

The Hydro Building. Queen Elizabeth High School, Hexham.

Introduction

The Hydro building forms part of Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham. It is located within the grounds of the school, to the west of the modern school buildings and is set upon a raised area of land, which accentuates the historic importance of the buildings. It is a grade II listed building and was first listed in 1976.

The original use of the buildings was as a Hydropathic centre and has been subsequently used as a hotel and a teacher training college before becoming part of Queen Elizabeth High School. The 'Winter Gardens' form part of the school but are also rented out for functions.

The building can be divided historically into 3 phases: - the southern building (the former Westfield House) dates from 1864; the central block dates from 1878 and the glass house at the northern end was added in 1907.

The former Westfield House, which forms the southern wing, is a two storey building of squared ashlar stone with a Welsh slate roof and has fine 2 over 2 sliding sash windows. The eastern elevation has a central pediment to the roof and a chamfered bay to ground floor with a stone balustrade to a balcony at first floor level. Its entranceway faces south with an ornate parapet above the central doorcase.

The entranceway to the main building faces east. It is a three storey building of squared ashlar sandstone with a central 5 storey tower with a mansard roof. The main roof is of Welsh slate with three pedimented dormers to either side of the central tower. The entrance door is located within the central tower and has a glazed semi circular head with 3 stone decorative corbels to the wrought iron balcony above.

The 'winter gardens', as the glass house building to the north of the main block is known, has an ashlar stone plinth and a Welsh slate roof. Its frame is of timber, divided into a myriad of vertical panes and is an attractive example of an Edwardian glass house.

Plan Form.

The built form wraps around in roughly squared shape and what was once a central open courtyard has been filled with a number of more modern buildings and extensions in brick, which are of lesser significance. There are also a number of

single storey outbuildings in stone to the north west (rear) of the main building and appear to be of lesser significance. Hence there may be opportunities for a number of adaptations and reorganisation of the plan form in these areas.

The most important elevations are those to the south and east, with the Winter Gardens to the north. Therefore the scope for adaptations and additions lies mainly to the west of the main building itself.

Architectural Characteristics

The buildings are of squared ashlar stone with ashlar dressings to the east and south elevations and squared coursed stone to the less prominent elevations, with some later brick extensions and additions. The roofs are of Welsh slate with tall ashlar stone chimneys. The windows are mainly timber painted sliding sash windows, primarily 2 over 2 sashes but there are a number of 1 over 1 and tripartite sash windows, together with an ornate Venetian style window to the first floor eastern elevation of the former Westfield House. . A few modern style windows have also been added to the rear elevations over the years. The pedimented dormers are an attractive feature of the roofscape and should be retained.

Internal features

The ground and first floor of the former Westfield House have retained their plan form and their original staircase, together with attractive architectural features such as decorative cornicing to the ceilings. The uses in this building are predominantly office use, with some classroom space. It is considered that this original plan form and its historic features should be retained and repaired as necessary.

The stone steps up to the 1878 building lead through the entranceway to a wide hallway leading to a grand staircase which rises up throughout the building, although it becomes less grand as it makes its way to level 4. The entrance hallway and the east corridor of the ground floor have ornate detailing to the room which is now marked as room 03 on the floor plans and currently used as a music room. This detailing, including decorative pillars, should be retained. The music room annotated as room 38 on the floor plans, to the north of the main entrance way, also has attractive cornicing and should be retained. The buildings and areas to the west of the main easternmost blocks have been altered internally over time and hence appear to have scope for internal alterations in the future. The exception to this is the room marked as room 31 on the floor plans which is used as a hall/drama space and is a grand space with timber Wainscot panelling to the walls which should be retained.

At first floor level in the main block the only internal features of interest are the partitions nearest to the original staircase and these should be retained. Levels 3 and 4 are also fairly plain, with no obvious architectural features of interest. Whilst some of the rooms on these upper floors have been altered in size and proportion over the years, further research should be undertaken into the plan form to achieve a clearer understanding of its historical importance.

At level 3 some of the roof trusses are clearly visible and the some of the dormer windows and the cast iron sky lights appear to be in a poor state of repair, with the ingress of water in areas.

The Winter Gardens along the northern end of the site are an attractive Edwardian edition to these Victorian buildings. Internally they form one large space and are use as a dining area by the school and are rented out for functions such as weddings. This building should be retained and repaired as necessary.

Conclusion.

The Hydro building at Queen Elizabeth High School is of historic and architectural importance. In the main it is in good condition although it does appear to have water ingress issues at higher level. It is a grand building, constructed in three phases and standing in an elevated position on higher ground above the main school.

The site does have opportunities to rationalise and possibly rebuild upon existing later additions and extensions which are of lesser significance. There may also be opportunities to build to the rear (north western) side of the site, set well back from the principle eastern and southern elevations. Internally the two original staircases (one to the former Westfield House and one to the main block) together with some architectural features, mainly to the ground floor and the plan form of the eastern and southern blocks of the ground floor, should be retained, but it is considered that there is scope for internal modernisation elsewhere. However the external elevations, with their attractive timber sliding sash windows, should be retained and should not be altered to facilitate any internal modernisation.

A full and thorough Heritage Statement should be undertaken to help improve understanding of the significance of the buildings and to justify any changes to the buildings. This would need to be submitted in support of any application for Planning Permission.

