

NEWSLETTER

Issue 25 May 2006

IHBC

WEST MIDLANDS BRANCH

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONSERVATION

DIARY DATES

NEXT BRANCH MEETING

- ❖ *Tuesday 6th June 2006.* To be hosted by Roger Cullimore at Leamington BC. To include inspection of a development that has received a CABE award and a presentation on contemporary design in the historic environment.

BRANCH MEETINGS 2006

- ❖ *Wednesday 20th September 2006.* At a location in Staffordshire. Date, venue and theme to be confirmed.
- ❖ *Thursday 30th November 2006.* Perhaps central Birmingham. Date, venue and theme to be confirmed.
- ❖ *Tuesday 13th March 2007.* At Ludlow, to be hosted by Colin Richards. To feature Green Conservation and technical developments in practice as deployed at Ludlow Castle.

PEOPLE

Noel Knight. In connection with his retirement from Herefordshire, Noel received a gift from the Branch in a presentation during the 3rd March Branch meeting in appreciation and acknowledgement of his very considerable contribution to our work. Noel plans to continue in a private capacity, and we will see him at future Branch meetings and events.

NEW BRANCH OFFICERS

The following were elected to office at the Branch AGM on 3rd March:

- ❖ **Debbie Boffin** (Lichfield City) as *Branch Secretary* in succession to *Vicci Cox*.
- ❖ **Mike Eaton** (private practice) as *Consultations Officer* in succession to *Micky King*.
- ❖ **Dave Burton-Pye** (South Staffordshire) to the newly-created post of *Newsletter Reporter*, primarily to cover events for the *Newsletter Editor* when he is unable to be present.

All the other branch officers were re-elected *en bloc* for a further year of office.



CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

Ian Kilby

Course Made Good

Those of you with an interest in matters nautical will be familiar with the above expression. The skill of a sailor relies on being able to assess the changing direction and strength of the wind, to be familiar with the currents and direction of the tides and to avoid obstacles on the way be they fixed such as rocks or moving such as other vessels. A course made good allows a sailor to reach their destination factoring in all these external influences.

There must be a metaphor on the horizon and here it is. In our work we all know what we want to gain from a particular negotiation, be it with a client, contractor, architect or council officer. As in many instances the same goals are not shared between the parties concerned we find that other factors can push us off course from our desired objective.

A recent example of this for me concerns the design of a new supermarket. I should start by saying the proposal has no affect on the historic environment whatsoever but the site occupies a gateway (not that supermarket) location to the town so it was felt that the design required something more than the standard solution. This being a continental based retailer with a number of stores throughout Europe it had a strong identity –so much so that design flexibility is limited and usually rested whether the building (a portal framed structure), is faced in brick or render. As a footnote this was not just a case of brand image, it meant that the retailer has complete cost certainty over the build and even imports its own tried and trusted labour from Germany to ensure everything goes to plan.

Well it didn't go to plan in Shrewsbury. Officers called for a bespoke design and a strong architectural statement. The design was revised to incorporate intersecting mono-pitched roofs and lots of glass. On presentation to planning committee the scheme was criticised on all accounts, the Councillors didn't want the building at all, in particular because the proposal would require the demolition of a neo-vernacular road house pub. A second scheme was submitted, this time with a significantly higher specification but still broadly the same design. Again, despite support from officers, Councillors refused the application, this time on design grounds alone (when

all else fails design seems to be a good catch all reason for refusal).

The retailer has appealed both decisions and a local arsonist has since burnt the pub down. In an effort to progress things officers and local members met with the applicants to try and get things back on course. The retailer appointed a local architect and worked with our councillors to understand their concerns. After three lengthy meetings we now appear to have agreed a scheme that will gain the support of local members. It is the same size and has the same siting as before. The roof is similar but now omits the mono-pitched elements. The key change is the facing material which is now brick rather than the terracotta block promoted by officers in the previous schemes. I discussed the matter with the planning officer after the meeting and noted that after six months of discussions, two refusals, two appeals pending and three special design team meetings that the revised scheme was remarkably similar to the rejected solution. I suppose it just goes to show that you can get there in the end but often the journey is not by the most direct route.

