

Existing Elevation to Hill Street

JH Architecture
October 2024



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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to describe the proposed hotel scheme on the site of 20-26 Hill Street in Wisbech, in support of a pre-application submission to establish the local authorities' response and requirements, with the ambition of proceeding towards a viable full application.

Wisbech is a market town in the Fenland district in Cambridgeshire. The town is located in the far north-east of Cambridgeshire, bordering Norfolk, 5 miles south of Lincolnshire. Wisbech is within the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority.

The site is located on the lower part of Hill Street, which runs from the junction with Union Street to Nene Quay, bordering the River Nene. The street runs approximately north west to south east. Union Street connects Hill Street to the historic Market Place. No.26 Hill Street is a Grade II Listed Building. Each of the four properties (20-26) are interconnected at ground floor level (and hence at the upper floors also). None are occupied at present. The project intends to restore the building group to purposeful occupation, helping revitalise the area by introducing animation and activity in place of these vacant properties. This report should be read in conjunction with the drawings and additional documentation presented.

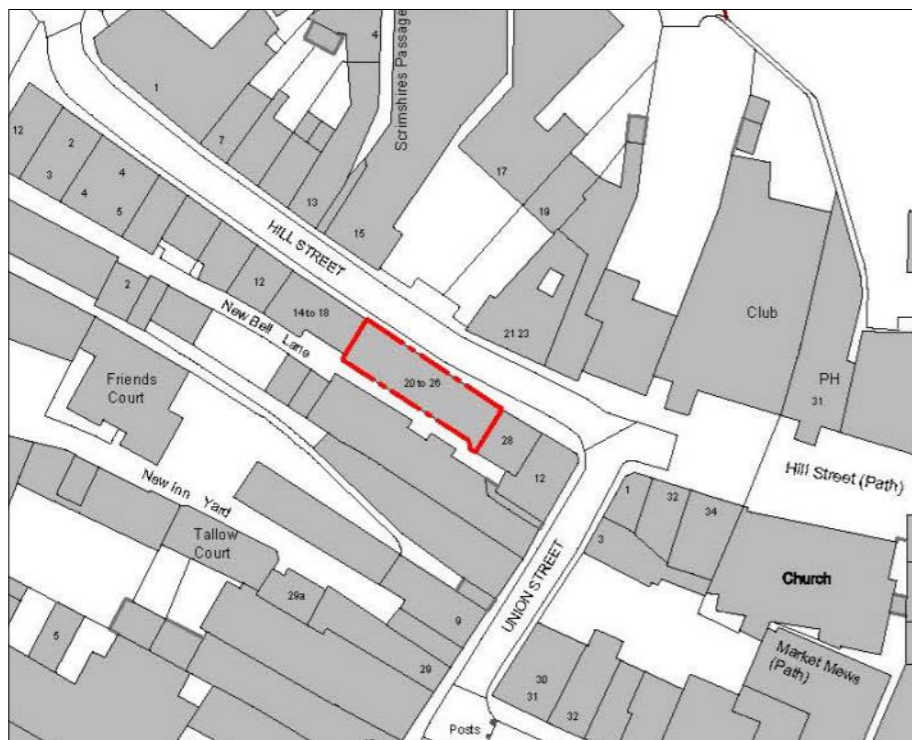
1.0 The Brief

The brief for the project has been designed to respond to the opportunities available in association with this site, benefiting from its location close to both the centre of the historic town and attractive riverside areas. Tourists are drawn to Wisbech by places like the Castle, Peckover House, the Fenland Museum, Octavia Hill's House, and by the theatre, cinema and port area. There is a restricted selection of accommodation available in the town centre, and a small 'boutique' style hotel could contribute positively to the current 'mix'. At the same time, a restaurant associated with the hotel will provide for local people as well as visitors. It is also proposed to retain an element of retail space, encouraging 'day time' activity. This report sets out a possible pattern for the organisation for these functions on the site.

The proposed new hotel will purposefully occupy this vacant site, refurbish the existing neglected built fabric, and enhance the local environment, animating and improving the quality and character of the urban realm. The scheme will bring much needed economic activity to the area in a high quality project which will sensitively respond to the existing buildings and their immediate context. The proposals represent a significant investment by the client in the local area, and will secure the beneficial occupation of the site for the foreseeable future.



