

EMPTY & NEGLECTED
HISTORIC PROPERTIES

WARWICK

NOV 2007

WDC PLANNING FORUM 7 FEBRUARY 2008

EMPTY PROPERTIES IN WARWICK

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the fascinating history of this county town, and its rebuilding after the fire, there is an air of neglect in the 21st century. There is a continuous undercurrent of dissatisfaction among the people of Warwick. Both the Town Council and the Court Leet seem unable to influence owners and developers.

The largest landowner is the County Council and is now (Oct 2007) going around the stakeholders of Warwick town, that is Warwick Town Council, Warwick District Council, Chamber of Trade and the Warwick Society informing them of their plans for the redevelopment of the finest Queen Anne street in England, which has been sold to Sandpiper developers, dependent on their getting Planning Permission. They are inviting ideas for the redevelopment of the façade of their offices which front on to Market Place, even going to the extent of consulting the 20th Century Society!

The west side of Northgate Street has Grade I listed buildings, which will empty in 2010 (or with slippage 2011) to the new Law Courts complex in Leamington Spa. Ideas at the Economic & Tourism Committee of the Town Council included retaining one 18th C mahogany Court as a film set or for use by schools in re-enacting trials.

As a Warwick West Town & District councillor, more constituents comment to me about the scandal of so many empty properties in this county town. At one time there were 80 but that number is smaller now.

WDC is proud of its Conservation areas of England's Historic Heartland and has produced an information and advice leaflet pack. Surely its own team: *Conservation and Design Team* could be more pro-active in contacting landowners and putting pressure on them to complete development – rather along the lines of the previously designated Empty Properties Team.

However, now that the WCC Education department has moved to Saltisford and emptied most of the properties in Northgate Street and the Crown Court scheduled to move out in 2010, this county Town has got an even bigger problem on its hands and how can we prevent even more historic properties becoming empty. The Warwick Society has highlighted Northgate Street (Observer Nov 15 2007) as being an expense while it remains empty.

1. The Leper Hospital – only one extant in UK consists of a 14th century Master's House and a Chapel, rebuilt at English Heritage's insistence.
2. The Old Post Office, close to St Mary's Church, is a purpose built Victorian Post Office with room for 38 bikes behind the building. It is a magnificent four storey building – there were two floors of offices about the main Post Office and Sorting Office. Now that the slate roof blows off in high winds the local Police have to close the road regularly during gales and sweep up the broken slates. There were plans to change it to an arts centre, a casino, a restaurant but none of these have happened. Loch Fyne Restaurants are the latest chain to pull out.
3. West End Garage on West Street has been an eyesore for years.

4. Eastgate has recently changed hands at auction and remains leased to Kings High School. However, floorboards and joists are now too feeble to allow a clock winder to wind the clock or even service it without scaffolding.
5. Westgate remains neglected even though it is in the careful hands of the Lord Leycester Hospital charity. The Highways department of WCC recently mended the retaining wall with land anchors, under their bridges budget.

There are, of course, several other empty buildings, not in the centre of town which irritate neighbours. On High Street/Jury Street the National Association of Estate Agents have moved out leaving Arbon House empty. Ardecco moved out next door within the last 2 years. On the other side of the road the Tudor building above Oyster Lounge is empty. Next door to the Aylesford Hotel, (newly empty for indoor renovations) a landmark post-fire iconic building are the original Masonic Rooms, empty since 2001.

Beyond Westgate, Blackfriars House has now been empty for about two years.

The Warwick Courier has started a campaign featuring the Leper Hospital first and today the Gas Works, where work has started on conversion into flats. It seems as though word has got round town even before this report was published! Next week, Fri 25 January 2008 the Courier will feature the Post Office and I have pointed out to the reporter the importance of the ironwork inside by de Normanville. The following week 1 February it will be Eastgate.

TOUR AROUND THESE EMPTY & NEGLECTED BUILDINGS

Warwick possesses many well-loved, well-maintained historic buildings used for all sorts of purposes. This is a tourist town proud of its Castle on the south side.

The Leper Hospital site, its 12thC Masters House and Chapel now occupy a tiny congested site with access from behind possibly precluded by the new WCC Education Department buildings. This site was last for sale in the late 1970s when the Master's House was just about habitable (cf photo when tarpaulin blew off). In the mid-1980s the local arsonists set fire to the timber in the Chapel. In those days English Heritage had "teeth" and persuaded the owner to restore it. Inside is internal scaffolding holding up the timbered clay tile roof.



I have tried to persuade the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings to move both the Chapel and Master's House brick by brick, but in 2004 they were director-less and had no capital to acquire any more buildings. Before the Castle was sold, the Earl of Warwick tried to move it to the Castle grounds in 1973. After all, it was an ancestor of his who inaugurated the shelter for lepers in the 12th century.

