



# Under the microscope

James Alexander

## Restoration

The mad eyed Welshman is back, filling our living rooms with heart-tugging tales of needy buildings. Yes, Griff Rhys-Jones, manic grin painted across his face, is once again dashing around the country introducing us to our decaying heritage. Aply supported by Marianne (a first class honours building surveyor no less) and Ptolemy (a scholar of New Mexico's adobe mud structures) he invites the masses to watch, listen and learn as together they tell ghastly tales of mis-treatment, neglect and downright incompetence.

And tell me, who doesn't love this programme? This is just the sort of stuff the British public adore. It has everything; romantic heritage, social history, personal perspectives and of course, the chance of a fairy tale ending of which they can be a part. To boot, the knight in shining armour, galloping over the hill, banner flowing, quill posed over a cheque book is, wait for it, the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Restoration programme's concept offers a truly democratic way to allocate public funding. Sure, promises of money come with the usual caveats, but fundamentally it is Mr and Mrs Ordinary, sitting in their shell-suits, eating pizza, being asked to make decisions about where money goes rather than the fusty academic types who normally dominate and prevail in these situations. And given that it is the same Mr and Mrs Ordinary who have been buoying up the Lottery Funds' coffers every Wednesday and Saturday since the mid 1990s, this is no bad thing.

But beyond good TV, where does all this get us? Well, I'm not really sure. Certainly it improves awareness of the issues of building care and maintenance and offers broad-based educational value (from social history

through to construction technology). But what else? Does it really help solve the challenges faced by these small groups of volunteers, autonomous trusts and persistent local interest groups? Whilst the promise of a little – and in the context of some of the schemes the sums on offer are little – money can help enormously, very often it doesn't sort out the problems of the here and now. And before you, the reader, lambaste me for talking out of my hat and being a killjoy, I should add that through the work that we do at Locum I am in a privileged position to comment. Not only does Locum spend the bulk of its time working on such projects, but more particularly we have been advising the Victoria Baths (last year's Restoration winners) and Lissan House (a 2003 runner-up), on how to move forward.

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My main anxiety (as any regular follower of this column will know) is not the challenge of getting a building ship-shape in the first instance, but rather, of ensuring it has a sustainable future. Indeed, were it not for the fact that the original uses of the Restoration buildings either stopped completely or slowed, to the point of seizure, then they wouldn't be on the 'in need' list in the first place. Whilst this might appear to be a blinding glimpse of the obvious, it is worth pondering, as this is where the real challenge lies: what next for the rescued building?

Beyond wholesome calls, from cheery faces, articulating how once refurbished building X or Y will house a museum or visitor centre (take for example the Knockando Wool Mill, The Hall of Clestrain, Llanfyllin Workhouse or Sherborne House), what is offered by way of future use? And don't we all know by now that museums, galleries and visitor centres are not the way forward (certainly the HLF should). Whilst these uses might offer something within a wider mix, they certainly don't cut it as undertakings capable of sustaining, in isolation, the heritage buildings they will occupy.

In Manchester I have worked closely with a colleague (the scribe of LDR's Economics Without Tears) as he has wrestled with exactly this difficulty. Sure, as the Beeb website says, the Baths now have an updated Condition Report and a full Measured Survey, but the gordian knot of the deal is how a future proof use of the whole premises can be found. Locum has been party to endless iterations of options analyses and appraisals yet still no solution is to hand. Whilst I am sure the Victoria Baths team will have the strength to push forward, there are many such groups that won't, or can't.

Often in such circumstances debate is characterised, on the one hand, by questioning the suitability of the commercial options and, on the other, by questioning the commerciality of the suitable ones. This is a desperate paradox that is further complicated by the large number of stakeholders involved in the decision-making process associated with such projects. Perhaps what is needed is a little more latitude from those involved in the planning process to allow the exploration of those uses at the margin that offer a sustainable future

but might, in other circumstances, offend the sensibilities of the heritage community.

Of course, in days of old it was easy and, in any event, the thinking didn't quite work like that. These crumbling assets were simply tools. Form followed function. Sure, the buildings were more or less glamorous in their conception and execution, but deep down they were functional investments; castles, grand houses, keeper's cottages, factories, gaols and mines. They had uses. Their very existence flowed from some other requirement. There was a compelling rationale for investment. Even our museums were purpose built.

Yet today, beyond a desire (honourable as it is) to restore and preserve, precious little else is discussed at any length. Preservation is all too often seen as an end in itself. And herein lies a great omission of the BBC's programme and of the country's restoration warriors. If as much energy went into thinking about the future use of these places as into the preservation of the fabric, and if Griff got as steamed up about the revenue economics as the window mullions, we'd all be better served. As I sit back on my sofa, watching with interest as the conversation moves towards the inevitable \$64,000 question, '...and once you have the money, what do you expect to do with property X or Y?', I wait, with baited breath. But alas, all too often the solution is predicated on something I know will be as hard – if not harder – to support from a revenue perspective as to raise the capital in the first instance.

And there's a further ironic twist here: it is the human and social interest story that makes these places so special. The family of Olympic swimmers raised by a father who was

the 'live-in' attendant at the Victoria Baths, the story behind the Bullough textile fortune used to create the Edwardian Masterpiece that is Kinloch Castle, the Poor Laws of the early nineteenth century (not repealed until the 1930s!) that triggered the construction of the Workhouses, of which Llanfyllin Union is but one.

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Yet, valuable and interesting as the stories might be they are not enough to keep the buildings alive. And, in any event, the buildings themselves deserve better. What is required, of course, are uses that will continue to breathe life (and, in time, their own social history) into the rescued structures, and this can only come from more innovative thinking. Commercial activities, residential uses, educational centres, securely funded community services. But not, please, museums and visitor centres at the mercy of discretionary local authority funding, the vagaries of the tourist/leisure markets and the public's largesse. Let these refurbished masterpieces be homes, venues or workplaces for another generation of occupiers, who will in turn contribute to a building's sense of place and identity.

And, there are good examples across the whole of the UK of where valuable historic buildings are being put to exceedingly good alternative uses. The magnificent Fort Dunlop factory in the Midlands (next to the M6) is being transformed as I write, Newcastle's Old Post Office dramatically restored to

house a local architectural practice, the magnificent Cliveden Hotel, sitting cheek by jowl with the National Trust's management of the wider estate, the Woolwich Arsenal, home to an eclectic mix of commercial, residential and community uses, and The Royal Naval College, Greenwich, now providing first quality accommodation to a London University. Indeed, were it not for the demise of the grammar school system I suspect that Restoration's very own Sherborne House would have continued to prosper as Lord Digby's School for Girls; a use that furthered the full and active utilisation of the building and added to the personal history of the place.

So, the sustainable re-use of historic buildings can be achieved without the need to turn immediately to thoughts of museums and visitors centres. And this must be encouraged, because, if it isn't, we will become a nation so over-run by projects that preserve and celebrate the past that we will forget how to look forward. Don't get me wrong, I don't advocate throwing the baby out with the bathwater, I simply urge that we should not always put the brakes on progress by coating our gems in aspic. Let's use the tremendous historic assets this country has, and of which Restoration is cleverly, and increasingly, making us aware, as stepping stones for the future.

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