

THE HARRIS & PEARSON BUILDING: USING A SUCCESSFUL BUILDING RESTORATION PROJECT TO COMMUNICATE ITS MESSAGE TO THE PUBLIC

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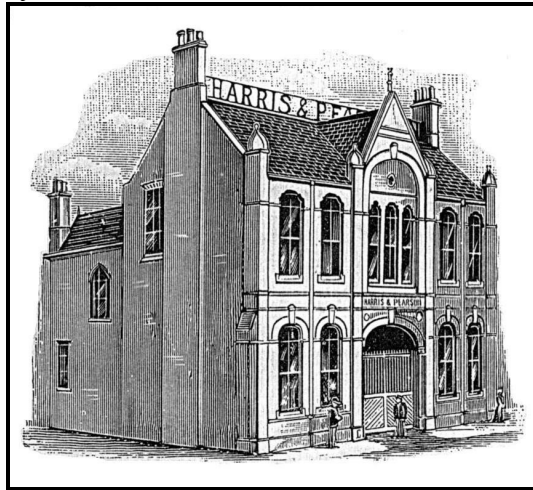
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West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust

Short Paper for inclusion in Session 5:
Communicating the role of industry and its historical identity

The Harris & Pearson Building Restoration Project

The author has been involved in this project from the earliest stages, being responsible for halting its demolition in 1996, securing its statutory protection and seeing its restoration through to completion. Earlier stages of this work were first reported to the TICCIH Interim Conference held in Hungary in 1999.



Harris & Pearson Ltd, a firebrick manufacturer in the Black Country region of the United Kingdom, built this office building in 1888. It was planned and built as a splendid and permanent advertisement of the quality of the products the company produced, and every brick was made at the works from local Stourbridge fireclay. Last used in 1990, the offices fell prey to vandalism in the mid-1990s, and were in the course of demolition when the author intervened and got them first protected and then listed. Following this, the local council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (Dudley MBC), made an approach to the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust (WMHBT). Contact was established between the Trust and the building's owners in December 1996. The latter tried to sell it on the open market in August 2000 but without success, and in July 2001, agreed in principle to transfer its ownership to the Trust, together adjoining land for a car park.

The Restoration Project

Condition Before Restoration

A temporary roof was placed over the demolished roof, but considerable water ingress had caused serious internal damage. All doors and windows had been secured, but vandalism had left only the ground floor protection in place. The inside fittings had been completely gutted. All of the fireplaces had been removed, together with the attractive stair balusters and oak handrail. Fortunately the removal of the upstairs windows allowed adequate ventilation to prevent any visible fungus growth. The floors were covered, in places to a depth of 10cm,

with various forms of detritus. This was cleared before restoration work began by volunteer groups organised by the WMHBT.

Making Restoration Possible

The Trust began the process of restoration by commissioning S T Walker & Duckham of Worcester to propose a scheme that could be acceptable to all parties. In January 2003 ownership of the property was transferred to the WMHBT and an application submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a Heritage Grant toward the costs of this restoration project. Resulting from a formal tendering process, Birmingham-based firm of William Sapcote & Sons Ltd were appointed as contractors to carry out the restoration work.

Costs and Funding

The total project costs for the restoration were estimated to be £890,000 (€1,283,848). Part of this was to be recovered by sale of the restored building as commercial offices, but this left a funding gap. As a 'Building at Risk' of gap funding was needed. In recognition of the architectural and historical significance of this building, financial support towards planning its restoration came from the Architectural Heritage Fund, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, the Manifold Trust and Advantage West Midlands, supplemented by the support of local volunteers campaigning to save the building. The approximate value of volunteer contributions alone amounted to an amazing £35,000 (€50,488). In October 2003 the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) awarded a Grant of up to £627,000 (€904,464) to the restoration. By March 2004 the WMHBT was in a position to approve a contract for the building work. The contractors began in April 2004 and completed their work in January 2005. An official opening was held on 11 February 2005. Local historian and radio presenter, Dr Carl Chinn, cut the ribbon as well as broadcasting live interviews from the event on BBC Radio WM.

The Building Layout

The building consists of two storeys and faces almost due south with an approximate total overall floor area of 200 sq m. There are seven offices with a total internal area of 140 sq m.

