a decorative striped pattern whilst the plinth of the Old Town Hall was clad in grey Cornish granite.
- 2.18 The piers between the windows were faced with thin glazed bricks of brown colour. They splayed wings of the Old Town Hall entrance were finished with marble and above them a balcony, intended for ceremonial and polling declarations.
- 2.19 There were six main entrances, with the civic entrances main face onto Royal Hill, the office blocks on the Greenwich High Road. The Borough Hall faced Royal Hill and the entrance to the smaller hall to the side elevation of Peyton Place.
- 2.20 A summary of the style of the whole former Greenwich Town Hall Complex comes from Historic England who described the

complex as 'avowedly Modernist in its uncluttered and irregular elevations, juxtaposing vertically, through a clock tower, with the horizontality of flat-roofed, low-rise office blocks" (1999)

2.21 The interior of the Old Town Hall was completed to a high standard, with Travertine marble used in the entrance hall and main staircase. The Council Chamber was panelled in weathered English sycamore with gilded columns and the stepped seating was of English walnut.

2.22 Committee Rooms were panelled in Burr Oak or white sycamore and the Mayor's parlour finished in teak to convey the importance of the space. Throughout the Civic Suite and other important rooms, the furnishings were designed by the architects in consultation with the interior designer Elsa Booth about who little is known today.



Figure 4: The Council Chamber in 1939 (Greenwich Heritage Centre)

2.23 The Borough Halls comprised two hall spaces, the main Borough or Assembly Hall with the Minor Hall below. The Assembly Hall was designed as an all-purpose hall. There were 534 seats on the main floor and 259 in the Balcony. The Hall was finished in Australian Walnut while the proscenium was panelled in Curly Birch; both still survive today.



Figure 5: The Borough or Assembly Hall in 1939 (Greenwich Heritage Centre)

- 2.24 A semi-sprung maple dance floor emerged when the chairs were removed. The stage was fully equipped for theatrical performances and a removable apron-stage provided space for an orchestra pit adequate for a medium sized orchestra. There was also provision for a cinema with a 'cinematograph projector room'. Entered from the hall was a small Bar or Buffet room which displayed a mural painting representing the first Masque performed in England – which took place at Greenwich – in the reign of Henry VII. Although the artist is unconfirmed, the mural is intact today as is the streamlined joinery. It is not known whether Elsa Booth's influence extended to the Borough Halls also.
- 2.25 Originally a ceremonial entrance connected the foyer with the civic suite in the Old Town Hall.
- 2.26 In 1965 the boroughs of Greenwich and Woolwich merged and the new Borough's administrative headquarters moved to Woolwich's 1906 neo-Baroque Town Hall.
- 2.27 Following this there was a series of works and refurbishment works carried out at the old Town Hall (newly renamed Meridian House) between 1972-4, in order to turn the space into commercial accommodation. These works were undertaken by Rolfe Judd Architects and resulted in the loss of almost all of the interior, including the whole Council Chamber which was subdivided with an inserted floor. All that remains today is the Travertine marble entrance hall and main, imperial stair.

- 2.28 The main external changes were the addition of an attic storey, which was allowed for by Culpin, the insertion of new windows to match the old ones in the council chamber area, and replacement of glass blocks by windows at basement level on Royal Hill.
- 2.29 While the interior was overhauled to facilitate the changing role of the building, the outside in the most part remained largely unchanged.
- 2.30 The Borough or Assembly Halls remained in council ownership, now known as the Greenwich Borough Halls. Following the war the Greenwich Borough Halls status as one of the borough's main entertainment venues continued to grow. A variety of performances were organised by musicians, theatre companies and dance groups. The whole complex was listed Grade II in 1990.
- 2.31 The list description reads:  
*“Brick cladding to reinforced concrete frame with steel frame for public halls; flat roofs. Dutch style, especially inspired by the architecture of WM Dudok and of his Hilversum Town Hall (1928-30) in particular. Elevation to Royal Hill has asymmetrical composition of opposing two and three-storey rectangular blocks culminating in a tall tower facing Greenwich High Road; long bands of low windows, with tall windows over two main entrances. Other elevations are similar but with plain three-storey plus basement elevation of 11 bays with rectangular windows to Greenwich High Road, with similar two-bay return adjoining tower to Royal Hill with mosaic by Carter and Co over side entrance. Interior: much altered in 1972-74, when floors inserted in council chamber area; entrance foyer with marble panels to walls and imperial staircase; assembly hall with round lights over panelled dado and plain balcony, medieval-inspired mural by Suddaby and Fryer.”*
- 2.32 The West Greenwich Conservation Area extends from the town centre, the pier the Thames foreshore and Cutty Sark to the railway station, the Georgian and Victorian housing and the open heath on the edge of Blackheath to the south. The conservation area shoulders the Old Royal Naval College and Greenwich Park and the three areas make up the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site. The inscription by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee confirms the international significance of the area.
- 2.33 There are a number of listed buildings nearby, including The 1907 Carnegie West Greenwich Public Library immediately

