

Consultation Details

Consultee: Peter Thomas
Case Officer: Gareth Davies
Application No: P/25/0299
Application Type: Listed Building Consent
Site Address: The Synagogue Church Street Merthyr Tydfil CF47 0ER
Description of Works: Repair and restoration of the Grade II listed Synagogue and Grade II listed Primrose Hill to provide a Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre, with associated landscaping works on land to the north and east of the Synagogue, the erection of a bat roost house, plant enclosure and air source heat pump.
Grade: Synagogue (Grade II), Primrose Hill (Grade II)

Recommendation(s)

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|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No objection | <input type="checkbox"/> Notes for applicant |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Object (Holding objection) | <input type="checkbox"/> Request for further information |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Object and recommend refusal | <input type="checkbox"/> Recommend conditions |

Relevant Legislation and Policy Context

This consultation response has been prepared in the context of the duties placed upon the local planning authority by the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 ("TCPA 1990) and the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023 ("HEWA 2023).

Section 96(2) of the HEWA 2023

"In considering whether to grant listed building consent, a planning authority or the Welsh Ministers must have special regard to the desirability of preserving—

- (a) the listed building to which the application relates,
- (b) the setting of the building, and
- (c) any features of special architectural or historic interest the building possesses."

Section 314A(1) of the TCPA 1990

"In considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the Welsh Ministers or a local planning authority in Wales must have special regard to the desirability of preserving—

- (a) the listed building,
- (b) the setting of the building, or
- (c) any features of special architectural or historic interest the building possesses."

Section 160(1) of the HEWA 2023

"In exercising a planning function in relation to a building or other land in a conservation area, a person must have special regard to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area."

Note - this is the starting point for assessment of all applications relating to listed buildings and conservation areas

The above raises two primary questions:

1. Would the development affect the historic asset or its setting (and, if so, in what way and to what extent)? and,
2. Would the identified effect preserve (or enhance) the historic asset, in the context of the statutory duty to have special regard to the desirability of preserving it?

The Barnwell Manor Wind Energy Ltd Court of Appeal judgment in 2014 contains important findings which have direct implications for casework where a listed building or its setting is affected or where it involves a building or other land in a conservation area. It held that despite the slight difference in wording, the nature of the duty in relation to listed buildings and conservation areas is the same and that a decision-maker, having found harm to a heritage asset, must give that harm “considerable importance and weight”.

Your report should expressly acknowledge the need, if harm has been found, to give considerable weight to the presumption that preservation is desirable and demonstrate that this has been done. Otherwise, it would not reflect the duty under s314A TCPA 1990 or s161 HEWA 2023. How that balance will be performed will depend on the factors in the case, but it will always be important to recognise the special status which s314A TCPA 1990 or s161 HEWA 2023 confers upon the relevant relationship with heritage assets and conservation areas.

National Policy

National policy is provided in Planning Policy Wales (PPW) Edition 12, which sets out a presumption in favour of the conservation of the historic environment (Chapter 6). This is supplemented by Technical Advice Note 24: The Historic Environment (TAN 24), which requires that any harm to a listed building must be convincingly justified and that alterations must be the minimum necessary and avoid adverse impact on special interest (paras 5.11–5.15).

Relevant guidance from Cadw, including Conservation Principles and Managing Change to Listed Buildings, has been used to inform this assessment where appropriate.

Assessment of Significance

The application relates to The Synagogue and Primrose Hill, both Grade II listed buildings. The Synagogue was designated for its historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales. It is listed as the Merthyr Christian Centre but is referred to in the application as The Synagogue. No reason for the designation of Primrose Hill is given in the list description although it clearly has architectural character, shares group value with the synagogue and makes a positive contribution to the townscape.

The application is supported by comprehensive statements of significance for both buildings in line with Cadw's Conservation Principles. There is no reason to disagree with the findings of those statements.

Elements Affected by the Proposed Works

The proposed works will impact the following elements of the building and/or its setting:

- The later inserted floor within the main prayer hall is to be removed in order to reinstate the original double-height volume of the principal interior space.
- Sections of modern internal partitions and enclosures, largely dating from late-20th-century adaptations, are to be removed or reconfigured to allow clearer legibility of the historic layout and circulation.
- Historic internal wall and ceiling finishes are to be repaired, with areas of later cementitious or non-breathable finishes carefully removed and replaced with appropriate lime-based finishes.
- Existing windows where missing or altered are to be repaired or reinstated, including the replacement of inappropriate modern glazing with traditionally detailed units that match the historic fenestration pattern.

