

Murals and Listed Buildings: Caught Between Popular Appeal and Heritage Protection

Duncan Marks

Introduction: Murals and the Heritage Dilemma

Over the past two decades, street art and large-scale murals have moved from vandalism to celebrated expressions of place and identity. Cities like Bristol, Belfast, and Glasgow host mural festivals; towns commission artists to animate blank walls; and Banksy has become a cultural icon.

Yet this enthusiasm collides with a heritage system tasked with managing change in the historic environment. Even painting a wall can trigger the need for Listed Building Consent (LBC), and murals in conservation areas are tightly controlled. What the public sees as enlivening, conservation officers may view as risk to fabric and authenticity.

This article explores that paradox: how murals are increasingly seen as cultural heritage and placemaking yet remain difficult to reconcile with heritage protection when placed on listed buildings. It considers why some—often installed without permission—are later celebrated and retained, while proactive proposals rarely succeed, and asks whether practice is shifting.

Heritage 'in aspic' versus heritage in dialogue

Conservation is sometimes caricatured as freezing the past, but its purpose is to manage change with care. Murals challenge this by being time-bound and ephemeral, bringing present voices into dialogue with the historic environment.

For communities, murals express pride and memory. The 1970s–80s saw a spread of community murals celebrating working-class culture and protesting decline. Historic England's 2023 study *Murals and the Community Arts in England, 1968–86* argues these works are now part of our heritage. Yet while postwar murals are celebrated—and the Twentieth Century Society campaigns for their listing—new murals face tighter restrictions. Policy focuses on safeguarding fabric and appearance, with interventions judged against potential harm to significance.

Retrospective fame versus proactive rejection

Many celebrated murals on listed buildings were unauthorised, appearing overnight, gaining popularity, and becoming difficult to remove.

Banksy's "Well Hung Lover" (2006) in Bristol, on the side of a Grade II listed former sexual health clinic, quickly drew national attention. Initially the council faced complaints, but a public poll showed overwhelming support. Councillors agreed it should remain, framing it as part of Bristol's identity as a street art city. Historic England did not endorse the work but chose not to intervene, leaving the outcome to local politics.



Banksy's "Well Hung Lover", Bristol – after having been 'paint balled'. [Image credit still to be sourced]



Banksy's "GCHQ Spies" (or "Spy Booth"), Cheltenham. Having gained retrospective permission for the mural, it was destroyed during remedial work to the render (and later sold as parts). Photo: Roger Smith.

Cheltenham's Banksy is known as "GCHQ Spies" or "Spy Booth" (2014). It is painted on the flank of a Grade II listed terrace and gained retrospective LBC. While causing 'less than substantial harm,' it was judged outweighed by public benefit and cultural resonance.

Not all successes involve Banksy. In Cheltenham, "Dancer and Horse", a racing-heritage mural by French muralist Margot for the town's Paint Festival, was intended to deter graffiti and had business backing. Despite objections from Cheltenham Civic Society, retrospective consent was granted in 2024, with councillors calling it a 'high-quality art installation.'



"Dancer and Horse" racing-heritage mural by Margot <https://marqay.art/eng/accueil-english/>, Cheltenham. Photo: Hannah Judah

In Preston, the "Mother" mural (2023) by Shawn Sharpe was painted onto existing cream render on the gable of a Grade II building that faces on to Grade II* Preston Minster. The mural was inspired by Preston's crest—the lamb of St Wilfrid and the Patron—and depicts a woman holding a lamb while wrapped in the city's flag. The symbolism of care and civic identity resonated strongly with residents. The mural became an instant landmark. Retrospective approval highlighted its reversibility and the communal value it had quickly acquired.



Preston's 'Mother' mural on Grade II listed former Conservative WMC now bar. Photo: Duncan Marks.



Setting of Preston's 'Mother' mural adjacent Grade II listed Preston Minster. Photo: Duncan Marks

The Yorkshire market town of Richmond provides another example. In 2022, Local artist Jackie Stubbs painted a sheepdog-and-sheep mural on York House, a Grade II listed building in the Market Place. Planning officers recommended refusal, but more than 2,700 residents petitioned in support. Councillors voted to grant retrospective LBC, with the decision attracting national press as a case of public pressure overriding professional advice.



Sheepdog mural on the side of York House, a mid-18thC building in the centre of the market town of Richmond, North Yorkshire. Photo: Stefan Kusinski



Historic setting of the sheepdog mural on the side of York House in the heart of Richmond's historic marketplace, with its Norman castle looming over the town. Photo Duncan Marks



Facade of Grade II listed York House, Richmond. The lefthand side gable has a sheepdog mural. Photo Duncan Marks

Refusals and removals: the other side of the picture

By contrast, proactive proposals through the planning system face a steeper climb. Without existing public support, decision-makers fall back on policy: harm must be justified and outweighed by benefits. Proposals that have been refused show how hard it is to reconcile murals with heritage policy.

Brighton (2024) – A proposal for a large floral mural on a shop in The Lanes, part of a listed terrace, was refused. Planners judged its bright colours ‘alien’ to the historic streetscape, undermining the coherence of the conservation area.



