

A Proposal for Restoring Pride

In

Flitwick Mill

By The Friends of Flitwick Mill

1. Context

Flitwick Mill is one of the few remaining buildings of historic significance in Flitwick, the others having been lost to the landscape and, increasingly, to living memory. There are references to a water mill on the site in the Domesday Book. It is now the only surviving water mill on the River Flit, with features that make it locally and nationally unique.

Flitwick Mill was designated Listed Grade II as long ago as 1961, when it was still a working mill meeting the needs of local farmers and indeed milling continued until the 1980s. Because it was run as a small, family-owned business, changes to the milling machinery evolved slowly and were often just adaptations made only to maintain its commercial viability. For this reason, much of the machinery still remains intact and provides a remarkable and unique record of the evolution of milling practice over the last 200 or more years

Recent surveys of the fabric of the building confirm that it is deteriorating with increasing speed. Water from the mill race is now running through the walls and causing serious damage, weatherboarding is falling off, gutters are leaking and slates are missing. The building has not been maintained to an appropriate standard and neither does Mid Beds District Council (MBDC) seem to have fulfilled its stewardship

role with respect to listed buildings, by insisting that it be repaired. The mill now needs to be placed in responsible hands.

The owner has proposed that the mill be converted into a domestic residence and has applied for planning permission to do so. Whilst this would preserve the external appearance with some modifications and also conserve much of the machinery as static, cased exhibits within the private house, it would destroy its spirit and essence as a working mill, and remove the possibility of future restoration and access as a heritage amenity for Flitwick and the wider community.

In October 2008 MBDC Councillors decided to defer to January 2009 a decision on whether to approve the planning application in the face of increasing objections by local residents' groups and by national heritage bodies. A challenge was issued that in this interim period, a viable alternative to a domestic dwelling should be sought.

2. The Proposal

2.1 A Charitable Trust

Following the MBDC's referral decision a group of local residents was formed to explore options for a new future for the Mill. The Friends of Flitwick Mill propose that a Charitable Trust should be established to purchase and restore the Mill as a working entity and to form a Limited Company to run the mill once restored. This will only be possible if planning permission for conversion to a domestic dwelling is refused and it is made clear by MBDC that no such application would be approved in future.

The most pressing need is to carry out emergency repairs, costing approximately £5K to prevent water from the mill race penetrating the walls. This will give the time needed to carry out a full structural survey, make a submission to English Heritage to have the Mill raised to Grade II*, complete the preparation of a Business Plan, and begin the process of applying for grant funding.

2.2 The Hinterland

Additionally the Friends of Flitwick Mill see its future firmly set in the context of its immediate surroundings and the catchment area of the River Flit as a whole. The Mill is situated on the outskirts of Flitwick close to Flitwick Moor, a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the heart of the Flit Valley. The moor is owned severally, although the majority is owned and managed by the Wildlife Trust. This is a superb, but fragile wetland, created by a combination of peat cutting and the naturally iron-rich groundwater bubbling up to the surface from springs.

Protecting and conserving historic places within the Flit Valley adds a sense of past and future for the local community to enjoy. Upstream from the Flitwick Mill the River Flit passes through the historic Flitwick Manor Park and near to the Old

School that has been recently renovated as a feature of the town. The Two Moors Heritage Trail provides walkers with a route to the De Grey Mausoleum, Flitton and also the moat at Ruxox farm, the location of a former Augustinian monastic cell.

The moor has some protection because of its SSSI status, but it lacks the visitor facilities and resources that could help to secure the international recognition that would give it better protection from gradual encroachment by housing developers. The mill is ideally placed to serve as a visitor and information centre for the SSSI, for the Two Moors Heritage Trail and for a proposed River Flit walk, creating a publicly accessible green corridor along the full length of the river valley from Chalton to Shefford.

The two moors are highly vulnerable to flooding from the River Flit. The River Flit passes the Flitwick Mill with three different channels. The main channel passes the mill and runs alongside the moor. The mill stream runs from the main channel through the mill wheel and passes under the Greenfield Road before rejoining the River Flit. The River Flit carries a high level of nutrients due to the sewage treatment works upstream at Chalton. Where the River Flit floods next to the moor the high nutrient level affects the vegetation and delicate balance of the moor's ecosystems. The trust would propose to maintain the sluices at the mill in a good state of repair and to work with the Internal Drainage Board to operate the sluices to control and manage the river at critical times. It is important to manage flooding upstream for local housing and agricultural land and downstream for the moors. This would maintain the mill's historic tradition of managing the water flow for hundreds of years.

