



Worcestershire Building Preservation Trust was delighted to be shortlisted for a Historic England Angel Award under the best rescue of a historic building category for the Weavers' Cottages project in Kidderminster. This terrace of 18th century artisans cottages were saved by the Trust after standing empty and falling into decay for over forty years.

The cottages would have won no beauty contest when the Trust was first approached. Hidden behind grey rendered facades were three tiny three storey cottages each with their own unique original twisting staircases and each with their own stories to tell once works commenced.

Saving the cottages was truly a labour of love for all involved, starting with a fight to stop the building from being demolished. For the Trust returning the derelict cottages to residential use was an obvious decision and architects Rodney Melville and Partners came up with a sensitive proposal which would conserve the original floorplans of the cottages whilst accommodating modern bathrooms and kitchens in rear extensions. The Heritage Lottery Fund and Architectural Heritage Fund provided the majority of the £1.1m funding to make the project a reality and contractors Croft Building and Conservation took over the site in February 2016 completing the works in April 2017. The whole project was co-ordinated and managed by DTS Solutions working closely with a project team of WBPT trustees.

The project was not without its hitches including significant delays arising from the need to rebuild the front wall of no 22. That grey cement render was doing more than making the place look ugly, it was holding the wall together! Taking away the render also revealed the story of no 21 as a hand painted sign above the ground floor window advertising the premises as a 'high class confectioners' was revealed.

Archival and genealogical research during the project confirmed that one of the cottages was, as suspected, the last remaining example of a weaver's home that pre dated the better known factory based carpet industry of Kidderminster. Peeling back the layers in no 22 helped to bring to life the original form of this the oldest and largest of the three cottages when a blocked doorway in the wall adjoining the next door cottage was discovered. The mystery doorway dates from a time when no 22 was first built and stood alone. It once allowed access directly into the third floor room where the weaver worked at the loom. Loading of materials and finished fabrics, and probably the loom itself, using a block and tackle to avoid carrying bulky items via those twisty staircases though the house where the family lived. We even know what fabric they were making: bombazine, a material often associated with black mourning clothes and made with a silk warp and a worsted weft.

The project involved community engagement, including open days and workshops, plus educational activities ranging from the creation of computer games to writing and performing songs. Works on site were filmed and clever 3D interpretation techniques have brought the history of the cottages to life. Information about the project activities and resources are available on the web site

www.weaverscottages.info

Whilst the project was not one of the Angels winners on the night the trustees were very pleased that their hard work and that of the professional project team was recognised and shortlisted for a prestigious national award. The Weavers Cottages project has not only saved an important survivor of the built heritage of Kidderminster but had made a significant contribution towards promoting regeneration in one of the most deprived areas of the town and provides three affordable homes. But in this case, the rescue has yet another benefit to add to the list of achievements. Prior to Weavers' Cottages the Worcestershire Building Preservation Trust was itself at risk, so even the Angels were saved and given a new impetus to take on more projects in the county.

So, there was a lot more to this Angels story than taking some ugly render off the front of an old building!

Sue Whitehouse

Chairman WBPT



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