Proposed and refused mural design for Grade II listed building in Brighton. [Image credit still to be sourced]

London (2020) – A vast 22m by 15m mural was proposed for the rear elevation of a Grade II listed 1930s Art Deco cinema in Barnet. Planning officers supported the scheme, but the Council’s planning committee refused consent, and the refusal was upheld on appeal. The inspector concluded the bold contemporary design would draw attention away from the

cinema’s architectural value, and that the scale of the work would not preserve the special interest of the listed building.

Colchester (2021) – A mural was proposed for the vestry wall of Holy Trinity Church, which is listed at Grade I. The applicant was an adjacent shopping centre, and the colourful design aimed to reference local history and personalities. Both Historic England and the Colchester Civic Society objected to its ‘scale, subject matter and its permanence’ and design and typer of paint to be used, respectively. The application was refused, confirming that highly graded heritage assets are effectively off-limits for such interventions.



Proposed and refused mural design for Grade I listed Holy Trinity Church, Colchester. [Image credit still to be sourced]

Localism, popularity and policy drift

Decisions for the retrospective applications are often shaped more by local politics than by policy. Bristol retained “Well Hung Lover” after a public poll; Cheltenham accepted “GCHQ Spies” for its notoriety; Preston’s “Mother” drew on civic pride. Richmond showed how petitions and councillor discretion can overturn professional recommendations. It contrasts with how lawful proposals without celebrity or publicity struggle. This uneven playing field risks encouraging retrospective approvals while deterring lawful applications.

Location matters: not all walls are equal

Not all parts of a listed building carry equal weight. Many murals appear on secondary elevations—blank gables, rendered walls, or later rebuilds—that contribute little to heritage value.

A finely detailed façade is more sensitive than a plain gable. Murals on less significant surfaces may therefore cause less harm. This explains why Preston’s “Mother” could be accepted, while proposals for principal façades or stonework are often refused. Recognising this distinction points to a way forward: choosing locations where artwork can be accommodated without undermining heritage value.

Content versus context

Most murals on listed buildings are not about the buildings themselves. Banksy’s works often address national or international politics, satire or cultural commentary, using listed walls as canvases. “Well Hung Lover” satirised voyeurism and infidelity; “GCHQ Spies” critiqued surveillance. Preston’s “Mother” drew on civic symbols, while Richmond’s mural celebrated rural life and the farming economy. In each case the listed wall was not site specific and chosen for historic relevance, but because it offered a prominent canvas.

This disconnect is frequently treated as a weakness in policy terms: conservation officers ask “why here?” when the mural has no connection to the building’s story. Yet for communities, the placement is part of the power: civic pride or political messages are embedded directly into the public realm. The framework’s current emphasis on architectural significance helps explain why retrospective approvals succeed through popularity, while proactive proposals framed as “art for art’s sake” often falter.

Are things changing?

There are tentative signs of change. Historic England’s 2023 thematic study highlights twentieth-century murals as heritage assets, creating a framework for valuing successors. The Twentieth Century Society campaigns for post-war murals, from civic centres to underpasses, to be listed. But there’s nothing on the suitability of new murals on listed buildings in England.

Admittedly, all but one of the cases discussed here concern Grade II listed buildings. And as Historic England is generally less likely to intervene at this level, reserving formal comment for Grade II* and Grade I cases where national significance and fabric sensitivity are greater, arguably the issue discussed in this article is not yet on their radar.

At local level, some councils are producing guidance that acknowledges cultural value where quality and location are carefully chosen. Cheltenham, influenced by its Paint Festival, has become a test bed for balancing creativity with conservation. Preston Council turned the success of “Mother” into a formal programme, working with Mural Makers CIC to support and commission new street art works. Both suggest councils are beginning to evolve from reluctant, retrospective approvals to proactive engagement, though national policy still sets strict limits on listed fabric.

Practical lessons for practitioners

For practitioners, several lessons stand out:

- Check sensitivity of the wall: façades are rarely suitable; gables may be.
- Ensure a narrative link: murals tied to local identity carry more weight.
- Demonstrate quality and reversibility: proven artists, suitable materials, and removal plans matter.
- Evidence public engagement: petitions or consultations strengthen cases.
- Guard against branding: works must be artistic or commemorative, not commercial.

These judgements ultimately sit within the NPPF framework, where any “less than substantial harm” to a listed building must be clearly justified and weighed against public benefits.

Demonstrating communal value or cultural enrichment can therefore be decisive.

Together these points form a framework for balancing heritage protection with cultural vitality.

Conclusion: Bridging the gap

Murals on listed buildings highlight the debate over heritage and contemporary culture. The current pattern—unauthorised works retrospectively approved, lawful proposals refused—shows a mismatch between public sentiment and heritage process.

Practitioners can help bridge this gap: by framing murals as part of a place’s evolving story, ensuring quality and reversibility, and engaging communities. If more confident frameworks are adopted, murals may move from tolerated exceptions to recognised tools of placemaking.

Author:

Dr Duncan Marks is Planning & Heritage Manager at York Civic Trust and teaches at the University of York. The Trust is in the early stages of commissioning a community heritage mural on a Grade II listed building in York.