Hill Street Looking West



Site Location plan



Existing Elevation to Hill Street

2.0 Location

The site of the proposals is No.'s 20-26 Hill Street. The existing buildings consist of a row of four buildings on the south side of the street, which connects the northern end of Union Street to Nene Quay. Union Street is connected to Market Place to the south, and Hill Street continues eastwards towards Horse Fair and eventually Churchill Road. The site is effectively a city centre site, however economic decline has led to the closure of many of the smaller retail businesses in the area, including those which previously occupied these premises (closed in 2020). This has resulted in vacant shop fronts, empty commercial space above them, and an increasingly challenged urban realm, without sufficient commercial activity to support investment.

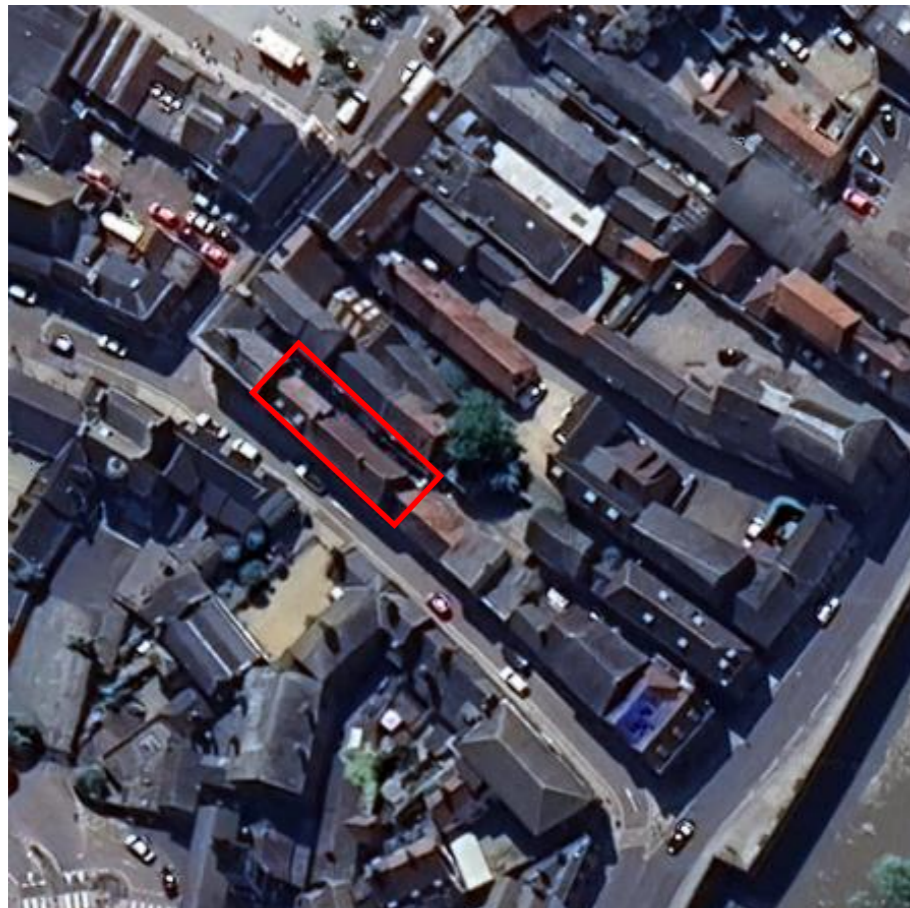
The site lies within the primary shopping area and constitutes the northern edge of the primary shopping frontage zone of the town.

In terms of patterns of use, the area around the site is varied, with ground floor shop fronts, upper level commercial or residential premises, a social club, and other residential typologies including terraced housing.

