

Fleetville Community Centre New Building Project

NB28 Dealing with the Archaeology

One question with, so far, no definitive answer has been that of the WW2 air raid shelters below the Community Centre building, and, by default, the building itself.

The history

In 1938 the City Council dug trenches parallel to Royal Road for the public caught out of doors in an air raid. The County Council excavated shelters at right angles to the road (these are the ones it is still possible to identify as parch marks in the grass on the rec in dry summers). They were brick lined in 1939/40 and covered with a concrete slab, lit and heated. In 1942 the Centre building arrived in sections and was placed on the concrete slab. The ramp which led down from the pavement to steel door entrances, remained visible until the front of the site was levelled for car parking.

Whatever we may choose to do with the site at its redevelopment, we have to contend with the existing building and the shelters, if for no other reason that the shelters may affect future foundations.

I therefore sought to remove some of the uncertainty by asking the Council's District Archaeologist, Simon West, an introductory question: *Is the Archaeology Department likely to take a professional interest in the site because the shelters remain under it, albeit the entrances being blocked by the car park?*

The structures

Simon and I met for a detailed on-site discussion, on June 13th 2016, about the issues which are likely to be important. The term 'structures' covers both the shelters below and the surface building, including the two surface shelters (the brick structures at the ends). His initial emailed answer was: *There is archaeological interest in such structures for a variety of reasons. Under Planning, any application would need to take account of the structure, and as an heritage asset in the historic environment it will be a material consideration. Depending on the level of significance of the structure and the proposed impact of any development, it may create a need to consider appropriate, reasonable and proportionate mitigation works.*

On site, and having seen the documentary, map and photographic evidence, as well as the layout and structure, it was decided that the WW2 structures

are indeed important enough for Archaeology to place mitigation conditions on any planning decisions.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the structures need to be retained, and Archaeology has no power to insist on it; only that a good quality and detailed record should be made before redevelopment works take place. Of the building, these were commonly found utility buildings put up for a specific emergency purpose; there are fewer of them left today, and in the FCC building we have the opportunity to make a full record of the site for future research, and before it is demolished, if that is what we intend to do. Archaeology is, for practical reasons, accepting it is inevitable the current building will be replaced, while leaving open the possibility that we might decide to retain part or all of it. If we do not, there is an opportunity instead to leave an aspect of the design of the current building as an architectural marker in part of the design of the new building.

A record as a community project

We are advised to obtain professional advice from an archaeology contractor specialising in recording structures. We now have a list of such bodies, one or more of which we could reliably approach. All have indicated to St Albans City & District Council that they are willing to work on projects in the district. We may engage them to carry out the project in its entirety or to advise us on the approach, observations and records which should be made, so that we can carry out a record as a Community Project. Given that the FCC is a community building the second method seems more appropriate. Both methods will involve cost, but the second will be, of course, less expensive. Since the cost is part of the redevelopment project it will be built into the funding grants we will apply for, so we should not consider it an extra cost.

The recording process could be usefully divided into two, with the building being recorded at any time; the shelters can only, of course, be recorded once their access has been exposed.

We will need to ensure that, whatever recording is undertaken, our current Health & Safety policy will cover matters related to data recording and investigation on the building and in the shelters.

As to the nature of the community group who would undertake the task, that will be up to us to decide. A group of volunteer individuals might form into a small team. St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society has a small investigatory team. The University's Heritage Hub may also be able to assist. There may also be other options.

Helped by existing evidence

The fact that “*there appears to be quite a lot of material, including written, cartographic, photographic and oral, relating to the site*”, will be of benefit to us, as there will be less pressure to maintain the underground structures, there already being evidence in the public realm. The evidence is in the form of aerial photos from 1939, maps, reports from the *Herts Advertiser* for the period 1938 to 1942, the original council meeting minutes at Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, and oral recollections subsequently transcribed.

Maintaining the shelters

We might choose to investigate the possibility of retaining some or all of the shelter accommodation, perhaps to use for storage, designing it into the detail of the new building. As an alternative solution, we might wish to leave the shelters in situ without using them, and pile the new building around them. instead of relying on traditional foundations.

The possibility has already been raised informally, of building into the new building a section of tunnel/shelter for permanent exhibition or display purposes.

Leaving some part of what are clearly *heritage assets* as a component of the redevelopment would contribute to our aspiration for incorporating the local community’s cultural heritage in the new community centre’s structure and/or facilities.

Outcome

The archaeology has, until now, been left as a complete unknown, so our thinking about the new building has tended to ignore it.

We now have some indicators as to the approach the authority is likely to take, and how we might proceed under those circumstances.

The outcome for the FCC is therefore much more helpful and promising than we might have feared. We can therefore proceed with developing ideas for the new building with greater confidence.