adjacent to the east in a 17<sup>th</sup> century 'Wrennaissance' style topped with a cupola.

2.34 Further to the west at 1-15 Greenwich South Street are a terrace of fine early 18<sup>th</sup> century townhouses with three storeys and attic and projecting single storey shops onto the street.

2.35 Opposite Meridian House, to the north, at 199-213 Greenwich High Road are four pairs of houses built in 1815-20 by Jesse Gibson, architect to the Drapers' Company. The houses are joined as a terrace by projecting side porches with each house forming a symmetrical two bay composition. Their slate roofs are hidden behind a parapet.

The Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site

2.36 A brief overview of the identified Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site is as follows:

*Symmetrically arranged alongside the River Thames, the ensemble of the 17th-century Queen's House, part of the last Royal Palace at Greenwich, the palatial baroque complex of the Royal Hospital for Seamen, and the Royal Observatory founded in 1675 and surrounded by the Royal Park laid out in the 1660s by André Le Nôtre, reflects two centuries of Royal patronage and represents a high point of the work of the architects Inigo Jones (1573-1652) and Christopher Wren (1632-1723), and more widely European architecture at an important stage in its evolution. It also symbolises English artistic and scientific endeavour in the 17th and 18th centuries.*

2.37 Meridian House lies within the buffer zone of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site. The buffer zone is an area identified to give an added layer of protection to the Site and is managed directly through the existing planning policies.

### **3 The heritage significance of the site and its context**

The relevant heritage assets

- 3.1 In terms of the assessment of proposals for Meridian House, the heritage assets most relevant to considering the effect of the scheme are the listed building itself, the West Greenwich Conservation Area and other nearby listed buildings. The building also lies within the buffer zone of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site.
- 3.2 The effect of the proposed scheme on these assets will be first and foremost on the special architectural and historic interest of the building itself, and then on the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of other nearby listed buildings. Further consideration will also need to be given to whether proposals have an effect on the setting of the World Heritage Site.

Assessing heritage significance

- 3.3 Meridian House, the listed buildings nearby, the West Greenwich Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site are 'designated heritage assets', as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (the NPPF). Other buildings and structures that make a positive contribution to the conservation area can be considered as 'undesigned heritage assets'.
- 3.4 'Significance' is defined in the NPPF as 'the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic'. The Historic England 'Planning for the Historic Environment Practice Guide' puts it slightly differently – as 'the sum of its architectural, historic, artistic or archaeological interest'.
- 3.5 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment' (Historic England, April 2008) describes a number of 'heritage values' that may be present in a 'significant place'. These are evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.
- 3.6 Historical value is described as being illustrative or associative. 'Conservation Principles' says that:

Illustration depends on visibility in a way that evidential value (for example, of buried remains) does not. Places with illustrative value will normally also have evidential value, but it may be of a different order of importance... The illustrative value of places tends to be greater if they incorporate the first, or only surviving, example of an innovation of consequence, whether related to design, technology or social organisation.

