

# Recycling historic buildings: a future from our past

**David Trevis-Smith**, Projects Director, reviews work by the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust

The benefits of recycling are not confined merely to household waste. 'Heritage Counts', the annual survey by English Heritage of the state of England's historic environment, noted in its 2004 report that: 'To demolish a Victorian terraced house is to throw away enough embodied energy to drive a car around the world five times. None of this is wasted if the building is refurbished.' We also have systems of statutory protection to prevent demolition of buildings that are of historic or architectural importance. Given (a) the logic of refurbishing buildings and (b) legal protection, why do we see so many old buildings lying abandoned, boarded-up, and on registers of 'Heritage at Risk'?

Problems often stem from the demise in the original purpose of the building. The building may be legally protected, but where is the income necessary to pay for

repairs and maintenance if its use no longer exists? Empty buildings then attract theft and vandalism, on a downward spiral that can create a blot on the landscape rather than a landmark. Finding a viable new use is the only sustainable way to provide long-term protection for a building but, even if a new use can be found, by this stage of dilapidation the costs of repair and conversion may be higher than the end-value. The problem for the building has by now become acute.

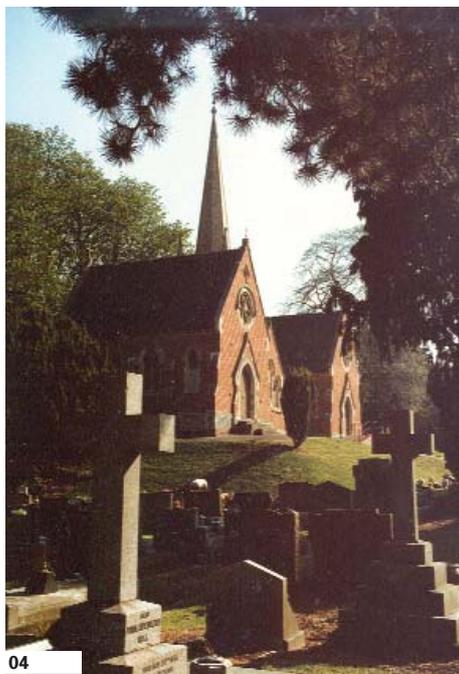
Building Preservation Trusts, or BPTs, are a special type of charity intended to provide a potential solution; the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust (WMHBT) is one example. BPTs are able to attract grants and low-cost loans to carry out the type of rescue scheme often necessary with historic 'Buildings at Risk' and in this way they aim to cover the

deficit in funding such projects.

As well as people from other disciplines, specialists in the field of building conservation are amongst the Trustees of WMHBT; all give their time on a voluntary basis. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in safeguarding historic buildings; subscriptions pay for the day-to-day expenses of the Trust. WMHBT's purpose is to preserve buildings within the West Midlands that are of historic or architectural importance. Where this cannot be achieved by simply raising awareness of the issues and opportunities, WMHBT will consider carrying out a conservation project itself. Specialist consultants and contractors are then engaged on a project-by-project basis, with fundraising campaigns used to generate the necessary funds.

WMHBT's most recently completed project is the grade II listed office building of the former **Harris & Pearson Company**, manufacturers of refractories (including firebricks), in Brettell Lane, Brierley Hill, Dudley (figs. 01, 02, 03, 06). This was built in 1888 as an extravagant three-dimensional showcase of their products. At that time the company was one of a number of Stourbridge manufacturers supplying firebricks around the world, each competing to make their offices stand out from the crowd. One of Harris & Pearson's specialities was to face firebricks with coloured glazes, as seen on numerous Victorian buildings across Britain, and they therefore built their office to feature bricks faced with a variety of these colours along with terracotta detailing. It was literally a shining example of their work (fig. 06).

A hundred years on, the Stourbridge firebrick industry had all but disappeared, the company had been absorbed into a national group and the offices were no



04



05

longer required. In the 1990s work to demolish the unlisted building was begun, but was then halted by a Building Preservation Notice hastily issued by Dudley Council in response to concerns raised by a local resident. Several months later an application for listing was approved, although by then considerable internal damage had resulted from partial removal of the roof. The building had been unoccupied for 13 years and was in a desperate and derelict state when acquired by WMHBT, with the costs of repair being far in excess of its market value. Thanks to grants and financial assistance from several sources, including primarily the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Architectural Heritage Fund and Dudley Council, conservation building work to convert the building for modern-day use as commercial offices commenced in April 2004 and was completed in January 2005.

The project, carried out by Wm Sappcote & Sons Ltd under the direction of conservation architects S T Walker & Duckham, has received a number of awards, including a 'commendation' in the 2006 Civic Trust awards. In conjunction with nearby schools, learning resource materials were produced, including oral history recordings of former company employees. A project website ([www.harrisandpearson.info](http://www.harrisandpearson.info)) was created to provide access to that material, along with other information and memorabilia collated during the course of the project.

The building has been returned as a local landmark and now serves as a focal point for recording what had been a major industry for the area. The project also supported other investment in the industrial park of which it is a part, acting as a catalyst to reverse the trend of industrial decline by attracting new businesses and creating employment

opportunities, as well as enhanced feelings of general well-being for the community.

WMHBT has a number of current projects, including the redundant **Lye & Wollescote Cemetery Chapels** building, near Stourbridge (listed grade II), built in 1878 (figs. 04, 05). The associated cemetery is still in use but the chapels (one Anglican, one nonconformist, at opposite ends of a single building) have been redundant since 1993. The deteriorating state of the building and attraction for anti-social behaviour in and around the cemetery is an ongoing cause of concern for the community.

Following public consultation, an analysis by building conservation consultants of optional uses commissioned by WMHBT concluded that use as commercial offices is the most viable option to provide a sustainable future for the building. WMHBT has obtained approvals for a scheme, designed by conservation architects Brownhill Hayward Brown, that includes creating a new access roadway into the cemetery, enabling the introduction of a boundary between the

cemetery and the chapels building, with the existing driveway to be used exclusively for access to the building. It will be suitable for a single occupier or two occupiers (in offices created in each of the two chapels, with a shared central entrance and lobby). WMHBT is currently inviting expressions of interest from potential tenant organisations, to support applications for funding.

In addition to returning the chapels building to a viable use, proposals include working with local historians to publish a book on the history of the cemetery, linking headstone inscriptions with the industrial development of the town, and working with teachers to create a resources pack for school project work on subjects such as the built environment and nature conservation, as well as social history and other aspects of the curriculum. A 2004 Government Select Committee report on urban regeneration noted that: 'The space around churches including churchyards can sometimes provide the only green space in an otherwise concrete-bound urban environment.' Cemeteries in particular are an often under-used community resource which this project seeks to address, noting their original design as landscaped parks.

The same Select Committee report notes: 'Historic buildings... lend character to an area and have deep-seated associations for local residents and communities' and 'Something like 24% of all waste is generated by demolition and construction. It is simply better in sustainability terms to use and recycle old buildings than to demolish them and build new ones.' All our WMHBT projects serve as a practical demonstration of that logic, seeking to create a sustainable future from our past.



06

01 Harris & Pearson building: front elevation detail following refurbishment (Alastair Carew-Cox)  
 02 Front elevation after refurbishment (Alan Smith)  
 03 Detail of pediment after refurbishment (Robert Tolley)  
 04 Lye & Wollescote Cemetery Chapels (Dudley MBC)  
 05 Lye & Wollescote Cemetery Chapels (Brownhill Hayward Brown) 06 View of the Harris & Pearson staircase after refurbishment (Alastair Carew-Cox)