

## MATHEWSON WATERS ARCHITECTS

**Planning Application for Change of Use of Canal Forge,  
Lower Wharf, Devizes; To  
Charity office & learning space for The WHBT,  
(The Wiltshire Historic Buildings Trust)**

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**Application statement.**



*View of the Canal Forge looking towards the south-west.*

**Introduction:**

This statement has been prepared by the WHBT, (*The Wiltshire Historic Buildings Trust*), as supporting information for the submitted planning application for the change of use of the Canal Forge building.

**Background to the application:**

Canal Forge is a late C19th early C20th single storey commercial building, with red brick elevations and a rear wall composed of an older, stone-built wall that abuts the former Wadworth Brewery site.

The building sits within the Devizes Conservation Area, in an enclave described in the Conservation Area appraisal as 'having an air of neglect'. The building is surrounded by and adjacent to areas of rough ground, presently used for parking, for which nobody is currently taking responsibility.

Wiltshire Council, in their excellent strategy document for Lower Wharf, laid out plans to better integrate the canal side with the historic town centre of Devizes, creating a culture zone and aiming towards the creation of a canal side walk between cultural destinations, such as the theatre and the new home for Wiltshire Museum at the former Assizes Courts (a project instigated and substantially funded by our small trust).

Our trust is applying for lottery funding to convert the Canal Forge to our charity's office and learning space, as part of which we are proposing to undertake works to improve the surrounding green spaces, with the support of volunteers. This has been discussed with Backhouse who, Wadworth suggest are now the owners and who have raised no objection to our plans.

The enhancements, and the repair and reuse of the redundant Forge will help elevate the area, making it a better place to pass through or visit, while improving the wider setting of the proposed new museum. Our new office has been designed to create an active frontage onto the canal-side, with an open-door policy for passers-by to drop in and view our projects and their progress, or to pick up advice leaflets to help them maintain their own historic buildings.

Until recently, Canal Forge has been used as a forge, with a blacksmith working on site and with regular educational visits by schools, groups and the media. When the smithy wished to retire, and nobody else showed interest in taking on his work, the building was purchased by our trust in the hope of using the site to help deliver Wiltshire Council's strategic aims for Lower Wharf. This application now seeks to do that.

Our plans are to reconfigure the interior space, to create an office for our trust. As a county-wide organisation, Devizes is the ideal central location and having a heritage organisation based in the proposed 'culture zone' should help those aspirations. Within the space, there will be a central office, exhibition and learning space, a library/archive/study space and a meeting room/additional quiet office space, as well as fully disabled accessible lavatory and kitchenette.

Exhibitions will be limited to information about our past and future projects. There will be specific learning opportunities associated with the development of the site, teaching local schools and groups about the history of Lower Wharf, the town gas works, canal, Assizes Court, Stone Wharf and brewery. There will also be specific learning programmes during the development phase, for local schools and groups regarding the environmental improvements that we are seeking to deliver.

Our charity has been asked to take on interns and placements from the RAU's heritage campus in Swindon and from the University of Cambridge. These students will be hosted on site. Hosting these placements will greatly improve our capacity, and our ability to deliver more heritage projects in our county. All learning agreements, volunteer agreements and staff contracts will include the requirement to arrive by public transport where feasible, or to park in nearby public car parks, such as Station Road. There will be no parking facility on site, except for one disabled parking space, which must be reserved in advance.

Our trust was founded in 1967, and we have a substantial archive of previous projects, which is currently scattered around various locations. By creating a small archive, library and study space, it will support our interns in their work and can also be used by local researchers and building owners, looking for information about how a successful repair project can be run. The additional office space at the south west end of the building is to be used as a meeting room or quiet office space. However, during the works to convert the Assizes Court, Wiltshire Museum has expressed an interest in taking this space as an onsite office, due to its proximity to the Court.

The green improvements will remove areas currently used for informal parking, and enhance the green corridor along the canal side. In discussion with 'Visit Wiltshire' and Devizes Town Council, it has been agreed that once our project and grant funding is approved, our trust will apply to install story boards and a bench in the canal side garden, encouraging visitors and creating a stopping place from which to enjoy the canal.

We have discussed our plans with Rory Bowen, in the council's regeneration team, Ruairidh O'Donaghue and Adrian Smith in the planning team and we have incorporated their advice in our plans. Devizes Town Council, Visit Wiltshire, the Wiltshire Historic Buildings Record and Swindon Borough Council have also been involved with our plans, and have written letters of support for the scheme. Councillors Laura Mayes, Gerry Murray, Stuart Wheeler and Christopher Newbury have been consulted and support our plans for the Forge, and our aspirations to support Wiltshire Council's regeneration of Lower Wharf.

**(a) Amount of development: (Gross-internal area)**

The existing and proposed gross-internal floor area is 63m<sup>2</sup>.

**(b) Layout principles:**

The layout of the proposed spaces within the Canal Forge is intended to create an office and exhibition space in the existing open-plan part of the Forge, such that this will be a welcoming and generous space to encourage visitors into the building.

The archive/small office and the loo and drinks station are more discreet and private to suit their purpose as ancillary to the main space.

**(c) Scale:**

There would be no change in the size of the building as a result of the change of use.

**(d) Landscaping:**

The area immediately around the building would be enhanced through planting and tidying as part of the intended overall future landscape improvements along the Canal path.

**(e) Appearance:**

The building would be repaired and refurbished without changing the character or facing materials of the building as it currently exists.

Replacement windows would be sympathetic to the existing and would generally be painted casements. The door and glazed screen arrangement would provide a welcoming and appropriate entrance to the building and would encourage visitors.

**(f) Access:** Lower Wharf provides direct and level access to the building and there is an existing space at the eastern end of the building to provide a parking space specifically for visitors with a disability.

**(g) Drainage:** Foul & surface water drainage would utilise the existing drainage for the building.

**Summary:**

This application proposal is a carefully-conceived and sensitive scheme which would respect the building and its setting within the conservation area.

The proposal would enhance the canalside and would provide a heritage and education resource to help support the work of the Trust within the wider County and to encourage a better understanding of the local built environment and social history for the public benefit.

**Howard Waters** *RIBA*

**BA; B.Arch; MSc. (Conservation of Historic Buildings)**

**(Current Governor of The Wiltshire Historic Buildings Trust)**

11th March 2026