

DUNKIRK MILLS NAILSWORTH: IN THE DOLDRUMS

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This year's progress report on Dunkirk Mills is necessarily short. In June 1991 the developers, converting what is one of the County's finest textile mills into residential accommodation, went into liquidation. They are only one of a large number of developers and building firms who have suffered a similar fate during the continuing recession in the economy. Since that date the site has been boarded up and no further visits have been made by GSIA Members. Fortunately the building had been made weather-tight before the receivers were called in. A brief review is given below of why the Society became involved in the conversion scheme and of the research work that has been continuing this year.

It is perhaps worth first restating the Society's general view that wherever possible an industrial building should retain an industrial use of some sort. However, it is clear that adaptive re-use of all industrial buildings is neither desirable nor feasible. The options for the future of any particular building depend on many factors not least of which is the prevailing economic climate.

In the case of a large 18th and 19th century stone built mill complex like Dunkirk the problem is particularly difficult. For some time we had been very concerned about the structure. Indeed the east wall on the 1798 building had partially collapsed and was supported by scaffolding. All we had been able to do hitherto was to voice our concern to the Planning Authority.

In view of the state of the mill and the developers wish to restore the water wheels, mill ponds and watercourses it was felt GSIA should play a positive role in researching and recording the site rather than simply bemoan its new use. Furthermore, since the developers intend to display the history of the site in a small on-site museum, GSIA were the right group to provide the information to go in the displays.

The work carried out by Members up to February 1991 has already been reported (1). Work has continued this year at a slower pace due to the developers going into liquidation. One of the priorities has been to maintain contact with the receiver selling the assets and the local Planning Authority. It is recognised that the provision of the small museum was an integral part of the planning permission granted for the conversion scheme. It is further recognised that a condition exists on the permission, that the plans for the museum must be approved. Thus any developer who takes on the scheme will need to satisfy this condition. Needless to say we will wish to

cooperate as much as possible with whoever purchases Dunkirk Mills.

Last year our research concentrated on the hosiery manufacturing at Dunkirk (1). The Walker family who came from Nottingham in 1890 to start the hosiery manufacturing also had a factory at Kirkby-in-Ashfield and a warehouse in Nottingham. Letters to the local press in those two areas brought forth a most encouraging response of 11 replies. These included photographs of both inside and outside the Kirkby premises. The interior pictures showed some of the machinery which appears to have been very similar to that installed at Dunkirk. One of the replies was from the Kirkby and District Conservation Society who are now kindly following up the story on our behalf.

One of the grandchildren of a manager at the "Stocking Mill" (as the hosiery factory was called) now lives in Canada, but she has kindly supplied a lot of information about him from her own family history research.

One intriguing story we wish to follow up is that of the bull that escaped from the cattle market at Nailsworth and sped along the main road towards Stroud. On reaching Dunkirk Mills the beast shot through the mill yard and under the railway and up towards Dunkirk Manor. Unfortunately, an elderly gentleman was sitting on a bench by the side of the path and when confronted by the bull he suffered a fatal heart attack.

A more basic line of enquiry is the recent history of the mill. During the twenty years or so prior to the start of the present conversion the mill had been split into 12 industrial units. Permission has been obtained to consult the papers relating to the various 'lets'. Thus we hope to complete the picture regarding the final phase.

We learnt that in 1982 an architect, Mr J Kenneth Major, who is well known in industrial archaeological circles was commissioned to produce a report on the buildings at Dunkirk. He has generously made available to us the photographs he took of the mill at that time.

The plans showing modifications to the tall stone chimney when it was rebuilt in 1875 refer to a Greens economiser being fitted at that time. As the name suggests this saved money by pre heating the boiler feed water by utilising waste heat in the flue gases which would otherwise have gone up the chimney. The company is still in business under a different name and a number of their order books for the end of the 19th century have survived. It is hoped that these may provide further information on what was supplied to Dunkirk.

The biggest change physically in the proposed display areas during the last year is that the two waterwheels in the 1818

mill are now protected behind heavy duty mesh guards. This is necessary to protect visitors from the wheels (and the wheels from the public!) and an "industrial" type of guard is considered far preferable to plate glass.

The last year can justly be described as a period of 'marking time'. How long this will continue can only be guessed at, although it is to be hoped that the delay will not be much longer. We are keen to bring the project to a satisfactory conclusion and hope that objective will be in sight when next year's report is made.

Reference

- 1 Wilson, R., Hosiery Manufacture at Dunkirk Mills Nailsworth, GSIA Journal for 1990, pages 32-42 (and references therein).