EDITORIAL

I duly sat down immediately after the 3rd March Meeting & AGM to write up the day for the Newsletter. Came the inevitable summons from the Secretary for the finalized edition. Panic! I couldn't find what I had written anywhere. Only after much agonized searching did I spot the right file name on a floppy disc. Phew! I must be more careful next time.

BRANCH MEETING & AGM 2006

3rd March 2006

Took place in the Council Chamber, Shrewsbury Guildhall, hosted by Ian Kilby. See the minutes for details of both meetings. A special 'thank you' to Ian for making the day's arrangements.

Lunch followed at the nearby *Anchor* Public House. On the way to lunch there was the opportunity to inspect the site of the forthcoming *Civic Theatre* on a site next door but one to the Guildhall.

After lunch, there was a visit to the Grade I *Ditherington Flax Mill*, an internationally important 'Building at Risk' with a site walkabout and the opportunity to view part of the original flax mill interior.

See the separate reports below for details.

VIEW OUT OF THE WINDOW

3rd March 2006

The Council Chamber had windows looking east and south. The east window provided an overview of a very large car park with glimpses of the riverside and central Shrewsbury in the middle distance. The south window had an impressive view indeed, with the riverside in the foreground, bridged by a contemporary-design single-pier suspension bridge. Then, on the other side of the river, the spectacular skyline of historic Shrewsbury, with its frontages, roofs, towers and spires. The full splendour of the view was cut off at the top by a trendy *brise-soleil*, one of several contemporary features featured in the traditional-appearance Guildhall building.



View from Council Chamber window, showing pedestrian footbridge and Shrewsbury skyline

CIVIC THEATRE, RIVERSIDE, SHREWSBURY

3rd March 2006

This is a municipal project. Shrewsbury and Atcham BC intend to commit £26m to create a new performance venue with two auditoria, one large and one small. Architects Levitt Bernstein have designed a large and architecturally interesting building to meet the client brief.

The site, on the riverside next-door-but-one to the Guildhall, seems to have been chosen for no other reason than that it was available. The choice of this site has confronted the scheme architects with an extensive array of constraints :

- ❖ Within the River Severn floodplain;
- ❖ Flood defences that do not fully satisfy Environment Agency criteria, which means that the building needs to be raised above flood-water level;
- ❖ The presence of the substantial remains of the Medieval St George's Bridge, which survived until the end of the C18 before being replaced by the present Welsh Bridge.
- ❖ Historic (Listed) buildings immediately next door which do not exceed three-stories-with- pitched-roof in height.
- ❖ Small site area.

The combination of these constraints has required the designers to create a tall building so as to provide the necessary volume and facilities.

The excavated remains of the Bridge are to be encapsulated within the theatre. Current proposals are to box them in rather than have them on public view with interpretation.

The present scheme is available in drawn, model and "virtual reality" form. Clearly, architectural quality is high, employing much of the design vocabulary used by the same firm at Hanley, Stoke on Trent. The designers have attempted to deal with the contrast in scale with the surrounding buildings by stepping the building up towards the middle. However, site area is so restricted that the necessary, large fly tower is still very close to the eastern site boundary, 'towering' (literally) over the neighbouring C18 historic building.

Ultimately, the present scheme involves municipal expediency clashing head-on with the principles of urban design.

Site Inspection

On 3rd March the Archaeology Team was on site completing the exposure of St George's Bridge. Two cobbled roadways were visible. The upper being presumably that of the bridge in its final C18 condition whilst the lower being of the C13, when the

first stone bridge was installed - in succession to a timber predecessor.

The bridge had been fortified, with gate towers at both the Frankwell and Town sides of the River. at the same time . To the west, there was a substantial ashlar plinth of a turret.

Prior to excavation, the first arch of the bridge had been a visible survivor. The present dig was demonstrating the substantial and extensive degree of survival of the plinth, footings and abutments.



The archaeology team on site at St George's Bridge, showing the surviving arch

Site clearance was not complete. There still survived some stone rubble burgage plot boundary walling, with a C19 brick stable built on top of one section.