‘Historic interest’ or ‘Historical value’

- 3.7 The historic significance of Meridian House lies primarily in its original purpose and function as part of the Town Hall complex for the Borough of Greenwich. Replacing a smaller building that was regarded, at the time, as being ‘dark and dreary’ the new complex was a dramatic modern statement both physically and politically. It represents the spirit and celebration of early/mid twentieth century local government.
- 3.8 Another important public building built at that time in the ‘modern’ style was the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea. This similarly had socialist associations – commissioned by Bexhill’s first socialist Mayor, the Earl De La Warr (and the first hereditary peer to join the Labour Party).
- 3.9 The building was clearly designed to make a physical statement of civic status – both in terms of the quality of finishes and also provision – with the Assembly Halls and the viewing tower making the building accessible for the people of the Borough.
- 3.10 In terms of Historic England’s ‘Conservation Principles’ a listed building provides us with ‘evidence about past human activity’ and, by means of their fabric, design and appearance, communicate information about its past.
- 3.11 Externally, the various alterations that have been made to the building since its construction in the 1930s have not harmed its ability to convey its historic character and heritage values which are retained through its strong architectural styling and landmark tower.
- 3.12 Designed by a recognised architect, Culpin, this association is an important historical connection – particularly the implication that Culpin’s ‘socialist’ associations were an important factor in his choice. The building’s long civic role also associates it with a multitude of local dignitaries and the setting for many locally important decisions.
- 3.13 However, the near complete loss of the civic interiors in Meridian House (although retained almost in their entirety in

the adjacent Borough Halls) has considerably diminished the building's overall historic importance. Its private use also means that the building's association with the people of the Borough has been diminished and now, after 40 years, largely lost. Its historic importance is physically now entirely manifested in its external physical appearance and architecture and any remaining historical records, photographs and memories.

'Architectural interest', 'artistic interest' or 'aesthetic value'

- 3.14 The architectural significance of Meridian House can be attributed to the fact that it formed part of a civic complex that represents a distinct strand of modernist architecture in the 1930s, completed to the design of a respected architect, Clifford Culpin.
- 3.15 The exterior remains largely intact as conceived by the architect and is immediately redolent of Willem Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall. Large plain elevations with simple critical windows, any detailing is expressed in the brickwork and the simple palette of materials. The elevations are both austere and dramatic.
- 3.16 The exterior of the building is always read as a whole with the adjacent Borough Halls. The impact of the tower is such that the rest of the complex appears comparatively low-rise and linear, even though it is considerably higher and dominant amongst its immediate neighbours. The main entrance is on Royal Hill with the Borough crest positioned above the entrance.
- 3.17 The external design was clearly intended to mark the civic centre of the Borough and its original purpose is still apparent through its style and form – particularly with its distinctive and landmark tower. A less successful consequence of the complex's scale is that its 'rear' elevation is particularly prominent from the east, where at high level the cheaper bricks and unadorned blank elevations can be seen over the roofs of the adjoining buildings.
- 3.18 The architectural significance of Meridian House has been almost totally lost internally. Other than the main entrance hall and stair all of the interiors and fittings that were specifically designed for the Town Hall have been lost. As a listed complex, the interiors of the adjacent Borough Hall do still exist, including wood panelling in the hall and the mural in the Bar.

#### West Greenwich Conservation Area

- 3.19 The significance of the West Greenwich Conservation Area is best articulated in its definition of special interest. This has been identified by the Royal Borough of Greenwich in its Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2013).
- 3.20 *“West Greenwich is significant for the quality of its townscape and the diversity of its architecture, which includes Hawksmoor’s Church of St Alfege, the Georgian houses of Crooms Hill and Hyde Vale and, in the twentieth century, the former town hall on Greenwich High Road. The Cutty Sark, now Grade I listed, is one of London’s most famous landmarks. The area is also notable for the formal set pieces such as Gloucester Circus and the Regency re-planning of the town centre around the market. Finally, the topography of Greenwich, with streets rising up the escarpment to Blackheath, affords incomparable views across the town centre towards the Thames and the centre of London”.*
- 3.21 The importance of Meridian House, and the Town Hall complex in terms of the conservation area is predominantly that of a landmark – especially the tower. The building does not relate to any other nearby buildings in either style or scale and even the brick exteriors do not relate due to the unique hand-made nature of the bricks and the stylistic patterns and details of the way they have been laid.
- 3.22 This does not, however, diminish its importance as part of the eclectic mix of buildings that characterise the town centre and its multiple functions – both historically and at present.
- 3.23 Whilst the tower is clearly a positive landmark in the surrounding area, as described above, the scale of the building in comparison to its surrounding setting does also reveal elements of ‘back of house’ that do not contribute to the wider townscape. Most particularly views towards the eastern flank of the building.

