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# Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 19 January 2015

**by Matthew Birkinshaw BA(Hons) Msc MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 20<sup>th</sup> February 2015

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**Appeal Ref: APP/C4235/A/14/2228584**

**Romiley Junction Signal Box, Romiley Station, Romiley, Stockport, SK6 4BN**

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
  - The appeal is made by Network Rail Infrastructure Ltd against the decision of Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.
  - The application Ref DC055820, dated 18 June 2014, was refused by notice dated 13 August 2014.
  - The development proposed is the demolition of existing two-storey signal box building, with slate hipped roof.
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## Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

## Procedural Matter

2. I have referred to the site address used on the appeal form, as this more accurately describes the location.

## Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether or not the proposal would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Church Lane Conservation Area.

## Reasons

4. The appeal relates to a junction signal box adjacent to an operational railway line immediately to the north-west of Romiley station. Situated within the Church Lane Conservation Area I have had special regard to the statutory duty to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the area.
5. The *Church Lane Conservation Area Character Appraisal* identifies two different periods of development that have defined the character of the area. To the south are cottages and individually designed villas set within generous plots on historic, former agricultural lanes. However, to the north the built environment is dominated by the development of Romiley as a railway suburb. Around the junction of Stockport Road and Church Lane the intrinsic link between the railway and the development of Romiley is clearly evident and emphasised by the train station and bridge, The Railway pub and the Romiley Arms. This group of buildings are a fundamental part of the character of the conservation area, and its significance as a designated heritage asset.

6. I appreciate that the signal box is not locally listed, and that English Heritage confirms it does not warrant inclusion on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. The appellant's evidence also indicates that the building is a fairly standard design replicated throughout the network, and that it has been altered over the years with UPVC panelling, windows and doors, and a large steel staircase and balustrade.
7. However, this does not diminish the functional association and relationship between the signal box and the station. Moreover, whilst screened from Stockport Road and excluded from any recognised viewpoints or vistas, due to its siting, form and design the signal box continues to be viewed in the same context as the station from both platforms. As a result, I consider that it remains an integral part of the group of original railway buildings, and its demolition would erode part of the character of the area and its history as a railway suburb. Although the harm to the significance of the conservation area as a whole would be less than substantial, the demolition of a building synonymous with its character and appearance, and one which is intrinsically linked with the historic expansion of Romiley would still be material.
8. In accordance with paragraph 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework ('the Framework') I have weighed this harm against the public benefits of the proposal. In particular, I appreciate that plans to consolidate operational signalling would have benefits to both the rail industry and passengers through fewer delays, increased flexibility and capacity, and reduced operating costs. By retaining a vacant signal box the appellant also suggests that it would become subject to vandalism, as has been the case with others in the area. Demolishing the building would therefore remove its maintenance liability and prevent the knock-on effects of additional costs and risks to safety and delays. Due to the proximity of the building to the operational railway line I also appreciate that options for its potential future reuse are limited.
9. However, these factors must be considered in light of the material harm that would be caused from the loss of significance to a designated heritage asset. Moreover, the signal box is currently still in use and the appellant confirms that it is inaccessible to members of the public. As a result, I am not persuaded that the building would necessarily become a target for vandalism or give rise to significant safety concerns. Although a recently vacated signal box in Stalybridge was vandalised after closure, no evidence has been provided to enable any meaningful comparison with the appeal proposal. There is also nothing to suggest that securing the building in the event that it becomes unused would facilitate vandalism, or significantly harm the appearance of its surroundings.
10. I therefore conclude that by reason of its association with the station group of buildings the proposal would fail to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Church Lane Conservation Area. As a result, it conflicts with *Stockport Unitary Plan Review Policy HC1.1* which states that the demolition of buildings will not be permitted where retention is necessary to preserve the character and appearance of the conservation area. By failing to maintain the significance of the conservation area the proposal is also contrary to one of the Framework's Core Planning Principles, and, the aims and objectives of *Stockport Core Strategy Development Plan Document Policy SIE-3* which requires clear and convincing justification to allow harm to the significance of heritage assets.

**Conclusion**

11. For the reasons given above, and having had regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

*Matthew Birkinshaw*

INSPECTOR

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