If Warwick can't look after this building and cherish it as an outpost of the TIC (for instance), perhaps the owner should be persuaded to re-sell it to someone who would treasure it. If Channel 4's Time Team could be persuaded to do an archaeological dig on the land between the Master's House and the Chapel what might be revealed? Apart from a few leprous bones? After all, it hasn't been used as a haven for leprosy sufferers since about 1635. It was used as the lowest of the low in terms of grades of almshouses.

Nicholas Pevsner's Warwickshire: *"Stone Chapel of former Leper Hospital, inside a panelled wagon roof, behind a timber-framed derelict house with closely set studding, Priests' House".*

In 1973, HMG's Department of the Environment listed it as: *"4, 6 St Michael's Court, part of Leper Hospital of St Michael's, 12thC now 3 tenements, 15thC structure on 12thC foundation often called Priest's or Master's House"*

The point of this details and quotations from learned tomes is that THIS IS ONE OF THE VERY FEW LEPER HOSPITALS OF EARLY MIDDLE AGES STILL SURVIVING IN ENGLAND.

It was founded by Roger, Earl of Warwick, about 1130 with a small endowment for the benefit of lepers and governed by a warden and brethren. The Warden was a priest and served as Chaplain of the Hospital. There was a quick succession of Wardens in the 14th century due to the Black Death. In the 1530s the value of the hospital was £10/2/4 and 26/- was paid to lepers. A century later in 1635 no lepers

were recorded due to medical, environmental, social and crypto-legal reasons no more lepers are recorded in Warwick.

The Chapel's foundation is actually older than the initial building of the Leper Hospital and has been owned by the Puckering's Estate when Thomas Puckering built almshouses beyond this site and 8 men and 8 women lived on £4 per year from the estate. This annuity continued until 1747-1765 when there was a dispute and eventually 112-118 Saltisford was built (almshouses) 2 rooms each under one roof, demolished 1964.

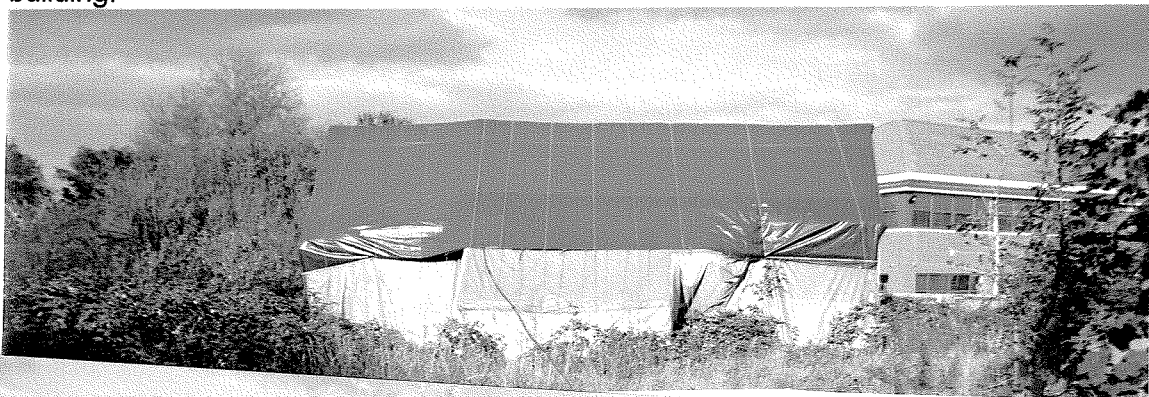
It is now on the English Heritage and Save Britain's Register Buildings At Risk register. This is important because of what happened on the day after Boxing Day.

I discovered that some 10 cm of turf had been removed and an incinerator installed outside the Master's House. I contacted WCC Archaeology Department and two members of that team accompanied me down to this historic site, and took more photos. We were contacted by a neighbour at the bottom of his garden who told us that a van, regularly, appears with three men and sledge hammers who then knock seven bells out of the interior of the tarpaulin covered house and burn the timbers.

