

FORMER SYNAGOGUE AND PRIMROSE HILL

HERITAGE IMPACT STATEMENT

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- Former Synagogue, Merthyr Tydfil - Heritage Assessment Appendices
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- Primrose Hill, Merthyr Tydfil - Heritage Assessment
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1.0 Introduction

In 2023, the Foundation for Jewish Heritage (the Foundation) appointed a team led by GWP Architecture to develop design proposals to develop a new Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre at the grade II listed derelict former Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, leading towards the submission of Planning and Listed Building Consent applications. In 2024, the commission was expanded to include the adjacent Primrose Hill House, also grade II listed.

The proposed development site comprises:

- The grade II listed Synagogue, dated 1875-77;
- The grade II listed Primrose Hill, dated 1850-52;
- The derelict land to the north of the Synagogue;
- The derelict land to the east of the Synagogue;
- The land between the Synagogue and Primrose Hill.

The Synagogue is currently unoccupied and in a partially derelict state; whilst Primrose Hill is in part use for residential flats, and part empty.

This Statement seeks to establish the historic development and heritage significance of the site, in order to inform the development of an appropriate heritage-led scheme for the site.

1.2 Authorship

This Heritage Impact Statement has been produced, on behalf of GWP Architecture, by Ashley Davies, an RIBA-accredited Specialist Conservation Architect, following visits to, and appraisals of, the site in between 2018 and 2025.

Ashley is also a Chartered Architect, a member of the RIBA Conservation Register National Steering Group; a Supporter of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation; has twice been the conservation specialist on the RIBA Regional Architecture awards panel; has lectured in 'Conservation Principles' at University; has presented at conferences on the theme of building conservation; and has appeared on a few television programmes talking about his passion for restoring historic buildings. He has undertaken several Building Conservation courses, including at SPAB and the RIBA. He has delivered dozens of heritage-led projects over his career involving the repair, restoration and adaptation of many grade I, II* and II listed buildings and Scheduled Ancient Monument.

In addition – and often, in parallel - Ashley has assessed and written over 150no. Historic Building Reports for over 95no. historic buildings and sites.

1.3 Who was Consulted

The following organisations and groups were consulted on, some participating in, the development of the Conservation Management Plan:

- Foundation for Jewish Heritage
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Neil Richardson (Project Manager)
- Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
- Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales
- Holocaust Educational Trust
- Dr Chris Clifford, Historian
- Dr Cai Parry-Jones, Author
- Architectural Heritage Fund
- Cultural Associates Oxford
- Headland Design Associates
- The Creative Core
- Almond Tree Consulting
- The Funding Centre
- Greenwood Projects
- Bronwen Thomas Landscape Architect
- Mann Williams
- Hydrock
- MEP Building Services Consultants
- Auditive
- IDACS

1.3 The Objectives of this Heritage Impact Statement

A Heritage Impact Statement must be submitted with any Listed Building Consent application and any Conservation Area Consent application.

The objective of the Listed Building Justification Statement (or Heritage Impact Statement) is to establish the historic development of the site and its setting, and provide an evaluation of the significance of the building and its context, to inform the development of an appropriate heritage-led scheme for the site. Planning Policy Wales 'Technical Advice Note 24: The Historic Environment', dated May 2017, states:

"5.12 Applicants for listed building consent are required to provide a heritage impact statement. This presents the results of a heritage impact assessment, which is a process designed to ensure that the significance of the building is taken into account in the development and design of proposals for change. Heritage impact assessments should be proportionate both to the significance of the listed building, and to the degree of change proposed, and the statement should provide enough information to allow the local planning authority to judge significance and impact when considering applications for listed building consent."

The Welsh Government's 'Heritage Impact Assessment in Wales' document has been used as a guide to preparing the Statement. This sets out the general principles to consider when planning changes to historic assets and applying for listed building, and states:

"Your heritage impact assessment should take into account sufficient information to enable both the significance of the asset and the impact of change to be understood."

"The basic stages of heritage impact assessment, whatever the size and scope of the project, are:

1. explaining your objective and why changes are desirable or necessary;
2. understanding the significance of your historic asset;
3. identifying your proposed changes;
4. assessing the impact of your proposals;
5. setting out the reasoning behind your preferred option, including your design concepts and principles, in the light of the assessment process.

Once you are clear about stages 1 and 2, stages 3, 4 and 5 may be repeated until you find the best proposal that meets your objective and has the maximum benefit for your historic asset."

1.4 The Structure of the Heritage Impact Statement

In line with the previously-mentioned guidance within the Welsh Government's 'Heritage Impact Assessment in Wales' document, this Heritage Impact Statement has been set out in six main sections with an Executive Summary.

- Section 1 explains the objective of the project and why changes are desirable or necessary.
- Section 2 - 'Understanding the Heritage' - seeks to summarise the key information known about the study location – its historical development and principal phases – through historical and architectural research.
- Section 3 - 'Understanding the Significance of the Historic Asset' - takes the form of a Statement of Significance, which involves appraisals based on the Evidential, Historical, Aesthetic and Communal Value of the heritage asset, drawn from what the 'Understanding the Heritage' research reveals.
- Section 4 identifies and explains the proposed changes to the heritage asset and its context.
- Section 5 assesses the impact of the proposals against the respective Values and Significances already established.
- Section 6 sets out the reasoning / justification behind the preferred option, including the design concepts and principles, in the light of the assessment process.