The Ground Floor

The ground floor's main entrance is through a central arch containing a weighbridge. This gives access to an entrance hall and the flight of steps to the upper level. A doorway left of the stairs allows entrance to the weighbridge office (5m x 5.5m), with its mechanism still in situ. This office has two front facing windows and one overlooking the weighbridge in the archway, the latter re-inserted in the restoration. The archway above the weighbridge is extended to cover the entrance area and also the door opposite giving access to the east side offices, two in number. The front office is approximately 5m x 2.8m, again with two front facing windows, the other being smaller, 3.8m x 2.5m.

The First Floor

The single staircase approaches all of the first floor. A trapezium shaped room, 3.5m x 3m, leads from the landing to the left, with a corner fireplace and a single window facing north. The first door on the right leads into the office formerly occupied by Mr Pearson, 5m x 5.5m, with a single window, facing west, and two front-facing windows. A second door on the right leads into an office, 6m x 5.5m, with access into a father office at the eastern end of the building, 3m x 5.5m. The first of these offices is above the covered weighbridge entrance. An original timber partition separating the first office from the office to the east has been retained, complete with its two small sliding hatches, one used when the first telephone was

installed in the building and the second for a purpose as yet unidentified. The first office has the three central windows seen on the facade of the building; the easterly office has four windows (two south and two north) and a large fireplace. A small office on the north side, 3.3m x 3.2m, has a single window and a repeat of the patterned quarry tiled floor seen in the ground floor lobby and first floor landing.

The restored building is now back in use as self-contained commercial offices, bringing important regeneration benefits to the area.

Communicating the message of a successful building restoration project to the public

During the course of this restoration project, so many people came forward with memories and memorabilia that it was decided to create a website to present these to the public. It also became clear that the project was going to be a considerable success, so it was also decided that this website should be used in an 'evangelistic' way, to promote the role of Historic Buildings Trusts and the value of restored historic buildings.

The Website

It is a requirement of projects funded by the HLF that a website be created about the project; that this have an educational bias, and that it be maintained and updated for a minimum of 10 years. This notwithstanding, it was the desire of all involved in the restoration project to use it as just such an example to encourage others to try and save other former industrial buildings. Therefore, the idea of creating and maintaining a website as one means of doing this suited the wishes of all parties involved in the restoration project. As the work neared completion, a domain name - <http://www.harrisandpearson.info> - was registered, and work began on drawing together information to be presented on it. This came from a variety of sources, including: -

- Analogous knowledge and experience contributed by local experts
- Information researched in local libraries and archives
- Material donated by local people
- Personal memories and recollections of local people and former employees
- Souvenirs kept by former employees

The website has 11 sections, beginning with: -

1) Company History

In 1852, Peter Harris and George Pearson acquired the lease of the site, then 6 acres, and further increased the area to 9 acres in 1872. Between 1852 and 1874, the amount of fireclay extracted from the Staffordshire coalfields increased fivefold, and by 1874 there were 20 different firms involved; an indication of the expansion of the industry. A typical 19th century Black Country firebrick-works required local mineral reserves, including clay pits to provide the ceramic raw material and coalmines to provide fuel. Other resources available here at Brierley Hill included iron, lime and sand, all essential ingredients.

The site was also bounded by the Stourbridge Canal to the west, Brettell Lane to the south, Bull Street to the north, and the Great Western Railway to the east. The Black Country Tramway network ran along Brettell Lane. Transport links were therefore present all around the site. Active coalmines were present to the east, west and north. Brierley Ironworks to the north and Brettell Lane Lime Kilns to the southwest. In fact the site and its location were ideal for a successful business, proved by the fact that it still continues today, producing high temperature ceramics for the furnace industry operated by Dyson Industries Ltd. of Sheffield.

Peter Harris died in 1874 followed by George Pearson in 1899; the firm continued to be run by their respective sons. During the depression of the 1920/30s the company acquired several, similar, small businesses and consequently became incorporated in 1931 to become Harris & Pearson Ltd. In 1968 Dyson Group Plc. purchased the company, although it continued to trade independently until about 1980. Pickford Holland, who were part of the Dyson Group or J & J Dyson, as they were then known, last used the Offices until 1990.