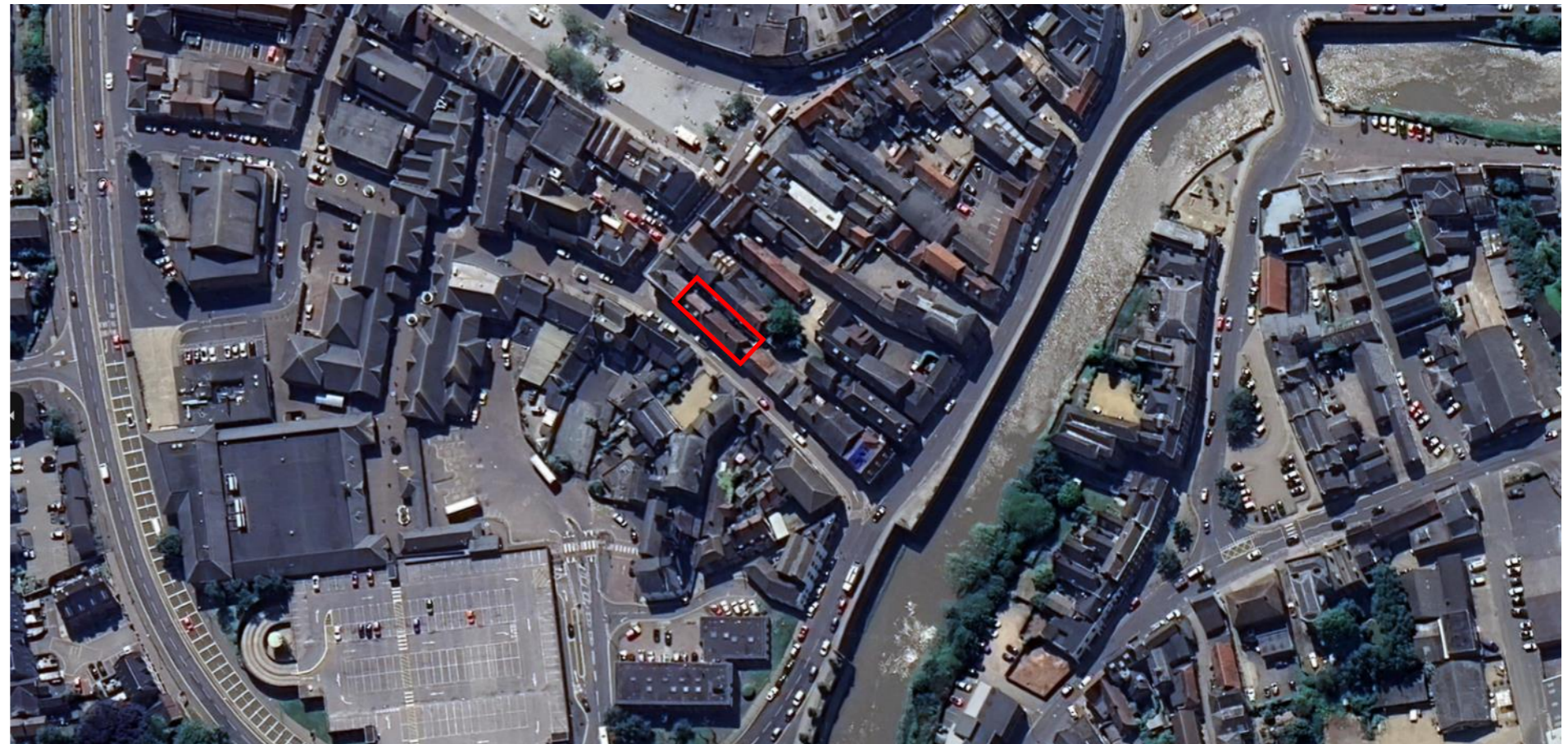
(Notably, the site was used as a cannabis factory, before being closed down by police in 2022).



Hill Street Looking West



20-26 Hill Street



The site in the context of Wisbech Town Centre

Urban Form

Hill Street has an interesting position in relation to the overall form of the town. Wisbech has a distinctive urban figure. At the heart of the historic town is the Crescent, Union Place and Ely Place, addressed by the Castle. Bridge Street connects axially to the west, to the river; Market Street connects north to Market Place. The north west 'quadrant' beyond Castle Mews and High Street is characterised by a series of lanes, yards and streets which run east / west between High Street and the river. Plots are narrow and elongated. Hill Street is the most northerly of these lanes, forming a northern boundary to this pattern, with New Bell Lane running behind it. The application site 'spans' between New Bell Lane and Hill Street, having access to both. There is an opportunity to 'upgrade' the appearance of New Bell Lane, as well as introducing activity within it, as a consequence of these proposals.