1.5 Policy Context

This Heritage Impact Statement has been prepared in the context of the Welsh Government and Merthyr Tydfil Listed Building policies. The policy context against which the Planning and Listed Building Consent applications must be determined, insofar as the heritage context is concerned, are as follows:

- Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990
[Paragraph 16(2) indicates that, in considering whether to grant listed building consent for any works, the local planning authority shall 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.]
- The Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023
- Planning Policy Wales – 12th Edition – February 2024
- Planning Policy Wales 'Technical Advice Note 24: The Historic Environment', dated May 2017
[Note: Previously important Welsh Office Circulars '60/96 Planning and the Historic Environment: Archaeology'; '61/96 Planning and the Historic Environment: Historic Buildings and Conservation Areas'; and '1/98 Planning and the Historic Environment: Directions by the Secretary of State for Wales' have all been superseded by TAN 24].
- Planning Policy Wales 'Technical Advice Note 12: Design', dated March 2016
- The Welsh Government Historic Environment Service's / Cadw's 'Heritage Impact Assessment in Wales' guidance document, dated May 2017.

2.0 SECTION ONE - THE OBJECTIVES FOR THE PROJECT

The proposed development site comprises:

- The grade II listed Synagogue, dated 1875-77;
- The grade II listed Primrose Hill, dated 1850-52;
- The derelict land to the north of the Synagogue;
- The derelict land to the east of the Synagogue;
- The land between the Synagogue and Primrose Hill.

The Synagogue is currently unoccupied and in a partially derelict state; whilst Primrose Hill is in part use for residential flats, and part empty.

The project seeks to develop a new Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre.

The Foundation states that

“the new Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre will convey the life and contribution of the Welsh Jewish community. We will tell the story of centuries of Jewish history within Wales. Our exhibitions will cover a myriad of subjects - from Jewish culture and values to the Jewish calendar and life cycle. We will also be looking at Jewish relations with wider society and examining the impact of world events including the Holocaust. We will preserve the stories of the past in order to play a meaningful role in society today.”

It goes on to states that

“the Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre will tell the stories of the Jewish community in Wales. We will have a series of permanent and temporary exhibitions in our museum, and we will develop educational programmes and curriculum resources to support these. We plan to offer arts and culture programmes linked to the Welsh Jewish story and migrant experience - including lectures and workshops, festivals and events. We'll also work with our local community to include them in our plans and will our building will be available to hire for functions and meetings.”

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is currently unoccupied and in a partially derelict state, growing worse with each year; whilst Primrose Hill is in part use for residential flats, and part empty, and is building up issues with damaged fabric, damp ingress and mould growth. The Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre would save both of these nationally listed buildings and give them a new life, directly connected to their old lives. Repairing them and restoring them is essential to achieving this.

Issues with anti-social behaviour in and around the former Synagogue have caused consternation to the local community for many years. This has also concerned the Police, who have included the site as a site of concern. Bringing the building and site back into use, giving it activity, lighting and security, and making it safe, would provide an enormous benefit and comfort to the local community.



3.0 SECTION TWO - UNDERSTANDING THE HERITAGE

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENTS ENTITLED:

SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - HERITAGE ASSESSMENT and

SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - HERITAGE ASSESSMENT APPENDICES and

SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - RECORD OF BUILDING AND CONDITION ASSESSMENT



**However, here is the EXECUTIVE SUMMARY from
the HERITAGE ASSESSMENT**

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was purpose-built for the Merthyr Tydfil Hebrew Congregation between 1876-7; the cornerstone laid by the Rev. A. L. Green, of London, in March 1876 and the opening and consecration ceremony conducted by the Rev. A. L. Green, of London, in June 1877. The synagogue was designed by Charles Taylor, a well-respected Merthyr architect with a penchant for the 'subdued Gothic Revival' style. The building was erected by John Williams, a local builder from Merthyr.

The Jewish population of Merthyr Tydfil first arrived in the late 1820s. The Industrial Revolution had a significant impact on Wales, with Wales often described as the world's first industrial nation, as by 1850 more people were employed in industry than in agriculture. The economy and society of Wales was transformed, and the evolution of Merthyr Tydfil in the 19th century epitomises this. Merthyr Tydfil's industrial expansion and resultant wealth attracted Jewish settlers and formed an important part of the history of Jews in Wales.

The first purpose-built synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil was at Victoria Street in 1848; it was only small and served a Jewish population of around forty. As Merthyr Tydfil expanded, so did its Jewish population. Facilities at Victoria Street became unsatisfactory with a second purpose-built synagogue opening on John Street in 1853. By the early 1870s the John Street synagogue had become too small for its congregation and an appeal was issued to raise funds for a new building.

This third purpose-built Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built on land that was the freehold property of the Court Estate, leased to the trustees for 99 years. The congregation raised the funds by way of donations and a mortgage. The synagogue opened in 1877 in what was described as "one of the most interesting ceremonies ... ever witnessed here" such was the level of interest that admission was by ticket only so that the synagogue did not become overcrowded.

The Jewish Collegiate School within the building opened in 1878 with a classroom designed to accommodate up to 60 children.

