



Mr John Davey

Bath & North East Somerset Council

Planning Services

Lewis House

Manvers Street

BATH BA1 1JG

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Dear Mr Davey

Objection:

Friends Meeting House, York Street, Bath Applications 20/04050/LBA & 20/04049Ful

I write to object to the above applications.

I am a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, a Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, a Member of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, and I hold a Doctorate in architectural history conferred by the University of London. I was also the recipient (2017) of The President's Medal of the British Academy for my work as an architectural historian, and was honoured with an Award by the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art of America in New York in 2019. My *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry*, published in 1991,¹ won the Sir Banister Fletcher Award as best Book of the Year, 1992. I have twice been Visiting Fellow at Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, to pursue my architectural researches.

The distyle *in-antis* arrangement found in the Friends Meeting House and so many Masonic buildings convinces me that it is a reference to Jachin & Boaz in the Biblical descriptions of King Solomon's Temple. That is NOT to say that ALL distyle *in-antis* porticoes are Masonic, but that the type proved to be a useful motif for purpose-built Masonic Halls themselves, linking a correct Classical *in-antis* type with the Biblical descriptions of the Jewish Temple as found in the Old Testament (*see* the many refs in my books).

Halls specifically for Masonic use were not usual until the 19th century as most Masonic meetings took place in pubs, etc., and the floor-cloths, being portable, were set out in the rooms where ceremonies occurred. All this is described in detail in my *Freemasonry & the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols, & Influences* (London: Historical Publications Ltd., 2011).

¹ James Stevens Curl (1991): *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry: An Introductory Study* (London: B.T. Batsford).

The Wilkins building in Bath strikes me as very interesting. The blind door inside the portico suggests that the interior of the Temple is shut to Cowans (the Uninitiated), and indeed is echoed in the *in-antis* arrangement at *piano-nobile* level at Underwood's Masonic Hall, Portland Street, Cheltenham (1818-23), which is Listed Grade II*. It is significant that the entrances were at each side, and the two windows, one on either side of the portico, were also originally blind. Masonic Halls are often inward-looking, concealing the interior goings-on from inquisitive passers-by, hence the rooflights. Therefore to open it up would destroy a singularly important part of the original design both in appearance and plan form. In ceremonies that took place in Masonic Halls it important to gain access to the main hall from the west, moving to the east, not the north as the proposed new main entrance would suggest. This is why the hall at Bath is laid out on an east-west axis and there are side entrances into the hall providing no direct access to the hall from the north.

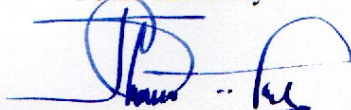
It is proposed to construct steps up to the reopened blind door. These works also go against the historic plan form relating to how the building was used originally for Masonic purposes. In addition, the steps appear awkward and clumsily squeezed in between the two Ionic columns. These works further disturb the historic fabric. The main hall is to have a new gallery and a lift providing access between the gallery, main hall, and the basement. This compromises the spatial qualities of the original Hall, as used by Freemasons, and compromises historic fabric. The lift which continues to the basement and the former kitchen area of the Masonic Hall appears to be placed directly in front of an historic kitchen fireplace opening

There are comparatively few purpose-built Masonic Halls of the Georgian period (1714-1830) in these islands, and this makes the building not only of significance to the study of Freemasonry in Bath but in this country. The Wilkins exemplar in Bath is one of the most architecturally distinguished, a fine example of scholarly Greek Revival, a style comparatively rare in that city, by William Wilkins (1778-1839), one of the most important architects in England who worked in that style, and one of the first to produce several fine buildings of the Greek Revival, including Downing College, Cambridge (1807-20), and The Philosophical Society's Museum, York (1827-30). His Freemasons' Hall, York Street, Bath (1817-19), is not only a splendid work of his in the Greek Revival style, but has a rarity value. There were many such halls built in the 19th and 20th centuries *after* 1830, but *before* then they were unusual.

York Street is in the centre of the historic City, and provides a pedestrian link to the Roman Baths and then to the Abbey: it is well used by pedestrians. I question the supporting statements that the bookshop will not be viable if permission is not granted for the opening of the blind door and a central access into the property. The building is clearly seen from the street, so with appropriate and sensitive signage, the public will be made aware that the building houses a bookshop and that access may be gained to the building by the existing side-entrances.

To sum up, I strongly object to the opening of the blind door, to the proposed steps to serve the new entrance, to the gallery and lift serving the gallery, hall, and basement. This is a special and unique building which deserves far more sensitive interventions than those proposed (which would harm the special historic and architectural interest of the listed, former Masonic Hall, the World Heritage Site, and the character and appearance of the Conservation Area). That harm would not be outweighed by any alleged public benefit.

Yours sincerely



James Stevens Curl