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/hphistory.htm>

2) The Office Building

Harris & Pearson built this splendid and permanent advertisement of the quality of their products in 1888 to be their new Offices. Every brick was made at the works from the local Stourbridge fireclay. The variety of architectural ceramics used in the façade is remarkable including both glazed and unglazed materials and a variety of colours. The glazed fireclay cills are particularly unusual. The white glazed lettering is a striking feature of the façade and a rare example of Victorian architectural graphics still in situ. Glazed brick walls exist in the entrance hall, landing and lobby in a variety of colours. The toilet also has glazed brick walls, but the outstanding internal feature is the patterned quarry tiled floor to the landing, lobby and small office (now converted to a toilet block) on the first floor.

The Building Layout

The building consists of two storeys and faces almost due south with an approximate total overall floor area of 200 square metres. There are seven offices with a total internal office area of approximately 140 square metres.

The Ground Floor

The ground floor's main entrance is through the central arch containing the weighbridge, on the left. This gives access to an entrance hall and the flight of steps to the upper level. A doorway left of the stairs allows entrance to the weighbridge office (5m x 5.5m), in which the Avery's mechanism still is in situ, alongside the weighbridge outside. This office has two front facing windows and a window overlooking the weighbridge in the archway, a window re-inserted as part of the restoration scheme. To the rear off the entrance hall is a washroom and toilet. A boiler room complex sits beyond this point with access gained only from the outside.

The archway above the weighbridge is extended to cover the entrance area and also the door opposite giving access to the east side offices, two in number. The front office is approximately 5m x 2.8m, again with two front facing windows, whilst the other is smaller, 3.8m x 2.5m. A small washroom has been added to the rear, projecting from the main building. This was in a ruinous condition. The restoration scheme included replacing this later addition with a toilet block meeting present-day standards for use by people with disabilities. The structure was built with new firebricks made by the nearby Cradley Special Brick Company, matched to original bricks in the main building. Vandals had demolished an outside lean-to garage originally used for housing Mr. Pearson's car.

The Building Layout - The First Floor

The single staircase approaches all of the first floor. A trapezium shaped room about 3.5m x 3m leads off from the landing to the left, with a corner fireplace and a single window facing north. The first door on the right leads into the office formerly occupied by Mr Pearson, 5m x 5.5m, with a single window, facing west, and two front-facing windows. The restoration scheme included the removal of a later plasterboard partition-wall that had been inserted to

sub-divide this room into two offices. The second door on the right leads into an office, 6m x 5.5m, with access from there into a further office at the eastern end of the building measuring 3m x 5.5m. The first of these offices is above the covered weighbridge entrance. Another plasterboard wall had been added to the front office to create a corridor that led to the second office in the sub-division of Mr Pearson's former office. This later addition was also removed as part of the restoration project, returning the first office to its original size.

An original timber partition separating the first office from the office to the east has been retained, complete with its two small sliding hatches, one used when the first telephone was installed in the building (see the recollections section of the website for more on this) and the second for a purpose as yet unidentified. The first office has the three central windows seen on the facade of the building; the easterly office has four windows (two south and two north) and a large fireplace. A small office on the north side, 3.3m x 3.2m, has a single window and a repeat of the patterned quarry tiled floor seen in the ground floor lobby and first floor landing. This was originally accessed from the central first floor office. In the restoration scheme this room has been converted to a toilet block to meet present-day office requirements, with a new access doorway being inserted from the first floor landing.

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/officebuilding.htm>

3) Recollections

One of the aims of the project was to piece together a historical record of the Harris & Pearson Company. People who had memories they wanted to share were encouraged to contact the organisers. Some of them wrote their stories down, and these are made available on the website in both .pdf and word formats. This is the story of the manufacture of glasshouse pots, as recalled by Harry Smith, by email from Adelaide in Australia: -

'My association with Harris & Pearson began in 1935. The main clay used at that time was the famous Stourbridge Old Mine Clay - however that was fast running out, and was being replaced by New Mine Clay, which was not as refractory. Clay was obtained from Withymoor. There were two grinding pans, one was the original and was driven by a coal fired boiler, which provided steam for an old marine engine, which in turn drove a system of driving belts, this marine engine had a huge flywheel which constantly needed chocking up and was the cause of many stoppages. The second pan had an electric motor drive and was the more efficient of the two.

