

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

Newsletter of West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust, Worcestershire Building Preservation Trust and City of Wolverhampton Regenerating Buildings Preservation Trust

Dear Friends and Supporters

Apologies for not being able to mail out our usual Newsletter which would have been due out now. We find ourselves in a very strange place at the moment but we think it is important to stay in touch with our members and let's hope that by the summer edition we shall be back to normal. Do remember you can keep up to date with us by following us in our Facebook page or checking into our website.

Events

Unfortunately we have had to cancel all of the events we were planning for this spring /summer season which is a shame because we were preparing a very exciting programme. It is of course very difficult to anticipate how long it will be before we can once again meet up for an event but do keep the evening of Thursday 8th October in your diary for our WMHBT AGM. This will take place in the Dadford Room at the Bonded Warehouse in Stourbridge and we shall be having a talk from Mark Davies the Chair of the Chance Heritage Trust. We shall of course be in contact again before that date but hopefully this will be something to look forward to. We all hope that you can keep safe and busy in the meantime and hope to see you all again in the autumn or sooner if possible.

Chairman's Blog March

I've been thinking about sustainability. "The quality of being able to continue over a period of time" or "the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level", are just two definitions I have found but, there are many more. Most people associate sustainability with green environmental conservation but the same principles must also be applied to our built heritage and historic buildings. Whenever we take on a project we are looking for a sustainable new use, a long term future for a historic building at risk. It can be tricky finding long term solutions and hard to predict what the future may hold!

Looking after historic buildings can be a costly business and taking on a listed building can sometimes be off putting to potential new owners. Some owners on the other hand love their heritage assets. On 13th March a group of trust members made a visit to Warwick Castle to see the conservation work being undertaken by stonemasons on the south front. We scaled a high scaffold and had a tour of the works in progress. The castle is Grade I Listed and partly a scheduled monument and as such any works must be carried out to the highest standards. It's a costly business but castle owners Merlin Entertainments recognise that the historic building is a valuable asset and invest in a regular programme of conservation and maintenance works to the highest standards. A balance is struck between conserving the building and operating a successful visitor attraction.



Conservation works make provision for safe access for visitors so that they can fully appreciate the building and the income generated provides a sustainable future for one of the most important heritage assets in the country. Long may it continue. It truly is a fabulous building.

The two projects that our Trusts are currently developing in Warwick and Droitwich are both challenging in terms of 'sustainability' being listed buildings that have been severely neglected for many years. Firstly, of course, adapting and reusing an old building takes advantage of the energy embodied in its historic fabric. The energy that was used to make the materials they are built of, transport them and construct them originally. This is recycling. Then, we are hoping that they will have sustainable futures providing much needed homes for local people. With 14% of greenhouse gases coming from our homes in the UK we are under increasing pressure to reduce carbon emissions and with the government setting the target of becoming carbon neutral by 2050 we must ensure those homes will be fit for purpose in the long term. In designing both projects our professional teams have to strike a balance between making alterations to facilitate and improve energy efficiency whilst safeguarding the special architectural and historic interest of the buildings. These things can't be rushed. Firstly we must ensure we understand the significance of the building and then minimise the impact of any interventions. Once again it is a question of balance and if we want these buildings and others to have a safe future in the long term then the decisions we make now will be critical.

Postscript

I started writing my 'blog' in early March and since then the challenges of sustaining historic buildings and the businesses and communities that work within them have become an even more critical issue. Many historic buildings depend on rental income and admission fees from visitors for their upkeep and I have noticed a lot of charities are now crowdfunding to try and maintain their income to see them over the crisis period. In particular I would urge you to look out for buildings preservation trusts who are struggling and consider lending some support over the coming months. Those who operate as museums and visitor attractions have been hit particularly hard as they depend on footfall and income from ticket and shop sales. A nearby example is the Newman Brothers Coffin Works in Birmingham managed by Birmingham Conservation Trust who are currently crowdfunding to see them through the crisis period (www.crowdfunder.co.uk/support-the-coffin-works) and now operate an on line shop. There are many other worthy cases across our area so do look out for those pleas for help and dig deep where you can.

PROJECTS PROGRESS REPORTS by David Trevis-Smith (Projects Organiser)

Willowcourt Farmhouse, Droitwich

An Options Appraisal commissioned by The Worcestershire Building Preservation Trust (WBPT) to investigate new uses for Willow Court Farmhouse (formerly known as Boycott Farmhouse) in Droitwich recommends conversion to six residential apartments to provide a secure future for the Grade II listed building. The Appraisal estimates there is a large conservation deficit between the costs of repair and refurbishment and the end-value. Grants towards project costs have been awarded by the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) and Wychavon District Council, both intended to form partnership funding to help secure a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The project includes a proposed agreement with Platform Housing Group for the farmhouse to continue to be owned by the Trust upon completion of the repairs and conversion work and leased to Platform for rent as affordable housing. This has potential to establish an innovative model for

solving two current challenges: saving historic buildings at risk and creating more affordable housing for people in need.