Scale and Massing

The site area has a footprint of approximately 810m². The site is wholly occupied by the existing buildings which are internally linked, most recently 'legally' occupied by a Pram and Toy store. The buildings are two storeys high, with No. 26 having an occupied roof space lit by dormer windows facing Hill Street. There are three storey buildings to the east of the site, connecting to the junction with Union Street, and a sequence of two and three storey buildings stretching west towards Nene Quay. The character of the street on this southern side is highly varied in both scale and materiality. The opposite (north) side of the street is also varied in character, predominantly two and half / three stories high, with a 'gap' in the centre forming the front yard to a fine Georgian building at No. 17.

Appearance

On the application site, No.26 is Grade II listed, and differs in appearance from the other properties. No. 26 is built from local brown brick, and dates from the mid 18th century. A sliding sash window and recessed blank window characterise the first floor; above this a painted stone cornice sits below a brick panelled parapet. A dormer window lights the roof space above. No's 20-24 are in red brick with beige stone features including quoins framing the window openings and brick patterned pilasters marking the cross wall positions. There is 'art deco' style shopfront glazing across all four properties, and a stone pier has been added to the ground floor of No. 26. Roof coverings are clay tiles (not original).

The existing building group is 'unexceptional' in many ways, but characterful in its own right, and forms part of the backdrop of the varied streetscape. As well as refurbishing what already exists, and where possible upgrading specifications and finishes, any new construction must sit comfortably in relation to the existing fabric, responding to the scale, proportions and materiality of the existing. Given the varied nature of the surroundings in townscape terms, however, it is possible to add to this varied mix, potentially increasing the volume of accommodation on site to achieve a viable commercial proposition by complimenting what exists, without compromising on its distinctive architectural quality.



Existing Elevation to Hill Street

4.0 Heritage

No.26 Hill Street (Listing Notes)

No. 26 Hill Street is a Grade II Listed Building. (List entry No. 1126682).

The building is listed as a mid 18th century house and shop, in local brown brick. The building is two storeys high, with a panelled parapet with a stone coping. Below the parapet is a dentil enriched painted stone cornice. At first floor level, there is one blind, and one recessed hung sash window originally with glazing bars. At ground floor, there is an Art Deco style shop front, with three similar windows to the west, and a 19th century stone pier to the east.

No. 26 is one of over 250 listed buildings and monuments in Wisbech. Most famously, the town has a number of fine examples of Georgian architecture, particularly along the North Brink, also including Peckover House (1722), and the Crescent, part of the circus around Wisbech Castle.

Heritage Impact

As noted above, the application building is Grade II Listed and located within the Wisbech Conservation Area. As such, there is a requirement to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of the area. Considerable weight and importance is given to the avoidance of harm to conservation areas and their setting. The Wisbech Conservation Area covers the historic core of the town taking in the medieval parish church, Georgian brinks, former docksides, former and existing market place, and planned early 19th century developments. It covers the market town's traditional shopping area but also includes residential areas in the historic heart of the town. In 2014 Wisbech Conservation Area was added to Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register due to issues concerning the dereliction of buildings and key streets within the conservation area which have had a considerable negative impact on the character and the appearance of the conservation area overall. There are also issues in respect of the erosion of historic character resulting from poor quality shop fronts, the unsympathetic replacement of windows and public realm issues.

The application proposal has the potential to have a positive impact upon the Wisbech Conservation Area, both preserving and enhancing it, by bringing a currently vacant Listed Building and its neighbours back into active use.

It is acknowledged that external alterations are required to facilitate the conversion to the proposed use, however these alterations have been carefully considered in the context of their impact on the character of the host building, and are designed to compliment rather than compete with the listed fabric. The design approach taken ensures that the historic, masonry based fabric remains legible and coherent, complimented by a 'light weight' rooftop addition in the form of a glazed attic storey. This is an approach which has proven successful in many similar instances, and not only minimises 'harm', but positively benefits the streetscape by introducing subtlety, variety and interest into the urban realm, enhancing its already varied nature. (See Section 9, 'Contemporary Precedents').

A number of internal alterations are proposed in order to facilitate the conversation. Details of these are illustrated in the scheme drawings.

Inevitably, if unaltered, there would be a strong probability that No. 26, and No.'s 20-24 adjacent, would remain vacant and continue to deteriorate. The proposals have the potential to strike the right balance between the delivery of a commercially viable scheme which can be implemented, and the protection of this historic asset.

Any harm resulting from the development would be at the low end of less than substantial harm and outweighed by the benefit of bringing this Listed Building back into active use.