Stripping of accretions from the historic building on the east side of the site had revealed that it had started life as a substantial early C18 town house, with rusticated quoins and good quality rubbed brick flat arches over window openings – contrasting strongly with the C18-C19 'industrial vernacular' of the east face of this same building.



West face of early C18 town house converted to a warehouse. Guildhall immediately behind

Also marked for retention is a tall brick chapel featuring round-headed windows and cast-iron glazing grids. It now operates as a tyre warehouse with the disbenefit of paint on its street gable, but nonetheless possesses considerable character and the possibility of easy reinstatement.



Mid C19 chapel in secular use as a car tyre shop

Comment

Before the arrival of the Guildhall the general area of this part of the Riverside had been rather run down. However, the advent of the new civic offices and its associated car parking has already resulted in some form of regeneration. New housing has been created in the locality and a block of apartments was on site under construction on 6th March.

Despite the failure of the client to consider the urban design and the cultural heritage factors as part of the decision-taking process, the new building could be something of an asset to Shrewsbury, providing a building of design quality (far, far superior to the neighbouring Guildhall) on a prominent riverside frontage site with the potential of becoming a regional centre for the performing arts – the Shrewsbury setting being intrinsically more attractive to prospective patrons than the competing 'big city' venues of Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

History

St George's Bridge had its moment in history. Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, arrived at Shrewsbury on his way to battle with King Richard III. The burgesses of Shrewsbury shut the bridge tower gates in his face. Only after lengthy negotiations did they grudgingly open up to let the future King Henry VII enter their town.

DIDDINGTON FLAX MILL, SHREWSBURY

3rd March 2006

The day included the opportunity to visit the Grade I Diddington Flax Mill, a very large 'Building at Risk'. It is a building of international significance, being the first iron-framed building in the world, dating from 1796.

One hundred years after being built it was converted into a maltings, and survived in use as an operational maltings to as recently as 1987. Since then, it has become a big problem. Its very size is one of the issues. A series of developers bought the site, but never succeeded in evolving a scheme that would stack up financially. Finally, last year, English Heritage bought the property from a creditor for £900,000.

English Heritage face a number of problems, including:

- ❖ Lack of street frontage and street 'presence' – the site has a poor quality 'light industrial' frontage to the nearby main road, which is in separate ownership;
- ❖ Limited free land on site for enabling development;
- ❖ Aggressive local juvenile population who exploit the building for confrontations with the emergency services, stoning firemen and policemen, and inflicting frequent damage and arson attempts;
- ❖ The physical condition of the building, which includes high level dry rot and structural movement that has involved cracking of the iron frame;
- ❖ A 'conservation deficit' of at least £4m (2004 figures).

The current position is that English Heritage are undertaking a careful evaluation of condition with a view to taking decisions.

In the meantime, the site is kept clean and tidy, with regular checking for, and rectification of, vandalism.

Site Visit

The Mill is built to a large scale. The original Flax Mill stands tall and narrow, to four stories, capped with a row of small gables on each long frontage. Wall faces are largely blank brick – a result of the conversion into maltings, which only required a minimum of window openings for the purposes of ventilation. However, the blocked-in windows of the original build are clearly visible.



Tall main frontage, topped by a row of gables reflecting the unexpected roof form.

A slightly later wing runs to the north at the east end at the same height. Its own north face is studded with a large array of tie plates. At the junction of the two is a *jeu d'esprit* involving a closeboarded turret capped with an open wrought iron belvedere. Next again to the east is the huge pyramid roof of the malt kiln.

But the site contains more still. At the east extremity is the detached "Apprentice Home", a

three-storey residential block with sash windows and the remains of pedimented doorcases. To the north is a remarkable grain store building with exotic bargeboarded covered hoists projecting out horizontally from the roof slopes. Most modern of all is a 1930s or 50s concrete silo in the north-west corner, matching the tallest for height. Finally, there is a range of offices and stables set around the west entrance courtyard.



'Railway style' hoist to grain store. There are two of these.

We had the opportunity to inspect the interior of the original flax mill portion.

