Cambridge Guildhall

Asset Assessment

Prepared for calfordseaden
in support of their strategic report
and recommendation regarding the
Cambridge Civic Quarter scheme of works

For

Cambridge City Council

Author	Michael Coleman	
Reviewer	Matthew Wittrick	
Rev 0	14/10/2026	
Rev A	14/10/2026	Roof and maintenance access DDA compliance, fire doors

1 Experience and qualifications

The lead author of this Asset Assessment is the Sector Director for Sir Robert McAlpine Special Projects Michael Coleman.

Michael Coleman joined the industry in 1986, joining John Laing Construction [JLC} as a non-technical graduate. Transferring into the heritage and refurbishment captive specialist of JLC, Holloway White Allom Limited, in 1988 his heritage and refurbishment experience was obtained as a construction line manager. Leading projects as both Project Manager and Project Director, Michael has been a Contracts Director since 2001. For the period 2003 to 2010, Michael was the Technical Director for Holloway White Allom. Specific responsibilities included liaison with external testing houses and assessing both the anatomy of patent and latent defects at preconstruction stage and in the field of post occupation project defects. In 2011, he joined Sir Robert McAlpine and commenced leading their heritage and refurbishment sector in 2015. Holding a post graduate level NVQ5 (2004) in Construction Contracts Management the portfolio of Grade I and Grade II listed buildings which advise and inform the observational comments contained in this Asset Assessment include The Mansion House, Winfield House (Regents Park), Buckingham Palace, Artillery Mansions (Victoria St), The Courtauld Institute (Somerset House), Admiralty Arch, 80 Strand, The Institution of Civil Engineers and the Elizabeth Tower. Michael was also involved in leading, alongside Donald Insall Architects the emergency interventions to prevent the loss of the Grade 1 listed Chandos House. It is a portfolio of projects which has required close liaison with and training by Historic England, SPAB and leading sector practices including (but limited to) Hutton and Rostrum, TWI, Gardiner and Theobald, Calford Seaden, Ridge, Historic Royal Palaces, Purcell, Donald Insall Architects, Alan Baxter and Associates, Conisbee, and Price and Myers.

2 Purpose of asset assessment

This asset assessment is produced in response to the Cambridge Civic Quarter Design Consortium and Sir Robert McAlpine being tasked with advising the project duty holders (Cambridge City Council) regarding their options for a minimum scope of work to the Guildhall.

3 The asset

It is the observation of the Sir Robert McAlpine project team that the Guildhall is a deteriorating asset with a visible worsening of the building occurring during the currency of the Cambridge Civic Quarter Pre-Construction Services phase of the Cambridge Civic Quarter project.

Applying our experience and knowledge we would observe that the building has, like many heritage assets that have lost their original purpose, become underused and has a clear maintenance deficit with a corresponding number of visible defects.

The visible defects detract from the asset, they render elements of the asset unusable and, subject to comment from parties more qualified to comment, we would suggest that Cambridge City

Council seek formal opinion as to whether they can discharge their responsibilities as a landlord or as an employer to provide a workspace.

Many of the projects Sir Robert McAlpine are being engaged with reflect historic assets where there is a primary requirement for adaptive re-use with a principal driver being the creation of 'work space' which is attractive and welcoming. Typically, these schemes see the capitalisation of the heritage (which is a differentiator and presented well drives premium revenues) alongside the provision of enticing environments which aren't 'any office anywhere'. We are of the opinion that the Guildhall is sub-optimal accommodation and likely to have little market value as currently presented.

The co-located team's occupation of the Guildhall commenced in the south corner of the 3rd floor office accommodation. Following water ingress, this location was changed to the north corner. Since the relocation, the office adopted as the architect's space has suffered water damage and the loss of plaster finishes. Water ingress through the ceiling is also now evident in the team's designated meeting room next door. These instances could present a risk of injury to office users if the soffit finishes collapse during office occupation.

The investigations into the Guildhall to advise the design consortium would point to the extent of risk currently being carried by Cambridge City Council. Based on experience, Sir Robert McAlpine would anticipate that a minimum scope works will need to resolve these patent defects.

4 Key observations

i) At 3rd floor level there are repeated instances where water staining is evident. Our assessment is that the most likely cause, presuming integrity of roof finishes, is failed pointing on the façade. This is allowing driven rain to penetrate joints and to pass under the coping stones. Based on the observations in the north 3rd floor office this is causing corrosion to embedded soffit iron heating pipework. This is now perforated and leaking. The water damage has now impacted the parquet wood block floor which is both stained and lifting.

The compromised heating system is then acting as a further moisture source creating the active conditions for further corrosion of both the heating distribution pipework but also of physical elements of the building fabric.

