

Briefing Note: Retention of Existing Buildings *(January 2016)*

Introduction

The principle reason for the redevelopment of this site is to safeguard its future as an employment site and retain hundreds of jobs for Wolverton.

Wolverton Works is an important employment site for the town. However, given the age of the Works, the majority of the buildings are either already derelict or increasingly obsolete and out-of-step with the requirements of modern business practices. There is a clear and pressing need for new investment in the site to allow it to continue to support local jobs.

As part of the development of outline proposals for this site, St. Modwen's team has been considering if any of the existing buildings could be retained on the site and refurbished for business or other uses within the new development proposals.

Refurbishment of buildings for rail business use

Given that the buildings were built for a specific purpose and at a particular time in history, they are not suitable for conversion to modern rail-related business premises:

- The internal heights of the buildings are too low for modern lifting equipment such as cranes
- Internal spaces of the buildings are not open enough - they are compromised by internal support columns which limit operations
- Floors are largely cracked or uneven and would need to be re-laid within the existing frames of the buildings
- Buildings need to be reoriented from their current position in order to allow a better flow of trains and carriages in, out and around the site
- Energy and maintenance costs for the old buildings are too high to be sustainable long-term and the quality of environment for workers is poor

Changes needed to respond to these issues could not be made within the shells of the existing buildings. The buildings are currently being used in a "make do" manner because they are there, rather than because they are fit for purpose. It has been made clear to St. Modwen that ongoing rail operations on this site would only be possible with new premises that will accommodate modern day working practises.

-more over-

Refurbishment of buildings for other commercial uses

If conversion for rail operations was not possible, would the existing buildings be appropriate for other commercial businesses?

St. Modwen has carried out significant research and sought advice from leading property consultants.

This has concluded that:

- The preference for offices in Milton Keynes is for more modern buildings and there is a particular demand for high quality new buildings
- There is (in contrast) already an oversupply of poor quality business premises, which is what the converted buildings at the Works would be competing with (and at much higher rents or prices) given the limitations of their shapes and structures
- There is no appetite for speculative office construction within Milton Keynes at present (which is what developing offices here would be)
- the demand for industrial space in Milton Keynes is for modern and purpose-built large new developments, of a high build and design quality
- If there were any demand for office buildings within historic buildings, this has already been met by the conversion of the buildings at Wolverton Park (which took a considerable amount of time to fully occupy and was heavily subsidised)
- The levels of commercial rent or sale prices that would be needed to cover refurbishment costs could be so high that finding occupiers could be extremely challenging and affect the viability and ultimately the ability to deliver the regeneration scheme..

If occupiers could not be secured, the above could undermine the business case of the entire redevelopment and leave the Works without the investment needed.

Re-use of buildings for new homes

St. Modwen has also considered the possibility of converting some of the buildings into residential properties.

The architects have been exploring what could be delivered but found these to have significant problems:

- The buildings' dimensions are completely out-of-step with the basic requirements of housing
- Walls, floors, roofs, windows, electrics and plumbing do not meet Building Regulations for housing and would require large scale alterations to the structures anyway to ensure these can be insured (with construction costs far in excess of the norm):
 - Removal of all roofs, floors for drainage and new foundations
 - New windows in existing walls and alterations to remaining walls
 - Having to design the new homes in such a way as to leave the framework of the building exposed – the houses would sit unattractively, awkwardly and impractically behind the façade of the building
- St. Modwen sought advice from a leading national firm of residential property consultants who assessed that, notwithstanding the Building Regulations requirements, even if new homes could be designed to fit the dimensions of the existing buildings the end result would not be viable:
 - The lifting shop, if converted within the existing shed's dimensions, would create around 60 1 bed duplexes, for which there is little or no demand within Wolverton (for this type of property in these numbers)

- Because of the size of these individual homes and disproportionately high refurbishment costs, the sale price would need to be significantly in excess of the current prices being achieved for housing in Wolverton

Re-use of buildings for heritage purposes

Wolverton Works is an employment site and jobs need to be safeguarded for the future.

None of the buildings on site are listed; many have been modified and some partly rebuilt over time, further compromising any perceived architectural heritage value.

St. Modwen and Milton Keynes Council each commissioned independent heritage assessments, both of which concluded that the heritage value of the site is based around its use and contribution to the community (communal value), rather than the architectural value of any particular buildings.

As the buildings cannot largely be refurbished for other uses, there is neither the considerable ongoing charitable funding required, nor the appetite (based on the need to protect the success of the Milton Keynes Museum close by) for the retention of what would be empty buildings, solely for museum/ heritage posterity purposes.

St. Modwen believes that the heritage of the Works is best preserved through its ongoing rail-business use and a range of other initiatives. These proposals will also open up the site to the public in a way which has never been possible before. They include:

- Artefacts and information about the Works being presented in a dedicated heritage and community centre located in a partially converted building, forming a key focal point within the redeveloped site
- Panels depicting historic images from the Works past being mounted on the wall fronting Stratford Road and in suitable locations in squares and parks within the new residential area
- The reuse of reclaimed materials such as railway tracks and sleepers for public art, landscaping and street furniture (like benches and signs), contributing greatly to the reflections of the heritage of the Works
- The use of digital heritage recording technology, preserving the history of the site and opening this up to in particular to the younger generation

Conclusion

St. Modwen's proposals for Wolverton Works will secure its future whilst also helping to preserve its past.

Without a comprehensive redevelopment, the site will continue to degrade and eventually lose the jobs and investment which it provides to the town. These proposals will breathe new life into the Works, ensuring that it continues to support Wolverton and its residents for years to come.