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An Addendum to the Heritage Appraisal of September 2016

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Purpose of this Report Addendum

The original heritage appraisal of September 2016 investigated the history and heritage significance of the Big Mill and described the proposed works and why they were acceptable in heritage terms. This addendum to that appraisal should be read in conjunction with that original document.

The original heritage appraisal stated, inter alia;

8.04 The condition of the Big Mill is now a matter of serious concern, with many clear signs of wet rot and damage to structural beams. The top two storeys are particularly badly affected with extensive water and rot damage across the whole floor structure and floor coverings.

The proposals at that stage envisaged the complete reconstruction of the roof (within its existing profile) and the renewal of the top two floors structure. The Big Mill was to be converted into apartments.

But most urgent of all was the need to repair the roof to prevent further egress of rain which has been the major cause of building fabric decay. Roof repairs are now nearly complete so that the building should now be able to dry out and conversion to a viable use can begin.

It is now clear that the amount of decay and the costs of repair are such that the viability of apartment conversion relies on a new internal structure. The extensively rotten timber beams and floors on every storey would be removed in their entirety and replaced with modern structure to accommodate the new apartments.

This has implications for the question of the heritage significance of the building. The most favourable conclusion would be for the building to be converted retaining the original internal structure. However, this will seriously undermine the viability of the apartment conversion.

Given that even in 2016, it was thought necessary to remove the roof structure and two floors of beams and joists, it was never the case that it appeared possible to reuse the Big Mill in its entirety.

In this unhappy context, it is necessary to review the principal heritage significance of the Big Mill. The most important significance of the building is as a major monument to the industrial silk industry, forming a highly important feature in the townscape and history of Leek.

It is a common feature of large industrial building residential conversions that even when the internal structure can be retained, such structure is often obscured by a multiplicity of partitions and fire protection cladding to facilitate the creation of apartments.

Preserving the Big Mill is of greater importance than preserving the internal structure. Rebuilding the internal structure is the price for retaining the Big Mill. However, removing the internal structure must be viewed as a substantial harm to the heritage significance of the Big Mill.

In this light the loss of the internal structure must be viewed in the terms of paragraph 195 of the National Planning Policy Framework:

Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to (or total loss of significance of) a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or total loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss or all of the following apply:

a) the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and

b) no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and

c) conservation by grant-funding or some not-for-profit, charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and

c) the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use

The long years of disuse and neglect and the absence of major funding (charitable or otherwise) provides a response to points a), b) and c).

There is great relevance in point d). The harm (through losing the internal structure) is greatly outweighed by the public benefit of:

- Retaining the presence of the Great Mill in the townscape of the town in a sustainable manner
- Providing a substantial number of residential apartments which will regenerate the building and assist in bringing new life to this part of Leek.

Conclusion

It appears that the current proposals represent the last chance for the Big Mill. The loss of the internal structure is a necessary price to pay to save the building. It is recommended that the local authority impose a condition on any listed building consent concerning the removal of the internal structure, requiring a method statement of the internal demolition work to be carried out in order to ensure that the outer walls of the building are not put at structural risk.

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