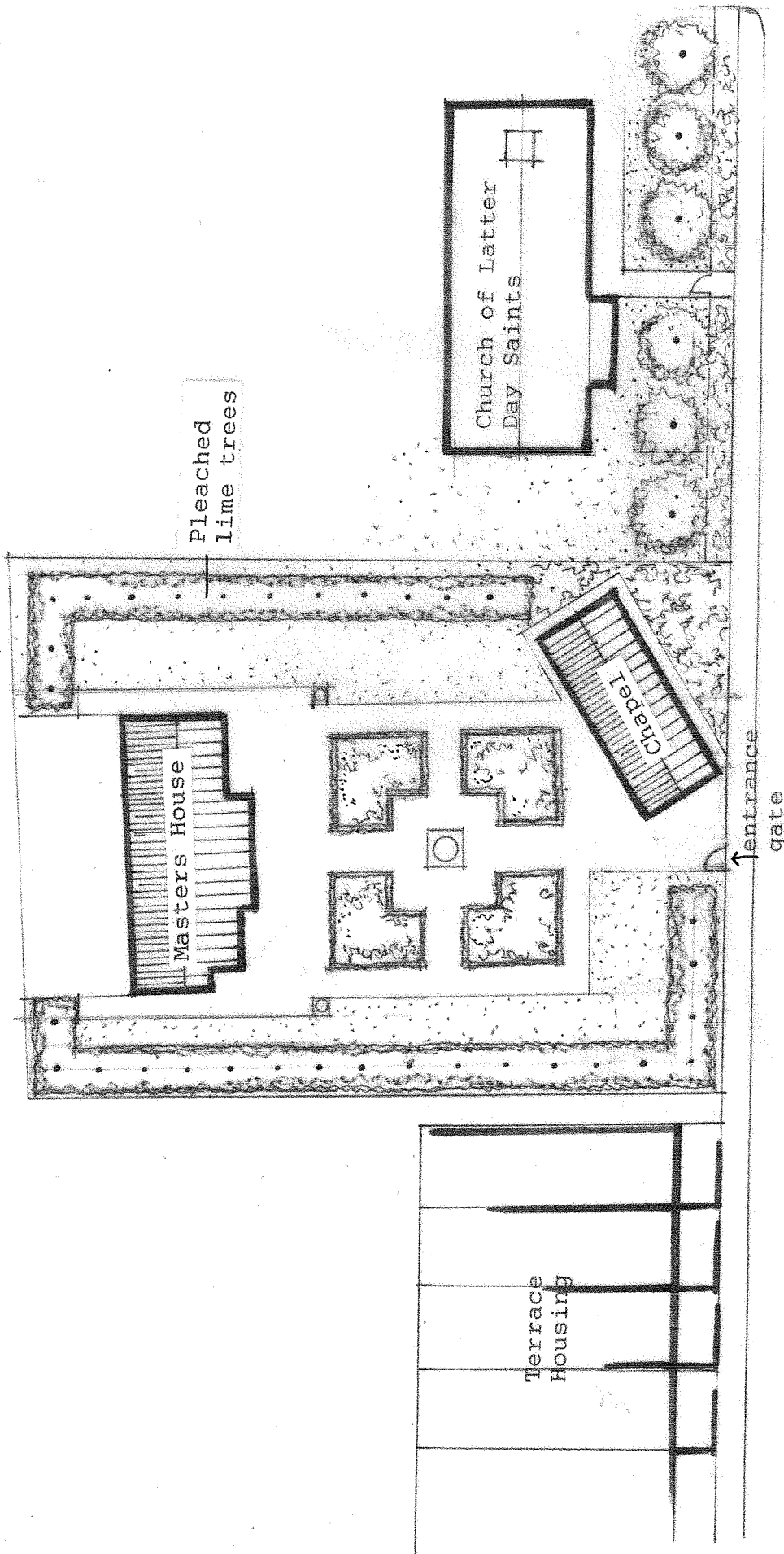
There is a "rough sleeper", who will surely impale himself on the Victorian railings. The fire brigade are regularly called to his fires. The overgrown nature of the undergrowth has caused the immediate neighbour on Saltisford to lose his fence in recent gales.

WCC Archaeology Department tried to get hold of English Heritage, on 27th December 2007, but it was all answer machines, and I have contacted the Enforcement Department of the Planning Department. English Heritage were supposed to inspect on Wed 17 January 2008 and to contact me but no contact was made so I am unable to confirm whether a visit from the "historical conservation police" was made.

What price history? Many residents of Warwick are extremely worried about this building.



