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Ultrafast upgrade for Grade II listed building proves you need to be flexible about the best laid plans

If you live in a Grade II listed building, like Little Aston Hall in Staffordshire, you'll want to preserve and protect the history, architecture and features of your home. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy future-proof superfast broadband. The challenge is getting it in place without a call to DIY SOS.

Set in over 17 acres of manicured grounds, including a lake and park, Little Aston Hall dates back to 1730. The main hall was converted into seven luxury apartments in the 1980s, with seven new apartment blocks and eight houses added around the lake.

But one essential the gated community lacked was a decent broadband connection. So when we got in touch to say we could upgrade the connection for free, the managing agent acting on behalf of the residents was keen to know more.

The project had two main requirements: speed and sensitivity. The director of the managing agent, and resident, Roger Adams, was only available for the summer. So we had a small window of opportunity.

As well as having to move quickly to start and finish on time, the residents were also keen to ensure that any work wouldn't affect the look of the building in any way.

The scale and scope of any job is determined by an initial survey

"We knew the listed building would be a challenge – panelled walls and historic carpeted interiors often need specialist teams involved – but the biggest obstacle turned out to be the 1980s additions." Openreach specialist Rashid Patel explained.

"We discovered that the footways and cable ducts in each new building were blocked. After rodding in from the road, we could pinpoint the problem – the ducts directly under the comms cupboards in each block were filled with concrete and sand."

That's a problem anywhere, but the usual solution of digging in a whole new access infrastructure underground wasn't really an option given the historic gardens and magnificent paved entrance around the Hall.

Working closely with Roger Adams, the director overseeing the project and Dennis Ward, a fellow director and building surveyor, we assessed our options:

1. Dig down from the comms cupboard to clear the blockage
2. Dig out the concrete area in front of the new blocks
3. Lay an overlay cable up the cupboard and along a trench in the tarmac outside

Everyone was keen to avoid options 2 and 3 – although those were the easier routes – so the work would have minimal impact on the architecture and landscaping. In the end it took a lot of elbow grease as we had to rod and dig in the comms cupboards to clear all the blockages, with the absolute minimum impact on the surrounding areas.

"We have teams of problem solvers, with great technical understanding," says Rashid. "But we also know the value of local knowledge. We want to keep all our customers happy and we took on board the advice and experience of Roger and Dennis. As a building surveyor Dennis knew the pros and cons of each option – and the impact it might have on the estate."

Roger says: "I had to leave before the blockages were cleared and was dreading the worst when I got back. I was most impressed that it was all finished and everything had been made good already."

It took a bit of ingenuity, a lot of sweat and a steely determination to get the job done but now there's a fibre connection to the apartments in the main hall, all seven apartment blocks and a wi-fi extension in the Pavilion and Orangery. The 18th century listed building is now future proof. And the gardens look perfect.

"From the original survey to the internal work and the civil engineers getting involved there's been only courtesy and a keenness to get the job done. The timetable got a little bit stretched, but given the challenge, the whole installation could be considered first class."

Roger Adams, the director overseeing the project

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