

Conservation Area Developer Case Study – The Former Great Western Railway Works, Swindon: Development by Thomas Homes

Thomas Homes is a private housebuilder. Set up in 1974, it specialises in historic building developments and conversions in conservation areas and listed buildings. The company is often motivated more by challenge than profit.

The development of the Grade II* listed former Chain Testing House, part of the Great Western Railway Works, was Thomas Homes' first project in Swindon, having worked mainly in Oxfordshire and Berkshire before. What attracted the company was the challenge of the scheme which included a building on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register. A number of developers had previously walked away from the potentially expensive scheme in a low- value market.

The development was officially opened in July 2016. All 56 flats were already sold.

The Conservation Area

The former Great Western Railway Works is part of one of the most significant surviving historic railway establishments in the world. The works were founded in 1842 and closed in 1986.

The Swindon Railway Works conservation area was first designated in 1987. Its special interest is twofold. First, the area's considerable historic importance as the site of a major nineteenth century industrial complex and its association with the early development of Britain's railways and, in particular, with the Great Western Railway Company; secondly, the architectural and historic interest of the area's surviving industrial and administrative buildings which display innovatory forms of construction and exemplify the style of industrial building typical of its period (c.1840-1920).

The Conservation Area Appraisal states that: 'Since designation in 1987...controlled and positive management of change within this historic area has been achieved through conservation area status, the listing of buildings of special interest and, through lengthy consultations with developers, and the sensitive application of planning controls.'

The conservation area is now mixed use, comprising leisure, retail, food and drink, offices and cultural venues. Its principal buildings include the complex of Grade II* listed buildings which are now the Great Western Designer Outlet Village; the Chief Mechanical Engineer's and General Offices, now the offices of Historic England, English Heritage and the National Monuments Record; and the former workshops now home to STEAM – the museum of the Great Western Railway.



Aerial view of the former Great Western Railway Works illustrating the mix of new and original buildings. © Thomas Homes

How do you feel conservation areas are different from non-conservation areas?

'If it's a listed building, the fact it's also in a conservation area makes very little difference. What's important is that we research the buildings – including the planning history of similar structures recently bought and sold – so we understand what's possible in planning terms before we start. In the case of the Chain Testing House, we visited the Wolverton works in Milton Keynes along with local authority officers, which was an important part in the process of developing the best scheme and showing we were serious.'

How has the conservation area changed over time?

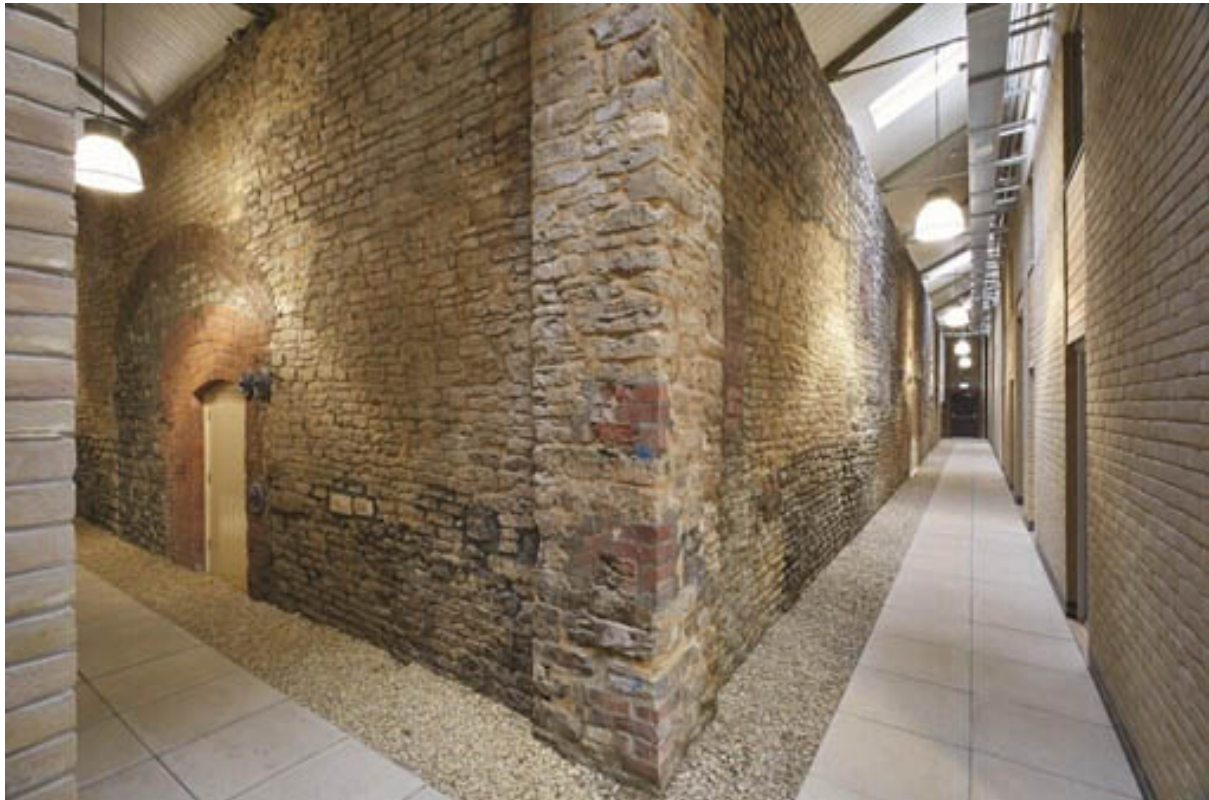
'Quite a lot. We looked at how the area had changed since the closure of the Railway Works and how the site had been redeveloped. The Chain Testing House was the last piece of a regeneration jigsaw and had to pull all those previous developments together.'



The Chain Testing House– before and after the renovation work. © Thomas Homes

Does conservation area designation encourage a better quality of development in conservation areas (and how)?

‘Yes. You need to look not just the development site itself but the whole area, why it’s been designated and what’s important about its character.’



The renovated interior of the Chain Testing House. © Thomas Homes

Do conservation areas place too many restrictions on developments which encourage good growth? (e.g. legislative restrictions, increased costs)

‘As a company specialising in the conversion of historic buildings we’re used to a particular set of processes and some bureaucracy, but we’ve never had a conversation in our offices which began ‘oh no...not another Conservation Area...!’ People can be a restriction – you need to take your partners with you and provide proof of what can be done.’

Do conservation areas increase the quality of an area?

‘Yes definitely – they help relate parts to the whole. At the Chain Testing House, the landscaping brought the whole site together along with adopting the most successful details from other previous redevelopment schemes in the conservation area.’

Has conservation area designation achieved its intended purpose of sustainable, long term growth – “good growth”

‘Our development of the Chain Testing House has won a number of awards - including the Excellence in Planning Delivery Category in the Royal Town Planning Institute South West’s Awards for Planning Excellence 2017 - so the answer would seem to be yes.’

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