

Case information

Case ID	300017599		
File Reference	HGH/B/LA/497		
Name of Site	The Villas Building, The Royal Observatory, Observatory Road, Edinburgh		
Local Authority	City of Edinburgh Council		
National Grid Reference	NT 325867 670586		
Designation No. (if any)	LB52372		
Designation Type	Listed Building	Current Category of Listing	N/A
Case Type	Designation		
Received/Start Date	2015 [University of Edinburgh Estates Review]		
Decision Date	15/04/2016		

1. Decision

In our current state of knowledge, the paired villas meet the criteria for listing at category C and has been designated (listed).

Statutory address	The Villas Building, excluding flat and pitched roof later 20 th century additions to the west elevation, Edinburgh Royal Observatory, Blackford Hill, Edinburgh
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2. Designation Background and Development Proposals

2.1 Designation Background

Mayfield Ward in Edinburgh, where this building is located, was resurveyed in 1997.

2.2 Development Proposals

There is a proposal for new building adjacent to the villas under the application 14/04082/FUL and 14/05331/LBC, (under construction, October 2015).

3. Assessment

3.1 Assessment information

The former paired villas at the Royal Observatory were considered for designation as part of the University of Edinburgh Estate Listing Review Project 2015-16. The Royal Observatory site was visited on 01/07/2015. The exterior and interior of the existing listed buildings and the villas building were seen at the site visit.

3.2 Assessment against designation criteria

An assessment against the listing criteria was carried out. See **Annex A**.

The designation criteria are found in the Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP), pp. 71-85. <http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/shep-dec2011.pdf>

3.3 Other considerations

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ANNEX A – Assessment Against the Listing Criteria*

The Villas Building, excluding flat and pitched roof later 20th century additions to the west elevation, Edinburgh Royal Observatory, Blackford Hill, Edinburgh

1. Description

W W Robertson of HM Office of Works, 1892-94. Pair of two storey, 4-bay, symmetrical, gabled and semi-detached former villas (converted to offices), with Greek and Italian detailing, set on ground sloping down slightly to the east and within the larger walled compound of the Edinburgh Royal Observatory on Blackford Hill. In accordance with Section 1 (4A) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997 the following are excluded from the listing: the flat and pitched roof later 20th century additions to west elevation.

They are built in coursed sandstone rubble with smooth sandstone quoins, window dressings and moulded window cills. There are deep decorative timber bracketed eaves and carved timber panel details with finials to the gable apexes. There are paired canted bay windows at the ground floor of the south elevation with carved stone balustrading forming small balconies above at the first floor level.

The villas have console bracketed door canopies linked by a first floor cill course to the north (entrance) elevation with timber panelled bi-fold entrance doors. There are corniced ridge stacks, the rainwater goods are cast iron with decorative hoppers and star shaped detail support downpipe brackets. The buildings have timber sash and case windows.

The interiors were seen in 2015 and the layout remains largely as it was designed in the late 19th century. Later alterations have linked the two buildings internally at both levels and they now form a suite of small room office accommodation. There are plain turned timber bannisters to the staircases, timber panelling to the bay windows and some simple dentil cornicing to the principal rooms. The panelled timber doors to the entrance lobbies have a margined glazing pattern.

2. Assessment Against the Listing Criteria (SHEP, 2011) pp74-75

Criteria for determining whether a building is of 'special architectural or historic interest' for listing under the terms of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997 [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/9/contents]

To be listed, a building need not meet all the listing criteria. The criteria provide a framework within which judgement is exercised in reaching individual decisions.