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was highly noticeable and very much in the public eye, with its roadside setting "in one of the most pleasant and commanding sites in Merthyr, namely, on the top of Church-street". The building had a striking appearance; with a gabled and double-turreted front, and red Welsh dragon perched on the gable. Its location at the top of hilly Church Street made it highly visible within Thomastown. Its visibility and individuality provide proof of the position the Jewish community once held within Merthyr Tydfil.

The synagogue was an important reflection of the wealth, position in society and degree of acceptance that Jewish settlers achieved in Merthyr Tydfil.

Following Jewish emancipation in 1858, the synagogues built across Europe had become grand and prominent symbols of Jewish presence in a town or city. This is true of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue with its distinctive architectural style, and prominent and highly visible location at the top of Church Street.

Historic newspapers from 1876 and 1877 describe Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue as being "of an imposing character", in a style that "is ancient gothic" and that "the edifice which fronts Church-street presents a commanding appearance from that street". Its Listed Building details describe it as built in the "heavy Northern Gothic style". Whilst the book 'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland' (p.90) by Sharman Kadish describes it as "a double-turreted Disney-world Gothic folly of a synagogue".

Its architect, Charles Taylor (1842-1919), was not well-known nationally but would have been well-known locally, as he both lived and worked in Merthyr Tydfil. His personal taste for neo-Gothicism, which was highly fashionable at the time, was incorporated into his designs for local schools such as Penydarren and Twynyrodyn.

Gothic Revival was the preferred architectural style of the Christian Church and especially the Church of England. As such, Jews in England and Scotland viewed the Gothic Revival style as being inherently Christian and English and avoided it when building their synagogues. This self-imposed ban didn't seem to exist in Wales and Ireland. In Wales, this might be explained by the popularity and tolerance of Nonconformist religions, and the widespread use of the Gothic style from the 1870s when building Welsh chapels; Welsh chapel architecture reflecting 'subdued Gothic' with pointed arched windows and doorways; this style often replicated at Welsh synagogues such as Pontypridd and Llanelli.

'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland' by Sharman Kadish says that "In the nineteenth century, Romanticism was fashionable in Wales" suggesting that design inspiration possibly came from nearby Castell Coch. Its architect, William Burges (1827-81) would have been seen as one of the leading architects in South Wales during this period; his Gothic Revival designs at both Cardiff Castle and Castell Coch significantly influencing the architecture of late 19th century South Wales.

Although the architecture of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is described as Gothic, there are also elements which could be interpreted as 'Oriental' in style; 'Orientalism' being popular for synagogue architecture in the second half of the 19th century. Domes, turrets and minarets were architectural elements adopted by 'Orientalism'. Merthyr Tydfil's Synagogue features a tripartite façade with turrets. Architectural theorists have said that a tripartite front imitates the appearance of the Temple of Solomon, whilst the use of a pair of turrets is reminiscent of the portal columns at the entrance to this temple named in the Book of Kings as Yahin and Boaz, symbolising stability and strength.

The building operated as a synagogue until the late 1970s and was sold in 1983. It was subsequently used as a Christian Centre and then a gym. A floor was added where the Ladies Gallery used to be in the main sanctuary space when building was used as a gym; this being the only significant structural change to the building. By 2004, the building was no longer in use and remained unoccupied with its condition rapidly deteriorating to the extent that it became formally classified as being at risk. The Foundation for Jewish Heritage purchased the building in 2019 and carried out urgent repairs.

Its exterior has hardly changed except for the loss of some windows and its iron railings and lamps. Its red Welsh dragon is still in situ, albeit missing a wing. Although no longer a functioning synagogue, it is not hard to imagine how the building would have looked to its arriving congregation. Sadly, its interior has not fared so well. Most of its religious artefacts were removed for use in other synagogues or donated to Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. The Ladies Gallery was removed, and a floor added, when the building operated as a gym.

The considerable remains of the synagogue with its original Victorian Gothic Revival façade provide the primary evidence for when and how the historic asset was built, and what it was used for. There are good visual records available; primarily of the synagogue and its western front elevation, showing how it looked when first built, in a photo from c.1904. Also, a large body of photographs from 1978, before the synagogue closed, showing how it looked internally before most of its religious artefacts were donated and the Ladies Gallery removed. There is also a set of plans and elevations drawn at around that same time by three students of the Welsh School of Architecture.

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is grade II listed "primarily for historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales." The synagogue is located within the 'Thomastown Villas' character area of the Thomastown Conservation Area. The synagogue is referred to as a "key building" within that character area. The synagogue is also referred to as a "key site with national importance" within the 'Assessment of Special Interest' section of the 'Thomastown Conservation Area – Character Appraisal and Management Plan (July 2014)'.

A historic asset might be associated with a notable family or person. This is true of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, the most famous name associated with it being the Sherman family. Abe Sherman (1892-1965) and his wife Anne lived at Park Lodge, just up-the hill from the synagogue and were long-term members of the congregation. There are stories that his grandmother regularly used Merthyr's mikvah in the 1920s, when the Sherman family lived in nearby Dowlais. The famous painter L.S. Lowry (1887-1976) has recently become associated with Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue following the sale of his painting of this synagogue at Christie's auction house in 2022, selling for £277,000. His painting of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue (1960) features some of his famous matchstick characters.