2.3 The Trust's Vision

It is envisaged that, once restored, there is the capacity for the Mill to serve as a heritage centre and visitor attraction encompassing:

- Demonstration of the milling process on a periodic basis

- Educational activities for local schools and adults, supporting a range of learning activities involving subjects such as the history of technology, scientific field studies, historic environment, social and cultural history of the area, not least in association with the national curriculum
- A gateway to the environment and heritage of the Flit Valley to include an information centre for visitors to the nationally important Flitwick Moor, the Two Moors Heritage Trail, and a proposed Flit Valley walk from Chalton to Shefford
- A contribution to the social and cultural life of the local community by providing small meeting, exhibition/gallery, activity and office spaces for groups, plus a café
- The provision of training placements for learning a range of heritage craft skills, both during the Mill's restoration and subsequently
- Demonstration of a renewable energy technology by the generation of electricity through its own water turbine, making a significant contribution to its own energy needs and selling any surplus to the grid. The main channel of the River Flit is currently used as the fish passage and therefore a water turbine at the mill would not have an adverse affect on the fish. The River Flit does not contain migratory fish. Managing the water flow to encourage the fish to use the main channel would help to meet the criteria for the Biodiversity Action Plan Targets

The Trust's proposed future uses for the mill will be designed to fit around the existing internal fittings, ensuring that the present atmosphere of the mill as a working building is maintained and that its former commercial function can be understood by the visiting public.

2.4 Delivering the Vision

The initial Trustees could be the current members of the Friends of Flitwick Mill Group (members are willing to serve). Further Trustees would be sought from the local community to establish commitment from people with a wide range of skills and

expertise that could benefit the Mill. The Trustees would actively recruit volunteers to be involved with the restoration and running of the Mill and it is estimated that a team of 50 would be needed

The Flitwick Mill Trust would work closely with The Wildlife Trust who manage the neighbouring Flitwick and Flitton Moors, and also with the Greensand Trust to create a circular path around Flitwick that would encompass the Mill. The Mill would be an integral part of the Green Infrastructure Plan for the Flitwick area. (The local Green Infrastructure Plan for Flitwick and Ampthill involves the local community to look after the environment, heritage and wildlife for the future). Members of the Friends of Flitwick Mill group have actively participated in the Green Infrastructure Plan workshop.

The objectives of the Trust would therefore be:

- To restore and preserve the listed timber-framed Mill, within the setting of the Flit Valley, to include the building's structure, overshot waterwheel and unique main gearing
- To ensure that the Mill is used for events and activities that promote a sense of local community for all and adds value to the area for education, business and well-being
- To provide a heritage and information centre to support the management and continued scientific interpretation of the Flit Valley

2.5 Development Phases

2.5.1 Phase 1 – Restoration and Internal Redesign of the Mill and its associated Machinery

Preliminary research indicates that capital costs could be met through grant aid. In-kind contributions would come from voluntary effort. The Friends of Flitwick

Mill have engaged a surveyor and are preparing estimates for the restoration and development of the mill.

The restoration work would be carried out in consultation with English Heritage, the Mills Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and the District Conservation Officer. The repairs would be carried out in accordance with the Mill Section's Philosophy of Repair. Using a directory of specialist craftspeople maintained by the Mill Section, the expertise of professional millwrights would be sought to coordinate the work of conserving the structure and overhauling the working parts.

It is anticipated that the specialist repairs will be carried out in stages, with only those repairs considered essential being carried out initially. This would help to spread the costs out over time, while ensuring that the start of urgent repairs is not delayed while funds are raised for the remainder of the planned work.

2.5.2 Running the Restored Mill via Fundraising and Commercial Interests, and providing Public Access to the Mill

Given the restrictions of space, the principal public access to the Mill would be pedestrian via the proposed Flit Vale walk. Limited disabled parking could be made available in the vicinity of the Mill but other parking would have to be negotiated with local landowners with space, for example, a public house in the neighbourhood. The Mill can also be relatively easily accessed by walking or taxi from Flitwick Railway Station.

In relation to activities, a major annual event day during the summer could give a focus for Flitwick as a community that no longer has a Carnival Day. There would also be general and working mill open days throughout the year. For larger events it may be possible to arrange for car parking within a nearby field. Volunteers would guide visitors safely across the Greenfield Road to the mill.

Depending upon the final plan for the Mill, it is proposed to use different business opportunities to raise funds. These would include:

- Providing office space for The Wildlife Trust
- Giving guided tours of the mill
- Renting out facilities for conferences or private parties and running educational courses
- Running a tea room and a gift shop as part of the visitor attraction
- Providing gallery space for local artwork
- Milling displays with flour for sale
- Generating hydroelectric power sold to the national grid

All aspects of Health and Safety, Disability Access, Environmental Health and Conservation would have to be implemented to conform to legislative requirements and enable public access.