2.1 Age and Rarity

The Royal Observatory and its associated complex of buildings was built on Blackford Hill in Edinburgh from 1892-94. The complex first appears on the 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Map (surveyed 1894, published 1897). The new

observatory was built following a donation of astronomical instruments and literature to the city of Edinburgh from the 26th Earl of Crawford from his private observatory on the family's estate at Dunecht, Aberdeenshire. Since 1822 the Edinburgh Royal Observatory had been housed in the Observatory Building on Calton Hill however by 1888 its efficiency was affected by inadequate buildings, outmoded instruments and by what had become an unsuitable site. In 1888, a Royal Commission recommended that the Edinburgh Observatory should cease to be a National Scottish Institution and that its buildings should be handed over to the University. It was this threat to the future of the Observatory that prompted the Earl of Crawford to offer his gift of the instruments and astronomical library from his personal estate on the condition that the Government build a new building on the Blackford Hill site and maintain it to ensure a future for the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh.

The 1892-94 construction was supervised by the new Astronomer Royal for Scotland, Ralph Copeland and, as well as the Observatory building, the site included the new residence for the Astronomer Royal, the two further paired houses for staff, the enclosing stone walls and a gate lodge and decorative gates.

The publicly funded site was designed to act as a public monument to astronomy as well as a state-of-the-art research centre for the time. The resulting brief for the architect W W Robertson (1845-1907) was to create a building to adequately house the technical instruments and library whilst also designing the group of buildings to a high level of detail and design quality befitting the buildings' status as a public monument for the city of Edinburgh. The carved stone Zodiacal designs to the main observatory building are finely detailed and the stone towers with their copper domes are both practical and highly decorative. The detailing to the astronomer's house and the paired villas are of correspondingly high quality with fine detailing to the stonework and gabled barge boards. The design of the detailing on the paired villas also subtly references the buildings' relationship to astronomy in the detail of the decorative downpipe brackets which are in the shape of stars.

The Royal Observatory was built within a large walled enclosure and when first built consisted of the observatory, the astronomer's house, the paired villas and the gate lodge, boundary walls and gates. Further additions were added in 1967 to the west of the main observatory with subsequent and extensive late 20th century additions built to follow the line of the curved wall on the west site of the site. Further additions are currently under construction (2015) to the south of the site adjacent to the paired villas. All buildings dating to 1892-94 apart from the villas building are currently (2015) listed at categories A and B.

The multi-period site continues to be in use for the purpose for which it was built and is a nationally important for astronomical research and study in the UK. It is currently occupied by the Scientific Technologies Facilities Council and the University of Edinburgh. As the site continues to evolve, the original buildings on the site remain the most prominent elements of the scheme and the villas building, even though it has been altered, continues to make an important contribution to the grouping of this purpose built facility.

The villas building has good quality stonework and design detailing and although these features are not unusual for villas of this period the fact that the villas were designed for use by the Observatory and its staff raises their interest in listing terms.

2.2 Architectural or Historic Interest

Interior

The interior of the villas building has been converted to form office accommodation using the original rooms with little alterations to the interior planned layouts as built. The two buildings have been linked internally at both ground and first floor levels however both retain their staircases with turned timber balustrades and the floor plan layout of individual rooms. The principal rooms retain panelled timberwork around the bay windows and dentil cornices. The fact that the internal planned layout survives makes some contribution to the interest of the interior in listing terms.

Plan form

The plan form of the villas has been altered from the original by the addition of a small pitched and flat roofed building to the west gable of the western most villa. This alteration has affected the symmetrical plan form of the paired villas. It is suggested that the later extension be excluded from the listing.

Technological excellence or innovation, material or design quality

The Royal Observatory on Blackford Hill was designed and built in 1892-94 to stand as a pioneering technically advanced facility for the time however the commission was also as a public building and the quality of the architectural design is of a correspondingly high level. The main observatory building has highly decorative stone and copper detailing. The architect designed the two towers in hexagonal stonework of high quality stone detailing of Greek and Italian inspiration. The rotating copper roof sections are also hexagonal, rather the usual observatory dome, which adds to the prominence of the towers and allow for further decoration to the copper work than would have been possible had they been constructed as domes. This decision was practical as well as artistic: the hexagonal form was thought to be better to withstand the high winds in the high exposed site. The telescopes were built by Grubb Parsons of Newcastle. The east tower contains a 36 inch telescope, built in 1928 and installed in 1930 when it was the largest operating telescope in Britain, and the west tower contains a 1930 telescope installed in the observatory in 1951.