4.0 SECTION TWO - UNDERSTANDING THE HERITAGE

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENTS ENTITLED:

PRIMROSE HILL, MERTHYR TYDFIL - HERITAGE ASSESSMENT and

PRIMROSE HILL, MERTHYR TYDFIL - HERITAGE ASSESSMENT APPENDICES and

PRIMROSE HILL, MERTHYR TYDFIL - RECORD OF BUILDING AND CONDITION ASSESSMENT



However, here is the EXECUTIVE SUMMARY from the HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

Primrose Hill is located at the north-east end of Church Street, at the point that the road turns southwards and becomes Brynteg Terrace. It is within the 'Thomastown Conservation Area' which was originally designated in 1978, in recognition of its historical and architectural quality. This Conservation Area is located to the east of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre, on a steep slope, with impressive views across the town and the valley. The Thomastown area is named after Dr William Thomas (1794-1858), who was a local magistrate in the early 1800s and owner of the land on which this middle-class residential area was built.

To the south-east of the site is Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, set dramatically against a dense section of woodland, with Brynteg Terrace and housing such as Springhill Villa, Bryn Heulog and Sunny Bank Villas to the south. To the east and north of the site is Thomastown Park. To the north are the attached rear buildings, garden and Primrose Cottages beyond; with Union Street (Upper) to the north-west and the sloping hill of Church Street to the west, leading down to the Town Centre.

Until the mid-18th century, Merthyr Tydfil had been sparsely populated with farming and livestock forming the main economy. Then abundant deposits of iron ore, coal and limestone were discovered, making it an ideal location for the relatively new iron industry that was leading Britain's Industrial Revolution. The industrial explosion in Merthyr Tydfil created pockets of wealth amongst the higher classes of society. This was reflected in the development of middle-class residential areas such as Thomastown; believed to contain one of the largest groups of late Georgian and early Victorian style buildings in Wales and to be one of the first purpose-built residential suburbs in Merthyr Tydfil. The richest residents commissioned individually designed detached and semi-detached Villas in the spacious and wooded surroundings of eastern Thomastown.

Primrose Hill is grade II listed and located just within the 'Thomastown Villas' character area of the 'Thomastown Conservation Area', on the border with the 'Georgian Thomastown' character area. The Classical front elevation of Primrose Hill sits comfortably alongside the Georgian-style terraced houses of Church Street, Thomas Street and Union Street to the west, as well as the elegant individually designed detached and semi-detached Villas to the south-east. Primrose Hill is referred to as a "key building" within the 'Thomastown Villas' character area.

Primrose Hill was built between 1850 and early 1852, although its architect is not known. Historic map research showed that the building did not exist on the 1850 Tithe Map, with a reference to Primrose Hill first being found in the 'Cardiff & Merthyr Guardian – Saturday 06 March 1852'. The newspaper featured an advert for "**MERTHYR GRAMMAR SCHOOL, PRIMROSE HILL, CONDUCTED BY MR. JAS. KERNICK.**". The advert was for a fee-paying establishment for "Young Gentlemen", where they would receive "a good Practical Education", and that boarders were accepted. A build date of 1850 to early 1852 makes sense given the spate of construction work taking place in that part of Thomastown during that period.

The building can be seen on the '1873 Ordnance Survey Town Plan (published 1875)' and '1868-75 Ordnance Survey Map 6-inch (published 1885)' under the name '**Primrosehill House**'. The detail on the 1873 Town Plan shows us that the building was L-shaped and consisted of three attached rectangular buildings, one building to the front running east to west, with two attached buildings at right angles to this front building. To the north of these rear buildings were several smaller outbuildings, some connected to these main buildings. Further north was a large garden, and beyond that, two additional attached buildings marked up as Primrose Cottage.

The sale by auction details in the 'Merthyr Telegraph – Saturday 28 May 1859' for '**Primrose Hill Academy**', as the school was then known, said:

"All that newly built and well arranged Leasehold Detached MESSUAGE or DWELLING-HOUSE, SCHOOLROOM, and PLAYGROUND, known by the name of '**Primrose Hill Academy**', in the occupation of Mr. James Kernick, the Proprietor, containing Parlour, Drawing Room, Library, Kitchen, Back Kitchen, China Pantry, and several Bedrooms.

"The House stands in a most healthy situation; the Rooms are lofty and spacious, replete with every convenience and finished in a very substantial manner; both internally and externally, the proprietor having spared no pains in making these premises well adapted for a superior Boarding School.

"Also, TWO COTTAGES in the rear of the above, and at the extreme end of the Playground, in a forward state of completion, and nearly ready for occupation.

"This Property is held under a lease for 99 years from the 1st day of November, 1851, at the moderate Ground Rent of £10 19s. per annum."

The building started life as a school for boys with many changes of name and headmaster between 1852-98. Subsequently it was a private residence, becoming a Modern Guest House in 1940. In the mid-20th century, ownership of these three attached rectangular buildings must have been broken up and the buildings converted into flats. Our site, Primrose Hill, being only the front rectangular building with entrance facade looking south onto Church Street. The site is currently subdivided into five flats.