These elements contribute positively to the significance of the heritage asset.

Assessment of Impact

The application is comprehensive, proportionate and well evidenced. It demonstrates a clear understanding of the significance of the listed building. It is supported by a robust suite of heritage documentation, including a detailed Statement of Significance, Heritage Impact Assessment, condition surveys and clearly articulated proposals, all of which are consistent with Cadw's Conservation Principles and the requirements of the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023. The information provided enables a clear assessment of the impact of the proposals on the building's evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal values and demonstrates that potential harm has been carefully identified, justified and minimised.

During the design development process, multiple layout options were explored, with three distinct design approaches tested and evaluated to assess their implications for the historic fabric, spatial quality, functionality and long-term sustainability of the former synagogue. Each approach was informed by the project brief and underpinned by an understanding of the building's significance, with particular regard to conserving and revealing its principal spaces. The evolution of the scheme is clearly documented, demonstrating why certain options were discounted and how the preferred option emerged as the most balanced solution. The chosen layout is therefore not arbitrary, but the result of a careful, iterative and evidence-led process and the application provides a clear and convincing justification for the preferred option in terms of heritage impact, design quality and operational viability.

The proposed works have been assessed in relation to their impact on the significance of the listed building, taking into account the nature of the proposed intervention and the degree to which historic fabric or character is affected.

Works to the Synagogue

Main Exhibition Space

The proposals centre on the restoration of the former Prayer Hall as the principal Main Exhibition Space, reinstating its original two-storey volume with a three-sided 'U'-shaped balcony around a central void. Later inserted floor structures are removed to reveal the full height of the space and the roof structure above, restoring the dramatic spatial quality that historically defined the synagogue interior. While the space is no longer intended for worship, its layout, proportions and hierarchy deliberately echo the original Prayer Hall, creating a flexible interpretative environment for exhibitions, education, contemplation and events. New elements, including a reconstructed balcony, replica chandeliers, a replacement Ark and bespoke coloured leaded glazing, are introduced in a clearly contemporary yet respectful manner, allowing the historic form and significance of the space to be understood and appreciated.

External Doors

The formation of a new opening on the north elevation will result in a limited degree of harm through the alteration of historic masonry, however, this harm is localised, carefully controlled and mitigated by the use of an existing window opening and high-quality detailing. This minor harm is outweighed by the benefits arising from the reinstatement of the original window openings on the south elevation, which reverses a harmful later intervention and restores the historic architectural rhythm and evidential clarity of that elevation. In addition, the new opening provides a more appropriate, legible and inclusive access point, improving functionality, accessibility and the relationship between the principal interior space and its setting. Taken together, the proposals result in a neutral impact indicating a proportionate approach to managing change.

Works to the Front Range

The front range of the building is repurposed to accommodate entrance, reception and orientation functions, along with vertical circulation, including a new lift and reconfigured stair arrangement. This allows the front range to contain circulation, toilets, storage and ancillary services, freeing the main body of the building to function as a largely uninterrupted exhibition and activity space. Interventions within the front range are carefully planned to minimise loss of historic fabric while ensuring the building can operate as a fully accessible public facility.

Upper Ground Floor

The Upper Ground Floor (formerly the school room) is retained as a flexible space capable of supporting education, activity and community use. It complements the Main Exhibition Space by providing a secondary area suitable for group activities, workshops and learning, while maintaining clear visual and functional relationships with the rest of the building. Its use supports the wider educational and community objectives of the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre.

Structural Engineering Details

Structural interventions are primarily focused on enabling the removal of later inserted floors and supporting the reinstated balcony and open void within the Main Exhibition Space. These works are designed to be discreet and integrated within the historic fabric, ensuring the long-term stability of the building while allowing the original spatial form to be re-established. Any new structural elements are clearly legible as modern interventions and avoid unnecessary disturbance to significant historic fabric.