20- 26 Hill Street looking west



20- 26 Hill Street looking east



The junction of Hill Street and Union Street, looking from the east



Part Elevation to New Bell Lane



No. 26 Hill Street (in the foreground)

5.0 Principles of Development

In summary, the principles which have informed the development are as follows:

The elevation of 20-26 Hill Street as it addresses Hill Street is to be retained in its current form, with the following adjustments:

- Shop front glazing (and doors) will be refurbished, replacing frames with similar materials and profiles, re-using decorative glazing, and upgrading clear glass specification where possible, specifically to the hotel rooms at first floor.
- The first floor sliding sash window to No.26 will be refurbished.
- A replica of the sliding sash window will be installed in the adjacent 'blank' window recess.
- The parapet height of the terrace from 20-24 will be raised in matching materials to the same height as that of No.26.

The most significant intervention is the proposed installation of a lightweight, recessed attic storey, providing four hotel bedrooms at second floor level, enjoying views both north and south over the town centre and the river.

The programme has been designed to encourage 'all day' use, promoting footfall and economic activity. All public functions will be 'street facing' through the existing shop front, using existing entry positions. The functions include the hotel reception and waiting areas, restaurant, and an independent retail unit.

Service functions are accessed from re-made openings on the New Bell Lane side of the property, providing a measure of beneficial activity in this underused space. The principle of re-using pre-existing openings prevents further disturbance to the existing fabric.



Existing Hill Street Elevation



Proposed Hill Street Elevation

The Plan

As describe previously, the planning of the proposals takes a straight forward approach to the organisation of the functions.

At ground floor, all of the public functions are 'street facing' through the existing shop front glazing, and are accessed through the existing entry points. No. 26 houses the hotel reception; No's 22 and 24 house the restaurant, and No. 20 houses a semi-independent retail unit. Service areas including means of escape stairs, staff office, kitchen and WC facilities are aligned along the rear elevation. Service access and emergency egress is available on New Bell Lane.

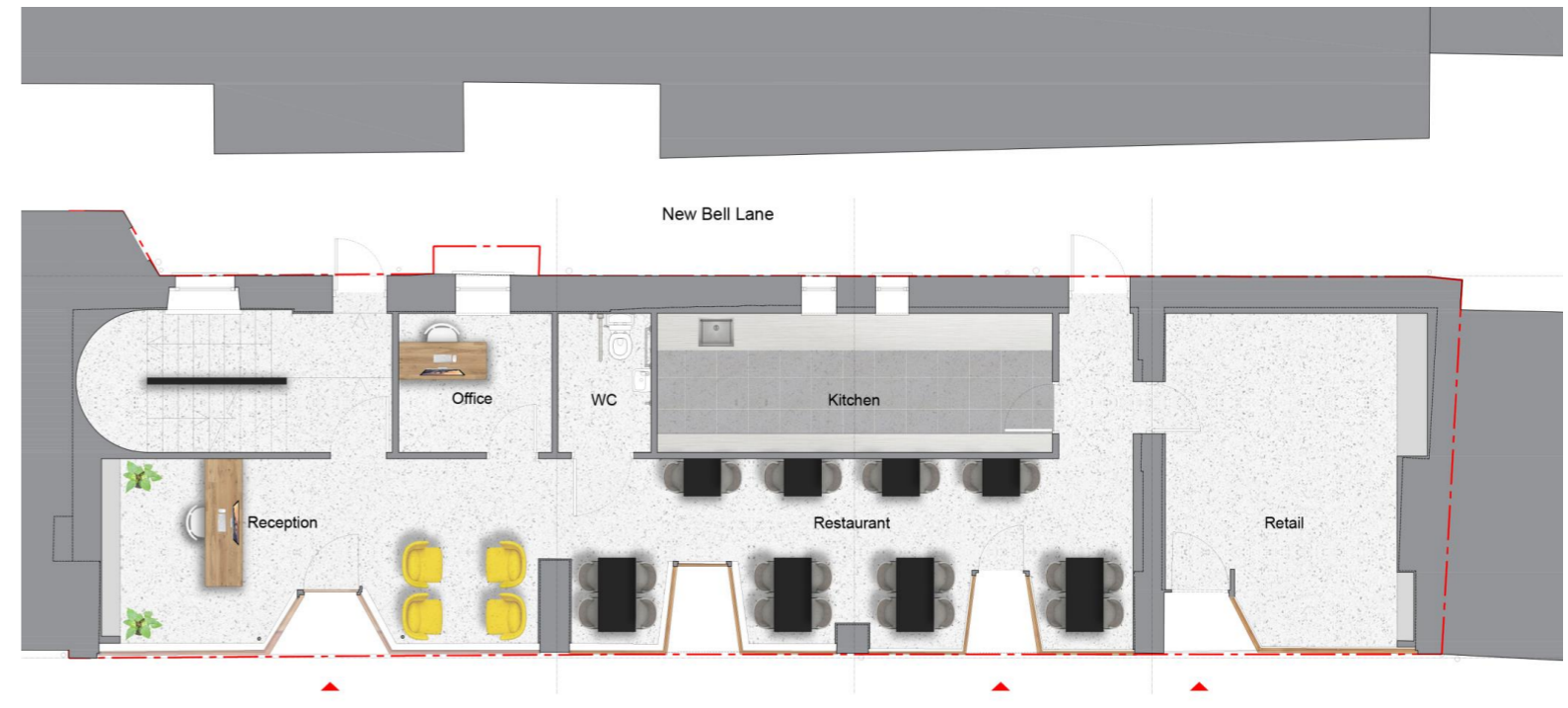
The new 'escape' stair provides access to hotel rooms at first and second floor levels. The access corridor runs along the rear elevation, lit be re-opened windows overlooking the lane. Hotel rooms are organised around existing cross wall positions, and make use of the existing windows on Hill Street. The proposed spatial arrangement works well with the module of the front elevations. Four bedrooms are provided at each level reflecting the four part subdivision of the elevation.

