

THE NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK 9 & 10 HIGH STREET ABERGAVENNY

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION OF RECONSTRUCTION WORK UNDERTAKEN 1977-80

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This building is listed as a "Building of Special Architectural or Historical Interest", Grade 2 as laid down by the Town and Country Planning Act, 1971, under an order issued by the Town Clerk, The Borough of Abergavenny on 24 October 1973.

The building is an accumulation of parts of widely different ages and the plan, prior to the recent renovations, was correspondingly torturous, indicating a series of ad hoc alterations carried out over a period of several decades.

The main part of the building is formed by the remains of a large early 18th century three storey townhouse of a 'U' shaped plan, with wings facing the rear.

The older and more preserved section of the building forms the north corner and houses the main staircase. This section, seemingly once a separate building, is at a lower level than the remainder. Historically, it is the most interesting part. It has been kept largely in its original condition and it appears to have suffered the least amount of alteration. This section appears to be the fairly complete remains of what is described by the listing order as an "Upper Cruck" House of three storeys with walls of timber frame construction and wattle and daub infill.

The remaining part is constructed, in the main, of stone walls - mostly in two skins with rubble infill - with some wattle and daub construction.

The floors were of timber construction. The roof covering was natural slate

The front part of the building appears to have been a Victorian rebuild, with heavy plaster mouldings and decorations inside in the form of arched niche, arched doorways, decorative fireplace and moulded ceilings.

An interesting feature was the number and arrangement of staircases. There were several staircases in various parts of the building, leading to different combinations of floors. No one singular staircase went through more than two floors at the same time, creating a complicated inter-floor relationship.

There is a basement under the front part of the building. The basement is in two sections connected by a narrow passageway. Part of the basement has a barrel vault roof. The basement has two staircases, one at each end. A third staircase was also in existence with a blocked up exit leading from the connecting passage suggesting an earlier presence of a third entrance to the basement, either directly from the outside, or from another point on the ground floor. An old iron vault door separated the two parts of the basement.

A section at the rear in between the two wings was evidently added at a later date at ground and first floor levels. A further extension at ground floor level was added to the south-east wing.

All the windows are in timber, mostly of vertical sliding sash type with a mixture of styles. Two windows at the rear appeared to have frames of ogee gothic design.

The house was evidently converted into a bank at some unknown date when it became known as the "Old Bank".

There is an involved party wall relationship with the adjoining properties (which have also undergone a series of changes and rebuilds). This is further complicated by the overhanging first floor construction of the building – a typical feature of timber framed construction of this period.

The ordinance survey map shows an open forecourt adjacent to a section of the party wall between Nos 10 and 11 High Street. No 11 was evidently altered later and the forecourt built over. Windows on all floors at No 10 overlooking the forecourt were subsequently blocked up.

FRONT FACING

The front wall appears to have been a Victorian rebuild of a neo-classical style of two storeys, and a parapet. The earliest known photograph (Marked A) shows the front with stuccoed embellishments of pediments, pilasters, cornice mouldings and open type parapet with a porch and iron railings. The listing order, in referring to the porch, suggests a possible influence of C.R. Cockerel. The porch and iron railings still exist, but the embellishments were removed at some later date. The parapet was rebuilt in plain wall and the entire face left as a plain rendered surface. (Photograph marked B).

The elevation was basically of a symmetrical design with two projecting wings and a central porch. The symmetry was broken on the ground floor of the north-west wing where, instead of two windows centrally placed, a large window with iron railings at sill level and an entrance door were placed. The built-in shoe scraper near the door and separate letterbox on the large window suggest a dual use of the building at some period of time. Vertically hung shuttering and the cast iron railings at sill level, together with an old cast iron gas street lamp shown on the early photograph, were also removed at some later date.

REAR FACADE

A mixture of window types and fenestration suggests a number of alterations of varying dates. Nonetheless, it appears that the alterations suffered were less severe than those of the front.

Generally, the walls were finished in rough cast render with timber windows and a natural slate roof. A series of gable ends with barge boards provided the main form of the elevation.

The gable end of the south-east wing had dummy ogee frames on the first and second floors, seemingly to balance the frames and windows on the opposite wing.

The entire section between the wings was evidently added at a later date with a lean-to roof at first floor and a flat roof at the ground floor. The extreme north-east wing with its different style windows and overhanging bay window at first floor suggests some modifications to this section at some unknown date.

A further flat roof extension was also added at some date to the north-east wing on the ground floor and a fire escape added, leading from the flat roof of the central section.

There is a photograph (marked D) of the part of the rear elevation showing the building as it was prior to the last extension. The features already referred to, of the overhanging of the upper floors, the original ogee framed windows and the dummy frames, are all clearly shown.

