

# GLIAS

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Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society

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25 March 2013

BY E-MAIL to Jillian.Holford@hackney.gov.uk

Dear Ms Holford

**Application refs. 2012/3923 and 2013/0032  
49-50 Eagle Wharf Road - Demolition of existing buildings and the  
erection of a mixed use building.**

This society objects to these proposals because they will be seriously detrimental to the character of the Regent's Canal Conservation Area in Hackney and destructive of its heritage assets. In the latter regard we have new evidence to present of the existing buildings' significance.

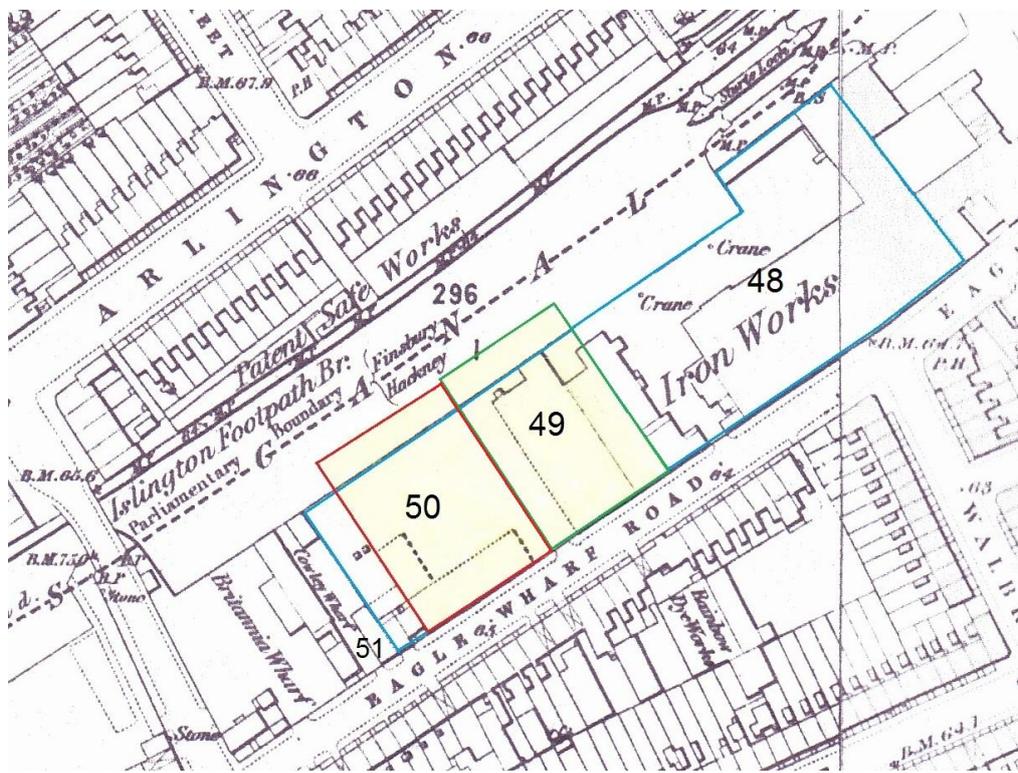
**1) Former Regent's Canal Ironworks**

1.1 Nos. 49 and 50 Eagle Wharf Road occupy part of the site of the once notable Regent's Canal Ironworks, and we have identified a roof within No. 49 as a survival from that works.

1.2 The Regent's Canal Ironworks was established around 1841 by Henry Grissell (1817-83) and his brother Martin. They were younger brothers of the major building and civil engineering contractor Thomas Grissell. Henry Grissell was a leading protagonist for the use of iron in structures, working as a contractor with the leading civil engineers of the day and earning the nickname of 'Iron Henry'.<sup>1</sup> He was the only ironfounder called to give evidence to the Royal Commission on the Application of Iron to Railway Structures (1848). From the Regent's Canal Ironworks he produced a vast array of bridges and building structures of high quality. Among bridges, there were major railway bridges at home and abroad. Closer to hand is the elegant arched bridge over the Regent's Canal at the east end of the Zoo, while several towpath bridges on the Lee Navigation bear his name and that of the ironworks. Among buildings, there are not only the ornamental iron facades of the Floral Hall at Covent Garden, mentioned in the Regent's Canal Conservation Area Appraisal, but also the internal structures of many other London buildings including the Houses of Parliament. He was the contractor for numerous iron buildings in the naval

dockyards including the world's first fully rectangular-framed multi-storey structure, the Boat Store at Sheerness (1858-60).<sup>2</sup> So the Regent's Canal Ironworks was a major site and it contained substantial workshop buildings.

