

## Bristol's Heritage Buildings: Relics or Legacies?

An Invitation to those interested in Bristol's Heritage Buildings to an exhibition and a free networking event.

### **Dates of Exhibition:**

21 October–23 November; Mon- Sat 10-4.

### **Date and time of Networking Event:**

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1.30 pm – 5.00

The venue will be John Wesley's New Room in the Horsefair and the event is part of the New Room programme.

Bristol's Heritage is being 'recycled'. Look, for example, at what has happened to historic (and not so historic) Buildings. What has become of the E Shed and the M Shed, of Bush House that was once the Acraman's warehouse, of William Champion's Pin-making Factory in Kingwood/ Warmley and of the Tobacco Factory?

'Recycling' continues apace. In recent weeks, there have been reports that Lower Redland Road Police Station and the Central Library and making space for primary or free schools.

Before police stations and libraries, churches led the way in terms of transformation. Among the places of worship erected in 'an age of faith' that have been put to new uses consider St George's, now a prime music venue, Trinity Church, a Community Arts Centre, and St Paul's Portland Square, home to Circomedia.

The University of Bristol has been particularly active in finding new uses for old spaces. It has put a Drama Department and Theatre Collection in part of an Ink-Works, built a Hall of Residence around Clifton Hill House, filled the Victoria Room with a Music Department, and put the Institute for Advanced Studies inside the Royal Fort House. Meanwhile artists –some 'hide-bound', some avant-garde – seeking studio and gallery spaces - have moved into or sometimes 'occupied' various buildings. They have appropriated a public convenience here, a motor-cycle show-room there, and their quests continue.

All this activity means that issues of Heritage and Legacy are constantly before the public. The Georgian New Room, John Wesley's Chapel in the Horsefair, is an appropriate setting for consideration of issues raised by these transformations. Put up as a Society Meeting Room under the supervision of 'contractor', George Tulley in 1748, the building also functioned as a clinic, school-room, and book-shop, and it included accommodation! John Wesley's vision of a Christian community took shape in the New Room that became the setting in which Methodism was transformed from a movement into an organisation. After Wesley's death, Methodist leaders, neglectful of their denomination's beginnings, sold the building to a non-English-speaking immigrant group. For more than a century, it was benignly neglected while in the hands of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, before being returned to Methodist hands. The year was 1929 and the architect who voluntarily shouldered responsibility for restoring the building and making it 'fit for purpose' was one of those who placed his hand firmly on the city, George Herbert Oatley.

Born in 1863, Oatley is best known for his University Tower at the top of Park Street, but his work on John Wesley's New Room in the Horsefair is also remarkable - if only because of the way it combines innovation with restoration. In 1930, Tully/ Oatley's New Room reopened as a Museum, and it continues in that role (yes - the museum lay-out is *mostly 1930!*). It is also a place of pilgrimage, a tourist attraction, a public space, an archive and a venue that offers a programme of music, worship and lectures.

While the New Room now has roles that continue some of those envisaged in the 1740s, the other Georgian Meeting Rooms in Bristol have fared very differently - and a glance at them suggests the range of destinies when it comes to treating Heritage Buildings. In Broadmead, the Meeting House built by Tully for the Religious Society of Friends served for many years as part of the Bristol Registry Office, and it is now Brasserie Blanc. On his web-page, Raymond Blanc enthuses: *The Brasserie is in the old Quaker meeting hall, lovingly restored. The room is a marvel; simply built but of outstanding beauty. We have even managed to access the small balcony that overlooks the main room. I just love it.*

While gastronomes book tables in the 'restored' (?) 'Quaker meeting hall', and bow their heads as they consume the offerings of expert chefs, the third local Georgian Meeting House, is a rotting shell. The designation George Whitefield's Tabernacle in Kingswood as a Grade 1 listed building has not prevented it from being vandalised, and it now stands as a blackened shell, playing host to rusting super-market trolleys and wind-blow plastic bags.

In October / November, and against a background provided by the 'stories' of these three Meeting Houses, the 'restored' New Room will host the Relics or Legacies? exhibition and the networking event. These will bring together people involved in regenerating 'historic buildings' - the terms will be generously interpreted to convey a sense of the range of activities and structures involved. The exhibition will include material prepared by some of the groups in the Bristol area grappling with issues of restoration and renewal, and the brief is, broadly, to 'tell the story of your project', draw attention to the issues that have been encountered, share relevant experiences, and pass on helpful links.

The networking event will begin at 1.30 on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November and will include presentations that look 'across the board' as well as at particular projects. The occasion will provide opportunities to learn about the experience of activists in the area, and to share/

It is anticipated that the exhibition and networking day will include input from or about:

Acton Court; Arnos Vale Cemetery; Charles Wesley's House; Carriageworks, Stokes Croft - [ideas@carriageworks.org.uk](mailto:ideas@carriageworks.org.uk); Clifton Rocks Railway - **Maggie Shpland**; Kingswood Heritage Museum – **Alan Britton**; [New Room - James Gibbs ]; [Oatley, George Herbert JG] Pierian Centre - **Jean Burrough**; St Stephen's Church - Susan Jotcham?; Thomas Chatterton Society - Michael Doble; Trinity Arts Centre - **Emma Harvey**; Society of Friends – Quakers Friars/ Central Meeting House - **Graham Davey**; Suspension Bridge - **Helen Jeffrey**; Victoria Methodist Church (links to Portland and Backfields School - recently Coroners Court) ; **Dorothy Brown** panels.

If you would like to be involved and/ or attend, please write to [jamesgibbs@btinternet.com](mailto:jamesgibbs@btinternet.com) on behalf of the New Room Museum sub-committee.

Thanks, James Gibbs