The Guildhall is understood to be mass masonry with an embedded steel frame. If the King George VI building at Newcastle University (likewise a brick-clad steel frame building dating the early 1930s) is an indicator, then Cambridge City Council should be alert to the likely direction of travel that such water damage can promote. The maintenance deficit on such building can lead to 'Regent's Street' disease so named due to this being a prevalent issue on buildings of this age and construction style along this part of London. On the King George VI building the corrosion of the steel frame is causing expansion - the coefficients of expansion would be a matter Conisbee would be placed to advice CCC around - and the pressures are such that this is leading to a fracturing of the masonry. The rectification scope requires the façade to be opened to allow remedial works to the frame before the reinstatement of the masonry finishes. Recognising that not all corrosion or the

conditions creating corrosion can be eliminated this building will also be subject to a cathodic protection scheme. The capital costs of this remediation are understood to present challenges to the owner operation of this listed heritage asset.

ii) On Peas Hill, SRM have bought to the maintenance team's attention that elements of the façade are friable and that there are instances of falling masonry. Sir Robert McAlpine consider that Cambridge City Council will either have to undertake a remedial programme to the facades by way of a maintenance activity or may need to consider netting the building to preserve public safety.

iii) The most visible area of corrosion in the northern corner office of the 3rd floor has perforated the embedded heating coils in the office soffit. It is reasonable to suspect the other area of soffit staining present a less advanced but present condition. As with the 3rd floor office, there is a significant risk that the render and set ceiling finish will delaminate. Were an occupier to be beneath such an incident there would be a high likelihood of a personal injury event.

As practiced by all major venues following the collapse of the lathe and plaster ceiling at the Apollo Theatre in 2013 which injured 76 people Cambridge City Council, as a Landlord and a venue operator should be expected to have an inspection and maintenance regime to police the integrity of the ceilings to the large and small hall, to the Council Chamber and, based on the evidence of the 3rd floor, the office areas where water staining is present.

Without remediation, Sir Robert McAlpine would be concerned that Cambridge City Council would need to remove spaces from public or employee use.

iv) Investigation of the MEP services would observe that many of the installation are time-served and, we contemplate, outside of bounds of economic upgrade, maintenance or readily available spares. This is not uncommon on the heritage estate and is a primary mover for schemes of work from the Palace of Westminster or small private museums and galleries.

It is noted that the small power installation is not to current regulations and the corridor skirting sockets are inverted as they are too low to permit the insertion of a moulded 13 amp plug. There is limited evidence of periodic testing of systems potentially presenting Cambridge City Council with a challenge around their duties to any tenant or occupier.

The south lift call buttons have developed a fault within recent weeks.

The heating system - as evidenced by the 3rd floor office soffit - is compromised and were any repair contemplated, SRM experience is that this would be costly and the scheme of work should be expected to be impacted by discovery and unknowns.

Air systems are unlikely to conform to current standards around fire compartmentation and maintenance. From the track and trace processes to advise the PCSA, Cambridge City Council should be aware that there is potential for Asbestos Containing Materials to exist

within the air systems. Previous experience on the London heritage estate emphasises the likelihood of such occurrence.

The fire alarm panel on the 8th October was displaying 5 zones disabled. Three zones were in fault with the panel sounding the fault warning alarm

v) The Council Chamber slate roof, as visible from the east 3rd floor corridor, has both damaged tiles and evidence of potentially spalled masonry/render (from above?) lying in the gutter. There is a lateral line of 'tingle' repairs at least one of which has slipped. The north hip flashing has numerous broken slates suggesting it has been used as access to get to the externally of the glazed roof light. Should there be water ingress into the roof space above the chamber, the risk of damage to the ceiling is significant. The areas of damage could prove relevant to staining and discolouration visible within the chamber.

vi) Assessing external maintenance access, the Guildhall has sub-optimal access provision for periodic maintenance and inspection. There is a noticeable lack of latchway and fall restraint provision and where step overs and ladders are present, these do not appear part of an integrated access and maintenance strategy that would meet current Building Management/CDM obligations. It should not be presumed that parapets are affording compliant access.

vii) DDA compliance as a marketable asset, the building does not appear to be meeting the requirements expected of a modern cat A office offering.

viii) Fire doors and fire compartmentation appear to be 'of an age'. It is observed that the building appears neither as well-presented heritage (for which there is an appeal/premium) or as a 'workplace' targeting the post-Covid 19 challenges that mean the 'office' has to be a destination environment.

ix) Asbestos is known to be present. The extent will not be determined without the essential demolition and refurbishment survey which will require the invasive taking of samples and the removal finishes. The extent in the basement is such that Cambridge City Council have restricted access.

x) The Guildhall is a heritage asset. Cambridge City Council as the owner of the builder have accordingly established legal duties to maintain a heritage asset. Reputationally, Cambridge as the planning authority and regulatory party around conservation could find themselves creating precedent, or be subject to public scrutiny, for their actions around the Guildhall.

5 Conclusion

In summary, the Cambridge Guildhall is a deteriorating heritage asset with a backlog of maintenance. Evident issues suggest that the capital cost of remediation is increasing with precedent from similar structures suggesting the increasing costs of and complexity of remediation scopes will work against future 'return on investment models'. With time served MEP systems, it is for Cambridge City Council to satisfy themselves that they are discharging their

responsibilities as the owner of a listed asset and that they are able to discharge their landlords responsibilities to prospective tenants (should any wish to occupy such accommodation) or to their own staff (should they be prepared to return).