

Finding new uses for redundant industrial buildings, and working with the community to deliver local aspirations

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There are over 1,600 grade 1 and grade 2* 'buildings at risk' in England alone (Scotland, Ireland and Wales have separate registers). These buildings are regarded as being in the 'top 6%' of heritage buildings in the country on account of their architecture, history and social significance and yet are 'at risk' of being lost, generally because their poor condition means that the cost of repair exceeds what is financially viable. The Architectural Heritage Fund was established by Government over thirty years ago to provide a source of grant and loan funding for voluntary organisations trying to rescue the buildings at risk in their neighbourhoods. There are now over two hundred 'Building Preservation Trusts' registered with the Architectural Heritage Fund and they share the same basic objective: *'to preserve for the benefit of the townspeople of the locality, whatever heritage may exist in the form of buildings of particular beauty, architectural or constructional interest'*. Trusts generally do this by taking historic buildings into their ownership and by applying public and charitable funds to secure their conservation and re-use.

Over the years, two types of building preservation trust have developed: (a) single project trusts, established to rescue, preserve and manage one particular building and (b) rolling fund trusts, who undertake a programme of several projects, investing the proceeds of one project into the next. Both types of building preservation trust are, in effect, 'property developers', motivated by heritage rather than profit. They are established and managed by voluntary, unremunerated directors, and operate as charitable companies on an entirely not-for-profit basis. They are registered with the Charity Commission and monitored and regulated by the Commission to ensure that they continue to operate only for public benefit. The charitable status means that they can access grants and funds that are not available to the private sector, and donors can receive tax benefits to encourage them to contribute. The ability to access funds to tackle projects that are generally beyond market forces has led to building preservation trusts being known as 'developers of last resort'.

Ancoats Buildings Preservation Trust was established in 1995 to preserve the historic buildings of the Ancoats area of Manchester, in the north west of England. Ancoats is often described as the 'world's first industrial suburb', because it was developed very early in the Industrial Revolution as a community of factories, workers' housing, and social facilities (churches, schools, public houses) that operated almost like a self-contained village on the edge of the city. The houses (and pubs) were built by speculative developers to take advantage of the immigrants from the countryside and from Ireland, flocking into Manchester in search of work. Religious groups then funded the churches and the first schools. (In some places, factory owners philanthropically built houses and schools for their workers, but not here. Ancoats was developed on a purely commercial basis.)

Ancoats is famous for its cotton spinning mills, which were the first large, urban factories in the world to be driven by steam power. Prior to this, mills were powered by water and had to be located on rivers with an adequate flow of water. Then steam engines were introduced to pump water over the water wheel when the flow was inadequate. Ancoats was the first place to harness steam power directly, and this meant that the mills did not need to be located near rivers. Also their size was not determined by the capacity of the river / waterwheel but by the skill of the builder.

Cotton spinning prospered in Ancoats from the late 1790s well into the twentieth century, but the mills were converted to other textile-related uses during the Second World War – such as the making of military uniforms and parachutes – and later suffered from competition from new

producers in India and the Far East. After the War the mill complexes were gradually sold off into many different ownerships, and units rented out for low-grade uses such as storage of imported clothing and coat hangers. In the 1960s much of the housing in Ancoats was demolished as being unfit and residents moved to new estates further out of the city. As a consequence of the loss of population, many of the shops, churches, schools and public houses closed and Ancoats fell into rapid decline. Vandalism, arson, fly tipping and squatting became a serious problem, and Ancoats started to be known as a 'no go' area. In an attempt to protect the heritage of the area, in 1989 the heart of Ancoats was declared a Conservation Area and fourteen of its buildings were listed.

Meanwhile, during the 1990s Manchester developed as an attractive European centre, with the warehouses and mills of Castlefield and the city centre being converted into loft apartments and quirky office space. The city was unsuccessful in securing the year 2000 Olympics but was invited to host the 2002 Commonwealth Games, which would be focussed on a new stadium in East Manchester, near Ancoats. Developers suddenly started to show interest in the redevelopment potential of the mills of Ancoats, and despite their deteriorating structural condition, the buildings changed hands for higher and higher prices. Often the purchasers were 'trader developers' with no intention of undertaking refurbishment projects themselves, but keen to secure planning consents and to trade on the buildings for others to convert. But whilst acquisition prices increased, the buildings still had no 'end value', as the general public was not interested in living in Ancoats and there was thus no 'market' for the proposed apartments. The 'conservation deficit' between the end value of the buildings and the costs to repair and convert them, meant that development was unviable and no activity took place.

