

The Restoration of Saltford Brass Mill

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Readers of this journal will be aware of the long saga of the restoration of Saltford Brass Mill. In this article I describe the most recent phase of work to the mill which has resulted in the repair of the roof and walls.

The Public Inquiry of 1987 led to the refusal of planning permission for conversion into flats and a museum and this established an important principle. This was that the character and archaeological importance of the Brass Mill are such that conversion and reuse of the building were out of the question. The roof could not be lined or services dug through the floor without unacceptable damage to the historic fabric. This meant that the possibility of using the building to generate income to fund restoration was now gone.

At this stage all parties involved in the inquiry stood back to consider the situation. Not only had relations been damaged but there were no sources of finance available to the voluntary sector or the local authorities for the necessary level of repairs. This left the ball in English Heritage's court as the only real source of funding for repair. The building was at this stage in a serious state of disrepair and part of the roof, including one of the balance beams, collapsed one winter night as a graphic reminder of what might happen if nothing was done.

English Heritage's first step was to commission a report from the Ironbridge Institute. This looked at the most appropriate future for the building and all interested parties were consulted. The report concluded that the building was of international importance, should be conserved as a monument and that this would involve substantial public funding. Although the report also suggested that a public body should be the owner of the lease neither English Heritage, Wansdyke District Council or Avon County Council were willing to take it on. At this stage Avon Industrial Buildings Trust (AIBT) agreed to take on the task of managing the building repairs contract so that the project could go ahead. The Trust has a small volunteer council supported by staff at Avon Planning Department and this was by far the biggest contract that we had ever undertaken.

The next step involved taking on an architect and Niall Phillips Architects were selected by tender and interview. Niall Phillips have a lot of experience of repairing industrial buildings as well as of working with trusts. This proved invaluable since they were able to give the Trust a lot of help with the aspects of contract management which were new to us as well as with the technical aspects of the repair. English Heritage paid them to produce a feasibility study into the repair of the building. This weighty document identified and costed all the repairs required to conserve the building.

The mill is owned by Mike Taylor who has leased it to the AIBT for 99 years. AIBT then leased back approximately one third of the building to Mr Taylor. The feasibility study argued that the AIBT should be given a grant of 100% of the cost of repairs to its part of the mill and the owner be given a proportion of the costs of the repairs to his part. The total of the English Heritage grant was around £150,000 plus VAT and English Heritage accepted the arguments in the feasibility study and made a firm offer to the Trust and the owner.

Niall Phillips then did a detailed schedule of repairs with drawings of each roof joint and put this out to tender to five suitable conservation builders. The contract was won by Stansell Conservation Ltd. From this stage on the project began to move quite quickly and most of the day-to-day responsibility was in the hands of the architect and builder. English Heritage made regular site inspections before authorising payments for each stage of the work. The worst part for the AIBT was to chase up the very complicated system of payments between English Heritage, the architect and a special account set up for the contract held jointly by the Trust and the owner.

The Trust was very pleased with the standard of work of the builder and the architect on an extremely sensitive building. The repairs are in line with the best current conservation philosophy ie as much of the original fabric was retained as possible and any repairs were made obvious so that they can be identified as repairs. One of the successes of the project is that the building looks very much as it did before although it is of course now in a very good state of repair.