1.3 The firm restructured as a limited company in 1864 but succumbed to financial difficulties in the credit crisis of 1866, which hit many contractors hard. The firm is last listed in the street directory for 1867. Disposal of the works took some time, so that it is shown apparently intact on the large-scale Ordnance Survey made in 1871<sup>3</sup>. By 1874 the site had been divided into three parcels, each leased to a 'highly respectable tenant', the head leases of which were then offered for sale by the liquidators.<sup>4</sup> The sale particulars detail the accommodation: Lot 1, a large site containing major buildings, had been let upon lease to the Henry Rifled Barrel Company Ltd and corresponds to Blenheim Works, later numbered 48 Eagle Wharf Road; Lot 2, with a canal frontage of 121 feet and also containing significant buildings, had been let upon lease to Mr Legg and corresponds to the present No. 49; Lot 3, was a wharf, shown largely as open ground on the 1871 survey, which later became No. 50 except for a strip that became incorporated into No. 51.



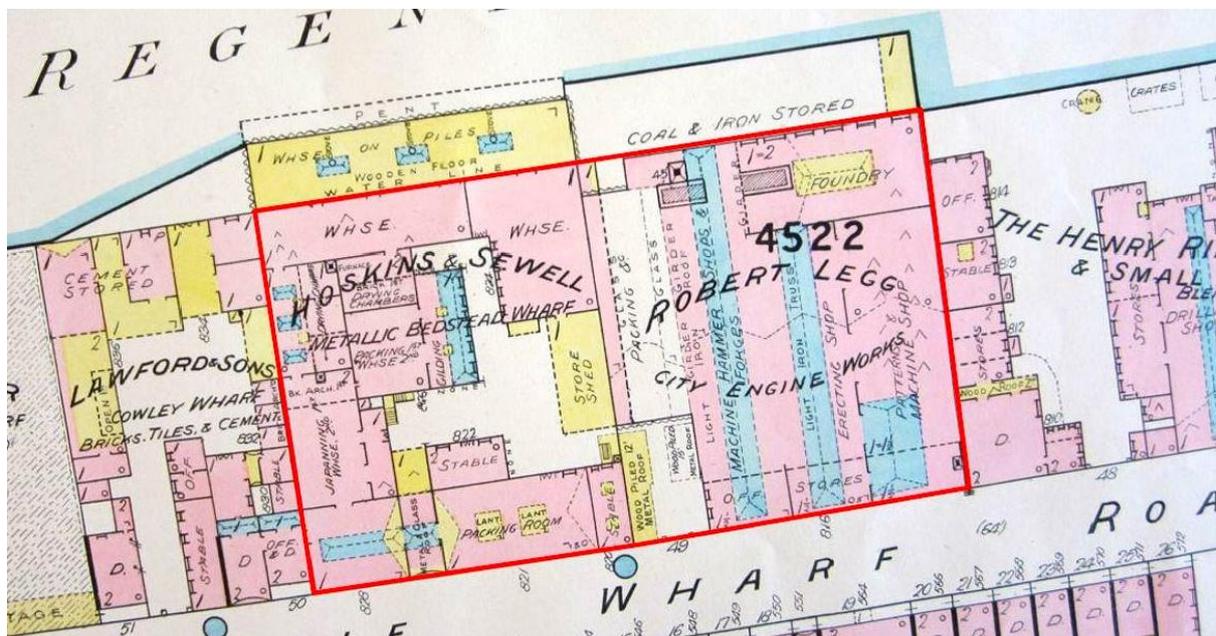
*O.S. 1:2500 plan surveyed 1871, with outline of Regent's Canal Ironworks added in blue and with post-1877 street numbering and subsequent boundaries of Nos. 49 and 50 superimposed.*

1.4 The buildings of the ironworks will have comprised fabrication workshops, forges and a foundry, representing a substantial investment, adaptable to the needs of other engineering firms as the sale particulars testify and not readily done away with. We have compared the building outlines on the 1871 OS plan with the Goad insurance plan of 1891.<sup>5</sup> We find that in the case of Blenheim Wharf, No. 48, the original buildings nearly all survived at the latter date, and in the case of No. 49 three workshop ranges and a chimney can also be matched to

the earlier plan, as discussed below. The name 'Regent's Canal Ironworks' is written across the site on the smaller-scale, 6-inch OS map of 1896, implying that they could still be read as a whole at that date.