In 1946, **Primrose Hill Guest House** had been offered for sale by public auction. The advert in the 'Merthyr Express – 23 March 1946' described the property as:

"This is a large double-fronted house with lawn in front, having the following accommodation: Large lounge, dining-room, 2 reception room (now used as bedrooms), kitchen and larder on ground floor; 4 bedrooms and 2 bed-sitting-rooms, with 2 bathrooms and 2 lavatories on first floor, 4 bedrooms on second floor. Also attached to house (with separate entrance) is a large room, now used as a storeroom. There are 2 staircases (main) one at front of house and servants' staircase at rear. Large gardens, etc., mostly cultivated, at rear and side of house (about $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of land), electric light throughout.

"VACANT POSSESSION ON COMPLETION.

N.B. – This Guest House is now run by the Misses Grant and Farmer and gives an excellent opportunity to purchasers who wish to obtain a successfully run Guest House, and if desired the Furniture be purchased at valuation. The property could also be used as a Residence, a Social Centre or converted Into Flats."

These changes of use will have involved many internal adaptations. Our site, Primrose Hill now consists of three full storeys plus a half lower ground floor / basement. However, its principal front elevation onto Church Street still retains its original Classical-style façade in keeping with the housing style of the original area. This elevation has an attractive, pale, smooth rendered, symmetrical appearance with large timber sash windows and central, simplified pilastered doorcase. The building has an enclosed front forecourt with right hand gate piers and benefits from a backdrop of mature trees.

Few, if any, original internal features remain within Primrose Hill, due to the many changes of use over the time. It is possible that the lobby and entrance corridor, accessed via the front door, retain their original layout. It is also possible that the staircase is the original front staircase; the 1946 sales details referring to "2 staircases (main) one at front of house and servants' staircase at rear".

Whilst Primrose Hill has changed use over the years, and many original internal features have been lost, it still looks much as it did externally when first built, especially when viewed from the front. Any changes have not destroyed its history and value. Through education, it has influenced lives and contributed to the economy of Merthyr Tydfil. It has a role to play in illustrating life in a fashionable residential suburb during the Victorian and Edwardian eras in industrial Wales; it helps demonstrate how industrialisation brought dramatic changes to small Welsh towns like Merthyr Tydfil; and how a previously smart and prosperous neighbourhood declined along with their industries.

Primrose Hill would have been a source of social, economic and spiritual value as well as emotional links and shared memories during its time as a school, private residence, guest house and flats; borne by its pupils, headmaster, teachers, parents, residents, servants and visitors. Also, to the community who lived nearby and experienced the building as part of their day-to-day life, maybe walking past on their way home or to Thomastown Park.

As a result, Primrose Hill is considered to possess:

- Medium Historical Value;
- Medium Evidential Value;
- Medium Aesthetic Value, insofar as the exterior is concerned, and Medium to Low Aesthetic Value insofar as the interior is concerned;
- Medium Communal Value.

5.0 SECTION THREE - STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENTS ENTITLED:

SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE and
PRIMROSE HILL, MERTHYR TYDFIL - STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE



6.0 SECTION FOUR - EXPLANATION OF THE PROPOSALS - FORMER SYNAGOGUE

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENT ENTITLED:

FORMER SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - THE PROPOSALS



7.0 SECTION FOUR - EXPLANATION OF THE PROPOSALS - PRIMROSE HILL

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENT ENTITLED:

PRIMROSE HILL, MERTHYR TYDFIL - THE PROPOSALS

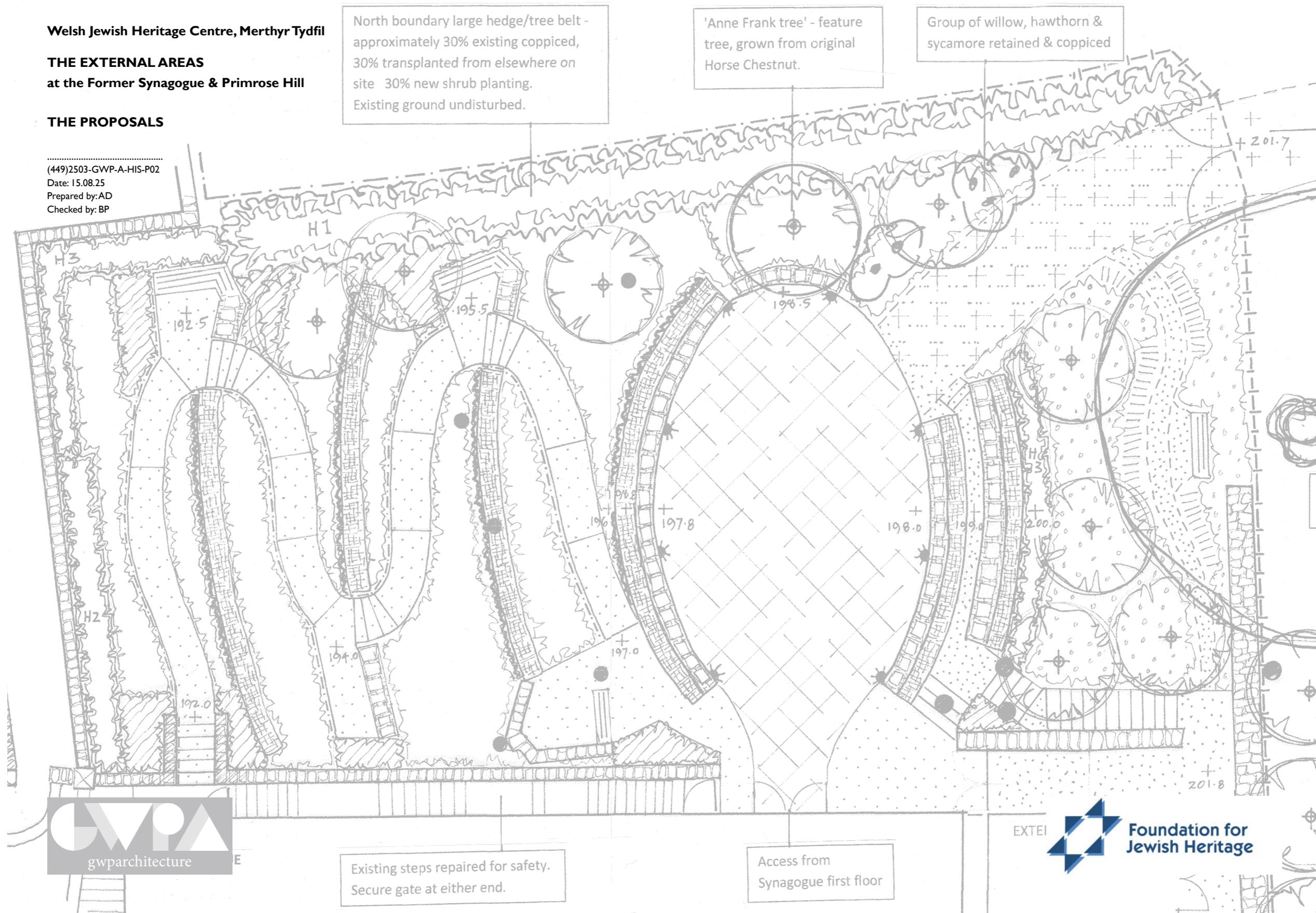


8.0 SECTION FOUR - EXPLANATION OF THE PROPOSALS - THE EXTERNAL AREAS AT THE FORMER SYNAGOGUE & PRIMROSE HILL

For this section,

PLEASE REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENT ENTITLED:

THE EXTERNAL AREAS AT THE FORMER SYNAGOGUE & PRIMROSE HILL - THE PROPOSALS



9.0 SECTION FIVE – ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

9.1 Statement of Impact on the Context and Setting

In every respect, the proposals would have achieve a very beneficial impact on the site's context and setting.

The Former Synagogue is derelict and worsening in condition over time. It is a very significant building in heritage terms, being the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales. It sets the scene for this part of the town and is a very important focus within the 'Thomastown Conservation Area'. To lose it would be awful. However, without a viable use, this is likely to happen. The proposed Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre would provide this use perfectly.

The Synagogue is a prominent building at the top of Church Street, with an iconic front façade. The proposals seeks to fully restore the building fabric and, hence, improve the view up the hill towards the building. However, even more than this, the proposals involve the restoration of the original view, but reinstating the lost decorative iron railings on top of the front wall to the steps and the iron lamp posts with copper heads on the two inner pillars.

Beyond its heritage significance, the building has become the scene of anti-social behaviour over a number of years. This is partly due to its context – two sets of narrow steps rise either side of the building and lead up to a rear which is overlooked by no one. As a result, it has been the site of years of anti-social behaviour, which has also meant vandalism and illegal entry to the Synagogue itself. The local public are distinctly unhappy about this, as are the Police. Bringing the building back into use, making it active and providing security to the area (not least, limiting access to these unsecure areas), would have a huge impact on addressing this anti-social behaviour, and significantly improving the feel of the area and the comfort of the residents.

Primrose Hill House does not suffer from quite the same dereliction as the Former Synagogue; however, its condition is worsening due to limited upkeep; a situation its new use would resolve.

Between the Former Synagogue and Primrose Hill House, the land has been left to its own devices for decades, and it is now derelict and significantly overgrown, with the tree canopy damaging the roof of the Synagogue and the trees themselves almost all in a poor condition. The proposals seek to control this overgrowth and provide a new external space for activity, engagement and contemplation. The garden would become part of the wider community itself and the views towards it would be vastly improved.

9.2 Statement of Impact on the Exterior

The proposals seek to repair and restore all aspects of the Synagogue building exterior:

- Its masonry walls have been re-pointed in the past with cement; which the proposals seek to reverse, applying a suitable lime mortar instead.
- Its crumbling and unsafe entrance steps and retaining wall would be relieved of the buddleia roots prising the stonework apart and repaired like-for-like; whilst, as stated, replica decorative iron railings would be reinstated, along with the iron lamp posts with copper heads on the two inner pillars.
- The collapsing rear steps and retaining wall – currently not only unsafe, but in danger of damaging the building – would be stabilised, albeit not removed, being part of the heritage asset.
- Its roof is in a very poor condition and, whilst some holes were filled in 2020, it is again letting in water; which the proposals seek to address, whilst also ensuring the restored roof is vapour-permeable, which the current is not.
- Its beautiful coloured leaded windows have almost all been lost, to time and vandalism; and the proposals seek to bring back the beauty and drama that they once had; however, this time using a specialist glass artists to provide a more contemporary interpretation of the Synagogue in its new role as the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre.
- Its leaning gable front and finial would be stabilised; whilst its characterful terracotta 'Welsh Dragon' overlooking the town for about 150 years would be repaired.
- The Hebrew writing above the front door, almost completely lost, would be reinstated.