2.5.3 Phase 3 - The Mill functioning as a Self-financing Operation expanding its Public Access and Building up Reserves to secure its Long Term Future

2.6 Marketing

2.6.1 Market Analysis and Research

The Friends of Flitwick Mill Trust are carrying out market research by finding out how other mills operate and who they attract. Other visitor attractions are also being consulted to evaluate visitors' footfall to different types of event, throughout the year.

Support from the local community for the mill has been demonstrated through a poll of readers of the Times & Citizen newspaper. Fifty three percent of respondents

said no to Flitwick Mill becoming a single dwelling and that it should be preserved for future generations.

2.6.2 Marketing / Visibility via the Internet

Flitwick Mill would be promoted as a visitor attraction via its own website, links to which would be established from local government and also local society websites. National websites such as for The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings could also be used to promote the mill. The website would also be used to book facilities and tours and for the sale of gifts and books. Donations to the trust could also be made on line.

2.6.3 Paper-based Marketing

Promotional Leaflets will be produced for use in:

- Tourist offices
- Libraries
- Town Halls
- Camp sites
- Other watermills, and windmills
- Hotels and motels

2.7 Finance

It is too early at this stage to provide a detailed financial plan which includes the capital costs of purchasing, restoring and adapting the mill to support its future operation as a self-financing business. Indicative income and expenditure based on the experience of cognate operations suggest that ongoing fundraising and income from activities could amount to c£30K set against operating costs of c£25K. It may be that certain activities can be sub-contracted with the Trust taking a proportion of surpluses.

A reserve would be built up to provide for contingencies and to secure the long-term future of the Mill

2.7.1 Indicative Figures of Activities from Other Organisations, used as a Guide for the Proposal for Flitwick Mill.

Fundraising

Type	Organisation	Income
Fundraising for 2008 including:	Stotfold Mill, Bedfordshire	£18000
Country Fair		
Annual Ball		
Friends of the Mill		
Donations		
Other		

Operational Income

Type	Organisation	Income
Operational income for 2008 including:	Stotfold Mill, Bedfordshire	£9700
Coffee Shop		
Merchandising		
Flour Sales		
Room Hire		
Visitors		
Milling Course		
Interest		

Operational Costs

Type	Organisation	Cost
Operational Costs for 2008	Stotfold Mill, Bedfordshire	£23500
including:		
Insurance		
Electricity		
Water		
Rates		
Maintenance		
Meadows maintenance		
Wages		
Accountancy		
Legal and Admin		
BT and fire alarm		

Education, Costs and Income

Type	Organisation	Cost	Income
School visits and teacher training courses.	Chiltern Open Air Museum (COAM)	£1000	£3780 (estimated minimum for first year)

Hydro – Electricity

Organisation	Type	Cost	Income
Navitron Renewable Energy, Rutland, estimate for Flitwick Mill	Turbine and generator (plus annual maintenance)	£10,000	
	Sales to grid (average buy back 10p per KW hour)		£4400 average per annum

Milling, Costs and Income

Organisation	Type	Cost	Income
Stotfold Mill, Bedfordshire	Flour milling estimate for Flitwick Mill	£140 per tonne of grain	£1400 per tonne of flour

The Friends of Flitwick Mill consider that this proposal provides a way forward which would find wide acceptance. Consultations to date (see Appendix B) have been very constructive and supportive.

Appendix A

Members of The Friends of Flitwick Mill

Arthur Bourne

Colin Carpenter

David Sedgley

Fiona Steele

George Nash

Graham Bellamy

Keith Quantrill

Vivien Bray

Appendix B

Organisations that have been Consulted for the Preparation of this Proposal

The Architectural Heritage Fund

Bedfordshire Rural Charities Commission

Biffa

British Hydropower Association

Bromham Mill

Cambridgeshire Preservation Society

Chiltern Open Air Museum

English Heritage

Flitwick and District Heritage Group

Flitwick History Society

Heritage and Environment Section, Bedfordshire County Council

Heritage Lottery

Institute of Energy

Jordans Family Millers Since 1855

Navitron Renewable Energy

Oxfordshire Bakers

Maltings Structures Surveyors

Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings – Mills Section

Stotfold Mill

The Greensand Trust

The River Restoration Centre

The Royal Commission for 1851 exhibition

WREN

Appendix C

Letters of Support

See attached

Appendix D

Plans for Flitwick Mill as the Proposed Heritage Centre

See attached