#### Nearby Listed Buildings

- 3.24 Similarly to the conservation area, the sheer individuality of design and purpose of the complex means that it does not relate to the nearby listed buildings – such as the adjacent Public Library – which is already completely overwhelmed by the building when seen in views to the east. Other than the front elevation and tower, this view of Meridian House exposes the greatest element of its ‘rear’.

- 3.25 1-15 Greenwich High Road have a similar relationship, with the 'rear' of the Town Hall complex, including the Borough Halls, appearing in its backdrop.

## 4 The policy context

- 4.1 This section of the report briefly sets out the range of national and local policy and guidance relevant to the consideration of change in the historic built environment.

### Legislation

- 4.2 The legislation governing listed buildings and conservation areas is the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Section 66 (1) of the Act requires decision makers to 'have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses' when determining applications which affect a listed building or its setting. Section 72(1) of the Act requires decision makers with respect to any buildings or other land in a conservation area to pay 'special attention...to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area'.

### The National Planning Policy Framework

- 4.3 In 2021, the Government published the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 4.4 The NPPF says at Paragraph 194 that:
- In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance.
- 4.5 A description and analysis of the heritage significance of Meridian House and its context is provided earlier in this report.
- 4.6 The NPPF also requires local planning authorities to 'identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this assessment into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage asset, to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal'.
- 4.7 At Paragraph 197, the NPPF says that:

In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

4.8 Paragraph 199 advises local planning authorities that ‘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. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be. Significance can be harmed or lost through alteration or destruction of the heritage asset or development within its setting’.

4.9 The NPPF says at Paragraph 201:

Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to or total loss of significance of a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss, or all of the following apply:

- the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and
- no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and
- conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and
- the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use.

4.10 Paragraph 202 says that ‘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 securing its optimum viable use.’

4.11 Further advice within Section 16 of the NPPF urges local planning authorities to take into account the effect of an

application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset when determining the application. It says that 'In weighing applications that affect directly or indirectly non designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset'.

4.12 Paragraph 206 of the NPPF advises local planning authorities to 'look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance. Proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset should be treated favourably'.

4.13 Paragraph 207 says that:

Not all elements of a World Heritage Site or Conservation Area will necessarily contribute to its significance. Loss of a building (or other element) which makes a positive contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area or World Heritage Site should be treated either as substantial harm under paragraph 195 or less than substantial harm under paragraph 196, as appropriate, taking into account the relative significance of the element affected and its contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area or World Heritage Site as a whole.

#### London Plan

4.14 The new London Plan was adopted in March 2021. Policy HC1 relates to Heritage Conservation and Growth. This states (in part, relevant to this application):

4.15 Development proposals affecting heritage assets, and their settings, should conserve their significance, by being sympathetic to the assets' significance and appreciation within their surroundings. The cumulative impacts of incremental change from development on heritage assets and their settings should also be actively managed. Development proposals should avoid harm and identify enhancement opportunities by integrating heritage considerations early on in the design process.

#### Royal Borough of Greenwich's Local Plan

4.16 The Royal Greenwich Local Plan: Core Strategy with Detailed Policies was adopted in July 2014. The relevant Strategic Policies in respect of this report include:

#### Policy DH1: Design

All developments are required to be of a high quality of design and to demonstrate that they positively contribute to the improvement of both the built and natural environments. To achieve a high quality of design, all developments are expected to:

