

Developments at the Ditherington Flax Mill, Shrewsbury

The building of the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals prompted the development of many commercial ventures intended to exploit the advantages of new transport opportunities. Thus it was that the Flax Mill came into being in Ditherington as one of the most advanced factory developments of its time back in 1796, utilising the canal to bring in the thousands of tons of coal which fired its steam engines and for transporting its other raw materials and finished goods. The building is designated a Grade 1 listed structure, not just because of the elegance of many of its features but significantly as the first iron-framed multi-story building, which makes it the prototype for skyscraper buildings the world over.

After around a hundred successful years operating as a flax mill it was converted for use as a maltings and remained in this role for close to another hundred years before its closure in 1987. Since that time there has been much discussion about potential uses and ways of conserving its most significant structures and developing the whole site for use in the future. Various initiatives have been proposed but our Trust members in the Shrewsbury area will have read of their failure with some dismay and also heard of the increasing decay and vandalism which is putting the buildings at increasing risk of irretrievable loss.

As a result of this a study was recently commissioned by English Heritage in partnership with Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council and Advantage West Midlands. The first phase of this researched the history of the buildings and carried out an assessment of the site and its buildings. It then produced a conservation statement, appraised the property market and did an assessment of the funding opportunities. The project then moved into a second phase of option appraisal, looking at the choices for the future of the whole site including design options, alternative cost profiles, a feasibility study and the identification of next steps.

The partnership is now in the process of consulting with the public and other interested parties, including the S&N Canal Trust, in order to seek the most appropriate way forward. As a part of this process two of our Trustees went to a meeting in May to hear of a "Masterplan Vision" arising from the Study which seeks to provide:

- "A mix of uses on the site, including retail, interpretation, employment and some residential development,
- Improved public access and interpretation of the site and buildings,
- A new public garden, including interpretation of the former canal,
- An attractive opportunity for public and private investment."

The Trust felt that many local members who would know the site and had

perhaps been following this debate in the local press might wish to express a view on this matter and hence all Trust members were sent details of the proposals and invited to pass on their comments. A number have done so and have put forward some very salient points regarding the benefits of combining the work of restoring both canal and Flax Mill in a co-ordinated venture. These efforts by members are much appreciated and highlights the importance of the part that members can play in supporting our restoration work even before the first turf is cut.



Following consultation amongst Trustees an official response was submitted, which also highlighted the benefits of a mutual approach to both restoration projects drawing attention to the following points:

- The whole history of the canal and Flax Mill are inextricably linked
- Each project will attract funding which could be mutually supportive
- The Flax Mill scheme already includes provision of public space – this would be so much more significant if it featured a living canal presence
- Including a canal opens up many potential uses of the Flax Mill buildings in association with the canal's presence
- As demonstrated in many parts of the country the presence of the canal will significantly increase the value of the Flax Mill site and surrounding area and hence be more attractive to investors
- The proximity of the canal will extend the opportunity for visitors to the site to walk or take a boat trip as a part of their visit to the Flax Mill
- The canal will provide a significant link between the Flax Mill and other historic buildings within the Town's conservation area

- The canal offers to make the site more inclusive through its links through the suburban housing estates heading out of town and into Shrewsbury's urban areas.
- The canal also provides links from the Flax Mill out to the Town's rural hinterland
- The canal line passes close to significant brown-field areas across the road from the Flax Mill which are on the verge of redevelopment. A project which embraces, and perhaps extends, the presence of the canal could result in a more imaginative and harmonious overall regeneration of a wide section of this locality which could prove far more beneficial to each project than if they were carried out in isolation

The Trust will continue in its dialogue with the Flax Mill partnership and will report on developments as matters progress.