

IHBC

North West

Newsletter of the North West Branch of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation
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Issue 6

MIDLAND SAVED



The crisis at the Midland Hotel, reported in September's *North West* has been averted by the timely intervention of Urban Splash, who purchased the building at the end of January.

The company has plans to refurbish The Midland as a hotel, and has appointed Liverpool architects, Union North to develop the project in conjunction with English Heritage and Lancaster City Council.

The courageous decision to buy the hotel is Tom Bloxham's own. He has visited a few times in recent years, and recalls "The first time I happened to go, there were all those fortysomething punk-rockers staying for a Sham 69 or UK Subs concert. The second time I popped in for a cup of tea and a mediocre meal and it was overtaken by transvestites, and that included the people working there. They weren't even the glamorous kind – it was all five-day growth." Who could resist!

PdF

Editorial

The dismal mess that the British high street has become (see opposite) will be old news to readers. Many of you will have been press-ganged into schemes to revitalise the high street, only to observe that after the treatment, the patient shows little sign of long term recovery. The problem is that, at the same time as local authorities are devising design guides, shop-front enhancement schemes, refurbishment grants, etc, the economic rug is being pulled from beneath the feet of Britain's high street traders.

Does this really matter? It should to us. The high street should be the most prestigious street in any town displaying corporate and civic pride of the community. Instead many of the regions high streets have become decaying slums inhabited by discount operations hidden behind ugly metal shutters. What kind of message does that send out about

the way we view our communities and the value we place upon providing quality, inspiring environments for our citizens? Is it any wonder that the urban renaissance is at best sporadic? Who in their right mind would choose to live in an inner urban area, blighted by blocks of empty shops? when they could be living in clean and well maintained suburbia.

This region has been hit harder than most. Even if the supermarket is seen as the way forward, what do we do with the redundant blocks of shops in our older suburbs? The plots are generally too narrow to be redeveloped and their location, fronting busy main roads, often poor. Victorian shops, in particular, do not easily convert to alternative uses as it is near impossible to reduce the size of the ground floor window without disastrous aesthetic results. And yet often the solution to failing centres, proposed by planners and politicians, the very thing that is causing the problem in the first place. The shops are failing so lets build another supermarket. This issue is wider than just where we buy our cornflakes. It is central to whether the urban renaissance will ever succeed.

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The views expressed by contributors (including the editor) do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation

Streets for All

AGGREGATES LEVY funding has been agreed for a project aimed at improving the hard landscaping of streets in the North West. The *Streets for All* project will publish policy guidelines for better streetscape design, with illustrated examples of good and bad practice and detailed specifications for successful cases. *Streets* was initially devised and published for London (*STREETS FOR ALL: A guide to the management of London's streets*, English Heritage and Partners 2000) but has proved popular with many other authorities. Although the policy aspects of the publication are relevant outside the capital, case studies from London are not necessarily appropriate elsewhere. Now, with funding from the Aggregates Levy scheme, regional versions of *Streets for All* can be produced, promoting the use of local materials and regionally specific design solutions.

The Aggregates Levy is an environmental tax on the extraction of aggregate. The intention is to make the use of recycled materials a financially more viable alternative to new extraction. The Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund was set up to provide grants for environmental improvements, mitigating the impact of aggregate extraction. The Fund is currently being run as a two-year pilot scheme, ending in March 2004, and English Heritage is one of the agencies distributing the money (others are English Nature and the Countryside Agency). English Heritage has concentrated on projects that relate to the historic environment, archaeological sites and landscapes.

The allocation of money for English Heritage's part of the ALSF pilot programme is now complete. A review of the scheme will be carried out this year to decide whether it will continue after March 2004 and, if so, what the eligibility criteria will be. News about the extension of the scheme will be circulated in future editions of **North West** or can be found via the English Heritage web site (www.english-heritage.org.uk).

Meanwhile, if you have examples of good – or bad – streetscape design, particularly examples that make use of materials or features that have a local resonance, EH would like to hear about them.

Please contact ;

jennie.stopford@english-heritage.org.uk or send information to English Heritage, 3 Chepstow Street, Manchester M1 5FW.

Ghost Town Britain

Ghost Town Britain, a hard hitting report by the New Economics Foundation has highlighted the disastrous decline of local shops including, corner shops, grocers, high street banks, post offices, pubs and hardware stores on the British high street. This trend is set to continue, with unfortunate consequences for those hoping for an urban renaissance.