1.5 The 'Heritage Asset Impact Assessment' by ASC Ltd in the current planning application contains a mistake in its Section 4.3 and Appendix 3, relevant here: the street was partially renumbered in December 1877, so that what had been No. 49 in a previous numbering scheme (where the ironworks was not numbered) became No. 51.<sup>6</sup> The directories list the cement merchant Capon and timber merchant Oliver at those locations. So there were never such firms on the present No. 49 site, which remained in engineering use.

1.6 Appendix 2.1 of the 'Heritage Statement' is also in error, marking the eastern boundary of the later No. 49 in the wrong position on the 1871/1877 OS plan. The 'Heritage Asset Impact Assessment' does mark it correctly, further east. This is relevant to identifying the buildings. The Planning Heritage Statement's assertion that buildings are unlikely to have survived is not correct.



*Goad Insurance Plan, London sheet XII-395, Feb 1891, identifying No. 49 and No. 50 [extracted from the 'Heritage Asset Impact Assessment' of the planning application for convenient reference].*

## 2) Buildings at No. 49 Eagle Wharf Road

2.1 Robert Legg, engineer, City Engine works, first appears at Eagle Wharf Road in the street directory for 1872, presumably shortly after taking his lease. As a manufacturer of specialist machinery, he will have found the workshops from the former ironworks well suited to his needs. The Goad Insurance Plan published in 1891 shows a roof infilling the western side of No. 49 and a later building in the north-east corner, with additional land reclaimed from the canal.<sup>7</sup> But three quarters of the site's width is seen to have comprised engineering workshops under three parallel ranges of light iron roofs, to the width of the buildings on the 1871 O.S. It can be presumed they were reused from the Regent's Canal

Ironworks, not built anew. The western of those ranges is still there, with wrought-iron roof trusses almost certainly made by Grissell's firm, who built roofs of similar character in the naval dockyards.

2.2 The writer of this letter has a speciality in iron roofs. This roof is of an incombustible construction characteristic of ironworks and similar installations, with details consistent with the third quarter of the nineteenth century and of excellent quality. Such roofs are increasingly uncommon through demolition. The main connection detail in some of the 'Polonceau'-style trusses is an unusual variant and particularly elegant, while the striking under-slung-trussed configuration of the valley girders was not common and is also of special interest. This roof is a major find. See photographs below.



*Polonceau trusses with forged connections and cast-iron struts*

*Connection detail of special interest*



*Polonceau trusses of a simpler design with wrought-iron flat bars*



*Valley girder of formed from wrought-iron flat bars as an under-slung truss.*

2.3 A cast-iron hollow pillar now located within the restaurant area is most probably a vestige of the equipment in the original ironworks. Such features are rare in survival.

2.4 The prominent chimney has proved not to be the chimney identifiable on the 1871 and 1891 plans and mentioned in the 1874 sale particulars: it appears to have been erected between 1894 and 1914 when the buildings were extended northwards. However, it is very distinctive and architecturally elegant, with its corniced and panelled stages, in a style unusual for that period. The stepped construction is reminiscent of earlier chimneys found in ironworks, so it was probably modelled on the previous chimney when the boiler house needed to be relocated.

2.5 The rest of No.49 appears to have been reconstructed at various times during the twentieth century, Robert Legg Ltd having remained there until the 1960s. The street façade is neat while the variegated spaces within the buildings seem ideally suited to the present use as studios, meeting a cultural need and apparently thriving, so also contributing positively to the conservation area.

### **3) Buildings at No. 50 Eagle Wharf Road**

3.1 Messrs Hoskins and Sewell, bedstead manufacturers, appear in Kelly's directory by 1877, and the street number 50 was allocated shortly thereafter. They were manufacturers of brass and iron bedsteads, mattresses and bedding, established in Birmingham in 1845, and had a City office and probably a showroom at South Place near Finsbury Circus.<sup>8</sup> Some of their products are now collectors' items. One can envisage the metal components brought down from Birmingham by canal and landed at the wharf at Eagle Wharf Road for assembly and lacquering, before sale in the prosperous London market.

3.2 This plot was shown as a largely open wharf with some open-fronted sheds on the 1871 survey, so it was built upon anew by Hoskins and Sewell. Two 3-storey buildings in yellow stock brick face onto the canal, one of them with close-spaced windows under segmental-arched heads suggesting a light workshop, the other with a handsome gable end with an arched opening in the centre, probably signifying a warehouse. They make a major contribution to the canal. The 1891 Goad plan marks single-storey warehouses here, so they were probably rebuilt to their present form shortly after that.