Scale and Massing

The most significant of the alterations required to achieve a viable proposition for the hotel is the creation of the rooftop storey designed to accommodate the top floor of bedrooms. The overall height of the building will remain as existing, however the profile of the roof space will be altered to provide internal headroom at 'attic floor' level appropriate to the creation of hotel bedrooms. This results in the creation of a lightweight, set back, largely glazed frontage to Hill Street, and a 'mansard' style, zinc clad profile to the rear.

Appearance

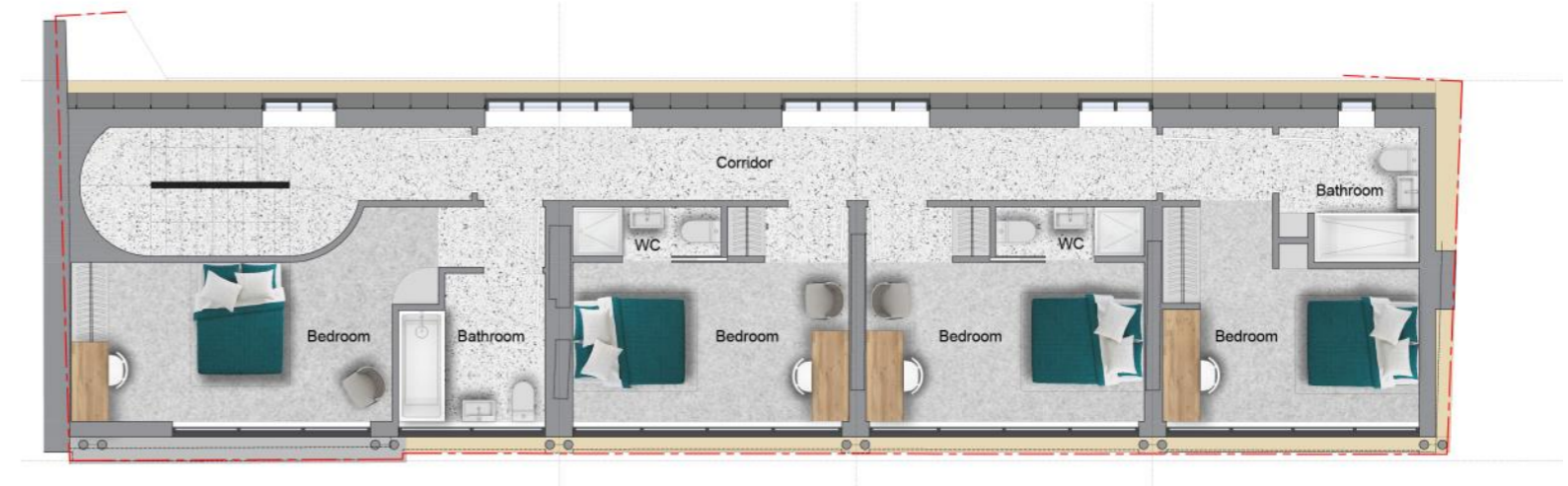
The appearance of the existing fabric will be little changed. The introduction of a 'real' window in place of the recessed 'blank' window will be the most noticeable variation on the front elevation. The parapet of No's 22-24 will be raised slightly in matching materials to the same height as the parapet of No. 26. The new attic storey has an expressed structure aligned with the existing cross walls below, evidenced by the brick and stone pilasters on the elevation. Glazing modules relate to the rhythm of the openings below, and the leading edge of the roof is minimised to emphasise the lightness of the intervention. The roof and glazing profiles are continuous between the outer party walls of the building group, unifying the overall elevation.