The New Economic Foundation claim that between 1995-2000 roughly 20% of high street institutions were lost, resulting in an increasing number of communities and neighbourhoods lacking easy access to services and shops. If this trend is to continue many communities in the UK of 3000 or less will no longer have these institutions. In a few low income neighbourhoods that fatal situation has already arrived. Over the next 10 years it will become commonplace.

NEF believe that there is no government willingness to tackle the real reasons why Britains towns are dying on their feet, namely: local markets increasingly dominated by (and preferential policy treatment towards) supermarkets, the failure to halt the downsizing of banks and post offices, transport systems that encourage car travel, weak planning controls on out of town stores and lack of support for truly local enterprises.

The report warns that the UK market could be close to tripping point, where the number of shops could crash dramatically, rather than following a steady trend of decline. When the number of local retail outlets falls below a critical mass, the quantity of money circulating within the local economy will suddenly plummet sharply, as people find there is no point trying to do a full shop at the impoverished local outlets. This is particularly true if people can no longer withdraw cash because of bank or cash point closures. The chain convenience stores are unlikely to be the salvation of local retail centres as they compete with independent shops in the same location and have no link between supplies and the local market.

Does it really matter?

NEF maintain that it is consumers themselves who lament the loss of local shops, but find themselves locked into a vicious cycle when closure and price, work and travel patterns, brands and advertising all conspire to undermine the local economy.

Indecisive Intervention

The government has made a commitment to improving shopping access for poorer people. Most high street banks have declared a moratorium on branch closures and the Post Office has said that it will not close rural branches for the next 5 years.

The supermarkets, in turn, are rushing to set up convenience stores in high street locations while farmers markets, organic vegetable box schemes and car boot sales are evidence of the groundswell of popular resistance to the standardisation of how we shop.

However these initiatives are failing to counteract the far greater economic forces that are devastating local services.

Ghost Town Britain is available from: the New Economic Foundation, Cinnamon House, 6-8 Cole Street, London, SE1 4YH Tel 020 7089 2800.

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The New Economics Foundation's suggestions to halt the decline include:

- 1) Tougher competition legislation outlawing predatory pricing strategies should be introduced, particularly selling food at a lower price than it was bought.
- 2) Local authorities should be given the right to veto any major retail development, as they do in France - or to veto theme or chain restaurants as some towns do in the USA**
- 3) Rate relief should be extended to more small stores in towns and villages where the local economy has been in decline. Rate relief should also be extended to pubs and community pharmacies in areas where the local economy in decline, and should be discretionary rather than applying the mandatory 50% to all cases
- 4) Local strategic partnerships, home zones and business improvement districts should include local retail plans and local authorities should set up neighbourhood retail managers as a counter to town centre managers.**
- 5) Banks along with the government should commit to a network of community banks in which the main banks share facilities and the costs of offering banking services in local areas.

Fire in Chester' Rows

The potentially catastrophic consequences of fire, within Chester's unique row system, was demonstrated during January 2002. Fire broke out in 61 Bridge Street and 67 to 69 Bridge Street row, a typical Georgian row town house of 4 storeys, with partly medieval, street level undercroft and extensive range of outriggers, writes John Healey.

The three bay frontage appeared to occupy two historic burgage plots.

The building showed many features common to row buildings of this era. To the principal building a plan form two rooms deep, with an intermediate longitudinal spine wall



accommodating the main stack. The principle rooms were located above row walkway and accessed by a stair located beside the central spine wall. The roof was aligned transversely with secondary stacks rising from the valleys shared with adjoining properties.

The building was in retail use, with separate shop units to street and row level. Above row level the building was occupied by a bridalwear company with both retail and workshops areas. The fire is thought to have broken out in these premises, most likely within the workshop areas.



The Fire

The fire developed during the evening after the premises had closed, however the alarm was raised only at midnight by which time the building was thoroughly ablaze. The property was not provided with any form of integrated fire detection system and the alarm was only raised once the fire had broken through the roof structure and when those occupying flats in adjoining premises were threatened by smoke impeding their escape by way of the row walkway. In an attempt to prevent the fire spreading, adjoining properties were hosed with water, notwithstanding the blaze spread across the roofs to 59 Bridge Street, 67-69 Bridge Street Row. Although refronted, the interior of this building contained a very fine early 17th century stair, together with contemporary chimney pieces and plasterwork.

