

## FLINT BARN COLUMNS

With any historic building there is a story to be told by each of its many different features , sometimes very clear ; at other times less so but with clues as to why they are there . The columns at Flint Barn fall in to the latter category.

In 1985 the building was part of an engineering factory which the owner wished to sell . Guided, no doubt by consultants, the view was that there was very little demand for factories with restricted access and parking but probably good demand for small ,traditional offices with good parking, particularly in a place like Amersham where small offices go well but parking is at a premium. Accordingly a Planning and Listed Building Application was made by the owners to restore and convert the two smaller two storey blocks , but to demolish Flint Barn itself to provide the parking needed , and to replace it with a smaller two storey pastiche copy of the others . For Listed Building reasons the old external wall of the Barn was to be kept as a very high boundary wall , giving a very constrained environment for the new block . This application was in due course approved , the buildings put on the market and sold.

Our client bought them . Knowing that I had previously lived in the High Street he approached us to see if we would build out what he had acquired - a prospect we viewed with very mixed feelings . Flint Barn, although a very utilitarian industrial building, was very much a part of Amersham's history, and formed a very significant Townscape role in closing off the courtyard opposite what had been the brewery it was part of . We did not wish to be party to its demolition.

On the other hand a Planning Consent had been given – and been bought and paid for . And there were very compelling reasons why – parking was (and still is) at a premium in the Old Town ;there was no demand for industrial , and if the whole building were to be converted to offices the parking shortfall would not only breach Planning requirements but would make the building very unattractive to prospective purchasers . There was also the problem that it looked like an old factory, and our client was convinced that no-one would buy an office which looked like an old factory. Hence there were very compelling financial reasons why our client intended to proceed as consented and , as he made very clear – if you don't want to do it I can find plenty who will !

A difficult decision – say no and the buildings fate is sealed . Say yes and there is at least a chance to recover something . From the clients point of view it was essentially a financial consideration – what is viable – ie will cover the cost of buying the building and produce an overall profit . Fundamentally viability has two parts ; what it is going to cost you to create the product ; and what it is going to be worth when you have finished . The former can , within limits, be calculated, the latter is very much up to the developers instinct ( guided by his Agents )

Unusually, costs worked in our favour . It was known that one of the Listed two storey blocks was built over the Misbourne . What was not known was the condition of the vaulting and its capacity to take refurbishment of the building over to create a modern office. As studies progressed it became clear that the costs of the two Listed Buildings would considerably exceed that assumed when the buildings were purchased. At that point a fundamental review of the whole project became a possibility.

In the meantime we had undertaken some studies in to the possibility of keeping Flint Barn and converting it to office use . These showed that by holding the building up on columns , using most of the ground floor for parking and restoring and converting the upper floor to offices , it was possible to provide the parking needed , create more ( but different ) office space , and ,crucially reduce overall costs . But, the critical point was – will it sell.

Fortunately, by that time we had converted a number of other old industrial buildings to similar new uses, including a multistory Victorian stable block, and had recently completed the first phase of the Albert Dock in Liverpool, which showed that it was possible to restore and convert old industrial premises in to successful commercial ventures.

We were nearly there ,but the question of image remained – Flint Barn itself looked pretty utilitarian – propped on stilts it would be even worse. How to soften that image in to something our client felt he could sell was the last hurdle – a sketch with classical columns did the trick . A new Planning and Listed building Application went in, was approved, and the building duly built. By and large that is what is there now.

Rescuing, restoring and converting an old building is always a matter of making compromises. As I said before each part of a building has a story to tell, and it is important to try not to lose that , or to confuse it by adding features which might be construed as being part of the original building when in fact they are not . If Flint Barn had been originally built on columns, they most likely would have been Cast Iron , probably with fine mouldings top and bottom . Whilst historically correct these would have been quite wrong to add in 1987. Today we would use crisp parallel flange columns and beams, these would be of our age , and therefore appropriate, and the market would be quite happy with them. In 1987 this would have been a step too far. What was needed was a column which looked like the classic traditional building our client was trying to sell, but which could not be confused with an element of the original building. The answer was a stylized Doric ( concrete ) column – after all what was good enough for Jesse Hartley in Liverpool was probably good enough for Amersham – particularly if it would help us to save Flint Barn.

So, the answer to your question about who put ,what you correctly describe as “gloriously inappropriate” columns on Flint Barn is – we did, and without them Flint Barn would not be there.

Mike Franklin  
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