- i) Provide a positive relationship between the proposed and existing urban context by taking account of:
  - Topography, landscape setting, ridges and natural features;
  - Existing townscapes, local landmarks, views and skylines
  - The architecture of surrounding buildings;
  - The need to retain trees
  - The quality and nature of materials, both traditional and modern;
  - Established layout and spatial character;
  - The scale, height, bulk and massing of the adjacent townscape;
  - Architectural, historical and archaeological features and their settings;
  - The effective use of land;
  - The potential for a mix of uses;
  - Patterns of activity, movement and circulation particularly for pedestrians and cyclists;
  - The cultural diversity of the area; and
  - Acceptable noise insulation and attenuation.
- ii) Promote local distinctiveness by providing a site-specific design solution
- v) Create attractive, manageable well-functioning spaces within the site;

- 4.17 Policy DH3: Heritage Assets: The Royal Borough will protect and enhance the heritage assets and settings of Royal Greenwich, including the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site, preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the 20 Conservation Areas, applying a presumption in favour of the preservation of statutory listed buildings and their settings, giving substantial weight to protecting and conserving locally listed buildings, protecting the three registered parks and

gardens, as well as Royal Greenwich's archaeological remains and areas of special character

- 4.18 Detailed Policy DH(h) relates to Conservation Areas: Divided into three parts, the most relevant part for this application is part (i): Planning permission will only be granted for proposals which pay special attention to preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the Conservation Area. The local scale, the established pattern of development and landscape, building form and local materials will all be taken into account. Development on sites in the vicinity of a Conservation Area and which would have a visual effect on its character or appearance, should respect the setting of that area.
- 4.19 Policy DH9(i) Statutory Listed Buildings: Part (ii) of this policy relates to external or internal alterations: Proposals for external or internal alterations or additions to Listed Buildings should respect the integrity of the buildings and harmonise with their special architectural or historical character. Where consent is required for internal alterations, features of interest should be respected and left in-situ wherever possible.

## 5 The proposals and their effect on heritage significance

5.1 This section of the report briefly describes the proposed amended scheme and its effect on the heritage significance described earlier. The proposed scheme is illustrated in the drawings prepared by JTP and this section should be read in conjunction with the Design & Access Statement.

5.2 The proposals have been informed by detailed pre-application discussion with officers at the Royal Borough of Greenwich as well as presentation to the Design Review Panel – all of which has contributed positively to the final design.

### The proposals

5.3 Due to the extent of the changes that have taken place inside the building perhaps the key impact of the proposals on the building's physical heritage significance is external – this impact is not just on the listed building itself but also the conservation area and the setting of the nearby listed buildings.

5.4 As a consequence, the approach to extending the building has been informed by a detailed analysis of the existing elevations and understanding the key principles of their architectural form. This has been broken down into: horizontal appearance; slender vertical openings; a regular grid; layering and simplicity; civic styling; and an austerity of detail. The proposals have also been tested in a series of views which are illustrated in the Design & Access Statement.

5.5 Of great importance has been the need to retain the primacy and verticality of the tower in contrast to the horizontality of the building below.

5.6 The additional floor follows the structure of the existing building, emphasising the horizontal and using the existing architectural grid to position the openings, while setting it back from the front elevation to ensure a subservience to the original.



Figure 6: View from Greenwich High Road looking southwest

- 5.7 On Royal Hill the additional extension giving access to the rooftop amenity is set well back from the main elevation and has been positioned centrally on the elevation so that it respects the established order of Meridian House. It will be curtain glazed to ensure it has a recessive 'background' appearance that will not compete with the main elevation and in most views of the building will not be visible (see fig 7).



Figure 7: View from Royal Hill/Burney Street junction

- 5.8 Whilst the southwest elevation adopts similar design principles, the element that sits over the former Council Chamber will have a more vertical expression in order to create a contrast and recognise the differing former uses within the building.



