

## The applicant's response to the Heritage Foundation's report for the Independent Inspector, Case No 37467

**Clutterbuck c. 1920s** The black and white photo of 10 Norton Way North (NWN) included in the report for the independent inspector is likely not from the 1920s but contemporaneous with the photograph below, taken from the scaffolding of St. George's Church during its construction. This would date them both to around 1963, and both photographs show a well maintained and cared for house and garden.



The applicant has heard reports that some time after the building of St. George's, 10 NWN was unoccupied and fell into disrepair. A builder bought the house with the intention of converting it into flats. While waiting for planning permission, which was unsuccessful, the front garden was ripped out and tarmacadamed to provide the additional parking needed for the flats. The house passed through a succession of owners, one of whom demolished the chimney stack together

with the first- and second-floor chimney breasts serving a bedroom, the waiting room, and the kitchen range. When the applicants bought the house in 1985, it was in a bad state of repair and decoration. The garden and gates had been devastated, as can be seen from the photo below, taken from the estate agent's details.



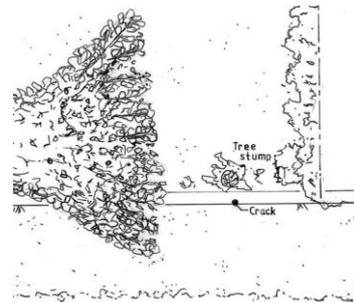
Given the removal of the space and vista which had been in front of the house, and the consequent dislocation of the house from the remainder of Norton Way North, it would seem likely that there was a causal link between the construction of the church and the sharp decline in the condition of the house and garden of 10 NWN.

## 2. Background

**2.2** There is nothing in this general description of the terrace to disagree with. It is an interesting and attractive building, which is why the applicant purchased 10 NWN nearly 37 years ago, despite its poor state of repair. It is worth pointing out, while discussing Unwin's '*principles of site planning*,' that Bennett and Bidwell's design for the 10-14 NWN terrace brought about a major piece of town planning in the creation of a significant focal point for the vista coming down from Norton Road, the overlapping gables of 10 NWN. This focal point was made redundant by the wilful placement of St. George's Church at the front boundary of its site. The original intention was to link the 1915 church hall to the church, which would have respected the 1908 building line. In terms of site planning, the terrace now only turns the corner, with a large break in the roofline which Unwin would have found unsettling. Had the building still displayed both the focal point for the vista and turned the corner it might have got higher praise than being of "Local Merit."

**2.3 Nature of Works.** Ref. 20413 Replacement windows, approved 2009, has nothing to do with 10 Norton Way North, but is for a property at 48 Cromwell Road.

However, plan approval notice 21294 for the removal of a Lawson Cypress tree in the front garden, dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 2009, has been omitted. The stump for this tree and the crack in the wall resulting from the tree is referenced on Drawing no. 101A, Existing ground-floor plan.



## 3. Application

**3.1** It is pleasing to read that the proposals are considered to be well designed, which echoes the thoughts of the North Hertfordshire District Council planning officer who commented that the scheme was a "very sensitive design."

It is entirely correct to prevent inappropriate front extensions. However, the circumstances of this case are that the current massing of the terrace is inappropriate to its current context. The church has reduced the legibility of the terrace, creating ambiguity and anonymity. The crucial element of the tiled gable, which was a significant focal point in its own right at the end of a vista, is largely masked by the church denying a visible balance to the asymmetries at the other end of the terrace.

The proposal will increase the visibility of the part of the terrace that is currently largely obscured. It will restore visibility to the tiled gable and recreate the tension between it and the framework of the four rendered gables.