AN IMAGINATIVE IDEA FROM A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT



B i r m i n g h a m R o a d

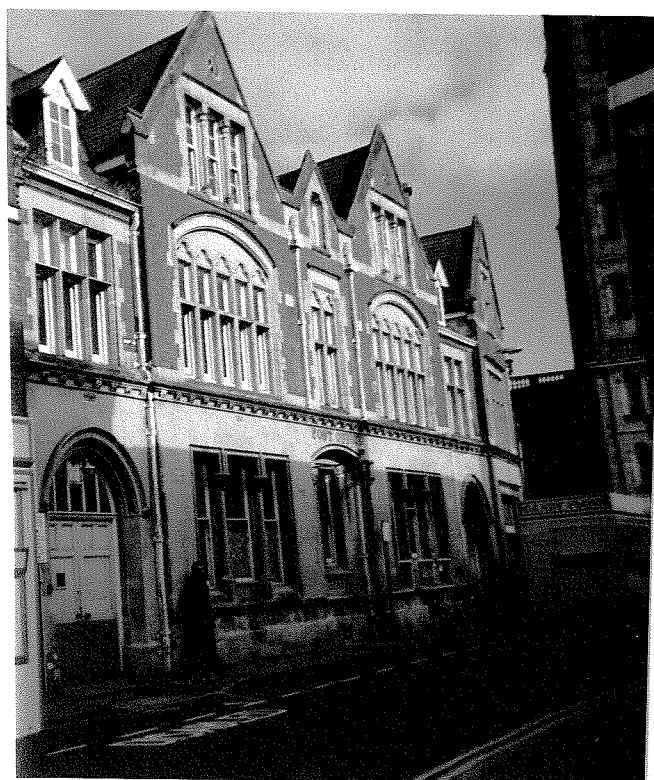
GS 01/08 NTS

The Victorian Post Office, purpose built by careful architects and possibly over-engineered, ie too strong for its purpose. However, late 20th C law has condemned it to dereliction by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In the basement is a huge safe and a boiler keeping the building frost-free. The parquet floored ground floor of the main post office has been ruined by prospective developers hooking it up looking for pipes. This floor is now un-restorable. Behind and outside is a shelter for 38 bikes. This could be demolished to make a courtyard garden or car parking spaces. Upstairs are 2 floors of offices divided by 20th C room dividers.

Ideally after abortive attempts to convert it into an arts centre, a casino or restaurant, it should be converted into 3 town houses.

Again, a unique building –purpose-built – allowed to remain empty for decades. Cllr M Kinson persuaded Environmental Health in the autumn to clean up the alley-way on the Church side where a “rough sleeper” had been living and it was discovered that no Council Tax has been paid on it for years. It is still full of builder’s rubble in Jewson’s bags which does prevent another “rough sleeper” bedding down there.

Part of the Victorian building is a de Normanville construction, the famous ironworker from Leamington Spa.



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ESTATE AGENT
MOVED TO HEATHCOTE



The purpose built **Old Dispensary** (film set for BBC's *Dangerfield*) will be empty due to the Practise moving to Chase Meadow, however, now the For Sale sign has been overwritten with "SOLD". So that is a bit of progress.



Blackfriars – office block accessible from Hampton Street – has been empty for about 2 years. There were elderly residents of Warwick who can remember looking from their nurseries on the top floors, when it was a family house, at the horses hauling a yule log for the Earl of Warwick's fireplace in the Great Hall of the Castle.



ARDECCO HOUSE



POST-FIRE MASONIC ROOMS



LAST 16C HALF-TIMBERED HOUSE



HIGH STREET/JURY STREET

CASTLE LANE

Castle Lane obscures these two empty garages, which nearby residents would love to buy or rent.



CASTLE LANE

This penthouse apartment has been empty and unfinished for about 5 years, hence the apartments underneath remain cold. The soffits and fascias leach damp, possibly blocked gutters.



CASTLE LANE

These garages are two floors below that penthouse, are inaccessible and again unavailable to rent/buy. Judging by the moss in these photos, no work has happened here for some years.



WEST STREET



Warwick is on the way up with a Marks & Spencer Simply Food store opening on the Farm Foods premises. Therefore, I plead with the WDC Conservation & Design at this Planning Forum to please put pressure on landowners.

At Planning Training with John Archer and Mike Wrigley, University of West of England, both confirmed it is the District Council, not the Town council or County, who must deal with owners of listed buildings. English Heritage must be involved too.

Local Plan 1996-2011 deals with empty properties in great detail.

DAP6 Protection of Listed Buildings:

9.29 WDC is committed to ensuring Listed Buildings are given a high level of protection and enforcement action will be taken against unauthorised and unacceptable works to Listed Buildings.

9.30 Government advice urges local authorities to maintain and strengthen their commitment to stewardship of the historic environment, and to adopt suitable policies to protect it.

There is a statutory requirement that Local Authorities should have special regard to the desirability of preserving any listed building, its setting or any features of specific architecture or historical interest that it possesses.

DAP7 Changes of Use of Listed Building

9.33 The best use of a Listed Building is usually the use for which it was originally designed... unless no longer viable.

Obviously we can no longer use the Leper hospital or the Gas Works for its original purpose so some alternative must be found.

Your Building on Excellence paper (dated mid-2007) and this problem of empty & neglected historic buildings in our county town must come under the CEO and Legal Services. Warwick's Town Clerk informs me that the owners have planning permissions with penalties to be inflicted IF work does not start within a specified number of years.

Now that the largest landowner in central Warwick is doing a huge re-think on the property it owns in Warwick town centre, I feel NOW is the time for the WCC Regeneration Team and Warwick District Council Planning Forum to put their heads together and put pressure on owners and developers to eradicate this air of neglect in our county town.

I have reported this to the Town Council.

Mrs Elizabeth Higgins
District & Town Councillor Warwick West
18/01/2008