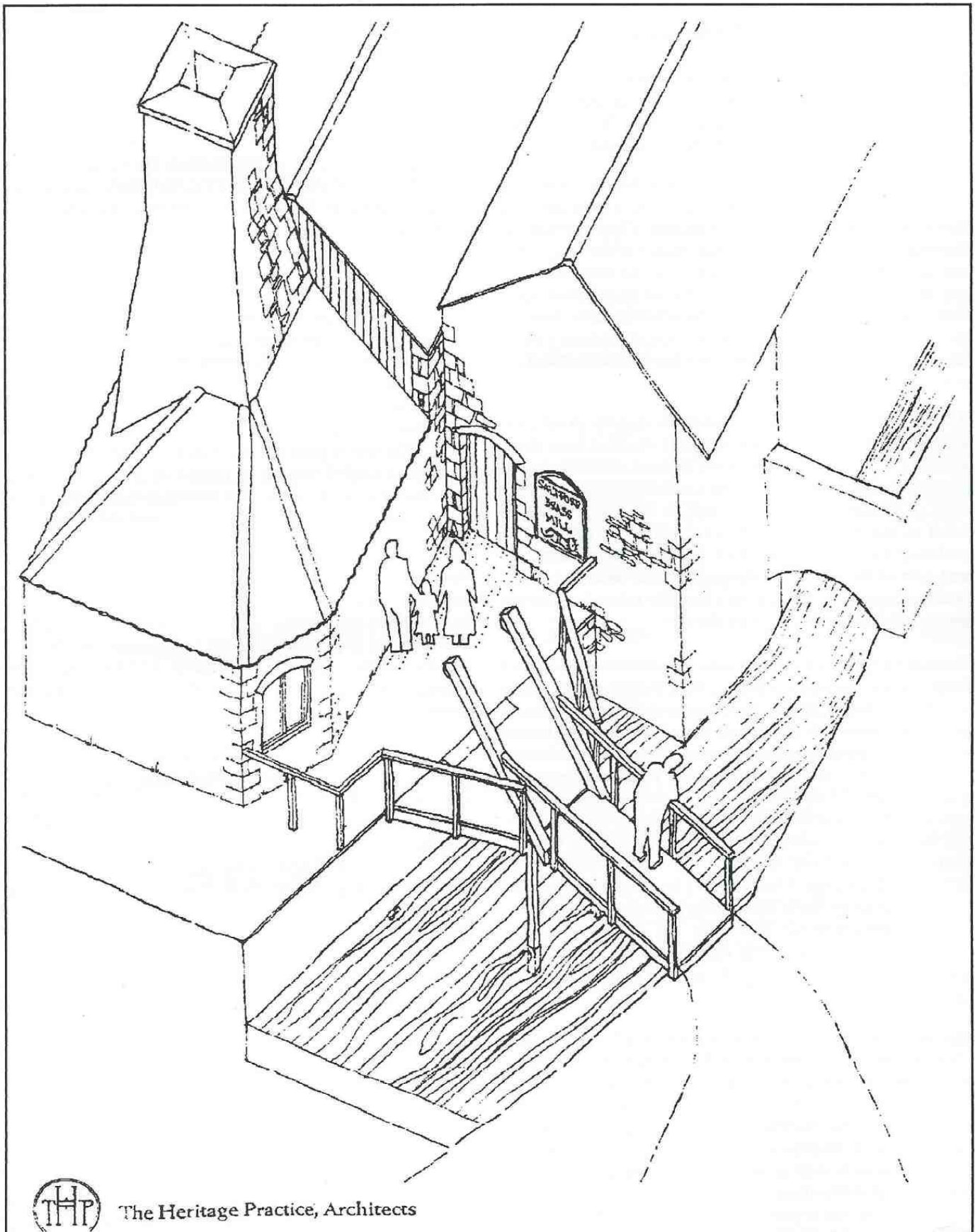
A lot of the archaeological information about the processes within the mill and the development of the building lies in the roof structure - for example marks where machinery was fixed. Although the repairs retained as much as possible English Heritage were concerned that some archaeological information would be lost in the repair process. They therefore commissioned a detailed archaeological record prior to the building works from the Hereford Archaeological Unit. This contains drawings of the roof structure and an analysis of the building based on this evidence.

The repairs were finally finished in the spring of 1995 and a well attended opening was held in June. We were very pleased to have people there who had been involved in the conservation of the building for many years not just for this phase.

The next phase is to build a foot bridge to allow access to the Trust's part of the building and this is being organised by a local group of volunteers with AIBT. A local steering group has been formed to look at the other aspects of the future of the building: maintenance, public

access and displays. At present the Trust's part of the mill is open for guided tours only, although we hope to have open days in the future. We hope that the new local

authority for Bath & North East Somerset will give the project the support that Avon and Wansdyke Councils have given in the past.



The Heritage Practice, Architects

Proposed foot bridge to Salford Brass Mill