These two mills provided feed for the two Pug Mills (extruders) via tempering tubs in which the ground clay was watered down to become plastic; some quite stiff for extruders, and some quite soft for the hand moulders. Most processes were labour intensive and forklifts etc were unheard of. The extruders were housed in long sheds (stoves) and were serviced by men with special long topped barrows who would run down the stove and stack the bricks for drying. The extruders made mainly bricks of 9x4½x3 dimensions and by the use of wires could be made to produce Side Arch and End Arch etc. The extruders could also make large stiff clots for use with the presses. These were again hand operated and were known as 'Swing Presses' or 'Hand Presses'. The Swing Presses consisted of a heavy screw some 4 inches to 6 inches in diameter attached to a large circular wheel. By turning the wheel the press would move up and down. The operator (sometimes two) stood on a platform and swung the heavy wheel, and the screw drove the top plate into the die box and pressed the bricks. Accidents were prone to happen for the press had very few safety features.

The other method of manufacture was by hand moulding, which is where I came in. Since the advent of Plastic Refractories had not yet arrived; most specially shaped bricks were made in wooden moulds; by both male and female moulders. These moulds could be quite complicated and necessitate either loose fittings in a timber frame or collapsible moulds. At one time three of us could not keep up with demand and we had to send for a Mould and Pattern Maker from Amblecote Works. The moulds could be very large as in the case of glasshouse tank blocks (which necessitated two moulders to handle one) or very small which normally women would make.'

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/hpaudio.htm>

4) Recorded Memories

Seven former employees were interviewed for the project and their recorded their memories are also made available on the website, both as sound excerpts and full transcripts. Here. Mary Clark, who was the wages clerk between 1939 and 1947, recalls the use of a speaking tube device: -

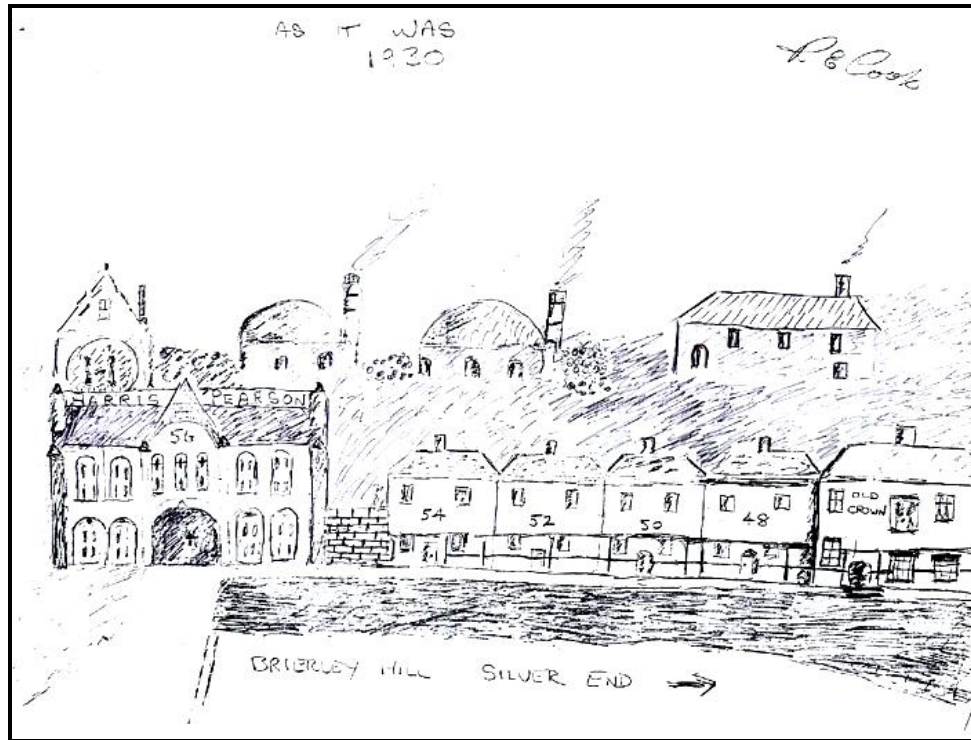
'Do you remember seeing or using the speaking tube device? Yes – it connected to Mr Ron's office. There were 2 tubes, one to speak into, and one to listen with. To use it you took the stopper out of the speaking tube and whistled into it [no whistle provided]. The person upstairs heard this and picked up their tubes to respond. It was very effective and the sound was very clear. Mr Ron used it a lot, but the staff often ignored it!'