3.3 The other buildings appear to have been rebuilt at various times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including a neatly designed post-war range along the street probably from Robert Legg Ltd's occupation. The removal of low-rise buildings in the centre has created an attractive courtyard and again the buildings are in full use. They contribute positively to the conservation area.

### **4) The Regent's Canal Conservation Area**

4.1 Hackney Council's Regent's Canal Conservation Area Appraisal (2007) notes in Section 2.2 that the Conservation Area represents a unique industrial heritage, of which the industrial buildings alongside the canal are one component. In Section 5.4 it notes the industrial wharves, factories and industrial buildings as of particular importance in making a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and providing the cohesive and interesting historic townscape which is necessary to justify

designation as a Conservation Area. On the map it identifies the present site as Buildings of Townscape Merit. Section 4.4 lists Holborn Studios (49-50 Eagle Wharf Road) among the most important buildings contributing to views.

4.2 We totally agree with this, and we would point out that it is views towards buildings that contribute to the character as much as or more than views past them. They exhibit the shapes and materials characteristic of the times the buildings were built and the purposes for which they were provided. We find the stretch of canal passing 49-50 is one of the most interesting stretches in Hackney, despite the less-than-interesting buildings on either side, and if these buildings were to be removed it would be a major loss to the canal's character.

4.3 In its Description (Section 4.2), the Conservation Area Appraisal does not provide any visual analysis of individual sites, so that the chimney at this site is not mentioned at all. Yet that structure truly makes the scene in the photographs. We consider the chimney should have been included on the Local List, had the list's compilers taken a proper interest in features along the canal or felt permitted to select individual features. Our findings concerning the ironwork inside No. 49 raise this site's importance further, as an undesignated heritage asset. The Bedstead factory is also important in showing the visually respectable character of other manufacturing premises that lined the canal and in providing a relief from the encroachment of new flats.

4.4 The conversion and refurbishment of Holborn Studios is separately praised, on pp. 37-8 of Section 4.2.

4.5 Another important aspect of the Regent's Canal is the industrial history attaching to it, which the writers of the Conservation Area Appraisal have addressed in general terms. As a transport artery the canal attracted many firms that illustrated London's once major importance in manufacturing. From this Society's specialist perspective and from study of maps and directories, we can add that the canal through eastern Islington and Shoreditch particularly attracted industries in the general manufacturing sector and in engineering, and that ironworks were particularly numerous here, Grissell's having been the largest of several. There are very few sites now where one can demonstrate the former presence of such industry, and such evidence as is allowed to remain will have a significant educational role.

## **5) The proposals**

5.1 The proposals would erase all this and substitute yet another large building unrelated to the past. It is claimed that this fits well and enhances the appearance of the conservation area, but that is not borne out by the elevational drawing. Even if it were, that would miss the point, since a conservation area is declared for the purposes of conservation, for protecting what is best from the past, not to destroy it and put something else in its place.

5.2 The 'Heritage Statement' by David Lewis Associates attempts to argue that it is only the buildings on the Local List that are of special importance, whereas in this conservation area we see those as merely incidental. The conservation

area was not designated with them in mind and no changes or simplifications of legislative wording can inadvertently alter that.

5.3 This letter is longer than we would normally write, but the proposals are a direct assault on the principles of the Regent's Canal Conservation Area. We urge you to recommend refusal.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm T Tucker  
Engineering Historian  
Caseworker for the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Obituary, *Minutes of Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*, Vol. 73 (1883), pp. 376-8; *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers, Vol. 2: 1830-1890*, Thomas Telford Ltd, 2008, pp. 354-5.

<sup>2</sup> AW Skempton, 'The Boat Store, Sheerness', *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, Vol. 32 (1960), pp.57-78.

<sup>3</sup> Ordnance Survey, London 1:2500, First Edition, sheet XXVI, surveyed 1871, engraved 1876, published 1877, and sheet XXVII, surveyed 1872, engraved 1876, published 1877,

<sup>4</sup> *London Gazette*, 3 July 1874, p. 3340, col. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Charles E. Goad, Insurance Plan of London, Vol. XII, Sheet 395, Feb 1891.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly's Post Office London Directory; Metropolitan Board of Works, Street Renumbering Plan No. 2068, 21 Dec 1877.

<sup>7</sup> Goad Insurance Plan 1891, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Hoskins\\_and\\_Sewell](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Hoskins_and_Sewell), accessed March 2013; Kelly's Post Office London Directory, Commercial Section, various dates.