

Brief History

Bill Mills is a historic group of industrial buildings surrounding a water mill, and is typical of ancient water mill sites, in that industrial production has taken place continuously in this location over many centuries. There is documentary evidence of a mill on the site as early as 1362. Since that time the site was used for a wide variety of purposes that required waterpower, including an ironworks, a paper mill, corn milling, malting and most recently the bottling of beer and soft drinks. Bottling started here in the late nineteenth century, and was at first powered totally by waterpower. Later the waterwheel was assisted by steam engines. After the Second World War diesel engines were substituted for the steam engines, although the water wheel was still occasionally used until the 1950s. Eventually mains electricity was adopted as a power source, and this continued to power the plant until all production on the site ceased a few years ago.

The mill buildings form a continuous terrace surrounding the old millpond on two sides. Like many water mills the Bill Mills complex has been added to and altered at various times throughout its long life as an industrial site, and the various buildings were constantly being adapted or rebuilt to suit new methods of production or to accommodate new uses, and the widely different historical styles and mixture of forms and materials thus created has produced a naturally picturesque composition of buildings around the now-silted mill pond.

The mill is in an isolated rural location in a shallow valley, at an S-bend in the narrow road. The bends in the road on both approaches mean that a traveller comes upon the group of buildings suddenly. The contrast between the open farming country beyond and the sudden entry into this industrial hamlet is very striking, and this experience has not been marred by the recent construction of the modern factory, as this building was kept well back from the road in a slight hollow and is screened from distant views by trees and hedgerows. The historic mill buildings form a grouping of buildings typical of the industrial heritage of Herefordshire and their importance is reflected in their Grade II listing.

By the last decade of the twentieth century the old mill buildings were proving to be increasingly poorly adapted to modern methods of production and the demands of an expanding business. Hence in 1990 a modern factory was built next to the older buildings to house the bottling plant, and various steel framed extensions capable of use by modern factory machinery were added to the older buildings. From that time the historic mill buildings become progressively redundant to the industrial process. During this period one of the old mill buildings was however restored as a water-powered corn mill, as a historical curiosity for visitors, and an old steam engine was set up in the basement. At the same time some of the old mill buildings were also converted into cottages. By the end of the decade the bottling business had outgrown even the new factory at Bill Mills, and the decision was made to transfer the business, (by then called Dayla Liquid Packing), to new premises in Ross on Wye. From late 2001 the remaining historic mill buildings, as well as the modern factory, have remained empty.

A planning application by Dayla Liquid Packing to demolish the modern factory building and replace it with 12 new dwellings and also to convert the historic mill buildings to five dwellings was taken to appeal in 2001. The decision of the Secretary of State was that permission for the conversion of the old buildings was allowed, (subject to certain conditions), but the application for the new dwellings on the site of the new factory building was refused.

Architectural intentions

The appeal decision presumes that the modern factory building can be let or sold and continue in business use, and that the historic mill buildings can be viably converted to residential premises. Our intention in the present application is therefore to devise a scheme for the reuse of the historic buildings that is sympathetic to the existing fabric and hopefully that can generate enough value for the buildings to be restored without the need for additional "enabling development" on the site of the modern factory, (which was the economic presumption of the previous application).

The best way to ensure the preservation of a redundant historic building is to find for it a new use that will not only generate the funds for the restoration and conversion of the building, but also create sufficient income or value to ensure the maintenance of the building for the foreseeable future. From our studies of the viability of various strategies for the site, we consider that the only new use that is viable in this location is to convert the buildings to residential units a point recognised by the inspector.

In planning the conversion of the group of historic buildings, we have decided to demolish the recent steel-framed additions to the original complex of buildings, as well as certain other extensions that detract from the appearance of the group as a whole.

We believe that it is important that the existing composition of buildings surrounding the mill pond is not marred by parked cars, and so we have made the strategic decision to create a new landscaped parking court behind the north range of historic mill buildings and to connect it to one of the existing site accesses to the modern factory, rather than to create a new junction with the public road. The parking court will be screened from view by the existing buildings to each side, by the existing trees along the river and outfall leat, and also by a new stone wall and new screen planting. The parking court and associated screening will also form a buffer between the factory and the residential site.

In order to ensure flexibility of future usage of the modern factory building, we have been careful in the location of the boundary between the residential conversion of the historic buildings and the modern factory building, to ensure that the curtilage of the factory will contain the whole extent of the present hard-surfaced loading bays as well as the existing vehicular circulation route round the building. The two existing turning heads for factory vehicles into the site of the historic buildings will however be removed.

Between the new parking court and the north elevation of the historic buildings a belt of landscaped space will be formed, broken in places by stone walls to screen the parking court from the dwellings. There will also be a shared entrance courtyard for three of the units. We have aimed to create an appropriate landscaped setting for the buildings which will not feel over domestic. We have restricted the number of garden boundaries to the minimum to try to retain the industrial atmosphere of the group.

In designing the internal planning of the new residential conversion, we have endeavoured to maintain the architectural integrity of the existing envelopes. Hence the proposed divisions between the various residential units will follow the grain of the existing buildings, and we have designed them to coincide wherever possible with the dividing walls between buildings of different dates or to follow main lines of structure.

Our overall design approach is to treat the surviving mill buildings as a series of archaeological layers that are visual evidence of the historical evolution of the buildings. We have aimed therefore to retain the surviving fabric of all the phases of evolution of the buildings. We have sought to ensure that the small amount of new additions and alterations necessary to the conversion are always in sympathy with the style of the older buildings, and that they reflect the massing, materials and overall sensibility of the older buildings.