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/recordings.htm>

5) Drawings & Memories

Ron Cook was: *'...born next door but one to Harris & Pearson in 1935, and my mother, Elizabeth, worked there for about 15 years, from 1942 till 1957. I also worked there, my first job when I left school at 15 until I went into the army. I worked as a page to Billy Jones who was the brick maker. We made bricks by hand rolling clods of clay, punching it into moulds and bumping it on a big wooden table, cutting off the surplus clay with a wire and laying them on a hot floor.'*

He also produced some sketches to show what the works looked like and the buildings which surrounded it, most of which have since been demolished. This view shows long demolished cottages in Brettell Lane, plus the brick kilns, and other works buildings behind these, as they were in 1930:



- Link: <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/recook.htm>

6) Harris & Pearson Families

Development of the website offered an opportunity to look beyond the specifics of the restored offices and to provide information to those who wish to conduct research. One popular strand of research is that into people's own family history. For this we were able to include an article by Steve Pearson, a descendant of the Pearson family, which gives general guidance as well as specific information. Here, Steve Pearson describes how to approach: -

'...researching family history in Kingswinford (which here shall be taken to include its later constituents) for which there are three main primary sources:

- *Parish Registers (which begin in 1603)*
- *Manorial Records (which also begin around 1600 - the Manor of Kingswinford was held by the Earl of Dudley)*
- *Wills - few families in the area were of sufficient status to be able to leave a will until a relatively modern period Pearson Records*

Sporadic early mentions of the surname occur as early as the 14th century. However, it is not until the time of the surviving parish registers that there is anything like a continuous record. The Manorial Records are of little help here: three generations of the same family - all named Nicholas Pearson - are recorded during the 1600s, but in the succeeding century records from this source are sparse.'

- Link: <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/familyhistory.htm>

7) History of Firebricks

Another contributor to the site is local firebrick expert, John Cooksey. This is his introduction to a history of firebrick manufacture in the Black Country: -

'This small area of the Midlands covers an area 13 miles by 9 miles only became known as 'the Black Country' in about 1840. Before this it was part of the giant South

Staffordshire/East Worcestershire coalfield. One person travelling through the area described it as: 'black by day and red by night, a place where no trees grew, no birds sang, and the rivers and pools were black and lifeless, and the life expectancy, was 34 years, all this to give other people materials they needed.' In this small area in 1860 there were 200 blast furnaces, over 2,000 puddling furnaces, 86 Brickyards and dozens of foundries, making a vast amount of items from lots of different metals. All of these, plus countless others outside the district, were crying out for refractories.'

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/brickmanufl.htm>

8) The Restoration Project

Making Restoration Possible

Following listing an approach was made from Dudley MBC to the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust to suggest that the building could benefit from the Trust's involvement. Contact was established between the Trust and Dysons in December 1996. Dysons placed the property for sale on the open market in August 2000 but without success.

In July 2001, Dysons agreed in principle to transfer ownership of the building to the Trust, together with a small parcel of adjoining land that could become a car park for the building. The Trust began the process of restoration by commissioning Robert Tolley of S.T. Walker & Duckham in Worcester (architect and subsequently lead consultant for the project) to propose a scheme that could be acceptable to all parties.

In January 2003 ownership of the property was transferred to the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust and an application submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Heritage Grant toward the costs of this restoration project. Resulting from a formal tendering process, Birmingham-based William Sapcote & Sons Ltd were appointed as contractors to carry out the restoration work.

Costs and Funding

The total project costs for the restoration scheme were estimated to be in the region of £890,000. Part of this cost would be recovered by a sale of the restored building as a self-contained suite of commercial offices, but this left a significant gap of funding to be found. As a recognised 'Building at Risk' the target was to identify providers of gap funding to enable the Trust to resolve this long outstanding problem, enhance the area, and re-introduce an historic building back into beneficial use. In recognition of the architectural and historical significance of this building, financial support towards planning its restoration was provided to the Trust by the Architectural Heritage Fund, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, the Manifold Trust and Advantage West Midlands. Without this type of initial help, projects such as this one could not get off the ground.

Much of the grant awarded has been made possible by the local support of volunteers campaigning to save the building and in some cases making donations themselves to the fundraising appeal. The approximate value of volunteer contributions alone amounted to an amazing £35,000. The excellent news received in October 2003 was a decision by the Heritage Lottery Fund to award a Heritage Grant of up to £627,000. By March 2004 the Trust had raised sufficient funding from other sources to be in a position to approve a contract for the building work. The contractors began in April 2004 and completed their work in January 2005. The restored building is now back in use as self-contained commercial offices, bringing important regeneration benefits to the area.

