

Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Local trust repairing and taking on the management of important industrial heritage building and sustaining through rentals and visitor income
Name of project/group:	Newman Brothers Coffin Works, Birmingham Conservation Trust
Location:	Central Birmingham
Duration (if applicable):	12 year project from initial studies to moving in

Short description of project:

The main objectives of this project were to preserve and develop a sustainable future for an important industrial building and its collections, and to provide a new home for the Birmingham Conservation Trust (BCT), which was formerly housed in the local authority, from which it could better develop community and partnership links.

The project took around 15 years to complete and the scheme changed significantly over that period. The building was acquired from the owner by the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands (AWM), and the Trust worked in partnership with them for 7-8 years until the RDAs ceased to operate and withdrew funding. The project was then re-worked and the building was transferred to the Trust at market value, using a grant from Birmingham City Council, after AWM was disbanded. The Trust then secured HLF/LEP/EH/charitable trust funding for the conservation works. The whole project cost circa £2m. The project combines a visitor attraction to the most significant areas of the building and commercial offices in the rear wings, whose rents subsidise the Trust and the long term maintenance of the buildings.

The repairs were completed last year and the visitor attraction has been open since October 2014.

The Trust runs the visitor attraction and manages the rental units, but also undertakes consultancy work. The Trust is actively looking for new projects in Birmingham with around 4-5 projects in the pipeline.

What would have happened without this project/group?

If the Trust had not taken on the property, the building, along with its unprotected and internationally-significant collections and in-tact historic machinery, would have been in jeopardy.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

The project achieved its objectives by cataloguing, storing and then returning the collections and business archive; repairing the building; conserving the in-tact original machinery; researching the history and developing interpretation, including guided tours led by volunteers and opening the visitor attraction allowing public access six days a week. The non-heritage attraction spaces were developed into modern commercial units, and let as workshops and offices, including the new home of the Trust. The Trust engages with the community through volunteering and events and has been successful in attracting new audiences through vibrant social media.

In order to get the building ready for operation, the Trust worked with a team of conservation professionals, plus specialist museum and community engagement professionals and took advice from property consultants. The work was completed by a specialist contractor.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

The project saved a Grade II* listed building on the Heritage At Risk register and its unprotected historic contents and unique collections in situ. It enhances the local environment by removing dereliction and creating new jobs and new workspaces, including a popular local yoga centre. The visitor attraction has grown in popularity, becoming rated #1 out of 27 museums in Birmingham in 2015 and within the top 10 of over 300 things to do in the city on TripAdvisor. A recent public review says:

“Only open since October 2014, this wonderful living museum really does bring the past to life. We had a great guide who talked us through the exhibits and told us stories about the characters involved in the business when it was active. So happy that this place was preserved and reopened as it really is an important part of the history of industrial Birmingham”.

The ‘resurrection’ of Newman Brothers Coffin Works has won three regional awards, and won the “People’s Favourite” national Historic England Angels Award in September 2015.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges would anything be done differently?

The main lesson learnt from this project was to always be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances and build in plenty of contingency from the start. This project survived massive changes by being receptive to alternative ways of doing things and building significant support with stakeholders and the public so they did not wish to see it fail. When AWM pulled out their funding, the project had to be reduced by over £1.5m, which was mostly achieved by keeping an existing 1960s wing and refurbishing it, rather than replacing it, and keeping expenditure to the absolute minimum.

What is the future for the case study?

The project is now up and running, with commercial spaces fully let and the visitor attraction is gradually increasing its visitor numbers through admission to the museum and through an events programme so it becomes self-sustaining. The building is winning awards and the Trust is moving on to other projects. The lessons learnt will be shared with other BPTs at their conference and through case studies.

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