## 5. Issues

**5.1** Bennett and Bidwell were very talented architects capable of working in any style from Arts and Crafts to Art Deco, while working with Neoclassicism along the way. They built extensively, and

several of their buildings have deservedly been given listed status. However, the 10-14 NWN terrace is not listed and there is little written anywhere about it. Even the Heritage Foundation's own nine-page pamphlet on Bennett and Bidwell's practice fails to mention it anywhere except in the chronological list of buildings completed. The 10-14 NWN terrace is a very good piece of domestic architecture, and we feel privileged to live in it, but we think it is possible to overstate its current importance. If St. George's had been built at the rear of its site and the twin gables of 10 NWN were still visible at the end of a long vista, it would be of far greater significance. Of course, any alteration to the building should be scrutinised to ensure that the effect of it on the whole building and its environment are purely beneficial, but it has been debased by the imposition of St. George's.

**5.3** The composition **was** successful within its original context, of an open external corner with the whole terrace being visible from a distance. However, it is less so now that St. George's has obscured significant parts of the building, which were previously visible from a considerable distance away. The aim of the proposal is to restore some visibility to those parts in the only way possible, restoring integrity and cohesion to the terrace.

**5.7** Tile hanging was a favourite technique of Arts and Crafts architects, and the tile hung gable is an important feature of the entire terrace.

**5.8** It is a beautiful building albeit flawed by, among other things discussed in the design statement, sewage pipes adjacent to the front door.



Given it was such a significant building, it is a shame that St. George's was allowed to obscure the twin contrasting gables of 10 NWN, closing off the vista from the junction with Norton Road. The combination of tiled and rendered gables was a favourite of the practice and was used on Wilson Bidwell's own house in Willian Way, shown opposite.

**5.9** Before the construction of St. George's, the tiled gable was a very prominent feature of the terrace in the sense that it was very visible from a long distance away. The proposal will restore some prominence to this, currently under exposed, feature.

**5.10** There is no uniform front building line. The proposal brings out the tiled gable to meet the building line of 1 and 3 Common View, which will make a uniform building line. To suggest that the proposal engulfs the front elevation is an exaggeration. It does overlap 20%-25% of the rendered gable's surface area, but much of that overlap is an open porch. No part of the rendered gable is overlapped to the right of its centreline. The rendered gable is one of a pair, and they, along with the pair flanking the porch of 12 NWN, create a single visual framework which utterly dominates the composition. The proposed overlap on the fringe of this framework will not reduce its significance. Outside of the rendered gables, the symmetry stops. The tiled gable is a maverick feature of the elevation, and as such operates under its own rules. The changed context of 10 NWN from the building of the church opposite would be sufficient justification for moving the tiled gable without disrupting the rest of the terrace. The design statement claims that the relationship between the rendered and tiled gables of 10 NWN is discordant; it does not claim that it is unbalanced. However,

the restricted visibility of the unique tiled gable diminishes its ability to counterbalance the asymmetries further down the slope at the other end of the terrace.

**5.11** The rendered gables work together to provide a framework for the composition and go a long way to provide a semblance of balance. Unfortunately, the site has a considerable slope on it, and it cannot therefore be completely symmetrical. For this reason, additional asymmetries are introduced to balance the composition. On the south-west side of the line of symmetry the asymmetries include:

The falling rooflines.

The falling levels of fenestration.

The eyebrow window.

The ginnel.

The raised roof line of 14 NWN.

There is a single and hence very important asymmetry on the north-east side of the line of symmetry, the tiled gable.

Symmetry can appear very formal and staid and was not favoured by Arts and Crafts architects. The solution was to introduce a secondary focal point, which in the case of 10-14 NWN was the tiled gable. It provided the initial focus down Norton Way North and counterbalanced the asymmetries at the other end of the terrace. This created interest, tension, and balance. It is an important element of the overall design of the terrace and should not be considered solely within the narrow context of 10 NWN.

**5.12** The terrace displays many interesting aspects of Arts and Crafts design. Since the construction of St. George's compromised its context, one has to walk around the building to explore these aspects. The terrace is no longer able to display itself as was originally intended, being fully exposed on all three sides at a distance where the full value of the composition could be appreciated. Bennett and Bidwell indicated the whole design in the extended front elevation; it was not split into three segments. The proposed alterations will help to enhance the visibility of the tiled section of the elevation, restoring greater interest, tension, and balance to the terrace.