The Roof

No significant alterations are proposed to the roof form. The roof structure, including the historic timber trusses, is retained and revealed as part of the restored double-height exhibition space. Repairs are undertaken as necessary to ensure structural integrity and weather tightness, allowing the roof to continue to perform its historic function while contributing to the aesthetic and spatial quality of the interior.

Repairs

A comprehensive programme of repairs underpins the proposals. This includes the repair and conservation of historic fabric such as masonry, render, timber elements and decorative features, alongside the reinstatement or repair of windows with new coloured leaded glazing inspired by the building's Jewish heritage. Inappropriate later materials and finishes are removed where harmful and repairs are carried out using appropriate traditional materials and techniques. Collectively, these works stabilise the building, arrest decay and secure its long-term future as a nationally significant heritage asset.

Primrose Hill

The proposed drawings show a repair-led and largely like-for-like scheme focused on the conservation and maintenance of Primrose Hill House, with no substantial alterations. Works include the repair of cracks and defects to external render, particularly at ground-floor level, with defective cementitious or hollow render removed and replaced in a breathable lime-based finish, repainted to match the existing white and yellow colour scheme. Existing timber sash windows and doors at ground floor are to be carefully repaired, rubbed down and repainted, with localised splice repairs where required and the replacement of inappropriate modern glazing with slim-profile double glazing. Rainwater goods, soil and vent pipes are to be checked, repaired and re-set as necessary, with minor rationalisation of services and vents. At the rear and side elevations, blocked or altered openings are to be tidied and made good, historic openings restored where identified and modern interventions rationalised.

External Works

Front Entrance and Forecourt

The existing stone steps, retaining wall and piers to the front of the former synagogue are in very poor condition and structurally compromised due to root damage and long-term decay.

The proposals involve carefully dismantling the wall and piers down to step level, removing all invasive vegetation and rebuilding them accurately using the original stone. Decorative iron railings and historic-style iron lamp posts with copper heads are to be reinstated, restoring the ceremonial character of the entrance and enhancing the building's setting within the conservation area.

Side Access Routes and Steps

The long, steep stone steps and retaining walls on both sides of the building are to be retained and repaired in situ. Due to their construction and relationship with the building walls, full removal and rebuilding is not feasible or desirable. Instead, a programme of localised stone repairs, re-laying of damaged treads and landings, vegetation removal and stabilisation is proposed. Drainage pipes embedded within the steps are to be cleared and repaired, with sleeves introduced where necessary to improve long-term performance. A new controlled opening is formed in the north wall to provide access into the garden area.

Rear Steps and Retaining Structures

The rear steps and retaining wall are in a critical condition, having already required emergency shoring. Following extensive structural assessment, the preferred solution involves retaining the existing steps and wall (with previously removed upper courses) and encapsulating them behind a new retaining structure with a new slab formed above. This approach avoids wholesale demolition, minimises loss of historic fabric, improves safety and creates a usable upper-level platform capable of supporting a lightweight structure and plant equipment. Voids created within the retained structure are to be used as a compensatory bat hibernation roost, incorporating specialist ecological features.

New Garden to the North of the Synagogue

The land to the north of the building will become a terraced garden. The steep site is re-graded into a series of terraces linked by gently sloping paths, steps and ramps, creating accessible routes and areas for gathering, interpretation and quiet reflection. A central paved area is formed, focused on a newly planted Anne Frank horse chestnut tree, with retaining walls doubling as informal seating.

Primrose Hill Forecourt

The forecourt of Primrose Hill House is enhanced as a shared arrival and gathering space, reinforcing the visual and functional relationship between the house and the former synagogue. Boundaries are clarified and made secure, while historic features are retained and repaired. The forecourt functions as an important transitional space between Church Street and the heritage centre.

Boundaries, Access and Public Realm

Boundary walls and fences across the site are repaired or rationalised to improve security while respecting historic fabric and neighbour rights of way. The public highway frontage is

tidied and repaired, ensuring safe and legible access. Provision is made for discreet servicing and emergency access, with minimal visual impact.

Landscape and Sustainability

The landscape strategy adopts a contemporary but sensitive approach, conserving historic walls and steps while introducing new planting, biodiversity enhancements and sustainable drainage. Native and mixed species planting supports habitat creation, screens neighbouring properties and enhances seasonal interest. The external areas are conceived as integral to the visitor experience, supporting outdoor learning, events and community engagement while reinforcing the heritage significance and setting of the listed buildings.

