

# Conservation

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## Conservation Principles in Practice



Everyone agrees that conservation aims to sustain the special character of places. But who decides what is special, and how do we reconcile conservation obligations with the need to keep buildings in everyday use?

The J W Evans metal-works offers complete immersion in the lost industrial world of Birmingham's historic jewellery quarter. Before embarking on its rescue we had to establish what makes the place so special and how its unique heritage values can best be sustained into the future – in other words by putting English Heritage's *Conservation Principles* into practice.

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thirds of the way through our accelerated survey programme and well advanced in implementing our IT system. We still have much to do to understand what the data is telling us, but we are in a better position than ever before to maintain and conserve our sites to the consistent standard they deserve. ■

### Periodic Renewal and Repair

#### The JW Evans metal-works

Nick Molyneux

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The Evans metal-works offers complete immersion in a lost industrial world, represented by the buildings, machinery, stock, and archives of the business, and by the last owner of the business, the grandson of the founder. Here, in the physical remains, lies the evidence of three generations of the Evans family and the people who worked for them: lives of enterprise and hard work from 1881 to 2008.

But why is it so important? A few years ago a comprehensive survey (Cattell *et al*, 2002) identified Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter as the last-surviving working industrial quarter of its type in Europe. The premises of J W Evans and Sons were in turn recognised as an exemplar of the conversion from domestic to industrial use that characterised the development of small-scale metal-working industries during the 19th century. Constructed as houses in 1836, the buildings were progressively modified for industrial use. The back gardens were

eventually completely filled with the long narrow shopping (ie workshop) ranges characteristic of the Quarter.

English Heritage has been seeking a solution for the future of the Evans works since being approached by Tony Evans, the grandson of Jenkin W Evans who founded the firm in August 1881. After an unsuccessful search for a partner to take on the works and retain the heritage of the site, English Heritage bought the buildings and their contents on 31 March 2008 as a last resort.

English Heritage's first step as the new owner was to learn the bucket-emptying regime from Tony Evans, before undertaking emergency repairs to stop the leaks. It then needed to lay the foundations for the future. This began with a 'conservation philosophy', based on an understanding of the heritage values of the place. These were identified using the very wide variety of experience available within English Heritage, and led to the development of a guiding philosophy:

Minimum intervention is the approach to be adopted. This ranges from not redecorating workshops and leaving as many of the dies on racks as possible, through to the minimum of intervention to introduce new services, and a low-key approach to object conservation.

In conserving J W Evans & Sons, the question is 'Will it last if nothing is done?' – not 'Is it attractive?' If the answer is that it *will* last, whether in pristine or deteriorated condition, then no work will be done. If it will *not* last, or the decay will accelerate, then English Heritage will find ways



Originally constructed as houses, the buildings of the J W Evans works were progressively modified for industrial use and their back gardens filled with the long narrow workshop ranges that characterise the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter.  
© English Heritage



to slow down the deterioration while minimising change to the significances of the place. Before deciding any element is dispensable its significance needs to be understood within the context of the J W Evans & Sons business. The end result must be the preservation of the character of the working environment.

Oral history has reinforced our understanding of how the Quarter functioned: there was no retail trade, and very few firms carried out all the processes from the initial rolling of metal through to polished saleable goods. Rather, it was a complex network of small businesses that, through their proximity, functioned as a production centre for all forms of small metal goods. Almost all of J W Evans & Sons' production was sold under the names of others, such as Garrards and Mappin & Webb, and bore the hallmarks of those companies. The Evans company would sell anything from components fresh from the drop stamps through to made-up goods, which would then be finished by their customers.

Conservative repair will maintain the significances of the place, but will involve choices where worn-out elements that are contributing to further decay need to be replaced. The first stage is to ensure the maximum long-term survival of the whole. The main roof coverings and roof lights have to be entirely renewed to secure the building, but English Heritage will retain plastic corrugated sheeting on some subsidiary roofs. The internal finishes are the result of more than 100 years of working in the premises and would be impossible to reproduce convincingly once disturbed.