Upon damping down it was clear the building was extensively damaged. The roofs to the rear outriggers were substantially lost and that to the principal building had been reduced to a series of charred and racked trusses. Stacks and walls remained standing, however the wall to the southern outrigger and particularly the rear wall of the principal building were in parlous condition with large areas of missing brickwork where lintels had burnt through. This wall was taken down immediately following the damping down operation. Floors remained in situ only to the front range of the principal building elsewhere there had been wholesale collapse of floors.

Building Act

Once the Fire Brigade had completed their operation, our Building Control Team took over the site under the Section 78 Emergency Measures of the Building Act, appointing consulting engineers to advise.



Unlike other provisions of the Building Acts, Section 78 makes no reference to consideration of the listed building legislation prior to undertaking any works. This has very significant implications in terms of controlling the amount and nature of any demolitions; the salvage of materials; the recording of the building, and the provision of any temporary protection as Section 54 (Urgent Works) is likewise over-ridden.

The site presented considerable difficulties in terms of making the buildings safe, both to the public and demolition contractors. In plan the site was very deep yet virtually land-locked. Save for tortuous rear alleyways adjoining the walls of the rear outrigger, the only feasible access into the site was from the street. The rubble of the demolished rear wall of the principal building and collapsed floors made accessing the building from below impossibly dangerous. It was therefore decided the danger would be removed from above, by way of cranes placed in the street. To reach the rear of the site and at considerable cost to the Council two of the largest mobile cranes available in the UK were brought to the site.

Building Recording



At this stage, it was agreed that a full photogrammetric record of the building would be made, together with a rapid assessment

of the standing building. To assist the previous planning history of the building was pulled, which in conjunction with the Rows Research Project provided full plans and elevations of the buildings and a photographic archive, which was later to prove invaluable in the replication of internal features of interest.

English Heritage's Heritage Engineering Team was also made available and entered into a very useful dialogue with Building Control's engineers, seeking to minimise the amount of demolition originally proposed.

Demolition

Activity was initially concentrated on further demolitions, mostly by crane but also in the initial phases by the use of the rear alleyways. At this stage there was no agreement on a watching brief nor for the sorting and salvage of materials. Progress at this stage was relatively rapid and losses of both material and archaeological evidence large. Having sought the assistance of a local reclamation yard, loss adjusters agreed to bear the costs of carting all material for safe off site sorting, evaluation and storage. The City Council also agreed to fund a watching brief, which allowed for the on site monitoring of the demolition, tagging of material and subsequent analysis at the reclamation yard. The methods of demolition remained unchanged, the priorities being the economic and speedy removal of danger.

Winter Weather

Meanwhile a wet and very windy late winter, severely limited crane operations, whilst Building Control's structural engineers became very concerned over wind loads to stacks and the partially damaged roofs to adjoining buildings. As a consequence there were further losses of fabric and further water penetration to the buildings. Of particular concern was the threat posed to the Jacobean interior of 67-69 Bridge Street Row.

Stabilisation

Works under Section 78 continued for a 12 week period. During this period substantial works of demolition and stabilisation had taken place. The front façade to 61 Bridge Street and 71-73 Bridge Street Row was saved at an early stage by a structural scaffold erected to prevent a feared collapse into the street. Behind the longitudinal spine wall most of the fabric of this building was lost above row level. To prevent the possible collapse of adjoining buildings into this void substantial braces were installed across the site. All remaining roof fabric and all stacks to 71-73 Bridge Street Row were removed. To 67-69 Bridge Street Row the fire damaged roof and gables to the rear of the central stairwell were removed, together with the non fire damaged roof to the stairwell together with stacks and gables to the entire roof structure.

Following handover of the site the insurers agreed to undertake various protective works that were not legitimately considered to form a part of the Section 78 works. These included providing temporary felt and boarded roofing and the soft propping of vulnerable surviving ceilings, together with ensuring adequate ventilation to rooms and floor voids.

Building Evaluation

A clearer picture of the evolution of the building emerged during the off site evaluation of the demolished material. Although likely to have been completely rebuilt in mid-late Georgian times, much re-used timber was found from stud walls, floors, lintels and bonding timbers. The consistency of this material suggested re-use from one site, most likely that of the present building and indicated the former presence of a late medieval townhouse of considerable status with fine moulded beams, likely coffered ceilings (similar to that to the dining room at Little Moreton Hall) and a caged newal stair. Unfortunately the intensity of the fire destroyed most of the Georgian interior including most doors and cases and the principal stair in its entirety.