Ground Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



Second Floor Plan

Urban Form—A Varied Streetscape

The appearance of the proposed buildings represents a fusion of contemporary materials and technologies with the materiality and formal characteristics of the 'original' buildings. In the context of the existing streetscape, the lightness and transparency of the proposed 'attic' intervention is contrasted with the solidity of the continuous (original) masonry wall plane below. This masonry plane is characterised by a variety of materials in itself; primarily red brick, brown brick, and white painted brickwork. There are also areas of painted render, and a variety of shop front designs.

The proposals add further richness to this 'tapestry' of materials, without undermining its essential characteristic - its 'solidity' - by contrasting this with the light weight additions above parapet level...in some ways 'balancing' the largely glazed shop front at street level.



Detail of Proposed Hill Street Elevation



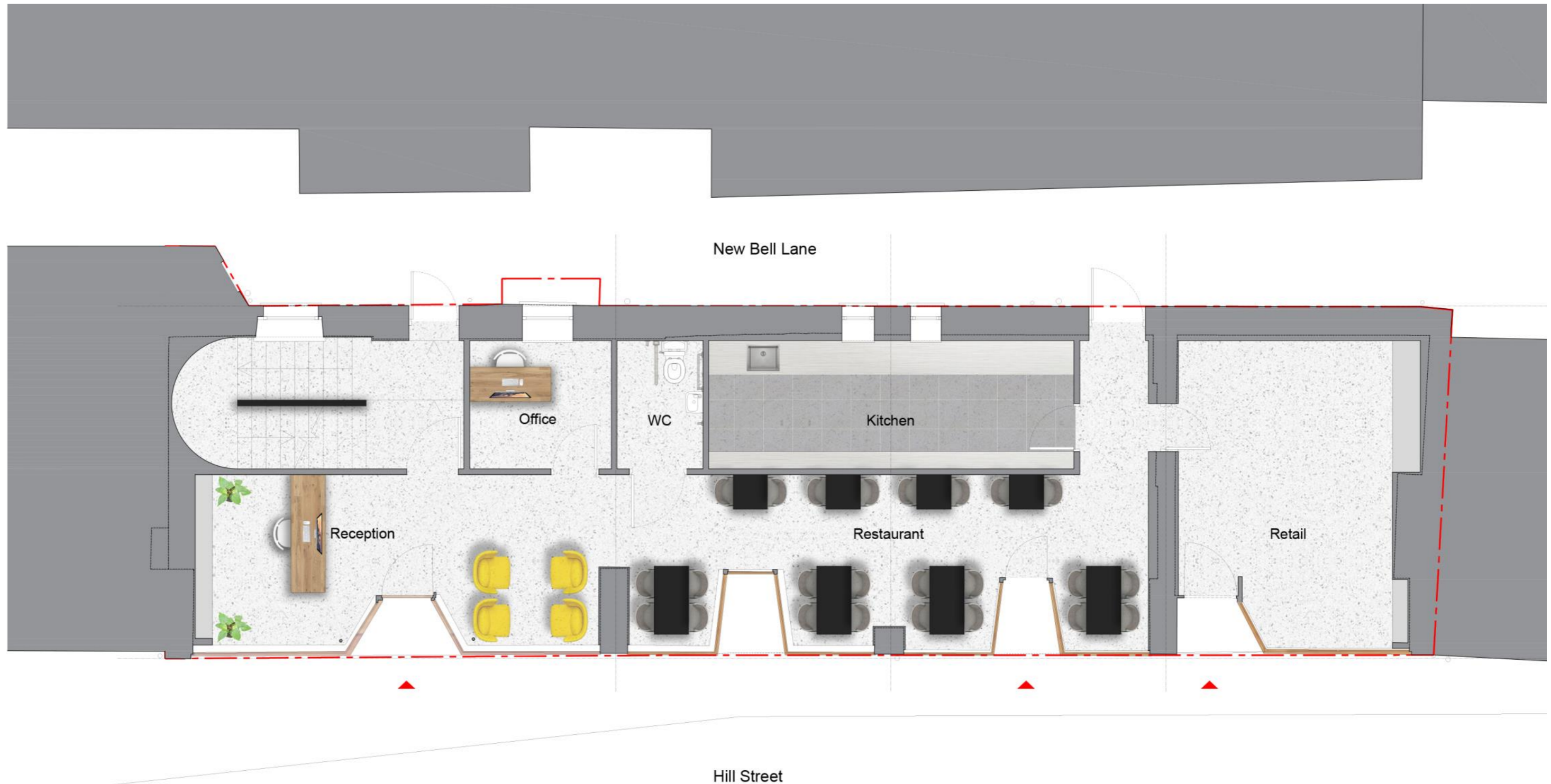
Proposed Hill Street Elevation in Context

