

Heritage Statement

Broad Walk

Grosvenor Mansions is situated on Broad Walk, a promenade with the listed early C19 Pavilion Gardens laid out by Sir Joseph Paxton on one side and a row of mid C19 “villas” on the other. Grosvenor Mansions is the second in a row of 3 villas or boarding houses, now blocks of apartments. Possibly designed by Paxton for the Duke of Devonshire, it was built in 1860 of rock-faced millstone grit with ashlar dressings and Welsh slate roofs and stone stacks. The 4 storey symmetrical frontage includes, on its first and second floors, 9 pairs of 2-storey canted bay windows with plain sashes and hipped lead roofs. The top two floors include single plain sashes.

Virtually all the buildings along Broad Walk were Grade II listed in 1997. Some are reputed to have been designed in detail by Paxton’s former pupil, Edward Milner, and built by Sanders & Woolcott of London for the 7th Duke. Together with the Pavilion Gardens and Broad Walk the villas form an historic and attractive ensemble.

The buildings at the far end of Broad Walk present a continuous parade that can be clearly seen from across the Pavilion Gardens. Most of the villas on Broad Walk have been split up into flats. There are also three hotels and two other commercial premises, one being the dental surgery beneath this flat. The charmless Milton Court – a 1971 council built sheltered housing block - then intervenes where once were three more villas and subsequently tennis courts for the former Spa Hotel. Finally, two larger buildings, Grosvenor Mansions and Cavendish Villas, both originally comprising vertical town houses but now split into flats, complete the row. Grosvenor Mansions is screened from view by tall trees lining the Gardens and so only visible from Broad Walk itself.

Concern has been expressed about how the improvement proposed in this application will sit within the overall setting of Broad Walk, suggesting that the buildings are a uniform row. This has to be challenged. Indeed it was disingenuous of a previous Conservation Officer to suggest that this remains the case “despite some modern organic progression of development, which is neutral and subservient in this vicinity”. Milton Court is a charmless 100m interruption to the row, separating the town houses at one end from the villas at the other. This latter stretch of the parade is further disrupted by the tarmac, modern (not heritage) bollards and egregious car parking now established in front of the Hidden Hearing building. Furthermore, there is now a miscellany of glazing evident along Broad Walk: original glass; modern glass; upvc double glazing;; secondary glazing; even Heath Robinson wrinkled insulating film in the winter. Double glazing is now present in a number of other premises, in some cases with post-hoc permission.

Grosvenor Mansions will have been listed primarily to protect it from demolition or major change and so preserve its undisputed part of the ensemble rather than as an architectural gem in its own right. (cf. the unfortunate demolition years ago of the next three villas to make way for tennis courts for the then Spa Hotel and subsequently for Milton Court.). That said, it presents as an imposing symmetrical structure, with three modestly grand entrances at what would once have been the main doors to the original three town houses. All the other flats, including Flat 6, are accessed by what I presume to have originally been service doors at the rear of the premises on Hartington Road.

The only reference in the Historic England listing of Grosvenor Mansions to the Flat 6 elevations is to its canted (the most common form) bay windows and its plain sashes; in short there is nothing intrinsically remarkable about the windows, pictorial examples of which barely feature in Historic England Guidance. Unfortunately for Flat 6 its side elevation faces the utilitarian end wall of Milton Court, interspersed with tiny upvc double glazed bathroom windows and large landing windows.

Nowadays, Grosvenor Mansions comprises 13 apartments, each one owned, and for the most part occupied, by the 13 shareholders of Grosvenor Mansions Management Ltd. The apartments are not “heritage homes”; they provide a mix of middle priced accommodation (£250-£450k) and are not posh despite their address! But we all very much appreciate the historic significance of the building and we all willingly spend money to maintain it in good order – including the odd window replacement over the years. We are all anxious that our flats remain internally attractive and comfortable places to live, thereby ensuring their sustainability and saleability in the future by meeting the demands and priorities of future buyers. Not everyone wants to take on a Victorian age home so, without such attention, there lies the possibility of the building becoming uninhabited over the years and so derelict – as has happened elsewhere in the town.

Given that sustainability is a key element in protecting historic buildings, we were all dismayed by an assertion of a previous Conservation Officer that “the same level of comfort experienced in a modern or ‘new build’ house is not wholly achievable in buildings built of 1800 (in this case) construction”. This is a counsel of doom which, taken to its logical conclusion, will eventually lead to the depopulation and ultimate loss of older properties.