## 6. Applicant's design statement

### Flaws in the diamond

**6.2** See 5.10

**6.3** The Heritage Foundation underestimates the importance of the tiled gable. Moreover, the original intended design has been undermined by the placement of the church.

**6.4** The maintenance issue is a minor irritation compared to the major embarrassment of the soil and vent pipe adjacent to the front door.

**6.5** The shared window is a common feature, but not one usually found on the front elevation of houses designed to be a focal point. It was unnecessary to put the bathrooms on the front of the house, particularly since the kitchen is at the rear.

### Contextual change

**6.8** The positioning of St George's certainly does diminish the importance of the grouping. The fabric of the building remains but is devoid of much of its visibility. This visibility was not only important to its overall appearance but also to the comprehension of its relevance and rationale. The failure of the Heritage Foundation to recognise this is to endorse and perpetuate the damage caused by the imposition of St. George's.

**6.9** The 1918 Estate Plan is less relevant than the 1910 Estate Plan, which was produced nearer the time the 10-14 NWN terrace was being designed in 1912 (signed off by Unwin on 10th January 1913). There is no mention of a church in the 1910 plan included in our design statement.



In its listing for St. George's Church, Historic England states that the gothic church hall was built in 1915 to which a connected gothic church was to be built at a later date. The church hall is shown on the 1918 plan behind the site marked "CHURCH SITE." Significantly, this indicates that the connected church was to be built at the rear of the site, respecting the existing 1908 building line, as one would expect.

**6.10** The 10-14 NWN terrace is still a handsome building and deserves respect, but it could have considerably more impact if it could be viewed as initially intended. The proposal is designed to restore some of that impact.

**6.11** No one can doubt the importance of the rendered gables to the design of the terrace and the powerful synergy between them. The photographs of the terrace show that very well. They also show how the tiled gable has been marginalised by the church. Partial glimpses of the tiled gable are only fleetingly available, depending on one's vantage point. The proposal would increase the visibility of the quintessential Arts and Crafts tile hanging motif with its highly unusual projecting base. Consequently, it would partially overlap the north-eastern rendered gable. However, in the same way as the tiled gable currently projects a gestalt image, the rendered gable would do the same; this and the power of symmetry would maintain the legibility of the rendered gable. The power and significance of the four gables would not be reduced in any way.

**6.12** It is relevant to point out that the proposal will benefit the church rather than harm the relationship between the two buildings.

## The benefits of the proposal

**6.14** The proposal aims to restore the architects' original design intention of creating two focal points while staying as close to their eventual design as possible.

## The proposals and the architecture of the terrace

**6.15** The applicant does not accept that "the works will cause damage to the grouping." The applicant was merely empathising with the previously stated concern that the "proposal would

unsettle the balance created by the strength of the simple rendered gables.” The applicant immediately stated it was an “overly pessimistic view” and went on to give reasons why the proposal would not unsettle the balance of the composition.

## 7. Conclusions

**7.1** The applicant wants to adjust the design of 10 NWN to rectify the damage inflicted on it and the terrace by the insensitive positioning of St. George’s Church. All cases should surely be judged on their individual merits, and the unique, complex, and historic circumstances make this case exceptional. It would be remarkable if any other case was able to cite this example as a precedent. The applicant knows from personal experience how keen the Foundation can be in its pursuit of conserving our heritage, and is confident that they will be able to reject any inappropriate claims of precedent.

**7.2** The applicant believes that the proposal restores the architect’s original design intentions for the terrace and that has complied with the design principles. The design solves a number of complex interlocking problems for the house, the terrace, and the local fabric of the built environment. Furthermore, it restores the character and appearance of the existing property, and the Heritage Character Area, as closely as possible back to its pre-1963 condition.