9.3 Statement of Impact on the Interior

All of the internal character, aesthetic and features of the former Synagogue have been lost. Historic photographs provide an appreciation for what it used to look like; but that is no more. The proposals would bring back the form, appearance and much of the character of the original Prayer Hall. However, this will not be a Synagogue, but a Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre accessible to the whole community; and therefore the space would provide a character and aesthetic more in keeping with its new, contemporary use. It would echo the Synagogue and help to show people what the Prayer Hall looked like and felt like; and it would do so in as honest a way as possible. For someone to stand in the new space with the three-sided balcony wrapping around them, looking at photos of what the Prayer Hall used to look like, would be an amazing feeling. This would be a restoration drawing upon the essence of the 150 year old space but in a way which works for the now.

- The three-sided balcony would appear much as the original did, but built in a more contemporary, more efficient way.
- A replacement Ark would replace the lost Ark, located in existing the same spot.
- The new artist-designed coloured leaded glass windows would provide much the same dynamic and beautiful light that once flooded into the Prayer Hall.
- The replica chandeliers would provide these decorative objects which used to float in the middle of the space.

Whilst the main space would involve bringing back the feature of the Prayer Hall, the front range must work hard to provide access and amenities to all users.

- It inserts a lift; which it does so by making use of what was the basement of the Synagogue and using the level access from the street that it provides.
- It reconfigures the staircase, moving it all to one bay so that the lift can fit. However, it would do so by reflecting back to the original staircase, particularly in its re-use of the thick trefoil relief pointed newel posts, trefoil pattern baluster infills and heavy moulded handrails.
- It installs some toilets and a cleaner store in the same location where the original toilets, and drainage, were.
- It also seeks to 'reveal' the hidden Mikvah in the basement and provide access to and interpretation of it to the public.

Part of the ground floor of Primrose Hill is in very poor state, badly impacted by damp ingress. The proposals seek to address that, and avoid it happening again.

Where the proposals for Primrose Hill do result in some loss – the removal of part of both walls flanking the entrance lobby / corridor – with the retained downstand and nibs, they do ensure that open is still able to 'read' these walls and still appreciate that there were three separate spaces.

9.4 Impact on Heritage Values

9.4.1 Impact on Historical Value

The aspiration to provide a Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre in the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales is a perfect way of restoring, retaining, interpreting and celebrating its historical value to the wider community; not just the Jewish community, but everyone, especially young people encouraged to learn about the Jewish faith and all other faiths. Given that fact that the building has not for 42 years, nor will any longer, provide a place for the Jewish faith to worship, one could not find a better way to preserve its historical values than this.

The Centre would tell the stories about the Synagogue, about the Jewish faith, about Merthyr Tydfil and Wales; and, in so doing, develop the heritage value of the building even further than it has probably even been. This is an opportunity to turn a derelict building into a beacon for story-telling and celebration. Its impact on the Synagogue's historical value could be significant.

Indeed, during the time that the project has been discussed, the Foundation has reached out to hundreds (even thousands) of people to seek stories, artefacts, imagery etc to present. Even more, however, it has engaged with so many people that communities are being re-built around the concept of this Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre. The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was the instigator for this and its renaissance is vital to the further development of these communities and the further engagement between Jewish communities and all other communities.

9.4.2 Impact on Evidential Value

So much of the original internal fabric has been lost. Its balcony, Ark, pews, bema, coloured glazing, chandeliers, Mikvah tiling, basins etc have all been lost. Its walls plaster has been replaced with something unsuitable; its ceiling has been replaced with something unsuitable; its floors have been replaced. Much of this internal evidential value has been lost and, therefore, the proposals do not result in any detrimental impact. However, through photographs and an appreciation of what used to be there, bringing back much of these features, albeit in new fabric apart from the alternative Ark, can only be a good thing.

Externally, the solid stone walls remain very much unchanged in 150 years, apart from the addition of cement pointing. These would be subject to little impact, apart from the benefit of the removal of this cement pointing and its replacement with lime.

The ground floor of Primrose Hill House would be subject to some loss of evidential value. The loss of some walls to the rear which currently form toilets and kitchens is not deemed too detrimental, not least as they are unlikely to be original. However, the loss of part of the two walls flanking the entrance lobby / corridor, which are thought to be original, would be a loss.

Given, however, that it is so important for the use of the building to now have a large, open space for communal use on entering the building, the proposals to retain downstands and nibs, so that the form of the wall is still apparent, is some mitigation to their loss.

In removing trees to the derelict woodland, evidential value would be lost; however, the condition of these trees, and the damage they are causing the Synagogue, make this an understandable loss.

9.4.3 Impact on Aesthetic Value

As stated, the Synagogue is derelict and falling into further disrepair with every year. It, and the site, are the subject of ongoing anti-social behaviour, including graffiti and vandalism. The interior has lost all of its original character and most of what made it such a special place. Indeed, the interior has, for some while, been the home to pigeons and anti-social behaviour. The derelict land to the north is in a poor condition and is unsafe. The external and internal finishes to Primrose Hill are falling into disrepair, with a particular issue being the damp and mould through some on the internal spaces.