In the mid 1990s a number of agencies were established to tackle the anti-social behaviour and physical deterioration in Ancoats, and to promote regeneration in the area:

- Eastside Regeneration, which focussed on social issues: community safety, training and educational attainment; childcare and family support
- The Ancoats Urban Village Company, which was established to encourage private sector investment, particularly in the potential of 'gap sites' for new buildings
- The Ancoats Buildings Preservation Trust, whose role was to protect the historic buildings from demolition or inappropriate conversion
- Additionally, the North West Regional Development Agency, established by Government to take a lead in economic development in the north west of England, identified East Manchester as one its priority areas

These four organisations developed a 'shared vision' for Ancoats as an 'Urban Village' (a concept that was very fashionable at the time, on account of the personal interest of Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales). The Urban Village would be an attractive, safe environment in which up to 5,000 people would 'work, rest and play'. The best of the old buildings would be preserved and refurbished for economically viable new uses, new buildings would be constructed of the highest architectural design quality, and squares and traffic-calmed streets would contribute to a vibrant public realm. **[Photo 2]**

Within the overall framework for the Ancoats Urban Village the building preservation trust's primary role was to fight for the heritage buildings, by contributing to planning debates and working with owners to get them to look after their buildings. It soon became apparent that owners were not interested in restoring their properties, however, either because their rental income was insufficient to cover the costs of repair, or because they were waiting for the market to pick up in order to trade on their property to a developer for refurbishment. A grant scheme initiated by English Heritage, the Government's national heritage agency, had some impact. It offered a 'carrot and stick'

approach: 75% grants to help with emergency repairs were available to the owners of key listed buildings, and could be used towards the cost of temporary roofs, or boarding up windows to prevent unauthorised access. If owners refused to undertake grant-aided urgent works, the authorities could use the 'stick' of statutory action to force them to do so. In the event, however, when the real pressure was imposed, the owners just sold on their properties to another naïve owner and the deterioration continued.

In 2001, a step change in regeneration progress was made when the North West Regional Development Agency (NWRDA) was granted wide-ranging powers to acquire private property to facilitate regeneration. All the buildings within a 12-hectare site were identified for compulsory purchase. Owners were invited to submit proposals that were in line with design guidance, together with costed, funded programmes for execution within a set timeframe. Those whose development plans were acceptable and deliverable, were required to enter into development agreements with the NWRDA. Property freeholds were vested in the Agency, and 999-year leases, with covenants, granted on satisfactory completion of the development. Those owners who did not have the will or the ability to undertake redevelopment plans, received compensation at a good market price, and new developer-owners were selected through competition. This process immediately increased the speed of regeneration, as all owners were forced into development at the same time, rather than always waiting for the man next door to develop first, or developing in isolation, which would be unattractive to potential end occupiers.

One of the critical projects in the Ancoats Urban Village was Murrays' Mills, a complex of two multi-storey cotton spinning factories and associated offices, engine houses and a chimney, arranged around a square courtyard. The buildings provided over 12,000 m² of what was then semi-derelict, vacant workspace. They were grade 2* listed and included on English Heritage's Heritage At Risk Register in the highest risk category. Built between 1798 and 1804, the buildings were Manchester's oldest cotton spinning mills and the UK's earliest remaining example of an urban steam-driven mill complex. They were however in several different ownerships, including an absentee landlord who owned the courtyard, chimney and site of a demolished structure; a retired businessman who had rented space to a number of small textile-related, but unviable, enterprises; and a local builder and his estate agent wife, who wanted to carry out a redevelopment but did not have the funds or expertise to do so.

It was clear to the regeneration agencies that the Murrays' Mills buildings would require a considerable amount of public investment to preserve their heritage and bring them back into a condition where they would be capable of economically-viable conversion to new uses. This level of funding would not be available to the private sector, and the public agencies did not have the capacity or will to undertake such a venture. And so it was that Ancoats Buildings Preservation Trust, with a voluntary board of directors (Trustees) and just one member of staff, embarked upon the £12m 'permanent shell repair' of Murrays' Mills.

A four-year fund raising programme was undertaken by the Trust alongside statutory action by the NWRDA to secure ownership of all the buildings. The Heritage Lottery Fund, established in 1997, eventually provided over £7m, which at the time was the largest grant ever awarded to a voluntary organisation. It represented a brave change of direction for the Lottery, which up until then had focussed on supporting museums, visitor attractions and archive collections. This was the HLF's first taste of regeneration and one of its earliest major grants outside London. The NWRDA secured ownership in 2003 and granted a lease to the building preservation trust, as well as over £4.7m in grant (although it was anticipated that some of this would be recouped when the property was sold on to the private sector for conversion).

The shell repair project was designed to return the Murrays' Mills buildings to a structurally sound and watertight condition, re-establishing original load paths, preserving as much original fabric as

possible and only 'upgrading' the buildings where it would not be possible to do so during the subsequent conversion project. The buildings had very limited foundations but underpinning would have prevented the natural movement of the lime-mortared masonry, so supplementary reinforced concrete foundations were introduced to the inside of the external walls. Thermal insulation was introduced into the roofs, but original timbers were preserved and repaired wherever possible, and the new slate finish used Welsh slate installed using traditional techniques. Structural strengthening to enable the floors to meet modern loading standards was achieved by 'flitching' steels into the original timber joists and inserting new columns to supplement the existing cast iron structure. Modern double-glazed metal windows were inserted, to re-introduce the long-lost small pane window pattern but to meet current thermal and acoustic performance expectations. Work began on site in September 2004 and was completed – on time and under budget – in June 2006.

