

Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Repair and Maintenance: A building on the Heritage at Risk Register brought back into use.
Name of project/group:	1-4 St Paul's Square – Aldwyck Housing Group
Location:	Bedford
Duration (if applicable):	3 ¾ years (11 months on site August 2014 – end June 2015)

Short description of project:

The project aimed to rescue a terrace of four historic buildings from dereliction and re-use the floor space to provide town centre affordable accommodation. The buildings had fallen out of use in 1969, narrowly avoiding demolition. Over the next 46 years the condition of the properties declined, threatening the historic fabric. The buildings trace over 555 years of Bedford's architectural and civic history. The earliest building (1 St Paul's Square) dates to c1460.

The project team was led by Aldwyck Housing Group (Aldwyck), who were originally approached by Bedford Borough Council (the Council) with a proposed scheme to bring the buildings back into use for affordable housing. Given the high cost of repair, grant and public funding sources played a significant part in achieving a viable scheme, with funding from Bedford High Street Townscape Heritage Initiative (a Heritage Lottery Fund scheme, managed by the Council), the Homes and Communities Agency Empty Homes Initiative (secured by Aldwyck) and the Council's own affordable housing budget. The remainder of the project was funded by Aldwyck who purchased the buildings in July 2014. Work started on site in August 2014 to create nine flats and one three bedroom house. Works completed in June 2015.

What would have happened without this project/group?

Before the project began, the condition of the buildings was extremely poor and worsening each month. The local authority recognised that the viability gap for bringing them back into use would soon be unbridgeable and a swift solution was needed to save the buildings. Historic elements were near the point of collapse, the cantilevered timber stair in 4 St Paul's Square was of particular concern. The timber frame of 1 and 2 St Paul's Square had also been covered in concrete render, so there were concerns about the condition of the timber frame beneath and the impact this would have on the structural integrity of these buildings. It was a possibility that large elements of the buildings could be lost.

The prominence of the buildings in the town centre location also detracted from other regeneration efforts in the High Street and St Paul's area. As symbols of urban decline, they created a negative atmosphere at a key gateway point for the town. Delivering a quality and

lasting solution for the much-loved and high-profile buildings in the town was therefore important for the local community and local businesses, as evidenced by their frequent mention in the local press and an art installation - 'Lace in Place' on 1 St Paul's Square, by Bedford Creative Arts in 2012.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

In 2011, the Council secured 'Townscape Heritage Initiative' (THI) funding from the HLF to repair and bring Historic Town centre properties back into use. HLF asked that 1-4 St Paul's Square be included in the scope of the project. Grant funding secured, the Council was able to progress discussions about the buildings' future with the property owner, the Ministry of Justice. The Council's Housing department approached a number of housing associations looking to increase their affordable housing offer in Bedford town centre, and Aldwyck decided to take on the project. They appointed Philip Bailey Architects to draw up the redevelopment scheme. Beacon Planning provided heritage consultancy. Planning and Listed Building applications were submitted based on layouts that had been negotiated in detail with the Council. Schedules and specifications of works were reviewed to ensure the requirements of the THI and HCA grant funding was met.

The works were done by V E Parrott on a design and build contract, which is unusual for a project that had a central conservation element. Numerous surveys and investigations were required before Aldwyck and V E Parrott were comfortable apportioning the risks under the contract.

The project delivery was therefore characterised by strong partnership working from the very outset, through to completion of the work.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

Bringing the buildings back into use has increased quality affordable housing in Bedford town centre by creating 10 units accommodating up to 26 people in total.

Kerry-Ann Gracey and her three year old son Tyler were the first residents in the affordable housing scheme which opened on 1 July 2015. They were moved into their new home after being registered as homeless since December and living with Kerry's Mother's for almost two years.

Kerry, who has lived and worked in Bedford all her life said: "We are extremely lucky to have been given the chance to live in this house. I am so overwhelmed. The place is amazing and it is so close to my work and the river. We are very excited about living here and starting our new lives."

As the project was completed recently, formal evaluation has yet to be undertaken. The

Mayor of Bedford remarked: “These historic buildings stood derelict for nearly fifty years, looking tired and tatty in one of Bedford's most prominent locations. They are now looking suitably handsome in the heart of the town centre, thanks to this project to bring them into use and to restore and protect the site's medieval heritage.”



1-4 St Paul's Square (15 June 2015, Photo: Adam Smyth).

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

The initial challenges were to identify all the parties to bring to the table and to negotiate a viable yet sensitive new use for the buildings. Once the THI grant funding had been secured, this helped the Council to help discussions regarding options for re-use and the sale of the buildings.

Once Aldwyck were able to deliver the project, there was a steady and clear progression of the project, without any significant changes to the objectives of the project. The key challenges were ensuring the completion of the project within a fixed budget, to the requisite quality and attention to detail and within the timescales attached to the grant funding. This was overcome by detailed and thorough negotiations of the Schedule and Specification of Works, before tendering, and close partnership working between Aldwyck, the Council and V E Parrott once the project was on site. The project was delivered on budget, which is an extraordinary achievement by Aldwyck and V E Parrott.

What is the future for the case study?:

The project sets a precedent for what can be achieved on a limited budget and limited timescale, within the historic environment. A sensitive and sympathetic re-use scheme, that is well considered and follows the advice of heritage consultants, has delivered high quality, affordable, residential accommodation for Aldwyck.

The works also provided opportunities to learn more about the history of the buildings, both with archaeological recording, dendrochronological testing of timbers (which dated one of the buildings to c.1465) and detailed research in the local archives and historic environment records. This information has been given in talks and guided tours of the buildings, informed press releases to the local media, and synthesised into a 'treasure hunt' exercise that was offered as an event for the public as part of Heritage Open Days (September 2015) and also to schools and the local college.

V E Parrott also offered on-site work experience to Technical & Professional NVQ learners from Bedford College and delivered a taster session on the use of lime-wash for Bedford College Painter & Decorator learners.

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