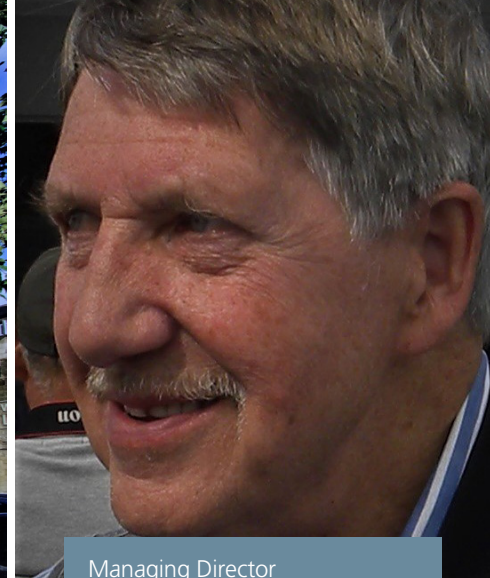


Innovation at Hebden Bridge Mill



Hebden Bridge Mill: over 700 years of history and heritage. Now environmentally sustainable and commercially successful



Managing Director
David E. Fletcher MBE

Innovation, based in Hebden Bridge Mill, have fought to preserve the industrial heritage of their local area. The threatened demolition of the 1314 Manorial Corn Mill led to the creation of the company as they sought to prevent the removal of a key part of the local history. After extensive renovations, the mill is now home to a shop, a café and ten small business tenants. Having reactivated the 14-foot waterwheel, added a modern turbine and twin heat pumps, they aim to produce all of the energy they require. David Fletcher tells *The Parliamentary Review* more.

Our project is rooted in conservation of the industrial heritage and the social and economic wellbeing of the local community. The sudden demise of the town's traditional textile industry brought depopulation, dereliction and demolition. However, Hebden Bridge is a resilient town. In the absence of any external support, it fought back to reinvent itself through energetic voluntary effort and campaigns to save its historic mills for later adaptive re-use. We were very much a part of this.

The evolution of our project

It was, however, the threat of demolition of the 1314 Manorial Corn Mill at the heart of the town that spurred us into personal action. With great trepidation, we borrowed and bought it to save it. With the building derelict and abandoned for 20 years, full of dry rot and almost at the point of collapse, our only way forward was a ten-year DIY effort alongside our day jobs.

FACTS ABOUT INNOVATIONATHEBDENBRIDGEMILL

- » Managing Director: David E. Fletcher MBE
- » Founded in 1972 with the purchase of Hebden Bridge Mill
- » Based in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire Pennines
- » Services: Retail and property restoration/letting
- » No. of employees: 13
- » www.hebdenbridgemill.co.uk

“Pull-out quote”

Years later, we now have a shop and a café on the ground floor, 13 full- and part-time staff, and a further ten small business tenants on the upper floors, collectively employing a couple of dozen more people. Working with others, we then established a charitable trust, Pennine Heritage, to replicate this model to save further historic mills and a former church. This has created additional workspace for around 150 people in the mills, plus valuable community facilities in the Birchcliffe Centre, a former church.

The spirit of entrepreneurship is once more alive and well, attracting new residents and investors to our visitor economy and digital start-up scene.

The learning curve

Life as small shopkeepers, landlords and environmental activists has been a steep learning curve. Initially, our shop Innovation stocked a colourful “Aladdin’s cave” of decorative items, seeking to be all things to all

people, but we soon realised the need to better understand our local market. Consequently, both our shop stock range and café menu changed character over time and continue to do so as we move with contemporary trends.

The 2008 financial crash brought uncertainty and caution. People thought more and bought less. Extravagant home décor was out, but, interestingly, personal items and gifts survived. Greater specialisation in selected areas is a trend that continues to accelerate as online shopping increasingly erodes high street trade.

The combination of the online revolution, austerity, current political uncertainty and four floods in three years, including the worst one at Christmas 2015, has seriously impacted our business. The last flood cost us an uninsured £40,000, as we could no longer get cover. Recovery has not been helped by the continuing 30 per cent reduction in footfall, largely due to subsequent lengthy Environment Agency works and related traffic chaos.

The future of the high street: resetting the balance

We are much encouraged by the government’s obvious commitment to helping the high street through the small business rates relief. This is a good start, but much more will be needed to create a truly level trading platform. The high street offers so many social benefits beyond mere shopping, while delivery drivers, making multiple deliveries, bring the serious disbenefits of congestion and pollution, with related public health problems: almost 20 per cent of urban traffic congestion and pollution is caused by these vehicles. Taxation needs to reflect better this very real cost-benefit imbalance, perhaps through total replacement of town centre business rates

Retail and catering add interest and income to support heritage restoration and management



with a commercial delivery vehicle mileage charge.

We applaud the government's successful approach to renewable energy whereby we take the risk and borrow the money, to be repaid, eventually, by the feed-in-tariff and/or the renewable heat incentive according to output. A similar system could be applied, indirectly, to online shoppers by imposing realistically increased delivery costs to take account of the costs they impose on society.

While we are encouraged by the government's approach to the matters above, we must also express our dismay at the gulf that seems to exist between the positive spirit of legislation and the more ritualistic approach of some regional and local agency staff responsible for its delivery. Dogmatic local interpretations by regulatory officials are one of the challenges we are currently facing. One can be forgiven, at times, for wondering who is actually the boss.

Promoting diversification

Clearly, we are once again at a watershed moment and need to take stock of all our assets: the shop, café and mill as a package. We have a listed heritage building; an attractive riverside setting; a popular but less-than-profitable shop; a cheerful, well-patronised, licensed café; and adequate rental income, plus my wife and our very loyal and hard-working staff.

To continue to sustain the business, we are actively working to launch an online shop, starting carefully with our own branded products. We are also planning to develop the café. Our café has an attractive riverside terrace and a rather quirky front forecourt. Plans are in hand at the latter to install protective canopies and create a better sense of enclosure, subject to necessary listed building



Sustainable renewable energy brings clean air, clean rivers and a return of wildlife to the town: we reached zero-carbon emissions in 2014, 36 years ahead of the new government target

consent. Beyond this, we are aiming to make the mill a heritage destination and are planning free leaflets, wall panels and guided walks. Building on this, we have recently submitted a planning application for eight holiday apartments above 21 craft studios for rent in another nearby semi-derelict mill.

Our most ambitious plan has been our ecopower initiative to return Hebden Bridge Mill to total dependence on waterpower. The restored 14-foot, four-ton waterwheel, plus installation of a five-metre Archimedes' screw on the 1314 weir, produces all of our electricity and more, as we also supply the grid. The two added powerful water source heat pumps provide all the hot water needed for three kitchens and full central heating for the entire building. Even our small jazzy runabout parked outside carries the slogan "Innovation hydropower – this car runs on water". And so it does – hydropower straight from the river, not second-hand electricity from some distant fossil fuel power station. We must be one of the few totally carbon-neutral businesses in the land. It doesn't cost the earth to shop, eat or drink at Hebden Bridge Mill.

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