A first-round grant application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund was unfortunately turned-down at their Autumn 2019 meeting but in response to positive feedback, and thanks to continued support from Wychavon District Council, your trustees agreed to re-submit a revised bid strengthened in the ways detailed in the previous newsletter edition. That bid has now been assessed, though news of the decision is currently embargoed... *watch this space!*

Master's House, Warwick



Meanwhile, over at the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust's (WMHBT) project at the former Master's House and St Michael's Chapel in Saltisford, Warwick, Warwick District Council issued an Urgent Works Notice and subsequently instructed contractors who have installed internal and external scaffolding and a temporary roof to protect the Master's House until a refurbishment scheme is implemented (photo left).

The WMHBT scheme is to convert the historic buildings to provide affordable housing supplemented by new-build, which a Viability Appraisal report commissioned by WMHBT identified to be a sustainable new use for these two 'at risk' historic buildings.

A similar partnership is proposed to the one involving Willow Court Farmhouse, in this case between WMHBT and Platform Housing Group and there is a conservation deficit which needs to be bridged by external funding. Grants have been secured from Warwick District Council and AHF, with Historic England willing to consider an application in due course. Thanks to this funding and partnership support, research data and reports needed to inform applications for statutory consents, as described in the previous newsletter edition, have been obtained and design work is in progress.

The aim is that an agreement on the basis of WMHBT acquiring the property will be reached, to enable WMHBT to consult on the designs and submit a planning application.

Meanwhile

We are monitoring the impact of COVID-19, actual and/or potential, on both projects. At present the impact is relatively minor; e.g. all of the consultants appointed to work on the projects are able to continue working, in some cases following organisational changes to enable home-working, and project meetings are able to continue using online meeting platforms via the internet. Public consultation and engagement with the projects will be more of a challenge as and when each project reaches relevant stages and programmes may need to be revised to use methods that don't require group sessions, to follow Government advice on social distancing. It should be possible to find solutions to such short-term challenges and all of our funders are being very supportive.

Thankfully, neither project has the complication of having a building contract running at this point in time as most non-essential construction works have been suspended. It would seem that decisions

to temporarily shut-down sites have been taken where it is not possible to operate the site safely, in accordance with social distancing and hygiene, or the supply of materials has been interrupted.

The longer-term impact of COVID-19 is perhaps the greater threat to our built heritage; if the legacy is a major economic downturn with a fall in property prices and in grant funding budgets then ways to find and implement a new sustainable future for buildings at risk will become all the more difficult. But where there's a will, there's a way!

NLHF Emergency Fund

We welcome the launch of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Emergency Fund which includes £50m of grant aid which can be accessed over the next 3-6 months as short-term funding to address immediate pressures for those most in need of help. Grants of £3,000 to £50,000 will be available.

Funding will be available to organisations that have received funding in the past and are either a current grantee, or still under contract following a previous grant. Applications will be open to the full breadth of heritage, from historic sites, industrial and maritime heritage, museums, libraries and archives to parks and gardens and landscapes and nature. Priority will be given where there is limited or no access to other sources of support, or where heritage is most at risk.

Happy Easter - and a little light relief

We do hope you can manage to have a Happy Easter and we have been very pleased to see news from New Zealand and await a similar announcement from Downing Street!

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has declared the Easter Bunny to be an essential worker in her country, stating that the rabbit can go about its mysterious business on Easter Sunday as usual, despite a nationwide lockdown.

Ardern announced the exemption in response to rampant speculation by New Zealand's youngest citizens, who had wondered how the coronavirus crisis might affect the traditional arrival of colourful eggs, chocolates and other treats. In a sweeping move, Ardern also laid to rest any doubt about the tooth fairy's status, saying the overnight exchange of gifts for lost teeth will continue.

"You'll be pleased to know that we do consider both the tooth fairy and the Easter Bunny to be essential workers," Ardern told reporters at a recent news conference.

Ways to contact the Trusts

The best way to contact us at the moment is through the website www.wmhbt.org.uk or you can message us through Facebook - West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust (WMHBT). Unfortunately if you write to us at the Company Offices we cannot guarantee we shall get your letters at the moment.

Stay Home - Stay Safe