

# Profile for Heritage Counts 2015

## *Kevin Morris – Local Council Officer*

**1. What is your role title?**

“At present I’m Environment, Community and Commissioned Services Manager at North Dorset County Council. Doesn’t sound like I have much to do with heritage! However one of the services for which I’m responsible is the historic environment, although I originally moved to North Dorset as Conservation and Design Officer some time ago.”

**2. What does your role involve? (specifically relating to providing advice to listed building owners or amenity societies)**

“My role involves overseeing the delivery of a conservation service for the district, comprising reactive and pro-active work. This involves managing the conservation officers who do an excellent job and it is sad that many agents and applicants fail to appreciate their true value, knowledge and experience. I also provide advice and guidance on heritage related matters to applicants and their agents as well as supporting town and parish councils along with community and other voluntary organisations on the production of design statements, neighbourhood plans and other strategies, which can range from the production of a paint palette for shopkeepers to securing proposals to regenerate a town centre. Other work involves the production of conservation area appraisals and management guidelines, buildings at risk and enforcement.”

**3. What is most pleasing about your role (relating to providing advice, and who you provide it to)?**

“Despite the often negative comments we receive, working with others and in partnership to secure a shared outcome and which safeguards a heritage asset is extremely satisfying. This can range from the production of a conservation area appraisal to identifying solutions to secure re-use and restoration of a derelict farm building. Opening people’s eyes and enabling them to appreciate and value a previously unloved building or object is very rewarding and reminds me why I chose to work within the heritage industry.”

**4. Please explain any interesting examples where there were challenges/barriers that were overcome relating to managing heritage in the local context (individual listed buildings – grade II preferably)?**

“There are numerous examples as being a conservation professional one is challenged on an almost daily basis when acting for a local authority determining applications for planning permission and listed building consent. However, in a previous authority one, of my most proud achievements was identifying and securing RAF Biggin Hill as a designated conservation area despite the Ministry of Defence’s best attempts to prevent that happening and to dispose of the site for development as a business park. I was lucky to have huge support from colleagues at English Heritage and my district councillor was an ex-paratrooper so one could say I had a head start!”

“With regard to listed buildings, there are numerous barriers to securing informed re-use or restoration of our historic assets. In addition to the normal issues of condition, construction methods and materials, two significant issues are, in my view: too much money and unrealistic ambitions. Very often the best preserved buildings are a result of owners being asset rich cash poor where individuals over the centuries have repaired and “made do” and their buildings reveal a wealth of evolutionary changes and layers of history. Whilst there are many owners and agents who are enlightened and appreciate their heritage asset and wish to do the right thing, there are a minority who often seek our comments and support for proposals which are evidently hugely expensive and lacking any respect for the host building. In an age where open-plan living is de rigueur, I am often confronted with proposals which sweep away those layers of habitation and adaptation with little or no appreciation of a building’s previous occupants or uses. Very often these changes are based upon unrealistic ambitions with significant amounts of money being used to purchase a building which simply cannot accommodate the levels of change envisaged by the new owners. At times these ambitions are supported by agents who also have little understanding or appreciation of the value of the heritage asset in question and so the predictable complaints of obstructive behaviour and involvement of elected members ensues. However, there are examples where despite complaints I have maintained a position given the heritage value of the asset and in one recent example having explored numerous options for a modest extension to a grade II listed farmhouse, the applicant turned to me and said, “I hate to admit it but you were right!” We don’t always get it right of course as none of us are perfect but when a scheme which has involved informed discussion and debate, a mutual respect for all those involved and the outcome is there for all to see, the difficulties and challenges faced during the process suddenly seem worth it.”

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