



IPSWICH BUILDING PRESERVATION TRUST AGM 28/10/15

**THE PORT OF IPSWICH – ‘FROM RICHES TO RAGS AND BACK AGAIN’
An Illustrated talk given by John Field – notes by Bob Allen**



After the formal business of the AGM was completed, John Field delivered a most absorbing survey of the development of the port from the earliest times to the present day. The focus of the talk was on the development of the enclosed Wet Dock from the 1840s,

set within the wider context of Ipswich as a trading centre from Saxon times to the present. John selected a very illuminating and extensive sequence of slides to accompany his talk



We began with the maps drawn by Pennington (1778) and White (1865) to show the construction of the New Cut and the impact of the new wet dock – once, briefly, the largest in western Europe, transforming the port into one in which vessels could load and unload at all states of the tide. As the dock grew, so did Ransomes engineering works and John illustrated the scale of their products, from the fire-eating dragons of the first China railway to the immense walking draglines of the 1950s. By 1917 there were 33 factories, but by the 1960s the traffic in the dock was in decline and by the 1980s dereliction was blighting the area and many historic structures were under threat or already demolished. Already very few pre-Victorian timber-framed buildings survived, and very few structures were listed. These included the Isaac Lord premises and the Felaw Street Maltings. Some Conservation Area protection was introduced in 1974 and extended in 1979. In 1990 the Borough Council made a decisive move to make the whole dock area a Conservation Area. Redevelopment moved in stages, with long periods of stagnation, but without the protection afforded by the decisions of the Borough Council, several important buildings would have been demolished as the owners originally intended.



John then took us on a visual tour of the dockside. He emphasised where new developments had sensitively echoed elements of previous buildings, particularly in materials but also in features such as towers, roof-lines, and gables such as those of the former Cranfields mills. The Custom House is a major feature of the waterside but by the 1970s its inadequate foundations (on re-claimed mediaeval quays) were causing the façade to detach from the rest of the building. Extensive works were required to put his right. Immediately to the east of the Custom House stands what was R&W Paul's Home Warehouse. Inclusion in the earlier Conservation Area saved this warehouse which John believes is 'Quite a magical building'. He argued strongly that this scheme sets a standard of excellence for the adaptation of old buildings to new uses. John also praised the dockside paving scheme which creates a unified and harmonious visual theme linking the Common Quay and Neptune Quay, replacing the old ground surfaces of railways lines, tarmac and concrete. John also noted the importance of red brick (with some polychrome) from the Custom House up to the new university building and incorporating the Bellway Homes development and the Salthouse Harbour Hotel. Together with the Isaac Lord complex, another important mediaeval survival is the Neptune Inn on Fore Street, with its delightful courtyard. Currently listed grade 2 *, John argued for a grade 1 listing for this outstanding building.



We then looked at the new university buildings and the sequence planned for the Coprolite Street area and the east end of the dock – unashamedly modern in materials and form. John pointed out the importance of the scale of the buildings surrounding the dock (six to eight storeys) – it is as if they retain and enclose the water in the dock itself, as well as being wonderfully reflected and fragmented on the water surface as it moves. Further round where the old gasholders were cleared there is still a timber yard in operation to remind us of previous industrial and trading activity, and the former Cobbold Brewery cries out for some sensitive and imaginative redevelopment. It stands as a kind of book-end to match the high rise developments at the western end of the dock and the same architect has a scheme to create a conference centre with spacious auditorium for the upper levels of the brewery. The proximity of the recently refurbished Holywells Park creates an

excellent opportunity to link the park with the dockside. Among the questions at the end of the talk were comments about the need to link the dock more successfully with its surrounding areas, including the town centre.



Across the lock gates and over the New Cut Felaw Street Maltings have found a good new use and between these and the west end of the dock stands a large-scale development of new housing, varied in scale and use of materials: an impressive sight, John argued, both from close-up and from across the water from the vantage point of the Custom House.



The island site which emerged when the New Cut was created was in Victorian times an important leisure site for townspeople, with a tree-lined promenade and an umbrella shelter with sea-horse sculpture adjacent to the 1881 lock gates to act as a focus for viewing the Orwell with its commercial and leisure shipping. By the 1960s all this had been

lost to railway lines and industrial activity. Half-way along the Cut stands the entrance to the original lock gate and the lines of cottages and Harbourmaster's House. Although not listed, John argued that these buildings must be retained in any redevelopment scheme for the island site because of the history they tell of change and development. The memory of the old promenade might itself be revived in some imaginative scheme for the future: trees might once again shade the scene, and public access be restored.



John finished the talk by looking at the area from St Peter's Church (a real success as a centre for music and community events) to the Custom House, noting how much remains to be done to complete the stalled re-development and to safeguard important buildings such as the old Burtons' offices on College Street. The group of churches which line the dockside, too, are vitally important and it is very good to see the current refurbishment of St Mary Quay as a centre for the Mind charity, and to welcome the possibility of St Clement becoming an Arts Centre associated with the new university - UCS.

He again emphasised the importance of materials and scale, and noted how features such as elevators, roof levels, lofts, ventilators, cranes, and cast-iron columns could be incorporated successfully to give a sense of continuity, and the masts of sailing ships could be echoed in new structures. Balconies on flats could mirror crows nests not only in form but also function for residents on the look-out or simply viewing the panorama. A term from the 1970s – 'placemaking' became a theme of these final remarks.

Altogether John summed up our dock as presenting 'the best dock regeneration scheme between the Thames and the Humber'. The warmth of the applause and the number of questions registered how much the audience appreciated his enthusiasm and commitment to the future of the dock and its importance to the town.

Bob Allen