Access

Public access is available through level thresholds from Hill Street to the hotel reception, restaurant and retail functions. (Space constraints within the existing building prohibit the installation of a lift). Service access will be from New Bell Lane to the rear.

Waste Management and Recycling

Proposals will include waste management and recycling space on site. Collection will be in accordance with local authority procedures.



9.0 Contemporary Precedents

The proposals include the addition of a lightweight attic storey across each of the four properties (including No.26) to provide the accommodation required by the brief. The principle of introducing lightweight, contrasting materials in the upper levels of developments which seek to adapt and re-use historic buildings has been successfully explored on many occasions. Some examples are illustrated here.

Whilst the proposals are not identical to any of these installations, the principles are the same. The contrasting aesthetic does not seek to 'challenge' or 'undermine' the host building, but rather the specific and unique qualities of each are emphasised. The historic component remains legible, with its own character, while the contemporary intervention is clearly of another era; the contrast achieves a lively unity. Each of the illustrated examples represents an adventurous combination of traditional and contemporary materials and 'styles' which both preserves and enriches the character of their host buildings, and the environments in which they are located.

Our intention on Hill Street is to draw inspiration from the character, form and materiality of traditional buildings in the area, ensuring that the intervention makes a positive contribution to the local environment without resorting to the type of 'urban pastiche' which is so prevalent in our cities and which undermines rather than enhances the character of the locale.



20-26 Hill Street



10.0 Conclusion

The proposals illustrated in this document represent a carefully considered scheme for the development of the site at 20-26 Hill Street, to provide a modestly scaled 'boutique' hotel, restaurant and retail space.

The proposals are intended to 'breathe new life' into Hill Street, in contrast to the pattern of closures and vacancies which drain economic activity from our town centres. The scheme respects the prevailing conditions on site, repairing and upgrading the existing fabric of the host buildings; sensitively adapting and extending this where necessary, and inserting a series of functions which will provide activity and animation in place of abandonment.

The site planning reflects local patterns and arrangements (public functions opening off of street level using the existing 'shop front' entrance ways; ancillary functions located at the upper levels).

The form and materiality of the roof level interventions achieves a contemporary interpretation of a recognisable traditional model—the 'attic storey', which in this case provides a lightweight counterpoint to the masonry structures below.

We believe that it is possible to provide a high quality contemporary hotel on the Hill Street site without negatively impacting on the character and quality of the host buildings or the area generally, and indeed that the proposed scheme and the urban realm improvements associated with it can improve the appearance and condition of the area by creating an animated and purposeful relationship between the building on the site and the street it addresses.

In conclusion, the proposals provide much needed occupation of the Hill Street site, which also represent an example of high quality architecture which does not resort to pastiche or mimicry to 'blend in', but which reflects and extends the language of the traditional buildings on and around the site in a way which is also relevant to contemporary patterns of use.



Proposed Front Elevation to Hill Street



Proposed Rear Elevation to New Bell Lane