Figure 8: View from Greenwich High Road/Greenwich South Street junction of the southwest elevation

- 5.9 The extensions will be clad in a dark bronze metal, with dark bronze aluminium fenestration and railings – to create a simple palette that sits comfortably and contextually with the red/brown brick of the main building and maintains the austerity of material and colour palette that typifies the building.
- 5.10 Where other openings are proposed in the existing elevations these have been designed to reflect to the simplicity of the existing openings in a contemporary style that also reflects the materiality of the extension.
- 5.11 With regards to the impact on the external envelope, we believe that the proposals preserve this element of the special interest of the listed building. It alters it, but in a way that respects and pays homage to the architectural principles and style that Culpin’s original building embodies. It responds to the elegant simplicity of the architectural detailing and ensures the dramatic juxtaposition of the verticality of the tower and perceived horizontality of the main building is maintained.
- 5.12 When viewed from the west, whilst additional mass is added to the southwest elevation the proposals arguable enhance an elevation that was clearly designed merely as a ‘back’ in cheaper brick and with no openings or detail – but nevertheless prominent in longer views.
- 5.13 Internally, as described earlier in the report, other than the main entrance hall and stair all of the interiors and fittings that were specifically designed for the Town Hall have been lost.

This includes the plan form of all rooms relating to the building's historic function.

- 5.14 The sense of a 'non-residential' building will be preserved by the allocation of all of the lower ground floor that fronts Greenwich High Road, and much of the upper ground floor for 'employment' use. Whilst this is not its 'historic' use, it will nevertheless ensure a more commercial character from the main road.
- 5.15 The principal entrance, hall and stair are to be preserved intact and the first floor lantern-lit space that formerly provided access to the Council Chamber will be preserved as residential amenity space – retaining its proportions as well as top lit light.
- 5.16 The proposals for the conversion of the building have used the remaining spine corridors to inform the positioning of the proposed new apartments, as well as the existing openings, staircases and access.
- 5.17 The effect of the proposals internally will be to preserve all those elements of special interest that remain within the building and the proposed internal works have been designed to ensure that they have no obvious impact when viewed externally.
- 5.18 An important public benefit that the proposals deliver is the restoration of the currently derelict observation deck at the top of the Clock Tower. Affording spectacular views over East and South East London, the space fell into neglect, and the possibility of offering managed access will restore an important element of the building's civic past.

#### Impact on surrounding heritage assets

##### West Greenwich Conservation Area

- 5.19 The contribution that Meridian House makes to the conservation area is outlined in Section 3. A series of views have been produced and are reproduced in the Design & Access Statement. These show 'existing' and 'proposed' images and we believe demonstrate that the proposals will not fundamentally alter the relationship between the landmark building and its wider context or affect the contribution that the building makes to the character and appearance of the conservation area.
- 5.20 Meridian House (and the adjacent Borough Hall) is already a landmark building of a different scale, mass, style and presence than any other in its immediate vicinity. This will not change

with the proposed extensions – which have been designed to compliment the existing building and thus its contribution to the area.

- 5.21 The views from surrounding streets show that the proposed massing sits comfortably with the existing mass of both Meridian House and the Borough Hall – for example from Brand Street and Nevada Street.
- 5.22 Even where the additional massing is more prominent – such as in long views from the west on Greenwich High Road, this does not alter the relationship of the existing complex with its surrounding context.
- 5.23 Arguably the southwest elevation will be enhanced by a more architecturally considered addition, rather than the existing blank elevation of cheap brick.

The setting of nearby listed buildings

- 5.24 As described earlier, similarly to the conservation area, the sheer individuality of design and purpose of the complex means that it does not relate to the nearby listed buildings – such as the adjacent Public Library – which is already completely overwhelmed by the building when seen in views to the east. Other than the front elevation and tower, this view of Meridian House exposes the greatest element of its ‘rear’ and the proposals should enhance this view of the building with an addition of high quality that will not fundamentally alter the setting of the listed building.
- 5.25 1-15 Greenwich High Road have a similar relationship, with the ‘rear’ of the Town Hall complex, including the Borough Halls, appearing in its backdrop in longer views. As described in the context of the conservation area above, the relationship between the complex, with its extensions, does not fundamentally alter the relationship between, and therefore setting of, the listed buildings.

The Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site

- 5.26 Although Meridian House lies within the buffer zone of the World Heritage Site (WHS) – designated to give an added layer of protection to the Site – the proposals will not have any effect on the identified Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the WHS which is focused on the former Royal Hospital, Queen’s House, the Royal Observatory and the Royal Park. From within the core part of the WHS the most prominent element is the Clock Tower, which retains that status, and the other elements,

even when visible – such as from Nevada Street, will not impact the OUV.