The machinery and die racks will remain *in situ* during building works as will most of the movable

contents, which range from thousands of metal dies through to metal stocks and a vast selection of finished and partially finished goods. This will help ensure an authentic experience when all is complete, in contrast to earlier projects where the contents have been carefully removed for the building works and then replaced, resulting in a sanitised experience.

A characteristic of many industrial sites is that some areas were left unused for considerable periods as the business expanded and contracted. The Evans works exemplifies this, with two workshops recently inhabited only by pigeons. While the guano will be removed, these shops will be kept in this form. The main working areas will need to be operated from time to time to retain their atmosphere.

Providing visitors with access to the site will inevitably require some changes. J W Evans & Sons never occupied the whole of number 57, so this part of the works can take the most change. There are other areas where adaptation will be possible once the significance of each part of the works has been properly assessed.

As an owner of last resort it is not English Heritage's intention to hold the Evans works in the long term. The aspiration to recommence manufacturing is also strong and it is recognised that Evans needs to be kept 'active'. English Heritage is



The internal finishes of the J W Evans works are the result of more than 100 years of working in the premises and would be impossible to reproduce convincingly once disturbed.

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Keeping the machinery and die racks in their original positions during repair work will ensure an authentic experience for visitors once the repair and minimal conservation has been completed.

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therefore exploring the opportunities to work with complementary businesses and organisations within the Jewellery Quarter to ensure the heritage values of the site are retained in a sustainable way. ■

REFERENCE

Cattell, John, Ely, Sheila and Jones, Barry 2002. *The Birmingham Jewellery Quarter: An Architectural Survey of the Manufactories*. Swindon: English Heritage

**Intervention to Increase Understanding  
Witley Court**

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With the help of the Wolfson Challenge Fund, English Heritage has been enhancing historic gardens at a number of its properties, most notably Kirby Hall, Kenilworth Castle and Witley Court. We are also working on the repair of important designed landscapes at Chiswick and Wrest Park. The restoration of missing garden features can add a great deal to the atmosphere and appearance of historic properties, and such projects have been carried out over a long period in England by private owners, the National Trust, the Historic Royal Palaces Agency and English Heritage.

*Conservation Principles* might seem at first sight to offer some problems for historic-garden restoration projects. Section 126 on Restoration offers some helpful criteria for judging the acceptability of proposed projects. On turning to the glossary,

however, we find that ‘restoration’ is defined as ‘To return a place to a known earlier state, on the basis of compelling evidence, without conjecture’. Taken at face value, no historic-garden repair or restoration project would meet this criterion. The problem is that the evidence is never so clear-cut as to avoid completely the need for speculation. Even in those rare cases where we have detailed knowledge of the designer’s intentions, we can never be certain that these were scrupulously executed, nor are we likely to know how these plans may have been modified by successive generations of owners and garden staff. Gardens are living things, and different plants flourish or suffer in ways that the garden designer may not have anticipated.

To augment the advice of *Conservation Principles* for the benefit of those responsible for managing historic designed gardens and landscapes, English Heritage has commissioned the respected garden historian David Jacques to draft new guidance on garden conservation. Like *Conservation Principles*, this will emphasise the importance of carrying out first-class multi-disciplinary research to inform and support decisions on repair and restoration. It will also stress the need to document that research and the decision-making process so that future curators can fully understand what we did and why. A good example is provided by the recent research carried out on the East Parterre at Witley Court, an English Heritage historic property in Worcestershire.

The gardens at Witley Court were designed by William Andrews Nesfield in the 1850s. Nesfield is



Witley Court, Worcestershire. The central bed of the East Parterre under excavation in 1996, showing the survival of plan evidence for Nesfield’s design. Note the surviving, if overgrown, box-hedging plants in the unexcavated half of the garden. © Nottingham University/English Heritage