The work of the building preservation trust is not just about preserving buildings, however. We are also concerned about engaging with the community, interpreting the local history and enabling people to understand, learn from and enjoy their heritage. At Murrays' Mills we organised informal open days and guided tours of the buildings and the neighbourhood. These were so successful that we decided to develop a whole programme of activities as a separately funded project, undertaken alongside the building contract. The Heritage Lottery Fund was again the main financial supporter of the 'Skills, Schools and Stories' programme, which had a budget of £145,000 over two years.

The building preservation trust employed a Community Development Officer to develop and manage the Skills, Schools and Stories project. Skills taster days were provided for 14-19 year olds from the deprived East Manchester community, many of whom had experienced three generations of unemployment in their families. The days enabled the young people to get 'hands on' experience of the building site and encouraged several to enrol on construction courses. The Stories element was aimed at 7 and 8 year olds in local schools, and over 300 children visited the building site during construction (which was quite a health & safety challenge). Materials handling and machinery demonstrations helped to encourage the children about the potential of the construction industry as a future career option, as well as reinforcing the message that building sites are dangerous places and not playgrounds. Art workshops, story telling and drama classes in school also promoted the history of Ancoats, and encouraged the children to talk to older members of their family about their past. Finally, a volunteer programme enabled the trust to record the memories of older residents and to create oral history tapes and an illustrated scrapbook publication.

During the Murrays' Mills construction project, a developer competition was held to select a partner to take on the repaired buildings. A scheme for conversion to residential apartments, offices, a hotel and restaurants was approved – but the programme is currently 'on hold' on account of the economic crisis, and sadly Murrays' Mills remain empty to this day, but watertight, protected and ready for conversion when the right time comes.

The Ancoats Urban Village project has been well-documented in urban regeneration journals and despite the economic downturn it has been heralded as a great success. The Murrays' Mills project won many conservation and regeneration awards and as a result of this project and the Trust's other work in Ancoats, English Heritage and many of the Trust's partners and supporters were keen to see the organisation expand its area of operation. Thus, after many months of business planning and negotiations with the Charity Commission, in January 2007 Ancoats Buildings Preservation Trust changed its name to 'Heritage Works', with a broadened geographical area of benefit enabling the Trust to work anywhere in England and Wales! Heritage Works also has a second charitable objective: *to educate the general public in the processes of conservation and regeneration of historic buildings* (which explains why I was able to come and address the

Industrial Heritage conference in Brussels in December 2008, and why I am now presenting this paper!)

Over the last two years we have concentrated on projects within 50 miles or two hours' travel time of our office base in Manchester. This area includes the post-industrial cities of Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Stoke-on-Trent, and although the Trust can work with any historic building, the focus has been on former industrial sites. Our aim is to make heritage work: physically, economically, socially and environmentally.

Funding programmes have changed considerably in the UK over the last few years and Heritage Works can no longer rely on grants to cover its operational costs. Alongside developing its own projects, the Trust now offers consultancy services including feasibility study commissions and historic building management for private or public owners.

Here is a sample of some of the Trust's recent and current projects:

- A feasibility study commission (client: Stoke on Trent regeneration agency) for Burleigh Pottery, the UK's last remaining steam-driven pottery. We showed how operations might be reconfigured to release space for workshops, offices and holiday accommodation to provide a rental income to help pay for the costs of refurbishment and to sustain the business.
- A partnership project with an ethnic minority community group in Sheffield, to help them acquire a former cutlery factory, to be converted to provide training rooms, flats and shops for local people. We assisted the group to employ a design team to undertake a feasibility study, and the group is now progressing the project.
- An extensive community consultation exercise and options appraisal for the grade 2* listed canal warehouse in rural Derbyshire. As the building has a canal flowing through it, it is not suitable for many uses. Our study suggested a complementary new building to accommodate income-generating uses such as cafés, workshops and offices, as well as facilities for a relocated village library.
- A project to restore and convert the fire-damaged grade 2 listed Police & Fire Station in Edge Hill, Liverpool – an area which is currently undergoing controversial regeneration involving the demolition of many Victorian houses. This project will retain the historic building and its adjoining public house and convert both properties to provide office accommodation for community organisations.

Much of our work now concerns how projects may be delivered in the current economic climate. Local authorities are keen to work with us where private sector proposals have been put on hold because of financial difficulties. In recent decades developers have often built new residential properties to provide profit to offset the costs of historic building refurbishment, and these schemes are now proving unrealistic. Not-for-profit building preservation trusts, with their lower overheads, access to grant funding, abilities to engage with the community to achieve wider public benefits, and high conservation standards are definitely good news for historic buildings – and economic recessions are good news for building preservation trusts!