Impact on the Conservation Area

The proposals will have a predominantly positive impact on the Thomastown Conservation Area. The former synagogue is identified as a key building of national importance within the conservation area and the scheme directly addresses long-standing issues of vacancy, dereliction and poor external condition that currently detract from the area's character and appearance. The comprehensive programme of repair, reinstatement and stabilisation will enhance the building's architectural presence and restore lost or degraded features, reinforcing its landmark role at the top of Church Street and strengthening the historic townscape.

The external works will improve the quality and legibility of the wider setting through the repair of historic steps and retaining walls, reinstatement of railings and lamp standards and the transformation of unmanaged and unsafe land into a coherent, designed landscape. These interventions will enhance the conservation area. Although some new structures and alterations are introduced, these are carefully sited, limited in scale and designed to be subordinate to the historic buildings. As a result, the proposals are considered to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area, in accordance with statutory duties and adopted conservation policy.

Summary of Impact on Significance

The proposals will have a largely positive impact on the evidential value of the building. The removal of later 20th-century insertions and non-breathable finishes will expose and safeguard earlier historic fabric, improving the ability of the building to provide physical evidence of its original construction, layout and use. Any loss of fabric is limited to elements of low evidential value and is justified by the need to arrest decay, improve understanding of the asset and enable appropriate repair. Overall, the proposals enhance the legibility of the building's historic development and do not result in the loss of primary evidential material.

The proposals will preserve and enhance historical value by reinforcing the building's ability to illustrate its original function, architectural intent and subsequent evolution. The reinstatement of key spatial qualities and the removal of incongruous later alterations allow the historic narrative of the building to be more clearly understood. By enabling a sustainable and publicly accessible use, the proposals also support the continued interpretation of the

building's historic associations, ensuring that its history remains an active and intelligible part of the site rather than a purely residual one.

The impact on aesthetic value is strongly positive. The proposals restore coherence to the building's architectural composition, proportions and internal volumes, which have been compromised by later interventions. Repairs using appropriate traditional materials will improve visual quality and material authenticity, while new interventions are designed to be subordinate and respectful. The overall effect is to reveal and reinforce the building's architectural character, both internally and in its setting, enhancing its contribution to the townscape and its appreciation as a landmark heritage asset.

The proposals will result in a significant enhancement of communal value. By securing the long-term future of the building and enabling continued community, educational and cultural use, the scheme strengthens the building's role as a shared social and cultural resource. Improved accessibility, legibility and use of both the interior and its setting will broaden public engagement with the building and its history. The proposals support inclusive narratives of heritage, reinforce local identity and pride and ensure that the building remains meaningful and relevant to present and future communities.

Having regard to the above considerations, the works are judged to preserve the special architectural or historic interest of the building.

Justification and Public Benefits

Justification

The justification for the external works is considered to be clear, robust and proportionate. The submitted evidence demonstrates that large parts of the external fabric, including steps, retaining walls and boundary structures, are in an advanced state of deterioration, with some areas already having required emergency stabilisation. A 'do nothing' approach is not feasible and would result in continued decay, loss of historic fabric and unacceptable risks to public safety. The proposals are informed by detailed structural, landscape and arboricultural assessments and adopt a conservation-led approach that prioritises retention and repair of historic fabric, with replacement or new intervention limited to what is necessary to secure stability, safety and long-term viability.

The works are also justified by the need to secure the sustainable future of the listed building and its setting as a publicly accessible heritage asset. The proposed repairs, reinstatement of historic features and creation of safe, legible and inclusive external spaces will enhance the setting of the building and enable it to function effectively as the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre. The scheme delivers clear heritage and public benefits through improved accessibility, interpretation and community use. Any limited harm arising from new structures or alterations is considered to be less than substantial and is outweighed by the public benefits and heritage gains achieved, in accordance with Cadw's Conservation Principles and a proportionate approach to managing change.