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/hpproject1.htm>

9) Virtual Tour

The website also has a link to a virtual tour of the Harris & Pearson building, which is hosted by the local authority – Dudley MBC – on its education server. The home page has this introduction: -

Welcome to the virtual tour of the Harris & Pearson Office Building.

Here you can walk around the inside of the building and see how it looked after the conservation work was completed in February 2005.

As you go round look out for the links to information boxes that are hidden in some of the pages.

Links then take people around the building in photographs, offering the following views: -

- Exterior
- Start
- Entrance Passageway & Weighbridge
- Entrance Hall & Stairs
- Office 1
- Cloakroom & Toilet
- Boiler Room
- Office 2
- Reception
- Disabled Toilet
- Up to the First Floor

Visitors to the site have the opportunity to proceed around the site ‘at will’, in that they can move forwards/backwards or left/right just as they could if they were actually in the building.

- **Link:** <http://www.edu.dudley.gov.uk/humanities/HandP/tourintro.htm>

10) Conserving Historic Buildings

For anyone looking at the website to gain further insight or information on how to conserve a historic building in which they are interested, there is a section devoted to this. Here is part of its introduction: -

‘It is all too easy for such buildings to be lost, to be replaced by modern buildings and for ‘my town’ to start to look very much like every other town. Buildings can be given legal protection through the process of listing although this does not guarantee survival. Long-term survival is dependent upon there being a viable use for the building, sufficient to justify and recover the often high cost of ongoing maintenance. Where the original purpose for a building no longer exists, this requires the identification of a new use and an adaptation of the building to suit that new purpose (within the restrictions of being a listed building).’

In cases where the costs of restoration and conversion outweigh the financial benefit, there is little incentive for the owner to fund such a project. This is where transferring ownership to a Building Preservation Trust (BPT) such as the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust can help. The charitable status of BPTs enable such Trusts to apply for grants and other forms of low-cost funding to bridge the gap between the project costs and revenue. The BPT will then agree the terms for ongoing conservation of the building when transferring ownership to the new user of the restored building.’

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/aboutbc.htm>

11) Links

Allied to the information provided on the Conserving Historic Buildings page is a Links page, which provides hyperlinks to the websites of the following: -

Government Agencies & Amenity Societies

The Ancient Monuments Society
 The Civic Trust
 The Council for British Archaeology
 Department for Culture, Media and Sport
 English Heritage
 Institute of Historic Building Conservation
 The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
 The Victorian Society

Industry Related Sites

Avery-Weigh-Tronix (manufacturers of the weighbridge at the Harris & Pearson site)
 Barr & Grosvenor Ltd
 The Brick Development Association
 Cradley Special Brick Company Ltd
 Dyson-Precision Ceramics
 William Sapcote & Sons Ltd
 S.T. Walker & Duckham

Special Interest Sites including Conservation Materials, Guidance and Examples

Archaeological Ceramic Building Materials Group
 Avery-Weigh-Tronix (Heritage section)
 The Black Country Living Museum
 The Blue Lagoon (disused brick pit)
 The British Brick Society
 Building Conservation
 Heritage Information
 Heritage Link
 Period Properties
 Save Britain's Heritage
 The Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society
 The Institute of Conservation

Funding Agencies

The Architectural Heritage Fund
 The Pilgrim Trust
 Funds for Historic Buildings
 Heritage Lottery Fund

Building Preservation Trusts

The Landmark Trust
 The Phoenix Trust
 The West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust
 The UK Association of Preservation Trusts

- **Link:** <http://www.harrisandpearson.info/hplinks.htm>

Other resources

The <http://www.harrisandpearson.info> site is freely accessible on the Internet. In addition to the information presented there, the project funding also permitted to production of additional

notes for teachers, and teachers' resource packs, which contain longer interview transcripts and reproductions of historic images and material for use in schools.

Conclusion

As of writing, the <http://www.harrisandpearson.info> website has had 2,495 hits, and teaching resource packs have been provided to all of the schools within Dudley Metropolitan Borough. Additional material has come to light as a result of the website's presence on the Internet, which has been included on the site. It remains the hope that the experience reported on these WebPages will encourage others to attempt the restoration of another derelict but worthy industrial building – only time will tell.

Dr Paul Collins

30 June 2006