We have also resisted the temptation to "tidy up" the existing buildings by rationalising the wide variety of window and door types, the range of colours and textures of materials. Our aim is to preserve the existing quirkiness of the buildings, and not to expunge their feeling of age and slow evolution by the substitution of standard modern components for existing elements of fabric that are capable of viable repair.

In planning the conversion of the buildings we have maintained the unity of the previously restored water mill. This will become a single unit, complete with its water wheel and steam engine room. Although we cannot impose this future on the building, nothing we propose would preclude the possibility of a private buyer repairing the whole mill and reopening it to the public in the future.

Detailed design approach

Units 1 and 2

We intend that these two units will be formed by dividing the present two-storey building into two new houses. A dividing wall is to be inserted into the building, staggered to maintain the present separation of the building into three bays, with the central bay shared between the two units. All the existing openings will be retained in the conversion, but some will be adapted to become windows or doors. In addition, a shelf will be inserted into the roof structure of each unit, supported by the present roof trusses, to provide an additional second floor bedroom in each house. The remainder of the space will be left open to the roof, to maintain the feeling of open space at the upper level.

Unit 3

Unit 3 is to be formed from the existing restored water mill, and the conversion is based around the retention of the existing mill machinery. The envelope of the unit is devised so that all the various items of mill machinery, including the water wheel and steam engine, will be contained within this single residential unit, to prevent future ownership disputes about different parts of the machinery. In order to comply with fire regulations a new protected stairway will be inserted into the building, rising through the three floors. Despite the proposed retention of the machinery, the building will be able to accommodate a three-bedroom house, with little alteration to the existing structure, and with the retention of all the existing external openings. A single new window is intended to be added to the front elevation to create more light in the ground floor.

Units 4, 9 & 10

These three apartments will be formed out of the tall four-storey building adjacent to the water mill. The building is to be manipulated in section so that each apartment will have a separate entrance at ground level and to create a separate cellar area connected to the adjacent watermill building unit 3 for the steam engine and associated line-shafting. The water wheel pit and wheel will also become part of the adjacent unit 3.

The large open floor plates for industrial production create the character of the interior of the present building, and this will be maintained in the conversion, by minimising the internal subdivision of the spaces. Unit 4 will be on two levels: the lower, basement level will contain the kitchen-dining area and open out into a courtyard garden. This garden will be formed by removing the area of fill associated with the steel-framed shed that was recently built onto the west elevation of the building, (and which we also intend to remove). The fill has obscured the one of the cellar windows, and by its removal we will be able to reopen this window and create a glazed door into the new garden.

The lower floor area of unit 4 will be connected directly to the upper level by an open staircase, (replacing the existing ladder). This upper floor will contain the two bedrooms and an open-plan living area, and will be lit by the existing metal windows in the west elevation as well as various new and existing openings in the north wall, facing out onto a shared courtyard.

The ground level to the west of the four-storey building is half a level above the ground floor of the building itself. At present this is resolved by a recent timber staircase at the east end of the space. In our alterations, this area will be changed so that the east door gives access to the floor above, (i.e. the first floor of the building), and this will become the main entrance to unit 9. A new wide staircase will open into an open plan living area of unit 9, lit by the existing metal framed windows in the north and east walls of the space. At the west end of the first floor, two bedrooms will be created, each using one of the existing metal windows in the west elevation.

Unit 10 will be created from the top floor of the four-storey building, and like the conversion of the lower floors will also be a two-bedroom apartment. It will be reached by a new external staircase,

built within the envelope of the remains of the stone extension to the north, (that are presently contained within the later steel framed canopy which is built against the whole of the north elevation of the four storey building, and which, like the other recent factory extensions, we intend to remove). The new spiral staircase will be formed behind the two blocked openings in the existing stonewall, and these will be reopened to form the front door and staircase window of unit 10. The top floor of the four-storey building is at present an attractive airy space, open to the underside of the roof and with large exposed timber roof trusses. This character will be retained in the conversion, but two bedrooms will be formed at the western end of the plan.

Unit 5

This house will be formed by the conversion and restoration of an existing timber framed building – one of the earliest surviving buildings on the site. At present this building consists of a stone cellar supporting a timber-framed superstructure, which takes the form of an open hall with the remains of a solar to the south. We have taken pains to retain this “hall-house” character in our conversion. We will leave the hall as an open full-height space, with a balcony platform over the kitchen at the southern end. The house will have a garden to the north and a view out over the millpond to the south. New openings, where required, will respect the logic of the timber structure, and will mostly be formed where openings have already been created by previous adaptations of the building. A new staircase ‘porch’ will be added aligned with the existing loading door, so the stairs do not destroy the existing lower floor structure.

Unit 6

This unit will be formed out of the adjacent stone building, to create a new three bedroomed house. At present this building opens out into a concrete blockwork lean-to to the north, which will be demolished and a new north wall created in its place, in sympathy with the rest of the building.

Units 7 and 8

These two houses will be created by subdividing the existing, largely Edwardian building at the eastern end of the terrace. This building was last in use as a residential flat, over offices and warehousing. The integrity of the building has however been compromised by new extensions to the south, west and north, which we intend to demolish. The removal of the recent southern extension will create a new courtyard to the south, which will become the private front garden of unit 9, and reveal the balcony above once again to view. We intend to create a new timber structure to support the balcony, as part of a new southern elevation to unit 7, formed by altering the existing internal wall in this location.

Unit 8 will be formed out of the eastern half of the Edwardian building, and extend into the former single storey office building adjacent to the mill pond. The existing modern external staircase that is built on to the north elevation will be demolished, and a new staircase created inside the unit. The primary floor structure and existing timber columns will however be retained. The existing loading door will be expressed as an opening, by recessing a new timber wall within the aperture.