#### Summary

- 5.27 In summary, the significance of Meridian House physically now lies primarily in its external envelope and its presence in Greenwich.
- 5.28 The proposals are the product of a detailed analysis and understanding of the subtleties, elegance and simplicity of the architecture of the existing building and have been designed to compliment this.
- 5.29 Internally the proposals recognise the building's former 'non-residential' use through the provision of employment space at lower and upper ground floor levels – and particularly along the Greenwich High Road frontage. The conversion preserves the key remaining spaces, including the main entrance and staircases as well as the first floor lantern lit area.
- 5.30 Views prepared as part of the process of design and provided within the DAS illustrate that the proposals should preserve the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of nearby listed buildings. The building's unique form, contribution to the area and relationship with surrounding buildings will change, but in a positive way.

## 6 Compliance with policy and guidance

6.1 This report has provided a detailed description and analysis of the significance of Meridian House and its heritage context, as required by Paragraph 194 of the National Planning Policy Framework. In addition, the report also describes how the proposed amendments will affect that heritage significance. The effect is positive, and for that reason, the scheme complies with policy and guidance.

6.2 The proposal, in our view, preserve the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building, the character and appearance of the West Greenwich Conservation Area and the setting of nearby listed buildings, and thus complies with S.66(1) and S.72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. They do not lead to 'substantial' harm or any meaningful level of 'less than substantial' harm to the listed buildings or any other heritage assets. The proposals have been designed to complement the architecture and the contribution that the building makes to the area in a positive way.

### The National Planning Policy Framework

6.3 In respect of Paragraph 197 of the NPPF, the proposed scheme can be described as 'sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation'. It continues to secure the 'positive contribution' that the buildings make to the Conservation Area, and the setting of other listed buildings, and it preserves the essential elements of its special architectural and historic interest as a listed building. The proposals are specifically designed to ensure the sustainability and economic viability of the building – crucial to its long term success.

6.4 The proposed scheme complies with Paragraph 201 of the NPPF - it certainly does not lead to 'substantial harm to or total loss of significance of a designated heritage asset'. It also complies with Paragraph 202 - the scheme cannot be considered to harm the listed building, but rather alters it in a fashion that has a small effect on overall heritage significance. The scheme has been specifically designed to ensure that the optimum viable use for the building can be secured, thus ensuring a sustainable and flexible space that is successful into the future.

6.5 The proposals combine residential use with provision of employment space and the restoration of the derelict

observation deck – restoring a long-lost element of the building’s civic past.

#### London Plan 2021

- 6.6 The proposals are in compliance with Policy HC1 of the London Plan. The proposals conserve the significance of the listed building through a full understanding of its special interest and ensuring that the proposals have been sympathetically designed. Further the proposals have identified enhancement opportunities such as the observation deck.

#### Royal Greenwich’s Local Plan

- 6.7 In positively addressing the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework, the works also meet the policy requirements of the Royal Borough of Greenwich Local Plan relevant to the historic built environment.
- 6.8 In terms of Policy DH1, the proposals ensure that they ‘take account of the architectural, historical and archaeological features and their setting’ in particular with the detailed analysis of the existing building’s architecture and its wider context.
- 6.9 The proposals have given careful consideration to the ‘quality and nature of materials – both traditional and modern’.
- 6.10 The proposals ‘promote local distinctiveness by providing a site-specific design solution’.
- 6.11 In terms of Policy DH3 the amended scheme continues to preserve the character and appearance of the conservation area and the key element of significance within the listed buildings will be preserved.
- 6.12 With regards Policy DH(h), the proposals have had full regard for the character and appearance of the conservation area.
- 6.13 In terms of Policy DH(i), the proposals and their effect on the listed building have been described in detail earlier in this report and have been designed to ensure they are both respectful and harmonise with the special interest of the building. They have also been designed to ensure that the remaining features of interest are respected and left in-situ.
- 6.14 Overall, for the reasons given in this report and other associated documents, we believe that the proposals comply with national and local legislation, policy and guidance with regards the historic built environment.

## **Appendix One: Sources**

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