Some Interesting Features Discovered During The Re-construction Works

During reconstruction, the following interesting features came to light:

1. Lighting and ventilation shafts to the basement were discovered in the middle section in between the wings together with some stone steps.

This gives extra support to the suggestion that an extension was added to this area at some unknown date.

2. Vertical joints in the stonework were discovered at the junctions between the front wings and the central wall.

This gives support to the suggestion that the front wings were a later addition to the original structure.

3. The inset clock taken out of the main feature fireplace which was demolished, was examined and the name C. Golding was found on it. Initial research suggests that this could, in fact, be G. Golding, who was a clocksmith operating in the High Street of Abergavenny between 1832-1868. It is possible, therefore, that the clock may have been made by him.

The clock has been overhauled and repositioned in the manager's room.

4. A stone slab cartwheel flue-type baking oven was discovered within one of the main walls adjoining the oldest part of the building. Part of this wall has been demolished to form an opening on the new access route from the rear.
5. The iron vault door in the basement is thought to be of some interest. It is thought that this may well have been of the kind incorporating a remote looking bolt control mechanism linked to one of the bedrooms on the upper floors.

No evidence, however, was found of any remainder of such a mechanism.

6. Steel roller shutters to the front ground windows were found housed within the first floor structure with metal guides on the sides of the windows.

These were removed.

7. Two arched, panelled and part glazed doors were removed and handed over to the local museum. The museum showed interest in these doors and intended to place them on display.

8. The Cybi brook is culverted under the rear end of the garden, providing a discharge point to some surface water drains.

The local authority's records of the line of the brook were subsequently altered to suit.

RENOVATION WORK UNDERTAKEN IN 1977-80

The scope of the renovation work had to be enlarged by necessity as the work progressed and as it became evident that the fabric of the building was in a worse condition than had hitherto been anticipated.

Throughout the reconstruction period, close liaison was maintained with the local planning authority and their advice and approval sought for any subsequent work that proved to be necessary.

The following is a brief description of the work carried out:

Basement: The basement was extended to provide a new strong room. The existing basement was renovated and redecorated and a damp proof course installed. A new staircase was introduced at the south-east end.

Ground Floor: This was completely gutted out and re-planned. Several dividing walls were demolished and structural steel added to support the floors above.

It was found that the plaster mouldings and decorations previously referred to, together with some heavily plastered ornamental fireplaces that were originally thought to be worthy of preservation, were not in a structurally sound condition and their architectural significance was questioned. These were removed and the walls in question subsequently re-modelled.

All the windows have been replaced in replica of the original and new windows added in harmonising style.

Special care was taken with the older part and architecturally more interesting section of the building. Essential remedial work was carried out in this area, together with general redecoration. The area as a whole was kept, in so far as possible, in its original state. A redundant section of a secondary staircase was, however, removed but the main staircase was kept intact with minor repairs and redecoration being carried out.

A new staircase at the south-east end was added providing access to the basement and first floor and a bullion hoist down to the basement was provided. A document hoist to go to the first floor was also installed.

A damp proof course has been installed, and all the walls plastered and decorated. The entire floor was redecorated, with a new suspended ceiling added and new furniture and fittings provided.

A section of the extreme north-east wing which was structurally unsound on all three floors, was demolished.

First Floor: The original timber floor was removed and replaced with a concrete floor on steel beams.

The entire floor was replanned and remodelled with the exception of the old section which is preserved, as previously described.

Second Floor: The original timber floor was removed and replaced with a concrete floor on steel beams. The original partitions were removed and the area left entirely as a roof space.

The older section is preserved, as previously recorded.

Roof: The roof was demolished and reconstructed.

FRONT FACADE: This was partially demolished and rebuilt. The main features of the facade were kept with additional architectural features introduced to enhance its appearance and to bring out the salient features of the original facade. The render was hacked off and the entire front rendered with a GRP cornice introduced above the first floor windows. Raised rendered bands were also introduced to the two wings. The symmetry of the elevations was restored by removing the door and large window from the north-west wing and replacing them with two windows centrally positioned to balance those on the other side.

The front was completely redecorated.

Rear Facade: Most of the rear facade was rebuilt and the original windows were replaced. The ogee decorative motifs were reproduced in cement and sand mortar, reflecting but not actually copying the original details. The elevation is finished in painted, smooth render.

Externally: A new car park with improved access has been provided with a paved terrace. An existing oak tree has been retained.

Mechanical and Electrical Installations and Other Works: A new central heating system has been installed, utilising the existing gas-fired boiler which was completely overhauled. The building has been completely rewired and new electrical installations provided.

All remaining existing timbers were treated and protected.

Furniture and Fittings: New fittings and furniture, together with soft furnishings, have been provided.

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