Each floor is characterised by a large number of slender cast-iron columns. Yet, as one ascends, the higher the fewer, until, on the top floor, there is only one row running along the centreline. The columns support transverse girders embedded in the original segmental 'fire proof' brick vaulting. On the top floor, these segmental vaults slope up to the centre in an almost tent-like fashion. The whole of this interior was pigeon-free, thanks to the use of well-maintained coarse mesh in all the window openings.

Oddly, the structural frame was never a complex 'box'. The outside walls were load bearing, being used to support the cast-iron girder ends. This design feature has generated something of a problem. First of all, the wall cured and settled after construction. Then, second, timber bearings were used under the girder ends. Being in an outside wall, they have been susceptible to rot. The consequence has been downward pressure on the girders, which has led to girder fractures at the point where the metal bears on the internal columns.

Maltings conversion resulted in the laying of smooth concrete floors on top of the original fireproof construction. The cast iron columns (most being cross-shaped in horizontal section) were exploited as locating flanges for boards separating the malt storage into compartments. One or two malt 'scoops' survived in situ within.

The side wing had a very interesting hybrid construction roof, in which timber rafters and ties had

been attached to iron trusses and purlins, the latter of 'fish belly' shape.

One window in the grain store had been dislodged, revealing another fine lightweight metal roof truss supported on cast-iron columns.

The south boundary was formerly an arm of the old Shrewsbury Canal. It is now marked by wall with a stone coping and a deep drop on the other side to the 'light industrial' premises fronting the main road. However, owing to the cutting-through of the derelict and abandoned canal by the modern dual carriageway to the east of Shrewsbury, canal restoration is not a short term option capable of making a positive contribution to the future of the site.

Immediately to the west of the site is a pleasant extended group of early Victorian housing, with a good early C19 yellow brick Neo-Classical church on the far side.



View from north, showing north wing and centre 'belvidere' turret. Grain store in shadow to the right.



View from the west outside the curtilage. Boundary wall and ancillary stabling. C20 concrete silo to left and part of main block – with attached hoist – to extreme right.

Comment

Clearly, there are no easy answers to the building's future. However, the original flax mill is so special that perhaps it should simply be consolidated and

opened to the public as an industrial monument, with no more than a modest amount of interpretation.

The Apprentice Homes, having been created as residential, could go back to the same function, with the benefit of giving the site 24-hour security. The grain store, with its largely 'open plan' interior, could be used for an extraordinary variety of purposes.

Clearly, a viable future for the site is a very tough problem, characterised by a succession of failed proposals and ownerships since maltings use ceased. In fact, a self-sustaining future may not be the answer at all. Instead, operation of the site as an industrial monument may be the simplest thing to do, given central government backing.

AWARDS

Two West Midlands historic buildings received commendations in the 2006 Civic Trust Awards. These were the *Birmingham Back-to-Backs* and the *Harris & Pearson Building*, Brierley Hill. Interestingly, both projects were undertaken by 'revolving fund' charitable trusts – the *Birmingham Conservation Trust* and the *West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust* respectively. No less interestingly, both projects were undertaken by the same professional team and contractor – S T Walker & Duckham, John Austin & Partners, Hancock Wheeldon & Ascough, William Sapcote & Sons – the team moving directly from completing the Back-to-Backs to starting on Harris & Pearson.

There was a third Commendation awarded to a townscape improvement scheme in Wolverhampton, the reinstatement of shopfronts and upper floors of a c1900 block in Worcester Street.

LETTER

Thank you!

May I through the columns of the Branch NEWSLETTER thank all members who attended the recent meeting in Shrewsbury very much for not only the gift and "clown" cake (most appropriate), but also for their good wishes in advance of my impending retirement from Herefordshire Council on March 31st.

As many of you will be aware I am proposing to set up my own advisory practice, and not just playing golf etc. I have every intention of not only remaining a member of the IHBC but also as an active branch member and will look forward to your continuing friendship at our future meetings. In the meantime, my very best wishes and thanks to you all.

I won't bore you with "The memoirs of an Historic Building Surveyor" just yet!