The proposals seek to address all of these matters.

- The repair of the building fabric, including the reinstatement of lime mortar for cementitious mortar and the re-covering of the roof with natural Welsh slate would significantly improve its aesthetic value.
- The replacement of the broken windows with new artist-designed coloured leaded windows would provide a huge lift to the aesthetic value of the building.
- The reinstatement of the lost decorative iron railings on top of the front wall to the steps and the iron lamp posts with copper heads on the two inner pillars; the repair of the terracotta dragon; the reinstatement of the Hebrew text above the front door would all add to its aesthetic value.
- Reinstating the balcony, Ark, chandeliers and windows to the previous Prayer Hall would hugely improve its aesthetic value from the blank spaces currently separated by a plywood floor. Making the space similar to the old Prayer Hall, but brighter and more contemporary would add to that value.
- The new garden, designed for enjoyment, learning and contemplation would be a significant improvement to the overgrown and untidy land it is at present.
- Improving the external and internal appearance of Primrose Hill by seeking to address the issues with damp ingress, mould and cracking would also be beneficial.

9.4.4 Impact on Communal Value

As stated, issues with anti-social behaviour in and around the former Synagogue have caused consternation to the local community for many years. This has also concerned the Police, who have included the site as a site of concern. Bringing the building and site back into use, giving it activity, lighting and security, and making it safe, would provide an enormous benefit and comfort to the local community.

The project draws upon an opportunity to truly share with everyone the essence of the Jewish faith and its history and stories; and to celebrate all cultures, nations and religions through a Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre, whose heart would be within the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales. The engagement would be with anyone and everyone; however, there would be a strong focus on young people, through known school programmes, which are already being discussed and developed. The impact this engagement would have with the local, regional, national and international community could be very significant indeed. In this respect, the communal value of the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, currently lost, would be thoroughly restored.

The issues with the damp and mould within Primrose Hill are of health concern. To address those would clearly benefit anyone occupying the building.

10.0 SECTION SIX – JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PROPOSALS

- The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is currently unoccupied and in a partially derelict state, growing worse with each year; whilst Primrose Hill is in part use for residential flats, and part empty, and is building up issues with damaged fabric, damp ingress and mould growth. The Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre would save both of these nationally listed buildings and give them a new life, directly connected to their old lives.
- Issues with anti-social behaviour in and around the former Synagogue have caused consternation to the local community, and Police, for many years. Bringing the building and site back into use, giving it activity, lighting and security, and making it safe, would provide an enormous benefit and comfort to the local community.
- In every respect, the proposals would have achieve a very beneficial impact on the site's context and setting. Both the Synagogue and Primrose Hill are very significant buildings in heritage terms, the Synagogue being the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales. They set the scene for this part of the town and are very important focusses within the '*Thomastown Conservation Area*'. To lose either, especially the Synagogue, would be awful. However, without a viable use, this is likely to happen. The proposed Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre would provide this use perfectly.
- The vision is for the main space within the Synagogue – which used to be its Prayer Hall, but is now sub-divided by a modern plywood floor and has lost all of its character, essence and features – to be restored and, once again, given pride of place within the building. The 'restoration' would not replicate the former Prayer Hall completely, but would use its volume, form, layout, features and details as the basis for a more contemporary space in which to present, interpret and celebrate the essence and history of the Jewish faith and all other faiths, religions and nationalities.
- Much consideration was put into whether the lost windows should be replaced like-for-like or replaced with a more contemporary and exciting version. Were the building to be restored as a Synagogue, honest replication might have been better here; but, as a new, modern Heritage Centre, the idea of a modern twist on the coloured, leaded windows was felt to be more suitable.
- The proposals focus primarily on the honest repair and restoration of the fabric of the buildings. In several cases, they seek to remove ill-advised interventions and repair with materials more suited to the building's construction and history. Such examples include replacing cementitious mortar with lime mortar; gypsum plaster with lime plaster; impermeable roofing membranes with vapour-permeable roofing membranes and insulation.
- The proposals seeks to reinstate the lost decorative iron railings on top of the front wall to the steps and the iron lamp posts with copper heads on the two inner pillars; repair of the terracotta dragon; and reinstate the Hebrew text above the front door. The proposals would also reinstate the balcony, Ark, chandeliers and windows to the previous Prayer Hall.
- The proposals for addressing the poor quality of the derelict land to the north and providing a special garden affiliate to the Centre – for learning, engagement and contemplation – would provide a great facilities. Placing a sapling from the Anne Frank tree in the garden would bring the area its own spiritual quality.
- The proposals for addressing and stabilising the collapsing rear steps and retaining wall – currently not only unsafe, but in danger of damaging the building – would ensure that it is retained as part of the heritage asset; but made safe.
- Primrose Hill House is under-used and, inside one of the flats, poorly maintained. The proposals should give it more consistent use; however, also use which would sit very well against its neighbour, the Synagogue. The proposals will provide opportunity to address some of the worst issues with cracking finishes, moisture ingress and mould growth; and hence address concerns over the health of occupants.

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