Rebuilding

It was agreed with structural engineers and insurers that various timbers principally from the roofs, could be re-used in the re-build. As their context had mostly been lost it is also intended to utilise the various medieval timbers in a cosmetic form within the new building. Due to the dumping of material during the initial phase of demolition only 5 pallets of bricks suitable for re-use were recovered.

Initial proposals for the re-build involved a largely steel framed building behind a retained façade. The approved scheme now provides for reconstruction of walls on a like for like basis; the retention of the original plan form to most of the building excepting where an earlier unimplemented consent providing for further opening up of the row +1 level and also to provide for an upper floor living over the shop scheme. The principal stairs are to be replicated on the basis of archive photographic evidence. Ceilings and internal joinery to the principal rooms are to be replicated on the basis of photo and on site evidence. The roof structure is to be of steel, however parts of the original roof structure are to be reinstated on a cosmetic basis. To 59 Bridge Street Row, certain salvaged roof timbers are to be reinstated in a structural form and elsewhere the structure is to be replicated in oak. Buildings adjoining those most damaged by the fire have required the making good of party walls in one case by way of recording, partial demolition and rebuilding. During these negotiations the legal difficulties of asking the owners/insurers to rebuild in matching materials removed under Section 78 powers became evident, however there is now broad agreement to sourcing suitable material for the rebuild.

Work has now commenced on site preparation with a full archaeological watching brief determining the progress of these works. Reconstruction is proposed to commence in the early New Year.

Safety Review

Following the fire, a group has been established to review fire safety within the row complex. It is hoped that it will be able to recommend the best way forward towards an integrated approach to fire detection and protection within Chester's unique rows complex.

Heritage Information



All over the UK, traditional building skills are disappearing. Centuries-old apprenticeship systems have all but disappeared and young school-leavers are heading for the bright lights of the IT and service industries. At the same time there is a woeful lack of education about job opportunities in conservation.

It is against this bleak backdrop, that Heritage Information came into being. The creation of Dorian Crone, an architect, currently on a career break from English Heritage, Heritage Information is a web-based resource designed to gather together the key people, products and information relevant to conservation in the UK. This information will be presented to the public in the form of a virtual, 'one-stop' conservation

shop window.

Demand and Knowledge

Brian Wilson MP, Minister for Energy and Construction at the Department of Trade and Industry, believes Heritage Information could dramatically narrow the current gap between the demand for traditional skills and knowledge of their existence. "Heritage Information is taking the medium of the future to support the legacy of the past," he said. "By creating a vetted online register of craftsmen, contractors and consultants, Heritage Information will help building owners and managers find exactly the right people for the job."

Heritage Information – through heritageinformation.org.uk – is currently accessible to the public, but will not be officially launched until May this year. A team of researchers is currently loading information on to the site, but more data will be needed if the charity is to provide the comprehensive service it promises.

Hundreds of Products

Lydia Wilson, one of four Education Officers working at Heritage Information, explained: "We are currently registering hundreds of people, products, courses and sources of information on the site, but Conservation Officers and local authorities are an important source of information which could be channelled through Heritage Information directly to the people who need it. We are a charitable trust so we have no vested interests."

Vetted Register

As well as academic and training courses, books, news and jobs, Heritage Information will also offer the first-ever online *vetted* register of consultants, contractors and craftsmen. Vetting is based on ICOMOS guidelines for consultants and NVQ criteria for contractors and craftsmen. EVERYONE who is vetted has to submit comprehensive information about five projects they've worked on, along with references

People do pay to be on the site - much of this constitutes the cost of paying the registrar to carry out the vetting process. Contractors pay £300 (this entitles them to have up to three individuals vetted), consultants (ie one individual) pay £150 a year and craftsmen (ie one individual) pay £100. Product and material suppliers pay £300 a year to have one 'advertised' page on the site. Every page has the same, straightforward information, with no sales pitch apart from a description of the company and a picture of its product, service or logo.

It is free for course and information providers to be listed on the site, and it is free for the public to search the site.

Dorian Crone, Heritage Information's Director, believes that the backing of organisations including English Heritage, the National Trust and the Council for the Care of Churches will give people the confidence to use Heritage Information to find the skills or information they need.