Noel Knight

REVIEW

RESTORED TO GLORY The BBC2 TV series

To the greater majority of viewers, this was probably just another of those property programmes; but, in this instance, relating to the older house integrated with numerous shots of three professionals driving around in a Land Rover, sitting round a table or commenting sometimes kindly and other times not on various aspects of building restoration.

Perhaps the series should have been accepted at face value. However, if the IHBC alone is anything to go by there were at least a thousand

critics glued to the screen. Yes, I was one. Unfortunately I missed the first episode, however from the second onwards I was hooked, but I regret to say not necessarily for the good, indeed on occasion I found myself getting quite cross. However having slept on the episode in question and had time to reflect a host of questions came to mind together with numerous excuses for that which had taken place, such as:

- ❖ What was the message of the series? Was it BBC 2's attempt at one-upmanship on property programmes compared to other channels, or an attempt to raise the profile of our historic heritage with the viewing public?
- ❖ The big unknown, which I suspect to be extremely high, is the amount of film that ended up on the cutting room floor, and dare I say it, did the producer fully understand his topic.

On reflection, would not the final episode have been better shown first by way of an introduction to the series? Extracts from each structure depicting condition and final goal, plus an insight towards planning law pertaining to our historic structures (and our heritage), methods and materials used in restoration work, and the approach that should be adopted. Hindsight is great, but it may have helped the layman to appreciate the works undertaken and reasoning applied to each property.

- a) Time in each episode was tight, but opportunities were missed – I refer for example when John pointed out a crown-post structure. The camera panned in to it all too briefly and it was gone. A simple sketch or illustration explaining its form could have been most helpful. Were our experts really not familiar with weather-boarded timber-framed houses?

The Vicarage – what was the conservation officer thinking (with no disrespect)? A fine pitch pine staircase mutilated because the owner wanted oak to match her new floorboards that replaced all those that were burnt. A good brick floor ripped up and skipped – the owner didn't like brick and wanted under-floor heating apparently, so they could have been re-laid. Any enforcement action or requests for Listed Building consent – or did that form a part of that which was left out in the editing? A pity. The layman could in consequence be forgiven for an attitude of "anything goes" where LB's are concerned.

- b) Our experts enthused about a window – the result, it along with all the other windows in the house were replaced with units of more modern styling (and what appeared to be double glazing rebates), and with the full approval of the conservation officer.

There were other niggles, but it is all too easy to be an observer ignorant of restraints associated with the programme and criticise in consequence, however I have to say that I did enjoy the series. BUT, and here is the sting in the tail no doubt shared by my peers, I was astounded at the seemingly wide-ranging attitudes portrayed by the conservation officers in their approach to Listed Buildings. As I have already said, maybe the answer to that also lies on the cutting room floor. It would also have been useful for there to have been discussion with the architects or agents involved with each project and for our experts to have met with the conservation officers. Though again time probably would not permit, added to which I'm probably looking too deeply into what was an enjoyable number of programmes, and yes, if the opportunity arose, I would welcome a further series.

Noel Knight

EDITOR'S COMMENT. This review has to some extent been overtaken by our National Chairman's

article in *CONTEXT*, confirming that this TV series was indeed the victim of "production engineering".

EDITOR'S SHOPPING LIST

Your Editor welcomes, for the next Edition of the Newsletter (No 26), to go out in the Summer of 2006, the following:

- ❖ Personal news of moves, retirements, arrivals;
- ❖ Copies of announcements and press releases;
- ❖ Case Studies;
- ❖ Letters;
- ❖ Articles on Law and Techniques;
- ❖ Book Reviews.

Material for inclusion in No 26 should, preferably, arrive not later than the middle of August 2006.

Please contact your *Newsletter Editor* :
Peter Arnold, 16 Elmbank Road, Walsall WS5 4EL;
01922 644219; pdarnold@care4free.net

PICTURE POSTSCRIPT



Shrewsbury Guildhall from the west, indicating the 'industrial vernacular' style used



Diddington Flax Mill. NW corner of main block, showing close-boarded hoist.