Public Benefits

The proposal delivers a range of clear and substantial public benefits. It secures the long-term conservation and sustainable reuse of a nationally significant listed building, preventing further deterioration and safeguarding an important part of Wales's Jewish and wider social history. By establishing the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre, the scheme provides new opportunities for education, interpretation and learning, including engagement with themes of migration, tolerance, faith and the Holocaust, thereby broadening public understanding of shared heritage.

The proposals significantly improve public access and inclusivity, both within the building and across its setting, through level access, safer routes and the creation of usable external spaces. The transformation of derelict land into a landscaped garden enables outdoor learning, reflection, events and community use, enhancing wellbeing and civic pride. In addition, the scheme improves public safety, enhances the character and appearance of the conservation area, supports cultural tourism and local economic activity and delivers biodiversity and environmental enhancements. Collectively, these outcomes represent substantial public benefits that clearly outweigh any limited and localised harm arising from the proposals.

Heritage Balance

Having considered the above, it is concluded that the proposals would result in a limited degree of harm to the special architectural and historic interest of the listed buildings, arising primarily from localised interventions to historic fabric and the introduction of new elements required to secure accessibility, safety and long-term use.

In accordance with section 314A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and section 96 of the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023, this harm has been afforded considerable importance and weight. However, it is considered to be clearly outweighed by the substantial public benefits of the scheme, including the repair and conservation of a nationally significant heritage asset, the reversal of harmful later alterations, improved accessibility and inclusivity, enhanced interpretation and understanding of Welsh Jewish heritage and the securing of a viable, sustainable future for the building.

On balance, the proposals are therefore considered to preserve the special architectural and historic interest of the listed buildings and the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The proposed works have been assessed in relation to their impact on the special architectural or historic interest of the listed building. In accordance with Technical Advice Note 24 and Planning Policy Wales, there is a presumption in favour of preserving listed buildings and their features of special interest.

The proposals are considered acceptable in heritage terms as they preserve the building's special interest.

Conditions

Prior to their installation, full details of all rainwater goods, including material, profile, finish, jointing and fixing method, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. All rainwater goods shall be cast iron (unless otherwise agreed) and installed in accordance with the approved details.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

No repointing shall be carried out until details of the proposed mortar mix (including binder type, aggregate, colour, texture and joint profile) and a sample panel have been submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. All pointing shall thereafter be carried out in accordance with the approved panel.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Notwithstanding the submitted plans and details, prior to commencement of lift installation works, full details of the lift design, including shaft construction, headroom arrangements, roof interface, finishes and any temporary or permanent alterations to historic fabric, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. The lift shall be installed in accordance with the approved details and shall not adversely affect the external appearance of the building.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Prior to the commencement of the relevant works, full details of all new and repaired stained glass windows, including design drawings, colour palette, lead profiles, glazing specification and method of installation, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. Works shall be carried out strictly in accordance with the approved details, with historic stained glass retained and repaired where feasible.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Prior to installation, detailed drawings and specifications for the proposed railings and lamp standards to the west elevation, including materials, profiles, fixings, finishes and lighting specification, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. The

railings and lamps shall be installed strictly in accordance with the approved details and shall replicate the historic form evidenced.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

A condition survey of all existing windows and doors shall be submitted to and approved in writing prior to commencement of the relevant works. Where repair is not feasible and replacement is proposed, full details of the replacement units, including material, profiles, glazing, opening method and finish, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. Replacement shall be on a like-for-like basis unless otherwise agreed in writing.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

All new stonework to the south elevation shall match the adjacent masonry in all respects and shall be laid in an appropriate lime-based mortar.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Prior to commencement, a detailed method statement and drawings for the formation of the new opening on the south elevation shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the planning authority. This shall include details of structural support, sequencing and the reuse of salvaged stone (including stone from the north elevation where proposed). Works shall be undertaken strictly in accordance with the approved method.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Details of ridge tiles, including profile, material, bedding method and proposed bat access features, shall be submitted to and approved in writing prior to installation. The ridge tiles shall be installed in accordance with the approved details and thereafter retained.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

All new balustrading to the stairs shall match the existing in terms of height, materials, profiles, fixings and finish.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.

In the event that any previously unknown historic fabric or archaeological remains are uncovered during the course of works, all work in the affected area shall cease and the local planning authority shall be notified immediately.

Reason:

To preserve the special interest of the listed building.