"Heritage Information is all about putting people in touch with each other, making information easy to find and simplifying the process of conserving and restoring," he explained. "Our goal is 'making heritage happen' by providing an information service which will save people time and stem the tide of damage to the UK's historic landscape."

IHBC members are asked to help Heritage Information provide the best service it can by passing on details of consultants, contractors and craftsmen who might like to be contacted about appearing on the website. Telephone Lydia, Paula, Simon or Mike on 0207 2435888 or info@heritageinformation.org.uk.

Vale Royal: Historic Building Guidance

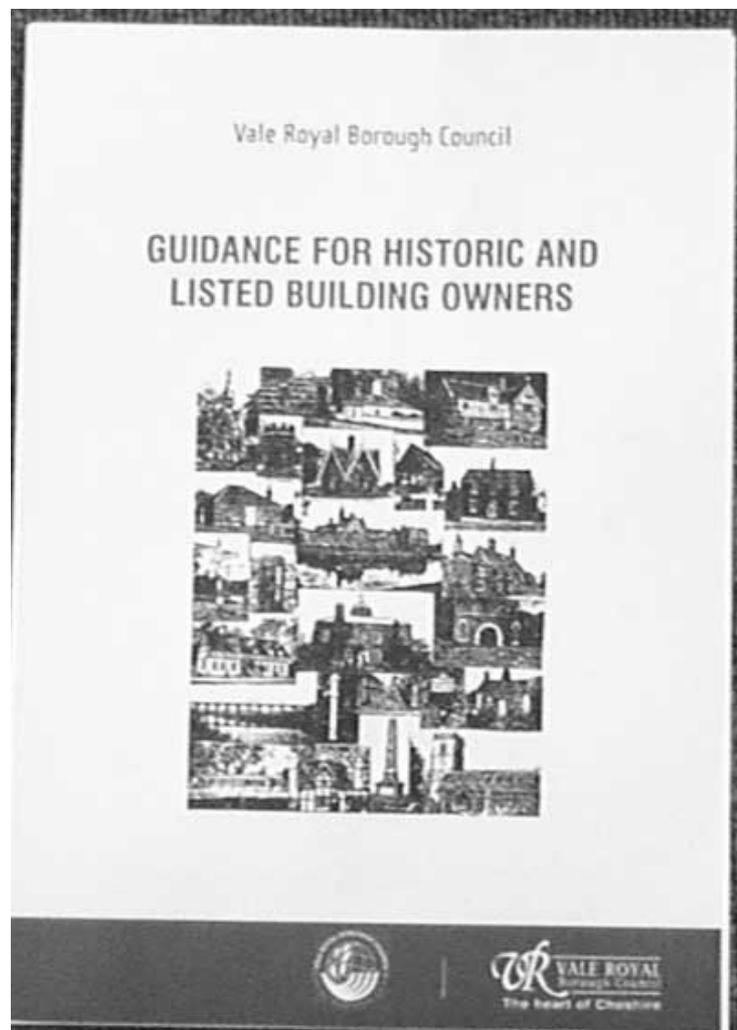
Vale Royal Council has published a booklet entitled "Guidance for Historic and Listed Building Owner."

Giving advice on the repair and maintenance of historic properties, the booklet has been sent to the owners of every listed building in the Borough. Its publication was timed to coincide with the first ever National Maintenance Week, which ran from 22 – 29 November. That was promoted by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings with the aim of helping and equipping property owners to identify basic maintenance problems in their homes in order to prevent decay.

The Borough Council's comprehensive booklet fitted into this theme. But as well as addressing repair and maintenance issues, the document also deals with VAT, grants, extensions, and planning and listed building control, amongst other topics. The booklet has also been published on the Council's website – www.valeroyal.gov.uk - to allow access by the owners of non-listed properties. It can be found as a link from the Historic and Listed Buildings Service page under the A-Z of Services or from Heritage or Environment Service headings.

Conservation and Design Manager Dave Hayes said, "This booklet is a way for the Borough Council to pass on the specialist knowledge and information that it has, to those who have day to day responsibility for the maintenance of these irreplaceable heritage assets that none of us wish to see fall into disrepair".

Along with the booklet, listed building owners and occupiers in Vale Royal have received the results of a visual condition survey of their property, conducted in 2001/2. This highlights those aspects of the property, to which owners will need to pay special attention. The details also include the listed building description and a map extract, to ensure that there is no confusion about which property is actually listed. Owners have been encouraged to complete a response sheet, so that any errors or queries can be addressed.



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