

# New uses for old buildings

**T**HE RE-USE OF older buildings is no longer the minority obsession of those with an interest in history; it is recognised as an inherently sustainable activity in a society that is increasingly concerned with the responsible use of resources.

Moreover the more intensive use of existing buildings in town and city centres meets several objectives. A lively town centre will be less prey to anti-social activities. And life can be brought back to the centre by re-using the upper floors of buildings for good quality housing – rather than storage or cheap bed-sits. Until recently there have been few incentives to support “living over the shop” projects. Now, however, programmes such as the Heritage Lottery Fund’s Townscape Heritage Initiative have enabled the needs of building conservation to be married to a broader regeneration agenda.

This paper discusses two THI schemes pursued by Pembrokeshire County Council and its partners. Pembroke Dock is one of the first generation THI schemes and is just coming to the end of its five-year term, whilst Haverfordwest is a year into its programme. The focus centres in particular on two “critical” THI projects – the Garrison Chapel in Pembroke Dockyard, and Commerce House, in Haverfordwest’s High Street.

## Pembroke Dock the Garrison Chapel

In 1814 the Navy began building a new dockyard on the south side of the Cleddau estuary. The dockyard continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century, producing vessels that ranged from battleships to royal yachts. As



▲ The Garrison Chapel, Pembroke Dock (Pembs CC)

## Jason Evans illustrates the objectives of Townscape Heritage Initiatives in Pembroke Dock and Haverfordwest



the dockyard expanded to meet the needs of empire, the town outside the walls grew rapidly. This has a distinctive grid plan, and a rhythmic townscape in which terraces are punctuated by impressive chapels – and more than a fair share of pubs! With the Victorian navy’s transition to ironclads, shipbuilding contracted, but limped on until 1926. Life returned, however, when the RAF set up a base for its Sunderland flying boats at Pembroke Dock in the 1930s. Two huge aircraft hangars rose within the dockyard walls, their functional character contrasting sharply with the dockyard’s late Georgian and Victorian buildings.

The THI has been focused on the whole town, but the majority of its projects lie within the dockyard wall. None has

been more important than the Garrison Chapel. Dating from around 1830, it was designed by George Ledwell Taylor, the Navy’s chief architect. It occupies a focal point within a highly formalised landscape setting. Once the military left the town, the building became a theatre, then a motoring museum. That closed in 1975. By the end of the 1980s, following failed private development schemes, the Chapel, with much of the rest of the dockyard estate, was in the hands of receivers. The depressing spiral of decline continued, despite efforts by the local authorities to intervene, until a regeneration strategy was agreed with the Welsh Development Agency, keen to revitalise a waterfront where roofless and vandalised buildings greeted passengers using the Rosslare ferries.

Several buildings were targeted, acquired, and repaired with a mixture of WDA, council and European cash. These included the Captain Superintendent’s Office, the Guardhouse and the Fleet Surgeon’s House. The Chapel remained in private hands, to be highlighted as a “critical project” when the county submitted its THI bid

in 1997. Its future would be a basis for judging the success or failure of the THI.

Acquisition of the Chapel and surrounding land was not easy – ownership was divided and one of the landowners was based offshore in the British Virgin Islands. While the Chapel owner was ready to sell out for a minimum amount, rather than try to put his own scheme together, or put the site on the market, the other landowner had to be dealt with by compulsory purchase. After fifteen months, and an eleventh-hour withdrawal by the owners from a public inquiry, ownership of the building was secured. Meanwhile an urgent works notice had been served under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to arrest the deterioration of the building, by now encased in scaffolding and tarpaulin.

Under the supervision of Acanthus Holden Architects, the first job to be tackled was to remove the roof trusses for repair. Even this job, however, was complicated because the serious state of disrepair meant that workers could not enter the building until the roof was removed and remaining walls braced and made safe. Following this, a new roof was constructed. Decorative plasterwork and joinery details were manufactured using fragments of the originals as a pattern, and a new cupola built and dressed in lead as the original had been. Work is continuing to reinstate the balcony and improve the landscape setting of the Chapel. This final stage should be complete by the spring of 2006, at which time the County Council will put the building to the market to try and find an appropriate new use.



▲ Commerce House, Haverfordwest – visualisations of the redevelopment (Pemb's CC)

## Haverfordwest Commerce House

Commerce House was the town's first department store, and in common with many buildings in old towns, has a relatively recent (1860) façade that hides much older structure. When the County Council and its partners put the THI bid together in 2002 this was selected as a critical project because of its key location and prominence in the townscape. The site is adjacent to a medieval vaulted undercroft, known locally as the Crypt, which also lies within the boundaries of the THI. The project illustrates technical problems of re-use and repair, and the need to be innovative in designing a development that makes sense in market terms.

Because the THI was slow getting under way, the building's condition deteriorated

rapidly, forcing the Council to intervene on the grounds of public safety. The key problem was that the façade of Commerce House had begun to peel away from the older structures behind. In 2003 it became necessary to pin the front of the building in place and erect a massive shoring scaffold. Market Street had to be closed to through traffic, generating huge numbers of complaints from local traders concerning the reduction in trade. The Council came under considerable pressure to "remove the problem" and re-open Market Street to through traffic, despite the fact that ownership of the building still rested in private hands – as the owner had no other assets, meaning that building and site had a negative value, he had little interest in resolving the problem.

Quite apart from the re-

source implications of demolition, the fact that Commerce House was both a listed building and a THI critical project meant that a solution was needed that involved repair and re-use.

The Council contacted a number of developers to determine private sector interest in the site. This was negligible, with most viewing the scheme as too high a risk in terms of return to even contemplate involvement. Several development studies established that Commerce House on its own was not an economic prospect despite the availability of some £500,000 of grant assistance. By this point, however, the council had been able to draw in a potential developer, and consideration could be given to the possibility of enlarging the site by incorporating the Crypt and other adjacent buildings.

A bigger site could counter the negative aspects of Commerce House and minimise risk. Acquisition of adjacent buildings would add value to the Commerce House scheme, enabling a much larger, mixed-use scheme that would be viable financially provided that the demolition of the mid-Victorian front section of Commerce House could be secured. Specialist analysis of the fabric of this building confirmed that economic repair was not possible, and consent to remove the structure was eventually secured. Meanwhile the developer had acquired neighbouring 7-11 High Street, and entered into an agreement with the council to purchase Commerce House and the Crypt site. For the Commerce House element of the scheme the Council had to arrange a "back-to-back" deal whereby the building came into the ownership of the Council and was transferred immediately into the developer's ownership. Building liability was therefore transferred directly to the developer and the associated risks

to the Council minimised.

The final scheme provides five town houses and 3000m<sup>2</sup> of commercial floor space out of the reconstructed and extended Commerce House site, and a further four apartments, two shops and a café out of the neighbouring properties and land brought into the package. The acquisition of 7-11 High Street was particularly important to the scheme; the creation of a private courtyard with controlled access for a limited number of future residents was a "must-have" if the right sale price were to be achieved. Both planning permission and Listed Building Consent were secured by the County Council and the front section of Commerce House was knocked down in April 2005. Funding via the THI was confirmed and the developer is committed to commence development in January 2006.

The cases of Commerce House and the Garrison Chapel illustrate extremely well the potential value of the THI programme. Neither scheme could have been brought forwards without the funding stream nor the commitment of the THI partners. In the case of Haverfordwest we look forwards to a successful programme; in the instance of Pembroke Dock we hope that the recent stage 1 approval for a further THI will be followed by stage 2 support and so enable more of the town's historic buildings to be re-used.

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