The architect Walter Wood Robertson (1845-1907) was born in Elie in Fife and studied architecture at Edinburgh College of Art. In his early career he spent time articulated to the offices of both Peddie and Kinnear and Brown and Wardrop before spending some time working in London. Robertson is best remembered for his large Post Office commissions at Perth, Greenock and Dundee executed from 1897-1898, however the observatory site, completed a few years earlier, is also one of his most prominent commissions.

The paired villas are designed to complement the main observatory building and have are proportionately highly detailed and constructed of high quality materials.

Setting

The villas are set within the walled boundary of the Royal Observatory site to the top of Blackford Hill in Edinburgh and the very prominent site stands as an important landmark within the south side of Edinburgh. The villas form an integral part of this architectural group with the Observatory building, the adjacent former astronomer's house, the former gate lodge and boundary walls. The 1892-94 group of original buildings on the site continue to complement each other in their similar detailing and group setting even though there have been substantial later addition buildings added within the site in the mid to later 20th century.

Regional variations

There are no known regional variations.

2.3 Close Historical Associations

N/A

3. Working with the Principles of Listing (SHEP 2011, p76)

In choosing buildings within the above broad headings particular attention is paid to:

- a. special value within building types*
- b. contribution to an architecturally or historically interesting group*
- c. the impact of vernacular buildings*
- d. authenticity*

When working with the principles of listing the former paired villas have particular interest under b.

b. The former Paired Villas at the Edinburgh Royal Observatory, constructed in 1892-94, with the Royal Observatory building, the former astronomer's house, the gate lodge and boundary walls as a purpose-built group of buildings to create the new Observatory on Blackford Hill. The villas have similar detailing to the other listed buildings and are an important component of the original group of buildings forming the core of the current observatory site.

4. Summary of Assessment Against the Listing Criteria**

The pair of former villas was designed in 1892-4 for the new Royal Observatory on the Blackford Hill site. The villas are an integral part of the original group of buildings. While the villa buildings are ancillary to the main observatory building (listed at category A), they are correspondingly well detailed.

In our current state of knowledge the villas building is considered to meet the criteria for listing.

5. Category of Listing

Categories of listing are non-statutory and buildings are assigned a category (A, B or C) according to their relative importance following the assessment against the criteria for listing.

Category definitions are found at: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/heritage/historicandlistedbuildings/listing

In our current knowledge the paired villas meet the criteria at category C denoting their interest at a local level. The former villas are part of a nationally important historic group however they are considered to be important functionally related buildings at category C.

6. Other Information

N/A

7. References

Canmore

<http://canmore.org.uk/site/75955/edinburgh-blackford-hill-observatory-road-the-royal-observatory> CANMORE ID 75955

Maps

2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1894 Edinburghshire, Sheet III SE

Printed sources

Gifford, J. McWilliam, C. Walker, D (1992) *Buildings of Scotland, Edinburgh*: Penguin p486.

Online sources

Dictionary of Scottish Architects:

http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=201227

[accessed 26/10/2015]

Royal Observatory of Edinburgh:

<http://www.roe.ac.uk/roe/history.html>

* This assessment is based on our current state of knowledge and has been prepared for the purpose of consultation or to provide a view on the special interest of a building. This assessment is a consultation document and will form the basis of any

new or updated listed building record should the structure be listed. The content of this assessment may change to take into account further information received as a result of the consultation process.

** A building may be found to meet the listing criteria but in some circumstances may not be added to the list. See 'When might Historic Environment Scotland list a building' at www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/historicandlistedbuildings/whatwelist